

Welcome to the second newsletter from the Learner Supports and Engagement Service.

First, a big thank you to all those who have been in touch to congratulate us on our first issue and wish the service well. We are aware that there were some hiccups in distribution, which, fingers crossed, we have overcome in this issue – it is our intention that this newsletter should reach all FET staff across the City of Dublin ETB, and if staff beyond FET get to read it too, so much the better!

The theme for this issue is neurodiversity. Following on from Lorraine's attendance at As I Am's conference in February about which she wrote in the first issue, the team has participated in several online and in person events, including Neurodiversity Celebration Week (March 13 to 19) and World Autism Acceptance Week, (March 27 to April 2).



Neurodiversity &
Autism
Acceptance



April 2 was the 16th, UN-sanctioned, Autism Awareness Day, when across the world buildings are lit up in blue, while April as whole is designated World Autism Month. This then is a time of the year when around the world we are encouraged to start a conversation about neurodiversity. It wasn't practical this year to organise our own event, but we are very keen to do so next year and would welcome ideas and suggestions from across our centres, above all from staff and learners who are themselves neurodivergent. One of the themes that has resonated across the events we have attended is "If I can't see it, I can't be it".

NEURODIVERISTY ACCEPTANCE

We are aware that the use of language around neurodiversity is sensitive and sometimes controversial. Where previously it was common to ascribe labels strongly linked to the medical model of disability, we have moved beyond this and as educators we have a responsibility to pay heed to how we talk to and about learners who have different strengths and needs.

Without any claim to personal or professional expertise, we nonetheless hope this issue can contribute to encouraging the conversation about neurodiversity across our centres of further education and training by sharing information and giving a platform to those who do have this expertise, such as Maire Dooley, Senior Psychologist from the City of Dublin ETB Psychological Service.



As always, a good starting point is the CDU Moodle. In the SEN Resources Section there is a wealth of material related to neurodiversity developed by the Psychology Service, which is now available <https://curriculum.etbonline.ie/course/index.php?categoryid=182> (If you are not yet enrolled, contact eva.hornung@cdu.cdetsb.ie).

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Welcome to Winstead!

Dr T. Stephen O'Neill



As Chief Psychologist, and on behalf of the Psychology Service, I am delighted to welcome the new Learner Supports and Engagement Service to share the offices here in 25 Temple Road, also known as 'Winstead'.

The Psychological Service, which is the oldest Psychological Service to Education in the state, was established in 1960 and has been based in Winstead since 1973, making this our 50th year in the building. Along with Adam Breen our new administrator, and including myself, there are seven psychologists working in the service, namely Mel Billings, Claire Donohue, Pauline Fleming, Georgie Maher, Marie-Louise O' Reilly and Maire Dooley, our new Senior Psychologist.

Maire has a wealth of experience as a psychologist working in education and in this month's newsletter, in keeping with the theme of neurodiversity, she has written a piece on autism.

With the expansion of FET over the years, the establishment of the Learner Supports and Engagement service is a very important development for the staff and learners in FET. The dual support of our services, providing academic support and promoting well-being and good mental health, can ease the stress of learners, enhancing their learner experience allowing them to grow and develop as individuals.

We look forward to working alongside our colleagues in the Learner Supports and Engagement Service and to contributing to future issues of their newsletter when themes and interests overlap.

News in Brief

Date for your Diary: Monday 29th May

The Learner Supports and Engagement Service is holding an event for City of Dublin ETB staff involved in learner supports across FET provision and our partners in external organisations who work with learners with additional educational needs who progress to FET in City of Dublin ETB centres.

The purpose of the event is to build awareness of the range of educational offerings available to learners with diverse strengths and needs at different stages of their educational journeys within City of Dublin ETB and to increase understanding of the range of supports available within centres.

Cathal Brugha FET College is kindly facilitating us for this event on Monday 29th May from 9.30-1pm. Many thanks to Patricia O'Keeffe and her team.

A registration link with more details will issue to centre management this week.

Congratulations Carrie!

Our heartfelt (if somewhat belated!) congratulations to Carrie Archer on winning the ETB Excellence Award for Equality, which was presented to her in Croke Park on ETB Day on March 2. As Professional Learning and Development Coordinator with the CDU, Carrie has been an outstanding champion of equality, diversity and inclusion.

In the few months that the Learner Supports and Engagement Service has been up and running, we've already had plenty of instances of what a supportive and co-operative colleague Carrie is. We look forward to working with her into the future promoting a shared vision of a culture of inclusion across the City of Dublin ETB.



News in Brief

Learner Survey 2023 – Update

With the Annual Learner Survey of 2023 closing soon, we are delighted to report that there has been close to a 90% increase on last year's response rate based on the number of responses received so far.

The immediate next steps will be to issue results unique to each centre, allowing the centres to hear the responses of their learners and plan for future programmes and intakes. Following this, a thematic analysis of the over-arching survey findings will be circulated, based on cumulative responses from all centres, during the months of May and June

It's Kushti to Rokker : College Opportunities and Supports for Roma and Traveller learners

Award Winning Whidden Workshops is hosting an online panel discussion with current Traveller and Roma learners on Friday April 28 at 12pm. They will be chatting about courses, progression routes, opportunities and supports in college.

https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_qtAaDoQHS4Wqg88NYIGAtg

PGC in Diversity and Inclusion in FET

The Postgraduate Certificate in Diversity and Inclusion in FET is now in its second year. The first class graduated at the beginning of February. You can read about the Level 9 qualification which is a joint initiative of Trinity College and the City of Dublin ETB, on page 63 of Education Magazine, where you will also see the proud graduates, (including our esteemed Director of FET!) in all their academic finery. Congratulations to them all.

[https://issuu.com/educationmagazine/docs/education_magazine_36-1i?](https://issuu.com/educationmagazine/docs/education_magazine_36-1i?fr=sMzQ4NTU3NTUzNzc)

[fr=sMzQ4NTU3NTUzNzc](https://issuu.com/educationmagazine/docs/education_magazine_36-1i?fr=sMzQ4NTU3NTUzNzc)

In the autumn we hope to speak to some of the graduates from last year and this about how doing the course has impacted their professional practice. Graduates, please get in touch with us if you'd like to contribute to a future newsletter.

Assistive Technology for Neurodiverse Learners Showcase

Avenido, the Assistive Technology (AT) distributor, will be in DCU on May 10 to present AT products that can bridge what they describe as the "neurodiverse gap. Entry is free

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/empowering-neurodiversity-assistive-technology-in-education-tickets-616404932747>

News in Brief

Online Information Event for Further and Higher Education Applicants for 2023-2024

Christian Ledwidge-O'Reilly, Information and Communications Officer with Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) has been in contact to say SUSI is holding its second virtual information event on 6 May at 11 AM. Topics covered will include the SUSI application process, available funding and eligibility criteria. There will be an expert team on hand to answer queries.

This will be of particular interest to FET guidance counsellors.

Register for the SUSI Virtual Information Event | SUSI

People with Temporary Protection (Ukrainians) and FET Update

Since hosting the City of Dublin PD Event on 24th February, we have been seeking clarifications regarding what the Minister for Justice's announcement on February 16, extending the temporary protection permissions granted to persons fleeing the war in Ukraine, means for our current learners and new applicants who fall into this category.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/602b5-minister-for-justice-announces-extension-of-the-temporary-protection-permissions-granted-to-persons-fleeing-the-war-in-ukraine/>

We have sought clarifications, particularly for new entrants to FET for Sept. 2023. Here is the current understanding regarding the implications of the extension for people with temporary protection (Ukrainians).

HE (continuing)

- Free fees as per last year
- Monthly stipend to continue (Erasmus Grant)

HE (new entrants)

- EU fees agreed with HEIs (not International fees) - so approximately €5,000 per year
- Monthly stipend is still under negotiation (possibly funded under the PLC Bursary)

FE (continuing)

- If on a 2 year programme fees will continue to be waived · And PLC bursary will continue: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/93c85-plc-bursary-for-displaced-persons-ukraine-scheme-2022/>

FE (new entrants)

- Fees – to be confirmed
- Bursary – to be confirmed

A New Face

Adam Breen is the new administrator for the City of Dublin ETB Psychological Service and Learner Supports and Engagement Service. Having joined in January 2023, Adam is very likely the first person you'll meet when you come to Winstead.

Adam has a background in hospitality having worked in a number of restaurants over a four year period including managing and part-owning a restaurant for a year.

Adam's duties include managing meetings and events taking place at Winstead, organizing the all important catering for said events, as well as the day to day management of the building.

As of this issue, Adam is also the layout editor of our newsletter. Welcome Adam.



CELEBRATING DIFFERENCE

Maire Dooley Senior Psychologist

The theme of this year's Autism Awareness Week was **Colour** and the symbol was **Infinity**. The rainbow colour pattern represents the entire autism spectrum, which is full of wonder and opportunity.



Maire Dooley, Senior Psychologist
City of Dublin ETB Psychological Service

What is Autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech, and nonverbal communication.

There is not one but **many subtypes of autism**, each affected by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Since autism is a spectrum disorder, every person diagnosed has a distinct set of advantages and challenges. The ways in which people with autism learn, think, and problem-solve can range from highly skilled to severely challenged.

Prevalence

The Department of Education and Skills (Republic of Ireland) has reported that 'autism is no longer thought of as a rare disorder' (DfES, 2006 [Wilkinson & Twist]). Similarly, in a UK wide survey of 373 teachers, 67% reported that they felt there were more children with autism now than five years ago in both special and mainstream education (Barnard et al., 2002).

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) found that one in every 65 students or 1.5% of the school population in Ireland had a diagnosis of autism: http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/3_NCSE-Supporting-Students-with-ASD-Guide.pdf. This is in line with prevalence estimates in other countries such as the UK, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Italy, Australia, Canada, and USA.

CELEBRATING DIFFERENCE

Victoria Honeybourne is a specialist advisory teacher and autistic. Her latest book, *The Neurodiverse Classroom* is published by Jessica Kingsley. In it she outlines the ways in which adopting a neurodiversity model in mainstream schools benefits everyone. *The Neurodiverse Classroom*

There are several excellent resources to support autistic learners, their families, and their educators available on the following links:

Autism Good Practice Guidelines <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/>

MCA <https://www.middletownautism.com/>

Aslam <https://asiam.ie/>

Tips to be considerate

1. **Be patient:** Slow your pace to allow everyone to participate
2. **Be understanding:** Keep in mind that autistic people behave differently in social situations
3. **Stay positive:** even if someone is not following social norms
4. **Show feelings and interest:** even if they may have trouble expressing theirs

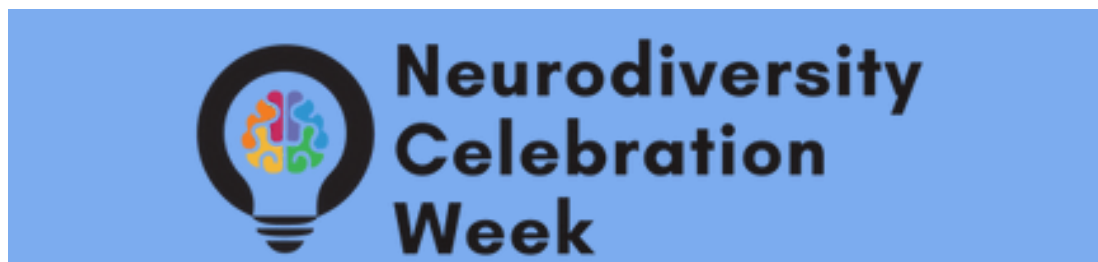
NEURODIVERSITY CELEBRATION WEEK

Sienna Castellan, who is autistic and has ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, founded Neurodiversity Celebration Week in 2018. Her goal was to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about neurological difference. She wanted to change a narrative that she thought was overly focused on the challenges facing neurodivergent people and create a balance that also celebrated their talents and strengths.

This year, in partnership with the specialist psychological consultancy, Lexxic, Neurodiversity Celebration Week organised a week of webinars, panel discussions and other online events, all of which were free of charge. The events weren't recorded so as to encourage participants to speak openly about their personal stories and experiences but we thought it would be interesting to share our thoughts on some of the sessions we attended.

The organisers did produce a post-event video, which gives a good insight into the week's activities. This is definitely an event worth putting on the calendar for 2024.

<https://youtu.be/KUEdtdgVhAQ?list=TLGG6eFBCEoEMjkyNDAoMjAyMw>



Mary Stokes

From a very broad range of presentations and panel discussions, I found '**Supporting the Success of Neurodivergent Learners**' particularly interesting. An expert and experienced panel considered how education systems 'are not designed to support learning differences or may be targeted towards 'neuromajority' learning styles.'

As this reality is often the context for learners who may choose to engage with FET options this is familiar territory. When traditional compulsory post-primary education options have not allowed the learner to flourish, the options and range of FET opportunities can be welcome.

A considerable challenge that we must acknowledge is to maximise resources available, to foster collaborative and coordinated supports – and it is vital to support those staff in the ETB to underpin all inclusion!

NEURODIVERSITY CELEBRATION WEEK



John Poole

Although all the panelists on the '**Neuroinclusion in Further and Higher Education**', discussion came from higher education institutions, their experiences and comments seem to be just as valid in the context of further education.

There were many references to people who are not identified as neurodivergent until adulthood, receiving a "late diagnosis", which in practical terms means individuals reaching adulthood without any professional diagnosis though they themselves have always been aware of being "different". Speakers stressed the importance of further education centres avoiding the pitfall of assuming that if a learner doesn't arrive from post-primary with a "diagnosis", neurodiversity won't be an issue.

This is even more relevant for those of our mature learners, who left formal education early. The reason formal education failed them in the first instance may well have been the failure to recognize autism, dyslexia, ADHD and so forth. To have this repeated again would be tragic because neurodiversity is not something that a person "grows out of". Needless to say, none of this will be news to staff across FET, currently working to support this cohort of learners within the existing constraints of resources and time.



Sneha Sarcar

The webinar '**Culture, Community and Class in Neurodiversity**' was an insightful, deep dive into the lived experiences of panelists and participants whose neurodivergence has been identified. Highly emotive, there was a lot of engagement among the participants who acknowledged the frustrations around the term 'labels', the sense of freedom one experiences on finally understanding their neurodivergence and also the grace they seek in working and personal environments.

Perhaps, the most eye-opening statistic to be revealed during this was the fact that while men were 4 times more likely to be neurodivergent, almost 75% of women in the UK are currently living their life, undiagnosed.

As a cisgender woman, hearing from the panelists about their journey in the webinar '**Experiences of Neurodivergent Women and Girls**', specifically having their neurodivergence identified, highlighted the biases in the field of medication which further shed light on the implications for the LGBTQIA+ community.

There was general agreement that women and girls were far more likely to be misdiagnosed with their behavioural patterns being chalked off as 'women being too emotional', 'women getting worked up' and 'women having "their days"'.

Despite having their neurodivergence identified, many of the women (panelists and participants alike) felt more demeaned than understood. Societal stigmas and expectations create an atmosphere where neurodivergence in women is perceived more as an excuse unlike for men, where it is seen more as a revelation demanding understanding and compassion.

AHEAD Conference 2023



Garreth Tierney

AHEAD - the Association for Higher Education and Disability - is an independent, non-profit organisation, which since 1988 has been promoting the creation of inclusive environments in education for people with disabilities, focussing on further education and training, higher education and graduate employment.

This was my first time attending an AHEAD conference, and I was very impressed.



This year's theme was **Unity: How Staff and Learner Communities Drive Inclusion in Tertiary Education**. Held over two days (March 22 & 23), the conference consisted of a mix of in-person, online and hybrid events with keynote speakers, in-person workshops, plenary conference conversations and online "lightning" sessions - very short presentations to highlight projects, area of research and so forth.

I don't have the scope here to provide a comprehensive account of all the conference's events but here is a selection of those that especially resonated with me.

Day One's in-person workshop **Meaningfully engaging with Learner Voice in Further Education and Training**, was excellent. Facilitated by Coláiste Dhúlaigh's Denise O'Connor, the participants, representative of a wide range of learners across FE, spoke very honestly about their experiences of FE before identifying areas they believed required improvement. The two big takeaways from the workshop were the importance of communication between learner and staff and the importance of not assuming that all learners will have the technical skills (IT and writing) to engage successfully. (You can read Denise's own account of the workshop in the next article.) <https://www.ahead.ie/event/ahead-2023/day2-workshop2>

The first lightning session introduced us to **ENGAGE** "an online learning programme designed by neurodivergent educators for neurodivergent learners", it is a "strengths-based" programme, designed on UDL principles and learner voice through which strengths and needs are identified.

The second lightning session "**Reasonable Accommodations for Disabled Staff in the Covid/Post-Covid Environment in Higher Education**" highlighted the challenges in accessing Reasonable Accommodations (RAs) post COVID, and the level of uncertainty of staff rights in relation to RAs.

Link: <https://www.ahead.ie/event/ahead-2023/day-1-lightning-2>

AHEAD Conference 2023

In the session “**Upping your Accessibility Superhero Game**”, James Northridge, project manager for Inclusive UCC, explored how FET or HEI can embed accessibility across all areas of their digital ecosystem, from teaching and learning to student support and marketing. The speaker highlighted the value of marginal gains and implementing a 1% improvement in our approach to begin with. as we moved towards the goals of Consistency – Responsibility – and Changing habits.
<https://www.ahead.ie/event/ahead-2023/day1-keynote>

Day 2 started off with a student panel on the topic of “**Learning from Lived Experiences of Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Tertiary Education**”, which was a valuable opportunity to hear directly from students in advance of the Path 4 projects aimed at developing new and existing programmes for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education. The big takeaway from this session, and just as true for further education, is the importance of meeting learners “where they are at”, with learner voice at the forefront of design.

The lightning session “**The use of inclusive e-learning academic tools to support under-represented HEA target groups in higher education**” provided a perspective on the academic needs of underrepresented learners along with a practical guide to using universally designed e-learning tools, while in the session “**The accessibility dream: An idea to future proof accessibility for staff and students**”,

DCU's Trevor Boland presented the case for building accessibility into every assignment, since accessibility will be a growing part of academic culture over the next decades.

Finally, the presentation “**A UDL approach to reducing the effects of Glossophobia**” demonstrated how applying the UDL principle of multiple means of action and expression can greatly alleviate learners' fears of speaking in public when for example they have to make a class presentation.

This is only a small sample of the stimulating and insightful sessions the conference had to offer. For those who would like to explore further, the link below will bring you to the AHEAD conference page where all sessions can be found at

<https://www.ahead.ie/event/ahead-2023/day-2-lightning-1>



Learner Voice Workshop at AHEAD Conference 2023

Denise O'Connor, Colaiste Dhulaigh CFE

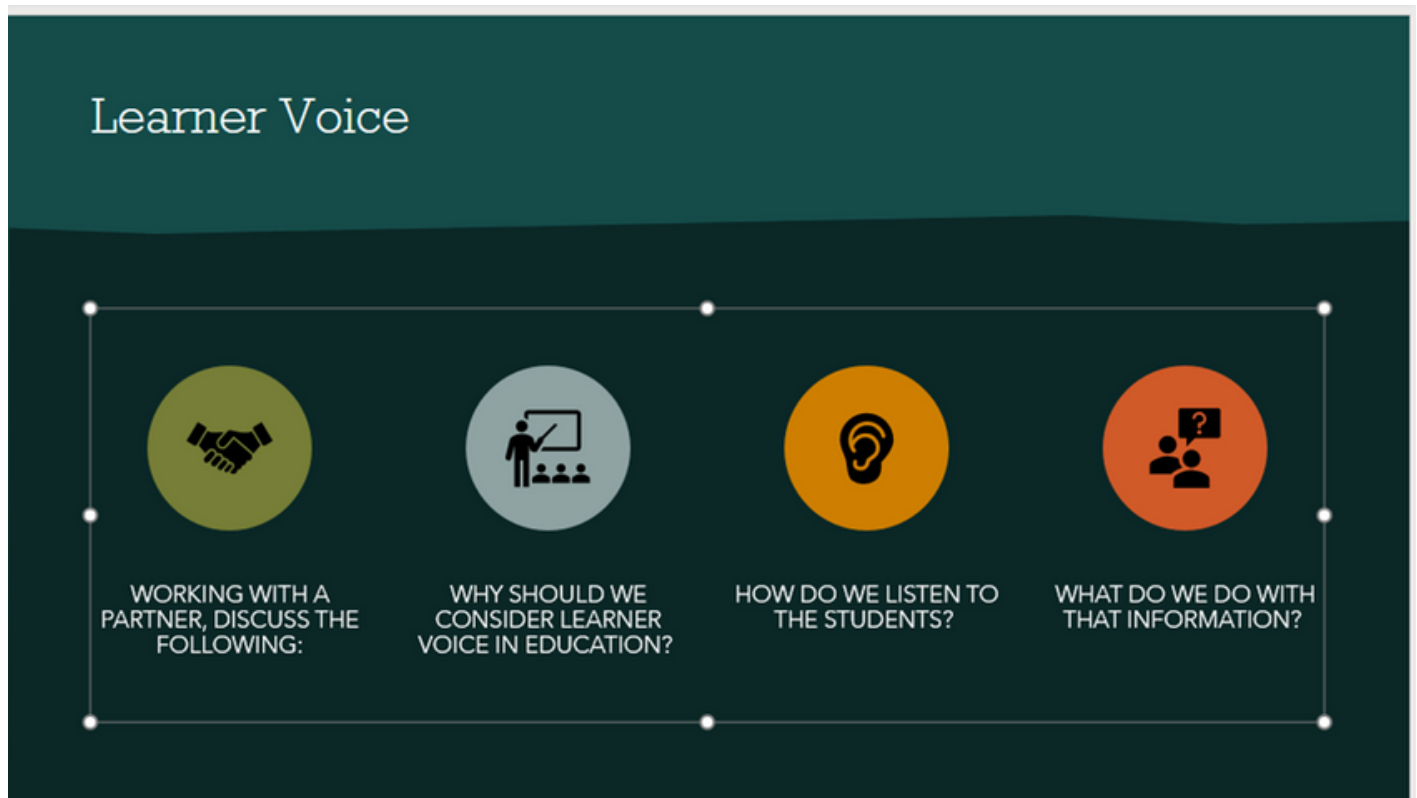
As part of the recent AHEAD 'Unity' conference in Croke Park on March 22nd, I was invited as a representative of City of Dublin ETB.

I delivered a workshop entitled '**Meaningfully Engaging with Learner Voice in Further Education and Training**'. The session focused on the importance of Learner Voice in identifying what learners need and want to reach their full potential in our education system.

There were practical suggestions put forward by the audience on how to engage with learner voice from chat functions and Board of Management meetings to post-its and focus groups. As part of the workshop, there were three learners on the panel representing learners with disabilities and mature students. The learners spoke so forcefully about how they could be heard better and how their suggestions could be implemented in the FE system.

The workshop brought to light what we do well in City of Dublin ETB but, also, what we could do better to always remember that the student is center to everything we do.

Below is an example of how the workshop engaged with the audience.



Youthreach North Great George's Street's Open Day

John Poole

We were delighted to accept Ger Lawless's invitation to attend the Youthreach centre's open day in March. The salubrious suburbs are grand but it's always good to have an excuse to go to into town!

Even more so when our destination was on one of the most beautiful and intact Georgian streets in the capital. Number 20, which is home to Youthreach has undergone a major refurbishment since August 2022, can now stand proud in a street that itself has experienced huge rejuvenation in the last few decades.

The former ground floor woodwork room has been repurposed into two beautiful new classrooms, showing off the building's original plaster wall friezes and ornate ceilings while allowing the centre to update the QQI modules it offers.

A brand-new gym has been installed in the basement and in the elegant hallway, in place of the old wood document cases, they have built a world clock wall showing the time and the flag of each learner's country of birth, a striking embodiment of the multicultural identity of which the centre is justly proud.

According to Ger the learners played an enormous part in making sure the building would be ready for the big day. Their pride in their lovely surroundings was clear in the learners who were acting as guides for the day – Reema, Orlaith, Eva, Kelly, Shane, Momen, Sinead and our guide for the afternoon, Zara Clarke.



Learners and Emma Kinsella, Beauty Therapy teacher, with the Lord Mayor.

Zara, who is studying Level 5 Beauty, bubbles over with positivity about her experience in Youthreach. As she guided us through the building, she talked about everything she has learned while in the centre.

When she introduced us to Eddie Daly, who is in charge of the centre's impressive kitchen, she said proudly "I couldn't boil an egg when I came here, and now I can cook a three-course meal". She spoke gratefully about the advice and guidance she has received about event security in which she works at weekends

Youthreach North Great George's Street's Open Day

.On the fourth floor she and her course mate Kelly, demonstrated the skills they are acquiring on their beauty course when they gave us hand massages. As they chatted away to us, we were left with the impression that their Youthreach experience is about much more than a qualification (valuable though this is); they are taking the opportunity to become well-rounded young adults with a strong sense of their own place in the world as well as gaining employable skills.



Ger Lawless and the Lord Mayor at North Great George's St Youth Reach Open Day.

Back downstairs it was time for speeches. The guest of honour was the Lord Mayor, Cllr. Caroline Conroy, who was lavish in her praise of the centre but the best testimonial to the good work being done came from the guest speaker Dwayne Edgar, an alumnus of the centre whose response to the pressures and stress of the pandemic was to set up the Inner-City Running Club which has proved a great success.

Dwayne, who is no stranger to media attention, having been an X-Factor contestant, is a life coach and motivational speaker. His positive impact on the audience at the open day is a clear example of the potential our alumni have to contribute as role models and sources of inspiration to our current learners as well as helping to build a strong sense of identity for City of Dublin ETB. It is a resource we must harness.

In conclusion a big thank you to learners and staff for making our first open day representing the Learner Supports and Engagement service such a pleasure.

Calling all FET educators!

We would love to share examples of innovative practice happening in centres relating to learner supports and learner engagement.

In next month's issue (May) we'll have a focus on RPL and Guidance.

We're always interested in hearing from practitioners so please do get in contact if you are interested in contributing to a future issue.

If you've contributed to, or led a project, initiative or event that is linked to any of the themes below, we'd love to hear about it and showcase it across the organisation. Or perhaps you've completed an assignment or research as part of studies you're undertaking that relates to learner support and engagement. If so, get in touch with us using [this link](#) and we'll feature it in a future edition.

- Accessibility
- Disability
- Diversity
- Extracurricular/non-curricular events and initiatives for learners
- Inclusion
- Language
- Learner voice
- Learner leadership
- Literacy
- Universal Design (for Learning)
- Learner wellbeing

We can accept video, audio or text submissions.

Finally, if you are organising an event and would like us to cover it in a future issue, get in touch!