



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Learners in Youthreach Centres

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Introduction

This guidance from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) advises on how Youthreach centres and their staff can support continuity in learning during the closures associated with COVID-19.

While all learners need support in maintaining their engagement in learning, learners in Youthreach centres are among those who may need sustained support to ensure continuity of learning at this time. Many centres have introduced a range of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of their learners are supported. Examples of those strategies are included in this guidance note.

The Department thanks and acknowledges the Youthreach centres involved for sharing their practice. The Department also acknowledges the advice provided by a broad range of stakeholders in the preparation of the guidance.

Key themes of this guidance

- The role of the patron bodies
- The role of Youthreach staff in engaging with learners
- Co-ordinators, resource staff and teachers working to support learners
- Keeping in touch with learners and parents or guardians
- Keeping learners safe in the distance learning environment
- Resources to support engagement, learning and wellbeing

Role of the patron bodies

Education and training boards (ETBs) should work to ensure that centres provide for continuity of learning for all learners and to support centre co-ordinators in doing so. Provision of opportunities for centre staff to have virtual meetings, discussions, sharing of ideas, models of good practice and expertise, and co-ordination of efforts are among the types of support and guidance that ETBs could facilitate at this time.

ETBs should also work to ensure that centres are provided with:

- up-to-date information from the DES and the State Examinations Commission (SEC)
- access to the necessary supports from organisations such as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), where appropriate, to ensure continuity of learning.

In Youthreach centres that are providing Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) programmes, it is particularly important that the further education and training sections of ETBs:

- provide support in relation to designing and delivering alternative methods of QQI assessments and in the completion of QQI modules
- provide support in making arrangements for learners to complete portfolios, tasks and assignments so as to ensure achievement of QQI qualifications and progress to further education and training opportunities, where possible and appropriate.

The role of Youthreach staff in engaging with learners

Some Youthreach learners may be particularly vulnerable as they cope with changes in their daily routine, with not engaging with their peers and friends, and with not having the daily support of centre personnel. All Youthreach staff have an important role in keeping the learners connected to learning and essential supports through engagement with their centres at this time.

The role of co-ordinators

Centre co-ordinators should maintain oversight of the continuity of learning for all learners and ensure that resources are targeted at those most in need. Co-ordinators should focus in particular on:

- Maintaining staff wellbeing and morale by convening regular staff team meetings
- Dealing with matters arising from contact with learners and parents or guardians
- Exploring and agreeing with staff the strategies and measures necessary to engage learners as fully as possible
- Providing for an appropriate mix of pastoral and educational support and a forum for learners to stay connected
- Overseeing the progression of learners' educational and care plans.

It is particularly important at this time to support learners who have disengaged, become demotivated, or are in challenging personal situations. In these circumstances, contact between the centre and the learner should be daily. Advocates, key workers and mentors have important roles in that regard.

The role of resource and teaching staff

Resource staff and teachers have a significant role to play in ensuring continuity of learning and in providing emotional support and a sense of everyday connection with learning. All staff should focus on maintaining learner motivation and ongoing engagement with specific tasks. Staff should also focus on assessing learners' work to ensure they achieve certification.

In supporting Youthreach learners, the following strategies should be considered:

- Using existing learner support systems and care structures to identify learners who are most at risk, who have disengaged or who require mental health and wellbeing supports

- Identifying the most appropriate staff member in the centre to make contact with learners
- Devising and initiating recovery planning for learners who are not engaging at all
- Maintaining a focus on engagement with learning as an essential part of supporting learner wellbeing
- Establishing the barriers to learner engagement and seeking solutions to those barriers
- Planning for the continuation of QQI modules, particularly for learners who are close to completion
- Providing essential materials, such as hard copies of assignments, tasks, and learning notes, or Art materials to allow learners to continue tasks, assessments, and portfolio work¹
- Setting up a system for learners to contact members of staff if they require assistance
- Capturing learner voice to seek their views on how they are learning best in the current situation and how to maximise participation and engagement.

Example 1: Staff photocopied notes and assignments and these were posted along with stamped addressed envelopes so that the learners could post back their work. The staff members are communicating through OneNote to organise work for the learners. Google Classroom is also being used by staff and by some learners. Where teachers have email addresses for learners, work is being sent by email. Staff members have adopted a highly flexible approach to the timing of their engagement with learners. Self-care video links are being shared with learners and they are encouraged to complete creative writing tasks linked to self-care and SPHE. Work is sent to the co-ordinator, who then distributes it to teachers. Teachers of practical subjects send demonstration videos to learners. The main academic focus is the preparation for and completion of QQI modules.

Here are some practical ways in which Youthreach centre staff members can engage with their learners:

- Phone
- Provision of hard copy work packs to learners, and parents or guardians
- E-mail
- Online video communication apps
- Social media platforms
- Centre websites

¹ Centre personnel should at all times observe public health directives in place in relation to accessing centre buildings. Provision of hard copy work packs and materials may be only be possible in the event of teachers being permitted to access school buildings.

- Audio-visual online platforms so they can talk with and see the learner and provide online support
- Online lessons to connect learners with their peers

Youthreach staff working to support learners

In the current context, it is necessary to consider learning from a different perspective. Learners' routines and support mechanisms have been impacted significantly and, in some instances, home circumstances may be challenging in terms of continuity of learning. Significant efforts are being made in many centres to ensure that learners continue to engage. This is contingent on connecting with learners directly and with their parents or guardians, if appropriate. These communications are key to ensuring continuity of learning in most circumstances.

In many Youthreach centres, very good use is being made of existing digital platforms and in particular social media platforms, to connect with learners. Learners are completing assignments remotely, participating in online lessons and at times requesting work and taking the initiative in their learning; this is arising from persistent efforts by centre staff to reach out to learners. Where difficulties arise in connecting with learners, centre personnel are encouraged to persist in their efforts to connect with them and to renew their efforts to re-engage with learners who have not responded so far.

***Example 2:** A key-worker system is in place. The centre co-ordinator ensures that all learners are contacted daily through text message or social media. There is a rota for answering emails and social media messages coming in from learners. Very good rates of learner engagement were reported. Regular online staff meetings are held and the centre co-ordinator provides support for all staff members in relation to issues raised in communications with learners. The main concern is for learners' wellbeing arising from learners' circumstances. This has made it necessary to review the centre's critical incident policy to ensure consistent measures in dealing with such incidents. The Youthreach co-ordinators' network proved invaluable in sharing expertise, discussing issues and generating solutions. The centre has received excellent support through its established links from a range of local statutory and NGO bodies.*

Supporting learners' mental health and wellbeing is a key concern of all Youthreach centres. The extensive support provided by co-ordinators, resource personnel, teachers, advocates or counsellors and psychotherapists, in this regard is noteworthy.

The Department is aware of practical strategies that have been put in place in a number of education settings which Youthreach centres could replicate. These include:

- *Loaning digital devices to learners who do not have any*
- *Putting out a call at local level to community services for extra digital devices that may no longer be used to be redistributed*

- *Investigating ways of purchasing connectivity for learners most in need*
- *Providing phones to identified learners who have no means of communication*
- *Providing a dedicated help line for learners with a guarantee of receiving a return phone call*
- *Surveying learners to establish what is working well for them*
- *Setting up a mentoring system where staff can act as mentors to support, encourage and motivate learners; this may be the key worker system in some centres*
- *Sending assignment packs to learners by hand delivery or the postal service, and providing stamped addressed envelopes for the return of completed assignments*
- *Linking with local community or youth groups to support learners in the community*
- *Sharing self-care video links with learners and encouraging them to engage with creative writing tasks linked to self-care and SPHE*
- *Encouraging learners to post their physical exercise to the centre's social media page, as a fun and motivating way to stay connected*
- *Including fun activities such as puzzles, quizzes and competitions*
- *Providing advice around sleep hygiene, eating well, staying safe and managing conflict.*

Keeping in touch with parents and guardians

At this time, Youthreach centre staff need to be sensitive to the challenges that families face in providing structure for young people and in helping their engagement in learning. It is important to reassure parents and guardians that their role is to support the young person's engagement in learning to the extent that it is feasible and practicable.

Effective and regular communication between centre and home will be key to ensuring that changing roles, approaches and expectations, which are necessary in the current challenging circumstances, are understood by all concerned. Centres should support learners, and parents and guardians around making time and space available every day to continue to engage and stay motivated.²

While all staff have a role in communicating with learners and parents or guardians, the role of the key worker (where this system is in place), the mentor, and centre advocate/counsellor in linking with learners and parents or guardians is crucial. The contact person should ascertain how learners are adjusting to new ways of learning and how they are coping in general. Supports should be put in place where necessary and all available support services should be utilised in this regard.

² Youthreach staff may wish to consult the Department's *Guidance on Continuity for Schooling for Primary and Post-primary schools* which provides general advice about the importance of communicating with all learners and parents or guardians.

Example 3: *The centre co-ordinator calls parents every morning to encourage learners to engage. Feedback from these conversations is used to inform practice, for example, to run online lessons for two-hour' duration. Each morning an online mindfulness exercise is provided and all learners are encouraged to do a run or a walk before lessons begin. Photographs or maps are uploaded to the social media page; this encourages learners to stay connected. Every day, after timetabled lessons, the co-ordinator conducts a video-meet with each learner to support their academic learning but also to connect with them and support them in general. The co-ordinator uses this time to ensure that all of the learners are informed and are adhering to social distancing.*

In the current context, it is important to identify those learners who are not engaging with learning at all or those who have been identified as being particularly at risk of disengagement. Centre staff should seek to communicate with the learner and, where possible, with their parents or guardians to establish the barriers to engagement, to offer support in a sensitive manner and put in place a manageable plan for re-engagement, and to offer other support as necessary.

As a means of enhancing communication and learner engagement, centres are advised to ensure that:

- Effective systems are in place to identify learners and parents or guardians in need of support
- Communication from the centre is frequent, clear and is in a variety of forms, for example, via centre website, phone call, text, email, and social media
- Parents or guardians and learners from minority backgrounds and/or for whom English is an additional language (EAL) are targeted for support, where appropriate
- Feedback is sought from learners, and parents or guardians regarding what is working well and suggestions for improvement and implemented.

The Department is also aware of additional practical strategies that centres have implemented to ensure effective communication. These include:

- *Centres engaging with learners and with their parents/guardians to establish what is reasonable in terms of their capacity to support continued engagement with learning*
- *Agreeing a mutually convenient time for teachers to engage with the learner through phone calls or other communications technology and considering the possibility for these times to be outside normal working hours*
- *Ensuring that staff providing advice and support to learners through phone calls are supported and that supervision is available where necessary*
- *Putting in place a security policy around use of staff personal phones*
- *Using online lessons to enable learners to connect with their classmates. For some learners this connection is essential in mitigating isolation and loneliness that they may be experiencing*

- *Posting videos/audios of lessons and learning materials directly on centre websites or other digital platforms used by the centre so that learners can access at any time*
- *Providing the link to the Covid-19 advice in different languages on the centre website.*

The range of strategies identified above is not exhaustive and centres are likely to have implemented additional approaches which are tailored to their own context.

Keeping learners safe in the distance learning environment

Centres should consult *Guidance on Continuity of Schooling for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*, published by the Department on 2 April 2020. It provides advice on the safe and ethical use of the internet during distance learning and on keeping personal data safe when working from home. Centres should particularly ensure that their Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) informs and guides remote or distance learning activity and engagement in all its forms.

In addition to the advice offered in that document³, the following advice is offered:

- Centres should research apps and online learning platforms being used in line with guidance regarding use of technology offered by the PDST⁴
- Learners may need to be familiarised with the various platforms which may be used before these tools are used to support teaching and learning
- Centre staff should use this opportunity to teach web safety skills and to establish clear rules for online learning activity
- Learners should be provided with support, if necessary, to enable them to access digital learning tools so that they can be confident in using them
- Centre staff should establish clear ground rules and expectations with learners when using online learning platforms by identifying what is acceptable and what is not acceptable online behaviour.

Resources to support engagement, learning and wellbeing

There are many online resources available to support learners. While many of these resources predate the closures, some sites have updated their content to reflect the challenges of providing supports remotely. The list of resources provided in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 is not intended to be exhaustive. Many centres will already be drawing from the resources identified and others besides. It should be noted that the DES does not endorse any particular external tools or resources.

³ [*Guidance on Continuity of Schooling for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*](#) available on the DES website

⁴ [*PDST Technology in Education Website*](#)

Appendix 1: Resources to support continued engagement with learning

Information issued by DES on home tuition through distance learning for the duration of the pandemic can be accessed [here](#).

The [ETBI](#) website, which has a dedicated COVID 19 and Health and Wellbeing section, provides a wide range of information available to all ETB staff and learners via the ETBI digital library.

The [QQI](#) website provides up to date information on issues relating to COVID 19.

Professional Development Service for Teachers resources

- The PDST provides a range of resources relating to provision for students at risk of educational disadvantage, including resources for teachers of LCA programmes. These can be accessed using the following links:
 - For LCA resources, please see the list available [here](#) through the Scoilnet website and also the [LCA Teacher Handbook](#)
- The PDST provides links to a number of EAL supports and resources which can be accessed [here](#). PDST also suggest websites which can be used to provide support to students with EAL and can be accessed [here](#).
- The PDST post-primary PE team has also produced videos and activities to support students in practising their fundamental movement skills at home in its [Beyond the Classroom](#) resource.

Literacy and numeracy resources

- The [JCSP Demonstration Library Project](#) website has links to a myriad of resources for schools and students categorised by topic and subject area.
- The PDST Maths team is uploading [Daily Maths](#) resource banks for post-primary students. A different mathematics topic is covered each day during the school closure period.
- The [National Adult Literacy Agency](#) provides resources to aid learners with literacy difficulties.
- The [national library](#) website provides free online access to eBooks, audiobooks, online magazines and newspapers.
- Students in the Republic of Ireland have open and free home access to a collection of all eBooks from World Book Online at [Scoilnet - World Book](#).
- Britannica is offering free access to its Science and Humanities LaunchPacks to all [Scoilnet](#) users during the school closure period.
- [Amazon](#) is providing free access to books and audio stories available.

National Council for Special Education resources

- The [NCSE](#) website outlines a wide range of resources suitable for students with special educational needs. The site has a new dedicated resource section to support home learning during this time that includes [Online Resources for Teachers](#), [Online Resources for Parents](#) and [Useful Apps](#) for home use. There are also links to many useful educational websites to direct parents or guardians and teachers towards further online supports.
- NCSE's network of advisors also remain available to schools via NCSE's online application form to provide support and advice by telephone and email to teachers of students with SEN. The form is available [here](#).

Distance learning resources

- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) website page on [distance learning](#) provides support for teachers to engage with learners remotely. Supports include an online teaching course, information about platforms, and distance learning supports for Health and Wellbeing.
- The [Scoilnet](#) website identifies resources for distance learning, home access and provides links to the Department's support services that are relevant to the school closures.
- The [Webwise](#) website offers a range of resources to help teachers integrate internet safety into teaching and learning. It also provides advice for parents, guardians and children.
- NEPS has provided resources on literacy, transition planning etc, in the Guidelines, Tips and Handouts for Parents and Teacher section of its [Resources and Publications](#) webpage.

Guidance-related learning resources

- The DES [Continuity of Guidance Counselling Guidelines](#) offer support and advice to schools and education settings, including Youthreach, as they consider how to provide guidance counselling online. Additional supporting documents and training resources are also available on the [National Centre for Guidance in Education](#) website. The full suite of supports can be accessed at the DES website [here](#).
- Education, training and career information is available on the [Qualifax](#) website.
- Education, training and career information, including information on the REACH+ programme is available on the [Careers Portal](#) website.
- The CAO has opened a [dedicated page with FAQ](#) to support applicants. It also offers an email service for any query which can be accessed [here](#).
- The [Access College](#) website provides information on equity of access to higher education and information on DARE and HEAR applications.
- The [Student Universal Support Ireland \(SUSI\)](#) website provides information on making grant applications.

Individual colleges and Higher Education Institutions are providing applicants with online support and advice including helplines and one-to-one support. See individual websites for more information.

State Examinations Commission resources

- The [State Examinations Commission](#) provides resources for students preparing for state examinations. These include materials such as previous examination papers, marking schemes and important contact information.

General online resources

- [World news](#) from the BBC in many languages is a useful resource for students with EAL.
- [National Geographic Kids](#) has a wide range of videos, games and quizzes that relate to History, Geography and Science.
- This Irish visual arts website [I Am An Artist](#) has short videos, slideshows, lessons and projects for schools.

Appendix 2: Promoting positive health and wellbeing

- The HSE webpage [YourMentalHealth website](#) provides information on all mental health supports and services that are available nationally and locally provided by the HSE and its funded partners.
- The HSE webpage [Mental Health Supports and Services during COVID-19](#) gives details of the services providers that offer online and phone mental health supports and services during the current crisis. It lists a range of services and resources that are available to help young people cope and manage themselves in the current crisis. Contacts for Jigsaw; BeLong To; Reach Out; Spunout; Barnardos, Childline etc. are listed. The webpage also give details of mobile apps that may be used to manage anxiety.
- The [National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\)](#) website provides valuable advice for schools and families on topics such as wellbeing, distance learning and provision for student routine and structure.
- The [National Centre for Guidance for Guidance in Education](#) has prepared materials to support the further education and training sector in their engagement with students
- [Webwise](#) provides teaching resources on range of topics including cyberbullying, image-sharing, social media and more.
- Teachers' attention is directed to the Department's Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme. Details are available at the following link: [Employee Assistance and Wellbeing programme](#)