



# THE YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEE WELLBEING REPORT 2022

A review of employees experience  
of working in the Youthreach Sector

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# Abbreviations

<b>ACEs</b>	Adverse Childhood Experiences	<b>DSP</b>	Department of Social Protection
<b>ADHD</b>	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	<b>EPMH</b>	Emotional, Psychological and Mental Health Difficulties
<b>AEO</b>	Adult Education Officer	<b>EPSEN</b>	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
<b>ALO</b>	Adult Literacy Organiser	<b>ESL</b>	Early School Leaving
<b>ALOA</b>	Adult Literacy Organisers Association	<b>ETBs</b>	Education and Training Boards
<b>BTEI</b>	Back to Education Initiative	<b>EWO</b>	Education Welfare Officer
<b>CAMHS</b>	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service	<b>FARR</b>	Funding Allocations Requests and Reporting System
<b>CEO</b>	Chief Executive Officer	<b>FÁS</b>	An Foras Áiseanna Saothair
<b>CPD</b>	Continuous Professional Development	<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>CTC</b>	Community Training Centres	<b>FETAC</b>	Further Education and Training Awards Council
<b>DCYA</b>	Department of Children and Youth Affairs	<b>HR</b>	Human Resources
<b>DDLETB</b>	Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board	<b>HSCL</b>	Home School Community Liaison
<b>DEASP</b>	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	<b>HSE</b>	Health Service Executive
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools	<b>IACTO</b>	Irish Association of Community Training Organisations
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills	<b>IAP</b>	Individual Action Plans
<b>DPER</b>	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform	<b>ICT</b>	Information Communication and Technologies
		<b>JC</b>	Junior Certificate
		<b>JLO</b>	Juvenile Liaison Officer
		<b>LCA</b>	Leaving Certificate Applied



<b>LCE</b>	Leaving Certificate Established	<b>SICAP</b>	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
<b>MAGIC</b>	Mentoring, Advocacy, Guidance, Information and Counselling	<b>SLS</b>	School Leavers' Survey
<b>NALA</b>	National Adult Literacy Agency	<b>SNA</b>	Special Needs Assistant
<b>NAYC</b>	National Association of Youthreach Co-ordinators	<b>SOLAS</b>	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna / Further Education and Training
<b>NEPS</b>	National Educational Psychological Service	<b>TUI</b>	Teachers' Union of Ireland
<b>NESC</b>	National Economic and Social Council	<b>TUSLA</b>	Child and Family Agency
<b>NESF</b>	National Economic and Social Forum	<b>VECs</b>	Vocational Education Committees
<b>NESSE</b>	Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training	<b>VTOS</b>	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
<b>PLC</b>	Post Leaving Certificate	<b>YR</b>	Youthreach
<b>PLSS</b>	Programme and Learner Support System		
<b>QNHS</b>	Quarterly National Household Survey		
<b>QQI</b>	Quality and Qualifications Ireland		
<b>SCP</b>	School Completion Programme		
<b>SEC</b>	State Examinations Commission		
<b>SENI</b>	Special Educational Needs Initiative		

# Foreword

This study addresses the question of the wellbeing of Youthreach staff generally and the factors which impact it, evolving towards one key question. That is, how a workforce, which in objective terms works in the most challenging of all education sectors, nevertheless seems to be in a better state of wellbeing than is the case for either their second level or primary sector equivalents.

The study talks of the higher levels of wellbeing by comparison to teaching staff at other levels of education. Compared to teachers and school leaders in the primary and second level sectors, the Youthreach staff in this study report higher levels of psychological reserves, more positive experiences of engagement with staff and students at work and generally say they find their work more meaningful.

This finding is all the more remarkable given the context in which Youthreach staff work. There is a sense here of Youthreach as an institutionally unloved initiative which, as one respondent in the study puts it, 'caters for young people who are most at risk with a staff cohort which are often forgotten about and never listened to' (p54).

The primary focus of Youthreach is on relationships. And there is a sense in the study that the relationships fostered in Youthreach between staff and students in themselves

constitute a daily critique of those between the staff and the institutional structures in which they operate. The classroom environment in which they work is one which aspires to the highest levels of mutual respect, co-creation and solidarity between staff and students. This contrasts with the institutional environment in which the staff find themselves where terms and conditions that are commonplace in first and second level education are denied to them. Precarious employment conditions are exacerbated by the reluctance of the regulator – the Teaching Council – even to recognise the staff as teachers.

On reading the report, one is struck by the value of Youthreach on the one hand but also how it works so much under the radar of the public narrative of education in Ireland. The great public outpourings of support and celebration which characterise and punctate the school year for their second level counterparts are somehow denied to the Youthreach students. The final year rituals in second level of CAO application in January; 'mocks' in Spring; prizegiving in May; Leaving Certificate in June; Debs in July and Results and CAO offer in August are essentially another world to the Youthreach student.

But while these 6000 plus students may be somewhat out of sight, they are not out of mind. In their centres they are encountering

a staff who, on the evidence of this study, are acutely aware of the early life challenges which led them to drop out of school in the first instance; are alert to their emotional and social development needs; are respectful and responsive to their needs and their talents and work from a position of solidarity with the students. And so, despite the fact that many of the students would have been considered disruptive and challenging in their early school life; despite the precarious work lives of so many in the sector and notwithstanding the lack of professional recognition by the regulator, this staff complement finds itself in a good space in terms of their own wellbeing and motivation. One can only speculate as to the reasons for this. It may for instance be due to the empathy and social purpose with which the staff invest in the Youthreach students – driven perhaps by a moral commitment to support young people who have already experienced deprivation or trauma to deal with this and to overcome any barriers it may present to later life opportunity.

Or it may be due to the relational focus of the pedagogy, focused on construction rather than instruction; addressing the multiple intelligences of the learner; non judgemental in terms of individual behaviour patterns and taking the student's concerns and dreams as the starting point.

Or it may be down to the formation and the self-development agenda of the staff themselves. The self-reflexive culture within this community of educators; their recognition of the value of collegial feedback and support for self-sustenance; their readiness to interrogate the power differentials between students and teachers in the formal system and to ensure these are not replicated in Youthreach centres may also be a factor.

Whatever the reason – or reasons – which apply here, there is no doubt but that schools in second level and also in primary can benefit from the learning in Youthreach; can look to it for direction in initial teacher education and in the continuing professional development of teachers and witness an education setting which manages to be truly learner centred.

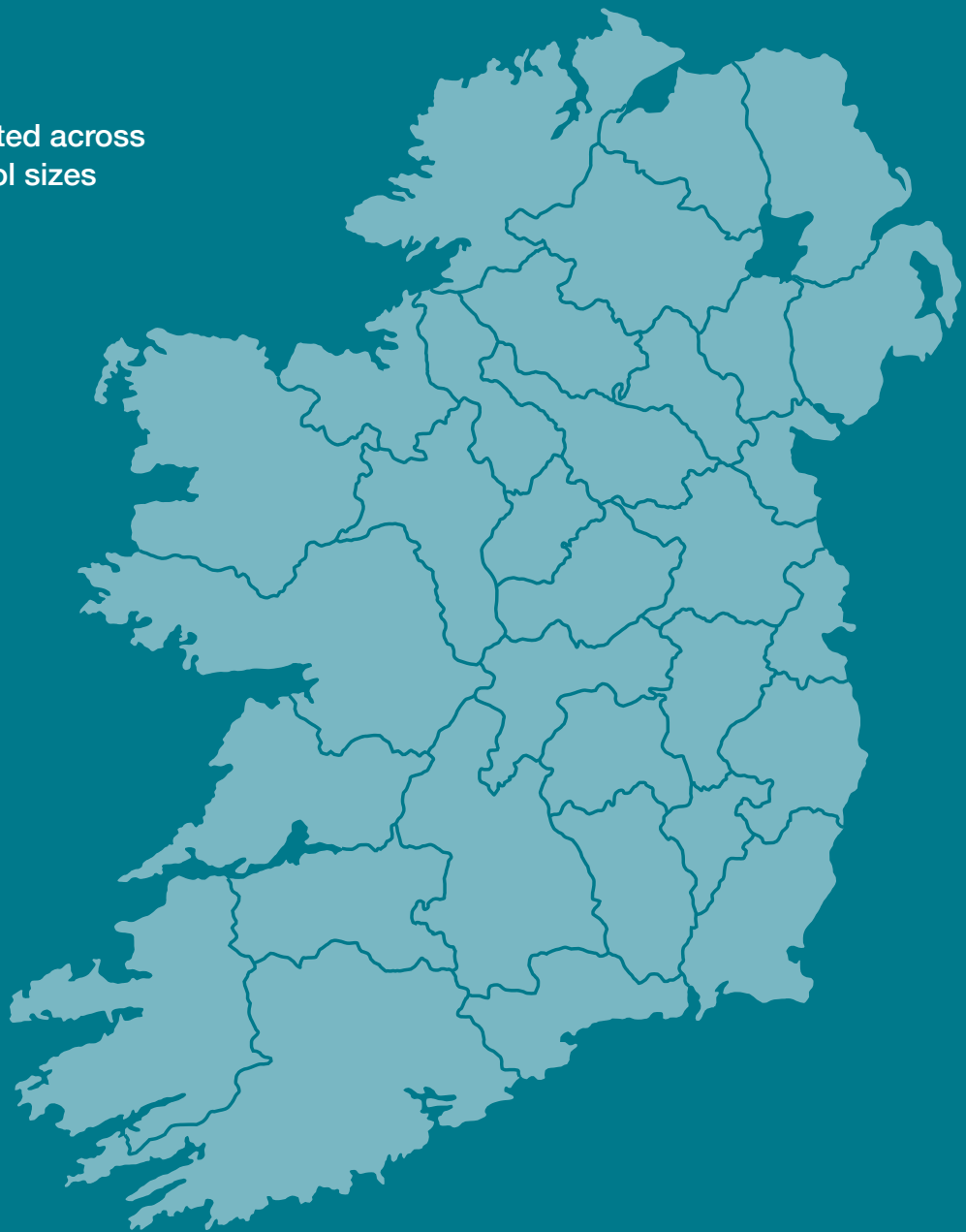
Finally, at the institutional level, Youthreach needs to be owned and celebrated by those responsible for it. The contractual situation of staff needs to be resolved; the input of staff must be valued and the professionalism and dedication of staff must be recognised.

**Professor Tom Collins**  
Former Head of Education  
Department and Interim  
President of Maynooth University

# Youthreach Employee Wellbeing Report at a Glance

**325**

Employees participated across all regions and school sizes



### MAIN FINDINGS:

- Youthreach employees have exceptional levels of wellbeing and resilience
- Youthreach employees with longer service need additional support
- Taking adequate respite from work is associated with higher levels of wellbeing
- Youthreach employees need to be adequately recognised

# 74%

Employees want to leave Youthreach within 5 years or are unsure if they want to stay or go



# 55%

Employees reported psychological flourishing and 80% resilience



### STRESS AT WORK

# 42%

Employees experienced a lot of stress, but only 6% reported chronic stress



### DEPRESSION

# 16%

Employees reported symptoms of mild to severe depression



### EMPLOYEES AT RISK:

Employees most at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue (job burnout and vicarious trauma), anxiety and depression are longer serving staff and those whose workload extends over the weekend and school holidays.

# Executive Summary

## OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

This research, Youthreach Employee Wellbeing Report: A review of employee's experiences of working in the Youthreach sector, was conducted in December 2021 with staff in the Youthreach programme in the Republic of Ireland to explore their experiences and wellbeing while working in the Youthreach sector in the wake of Covid-19.

A review of national and international literature relating to Youthreach, its context and evolution, staffing conditions and key features of working in the sector was completed as part of this research. An online snowball survey of experiences and wellbeing measures was circulated to Youthreach staff nationally in December 2021, starting with publicly available email contacts. The findings are presented in this report.

325 respondents, approximately a third of Youthreach employees, responded to the survey. 66% of respondents were female.

Most respondents were aged over 40 and in their role for over 10 years.

Respondents were located across all provinces and held various roles in Youthreach including positions as Manager, Coordinator, Resource Person and Teacher.

All Youthreach centre sizes were represented with half of the respondents working in centres with 10-25 learners.

## OVERVIEW OF YOUTHREACH PROGRAMME

The Youthreach Programme was introduced in 1988 as the Irish government's primary response to early school leaving and was designed to provide young people with access to education and training, progression and social inclusion (DPER, 2017; DES, 2015; Smyth et al. 2019). As part of the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020 (co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Social Fund (ESF), the Youthreach programme provides "two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age".<sup>1</sup> It is designed as an integrated education, training and work experience programme that has a strong emphasis on personal development, enhancing the core skills of literacy, numeracy, communications and providing a choice of vocational options and a work experience programme.

Respondents in this survey defined education as "person-centred", supporting learners to develop "academically, emotionally, socially and holistically". Building good relationships with learners to create positive and safe learning environments and experiences was defined as central in Youthreach. In terms of its teaching approach, most Youthreach centres follow a set curriculum with qualifications and a subject-centred approach.

Table 1. Overview of research respondents

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/>

## WORK CONDITIONS IN YOUTHREACH

Respondents to this survey described their commitment to young people, the value of the sector and its holistic and relational approach in learners' lives. Respondents acknowledged how the young people they work with bring "purpose & meaning" to their work and life. 80% of respondents noted they deal with a heavy workload. 39% of respondents work regularly in the evening and 23% reported they work regularly over the weekend. Compared to their colleagues in primary and post-primary schools, Youthreach employees reported taking significantly less time off over the weekend and school holidays. Previous studies demonstrate that lack of adequate respite leads to fatigue, burnout, depression, and a range of mental and physical health issues.

The most prevalent challenges identified by Youthreach employees were (1) time to address the needs of learners with learning difficulties; (2) pressure to achieve full certification; and (3) workload. Lack of recognition and parity of opportunity with their teaching colleagues at second level was mentioned most often as a challenge facing Youthreach employees. Respondents highlighted the impact on pay, conditions, progression, holidays and entitlements. The lack of equitable recognition of the status of the Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator role was raised as a key issue, with one respondent describing how "we are not even classed as teachers even though we are inspected and expected to teach and support the most vulnerable in society".

This comment was linked to organisational inequities between Youthreach and second level school staff who work with a similar cohort of learners, but have different working conditions, annual calendars, leave entitlements, scope of responsibilities, support structures and physical infrastructures. Youthreach employee respondents described impacts in terms of

a lack of recognition, impacts on their sense of wellbeing, lack of time to recuperate, and additional responsibilities during holidays. The lack of recognition was also experienced at a systemic level, with Youthreach respondents describing a lack of awareness or consideration of the specificity of Youthreach as a sector, especially from statutory agencies whose focus of attention was on mainstream school or FET provision. This is significant in terms of importance of the affirmation and support for the dignity of workers in the workplace which is key to enhancing well-being (U.S. Surgeon General, 2022, p. 24).

## WELLBEING AMONGST YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES

A total of 43% of the survey respondents experienced a lot of stress at work. Only 6% experienced mild or moderate levels of chronic stress; none reported severe levels of chronic stress. Most respondents did not report symptoms of depression (84% of respondents) or anxiety disorder (82% of respondents). Levels of depression and anxiety were similar to the national average during the pandemic (Hyland et al., 2020). One quarter of Youthreach respondents reported very high level of resilience, 55% moderate and 20% reported lower levels of resilience. The two most frequently used styles for coping in difficult situations were (1) finding creative ways to alter difficult situations, and (2) reflecting on how they can grow through adversity, which are effective coping strategies.

Youthreach employees reported higher levels of happiness compared with a sample from primary school leaders in Ireland. Over half of respondents reported flourishing psychologically, meaning that they experience high levels of emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing and social wellbeing. Levels of positive emotions and relationships in work reported by Youthreach



employees were higher than those in school sector studies (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, b). Overall, the wellbeing profile indicated that Youthreach employees have developed high levels of psychological and social resources that help them deal with work-related challenges. Despite experiencing stress, most employees have the skills to help them cope with adversity.

However, one quarter of employees reported moderate levels of burnout, vicarious trauma, and moderate or high levels of compassion fatigue, which was more likely to occur while working during holiday times, frequent evening or weekend work and having a longer length of service in Youthreach. The most at risk are those with particularly high workload who work over the weekend and during school holidays. The research reveals that Youthreach employees with longer service may need additional support to help them cope with adversities, prevent stress, anxiety, depression and compassion fatigue.

## CONTEXT OF COVID-19 FOR YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES

The context of Covid-19 created a sense of overwhelming pressure for many of the employees working in Youthreach, due to the sense of unpredictability, risk, change and danger. They described challenges originated from four sources:

1. Organisational factors,
2. Personal and family factors,
3. Student-related factors,
4. General factors.

Organisational and environmental factors included the challenges associated with implementing Covid-19 regulations in centres such as “masks, distancing and extra work cleaning”, as well as changing Covid-19 requirements that prevented or radically changed

how many activities were organised. Youthreach employees spoke of a gap between institutional policies and how they were implemented and experienced in practice, with Covid-19 regulations increasing administrative tasks, limiting and taking time away from teaching, responding to increased need amongst learners, working online with heavier workloads and different processes, pivoting between different approaches, whilst still expected to support learners and have the same level of outcomes. These findings were similar to those experienced by teachers (Dempsey and Burke, 2021). Youthreach employees spoke of the significant learning that they had to do in Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) and the need to creatively find ways of supporting relationships with learners through online formats. Covid-19 restrictions resulted in lower levels of interactions and connectivity between staff within Youthreach as a result of social distancing and a lack of meetings among staff. Those in management or coordinator positions spoke of the challenges of leading and supporting others, whilst themselves enduring Covid-19 and its restrictions.

Learner disengagement was a major issue in Youthreach centres, with respondents describing the challenges of maintaining relationships with learners significantly impacted by Covid-19. Staff highlighted the high levels of learner anxiety and mental health issues evident during Covid-19, including more “substance abuse, behavioural issues and over-reliance on their phones”. Significant numbers of Youthreach learners “were most impacted [by Covid-19] as families lost jobs, experienced bereavement, anxiety and mental health problems” which staff found challenging to support online. Mask wearing was a particular challenge for learners and learning as it can “enhance and encourage withdrawal from class” and “make [it] difficult in interpreting the student’s state of mind.” Trying to ensure learners keep masks on correctly was a particular challenge and caused untold behavioural challenges.



Respondents spoke of the impact of Covid-19 on their personal relationships and how isolation, restrictions and working from home lead to “disengagement”, greater levels of “anxiety, and a “lack of social interaction with family and friends”. There was a powerful sense of the emotional impact and personal toll of the restrictions on their personal and family lives during this time, similar to that expressed by participants in Dempsey and Burke’s study of schools during Covid-19 restrictions (2021).

## WELLBEING AND COVID-19

Reflective of Youthreach employees’ higher levels of wellbeing discussed in this study in comparison to teaching staff at other levels of education, respondents recounted active ways that they enhanced their personal wellbeing during Covid-19. The most frequent response was by engaging in exercise, greater self-care, engaging in counselling and other supports, and decisions about work (such as shorter working days, stop working on weekends, set boundaries around work, planning to retire early, changing role).

When asked about supports offered by their employers, respondents cited a range of adaptations offered through work and at organisational levels, including counselling, wellbeing and other supports. Several comments were made referring to no or little adaptations offered. Those who felt that no or little support was offered were critical of the limited nature of supports, such as online and telephone services, on offer. Many felt that the supports offered were not sufficient, were limited and procedural in nature, and many were unaware of available supports.

Adaptations offered through work and organisational levels included decreased class sizes, flexible and shortened timetables, counselling and supervision, employee support services, CPD and TEL supports and resources,

clear line of communications and information, and a whole-of-centre approach. Interpersonal supports and relationships with managers and fellow staff were cited as a vital support by respondents.

## VIEWS OF FUTURE

Nearly three-quarters of respondents to this research said that they were unsure or would not be working in Youthreach in five years time. Of those who said they would not or were unsure about working in Youthreach in five years, most did not give a reason, while a small number said that they would be retired by that time and others were actively seeking other roles despite the potential loss of increments.

Of the one quarter of respondents who saw themselves working in Youthreach in five years time, half expressed positive reasons in terms of their enjoyment and satisfaction with working with young people, expressing their commitment to the approach, pedagogy and relationships with young people. The remaining respondents expressed a sense of not having a choice to leave Youthreach as they were close to retirement and feeling “stuck” and restricted in seeking other employment. The lack of career progression and the issue of recognition of their service if they transferred roles was a key factor in their decision-making.



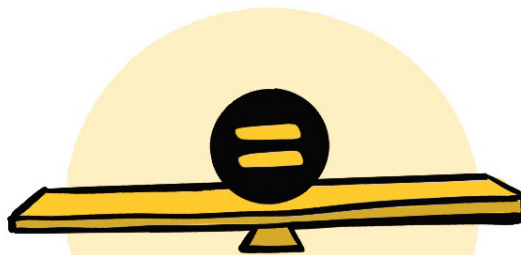
## RESPITE

The need for adequate rest and time off.



## RECOG

The need employees



Equal recognition with other teaching professions



Equal pay

Figure 1. Illustration of key themes of research findings on Youthreach employees.



## SUPPORT

Additional support needed for Youth Reach employees who have been in service for longer periods of time.

## COGNITION

to recognise adequately.



Equal time off



# Main Themes and Recommendations

Four main themes emerged from the research data which lead to recommendations in each of these areas:

1. Youthreach employees' exceptional levels of wellbeing and resilience.
2. Additional need to support Youthreach employees with longer service.
3. The importance of adequate respite.
4. The need to provide Youthreach employees with adequate recognition.

## YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES' EXCEPTIONAL LEVELS OF WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE

The study data highlighted particularly high levels of Youthreach employees' wellbeing and resilience. Compared with teachers and school leaders in primary and post-primary schools, the Youthreach staff reported higher levels of psychological resources, such as experiences of positive emotions, engagement at work, or finding their work meaningful. They have also reported higher levels of psychological resilience. All these resources help employees cope more effectively with challenging situations and help them bounce back faster after experiencing adverse situations.

These findings are not surprising given the type of person-centred and relational work Youthreach employees engage in. This is evident through this research as well as previous research reviewed in later chapters (Gordon, 2013; NEPS, 2017; Hickey et al., 2020; Smyth et al. 2018).

The researchers of this study recommend that

- The distinctive profile and pedagogy of Youthreach be recognised and resourced in terms of:
  1. Being a learner-centred, relational and responsive approach, smaller group sizes and individual learning plans.
  2. Having course content adapted for learner interests and styles of learning at local level.
  3. Being a holistic approach and wrap-around support with emphasis on lifeskills and personal development.
  4. Facilitating the acquisition of qualifications and progression to education, training or employment (Smyth et al., 2019, pp. 100-102).
- Recognition that the extended relational and support role for early school leaver learners by Youthreach staff is required. The responsibilities that Youthreach staff take of this relational aspect of their support to young people and its necessary social and psychological contribution in learning needs to be recognised.
- More suitable learner success metrics and indicators are required which are cognisant of the breadth of social, behavioural and academic development desired. These metrics should build on existing developments discussed in the next chapter and be developed through active collaboration of staff and learner forums.



- Further research across the education sector is recommended to further understand how to nurture higher levels of resilience, flourishing, relationship and engagement at an organisational and sectoral levels for the benefit of staff, learners and the wider society.

### ADDITIONAL NEED TO SUPPORT YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES WITH LONGER SERVICE

Our findings highlight the urgent need to support Youthreach employees with longer service. Specifically, length of service was one of the predictors of compassion fatigue. The longer Youthreach employees' service, the higher the risk of job burnout or vicarious trauma. Even though as a group, the Youthreach staff have high levels of wellbeing, their ability to experience burnout and vicarious trauma grows over time.

Research with educators in primary and post-primary school has not identified the same trend (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, b). Furthermore, previous research with therapists and counsellors identified a opposite trend; the longer therapists' served, the higher was their wellbeing (Burke and Hackett, 2017). The increase of wellbeing among therapists may be due to the support provided through regular supervision ensures the negative situations they deal with daily can be processed effectively, or the development of tools to ensure self-care in daily negative situation contexts. Their initial training, continuous personal development and structures put in place to support their wellbeing prevents a systematic accumulation of negative thoughts and emotions that may ultimately result in negative outcomes, such as depression.

Therefore, we recommend that similar support systems for Youthreach employees including:

- An inclusion of self-care education in all initial and continuous professional development

courses for Youthreach staff to assist them in looking after their own wellbeing.

- Creating a culture of self-care in Youthreach centres to ensure that staff look after their wellbeing and feel comfortable to seek help when required.
- Creating a range of annual continuous personal and professional development courses for Youthreach staff that aim to update them on new tools and techniques they can use to cope with adverse situations.
- Active and structured counselling services for staff, particularly longer serving employees, to prevent an accumulative impact of their work on their wellbeing. Additional mental health assistance is required for longer serving Youthreach staff to reduce their risk of experiencing vicarious trauma and job burnout.
- Increased government funding to ensure that Youthreach staff are provided with the psychological and social supports when required.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ADEQUATE RESPITE

The research data shows that most of the Youthreach employees work during the weekend or over centre's holidays (e.g. summer, Easter, mid-term, Christmas). Compared with the primary and post primary leaders and teachers, significantly less Youthreach employees take adequate respite from their job. This may be due to the workload that is mentioned as one of the greatest challenges for Youthreach employees. Alternatively, other reasons evident in this research are the structural conditions for Youthreach employees, and the intense pressure on staffing due to shortages and illness evident during Covid-19. It is an issue of ongoing concerns, given the high level of staff who say they will not be working in the sector in five years time.

Adequate respite is required for employees to experience work-life balance and to help them cope with adversities more effectively. The current research and this study indicates that the one of the strongest predictors of higher levels of anxiety, depression and compassion fatigue among the Youthreach employees was not taking adequate respite during centre's holidays.

Furthermore, not taking time out during weekend predicted compassion fatigue.

Therefore, we recommend that support systems are put in place for Youthreach employees, such as:

- A review and streamline of employees' role and responsibilities.
- Workload of each centre is reviewed, additional staff employed (if applicable) and support structures put in place to prevent current employees from working during the weekend and over centre's holidays.
- A Youthreach centre buddy system is put in place to allow centre staff to take uninterrupted holidays.

## THE NEED TO PROVIDE YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES WITH ADEQUATE RECOGNITION

Lack of recognition and parity of opportunity with teaching colleagues at second level was highlighted as a key challenge facing Youthreach employees, especially in relation to the status of the Youthreach Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator role. Respondents recounted the impact on pay, conditions, progression, holidays and entitlements of this situation.

This was linked to organisational inequities between Youthreach and second level school staff who work with a similar cohort of learners, but have different working conditions, annual calendars, leave entitlements, scope of responsibilities, support structures and physical

infrastructures. Youthreach respondents described impacts in terms of a lack of recognition, impact on their sense of wellbeing, lack of time to recuperate, and additional responsibilities during holidays.

This lack of recognition was also experienced at a systemic level, with Youthreach respondents describing a lack of awareness or consideration of the specificity of Youthreach as a sector, especially from statutory agencies whose focus of attention was on mainstream school or FET provision.

Based on these findings, we recommend that

- A national review of staffing and work conditions of Youthreach is conducted, with the objective of clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of staff and ensuring equivalent recognition, resourcing and conditions to colleagues across other education sectors.
- Additional CPD, learning supports and communities of practice to support staff responding to complex learner needs. This provision should be premised on a whole of society approach, collaborating with community and other service partners. Appropriate timing of CPD to suit staff availability is required.
- The physical learning environments of Youthreach centres should be reviewed and properly resourced. This should include a review of the rationale and appropriate resourcing of programmes running over the summer.



# 1. Overview of Research

This research was conducted in December 2021 with staff in the Youthreach programme to explore their experiences and wellbeing while working in the sector.

The project aim was:

- to explore the experiences and wellbeing of staff working in the Youthreach sector, in the wake of Covid-19.

A review of national and international literature about Youthreach, its context and evolution, conditions of staffing and key features of working in the sector was completed. The research design comprised of an online survey conducted with a range of Youthreach staff nationally in December 2021. Findings about their experiences and sense of wellbeing while working in the sector, including the context of Covid-19 is presented, followed by a discussion and concluding section.

## 1.1 OVERVIEW OF YOUTHREACH PROGRAMME

The Youthreach Programme was introduced in 1988 as the Irish government's primary response to early school leaving and was designed to provide young people with access to education and training, progression and social inclusion (DPER, 2017; DES, 2015; Smyth et al. 2019). It aimed to address the high levels of early school leaving at the time by providing what it described as second-chance education for young people who leave second-level school before Leaving Certificate level. As part of the Programme for

Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020 (co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the ESF), the Youthreach programme provides “two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age”.<sup>2</sup>

It intends to give young people positive learning experiences, builds capacities and provides qualifications and progression to further education, training and employment through a two year programme. It is designed as an integrated education, training and work experience programme that has a strong emphasis on personal development, enhancing the core skills of literacy, numeracy, communications and providing a choice of vocational options and a work experience programme. Youthreach describes its programme objectives as

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**holistic in nature in that there is a strong emphasis on allowing students to develop personally and socially while increasing their self-esteem in order to prepare them for adult life where they can participate fully in society**

(Youthreach ND-b in Smyth et al. 2019, p. 28).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/>



Distinctive in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector, Youthreach caters for young people who are, for the most part, the same age as the learners in the upper part of secondary schooling. NEPS (2017) highlight the challenges of working with younger learners in a sector designed for adult learners.

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**Youthreach caters for children and young people who are, for the most part, the same age as the students in the upper part of secondary schooling. However, by being located in a Further Education and Training programme, these learners are not included in the service brief of most of the agencies and sections of the Department that support mainstream [education]**

(NEPS, 2017, p. 6).

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Youthreach is currently provided in 112 Youthreach centres, with 6,779 learners taking part in the programme in 2020, with a funding allocation for 2021 of €70,984,936 (SOLAS, 2021: 41). Youthreach Centres are ‘centres of education’ as designated by the Education Act, 1998 and are managed by the ETBs. Most of the remainder of places for early school leavers are provided in Community Training Centres (CTC)<sup>3</sup> and funded by the ETBs.

Youthreach centres are managed and administered by ETBs, with funding allocated according to the number of learners in each centre. According to the Value for Money Review conducted in 2008, “compared to other sectors the cost per learner for Youthreach ... is seen to be greater than that in mainstream post-primary schools and less than that in

YEP [Youth Encounter Projects] schools” (DES, 2008, p. 237). They continue to say that “given the cohorts involved and the level of support provided [in Youthreach], this is to be expected, when you consider the level of supports required to ensure that the learner is provided with a quality educational service that meets their educational, social and cultural needs” (DES, 2008, p. 237). Currently Youthreach costs are exceeded only by those for specialist training programmes but compare favourably to the costs for similar intensive support programmes for vulnerable young people, such as Youth Advocate and Encounter Projects (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 32).

There is considerable variation in how individual ETBs approach Youthreach programme delivery, reflecting the autonomy of each ETB to allocate their block funding grant across their provision. The location of Youthreach Centres varies geographically across the country, reflecting the legacy of their development rather than current need. There is also considerable variation in the type of courses offered to learners and in the quality of Youthreach buildings.

Youthreach staff comprise: Resource Person/ Assistant Coordinator (although the title is used in varied manner by respondents in this research) who is responsible for management and directs class contact tasks “to the Chief Executive or Education Officer or Adult Education Organiser of the VEC as appropriate for the overall daily management of the centre” (CHL, 2006, p. 26). Resource Persons/ Workers/ Teachers are “responsible to the Co-ordinator on a day to day basis for the delivery of the programme” according to the range of teaching and support tasks listed by CHL report (2006, p. 33). Other staff are employed on teacher contracts and a range of other administrative and support contracts. All Youthreach staff are employees of the ETBs but are often working on different

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/>

types of contracts and conditions, even in the same centres (Smyth et al., 2019, p. xiii). There is variation in the level of support offered to staff, with some centres having structured daily supervision or debriefings and others having less or no supports (Smyth et al., 2019). The Operational Guidelines Working Group (OGWG) established by ETBI is reviewing the operational guidelines in 2022 to address “deficiencies, common areas, good practices, siloed practices/outdated practices and ensure the learner is represented in delivering high quality ETB programmes”<sup>4</sup>.

As noted above, the Youthreach programme is the government’s main response to early school leaving for young people who leave mainstream second-level schooling before completion of the Leaving Certificate. There is also an online alternative learning pathway offered by iscoil as well as a range of programmes from alternative education providers<sup>5</sup>. Early school leavers are a priority group for different Government departments and agencies working in a whole of government approach, including sections of Departments of Education, Children & Youth Affairs, Health, Justice & Equality, Jobs, Enterprise & Innovation and Social Protection.

Provision through Youthreach centres and Community Training Centres are managed by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which are grant aided by SOLAS under the overall direction of the Department of Education. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Levels 3 and 4 courses are the most common forms of provision, although some centres offer QQI Level 2 courses and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Centres provide courses at QQI Level 2 where there are larger numbers without Junior Certificate qualifications or where there is a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties among learners. A smaller number of centres offer the Junior and Leaving Certificate

(LCE) programmes (Smyth et al., 2019). Subjects offered vary in response to learner needs, with the main areas of the curriculum including general education, vocation training and work experience offered over an extended year, with many courses including QQI certification. Youthreach Operational Guidelines (2015) outline that learners attend the programme 5 days per week, 226 days per year between the hours of 9.00 am and 3.30 pm (or similar). The pedagogical approach is influenced by youth work, training and community education in terms of its learner-centred nature which takes learners’ background and experiences into account, is responsive, favours active and experiential learning and is deeply relational, caring and informal (Smyth et al., 2019, pp. 30-31).

## 1.2 NATIONAL CONTEXT OF LEARNERS WHO ACCESS YOUTHREACH

While Ireland has reduced its rate of early school leaving from 9.7% in 2012 to 6.9% in 2015 (Heeran Flynn, 2017, p. 7), young people who leave school early are now more marginalised and present with greater levels of need (Smyth et al. 2019). Gordon’s research on learners in Youthreach (2013, 2017) and NEPS (2017) identify high levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and basic literacy and numeracy challenges experienced by young people attending Youthreach.

Background experiences of Youthreach learners and/or their families identified in previous research include experiences of living in poverty, high numbers of young people with mental health issues, with disabilities, specific or general learning needs, ongoing social, emotional or health issues, experience of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, substance abuse issues or involvement in anti-social behaviour. A significant cohort of Youthreach learners

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-07-05/484/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://iscoil.ie/>

come from a Traveller background (Stokes, 2003; NEPS, 2017; Smyth et al., 2019). These factors are often experienced by young people in combination and as intergenerational, with Heeran Flynn describing how the “risk factors for early school leaving are highly complex and intertwined” (2017, p. 6) and lead to a gradual process of disengagement from school. Stokes outlines that ‘young people overwhelmingly cite the breakdown in their relationship with teachers as causing their early school leaving’ (2003, p. 83). While poor relationship with schools may be the trigger for early school leaving, it is linked with wider societal inequalities which are reproduced through the school system and culture (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977; Lynch and Baker, 2005; Byrne et al., 2010). SOLAS acknowledge the complexities of needs amongst current early leavers, which results in very significant impacts for young people and their families as well as the broader community and society.

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**Among the present generation of early leavers, we are seeing an increase in the complexities of their needs – whether they have mental health issues, come from migrant backgrounds so may not have English as a first language or have faced discrimination, or have previously engaged in anti-social behaviour**

Andrew Brownlee, executive director at SOLAS<sup>6</sup>

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Informal networks, including parents, guardians, family members, and peers is vital for raising awareness of and access to Youthreach provision according to Smyth et al. (2019) and

McCoy et al. (2020). School-based referrals, or referrals through other agencies, are evident for only a minority of Youthreach learners, which is a notable institutional absence given the negative experiences of schooling for many Youthreach learners (Smyth et al., 2019). Also evident amongst the profile of Youthreach learners is the absence of some groups of early school leavers. McCoy (2020) notes the absence of learners from migrant backgrounds in Youthreach, surmising that it is connected to the lack of awareness of the educational system and education centres, and the lack of social networks to mobilise and engage with education.

### 1.3 EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTHREACH LEARNERS

Previous research has primarily focused on experiences and outcomes of Youthreach learners, generally comprising of smaller studies and postgraduate research. Research on a national level includes reports on Youthreach programme (CHL, 1996, 2006); value for money review (DES, 2008), report on teaching, learning and planning in Youthreach (DES, 2010); outcomes among Youthreach participants (Gordon, 2013; NEPS, 2017; Hickey et al., 2020); and an evaluation of the Youthreach programme by ERSI (Smyth et al., 2019). These reports as well as a range of qualitative studies in Youthreach centres are reviewed below.

Smyth et al. describe the profile of learners in Youthreach in their national study as aged between 15 and 20 years, with a gender profile of 58% male and 42% female; 45% have a full Junior Cert only and 30% with primary education only, 25% have a learning need, many coming from communities that are designated as socio-economically disadvantaged. Most learners had experienced a high prevalence of emotional, psychological or mental health issues,

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.solas.ie/news-media/review-shows-early-school-leavers-benefit-from-significant-support/>

and a lack of family support or experiences of adverse trauma. 1 in 6 young people are from a Traveller background, 8% are lone parents, 14% had problems with the criminal justice system and 6% are from a migrant background. Many reported negative school experiences prior to entering Youthreach, with many participants describing a process of gradual exclusion and voluntary exclusion (Smyth et al., 2019, pp. 55-57). NESSE (2010) and Sheridan (2018) argue that looking at learners' background only gives part of the picture of early school leaving. They cite a range of school, community and social experiences that are all factors potentially – but not always - related to early school leavers. The European Commission (2013) similarly argues that it is crucial to have a multi-faceted view of early school leaving in terms of prevention, intervention and compensation.

Sheridan finds that the main reasons young people identified as the difference between their school experiences and Youthreach is the holistic approach shown by the teachers in Youthreach (25%), the pleasant atmosphere/ environment to learn and the supports offered in Youthreach (2018, p. 103). Youthreach learners note the value of the small group settings to facilitate more individualised support, a pace of learning tailored to their capacities, and a focus on project or portfolio work rather than exams. Positive relationships with staff is a cornerstone of a positive learning experience for Youthreach learners, with many referring to the “respectful relationship between staff and learners in Youthreach” as key to their engagement and enhancing their capacity to take responsibility for their learning (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 66).

Staff also identify a range of additional supports, including work placement, career guidance, personal counselling, and informal staff support as vital to re-engaging young people with learning (Smyth et al., 2019). Hickey et al. (2020) note the importance of a ‘good team’ amongst staff as an “important ‘coping mechanism’

in helping to reduce work-related stress for Youthreach staff. Learning from the experiences and knowledge of other staff is also identified as crucial ‘on the job’ resource which enable educators to develop strategies for supporting learners and give a “vital source of moral and emotional support” (2020, p. 22). Osborne (2016, p. 219) contends that the success of the Youthreach programme is based on its “ethos of learner-centred education, where the curriculum responds to individual needs, and is a good exemplar of a pedagogical holistic approach to working with children who have suffered adverse childhood experiences. It is recommended as a method from which teachers in other sectors of education can use” (2016, p. 219).

The profile of Youthreach learners, their complex needs and their previous experiences in schooling all noted earlier means that there are increased prevalence of EPMH and specific learning needs amongst its learners (Smyth et al., 2019, p. xviii). Gordon similarly identifies the high levels of adverse trauma experiences and challenges with basic literacy and numeracy experienced by Youthreach learners (NEPS, 2017). The relational focus and learner-centred model of education used in Youthreach has proven to be successful at re-engaging young people in learning (McHugh, 2014; Breslin, 2015; Osborne, 2016). Gordon calls for greater recognition of the “strong emphasis on learners’ care and on their emotional and social development; a priority focus on successful retention ... sufficient time for relationship-based approaches to be implemented” (2017, p. 22). Staff call for greater and more focused supports for learners, including guidance and counselling services, special education needs, continuous professional development (CPD) for staff (Smyth et al., 2019, pp. xviii-xix). Youthreach staff in Hickey et al. call for “targeted training and support in relation to trauma-exposed ... [and] learner mental health” as key areas where knowledge and capacity building was urgently needed (2020, p. 24).





Figure 2: Supportive relationships between Youthreach employees and students

Smyth et al. (2019) report that over two-thirds of Youthreach learners complete the programme, 45% progress to another education or training course, and 28% go straight into employment. 60% of those who completed a Youthreach programme in 2017 received a full QQI award. One in six of those who completed the programme are unemployed after leaving the programme; a rate that is similar to the unemployment levels amongst early school leaver population as a whole. According to Smyth et al. (2019), Youthreach learners report that participating in the programme boost their self-confidence and gives them a purpose and hope for the future. Hickey et al. (2020, p. 16) recount how Youthreach participants describe how they had ‘matured as a person’ as a consequence of their involvement in Youthreach, whilst also being more contented in their lives outside of school.

#### 1.4 THE DISTINCTIVE PROFILE AND PEDAGOGY OF YOUTHREACH

Youthreach staff in Smyth et al.’s national study describe Youthreach as providing a ‘distinctive programme’ which is very different to other local education and training services. They identify the following criteria which made Youthreach distinctive.

- Highly learner centred and responsive to the needs of respondents.
- Smaller group sizes with individual learning plans.
- Course content was adapted for learner interests and styles of learning.
- Range of learning and counselling supports available.
- Wrap-around support with emphasis on lifeskills and personal development.
- Holistic approach to learner need.

- Capacity to adapt programme at local level.
- Facilitating the acquisition of qualifications and progression to education, training or employment. (Smyth et al., 2019, pp. 100-102).

The teaching and learning approaches used by Youthreach staff also reflect its distinctive ethos within FET, with an emphasis on group work, discussion-based approaches, using computers, whole-group teaching and hands-on or practical activities, with didactic approaches rarely used (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 123). Youthreach staff describe how they adopt a variety of different teaching methods depending on what works best for each learner and group, they scaffold learning by breaking it into small manageable components and using continuous assessment and regular feedback processes for clarity and to give learners a sense of ownership of their learning and progress. They describe this process of scaffolding as key to building trust between staff and learners, and giving learners a sense of achievement and a way of engaging with staff and peers in a safe and respectful environment. Staff acknowledge the challenges of this scaffolded approach which require extensive differentiation and additional supports for learners. This is echoed by research in adult education and literacy which acknowledged the considerable work and time that is necessary to build trusting relationships of learning (Crowther et al., 2010; Duckworth and Smith, 2018, SOLAS, 2021a). Learners are positive about their experiences in Youthreach describing usefulness of this more individualised and responsive approach as well as the positive relationships with staff and peers as vital for their learning and personal development (Smyth et al., 2019, pp. 126-128).

This relational, learner-centred and responsive approach to teaching and learning is also evident in other areas of FET which have learner-centred rather than a curriculum- or subject-orientated

approach, including community education, adult literacy, numeracy, ESOL and family literacy (SOLAS, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Similar to literacy education, it is a “student centred approach where the needs, concerns and experience of the students are the focus of learning” (ALOA, 2022, p. 51).

## 1.5 EXPERIENCES AND PROFILE OF YOUTHREACH STAFF

Youthreach is usually staffed by a Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator who manages the programme, teachers and other staff (on differing types of part- and full-time contracts), varying according to local needs. Full-time staff are asked to work their 35 hours per week “in a flexible manner that may include evenings and other times, in accordance with service needs” (DES, 2008, p. 80). There are considerable variation in the posts, contracts and working conditions of staff across Youthreach, across these categories of Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator, and part- or full-time teacher contracts, as well as smaller numbers of instructor, administrative and other posts (CHL, 2006; Smyth et al. 2019, p. 88). The majority of Youthreach coordinators in Smyth et al. study had been working in Youthreach for 10 number of years or more and 71% had teaching backgrounds and 28% has youth work backgrounds (2019, p. 90). Staff come from a variety of backgrounds including “teaching, adult education and training, youth-work, welfare and health. This mix is regarded as essential, yielding a cross fertilisation of expertise from the different disciplines” (DES, 2008, p. 77). Centre managers identify the key qualities of Youthreach staff as the “ability to relate to parents/guardians and learners from diverse backgrounds and good interpersonal skills as very important. The vast majority also saw qualifications/experience in teaching/ training as very important” (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 89).

Given the profile of Youthreach learners, Stokes contends initial teacher training should “better equip practitioners to work more effectively to retain children in school and maximise the benefits they derive from schooling” (2003, p. 272). The Education and Training 2020 schools policy calls for student teachers to be offered practical exposure to the everyday reality of early school leaving through participation in work placements in schools with high drop-out rates or high levels of socio-economic exclusion or in supervised activities with vulnerable families. This would provide student teachers with the opportunity to consider their role as teachers and how they address the educational needs of children at risk (2015, p. 14).

It points to the lack of diversity amongst the teaching profession which is evident in other studies (Keane and Heinz, 2015; Keane et al., 2022). Gordon also points to the need for CPD for Youthreach staff in the area of dealing with mental health issues and challenging behaviour among learners (Gordon, 2013; NEPS, 2017), to support learners with additional needs, to support their own teaching and learning methodologies and assessment approaches (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 91). Hickey et al. (2020) describe the challenge of supporting learners who have experienced trauma, with staff needing to learn “how to ‘navigat[e] the boundaries’ between being an educator and offering care and support for learners – often in a context of limited access to training” (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 21). Their participants spoke about the need “to protect themselves and develop resilience to the traumas and challenges experienced by their students, whilst maintaining a sympathetic and supportive role in their lives” (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 21).

Staff-learner relationships and interactions in a Youthreach setting are described in terms of having greater equality and respect than in other education settings, characterised by being “less formal, and relationships with staff are ‘warmer’ than in schools...The young people perceive themselves to be listened to and respected, i.e. treated as adults” (Youthreach, 2014 cited in Sheridan, 2018, p. 59). Gordon (2017) documents how relational and emotional supports can mitigate some of the effects of traumatic experiences in young people’s lives and argues that this requires teachers to form care-giving relationships with their learners, to help learners to succeed in academic and vocational tasks and to support them in learning how to regulate their emotions and manage their behaviour.

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**The principal focus for the teacher is on the creation of a connection with the young person, which involves trying to understand where they are coming from, managing their own reactions carefully, modelling emotional regulation, avoiding power struggles and being careful not to reinforce negative internal working models by causing humiliation or experiences of rejection. The teacher attempts to construct a calm and regulated environment that is based on structure and consistency, sets limits on unacceptable behaviour, employs consequences rather than punishments and encourages the young person to heed and understand their feelings.**

(Gordon, 2017, p. 4)

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This reveals the importance of a caring and supportive learning environment that enhances caring relationships, encourages participation in learning and social activities, develops learner and teacher autonomy and fosters clarity about boundaries and positive expectations (NEPS, 2017). This is echoed in research on adult literacy (SOLAS, 2020, 2021a, 2021b), which identifies the importance of staff being able to “work empathetically in relating and communicating with students, to build capacity and independence amongst learners, and to use creative and responsive pedagogies” (AOLA, 2022, p. 32). Smyth et al. describe how Youthreach coordinators and managers have a “indepth knowledge of the histories and family circumstances in their centres” reflecting the deep relational knowledge built up with their learners (2019, p. 52). Youthreach learners in Gordon’s study spoke of the importance of this being embodied in the activities and environment of the centres, noting the importance of staff eating with learners at lunch time (2017). This was not merely symbolic, but part of the democratic relationship which staff explicitly built with learners “to facilitate a sense of ‘safety’ for students ... to break down any mistrust held by ESLs in authority figures and teachers, whilst also encouraging and enabling students to build friendships and supportive peer networks, further strengthening student resources and social capital” (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 17). It highlights the vitality of care in learning relationships, with Lynch arguing that interdependency is key in all human relationships including learning (2022).

While current metrics capture programme progression to education, training, and employment, many Youthreach Resource Person/Assistant Coordinators note the need to better capture transversal skills that are key in personal and workplace learning, such as communication, organisational skills, and personal development among learners.



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**Current metrics for reporting on the programme are seen as reflecting the aim of progression to education, training and employment but co-ordinators/managers as well as stakeholders expressed frustration at not being able to capture the value of the programme in enhancing the personal and social skills (such as communication and organisational skills) of young people using available metrics.**

(Smyth et al., 2019, p. xii)

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Greater recognition of the need to recognise transversal and learner-centred capacity-building is evident in the work on developing a wider benefits of learning tool by ETBI<sup>7</sup>, My Journey Distance Travelled tool by SICAP<sup>8</sup> and the Model of Enabling Employment Guidance (MEEG) tool<sup>9</sup>. Barnes and Wright (2019) review distance travelled and soft outcomes measurement tools for long-term unemployed people across Europe, offering useful insights into how to develop toolkits. They note that “using either hard or soft outcomes alone to measure or assess progress to the labour market is not likely to provide a full picture of the impact or benefit of participation” in programmes (2019, p. 8). In the case of employment programmes, soft skills measured include “increased wellbeing; self-esteem; self-efficacy; resilience; hopefulness; perceived progress; participation and re-employment quality; and access to education/vocational training” (2019, p. 9). Studies of education,

social work and health point to the importance of interpersonal capacities, communications, learning and wellbeing. NALA’s Outcomes Framework identifies 8 domains of outcomes under the categories of a) Educational (referring to benefits for the individual), b) Life-wide (for the individual and those around them) and c) Economic and Societal (for the country or population at large) (NALA, 2020, p. 17).

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**The Life-First approach of the MEEG model promotes a holistic approach that prioritises the life needs of individuals above an obligation to work. It promotes the right to work, rather than the opportunity or obligation to work, and emphasises human capabilities and well-being as ways to realise this right...The life needs of people who face multiple challenges, who may be vulnerable and marginalised in the labour market and in society are balanced with the need to work**

(Murphy and Whelan, 2021, p. 32).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://wider-benefits.learningandskills.ie/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8dee88-my-journey-distance-traveled-tool/#:~:text=My%20Journey%3A%20Distance%20Travelled%20Tool%20measures%20soft%20skills,for%20the%20client%20and%20show%20progress%20over%20time>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.inou.ie/resources/employment-guidance-toolkit/>

This need for a wellbeing orientated approach is recognised by Youthreach staff. Hickey et al. point to a lack of “data collection regarding students’ history of trauma and suggest that this may hinder educators’ interactions and ability to sensitively respond to their needs” (2020, p. 26). They argue that a “malleable programme would assist in promoting engagement among marginalised youth and longer-term success within and beyond education” (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 23). Smyth et al.’s research notes the importance of centre managers knowing student histories, with Hickey et al. documenting changes in this practice as the “sharing of this type of information with educators is limited by data regulation guidelines and is being gathered in a more veiled fashion” (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 24). It points to the need for clear ethical and professional standards in information sharing about learners within centres.

The increasing complexity of needs among learners and the emphasis on personal and social skills among Youthreach learners has significant implications for staff working in Youthreach centres in terms of their capacity to support complex needs and the adequacy of resources. Hickey et al.’s research reveals “low levels of compassion fatigue and burnout amongst participants” in the quantitative findings, while their qualitative data highlight experiences of “stress, helplessness and worry as a consequence of working with young people experiencing trauma. Feelings of frustration and being undervalued as a consequence of working within a system which was perceived as being under-resourced were also flagged in the focus groups with educators” (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 29).

Staff call for greater support and resources for staff wellbeing, provision of counselling services, as well as a supportive working environment through debriefs, supervision and mentoring (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 97).

This is also echoed in research conducted by Hickey et al. where staff “expressed frustration at perceived inadequate resourcing of the Youthreach programme and voiced concerns over what was seen as the increasing emphasis on academic achievement over personal and wellbeing development for learners” (2020, p. 22). They note that the “systematic collection of information on trauma is recommended as a cornerstone of trauma-informed care and is considered vital to optimising the school environment” (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 26).

The inadequacy of current provision also extends to physical buildings and the learning environment, with staff highlighting the limited support services for young people, lack of equipment, as well as the poor quality of premises in some centres (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 97). This has been a longstanding issue which was raised in the CHL reports on Youthreach (2006) and DES (2008) as well as Hickey et al. who “called for better buildings because of the ‘message’ it would send to attendees. Namely, modern, comfortable and well-equipped training centres were seen as a potential means through which to elevate the extent to which learners feel valued and respected, as well as further enabling educators to establish a welcoming and safe learning environment” (2020, p. 23).

Variation between ETBs in their approach to funding and service provision is also criticised for the lack of transparency about how funding is allocated across the FET sector (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 97). Youthreach managers express their concern at the lack of input in the hiring of staff and the difficulty of attracting staff because of contracts and pay levels in the sector (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 102). CHL’s comparison of the roles of resource persons and teachers reveal similar duties and note that the “role of Resource Persons extends beyond this to include the sort of duties that are performed by teachers having posts of responsibility in second-level vocational schools, specifically the posts of Assistant Principal and Special Duties Teachers” (2006, p. 43). Similarly the role of deputy principal and Youthreach Coordinators were defined as comparable, although acknowledging

the difference in scale of a school which has an existing institutional system versus the complexity of managing a Youthreach centre and the intensity of working with the profile of Youthreach learners (CHL, 2006, p. 41). Contractual differences also limit provision for learners during the holiday period as those on teaching contracts are not required to work and existing Resource Person/Assistant Coordinators struggle to cover activities without recognition of the additional work this involved and without a break over the holiday periods (Smyth et al., 2019, p. 107-8). This issue of staff contracts and recognition has been a longstanding issue raised by CHL in their 1996 and 2006 reports, where they identify “areas of serious dissatisfaction among staff arising from Youthreach’s origins as a temporary programme which was positioned very much outside the mainstream education system. A key issue is the status of the full-time staff employed in Youthreach centres” (2006, p. 1).

This chapter has given a review of existing policies and research conducted on Youthreach to represent its current profile, evolution and key features and issues in the sector currently. The next chapter is a review of the research design and methods used in this research, followed by the presentations of key findings, a discussion of findings and concluding chapter.

## 2. Research Design and Methodology

This section gives an overview of the objectives and research design that was used to conduct this research, including the research methods and analysis, the ethical implications and scope of this research.

This study involved a once-off, online, cross-sectional survey conducted across Ireland in December 2021. The research intended to explore the perspectives of Youthreach employees about their experiences and sense of wellbeing while working in the sector. The survey was distributed to all Youthreach employees via Youthreach email addresses available on public domain and snow-ball recruitment across the sector. The study received ethical approval from Maynooth University's Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

The survey comprised the following measures: Workplace PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2015), Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008), Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21: Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995), Mental Health Continuum Scale (MHC: Keyes, 2002) and Compassion Fatigue Short-Scale (Adams, Boscarino and Figley, 2006). It included a range of open-ended questions which explore participants' experiences and sense of wellbeing while working in Youthreach during Covid-19. These were analysed using thematic coding (Clarke and Braun, 2006) on MAXqda qualitative data analysis programme. The online survey data were analysed using SPSS version 27.

The survey was completed as an anonymised online survey to maintain the confidentiality of respondents. Any identifiable information such as names, locations and other features were anonymised or redacted. Quotes used from respondents do not identify their role (unless indicated directly in quotation) to protect confidentiality of respondents. All information has been securely stored and accessed solely for research purposes as per Maynooth University's Social Research Ethical guidelines.

This survey expresses the perspectives of Youthreach staff who completed the survey, with additional insights from other perspectives provided through the review of previous studies and literature.



# 3. Overview of Participating Youthreach Employees and Centres

This section provides an overview of the Youthreach employees and centres who participated in this research, before presenting findings on how participating employees define education and their role and responsibilities.

## 3.1 RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

A total of 325 respondents completed the survey, which is approximately a third of the Youthreach employee population, making it a representative sample. The vast majority of the respondents were female (66%, n=214), followed by male (33%, n=108), whilst three respondents (1%) chose not to declare their gender. Most of the respondents were aged over 40 years (78%). See Table 2 for further information about the participant's age.

Age	N	%
18 to 29	15	4.6
30 to 39	55	16.9
40 to 49	101	31.1
50 to 59	122	37.5
60+	32	9.8

Table 2: Respondents' age.

Respondents represent Irish provinces proportionally with the majority working in Leinster (53%), followed by Munster (28%), Connaught (12.3%), and Ulster (6%). See Table 3 for further information.

Provinces	N	%
Connaught	40	12.3
Leinster	174	53.5
Munster	92	28.3
Ulster	19	5.8

Table 3: Provinces in which represented Youthreach centres are based.

Almost half of the respondents worked in a role of a resource person (47%), followed by teachers (31%), Centre coordinators (15%), administrators (1%) and others. Others included a guidance counsellor, a psychologist, and a cook. Two 'Youthreach Resource Person' respondents identified themselves in the other category. See Table 4 for further detail.

Role	N	%
Teacher	100	30.8
Resource Person	154	47.4
Centre Coordinator	49	15.1
Youthreach Manager	13	4
Administrator	2	0.6
Other	7	2.2

Table 4: Respondents' roles.

The majority of respondents were in their role for over 10 years (71%), followed by those who worked in Youthreach 1-9 years (26%). The remaining 3% of respondents were employed by Youthreach for less than a year. See Table 5 for further detail.

Length of service	N	%
Less than 1 year	11	3.4
1 to 4 years	44	13.5
5 to 9 years	41	12.6
10 years +	229	70.5

Table 5: Respondents' length of service in Youthreach.

Finally, the majority of respondents were in their current roles in Youthreach for 10+ years (57%), followed by 1-9 years (37%), whilst 6% were in their current role for less than a year (6%). See Table 6 for more information.

Length of service	N	%
Less than 1 year	20	6.2
1 to 4 years	73	22.5
5 to 9 years	48	14.8
10 years +	184	56.6

Table 6: Respondents' length of service in current role.

Taking all into consideration, this is a representative sample of Youthreach employees, which consists of respondents holding all the main roles in Youthreach. Most of the employees are mature and have worked in Youthreach for a significant amount of time.

### 3.2 CENTRE PROFILE

Current research respondents come from a variety of centres across the sector. Almost half of them work with 10 to 25 learners (49%), a third work with 26-40 learners (35%). There was also representation from small (2%) and large (14%) centres. See Table 7 for further detail.

Centre size	N	%
Less than 10	7	2.2
10 to 25 learners	159	48.9
26 to 40 learners	114	35.1
40+ learners	45	13.8

Table 7. Youthreach centre size.



In relation to the teaching, the most prevalent approach is following a set curriculum closely followed by qualification-centred, student-centred, and subject-centred approach. The curriculum determined by learners is the least salient approach to teaching in Youthreach. See Table 8 and Figure 3 for further detail.

Teaching approach	M	SD
Set curriculum	4.22	0.95
Subject-centred	3.82	1.03
Qualification-centred	3.98	0.96
Student-centred	3.92	1.16
Students determine	2.09	0.87

Table 8. Youthreach teaching approach

M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

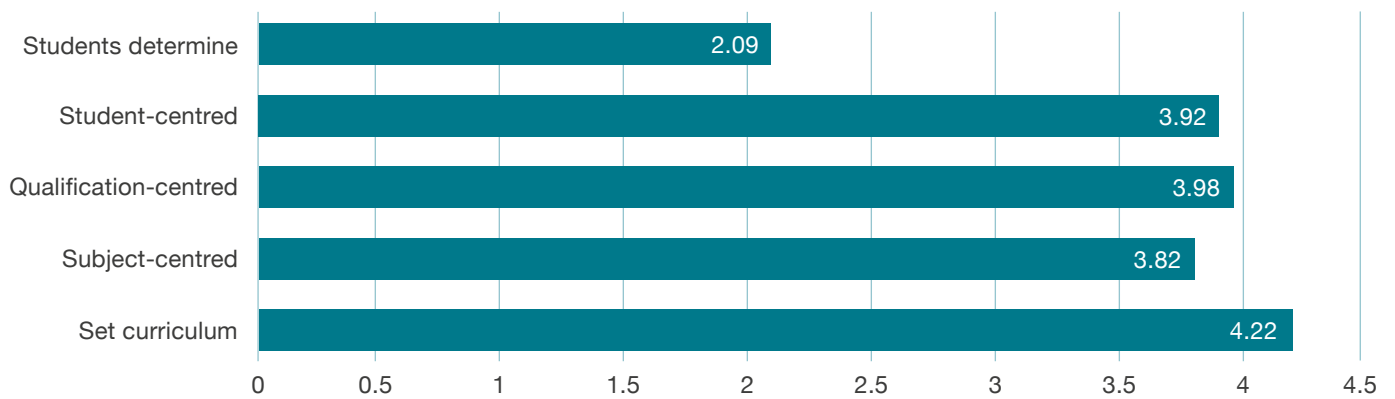


Figure 3: Youthreach teaching approach.

### 3.3 YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES - DEFINITION OF EDUCATION

Given these varied approaches to teaching in Youthreach, it is not surprising to find diversity in how employees of Youthreach define education. To explore this, respondents were asked for their definition of education that guides their daily work. This is discussed later in terms of how it compares to the definition of Youthreach outlined in policy and literature. A total of 324 of the 325 replies addressed this question.

The empathetic nature of the Youthreach frontline staff emerged strongly in their definitions of education. The word “help” or “helping” was used 42 times by respondents, while respondents also use terms such as “care”, “support”, “secure”. The focus on the learner was evident in that the use of the term “self” was associated with developing “self-awareness”, “self-confidence”, “self-esteem”, “self-acceptance”, “self-worth” and “self-reflection”. This reflected the emphasis on building autonomy and self-determination amongst Youthreach learners. Respondents spoke about the importance of being “person centered” and “student centered” in their education approach, helping the learner to develop academically, emotionally, socially and holistically. They described their role as supporting learners in their development and progression where they can come to a safe and secure environment knowing that whatever targets they set can be achieved with the correct support and effort on their part. It is not all about academic achievement. It is about building their confidence, knowledge, belief, and skills within themselves and most importantly to teach learners to also see that too. Self-reflection can be difficult for the majority of learners who we have in the centre”.

Many respondents described their role as very learner-centred, requiring them to be attuned to learners across different aspects of their social, personal and learning lives.

**"I am never away from the students even during my supposed breaks supervising their breaks, breaking up fights, dealing with crises, negotiating, investigating, monitoring, feeding them, entertaining them, dealing with their family issues, referring to relevant agencies for support, encouraging them, pulling them apart, encouraging cohesion and group work, disciplining them, doing food shopping for the centre to buying pregnancy tests and tampax. I invite in guest speakers and run activities. I deal with mental health issues. I help the students out. They know I have their back all the time."**

The importance placed by Youthreach frontline staff on teaching is also evident in their discussion of education, describing education as a “structured process of learning” and the process of “enabling young people with the skills, abilities, knowledge and attitudes required to function in society and cope mentally with the pressures of life”. 107 respondents refer specifically to gaining “skills” and 75 refer to getting “knowledge”, expressing how education is “enabling others to acquire the necessary skills in order to fully participate in society and to study further if they choose to do so”. The term “teach” and “teaching” is used 34 times in the responses, including as the “process of teaching and learning of knowledge, skills, etc” and as the “process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, morals, beliefs, habits, and personal development. Educational methods include teaching, training, storytelling, discussion and directed research”.

Respondents refer to formal educational delivery as “dissemination of subject-specific information by an expert”, the “act of teaching” and “process of facilitating learning, skills and personal development”.

The emphasis placed on the emphatic, learner-centred teaching approaches are evident in the responses from Youthreach employees above. It allies with the holistic and relational approach which was discussed in previous studies about Youthreach (Gordon, 2013; NEPS, 2017; Hickey et al., 2020; Smyth et al. 2018). Both give a richer insight into the type of education offered in Youthreach beyond the skills and task-orientation also evident in the DES’s description of Youthreach.

Basic skills training, practical work training and general education are features of the programme, and the application of new technology is integrated into all aspects of programme content.

There is a strong emphasis on personal development, on the core skills or literacy/ numeracy, communications and IT, along with a choice of vocational options and a work experience programme.<sup>10</sup>

The themes of Youthreach employees’ responses can be summarised by the statement from one participant that Youthreach education seeks to support learners in their development and progression where they can come to a safe and secure environment knowing that whatever targets they set can be achieved with the correct support and effort on their part.

### 3.4 YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES’ ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In order to better understand the role and responsibilities of Youthreach educators, respondents were asked to describe in their own words what they do every day. The most frequent response to this question was “teacher” (82 mentions), followed by “resource” person (22 mentions), and “manager” (14 mentions). A summative overview of how respondents listed their responsibilities is presented in the wordcloud on the next page. This reflects the very wide scope of activities that are involved in these responsibilities.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/>

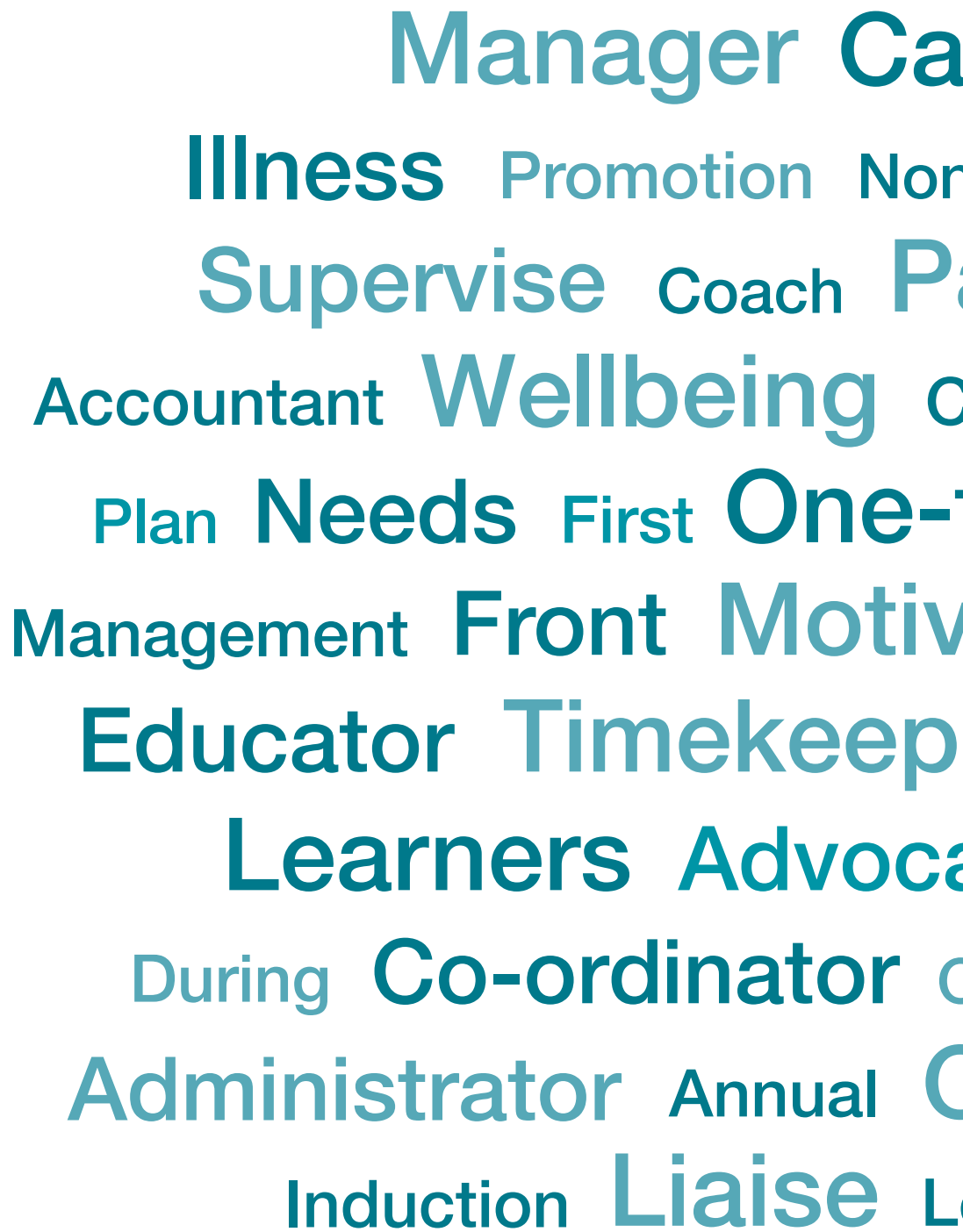


Figure 4: Wordcloud of how respondents describe their role.

retaker Meetings  
n-teaching **Special** staff  
parents Aider **Cook**  
cleaning **Student** Groceries  
to-one **Leave** Teacher  
vator Timetable **Line**  
er Training **Modelling**  
ate **Advisor** Education  
Cover **Cleaner** Support  
Conduct Positive **Foster**  
leader **Time** Centre

Respondents refer to being “an all-rounder” who can be a teacher, a coordinator, resource person, a good role model, giving the benefit of experience and getting learners to work and think for themselves. Respondents referred to their diverse tasks and responsibilities, including:

- Management activities of linking with staff for support and supervision, writing reports, creating timetables, QQI quality assurance, completing audits, program development, liaising with the external examiners, organising extra-curricular activities, applying for funding and additional support for learners, submitting learners’ final portfolios into the QBS system.
- Pedagogical responsibility for teaching and assessments, lesson planning, internal verification of learner’s portfolios, attending training, providing literacy and other learning supports.
- Relational responsibilities such as providing a listening ear and a kind word to all.
- General duties such as serving meals, cleaning, organising extra-curricular activities.

As learners’ lives and needs are diverse, the role of Youthreach staff also varies. They work across different spheres and areas, flexibly responding to different needs as they occur and linking with a wide variety of partners, acknowledging that

**"learners needs are complex and therefore extends my role to be a coach, drugs/sexual & mental health counsellor, carer, loco parentis, adviser, link in with social workers and case conferences, work experience supervisor, maintain attendance records, administration, and, most importantly, to champion young people. I am also the health and safety representative, cleaner (at times), key holder, develop timetables, cover classes when staff are sick, supervise breaks, support the coordinator in the daily running of the centre, monitor student behaviour, support staff, lead worker representative, and be prepared for class .... this list is not exhaustive."**

Core to the role of Youthreach is the relational work with learners who have left the schooling system early for a variety of reasons. A Youthreach Coordinator described their role as working

**"closely and collaboratively with the centre team to provide a safe and supportive environment to young people for whom mainstream education is no longer an option. We provide a parallel pathway for them to achieve their education and personal development goals and to be the best version of themselves they can be so that they can progress positively on to education, training or employment."**



For many Youthreach learners, their experiences of schools have been negative and re-building positive learning relationships in a safe environment is a vital part of the role provided by Youthreach staff.

**"My work involves teaching early school leavers in a second chance educational setting. Building good relationships with students is hugely important. Some students have been through really tough times and so listening to students, having empathy and showing kindness is also [an] important part of my role as an educator."**

**"I work with early school leavers who have left mainstream education for a variety of reasons by empowering them and supporting them to achieve their educational, personal, and vocational goals in a safe holistic environment."**

This requires Youthreach staff to take a particular approach to education which is understanding, non-judgement and deeply learner centred. This is described in greater detail in later sections. Being mindful and attuned to learners' past experiences to create a clear structure and process for future learning is central in the pedagogical role of Youthreach staff.

**"I am an educator who listens, supports, and teaches young people, who otherwise would be left by the wayside because our traditional outdated education system fails them."**

**"My role is to welcome, be non-judgmental, accept, understand and be mindful of past situations, encourage each student to attend every day, empower each student, regain their confidence and belief, ensure that the lessons are fun, and each student has a good understanding and experience of what task they must complete. Always be mindful of how vulnerable and broken some of our students are."**

Youthreach staff are very conscious of the courage of their learners and the role of Youthreach in supporting their ongoing learning journey, describing how they "work with young teens who have had the courage to come back to education and get their qualifications so that they can achieve their full potential and continue on to work or further or higher education".

### 3.5 MAIN WORK CHALLENGES

The Youthreach employees’ most prevalent work challenges were:

1. Time to address the needs of learners with learning difficulties (mentioned by 236 staff).
2. Pressure to achieve full certification (mentioned by 235 staff).
3. Workload (mentioned by 223 staff).

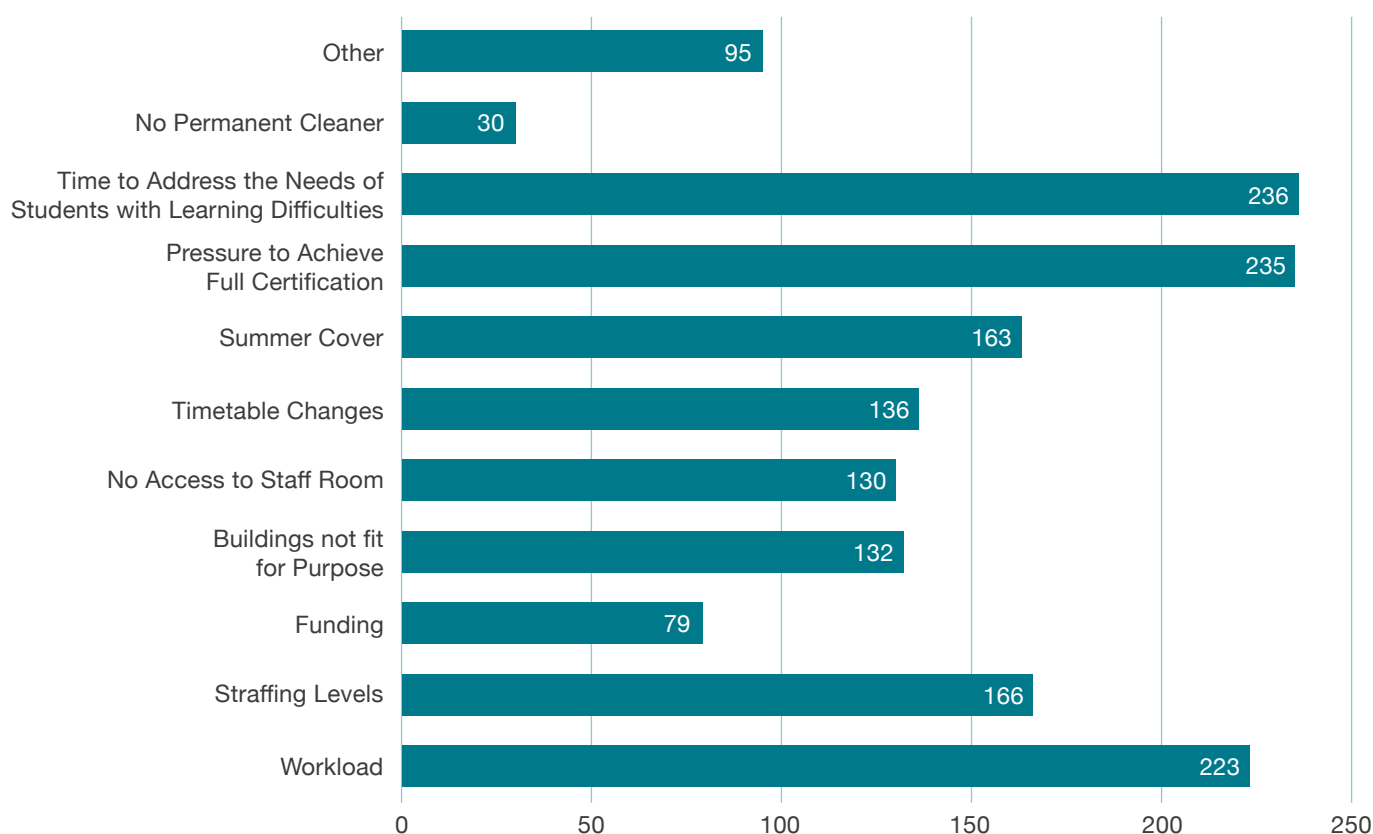


Figure 5: Number of respondents who experienced work challenges.

#### Other Challenges Identified by Youthreach Respondents

91 respondents added other comments in relation to this question. This is in addition to later open-ended questions which allowed respondents to elaborate further on challenges which are discussed in later sections. 14 respondents commented on administration challenges from “head office”, from “QQI certification”, and “emails and additional paperwork”. 9 respondents noted the pressure and lack of support from ETB, SOLAS, DES and

management, and 22 noted staff management issues at their own centre level. These included staff contract issues – particularly for new staff, inequality of pay and conditions, mental health support for teaching staff, toxic work environment, lack of recognition, the differing demands of SOLAS and DES, and poor facilities.

Youthreach learner attendance and consistency of attendance was noted 11 times, and behavioural issues among learners were noted by 4 respondents. The extra pressures from the Covid19 pandemic was noted specifically by 4 respondents.

### 3.6 SATISFACTION WITH WORK CONDITIONS

In order to understand the impact of employment conditions on respondents' satisfaction with work, they were asked to identify their satisfaction with each condition on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Of the six main employment conditions, respondents were most satisfied with their work with learners, followed by with their colleagues. They were mostly dissatisfied with the recognition of their work by the Teaching Council. Their second dissatisfaction related to their time off; and their third dissatisfaction related to their salary. See Table 9 for further detail (with numbers closer to 1 representing dissatisfaction and numbers closer to 5 representing satisfaction).

Role	M	SD
My work with learners/learners	4.2	0.792
My colleagues	3.9	1.006
My job status	3.07	1.378
My salary	2.92	1.203
My time off	2.73	1.436
The recognition of my work by the Teaching Council	2.34	1.231

Table 9. Youthreach employees' level of satisfaction with employment conditions.

### 3.7 ADDITIONAL CONDITIONS THAT IMPACTED RESPONDENTS' SATISFACTION AT WORK

Respondents were asked an open-ended question to discuss any additional aspects of their job that impacted their satisfaction, in addition to the main employment conditions. This resulted in 146 additional comments across a range of categories. The overwhelming majority of these comments pointed to areas and issues for improvement. Only 2 out of 157 responses to this question were positive, acknowledging how fulfilling they found the role and that they "work in a very happy student centered center". 10 were qualified comments such as the following "While I am happy with the work that I do, I am unhappy with the recognition of the work that I do". In other sections of the survey discussed

later, respondents mentioned aspects of their work with which they indicated satisfaction, particularly in terms of their positive relationships with learners, positive impact on learners' lives, teaching approaches and positive relationships and support from their colleagues.

The most frequently mentioned answers in relation to work satisfaction in question 18 was the recognition of Youthreach staff role in 111 comments, half of which were about parity of esteem and opportunity between Youthreach contracts and teacher contracts, followed by comments about Youthreach as a sector (20 comments), learners and pedagogy (22 comments) and about Youthreach as an organisation (19 codes). These are represented in Figure 5.



Figure 6. Word Cloud of most frequent words used discussing satisfaction in Youthreach.

Time Education  
e Leave Teachers  
ource Mainstream  
rs Leave People  
leagues Paid Job People  
ff Week Less Pay Salary  
cher Working More  
Recognition Needs

The additional employment conditions that impacted Youthreach employees' satisfaction are discussed in the following sections.

### 3.8 LACK OF RECOGNITION

Lack of recognition and parity of opportunity with their teaching colleagues at second level was the issue mentioned most often by respondents. The lack of recognition for Youthreach staff was described as "very demoralizing", with "low morale" amongst many Youthreach staff.

**"I feel like we are recognised as second class teachers in Youthreach - we are not even classed as teachers even though we are inspected and expected to teach and support the most vulnerable in society."**

Respondents described the lack of recognition of their role by the Teaching Council, senior management in the ETB and ETBI, as well as from statutory departments of DHFERIS and Department of Education as the most significant issue impacting on them. Of the 25 specific references to the Teaching Council in the survey in a lexical search, all are critical comments about the lack of recognition and support for Youthreach positions. The lack of equity with their teacher colleagues at second level is the most significant issue, leading to notable inconsistencies in working conditions between Youthreach and second level teaching staff in particular.

**"I am not recognised for my teaching as I am a resource person; yet I had an inspector from the Department of Education sit in my class recently and inspect my teaching but I'm not recognised as a teacher. I don't get the teacher pay, the recognition, or the holidays. I feel deflated all the time - I feel worthless in my job yet I have a H dip in teaching and education. Some of my work colleagues have a level 5 and they have a teaching contract."**

**"I am on the entry level salary pay scale despite my qualifications and receive no bonus for my degree. [My] ETB refuses to allow us to take any annual leave entitlement during term time."**

Respondents described how their educational qualifications and experience were not recognised as equivalent to their teaching colleagues at second level.

**"I feel that for having my degree and masters I am not respected with a correct title, salary or working hours and I feel less than the teachers here. This feeling makes me think I am not equal to that of a teacher even though I do the same job."**

**"I am not considered (or paid) as a teacher, even though I am fully qualified and registered with the Teaching Council. This is simple pay discrimination."**

**"I do the same work as a teacher (with extensive additional duties) but I am not recognised as such."**

They pointed to the inconsistencies for the sector where they were "classed as non-teaching staff when my subject/s are part of a learners' major award. Is the award valid if that is my status?" This raises profound questions about the status and value placed on work roles in the sector – encapsulated in following statement: "Resource workers are expected to be everything but recognized as nothing." This has importance consequences for recognition of teaching staff and their multi-faceted capacities, through qualifications and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). It raises key questions about recognition of the status of Youthreach in the FET sector and the wider educational system.

What does this say about how we as staff are valued? Also, how our students are valued? Their educators should not be "worth" less than educators in mainstream system.



### 3.9 INEQUITIES IN ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES AND ANNUAL CALENDAR FOR YOUTHREACH

Annual leave and working conditions over the summer were also mentioned as a challenging issue, not only in terms of the lack of equity with second level teaching colleagues who are off during these months but the impact it has on their own wellbeing.

**"Staff feel quite burnt-out during midterms etc when teaching staff are off and resource people are still in work."**

**"Having less holidays than our colleagues in mainstream [schooling] is the hardest thing for us to deal with. It is soul destroying and unfair we work as hard/ if not harder than them."**

This inequity also has an impact in terms of the running of activities and centres during midterms and summers when teachers are off.

**"How learners are expected to attend a centre in summer months with no teaching staff. It is an extremely stressful time in those months, putting plans together for the new academic year and manage the learners on a daily basis. June of this year for example I was the only centre manager (resource staff on maternity leave and another resource staff left). These were not initially replaced. Learners could not be brought into the centre with only 1 staff member so plans and activities had to be set up for online. It was an extremely difficult and stressful month. There are weeks also when I complete more than 22 hours of class contact due to staff absences. How I do this, while managing a centre (for less money than the teaching staff on less hours, etc) is baffling."**

Many respondents highlighted the impact that this has on their health and life conditions.

**"The knowledge that my decision to work in Youthreach as opposed to mainstream has hindered my chances of getting a mortgage and building a house as I am on a significantly lower pay grade despite doing considerably more hours."**

**"My colleagues - my single resource staff member has gone out on sick leave twice in the last year thankfully just for short periods - each time as a result of stress and illness brought on by stress. I have had very little sick leave for staff over the last two years despite Covid - despite have staff members who are in recovery from cancer or who have partners which made them vulnerable to covid - this is remarkable."**

Many respondents recounted how they struggled with their role because of their working conditions. For some, the conditions and physical environment in the centre was a big issue, as explored later. Time was also a significant issue. For many, the differences in annual leave allowances with their teaching colleagues at second level was cited as a significant issue. This was not only in terms of equitable working conditions, but the lack of time to recuperate and restore mental health and energy levels over the breaks.

**"I do not feel I get any external recognition or support for the role I do. My mental health has suffered since I started this job which I never had before and I blame not having time to recuperate unlike teachers who have 3 months and who do not have to deal with the many issues I do each day from own classroom management to student behaviours on a daily basis and teachers' complaints and issues about students that they feel they can't manage."**

Respondents expressed a keen sense of the specificity of the learners attending Youthreach and the impact that their own working conditions had on this. They described their work “with, for a variety of reasons, students that are disadvantaged in their previous negative experience of school and their social backgrounds”. While many respondents described general satisfaction with their work with learners, they expressed frustration that their workload does not allow them to spend as much time with learners in learning activities. This sense of commitment to learners was core in the reason why they worked and stayed in Youthreach. They were conscious that the system needed to be responsive to learners’ needs, and called for a review of the rationale and timing of Youthreach over the full year including the holiday period, as they are asking learners who had already struggled with school to spend a longer annual year in Youthreach.

Survey respondents recognised the impact of this on learners.

**"Learners are being disadvantaged as teachers are not being attracted to job opportunities in Youthreach due to the working conditions and holiday entitlements and pay differences. Learners should be entitled to the same level of education from qualified teachers in their subject areas as in the school system to give them the best chance later. Youthreach staff are often referred to as ‘teacher plus’ due to the wide range of other duties and skills involved in the role."**

This ‘teacher plus’ identity also impacted on their teaching and pedagogy.

**"In a lot of ways Youthreach staff have more of a workload than secondary school teachers do. An example of this is we have to formulate our own modules through QQI whereas secondary school teachers get handed textbooks."**

### **3.10 DIFFERENT ROLES: YOUTHREACH RESOURCE PERSON/ASSISTANT COORDINATOR**

The lack of equivalent recognition impacted differently on those in Youthreach Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator roles. While the formal definition of this role was outlined in Section 1, respondents described different experiences of their role in practice. A Youthreach Coordinator described how changing their role from Teacher to Coordinator has resulted in a longer year and very little time off. Most coordinators were responsible for a significant scope of activities in managing the centres, but were often working on a “Youthreach Coordinators contract. This means I am paid less than the Teachers I manage and have to much less time off”. They describe how they were caught in the tensions between different staff ranking, with the different contract positions of Resource Person and Teachers putting huge pressure on them. “As Co-ordinator I hear "them v us" all the time. I have no scope or ability to help either side”. Of the 24 mentions of contracts across all the open responses in the survey in a lexical search, 23 of these describe the difficulties and tensions inherent in their contract.

The survey respondents described how a “resource worker is responsible for the day to day running of the centre in much the same way as a vice principal is, but the role is not recognised in the same way in relation to pay or holidays etc”. They “work as teachers, counsellors, administration staff, cleaners and maintenance people for less recognition and pay than our teaching colleagues”. They described how they juggled finding time to teach and completing all the other tasks that were part of their role.

**"I feel that we are not treated as teachers by the ETBs yet we are expected to complete a curriculum and teach. We are also expected to complete administration tasks for the running of the building and programme in between. We are teachers when exams come and resource workers for summertime and the summer programme. We finish the middle of July even though we have completed the academic calendar by May."**

The resource staff continued to teach subjects but on a lower salary to their teaching colleagues and have administrative tasks included in their duties. Most contentious was the lack of comparable recognition and conditions to their teaching colleagues mentioned earlier.

**"I do more as a resource person to meet the additional needs of learners, as well as teach my subjects, than the 'teachers' in the Centre that get paid more than I do and receive more perks than I do. And I'm not recognized by the Teaching Council."**

**"I feel that there is a major unfairness between the status of teachers and resource [workers]. We work more hours, have more responsibility and jobs to do but get less holidays and pay."**

**"We are expected to teach the 22 hours per week yet have to take on roles such as coordinating the QQI, update accounts, WRAT 5, mentoring, help with timetabling and be available to learners when they have issues outside our subject area too. Teachers get their extra duties recognised with a and b posts, reduction in contact time and extra pay."**

**"Resource people are expected to fill every void for far worse pay and conditions than teaching staff."**

This lack of parity for Resource Persons and Teachers despite same qualifications, role and experience leads to a sense of a two-tier system between teachers and resource persons in the sector which "causes huge 'them and us' mentality among staff and has created a negative atmosphere" in centres where staff work side-by-side.

This division permeated through all levels of the organisational structures and human resources protocols, with respondents highlighting the existence of different contracts and conditions of work between staff working in the centres. Many Youthreach study respondents described different annual Fixed Term Contracts, lack of increments for those on part-time contracts, slow or unclear process for Recognition of Previous Learning (RPL) and roles, the lack of substitution cover for resource person, and the use of different contracts between staff working in the same centres and programmes. These differences in conditions between staff doing the same or similar teaching roles was described as "very demoralizing and upsetting".

Broader socio-economic conditions also have had a long-lasting impact on the sector with the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act (FEMPI) 2015 cuts and different contracts for those employed post-2011 causing lingering tensions. The lack of consistency in hours offered to staff and the limited hours offered to many staff was also contentious, leading to variation across the sector and individuals being de-motivated on a personal level due to annual negotiation and uncertainty over hours. The increased workload was also noted by respondents who recounted that "I'm with Youthreach over 20 years and my workload has doubled".

There is a sense of a lack of career progression or pathways in the sector, which potentially pushes staff out of the sector.

**"Not enough progression available in Youthreach and progression for a teacher to coordinator or resource is a demotion in salary terms, so really as a teacher there is no incentive to progress or even deputy roles available."**

**"Only job where the more experience you have, the less qualified you become and the less attractive to other employers."**

**"Being a Resource Person is a very difficult job, we are over worked and under paid. Those of us who stay, stay for the learners. That said I feel I must leave my position very soon as I can no longer justify accepting these conditions to myself."**

Teachers employed in Youthreach and recognised by the Teaching Council were also conscious of these divisions and consequences in their workplace.

**"I'm a secondary school teacher and I understand we don't fall under "Further Education" or "Secondary Schools" however it needs to be decided which one because we get the negative parts of both and none of the positive. We should no longer be in the grey area all the time. A decision needs to be made so we are clear."**

**"I have been teaching 15 years in Youthreach and I feel I have an identity crisis in explaining my role to my secondary school colleagues and this wears me down."**

### **3.11 SATISFACTION WITH YOUTHREACH SECTOR AS A WHOLE**

Respondents highlighted a lack of recognition in their comments about their satisfaction with Youthreach sector as a whole. Respondents felt that "YR caters for young people who are most at risk with a staff cohort who are often forgotten about and never listened to." Echoing the lack of recognition expressed about staffing, survey respondents were critical of the lack of recognition given to Youthreach as a specific service within FET. They felt that there was a lack of formal recognition by state bodies of their work in particular from the Teaching Council and the Department of Education who were perceived as being "very school focused", and not supportive or aware of Youthreach. There was a keenly felt sense that statutory agencies do not understand what occurs in Youthreach centres, with several respondents noting the distinctiveness of Youthreach's education to 'mainstream' schooling.

**"Youthreach is totally different to mainstream [education]. With lots of different challenges from student daily. It is very hard to cover class work as students have so many issues. Time is taken to always look after their concerns and wellbeing. My feeling is that ETB's and Teaching Council really don't know what teachers go through. Yes, they read all the reports. But really you have to experience what a coordinator, teacher, resource person goes through yearly to really understand what pressures and stress that all staff go through in a Youthreach centre."**

This lack of recognition was particularly pertinent in relation to the lack of recognition of the status of Youthreach teachers by the Teaching Council as discussed previously. Other organisational features also played into this, such as different expectations about the nature of learning and learner support, with “Inspectors com[ing] in and see[ing] it as a school but yet we have different goals we want to achieve as [Youthreach] is student based”. The full calendar year of Youthreach services meant the ongoing work of Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator over the summer when teachers are off caused challenges of staffing and type of provision and supports to learners that can be offered. Respondents were very conscious that the purpose and structure of Youthreach in statutory regulations created complexities and anomalies.

**"Youthreach is effectively a mainstream intervention in an out of mainstream setting. We are inspected by the Dept. of Ed and are subject to Child Protection requirements, yet we are in the very Adult Sector of Further Ed. All the major issues stem from this anomaly and the refusal of the Dept of Ed to take ownership of us despite their constant inspections."**

In other instances the different cultures and ethos of Youthreach centres meant some were “very like franchises in the business world. Some Co-ordinators look at the numbers and fill the centre to meet the numbers game”. Respondents noted how a business approach like this to education was very disheartening for staff and learners as “the right students need to be on the right course not just for numbers”.

### 3.12 WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance refers to an intersection between employees’ work-related activities and their personal lives (Brough et al., 2020). Traditionally, there was a clear distinction between work and family life. Nonetheless, researchers acknowledge that work-life balance has become more nuanced, especially post-pandemic (Palumbo, 2020). With hybrid work and increased use of technology, work matters often permeate family life and vice versa. As long as individuals can assimilate both aspects of their lives without feeling overwhelmed, they are deemed to have good work-life balance. Equally, when distress from work-related issues impacts negatively on their family life, the imbalance of work and personal lives is evident. In the current research, we examined employees’ contact hours, as well as the prevalence of respondents taking time out to work in the evening, during the weekend and over school holidays.

### 3.13 CONTACT HOURS

The vast majority of the respondents reported they taught more than 11 hours a week (81%) with 28% of respondents teaching 22 hours a week. See Table 10 for further detail.

Teaching hours	N	%
Less than 5 hours	17	5.2
5 to 10 hours	45	13.8
11 to 22 hours	173	53.2
22+ hours	90	27.7

Table 10. Teaching hours.

### Evening work

A total of 83% of respondents reported they have worked during the evening, and four out of 10 did it very frequently. See Table 11 for further detail.

Evening work	N	%
Always	25	7.7
Often	102	31.4
Sometimes	143	44
Never	55	16.9

Table 11. Frequency of evening work.

### Weekend work

A quarter of respondents reported they frequently worked over the weekend (23%) and additional 47% did it sometimes. See Table 12 for further detail.

Weekend work	N	%
Always	10	3.1
Often	66	20.3
Sometimes	151	46.5
Never	98	30.2

Table 12. Frequency of weekend work.



## Working during centre closed times

Almost half of the respondents frequently work during the centre closure time, such as holidays or mid-term break. Additional 36% did it sometimes. See Table 13 for further detail.

Centre closure work	N	%
Always	72	22.2
Often	82	25.2
Sometimes	116	35.7
Never	55	16.9

Table 13. Frequency of work during school closure.

Overall, large percentage of Youthreach staff responding to this study, work regularly in the evening, over the weekend and during the centre closure time, such as summer, Christmas, or Easter holidays. In research conducted with primary school leaders in Ireland (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a), 73% of them took their weekends off and 81% took time off during school closure. Similarly, most of the post-primary school leaders in Ireland take their weekend off (69%) and take a respite over holidays (79%) (Burke & Dempsey, 2021b). Therefore, compared to their colleagues in primary and post-primary school, the Youthreach employees reported taking significantly less time off over the weekend and school holidays. Taking regular respite from work was associated with higher levels of wellbeing, performance, more energy and life satisfaction and it improved employees' ability to cope effectively with stressful situations (Gu et al., 2020). Lack of adequate respite leads to fatigue, burnout, depression, and a range of mental and physical health issues (Toker & Melamed, 2017).

## 4. Wellbeing and Illbeing

According to the World Health Organisation (1948), health refers not only to the absence of illness but also the presence of wellbeing. Therefore, in the current research, we assessed respondents' symptoms of illbeing, e.g., depression, as well as a range of psychological resources indicating their wellbeing, e.g., social capital, that helped them cope with daily challenges more effectively. In addition, we added a health component that assesses their physical health.

For each component of wellbeing and illbeing, we reviewed the score, compared it with similar research and created two regression models to identify if the components of the models that indicate work conditions had any impact on respondents' wellbeing. The following are the models we created:

**Model 1**, behavioural conditions: length of service, contact hours, evening, weekend, and holiday breaks

**Model 2**, cognitive conditions: satisfaction with work relating to students, colleagues, job status, salary, recognition of work by the Teaching Council.

### 4.1 ILLBEING

In the current research illbeing was measured as the presence of depression, anxiety disorder, chronic stress and perceived stress, as well as compassion fatigue, measured by the presence of burnout and secondary trauma.

### Depression

Depression is a mood disorder. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders version 5 (DSM, 2013), adults need to have at least five symptoms lasting over two weeks of the following: depressed mood, loss of interest and pleasure, weight loss or gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation or retardation, fatigue, feeling worthless or having excessive guilt, decreased concentration, suicidal thoughts. In this research, we used DASS-21 questionnaire, which is a validated survey that identifies the presence of depression based on seven questions relating to symptoms of depression. Depending on the number of symptoms, respondents were grouped as having no depression, mild depression, moderate depression or severe depression.

Most of the respondents did not report symptoms of depression (84%, n=272). However, 12% (n=39) of respondents reported mild depression, followed by 4% (n=13) experiencing moderate depression, and one person (.3%) reporting severe depression. The prevalence of depression is therefore similar to national average during the pandemic (Hyland et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a systematic review of international studies of teachers' illbeing during the pandemic showed that on average, 19% of teachers reported symptoms of depression (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021), which is similar to the Youthreach staff. Taking all into consideration, Youthreach employees do not have a higher rate of depression than other sample of teachers both in Ireland and nationally.

## Contributors to Depression

**Model 1:** Of the five behavioural work conditions (length of service, contact hours, evening, weekend and holiday break), only working during centre's closed time predicted respondents' depression. Therefore, employees who experience symptoms of depression should take extra care to ensure they take adequate respite over holiday period. Equally, to prevent employees' development of depression, it is crucial for the FET management to put adequate resources to avoid holiday work by Youthreach employees.

**Model 2:** Of the five cognitive work conditions (satisfaction with work relating to students, colleagues, job status, salary, recognition of work by the Teaching Council), relationship with colleagues, job status and the recognition of work by the Teaching Council impacted on respondents' depression. Lack of satisfaction with these conditions predicted higher levels of depression. Therefore, more effort should be taken by the Department of Education, Teaching Council and management to ensure that the Youthreach employees feel recognised for the work they do. Also, quality team assessments should be conducted in centres, to identify their relational strengths and ways in which individual employees' satisfaction with their relationship with colleagues is improved.

## Anxiety

Most of the respondents did not experience anxiety (82%, n=266). However, 5% reported a mild, and 9% (n=30) moderate anxiety, whereas twelve respondents experienced severe (3%, n=11) or extremely severe (.3%, n=1) anxiety. The prevalence of anxiety disorder is similar to the national average during the pandemic (Hyland et al., 2020).

**Model 1:** Of the five behavioural conditions (length of service, contact hours, evening, weekend, and holiday break) only working during centre's closed time predicted respondents' anxiety. Therefore, employees who experience symptoms of anxiety should take extra care to ensure they take adequate respite over holiday period.

**Model 2:** Of the five cognitive work conditions (satisfaction with work relating to students, colleagues, job status, salary, recognition of work by the Teaching Council), those who did not feel their work was recognised by the Teaching Council and were not satisfied with their relationship with colleagues reported higher levels of anxiety. Thus, Teaching Council must initiate changes that help Youthreach staff feel their work is valued and recognised, and teamwork interventions must be applied, especially when respondents experience higher anxiety levels.

## Chronic Stress

The majority of respondents did not report any chronic stress (94%, n=304), despite 43% of respondents experiencing a lot of stress at work. This may be due to their well-developed coping strategies. However, a small percentage of respondents (4% n=15) reported experiencing a mild level of chronic stress, followed by 2% reporting moderate levels.

**Model 1:** Chronic stress was not predicted by the measured working conditions, such as the length of service, contact hours, evening, weekend, or holiday break.

**Model 2:** Chronic stress did, however, predict some of the five cognitive work conditions. Namely, those who were not satisfied with their relationship with colleagues, their job status and their work recognition by the Teaching Council reported higher levels of chronic stress.

### Perceived Stress Experienced in Term One

Perceived stress levels reflect how stressful respondents felt during the school year's first term. This subjective measure of stress does not consider how harmful they believed stress was to them. Research indicates that those who experience a lot of stress and believe it to be harmful to them are negatively affected by it (Crum et al., 2015). However, those with a more stress-dis-enhancing attitude towards stress are significantly less affected by stressful situations, even when experiencing a lot of stress. At the same time, a moderate stress level is an optimal amount of stress for respondents to feel engaged at work. In the current sample, 84% of respondents experienced moderate or a lot of stress in the first term of the school year. See Table 14 for further detail.

Stress	N	%
A little	51	15.7
Moderate levels	136	41.8
A lot	138	42.5

Table 14. Experience of stress during term one

**Model 1:** Of the five work conditions (length of service, contact hours, evening, weekend, and holiday break) only working during centre's closed time predicted respondents' perceived stress. Therefore, employees who experience symptoms of stress should take extra care to ensure they take adequate respite over their holiday period.

**Model 2:** Of the five cognitive work conditions (satisfaction with work relating to students, colleagues, job status, salary, recognition of work by the Teaching Council), those who did not feel their work was recognised by the Teaching Council and were not satisfied with their relationship with colleagues reported higher levels of perceived stress. Thus, Teaching Council must initiate changes that help Youthreach staff feel their work is valued and recognised, and teamwork interventions must be applied, especially when respondents experience higher perceived stress levels.

## Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a condition of physical and emotional exhaustion caused by taking on other people's suffering, especially when they experienced significant levels of trauma. In the context of Youthreach employees it may be suffering experienced by their students. In the current report, compassion fatigue comprises job burnout and vicarious trauma that occurs as a result of being exposed to their students' traumatic events. Higher levels of compassion fatigue is associated with higher attrition rates among educators, not to mention the mental health challenges they experience following their episodes.

Overall, the majority of respondents (74%, n=241) did not report compassion fatigue. However, 19% (n=61) reported moderate levels of fatigue, whereas 7% (n=23) reported high levels of fatigue.

**Model 1:** The best predictor of compassion fatigue was (1) working during the centres' closed times (e.g., mid-term, summer break), (2) frequent evening work, and (3) length of service, whereby those who worked longer were more likely to experience Compassion Fatigue.

**Model 2:** Of the cognitive work conditions, lower satisfaction with relationships with colleagues, job status and work recognition by the Teaching Council was the best predictor of experiencing higher levels of Compassion Fatigue.

In relation of the compassion fatigue component of job burnout, majority of respondents (63%, n=204) did not report it. However, some reported moderate levels of burnout (25%, n=81) and high levels of burnout (12%, n=40). Job burnout is a dangerous condition as it leads to a range of mental and physical health issues. Thus, steps should be taken to reduce the risk of burnout at work.

**Model 1:** Employees' job burnout was more likely to occur when individuals worked often during centre closed times (e.g., mid-term, summer break), and when they reported higher length of service. Thus, special care is required to prevent burnout among this group of employees.

**Model 2:** Of the cognitive work conditions, lower satisfaction with relationships with colleagues, job status and work recognition by the Teaching Council was associated with higher levels of job burnout.

The second component of compassion fatigue was vicarious trauma. The majority of respondents (78%, n=253) do not experience vicarious trauma. However, 14% (n=45) reported moderate levels of trauma and further 8% (n=27) high levels of vicarious trauma associated with work.

**Model 1:** What predicted respondents' high levels of vicarious trauma were (1) working during centre closed times (e.g., mid-term, summer breaks), (2) weekend work, and (3) length of service, in that those who worked in the centre the longest were more likely to experience vicarious trauma. The teaching hours and evening work did not predict vicarious trauma.

**Model 2:** Of the cognitive work conditions, feeling dissatisfied with job status and work recognition by the Teaching Council was the best predictor of experiencing higher levels of vicarious trauma.

The predictive models for vicarious trauma suggest that employees who struggle the most find it difficult to balance their challenging job, how well others recognise it, and how much support they are getting in their centre. Therefore, urgent support should be offered to anyone experiencing these challenges.

## 4.2 WELLBEING

Wellbeing refers to a range of outcomes and symptoms of psychological, emotional and social health. There are over 100 measures of wellbeing, which assess a variety of resources that individuals and communities use to maintain and increase their wellbeing and cope more effectively with adversity. In this research, we measured wellbeing as the presence of resilience, happiness, personal and work-related flourishing.

### Resilience

Resilience was measured using the Brief Resilient Coping Scale comprising four items (Smith et al., 2008) and it assesses respondents' ability to respond to stress in an adaptive way, such as searching for creative ways to alter difficult situations, controlling their reaction to stress, thinking for positive ways of dealing with difficult situations and actively replacing losses they encounter in their lives. Higher levels of resilience is associated with individuals being protected from depression following an exposure to trauma (Smith et al., 2008), therefore it is a useful skill when exposed to direct and secondary trauma.

The results showed that overall, the respondents were moderately resilient (M=15.29, SD=2.22). However, within the group, 20% (n=66) reported low levels of resilience, thus did not adapt well to stressful situations; the majority (55%, n=178) were moderately resilient and a quarter (25%, n=81) reported as being very resilient. Other studies reported a range of resilience between 14 and 17, thus compared with other studies, the current sample's resilience is similar (Gandhi et al., 2021; Kocalevent, 2017).

**Model 1:** None of the employees' working conditions, such as contact hours, respite (evening, weekend, centre's holidays), or length of service predicted their resilience.

**Model 2:** Of all the cognitive work conditions, being satisfied with working with students predicted employees' resilience.

### Coping styles

Of the four types of coping styles, the two most frequently coping style used by the respondents were looking for creative ways to alter difficult situations (M=4.02, SD=.77) and growing in positive ways by dealing with difficult situations (M=4.02, SD=.71). Figure 5 provides additional information.

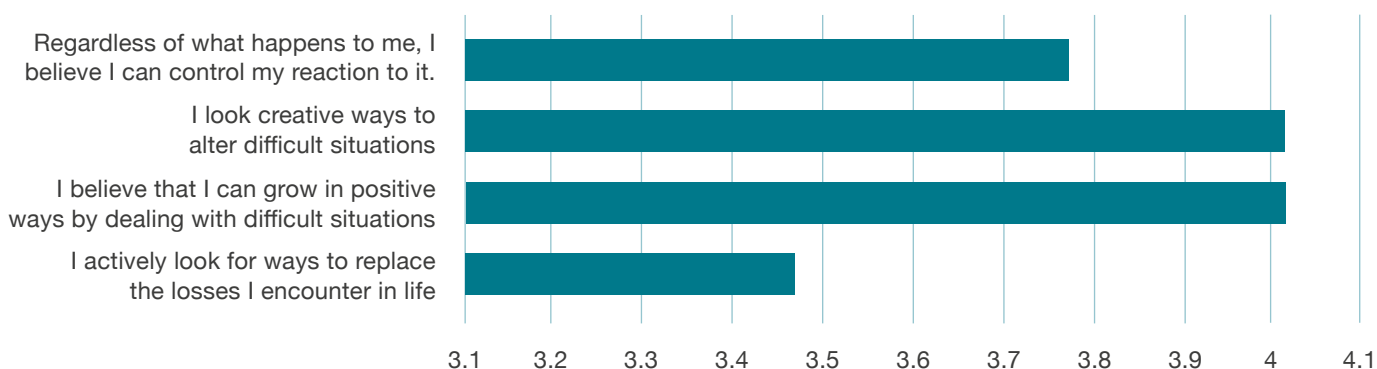


Figure 7: Prevalence of the resilient coping styles used by respondents.



## Happiness

Happiness was measured using one question: “Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are with your work?” In the current sample, the Youthreach employees recorded an overall happiness at  $M=7.37$ ,  $SD=2.51$ . Compared with research carried out in Ireland with 861 school leaders in primary schools ( $M=7.09$ ,  $SD=2.46$ ), the Youthreach staff self reported higher levels of happiness (Burke & Dempsey, 2021).

**Model 1:** Of the five behavioural work conditions, two conditions in particular predicted happiness. Employees that took regular respite over the weekend and during centre holidays reported higher levels of happiness. Also, when employees were satisfied with their relationship with colleagues at work and their job status, they reported being happier at work.

**Model 2:** Of the five cognitive work conditions, those who were satisfied with their students, colleagues, job status and recognition by the Teaching Council reported the highest levels of happiness.

## Personal Flourishing

Flourishing was measured using the Mental Health Continuum – Short Form (Keyes, 2002), a 14-item scale that assesses individuals' wellbeing. Specifically, it delves into social wellbeing, which denotes a level of participants feeling integrated into their community; emotional wellbeing, which indicates a balance of positive and negative emotions they experience daily; and psychological wellbeing, which explains general psychological functioning, whereby participants experience autonomy, they believe they can influence their environment, their life, in general, has a meaning and purpose, they feel like they grow every day, accept themselves for who they are. All these components allow individuals to live a good life,

regardless of the stressors they experience in their work and personal lives. Both continuous and categorical data was analysed, as per Keyes (2002).

A total of 55% of respondents reported flourishing psychologically in the current sample, 42.5% had moderate health, and 2.5% were languishing. These results show that the respondents' psychological functioning and social and emotional wellbeing are higher than the general public. Namely, a study with almost 10 000 people from 78 countries during Covid showed that the current study participants' flourishing levels are higher, moderate levels are lower, and languishing levels are significantly lower than the international sample (Gloster, 2020). This means that the Youthreach employees who have completed the survey have good levels of psychological and mental health resources that help them live a good life.

**Model 1:** None of the employees' working conditions, such as contact hours, respite (evening, weekend, centre's holidays), or length of service predicted their psychological flourishing levels.

**Model 2:** In relation to the cognitive working conditions, being satisfied with working with students and their job status predicted their flourishing levels.

## Work-related Flourishing

PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2013) was used to measure respondents' work-related wellbeing in the current study. Work-related wellbeing was associated with the extent to which work contributes to psychological and emotional wellbeing. Specifically, the scale assesses the experiences of positive emotions at work, how much cognitive engagement employees experience at work, the quality of their relationships at work, how they derive meaning from work, and a sense of accomplishment.

Additionally, the scale measured respondents' overall physical health, which relates to their life at work and outside. Both continuous and categorical data was analysed, as per Kern (2014).

**Model 1:** None of the five behavioural work conditions (length of service, contact hours, evening, weekend, and holiday break) predicted flourishing at work.

**Model 2:** Of the five cognitive work conditions (satisfaction with work relating to students, colleagues, job status, salary, recognition of work by the Teaching Council), satisfaction with students, relationship with colleagues and job status were the best predictors of psychological flourishing at work.

## Positive Emotions

The experience of positive emotions is fundamental to emotional wellbeing. The purpose of positive emotions extends to building psychological, intellectual, social, and physical resources, broadening minds, so that individuals can come up with more effective solutions to problems, as well as undoing the adverse effect of negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2004). The skill of creating positive emotions, especially during stressful events is a useful coping mechanism for Youthreach employees.

In the current study, respondents recorded high levels of experiencing positive emotions ( $M=7.26$ ,  $SD=2.19$ ), which was higher than the positive emotions experienced at work among primary school leaders in Ireland and slightly lower ( $M=7.26$  vs  $M=7.31$ ) compared with post-primary school leaders in Ireland (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a, b).

## Engagement

Engagement relates to the participants' ability to become absorbed in their work. High levels of engagement are associated with higher work performance and more satisfaction with work (Burke, 2021). In the current study, respondents' engagement at work was high at  $M=7.82$ ,  $SD=1.91$ . Compared with post-primary school leaders in Ireland, Youthreach employees' scores were lower than post-primary school leaders and higher than primary-school leaders (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a, b).

## Relationships

Relationships at work are crucial for employees. In the current survey, they were measured as supporting others and feeling supported by colleagues at work. The results indicated high levels of positive relationships developed among Youthreach employees ( $M=7.79$ ,  $SD=2.39$ ).

Compared with post-primary school leaders in Ireland, Youthreach employees' satisfaction with relationship was lower and compared with primary-school leaders, it was higher (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a, b).

## Meaning and Purpose

Meaning and purpose is the reason why employees do their job. When they find it meaningful, then they are more likely to see their work as a calling, put more effort into it and display intrinsic motivation to do their jobs well. Youthreach employees reported high levels of work meaning and purpose ( $M=8.29$ ,  $SD=2.10$ ). Research with post-primary school leaders in Ireland showed that their work was even more meaningful for them, especially after Covid-19, however, their primary-school counterparts showed lower levels of meaning and purpose for work than Youthreach employees (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a, b).

## Accomplishment

Accomplishment is our perceived sense that we make continuous progress in our endeavours, are able to achieve our work-related goals and handle any work-related responsibilities.

Respondents' sense of accomplishment was on average very good ( $M=7.88$ ,  $SD=1.72$ ). Youthreach employees scored higher than primary and post-primary school leaders in Ireland in relation to their sense of accomplishment at work (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a, b).

## Physical Health

Respondents' physical health was measured using three questions that identify individuals' perceptions of their health compared to others of the same sex and age. Youthreach employees' physical health was on average good ( $M=7.44$ ,  $SD=2.37$ ).

However, working over the weekend and having a higher number of contact hours a week was associated with poorer self-assessment of physical health. Also, length of service, evening work or working over the holidays did not predict Youthreach employees' health.

The more satisfied they were with their colleagues and their recognition by the Teaching Council, their perceived physical health was higher.

## 5. Covid, Wellbeing and Illbeing

In order to identify the perceived impact of Covid-19 on respondents' wellbeing, we asked them to express how it influenced their wellness. A total of 323 respondents responded to this question, in many cases making multiple comments which were categorised under different themes. The majority of these comments highlighted negative impacts of Covid-19 on their sense of wellbeing. Most survey respondents described negative impacts whilst a minority also identified mixed or positive aspects about how the context of Covid impacted on aspects of their lives such as interpersonal relationships, blended working, quality of work-life and online teaching.

The main themes emerging from these comments were analysed in the four categories listed below and discussed in the following sections.

1. General comments about negative impact of Covid = 35 comments.
2. Organisational (20), workload (15), environmental impacts (12), online teaching (33) = 80 comments in total.
3. Impact on learners (36) and mask wearing (16) = 52 comments in total.
4. Personal impact (29), working from home (18) and family impact (54) = 101 comments.

A total of 38% of the comments focused on the personal and family impacts of Covid-19 on people's sense of wellbeing, followed by 30% of comments focused on work-related issues

to do with the organisation, workload or working environment. 19% of comments discussed the impact on and for learners, with the remaining 15% of comments spoke about the general negative impact of Covid on their sense of wellbeing.

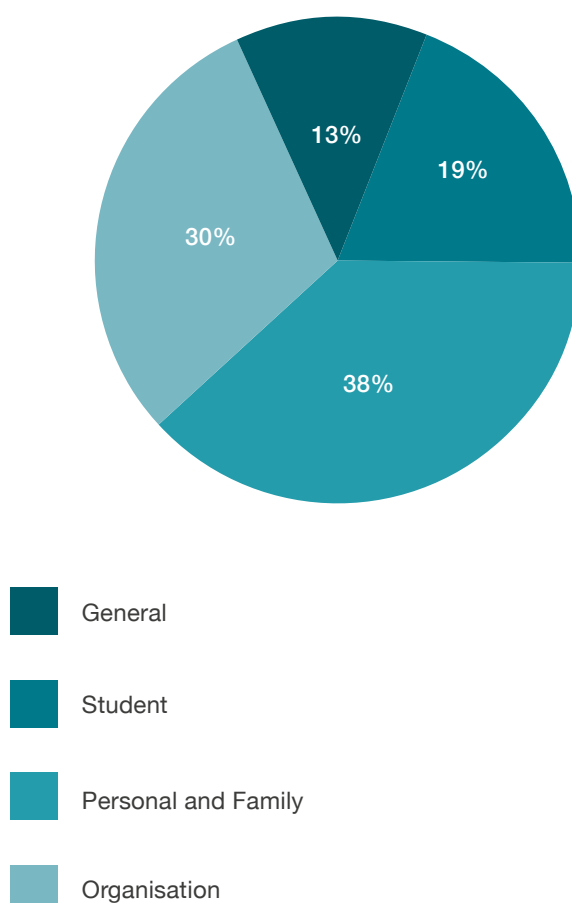


Figure 8: Impact of Covid-19 on respondents' wellbeing.

The tone of the negative comments focused on a sense of overwhelming pressure created during Covid-19 which was an “extreme and ongoing stressor at work for staff and students”, with respondents noting how it impacted “massively” on them creating a multitude of “pressures” that were both work and non-work-related. The terminology used indicated a strong discourse of danger with frequent use of words like “unpredictable”, “risk” and “danger”.

### 5.1 WORK-RELATED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 FOR YOUTHREACH EMPLOYEES

A total of 47 comments about the impact of Covid-19 were work-related, describing the impact of Covid-19 on people’s sense of wellbeing in relation to the organisation (20 comments), working environment (12 comments), workload issues (15 comments) and online teaching (33 comments). Comments focusing on organisational and environmental aspects highlighted the challenges associated with practicalities originating from implementing Covid-19 regulations in Youthreach Centres such as “stress over masks, distancing and extra work cleaning”. Staff respondents described ongoing difficulty in planning activities in their centres, due to the shifting Covid-19 related requirements that prevented or radically changed how many of their activities and events were being organised.

Respondents spoke of how the uncertainty of how Covid-19 regulations were applied to Youthreach contexts (as distinct to schools and FET settings which tended to be the focus of official guidelines). How these applied to different categories of staff were also key for those with different contracts conditions and/ or those in management, teaching, or administrative positions. Confusion about how regulations applied to this variety of conditions caused a lot of stress for respondents as they were often unclear about how regulations applied to them

and what regulations they were required to enforce at the given time in their work practices.

Respondents also highlighted the ongoing pressure of the general impact of Covid-19 on their working rhythms where “everything has become rushed and ad-hoc due to the changing and challenging environment and times. Plans can be made, scrapped, and made again in the space of a day.” This sense of shifting and continual change created what they described as a sense of “unpredictability” and at times “panic” amongst respondents. It is similar to the findings of Dempsey and Burke’s study of primary and post-primary teachers who described how they found it “difficult to live with the uncertainty of Covid” (2021: 53).

Also similar to Dempsey and Burke’s study of schools during Covid-19 restrictions, the working environment in Youthreach Centres caused specific difficulties, in particular the Covid-19 related requirements in 2020 to keep windows open for ventilation which meant learners and staff were in cold conditions all day long, particularly difficult in the winter months. The requirements for learners to work in pods, for restrictions in how people moved around the Centres caused pressure for many respondents. This was both in terms of how staff planned these flows and how they monitored and enforced regulations. Teaching staff respondents spoke of the consequences of the policies around restricted movements around the centre, as learners were assigned to specific rooms and pods. This meant that staff continually moved and no longer had specific rooms or even desks to base themselves and were “carry[ing] resources around with me all day”. Staff respondents also described the impact on their own socialisation with a lack of interaction between staff during breaks. For many, there was “hardly any engagement with staff because of Covid restrictions and guidelines in centre [which] has been difficult and very disheartening.”

In other instances, it was the organisational hierarchy and structure which impacted on Youthreach staff. Respondents spoke of how a “lack of communication and respect, the isolation, loneliness, exclusion by employer that hugely affects me negatively”. This was particular in relation to a lack of understanding or support from management for some people, with a sense that their organisation has “all policies in place on paper however they are not of any support to us when it comes to dealing with difficulties on the floor. They [senior management] just want numbers and certification while we must also tick all their boxes. All the daily eventualities we must deal with outside of that”.

This gap between institutional policies at the macro level and how they were to be implemented and experienced in practice was a significant problem for many staff. Respondents spoke about how Covid-19 regulations has increased the administrative workload, taking away time for teaching and learning and it has “exacerbated the ever-increasing emphasis on paperwork, data collection”. This has occurred due to increased regulations associated with Covid-19 while still expected to maintain “the same level of outcomes” across FET in relation to learners and learning outcomes.

Those responsible for managing staff spoke of the challenges of having to “lead” while personally enduring Covid-19 and its restrictions themselves. They spoke of the difficulties of maintaining regular number of staff to ensure continuity of delivery for learners during this time. The interpersonal aspect of management was clearly evident with respondents speaking of the challenge of “looking after staff who lost family members and their fears around being in the classrooms with Covid outbreaks. It kept me awake at night and led to compassion fatigue”.

Several respondents described an additional workload that resulted from Covid-19, especially working from home where Covid-19 has “added extra workload on top of what we already do and as a result of working from home, your working day is now longer and work issues are now in your own home”. Many found this situation exhausting and felt that it was not recognised sufficiently by their employers, describing “how undervalued I feel in the workplace. We worked extremely hard during the lockdown engaging with students and there is really no appreciation of what we do with FET.” They felt that Covid-19 regulations had made teaching difficult, with the heavier workload of online teaching experienced as “mentally draining”.

In other instances, this was allied with the changes in their role and additional pressures due to “staff shortages and staff skill set”, as well as the need for “increased support needs for students and staff”. The impact on learners was also visible, with the extended lockdowns being very difficult for learners who “require more intensive encouragement, engagement and intervention than an online class can offer.” The pedagogical challenges continued when they returned to centres as “learner disengagement and poor attendance following lockdowns has resulted in having to work much harder and more creatively with all learners when they are in. Almost a panic to get work done when they turn up.”



## 5.2 EMPLOYEES RELATIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19

In terms of teaching, comments focused on the impact of Covid-19 on staff relationships, collaborations, pedagogy, and learners described in other parts of this section, as well as 33 specific comments on the pedagogical impact of online teaching and the impact for learners.

At an organisational level, staffing was a huge issue in terms of replacing or filling in for staff who were ill or isolating. Online teaching and working conditions resulted in “disconnection with other staff [which] was overwhelming.” They spoke of their sense of changing guidelines and a feeling that Youthreach and FET was operating slower in changing Covid-19 teaching guidelines for staff, especially those on resource contracts. This links back to the earlier comments about the impact of sectoral differences in contract positions and working conditions between teaching and Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator roles.

Respondents also spoke of the general impact of the lower levels of interaction and connectivity between staff as a consequence of the reduced number of formal and informal meetings they had with each other.

**"As a result of Covid we have had less staff meetings and this has had a very negative effect on morale, more communication and connections/collaboration is needed, this would really help."**

Learner disengagement was a big issue in many centres with staff speaking about the pedagogical challenges of maintaining relationships with learners, finding that “students needed a lot more support as they were struggling... it felt like we were throwing information at the students and not teaching them”. This was similar to Dempsey and Burke’s

study of schools during Covid-19 restrictions (2021: 48-50). Youthreach staff described the consequences of this for subsequent pedagogy and learning.

**"Lockdown is very frustrating within our Youthreach centre as online learning was really not a good experience. We had even difficulty to get learners to answer the phone for a wellbeing call. My feeling of frustration was the fact that we had very little education productivity during lock down."**

**"I felt isolated and also under pressure to hit unrealistic targets for students who struggle at the best of times and now faced with remote learning were falling behind even more."**

Staff noted the different approaches needed for online teaching, “as I had to learn to work differently (online)” accompanied by a sense that this change in pedagogy was “not always taken into consideration”. This was particularly challenging for those teaching practical subjects; for example, describing how it is “very hard to teach woodwork online to students”.

Staff spoke of the increased workload associated with teaching online during the lockdown, similar to Dempsey and Burke’s study in schools (2021:36-38). They described the bigger workload, working longer hours and the intensity of online teaching. Part of this was impacted by the pivots between online and face-to-face teaching modes as Covid-19 restrictions changed, where

**"staff had to devise amended assessments and remote timetables, complete a covid inspection and prepare the centre for the return of in centre classes (then revert back again to online delivery!). Because we have had to have contingency plans for everything it has made everything more difficult and stressful."**



Several factors impacted on this including the additional tasks associated with the lockdown, such as “providing counselling support to learners online and by telephone - this was very challenging and an emotionally intrusive activity within my home setting”. Getting assignments completed on time was a major challenge as deadlines continued to loom and learners had to finish course work.

Many respondents spoke of the huge and unanticipated learning they had to do rapidly and, in the moment, to enhance their own TEL skills and capacities. They spoke of learning new digital skills as they had to learn to be creative and skilled in delivering online classes. They had a very rapid shift from being a

**“face to face teacher [and] the technical skills I have had to learn in a very short time span to facilitate online teaching and learning have been overwhelming at times. The ETB were very quick to specify what they wanted done but not so efficient in supporting or training teachers/tutors to do so. Once again my work colleagues were my main source of support.”**

Respondents also described how, with time, they improved their IT skills and capacity to teach online, which has had positive effects of improving confidence and taken away the worry and stress about online teaching.

### **5.3 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LEARNERS AND LEARNING**

The impact of Covid-19 on learners and learning was highlighted by many respondents who spoke of the overwhelmingly negative impact on “teaching, connections with students, causes tensions and upset, dealing with effects of Covid-19 on students' mental health as well as poor attendance, lack of connection with students, lack of motivation of students”. 52 comments focused specifically on the impact

on learners in total, 36 of which related to the impact on learners and 16 comments were specifically about the impact of mask wearing for learners. The wide range of impacts for learners included the challenges of engaging online with Youthreach learners who “are not IT savvy enough to engage remotely. They are also sometimes in chaotic situations and are unable to focus on schoolwork.”

The high levels of learner anxiety and mental health issues during this time were very challenging, with staff seeing more “substance abuse, behavioural issues and over-reliance on their phones”. Respondents described how “mental health issues have increased exponentially and therefore the workload has increased whereby students may need extra help/guidance/facilitation in many aspects of their time on the programme.” They recounted how they were “overwhelmed by the needs of students when they returned from lockdown”, described how their learners “really suffered, their numbness told me so mostly, only a few verbalised it in one to one online”. They felt that many Youthreach learners “were most impacted [by Covid] as families lost jobs, experienced bereavement, anxiety and mental health problems”. Similarly, Dempsey and Burke (2021: 70) found that “disadvantaged children become even more disadvantaged” in schools during Covid-19.

Mask wearing was a particular challenge for learners and learning for several reasons. Some staff described how mask-wearing can “enhance and encourage withdrawal from class”. This led staff to be “frustrated with the lack of facial expressions due to masks. This can make work difficult in interpreting the student’s state of mind.” This difficulty was also reported by teachers in Dempsey and Burke’s study of schools during Covid-19 restrictions. From their own perspective, Youthreach employees described they found “mask wearing

is exhausting” and it was “difficult teaching with a mask on all day in a cold classroom with windows open.” Trying to ensure learners kept masks on properly was a particular challenge and caused untold behavioural challenges with staff describing how they felt like they were “hounding students” and social distancing was “almost impossible to enforce”. Respondents spoke of their own concerns about catching Covid-19, especially where they or their family members were vulnerable. The changing FET policies where they may not be told that staff or learners have Covid-19 or may be unvaccinated exacerbated these concerns.

Nearly half of comments about the negative impact of Covid-19 by respondents focused on the personal and family impact. Out of a total of 101 comments, it included 29 comments about the personal impact, 54 comments about the impact on their families and 18 comments about working from and in their home environment.

Many of the 29 comments about the personal impact of Covid-19 focused on relationships and how isolation, restrictions and working from home led to “disengagement” and a “lack of social interaction with family and friends.” There was a powerful sense of the emotional impact and personal toll of the restrictions on their personal and family lives during this time, which parallels that expressed by participants in Dempsey and Burke’s (2021) study of schools during Covid-19 restrictions. Words like “isolation”, “fear”, “anxiety”, “loss”, “lonely”, “worried”, “stress”, “panic”, “nervous” and “missed” were frequently mentioned. There was a sense of uncertainty and of being anxious about the changing and reactive nature of life.

**"I have a feeling that I am constantly fighting fires instead of planning and organizing. "**

**"I wake up early on Monday mornings with a sense of anxiety and dread and I have to [take] deep breaths on the drive to work."**

Study respondents described how they have become more isolated and “anxious re restrictions, life is uncertain and can be very frustrating”. For some, they acknowledged that they are more “stressed and anxious” and so “catastrophise things that I didn't used to”. Many recounted a litany of feelings about working at home during the lockdowns including “stress, uncertainty, confusion, resentment and at times sadness”. Again, this echoed the responses of teachers in Dempsey and Burke’s (2021) study of schools during Covid-19 restrictions. The cumulative sense of the impact of the uncertainties, unending nature of the crisis and continual overload was striking amongst many comments from Youthreach respondents.

**"My empathy has turned down on occasion to a drip, which I notice I am getting irritable. I am normally able to stay on top and am called a problem solver. Covid has challenged that."**

**"I have become quieter, distant and even to a certain extent remote from others as a result of the pervasiveness of COVID 19."**

**"I have become more worried about interacting with learners and other people. I stay at home more often and often feel anxiety before doing things outside the home. I don't sleep well at night."**

In many instances these feelings were combined with the worries and stress of home situations where they were taking care of others and a sense of loss as the cycle of life and family experiences together were missed or lost due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

**"Apart from contracting COVID and managing various isolation in our household, the main difficulties I have encountered is the sense of loss I have in not seeing/sharing social and growth experiences with my own children and not seeing distant relations and friends. People have passed away, children have been born, time has been lost."**

**"I had a baby in lockdown and it has been hard with the restrictions and I feel busy now that I am back to work after so long off."**

## **5.4 ACTIONS TO ENHANCE PERSONAL WELLBEING**

When asked "What actions, if any, have you taken to enhance your personal wellbeing?", 243 comments referred to active responses that they had taken to enhance their wellbeing.

75 of these comments named specific activities to support wellbeing including yoga, mindfulness, meditation, reiki, wellness seminars and CBT training. The most frequent response was respondents described how they engage more in active exercise "for my mental health" including physical activities, "Gym, walks, talking with colleagues", "Exercise, study, gardening", "cycle, garden, walk dogs, swim", running, hiking, taken up a new sport.

For others they read, play music, listen to music, baking, be creative, engage in hobbies. Some people specifically mention exercising outdoors, walking in woods and "spending time in nature is very important and restorative for me".

Respondents described how they try to engage in more "self-care e.g., getting out for a walk etc & eating healthily".

For others, it was active plans about work including "working one day less" a week, using parental leave, "changing job location", "applying for a Career Break next year" or in another case, applying to "job share so that I can be more available to my children. This has

impacted me financially, but it has made a huge difference to my own ability to balance work and home responsibilities". Several people outlined how they are "looking to retire early". For a few people it meant a change of roles, with one participant describing how they changed job to "teach in Second-level Schools with less stress and more pay." Another person described how they have "taken on a second job which I find very satisfying, and I am investing my energy there instead with the hope of moving out of YR soon."

In other instances, respondents recounted active steps to stop working at weekends, "tried to stop being so available". Many centres and programmes integrated activities which staff find useful for their wellbeing such as "going for walks with learners for SPHE" and "integrated a weekly walk into the Youthreach timetable". Many described the active support of colleagues, staff team support. Counsellors and external supervisors were noted as people who supported them "I would not be in this job without this support". Some accessed counselling through work, but several spoke of using a private counsellor and in a few instances "tried to access counselling but was told that I didn't meet their checklist requirements to receive hours. I had to go privately". They felt that counselling and therapeutic activities "better enable me to re-evaluate my own purpose. This has helped me to look after my own needs instead of giving when my own reserves were running very low".

Respondents describe how they have actively set boundaries around their work by "saying no to certain things at work". Another participant described how they have "disengaged with a lot of the dysfunctional work of the centre and draw lines of responsibility for myself." Some noted the irony of some of their efforts "I signed up for a mental health initiative through work but then was too busy with audits and inspections to attend". Engaging with other people and ensuring that they have regular

socialisation and communication was also cited by many respondents as vital in maintaining their wellbeing, often combined with physical activities to ensure that they “meet friends and keep connected as much as possible”. 19 people responded that they had taken no actions, or very little, to enhance their personal wellbeing.

### 5.5 ADAPTATIONS BY EMPLOYERS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In terms of adaptations, if any, made by employers in response to Covid-19, respondents commented under three distinct areas:

1. Adaptations in work and organisational related issues (144 comments).
2. Counselling, wellbeing, and other supports (45 comments).
3. No or little adaptations offered (150 comments).

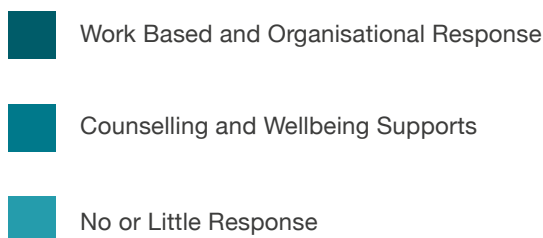
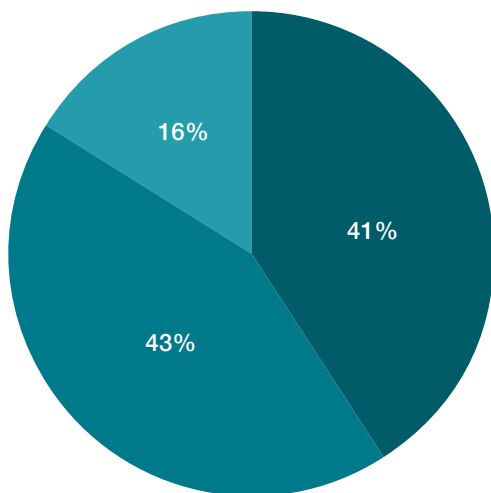


Figure 9: Adaptations made by employers in response to Covid-19.

### Adaptations in Work and Organisational Related Issues

Adaptations in work and organisational related issues in different areas were mentioned by respondents in 144 instances as outlined below.

Firstly, adaptations in relation to organisational changes in the workplace or practices of Youthreach which supported staff. These included “the decrease in class size”, “Shortened timetable when online; half-days”, flexible timetables especially when staff are on sick leave.

Interpersonal supports were noted as vital, particularly in terms of having an understanding manager or “employers [who] have been very understanding about my personal circumstances and accommodated me in my job-sharing application.” They spoke of the importance of having a “caring” and “supportive” manager, of “employers [who] have always shown appreciation for the work I do and are particularly supportive during the last year.” Connections with staff and providing spaces where they could talk and connect together was frequently mentioned, with an open-door policy and a regular “chat to see if everything's ok”.

There were formal supports as well through access to counselling and supervision (explored in the next section) as well as the Employee Assistance Service, PPE resources, information technology, and physical resources, and the ongoing CPD calendar. A clear flow of information and communications about these supports was cited as vital. Respondents spoke of the “Initiatives put in place such as support & supervision and other supports when required as well as staff CPD.” However, some staff pointed out that they “often cannot access the CPD as it is usually on during class time.”

The broader supportive approach of employers in a whole-of-centre approach was described as most supportive for many respondents.

**"We have been facilitated and encouraged to provide a positive, supportive, imaginative approach to adapting our working with learners within the COVID requirements. We have PPE and sanitization/cleaning processes in place. We had return to work training and we are certainly COVID aware in the centre... Our personal health and wellbeing has been inquired about regularly and when suffering with COVID I felt fully supported."**

### **Counselling, wellbeing, and other supports**

Study respondents cited a range of counselling, wellbeing, and other employee support services that they were informed about and encouraged to access by employers. This included existing services such as psychologists, counselling, wellbeing coordinator and employee assistance programme. Most frequently mentioned was the psychological support services. Many found these useful, saying that they were "offered the employee counselling services for myself and family". Some respondents felt that the information about these was sent to them several months into the pandemic and in other cases, was limited in its timescale (6-8 weeks) and too high a threshold to access them.

Specific initiatives and supports were also put in place specifically for Covid-19 which respondents mentioned. These ranged from online resources and general emails to all staff about wellbeing and counselling support services. Wellbeing or mindfulness days and courses were organised for staff which they were encouraged to access. Respondents listed a wide range of courses and workshops on mindfulness, mental health awareness and reflective practice. These were useful for many respondents, but a significant number of respondents were critical of their limited duration, scope and online provision.

### **No or little adaptations offered**

A total of 43% of the comments to this question were critical of the lack of support or adaptation that was offered by their employer. 150 comments made by respondents felt that no or little adaptation had been offered by their employer. In many cases, they responded simply with "none", "very little" or "can't think of any", "nothing yet", "None other than H&S [health & safety] measures". Many were unaware of any supports aside from online or telephone supports or a weekly email reminding them about online supports. There was a clear sense that this was not sufficient and too general. "Not much to be honest. There is a helpline to call if you are struggling but there is nothing on a day-to-day level in the centre."

For many respondents, the nature of the supports was problematic for them, for example several people mentioned the limitations of email, telephone and online supports offered. "Online (which I hate) meetings and also phone calls with my line manager". Others felt that adaptations and supports offered were limited in terms of effort by the employer with "the onus is on the individual to be proactive in maintaining and enhancing their own wellbeing".

Several respondents felt that the limited efforts made were limited and procedural in nature. "Limited access to standard services as per public sector norms". "Nothing meaningful that I can think of - I would be pretty sure that they [my employer] are just interested in covering themselves and ticking a box somewhere", "rubber stamp issues to cover themselves under the relevant legislation - there is no substance". Many respondents were frustrated by the lack of thought in the supports offered, with several people saying that supports and "workshops have been scheduled during my mostly non-existent breaktimes".





## 6. Looking Ahead

To assess respondents' sense of their own future work plans and potential attrition rates, respondents were asked if they felt that they would be working in Youthreach education in 5 years' time. 187 respondents responded to this question, with 41% saying no (76 people), 33% were unsure or had mixed feelings about it (62 people) and 26% felt that they will still be working in Youthreach education in 5 years' time (49 people).

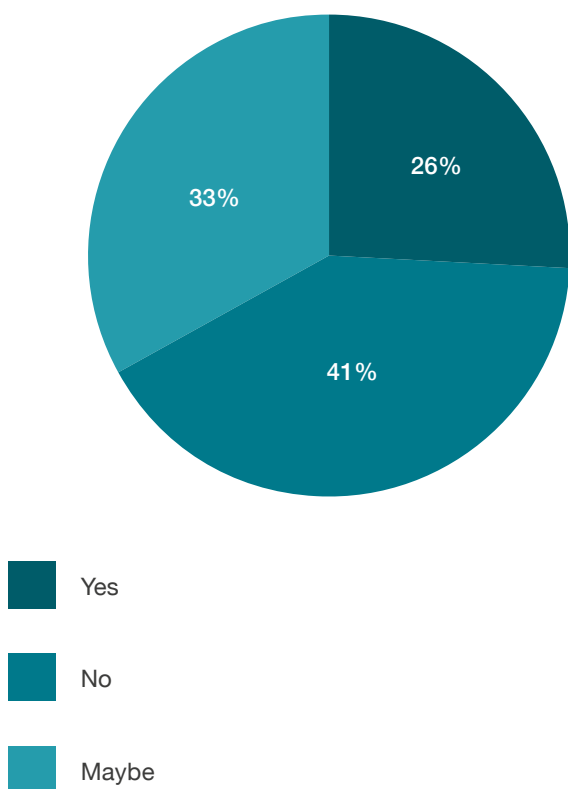


Figure 10: Respondents' intention to work in Youthreach in five years

### 6.1 RESPONSES OF THOSE WHO PLAN TO STAY

Of those who felt that they will still be working in Youthreach education in 5 years' time, half of these expressed this for positive reasons in terms of the satisfaction of working with young people. "I really enjoy my work and working with young people".

**"I see myself working in Youthreach in five years' time and hope that I will be involved in some kind of academic research of my own in relation to Youthreach."**

**"I love working with the students I get huge satisfaction from seeing them achieve and overcoming their struggles."**

Many had worked for decades in Youthreach and expressed their commitment to working in the sector. "I love working in Youthreach and feel I am very skilled to work here"

Several respondents mentioned the specific commitment to teaching in Youthreach because of its approach, pedagogy and relationships with young people.

**"I taught at mainstream [school] before coming to Youthreach ten years ago. I loved my job in mainstream but find Youthreach allows me to teach in a much more inclusive way."**

**"I love Youthreach, the idea of the course, the dynamic and flexibility of it. It is a great programme for vulnerable young people."**



**"I see the immense benefits to the Youthreach programme in general, at risk and disadvantaged young people are being helped by the programme and I like to think that I will play a part of this into the future."**

The remaining half of these responses expressed a feeling of not having a choice to leave Youthreach as they were close to retirement and are "age restricted in seeking other employment". The issue of recognition of their service was key.

**"It is not financially viable for me to leave as I can only get recognition for 5 years teaching experience even though I've been here 30 yrs."**

**"If I leave I will only get 5 years recognition for all the years I have poured into this job - I would have to start at the bottom somewhere else."**

For many, there was a sense of being unable to move with little or no progression evident to them. The word "stuck" was mentioned most often in relation to this issue.

**"I'm stuck here on a teachers contract on 22 hours, with no hope of moving to a school or ETB on same contract and pay. "**

**"If I move to mainstream, I would need to retain current salary. At moment this is not possible so feeling of entrapment within the job."**

## **6.2 RESPONSES OF THOSE WHO ARE UNSURE IF THEY WANT TO STAY**

For those who were unsure if they wanted to stay, it was for a few different reasons. For some, it was based on hopes that the conditions in Youthreach would improve.

**"Depends on the direction it takes and if improvements are made across the board. I love the job and I love the programme - I fully believe in it but it has become increasingly more difficult over the years due to added pressures on management that I feel is more admin than coordinator."**

**"As the workload increases I will have to consider my work life balance."**

Lack of career progression was key for several people. "It is hard to move around or progress, little opportunity to work your way to a higher level". Another participant describes how "There are no opportunities to progress in my role and this also affects my motivation". Respondents were conscious of the impact of their pay and working conditions on their families which was influencing their decision-making about staying in Youthreach.

**"The biggest challenge is dealing with the regret that while I chose to work in Youthreach, this has a massive implication on my family as the lower pay grade and the extremely bad holiday time not only affects me, but also effects my family. So therefore, I do have to consider taking a less rewarding job, that has better pay and conditions."**

**"I would like to progress with my career to earn a better living to support my family. If my conditions were better, I could see myself staying."**

**"I want to stay, but I am unsure if that is the best decision for my health and my family."**

Covid-19 has had an impact on the working lives of several respondents, with one person describing how "the joy has been reducing - Covid has destroyed a lot of the closeness [with learners]". Six people described themselves as "at the edge of burnout" and "I sometimes feel like I am heading for 'burnout'". These wellbeing and health concerns posed serious dilemmas for staff as described below.

**"With rising stress levels and the feeling of not being able to keep every ball in the air I have seriously considered a career change which is a pity as I do love working with these young people and giving them a second shot at life. When you do get to the end of the year it is so rewarding however the journey is becoming more and more difficult each year."**

Issues of recognition of their work and the Youthreach sector generally was central in the dilemma of many respondents as the following quotes reveal.

**"I would stay in Youthreach because of the good work, diverse learners and great staff. But the pay issue with respect to teachers is what stops me. I find it horrible that I can work the same hours as a teacher, teach classes and deal with the same struggles, even be as or more qualified than them but receive less pay, less time off and less respect in my job title. I do not feel resource person carries any weight to it, instead it sounds like I wasn't good enough to be a teacher, yet I am good enough to do the work. In a sense I am an underpaid teacher called a resource person made to work longer hours with lack of supports during our lessened holidays and summer programmes"**

**"I love the students I work with and if my work was recognised as what it is ...teaching I would continue teaching in Youthreach. It is not good enough to say these kids are fine to have 'resource workers' teaching them, they deserve and are entitled to have qualified teachers delivering their curriculum and in turn we deserve to be seen as teachers if we have that qualification."**

**"I love my job - I love the young people I work with - they have always brought purpose & meaning to my work and life and I'm really proud of the centre and all the work we have done for so many over so many years that I know they appreciate. However - I think for my own health and wellbeing I need to find a new role. It makes me so sad to think in this way."**

### 6.3 RESPONSES OF THOSE WHO WANT TO LEAVE

A total of 76 respondents said that they would not be working in Youthreach in 5 years' time. Of these, 19 people said that they would be retired or would have taken early retirement by then. Many gave the simple answer of 'no' to this question. Three people explained that they would try to change to another area of FET and five people said that they were actively seeking a teaching position in a second level school (open to those with second level teaching recognition). They acknowledged that if they change teaching role this will mean that they "will lose most of my increments as Youthreach is not considered teaching".

**"I have been working in Youthreach for many years but on a part time basis for many years with no pension contributions. When I feel I can no longer give the best of me I will have to leave, regardless of financial need as Youthreach is a place that you absolutely need to be on top your game, otherwise you will just burn out."**

A sense of despair was evident in many responses as respondents explained that they

**"love helping learners, but this job would be impossible to do long term for me. I worry so much about learners and try to help them as much as I can, but this affects my sleep and my life outside of the centre. There are not enough supports to facilitate staff to cope with all of the pressures of work and to continue long term. I also drive 150km each day for work, with almost €500 per month cost of diesel. It is unsustainable on such a low income."**

Several respondents spoke about how they cannot see themselves continuing in Youthreach but feel trapped as they are struggling to find other job opportunities.

**"[I] have been working in Youthreach for 25 years and have post grad qualifications and am constantly upskilling, challenging myself and am incredibly skilled. Yet I have not been successful in applications for other jobs. It seems like Youthreach staff are kept in their box, great to work with the most disadvantaged and challenging young people but it seems like despite all that they offer there are no opportunities. In truth I feel thoroughly disillusioned that it seems I have to remain in my job until 68."**

**"I have been studying something else in order to allow me to leave Youthreach and go into a completely [different] area."**

## 7. Concluding Discussion

This chapter gives an overview of the objectives of this research, review the context and existing literature, and outlines research design that was used to conduct this research. It gives an overview of the key findings before concluding with a summative discussion of its implications for the sector and list of future recommendations.

The research set out to explore the perspectives of Youthreach staff about their experiences and sense of wellbeing while working in the sector.

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**The project aim was: to explore the experiences and wellbeing of staffworking in the Youthreach sector, in the wake of Covid-19.**

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A review of national and international literature about Youthreach, its context and evolution, conditions of staffing and key features of working in the sector was completed. This highlighted the role of Youthreach in providing young people who leave school early with positive learning experiences, builds capacities, and provides qualifications and progression. Central themes evident in this research includes the conditions of working in Youthreach, recognition and parity of opportunity across education sectors, wellbeing amongst Youthreach staff, and amidst the context of Covid-19 and plans for the future.

The research design comprised of online survey conducted with a range of Youthreach staff nationally in December 2021. Findings about their experiences and sense of wellbeing while working in the sector, including the context of Covid-19 are summarised in the following section.

### REVIEW AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A total of 325 respondents responded to the survey, which is approximately a third of Youthreach staff. Two out of three respondents were female. Most respondents were aged over 40 and were in their role for over 10 years working in a variety of centre sizes. Respondents were located across all provinces and held various roles including Youthreach Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator and Teacher.

The Youthreach Programme was introduced in 1988 to provide young people who leave school early with positive learning experiences, build capacities, and provide qualifications and progression. Respondents defined education as “person-centred”, supporting learners to develop “academically, emotionally, socially and holistically”. Building good relationships with learners to create positive and safe learning environments and experiences was defined as central in Youthreach. Most respondents agreed that they work with disengaged learners, with the majority feeling that their learners experienced decline in their wellbeing during Covid-19.

The profile of Youthreach learners and the characteristics of the programme meant that it has a very distinctive educational provision in Ireland. It provides a holistic educational and training services which runs throughout the year to engage young people socially, economically and academically. As previous research reveals, this requires staff working in the sector to have specific pedagogical capacities and approaches that span across a wide range of activities including relational work of engaging young people in trusting and secure relationships and providing holistic care and development; providing education and training, and administrative and management roles (NEPS, 2013; Osborne, 2018; Smyth et al. 2019). This span of activity means that staff are pulled in many different directions.

Youthreach staff described their commitment to young people and their belief in the value of the sector and its holistic and relational approach in learners' lives, acknowledging their sense of purpose and pride in their work. The most prevalent challenges of Youthreach employees were (1) time to address the needs of learners with learning difficulties; (2) pressure to achieve full certification; (3) workload. The three main reasons for work dissatisfaction reported by respondents were (1) lack of recognition of their work by the Teaching Council; (2) inadequate time off; and (3) inadequate salary. The majority of respondents agreed that they carry a heavy workload and half of the respondents work regularly in the evening and a quarter reported to work regularly over the weekend. Compared to their colleagues in primary and post-primary schools, Youthreach employees reported taking significantly less time off over the weekend and school holidays. This was allied with a lack of recognition and parity of opportunity with teaching colleagues at second level which was discussed in terms of its impact on pay, conditions, progression, holidays, and entitlements.

Wellbeing amongst Youthreach staff was quite high. Whilst 4 out of 10 respondents demonstrated levels of stress of work, none reported severe levels of chronic stress, and the majority did not experience depression or anxiety disorder. Levels of depression and anxiety were similar to the national average during the pandemic (Hyland et al., 2020). One quarter of respondents reported moderate levels of burnout and vicarious trauma, and moderate or high levels of compassion fatigue, which was more likely to occur while working during holiday times, frequent evening or weekend work and having a longer length of service in Youthreach. Respondents with longer service were more susceptible to coping with adversities, stress, anxiety, depression, and compassion fatigue. Previous research identified teaching as a high stress profession with stress, emotional distress and secondary traumatisation common amongst educational practitioners (Johnson et al., 2005; Titheradge et al., 2019). Craig (2017) noted that compassion fatigue and burnout can accumulate over time and has negative impacts on "educators and their ability to develop and maintain appropriately supportive relationships with their students (in Hickey et al. (2020:29)".

Overall, respondents were moderately resilient, a quarter reported very high level of resilience and 2 out of 10 showed lower levels of resilience. The two most frequently used styles for coping in difficult situation were (1) finding creative ways to alter difficult situations, and (2) reflecting on how they can grow through adversity. Over half of the respondents reported flourishing psychologically, meaning that they experience high levels of emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, and social wellbeing. Respondents reported high levels of work-related wellbeing, positive emotions and engagement and relationships. Levels of positive emotions and positive relationships in work held by Youthreach staff were higher than those in school sector studies (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, b; Dempsey

and Burke, 2021). Overall, the wellbeing profile indicated that Youthreach employees have developed high levels of psychological and social resources that help them deal with work-related challenges. Despite experiencing stress, most employees have the skills to help them cope with adversity. Echoing findings from cognate sectors in adult education and inclusion in FET, the learner-centred ethos and relationships with learners at the heart of Youthreach means that its employees hold person-centred values and relational characteristics which require high levels of positive emotions and relationships (SOLAS, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; ALOA, 2022).

However, conditions within the sector undermined these positive emotions and resilience. In particular, respondents highlighted the lack of recognition and parity of opportunity with teaching colleagues at second level. Respondents highlighted the impact on pay, conditions, progression, holidays, and entitlements. The lack of equitable recognition of the status of Resource Person/ Assistant Coordinator role was raised a key issue, with one respondent describing how “we are not even classed as teachers even though we are inspected and expected to teach and support the most vulnerable in society”. This was linked to organisational inequities between Youthreach and second level school staff who work with a similar cohort of learners, but have different working conditions, annual calendars, leave entitlements, scope of responsibilities, support structures, CPD opportunities and physical infrastructures.

Youthreach staff who responded to this survey described the impacts on their sense of wellbeing, with the lack of time to recuperate, and additional responsibilities during holidays. This lack of recognition was also experienced at a systemic level, with Youthreach respondents describing a lack of awareness or consideration of the specificity of Youthreach as a sector,

especially from statutory agencies whose focus of attention was on mainstream school or FET provision.

The context of Covid-19 created a sense of overwhelming pressure for many working in Youthreach, due to the sense of unpredictability, risk, change and danger. They described challenges originated from organisational factors, followed by personal and family factors, student-related factors and general factors. Organisational and environmental factors included the challenges associated with implementing Covid-19 regulations in centres including “masks, distancing and extra work cleaning”, as well as changing Covid-19 related requirements that prevented or radically changed how many activities were organised. Staff spoke of a gap between institutional policies and how they were implemented and experienced in practice, with Covid-19 regulations increasing administrative tasks, limiting and taking time away from teaching, as well as the challenges of responding to the increased need amongst learners, working online with heavier workloads and different processes, pivoting between different approaches, whilst still expected to support learners and have the same level of outcomes. These findings were similar to that experienced by teachers (Dempsey & Burke, 2021).

Staff spoke of the significant learning that they had to do in Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) and the need to creatively find ways of supporting relationships with learners through online formats. Covid-19 restrictions resulted in lower levels of interactions and connectivity between staff within Youthreach as a result of social distance and lack of formal and informal meetings between staff. Those in management or coordinator positions spoke of the challenges of having to lead and support others, whilst enduring Covid-19 and its restrictions themselves.



Learner disengagement was a major issue, with respondents describing the challenges of maintaining relationships with learners who were significantly impacted by Covid-19. This is similar to the findings of school-based studies during Covid-19 (Dempsey and Burke, 2021), but of significance was the higher levels of learner anxiety and mental health issues reported by Youthreach staff as evident during Covid-19, including more “substance abuse, behavioural issues and over-reliance on their phones”. Significant numbers of Youthreach learners “were most impacted [by Covid] as families lost jobs, experienced bereavement, anxiety and mental health problems” which staff found challenging to support online. Regulating mask-wearing was a particular challenge, leading to numerous behavioural challenges within Youthreach as well as in the school studies (Dempsey and Burke, 2021).

Respondents also spoke of the personal impact of Covid-19 on their relationships and how isolation, restrictions and working from home lead to “disengagement”, greater levels of “anxiety”, and a “lack of social interaction with family and friends.” There was a powerful sense of the emotional impact and personal toll of the restrictions on their personal and family lives during this time, which is similar to that expressed by participants in Dempsey and Burke’s study of schools during Covid-19 restrictions (2021).

Reflective of Youthreach employees’ higher levels of wellbeing in comparison to teaching staff at other levels of education, respondents recounted active ways that they enhanced their personal wellbeing during Covid-19. The most frequent response was by active exercise, greater self-care, engaging in counselling and other supports, decisions about work (such as shorter working days, stop working on weekends, set boundaries around work, planning to retire early, changing role).

Respondents also cited a range of adaptations offered through work and organisational levels, including counselling, wellbeing, and other supports. Several comments were made in reference to no or little adaptations offered. Adaptations offered through work and organisational levels included decreased class sizes, flexible and shorted timetables, counselling and supervision, employee support services, CPD and TEL supports and resources, clear line of communications and information, whole-of-centre approach. Interpersonal supports and relationships with managers and fellow staff were cited as a vital support by respondents.

For those who felt that no or little support was offered, they were critical of the limited nature of supports, such as online and telephone services on offer. Many felt that the supports offered were not sufficient, were limited and procedural in nature, and many were unaware of available supports.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents said that they were unsure or would not be working in Youthreach in 5 years time; most did not give a reason, others said that they would be retired at that time or were actively seeking other roles despite the loss of increments this may cause. Of the one quarter of respondents who saw themselves working in Youthreach in 5 years’ time, half expressed positive reasons in terms of their enjoyment and satisfaction working with young people, expressing their commitment to their pedagogical approach and relationships with young people. The remaining responses expressed a sense of not having a choice to leave Youthreach as they were close to retirement and feeling “stuck” and restricted in seeking other employment. The lack of career progression and the issue of recognition of their service if they transferred roles was key for them.



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