



Longford Women's Link

Submission to QQI

Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines

February 2016

Provider Profile

Longford Women's Link (LWL) is a women's centre based in Longford Town and has been in existence since 1995. We are a long standing provider of Community Education in Longford Town and County with Education and Training delivered according to the principles of Women's Community Education (WCE) at our dedicated WCE Facility. We provide a wide range of services, including Education and Training (QQI Centre), using our Integrated Service Model. LWL is a third level Outreach Centre for NUI Maynooth and a partner college of the Irish AcAdemy of Public Relations and An Cosán's Virtual Community College (VCC). LWL's purpose is to link women with the resources to change their lives and transform their communities and we have a long history of promoting the transformative nature of WCE.

LWL's purpose-built WCE facility has provided a much needed resource to cater for the additional Education and Training needs of learners in Longford. In 2015, over 300 students completed a wide range of courses/modules from interest courses to University outreach, while 276 FETAC/QQI awards were achieved (248 component awards and 28 major awards). As an outreach centre for NUI Maynooth, the Irish Academy of Public Relations and the VCC, LWL provides much needed access to third level education in Longford.

LWL is a member of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, and is represented on the AONTAS Executive Committee by our Deputy CEO, Tara Farrell, who is also a member of the Community Education Network (CEN) Steering Group. In 2015, Tara also represented AONTAS on the Joint QQI/Community & Voluntary Sector Working Group

Longford Profile

The majority of our adult learners are from Longford Town and County. The Trutz Haase Profile Report (2013) shows that The Midlands Region is the third most deprived region of Ireland and County Longford is the most deprived local authority

area within this region. Like any other part of the country, Longford has been severely affected by the economic downturn after 2007, reflected in the drop in the absolute deprivation score from -4.9 in 2006 to -12.1 in 2011. This represents a drop of 7.2, compared to a nationwide drop of 6.5. Longford is the fourth most disadvantaged local authority area in Ireland.

In terms of education, the proportion of adults with third-level education in County Longford is more than eight percentage points below the national average, and remains to be the second lowest proportion pertaining to any county.

Women's Community Education

As a Women's Community Education centre, LWL is committed to adult education and community development based on the recognition that women have unequal access to resources and to influence, and challenge these inequalities. We are committed to providing the very highest standards in Women's Community Education – education, a unique and distinctive approach that enables and empowers women to make choices about their lives by being:

- Based on on-going social analysis of gender equality and social inclusion issues
- Based on commitment to women's safety, growth, and well-being
- The creation of space for feelings as well as dialogue
- Based on peer support as well as staff support
- Informed by participative evaluation and self-evaluation

Comments on Draft QA Guidelines

LWL welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in relation to the Draft QA Guidelines. Having attended the QQI Briefing on January 29th 2016 in the Ashling Hotel, Dublin, we believe that our input is quite reflective of many community and voluntary FET providers, particularly those with a focus on Women's Community Education. We would also like to commend QQI for holding the briefing in advance of the submission deadline date as this was very helpful to those providers who had drafted submissions.

Introduction

LWL understands that QQI do not intend these guidelines to be a 'how to' manual for providers (page 6). However, we do feel that some set of parameters needs to be available to providers to ensure that QQI requirements are met. We believe that providers are more than capable of establishing internal quality systems and review systems yet it is in everyone's interests (providers and QQI) to ensure that there is some degree of uniformity. Therefore we would urge QQI to consider providing a clear outline of what is required to satisfy QQI standards. Our own experience

indicates that this would be of considerable benefit to providers and QQI as it would ensure good practice is implemented.

LWL also understands the rationale behind QQI's decision not to issue templates for the re-engagement process however, with such a large number of providers expected to re-engage, it might be prudent to issue outline templates for certain elements of the process in order to ensure a uniformity of responses where possible. We believe that one of the key issues in the QA process in recent years has been the lack of a uniform approach in some aspects; therefore *broad* outline templates would be welcome for example in relation to: Quality Assurance Policies and Procedures, Self-evaluation, Internal Monitoring etc.

Section 2 – The Core (Statutory) QA Guidelines

Section 2.4 – Staff Recruitment, Management and Development

LWL notes the continuous reference to staff within the White Paper. Many community and voluntary FET providers (including LWL) engage independent contractors (tutors) to deliver their programmes. In the case of LWL, our tutor panel has been established over a considerable period of time and there is a documented process by which expert tutors are recruited. Therefore we suggest that perhaps an additional comment is inserted into section 2.4 to reflect this. This will be an integral element of evaluations and reviews and therefore we feel that if there was reference to this within the guidelines it would be a truer reflection of the processes within many community and voluntary FET providers.

Section 2.6 – Assessment of Learner Achievement

Obviously this is a critical element of the QA Guidelines. LWL, like all providers have established policies and procedures in this area and tutors are inducted into these systems prior to commencing teaching. However where we feel there is room for improvement is within the differing requirements/expectations of the external authenticators. LWL's external authentication reports have always been very positive and where relevant have contained positive suggestions for improvements however there have been occasions when a new external authenticator has different requirements and focus than their previous counterparts. We recommend that a standard set of criteria, along with training for external authenticators would be of benefit to providers, authenticators and QQI.

Section 2.7 – Supports for Learners

LWL delivers all of its services according to our unique Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) model. From a learner perspective, this means that the learner has access to a wide range of supports within LWL and can also be referred to external support services (at the learner request) should the need arise. However, as is the case for most community and voluntary FET providers, these internal services are dependent

on funding. Therefore we recommend that clarification is required in **Section 2.7.1** which states that '*There is appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and adequate and readily accessible learning resources and learner supports are provided*'. This is *not* to state that LWL, believes in offering supports of a substandard nature, or indeed removing supports from the learner, but there needs to be a recognition by QQI of the fact that many community and voluntary FET providers are operating on the basis of annual funding which can be reduced or cut at very short notice. In these instances, LWL does its utmost to ensure that all supports are still available to learners while replacement funding is sourced or services reviewed.

Section 2.8 – Management Information and Data

LWL recognises the absolute necessity to record KPIs and to have a robust method of collect and analysing learner data. However, as with other points raised in this submission, it is critical that guidelines are provided which provide the standards expected by QQI in order to satisfy statutory obligations. This is essential for community and voluntary FET providers who very often do not have the resources to implement high level Management Information Systems. We would suggest that QQI provide the essential headings for providers who can then populate these according to the internal systems in place within their organisation. Community and voluntary FET providers should be able to place a considerable focus on qualitative measures, especially case studies, as it is felt that this is an excellent method for many providers in terms of capturing what is working well within the sector.

Section 2.11 – Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

As outline in the **Introduction** section above, LWL understands that QQI are not in favour of issuing templates, however in the interests of ensuring that self-evaluations and reviews are conducted to the requirements of QQI, we feel that more in-depth guidelines are required for this element of the process. This is to minimise the amount of time spent by providers contacting QQI to ensure that they are following the correct path and also to ensure that there is something of a uniform approach to self-evaluation, monitoring and review within the sector.

Recognition of Available Resources

Underpinning all of the above is the issue of resources. It is our assertion that the majority of providers are very much under-resourced, both from a human and financial perspective and from our analysis of the White Paper these changing administrative requirements will place a much greater burden on FET providers. While we recognise that adherence to the QA Guidelines is absolutely necessary in order to maintain the high standards that are required by QQI and that we set ourselves, we do believe that QQI need to take cognisance of the under-resourced environment within which we work. That is not to suggest that standards must be allowed to slip, rather that issues such as increased administrative requirements for

community and voluntary FET providers will have a significant impact on many providers and in some cases will reduce the opportunities available to the learner, who is at the centre of all our activities.

(Note – the above does not imply that LWL objects to any of the additional administrative requirements, merely that there is a resource issue associated with them and therefore this must be taken into account.)

Conclusion

As with our previous submissions, LWL would urge QQI to ensure that the expertise and input of community and voluntary FET providers is not discounted. Once again, we welcome the opportunity to make this submission and look forward to continuing our positive working relationship with QQI.