

Researcher Biography

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Davina Brady (P.G.,M.A.,B.Sc.)

Table of Contents

List of tables and figures	3
List of Acronyms	4
Foreword Mary Lawlor	5
Foreword Dr Paul Downes.....	6
1. Executive Summary	7
1.1. Rationale for this Research	11
2. Methodology.....	14
3. Early School Leaving	16
3.1 Current contributors and consequences to ESL	16
3.2 Mental health challenges and ESL	19
4. Ireland's Education System and Curriculum	21
5. Carlow in Context	27
5.1 Education in Carlow	27
5.2 Understanding retention statistics	28
5.3 Support Services for Young People in Carlow	35
6. Statistical figures based on experiences and views	37
7. Stakeholders' Experiences, Views and Recommendations	38
7.1 Challenges and barriers facing young people and potential contributors to early school leaving	38
7.2 Challenges identified by stakeholders working with Young People and ESL.....	43
7.3 Challenges facing schools and services working with young people and ESL	45
7.4 Gaps in services from the stakeholders view and recommendations offer through consultation	48
8. Analysis and Recommendations.....	49
8.1. Analysis of data (primary and secondary)	49
8.2 Recommendations and pointers	51
Bibliography	54
Appendices	59

Figures

Figure 4.1 : Attendance in Carlow(2013-2016) and Ireland (2011-2016)

Figure 4.2 Labour market statistics for ESL in Ireland

Figure 5.1 Annual unemployment rates in Ireland from 1985 - 2016

Figure 5.2 Increase and decrease in apprenticeship uptake in Ireland between 1995 and 2011

Figure 5.3 Steady rise of Carlow retention rates

Figure 7.1 Challenges and barriers of mainstream school for young people

Figure 7.2 Psycho-social challenges related to early school leaving

Tables

Table 3.1 Junior and leaving certificate retention rates in Carlow for entry cohorts : 1999-2011

Table 3.2 Employment and Unemployment rates in Carlow : 2011 and 2016

Table 4.1 Retention rate in Ireland up to Leaving Certificate for the 2011 entry cohort

Table 4.2 List of post primary Leaving Certificate exam subjects

Table 4.3 Number of children aged 4-12 in Carlow

Table 4.4 Number of young people aged 13-24 in Carlow

Table 5.1 Junior and leaving certificate retention rates in Carlow for entry cohorts : 1999-2011

Table 5.2 Cohort number and retention rates of Leaving Certificate for entry cohort 2011

Table 5.3 Retention rates in Ireland from first year entry cohort up to Leaving Certificate in Ireland (1995, 1999, 2005, 2009, 2010)

Table 5.4 Population and surface size of Carlow and comparison counties

Table 5.5 Leaving Certificate retention rates for Carlow and comparison counties for entry cohort 2009

Table 5.6 Leaving Certificate retention rates for Carlow and comparison counties for entry cohort 2011

Table 5.7 Post-primary school types in Carlow and comparison counties

Table 5.8 School numbers and pupils enrolled in Carlow and comparison counties (2016 census)

Table 5.9 Post-primary schools with Deis status per county

Table 5.10 Number of Youthreach centres and School Completion Programmes for Carlow and comparison counties

Table 5.11 School absence for Carlow and comparative counties for 2014/2015

Table 5.12 School absence for Carlow and comparative counties for 2015/2016

List of Acronyms

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

CAMHS - Children and Adolescents Mental Health Services

CCDP - County Carlow Development Partnership

CFA - Child and Family Agency

CSO - Central Statistics Office

CRYS - Carlow Regional Youth Services

DES - Department of Education and Skills

ESRI - The Economic and Social Research Institute

ESL - Early school leaving

ETB - Education Training Board

EWB - Education Welfare Board

EWO - Education Welfare Officer

HSE - Health Service Executive

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

KCETB - Kilkenny Carlow Education Training Board

LCA - Leaving Certificate Applied

LCVP - Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

LGBTI - Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender and Intersex

NCCA - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NEPS - National Education Psychology Service

NEETS - Not Engaged in Education or Training Services

NFQ - The National Framework of Qualifications

OCED - Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

SCP - School Completion Programme

SICAP - Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

TY - Transition Year

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

Foreword Mary Lawlor

At the macro level, while early school leaving is an obstacle to economic growth, we are aware of the unintended consequences of early school leaving on the individual in terms of weaker job prospects, lower incomes, limited professional development, social exclusion and poverty.

Early School leaving is a challenge, which affects communities all across Ireland, including Carlow. While the report finds that over the past ten years Ireland has seen an upward trajectory of performance in both retention up to Leaving Certificate and in progression up to third level education nationally, this improvement has not been experienced in Carlow. The report also finds that Carlow has remained in the bottom ten counties for early school leaving for the past two decades with up to 9.8% of our young people not obtaining a Leaving Certificate during the same period.

At the time of commissioning this research, data from the Department of Education and Skills (2016) highlighted that Carlow had a retention rate of 86.4% of the 2010 entry cohort, the lowest in the Country. It was our examination of this trend that convinced us of the need to produce research which will generate accurate, reliable and valid information in order to better shape our approaches to early school leaving. And while we will continue with our after schools club, homework clubs, transition programme, and positive mental health programmes, some new approaches are needed if the retention rate in Carlow is to improve.

Our vision is for all young people in Carlow to engage in, enjoy and complete primary and secondary education with the support of their families and the wider community. Our approach therefore is to develop and implement, on a collaborative basis, a client centred, coherent and evidence-based strategy comprising prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

Finally, I would like to thank all who participated in this research, in particular the team in Carlow Development Partnership CLG, local school, as well as all other support service across the county



Mary Lawlor.
Chief Executive

Foreword Dr Paul Downes

This report is an extremely valuable contribution to understanding early school leaving in Carlow and does an excellent job in situating issues in Carlow against the background of the national context in Ireland.

Key avenues for hope are identified, such as the rate of improvement of school retention figures in Carlow and the recognition that “Carlow has the potential to move out of the bottom 10 counties and into the top 10 categories in a relatively short amount of time”. However, it uncovers a number of real concerns. These include suspension rates, bullying and questionable approaches to engaging with members of the Traveller community in some schools, as well as very concerning reports of higher bullying of Travellers in schools.

The report provides many useful recommendations and fresh approaches for a holistic, systemic approach for early school leaving prevention, such as recommending stronger connections between youth services and schools. It gives expression to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, that children and young people have a right to be heard on issues affecting their welfare.

It is evident that a central issue emerging from this report is the level of need and lack of adequacy of systemic response for emotional counselling/therapeutic supports in and around schools. The reports finding on this issue are stark:

- “Mental health issues were a significant cause for this cohort exiting the mainstream school system with 55% of participants self-reporting mental health problems. A third of these felt they needed one-to-one support to help with these issues but it was not always available and when it was it was with the guidance counsellor.”
- Among key stakeholders, “It was commonly agreed that mental health was the most significant challenge for young people today.”
- “a rise in chronic anxiety surfacing in the primary years.”
- With school refusal being linked to “chronic mental health problems where the young person could physically not go to school anymore due to social anxiety.”
- “Currently, schools do not offer a dedicated counselling service, and while guidance counselling and chaplaincy are frequently available, due to the complexities of mental health this is not suited to purpose.”
- “Over 50% of the young people who left mainstream school early attributed this to mental health issues.”

Young people’s emotions and emotional needs must be taken more seriously at national policy level. This report is to be particularly commended for shining a light on this vital issue.



Dr. Paul Downes
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1. Executive Summary

*"What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge,
and not knowledge in pursuit of the child."*

George Bernard Shaw.

Understanding how retention rates are measured and having an understanding of the importance of the climate in which statistics are taken, is the first point of call for any researcher exploring ESL. Retention rates, while great for measuring progression and non-progression, can also act as indicators for what may be occurring in a country at that time. For example, since 2000, retention in Ireland for Leaving Certificate (LC), third level education and skilled trade level apprenticeships have all seen great changes and increases in attainment right across the continuum. This increase and the abundance of qualifications is one of the greatest achievements in Europe in many respects. It has been attributed to the economic growth seen in Ireland between the late 1990s up to 2008.

In 2000, retention rates were as low as 78% and by 2005 they were still low in comparison to nowadays (80.5%). The rate of apprenticeship take up saw significant increases year on year. 2,500 people in 1995 were enrolled on apprenticeship trainings while in 2005 had increased to 29,000. This indicates that this uptake contributed to the overall rates of retention during this period. From 2007, apprenticeship uptake saw a dramatic decrease while retention rates for LC started to increase. By 2010, 89.5% of young people in Ireland had retained a LC.

Retention rates can be unreliable and this is something which needs mentioning at this point. Data for the national statistics are collated through internal data collection processes. Retention rates year on year are supplied by schools to the Department of Education. This process, while it is logical and resourceful, can have its challenges. To begin, this research has captured stories of young people who have remained on the school system long after they had left it. It has been shown that even up to one year after leaving; the young person was still enrolled in the school. Young people that this affected were over the age of 16 in most cases.

The law states that young people can leave school at 16 or after 3 years of secondary education. This law means that after 16 no state organisation is looking out for the educational welfare of these young people. If they are not in a Youthreach or a Youth Training Centre, they are disengaged altogether and if adverse affects already occur, this will have a massive impact on the young person's later outcome. This highlights the need for national adjustments in retention rate collection. However, it also highlights the stressed facing a school if they have to keep young people in the system even though the young person has physically left the school. It has been reported that this occurs because of issues with resources and if the school numbers do not meet a certain criteria, resources will be cut. This national system does not take the child into account whatsoever and if a school has extra needs, even if they have DEIS status, the numbers they enrol year on year are what counts when funding comes around. This is a broken system and needs addressing nationally if the educational, psychological and physical needs of children and young people are to be met.

This research was carried out in an Ireland which has 'recovered' from the 'crash'. Carlow on the other hand, has a 17% unemployment rate, according to the CSO (2016), making it the third highest rate of unemployment in Ireland. This shows how retention rates are potentially dependent upon economic circumstances and if employment is not there, school education becomes more important for society. On commissioning this research CCDP set out to explore the reasons for such low rates of retention up to the LC in the county. At the time Carlow had been reported by POBAL as having one of the lowest retention rates in the county (87%). The most up to date

retention statistics from the Department of Education shows that Carlow has increased this figure to just over 90% in a very short space of time. This increase could be attributed to the unemployment rate and less opportunity in the county for young people outside of the school system. The research does illustrate a move in a positive direction for the county in regards to LC retention rates in that they are on the rise and this needs to be noted, regardless of the economic climate. While retention has increased and while it is clear that efforts are being made right across the county, barriers to education still exist for 10% of its school age population and this needs addressing.

It is worth noting that some of these figures are made up of young people who have not completed a Junior Certificate (JC) and this is perhaps where the gap lies in regards to increasing retention at LC in Carlow county. Of the entry cohort of 1999, 97.5% of young people in Carlow retained a JC. From the 2010 entry cohort, only 95.1% of young people completed the JC. This decrease is concerning and something which needs to be explored in the county and right across the country.

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”
William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

In Ireland, very little county and local research has been conducted on ESL and the barriers which exist for young people and their families in regards to this. Hence, it must be noted that, even though findings from this research are surprising and stark in some instances, it is not that Carlow is the only county in Ireland that is seeing these challenges or barriers to education; but that they are one of the few counties who have researched it at this level. This must be warranted as forward thinking, proactive and noted as a step towards securing better outcomes for young people in the county.

To obtain data which is reliable, several stakeholders were interviewed throughout this research. Focus groups were conducted also and surveys were distributed to harder to reach participants. All relevant stakeholders were invited to participate in the research and while some agents were very enthusiastic, it did appear that others were less enthusiastic and harder to reach. A very small number of school Principals participated while a high number of support services took part. Through consultation, it was evident that struggles facing young people in under resourced schools is a contributor to ESL.

The level of engagement of participants while very high for some services and education institutes, was very low for other very relevant institutes. This uptake is concerning especially given that this latter cohort contribute to how we intervene with potential early school leaving. To understand where Carlow sits in regards to resources, comparison counties were included in the research. These include Sligo, who had the highest retention rate in the country at the time, Monaghan and Roscommon. With Sligo the main difference was the number of Youthreach facilities they had access to. In Carlow there is only one Youthreach and while it is doing significant work in Carlow town, there is a cohort of young people who have no access whatsoever to alternative education.

Several significant findings have been identified through this research and these include;

- This research has shown a greater need for **universal interventions for all** young people in regards to LC retention.
- This research indicates that **ESL is not only a result of Adverse Childhood Experiences but that it can effect all types of young people** regardless of their background.
- This research has found that **mental health challenges are the number one barrier to retaining a LC** for young people in Carlow.

- This research found that young people who suffered with mental health problems were from a variety of backgrounds.
- This research has shown that unsupported learning needs leads to ESL
- This research has identified challenges with JC retention in the county.
- This research has found a greater need for mental health support in the county for young people.
- This research has shown discrimination towards members of the travelling community in regards to the type of education they have received in some schools in the county.
- This research has identified a need for change in how the views of members of the travelling community towards education are understood.
- This research has shown that a cultural shift needs to occur in Carlow around the education potential of members of the travelling community.
- This research has shown that the national school curriculum puts massive pressure on young people regarding retention and this is a predictor of ESL.
- This research has found that young people are very capable of self diagnosing mental health challenges but that when they seek support, that support is not always there.
- This research has shown how one to one support can effect a young person's outcomes positively and increase their chances of attaining a LC regardless of background.
- The findings of this research indicate a need for greater psychological supports in schools across Carlow and Ireland.
- This research identified a need for ESL support for under 15's.
- This research identified a gap in resources for the 16-18 year old group in the county who are engaged in alternative routes to LC - this includes more educational options and access to them.

The findings of this research are significant for a number of reasons. First, up to now interventions have been targeted at the child or family from a low socio economic background throughout Ireland's history of prevention. While interventions are necessary and have proven results within this cohort, universal interventions lack significantly in Ireland. Stakeholders stated a need within this group and a need which is stronger than our current frameworks have anticipated. This *Age of Acceleration* has had its benefits for society but it has resulted in more social issues all around. While targeted interventions are needed to keep young people in school that are from more adverse backgrounds, this research has shown a need for an intervention for all young people.

One area where a greater universal approach is required is within mental health interventions and supports. The level of support for young people with mental health problems in Ireland is disappointing and this lack of adequate resources in the community and in schools is having an effect on young people's outcomes. In some instances young people reported staying out of school for 2 years before re-entering education because of struggles with mental health. The connection to ESL is significant. The research has shown that ESL was directly related to ongoing mental health challenges among some participants. The lack of support when they self diagnosed has been stated as a contributor the continuing challenges and escalation of it to a level where they could not go to school anymore. One to one support and a move from the large numbers and pressures of main-stream school decreased mental health challenges. This indicates that if support did exist at school level, it is very possible that more young people would stay in school. It has also been reported that academia was a struggle for some and because they did not have the support they needed they fell more behind. A problem exists in Ireland where children who have extra support in primary school, whether through the resource teacher or otherwise, lack this in secondary school which decreases their chance of succeeding at second level.

Young people who reported struggling with academia did not state this for every subject but for some subjects. Young people from the travelling community stated issues around educational support and when they sought help, they were told to join a class which was predominantly travelling children, in which no teaching occurred. A similar story was shared by members of the community who were in the education system 20 years ago. In one instance one mother who was consulted spoke about feeling belittled and 'spoke down to' by school agents. It was noted by several members of the community that this discrimination occurs right throughout Carlow town. A number of those consulted said that *in primary school you are unaware that you are any different and it is not until you get to fifth or sixth class or even secondary school that people start to treat you differently*. This is when the derogatory name calling begins and in many instances, if reported, participants said little action was taken. Participants spoke about other young people not wanting them in their group of friends and *if you do not have another travelling child there, you will be on your own*. The findings around the travelling community experiences in the county or indeed the country are not new. Discrimination against the group still occurs today in Ireland and across the world and this research has only identified it at a more local level. To say Ireland requires a cultural shift in how members of the community are treated is an understatement. To think that as a country we are responsible for children or young people not reaching their full potential because of their background is something to be ashamed off.

The recommendations going forward are attainable for Carlow. It has been shown that a 'wrap around', Meithal type system, could be introduced into schools and in collaboration with youth services, a service of support could be offered to young people. This would be revolutionary in regards to the Irish education system and there is nothing in policy that states this cannot be achieved. It is shown right across the county that resources lack and when resources lack, people have to work together more and pool expertise. In a country where government frameworks and funding schemes are disabling in some ways, services, schools, voluntary groups and communities as a whole have to intervene. Carlow has the potential to be a reference point for other counties in regards to ESL. Having this research and pointers for going forward, gives Carlow the opportunity to start moving Ireland in a direction which will benefit our young people rather than hold a mass of them back. This requires collaboration, multi-disciplinary processes and an integrated service. It needs to be driven however, and this is perhaps where the challenges may lie.

***"None of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things,
with great love, and together we can do something wonderful."***

Mother Teresa

1.1. Rationale for this Research

In the 1916 Proclamation of Independence, read out on the steps of the GPO, equal rights and equal opportunities were guaranteed to all Irish citizens, and the resolve to cherish “*all of the children of the nation equally*” was declared. This is understood today to mean that every young person should have equal access to good quality and inclusive education and the opportunity to develop his or her full potential, irrespective of individual, family-related, gender-related, or socioeconomic factors. However, **many young people leave the education system without having the skills or the qualifications which are now seen as necessary to make a successful transition to the labour market and for active participation in today’s knowledge-based economy.** At societal level, research shows a consistent association between school dropout and unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poorer health outcomes.

Early School Leaving is a challenge which affects communities all across Ireland, including rural counties such as Carlow. Over the past ten years Ireland has seen a growth in performance in both retention up to Leaving Certificate and in progression up to third level education (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016, 2018; Growing up in Ireland, 2017; OECD, 2016). Retention rates are recorded on a yearly basis from first year right up to sixth year for that entry cohort. For example, the retention rate of the 1995 entry cohort (first year) who sat the leaving certificate in 2000 was 78% in Ireland. The 2005 entry cohort saw the highest increase since the turn of the century with 89.5%. The current retention rate in Ireland is 92% and this was from the 2011 entry cohort. **However, even though retention rates are increasing at junior and senior cycle levels across Ireland, Carlow has remained in the bottom ten counties in the country for the last two decades for Leaving Certificate retention rates, and was the worst performer for much of that period.**

At the time of starting this research, data from the DES and Pobal (2016) showed that Carlow had a retention rate of 86.4%, the lowest in the country. This data was a representation of Leaving Certificate retention rates from the 2010 entry cohort. Since then data from the 2011 entry cohort has been released, and shows an improvement of 3.8% to 90.2%. Factors which may contribute to this include a population increase across the county and a small increase in budgets from the 10% cut during the 2012-2014 period (Education at a Glance, 2016). **Currently, Carlow is the ninth lowest county in Ireland for Leaving Certificate retention** and over the past 20 years, Carlow has consistently been among the lowest 10 counties, with 9.8% of its young people are not obtaining a Leaving Cert (1:10).

International and EU-wide research clearly indicates that a low education attainment has a detrimental effect on a person's future and on their quality of life (Jerrim & Macmillan, 2015; EU Directorate General for Internal Policies, 2011). In 2015, Europe had over 4 million early school leavers with only 40% of this cohort in employment. A report released by the European Network of Education Councils (2013), confirmed that low qualification levels lead to weaker job prospects and lower incomes over the whole lifespan. It results in taking up less learning opportunities and thus endangers further personal and professional development. However, early school leaving is rarely the result of just one contributor and often the needs of young people at risk are complex. It is usually a slow process and can affect young people right up through adulthood. The Europe 2020 Strategy recognises the challenges which result from early school leaving and lower levels of education and has set itself a goal of bringing the percentage of early school leavers from those aged 18-24 to below 10% (EU Commission, 2016).

Current research for Ireland on retention rates is conducted by European and national institutions (UNICEF Report Card, 2017; Education at a Glance, OCED Indicators 2017; The State of Ireland’s Children, 2018; DES retention rates, 1995 -2011 entry cohort, TUSLA, 2015, 2016; CSO, 2016; POBAL, 2016). As quantitative and measurable, this research is central to an understanding of the extent of the issue. The type of research does not however provide a precise understanding of the reasons behind the figures. Research which explores some of these issues

and potential contributors to early school leaving includes *Early School Leaving - What's next?* (DES, 2013); the ESRI (2018) *Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme; No way back? The dynamics of early school leaving* (Byrne and Smyth, 2010); *Education Matter's* (Focus Ireland, 2017); and, *the Education Attainment Thematic Analysis* (CSO, 2018).

One area which is receiving increasing attention is the relationship between early school-leaving and mental health issues, especially in the light of an increasing awareness of the impact of stress and anxiety on young people in Ireland today (Downes, 2011; 2018). During 2012-2016, the total referrals to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) rose by 26%. This is reflected in other research from the past 3 years which indicates the statistics are still rising (Healthy Ireland Survey, Summary of Findings, 2016; Jigsaw Annual Report (2017); Youth Mental Health in Ireland and Northern Ireland, 2018). There are a number of studies which explore the mental health of young people post early school-leaving, including the OCED (2017) research which found a 26% rate of depression amongst female ESLs and a 21% rate amongst males. Further research to see if these factors were present prior to leaving certificate would greatly aid understanding in retention rates of both Junior and Leaving Certificate.

In response to these troubling figures on retention rates and in the knowledge of the damaging effects these have on the individual and on local communities, Carlow County Development Partnership CLG (CCDP) sought to explore, understand and propose some recommendations to the complex and multi-faceted challenges and barriers which contribute to the issue. In a similar way to other research it has commissioned, including the 2018 report on homelessness, Carlow County Development Partnership recognises the need to involve stakeholders in understanding social issues facing the county. **In order to respond effectively and efficiently to the complex reasons behind early school leaving, and in particular to understand the reasons for lower retention rates up to Leaving Certificate in the county, it was seen as essential to hear the views and acknowledge the challenges voiced by all relevant stakeholders.** Consultation with stakeholders is an essential component in ensuring best practice for policy-makers when developing and implementing new strategies for early school-leavers and those at risk of the same.

Carlow County Development Partnership CLG is the Local Development Company for Carlow Town and County and has been active in community-level local development for over 15 years. Their overall strategic focus for County Carlow has 3 inter-related strands: labour market activation; rural economic development and community development. The strategy for is based on the foundations of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), and the Rural Social Scheme (RSS). SICAP tackles poverty, social exclusion, and long-term unemployment at a local level through partnerships between disadvantaged or marginalised individuals, community organisations and public sector agencies. RSS seeks to support low earning farmers and fisherpersons who are in receipt of a social welfare payment while providing certain services to rural communities. The rural economic development strategy is underpinned by the LEADER programme which covers sustainable management of the county's natural resources. The Tús Programme and the Jobs Club service guide the strategy. The purpose of Tús is to provide opportunities for those who are unemployed and who need support becoming job ready, while the Jobs Club aids job-seekers who are going back to work. Carlow County Development Partnership is at the heart of the county and aims to make Carlow a great place to live for its inhabitants where everyone is included and can embrace the same opportunities.

Through this research, Carlow County Development Partnership consulted early school leavers, those at risk of early school leaving, and those in education, community, health or youth work roles within the county. This collective voice will guide recommendations where possible and in turn empower both Carlow County Development Partnership and all stakeholders to work towards improving the educational experience for young

people. The Partnership will aspire to promote change in areas where gaps are evident within the research and to provide some evidence-based qualitative and quantitative data which may inform other organisations going forward. Having such information will ensure that organisations in Carlow and nationally can respond more effectively to the challenges and barriers which present for early school leavers and to alleviate some of the contributors to ESL for young people in Carlow.

Consultation with individuals who have left the education system in relation to barriers and challenges which prevented them from attaining a Leaving Certificate is at the core of this research.

The aims of this research as guided by the Steering Group are;

- Identifying the factors that contribute to Carlow having one of the lowest retention rates of young people in the senior cycle up to Leaving Certificate examination;
- To explore the barriers to retention across various demographics including ethnic minority groups;
- To identify the gaps and lack of supports in service provision that impact negatively on retention, and
- To deliver recommendations to address these gaps and strengthen services.

The report seeks to:

- Identify themes in research,
- Increase the amount of evidence-based research in Carlow to enable better decision making and strategic planning;
- Undertake an analysis of needs, trends, and current issues which have presented through consultation;
- Act as a vessel through which early school leavers and those in relevant roles can have greater input on issues which affect early school leaving;
- Explore objectively what works well and what could be offered or carried out differently;
- Give voice to stakeholders and listen to their recommendations about not only the causes but the solutions or gaps in services;
- Give voice to the young people in education in County Carlow;
- Promote the importance of inclusive research which is inclusive of all stakeholders;
- To stress the importance of giving young people a voice in matters which concern them;
- Create awareness at a national level while emphasising the issues which arise locally, and
- Put forward a set of recommendations which are achievable.

Section 2 outlines the data collection methodologies. Using a mixed method approach, both qualitative and quantitative data has been gathered. Section 3 explores early school leaving, the contributors to it and the consequences of lower education attainment. Section 4 looks at education in Ireland and section 5 explores education, retention rates and other potential factors associated with ESL in Carlow. Using both informative and comparative analysis and current available research, this section gives an objective view of early school leaving and the contrasts between Carlow and other counties. Sections 6 and 7 consist of the primary data gathered throughout this research. The opportunity to gather both qualitative and quantitative data has enhanced the analysis and given an all-round narrative to early school leaving. The final section, Section 8 will combine the primary data with pre-existing research to develop attainable pointers and recommendations.

2. Methodology

This research report seeks to contribute to current research in Carlow and Ireland relating to early school-leaving. While providing an objective assessment of the challenges and barriers to retention up to Leaving Certificate in Carlow, it will identify contributors to early school leaving and uncover any potential gaps. **This research should be viewed as the initial step towards a wider, more-informed development process which gives voice to young people and early school-leavers, and the services who support them.** The research output is both qualitative and quantitative. Surveys, interviews (one-to-one and group), and focus groups were carried out over a two-month period with stakeholders including:

- Early school-leavers or those at risk of early school-leaving;
 - Participants who left school early and did not return to school
 - Participants who left main-stream school and sought education elsewhere (under and over 18)
 - Participants from diverse groups such as early school leavers from the Travelling community and ethnic minority communities.
- Stakeholders who support early school-leavers or those at risk including,
 - School Principals
 - Early School Leaving intervention staff
 - Training centre coordinators and staff
 - Education welfare officers
 - Child and family welfare officers
 - Youth and community coordinators
 - Youth workers
 - Youth diversion workers
 - Youth drugs workers
 - Youth mental health workers.

In correspondence with the aims and objectives agreed by the Steering Group, the methodology focused on providing a safe and confidential space for stakeholders to express their experiences of early school leaving, articulate their views and offer their own recommendations.

All organisations and institutions which work with the target group were invited to participate in the research. At least 80% of those approached participated and added invaluable insights. They are referenced below.

- TUSLA
- ETB(Education Training Board) funded schools (4 of 10)
- Carlow County Development Partnership
- Carlow Regional Youth Services
- Youthreach
- Tullow School Completion Programme
- St Catherine's Community Services Centre

The type of data required from each group differed depending on the participant group. Where access was more difficult to access due to time constraints and logistics, online surveys were used. Where organisations have a number of services which could add insight into the research, focus groups were conducted with up to a maximum of 7 participants. Interviews were carried out with stakeholders who were seen at risk of leaving school early and those who had left school early but returned to alternative education either immediately or some time afterwards. Interviews were also carried out with those in roles directly associated to early school leaving. Even

though the information required from each stakeholder differed in some ways, questions were focused on the following:

For early school leavers, those in alternative education, and those who are at risk of:

- School - curriculum, school process, school routine
- Supports - young people have in place
- Individual needs - contributors to ESL
- Challenges and barriers- school/after leaving school
- Gaps - What may have helped them to stay in school?
- Wellbeing - before and after leaving school
- Future educational path

For those working directly and indirectly with ESLs

- Procedure - the experience of the young person
- Partnerships - relationships with other services and schools
- The Student - attributes and behaviours / support network
- Staff expertise and training - complexities associated with early school leaving
- The System/curriculum
- Other Potential barriers/challenges
- Gaps in services

Stakeholders who participated had the opportunity to share any other relevant information about their experiences and views and were encouraged to offer recommendations and solutions. Most data was gathered between January and March, 2019. Research findings were presented to Carlow County Development Partnership at the end of April 2019.

3. Early School Leaving (ESL)

Understanding ESL

The Eurostat data (2017) for Ireland shows that of all 18-24-year olds, 5% were early school leavers. In contrast, in Europe for this period, the rate stood at 11% (or 4,000,000 young people) who did not obtain a Leaving Certificate or equivalent. The CSOs Educational Attainment Thematic Report (2018), showed that males were twice as likely to be early school-leavers (6% versus 3%). In Ireland, the legal definition of early school leaving (ESL) is '**non-participation in school before a young person reaches age 16 or before completing three years post primary education, or whichever is later**'. Thus, by definition, a young person who completes the Junior Certificate at 16 years old, is not an early school-leaver but rather someone who has completed a legal duration of post-primary education. 49% of the young people who have unfinished qualifications at upper secondary level would not be classified as early leavers because they have either already attained an upper secondary qualification; or subsequently went on to attain an upper secondary qualification (European Commission, 2014). However, to go to university, a student must have a level 5 certification qualification and, with the current emphasis on third level education in Ireland, the term "early school leaving" is often used to describe anyone who has not obtained a Leaving Certificate.

In Ireland, retention of Junior and Leaving certificate is reported on at the end of each academic year. In recent years, retention research is based more on the attainment of the Leaving Certificate than the Junior Certificate, even though in counties such as Carlow, retention rates to the Junior Certificate is decreasing. The most up-to-date DES retention report does not show Junior Certificate retention rates and instead show comparisons to European member countries concerning senior-cycle retention.

Table 3.1 Junior and leaving certificate retention rates in Carlow for entry cohorts: 1999-2011

Carlow	1999 cohort	2005 cohort	2009 cohort	2010 cohort	2011 cohort
Junior Certificate	97.5%	95.8%	94.5%	95.1%	-
Leaving Certificate	82.6%	87%	84.6%	86.2%	90.6%

Source: Department of Education and Skills

3.1 Current contributors to ESL and the consequences of it

In 2018, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) carried out an in-depth evaluation of the national Youthreach Programme. It found five, often, interlinked contributors to ESL and added that ESL is a gradual process and not something that just happens overnight: *Early school leaving is gradual rather than an 'event'* (ERSI, 2018).

For the purpose of this section, the author will use the ESRI (2018) findings and expand on the main points with current and previous research.

Contributing Factor 1. ESL is strongly influenced by family background, social class and parental education.

According to Byrne and Smyth (2010), the education system is embedded in a middle-class perspective, which promotes values that may be incompatible with the value systems of low-income families and children. Furthermore, there may be parents of children in primary and secondary school who themselves have very limited education. Statistics from Pobal (2016) reveal that 14% of the population of Carlow only have primary

education, while 28% hold a third level degree. Lower levels of parental education have been associated with poorer educational outcomes for young people throughout research (Battin-Pearson *et al.*, 2000; Curtis & McMillan, 2008), and often it is linked to early school-leaving (Dale, 2010; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). It has also been argued that parental expectation can have an effect on the education outcomes of the young person. McLaren(2010) found that 68% of higher educated mothers expect their child to complete a university degree, but this drops to 38% when the highest level of parental education was lower than Year 12 (equivalent to 6th year).

Research has shown that family structure has also been linked to early school-leaving (Ferguson *et al.*, 2005; Mance & Yu 2010; Song, Benin, & Glick 2012; Traag & van der Velden, 2011). 20.3% of young people in Carlow live in a one-parent families (Pobal, 2016), 2,206 with a mother and 370 with a father at home. A report issued by the Saint Vincent de Paul (2019) showed that lone parents in Ireland have the second highest rate of income poverty, persistent poverty, and severe deprivation among the EU-15 countries (data from Eurostat EU-SILC survey). They also found that lone-parents are five times more likely to experience deprivation. A further finding showed that 20.8% of working lone-parents were still living in poverty.

The Pobal Deprivation Index (PDI) shows that Carlow has been below the national average on measures of social deprivation since 2006. Based on 2016 figures, Carlow received an overall Deprivation Index rating of -7.9 which was below the national average of -3.6, while some areas in Carlow received ratings as low as -23. Furthermore, CSO figures (2016) showed that the unemployment rate for Carlow was below the national average of 12.9% (CSO, 2016), with 17% of the population unemployed making it the third highest rate of unemployment in Ireland.

Table 3.2 Employment and Unemployment rates in Carlow: 2011 and 2016

Work Status	2011	2016	% Change
Employed	19,502	21,973	+13%
Unemployed	5,908 (23% of population)	4,507 (17% of population)	-24%

Source: Central Statistics Office, 2011 and 2016

Of its current workforce Pobal(2016) found that 21% were semi or unskilled roles, while 30.2% worked in professional roles.

According to the CSO's Educational Attainment Thematic Report (2018), which surveyed a cohort of 18-24-year olds, early school leavers are twice as likely to be unemployed, than those who have completed the LC. The graph below shows the proportions of early school leavers employed/unemployed in comparison to those in the same age bracket who did not leave school early.

Figure 3.3 Labour market statistics for ESL in Ireland



Source: Central Statistics Office

Over half (54%) of all early school leavers were not economically active compared to 35% of other persons aged 18-24. Early school-leavers had a much lower rate of employment (28% compared to 56%) and the unemployment rate for early school-leavers was 18% which was twice that of other persons aged 18-24 (9%). Unemployment and the mind-set of not contributing to the workforce has been correlated to other effects throughout the lifespan. According to research carried out by Sneddon and Harris (2013) and updates by Rochford in 2016, entitled *Prevention and Early Intervention in Children and Young People's Services – Children's Learning*, adults with lower educational attainment are four times more likely to be unemployed, usually in a low-skilled job. They are more likely to suffer from ill-health or depression and are more likely to be dependent on state benefits. It is also more likely that they live in poorer housing conditions (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2009), or are at greater risk of homelessness (Focus Ireland, 2017). Economic disadvantage, mental health issues, addiction and broken-down family structures are potential consequences of early school-leaving and unemployment.

Contributing Factor 2. ESL is linked to lower scores on reading and maths on entry to second-level. Research has shown a strong link between low academic ability and early school-leaving (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Marks 2007; Beekhoven and Dekkers, 2005). Reduced educational attainment, particularly with respect to literacy, is linked to a number of poorer outcomes through adult life, such as unemployment, lower income, and poorer mental and physical health (Rochford, 2016). Women with low literacy skills are five times more likely to be classified as depressed than those with good literacy skills. Adults with low levels of literacy are also more likely to end up in the criminal justice system (French, 2012).

Contributing Factor 3. ESL rates are higher amongst those allocated to lower stream classes.

According to Byrne and Smyth (2010) falling behind in schoolwork, in combination with repeated educational failure, impacts the self-esteem of young people who ultimately lose confidence in their learning. Lalor et al., (2007) and Byrne and Smyth(2010) both found that streaming or ability grouping contributes to early school-leaving. Streaming results in lower teacher expectation and separation from other higher performing students, resulting in disengagement and alienation from the learning process (Ibid). The problem arises when the expectations of individuals are then lowered on the basis of the group to which they belong (Masters, 2011).

Expectation and learning go hand-in-hand. In a paper commissioned by the Australian Council for Educational Research, called *The Power of Expectation*, it is stated that the expectation which young people have of themselves combined with the expectation others have of them, contributes to their success or failure. In regards to learning it states:

Not surprisingly, students develop differing beliefs about their own abilities to learn. Some students appear to view ability as 'fixed' and something over which they have little control. Students who believe they have low fixed abilities tend to believe that effort will make no difference.

Contributing Factor 4. ESL is strongly associated with negative teacher-student relationships.

Positive relationships are a core element in wellbeing and also in learning. If positive relationships are lacking in a young person's life, trust can be an issue. However, if a young person has at least one positive relationship with an adult, they can exceed their own expectations. In learning facilities or institutions, it is crucial for the young person to have good relationships with educators where they feel heard and listened too. Otherwise, being in this environment can be difficult for a young person, especially if they have few, if any, positive relationships in the home or through a youth service.

Given its importance to ongoing learning and achievement, few outcomes of schooling are more important than the development of a belief in one's own capacity to learn. Because teachers and schools are in powerful positions to shape this belief – both positively and negatively – vigilance is required to ensure that educational practices do not unintentionally communicate and institutionalise low expectations of some learners.

(Masters, 2011)

Contributing Factor 5. ESL is related to the use of punitive sanctions.

According to the ESRI (2018), punitive sanctions can contribute to a young person leaving school early. If a young person has a negative experience in school, they will often react to this by behaving in a way which can incur the consequence of sanctions. If a young person is 'in trouble' on a regular basis, going to school can become a battle for them every day and hence they may choose not to attend or leave school altogether.

3.2 Mental health issues as contributors to early school leaving.

Mental health challenges amongst young people is not a new phenomenon but its prevalence is increasing dramatically in recent years, especially amongst young females. Between 2012 and 2016 there has been a 26% increase in the number of referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The Health Research Board (2018) found that a higher number of girls were being admitted to in-patient psychiatric units, accounting for 60% of all under-18 psychiatric admissions. A recent report by the OCED (2017) showed that in Ireland the depression rate amongst female early school-leavers was 26%. This is the second highest in the OCED. The depression rates for male early school-leavers for the same period was 21%.

Jigsaw, the National Centre for Youth Mental Health, reported that 39% of its users experienced anxiety, ;31% reported low mood; 31% 25% issues with stress, 17% sleep disturbances, 15% said they had difficulties with anger, 14.5% had mental health issues due to family problems, 12% said they had low self-esteem and high self-criticism, while a further 15% had suicidal thoughts (Jigsaw Annual Report, 2017). In the period 2014-2016, the CSO reported County Carlow as having the highest rate in Ireland among adult women of suicide per 100,000 people. Death by suicide amongst males was the tenth highest in the country (CSO, 2016).

To say that mental health is not a lead contributor to absenteeism in school or early school-leaving would be naïve when looking at the figures shown above (Downes, 2011). Currently, schools do not offer a dedicated

counselling service, and while guidance counselling and chaplaincy are frequently available, due to the complexities of mental health this is not suited to purpose. The large size of most schools and the lack of extra resources available to young people prevents schools from giving the help that they want to, with consistent one-to-one communication and support not being something that can be offered.

Training centres such as Youthreach have these types of supports in place and in turn, have been shown to help young people who have greater needs. The National Educational Psychological Services (2017) report entitled '*A profile of learners in Youthreach*' found that 78% of learners in their study suffered from depression or long periods of low mood. For half of this group, when they entered Youthreach, depression and low mood lessened. It also shows that 61% of participants reported having panic attacks, specific fears/phobias, or a high level of chronic worry or anxiety prior to entering Youthreach. This decreased by 20% after entering Youthreach. As this research indicates that on entering Youthreach, two-thirds of participants suffered from mental health problems, we may surmise that that mental health could be a contributor to leaving mainstream school early. The decrease in problems due to the supports offered by Youthreach shows that extra psychological support may help young people stay in education.

Outside of school or Youthreach, mental health supports are limited not just in Carlow but across the country. In 2018, numbers working in youth mental health services fell by 4% even though the ratio of young members of our society is growing. Among areas affected, Carlow, South Tipperary, Wexford, Waterford and Kilkenny, saw a drop of 9 posts across counties. Carlow, like fifteen other counties across the country does not have an out- of-hours psychiatry team. Carlow Regional Youth Service (CRYS) offer services of youth counselling in Carlow town, and areas such as Tullow do have connections to youth mental health counselling but otherwise supports are limited for this age group. From the data collected in the above research on Youthreach, having mental health support from experts has clear positive effects on education and is an area which requires a greater focus on resources to respond to the needs of young people throughout the education system.

4. Education in Ireland (Governance, System and Curriculum)

Ireland Today

The Ireland of today has over 350,000 students (junior and leaving cycle) enrolled in 715 post-primary schools. Currently, Ireland has a retention rate of 92% of pupils attaining a leaving Certificate. Ireland has one of the highest completion rates of upper second-level education in Europe (At a Glance, OECD indicators 2017). For girls, Ireland has the third highest completion rate (92%) and the second highest for boys (90%) at Leaving Certificate cycle level. These successes have occurred despite significant cuts in funding over the past ten years.

With rapid growth in national income as well as public expenditure in the decade up to 2007, spending by public authorities on education also grew rapidly in Ireland, as it did in other European countries. However, between 2010 and 2014 there was a decrease by 10% in total in public and private spending (compared to an increase of 4% on average across OECD countries) for all levels of education combined.

Education at a Glance 2017, OECD Indicators

Despite the recent recovery, the budget for education has not returned to the levels seen before the “crash”. Resources in schools are continually challenged from a budget and workforce perspective and more schools now have to fundraise themselves for parts of this budget. Ireland's population is also growing (up 3.7% from the 2011 to 2016 census) and the educational needs of children and young people are becoming more complex. To maintain a rise in retention, investment must be put into education at a local and national level.

The most up-to-date statistics are available from the Department of Education and Skills (DES), for the 2011 entry cohort. This cohort was scheduled to complete the leaving certificate in 2016/2017. A list of the counties and retention levels are shown below (Table 4.1). The figures highlighted in green represent the ten counties with the lowest retention rates. In order, from the lowest, these are Longford (87.3%), South Dublin, Westmeath, Leitrim, Galway City, Dublin City, Louth, Carlow (90.6), and Wexford (90.7%). The figures highlighted in purple represent the counties with the highest retention rate. The county with the highest retention rate of 93.8% is Sligo. Kerry and Tipperary have retention rates of 93.3%, Galway, and Kilkenny 93.1%, and Donegal had a retention rate of 93%. A full list of retention rates up to leaving certificate can be seen in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Retention rate in Ireland up to Leaving Certificate for the 2011 entry cohort

County (2011 entry cohort)	Retention rate %
Carlow	90.6
Cavan	92.3
Clare	91.6
Cork City	90.8
Cork	92.7
Donegal	93.0
Dublin City	90.3
Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown	92.8
Fingal	92.6
Galway City	90.0
Galway	93.1
Kerry	93.3
Kildare	92.2
Kilkenny	93.1
Laois	90.9
Leitrim	89.5

Limerick	91.6
Longford	87.3
Louth	90.4
Mayo	92.3
Meath	91.9
Monaghan	91.3
Offaly	90.8
Roscommon	92.0
Sligo	93.8
South Dublin	89.2
Tipperary	93.3
Waterford	92.9
Westmeath	89.4
Wexford	90.7
Wicklow	90.4

Source: Department of Education and Skills

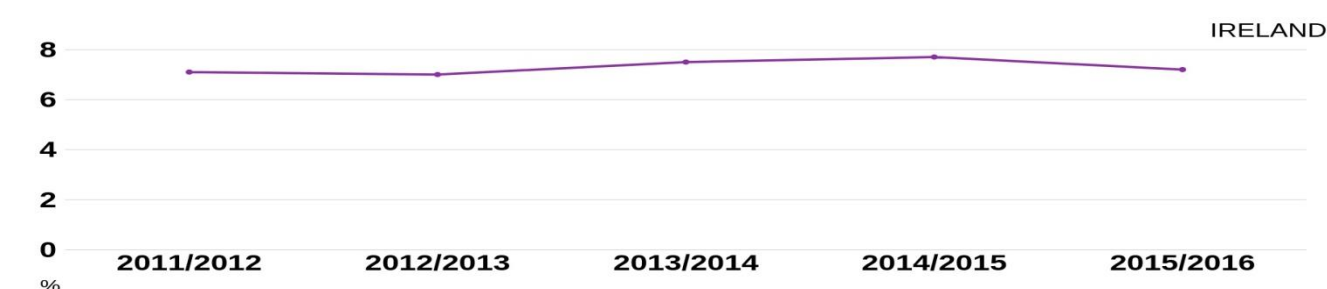
Compulsory Education

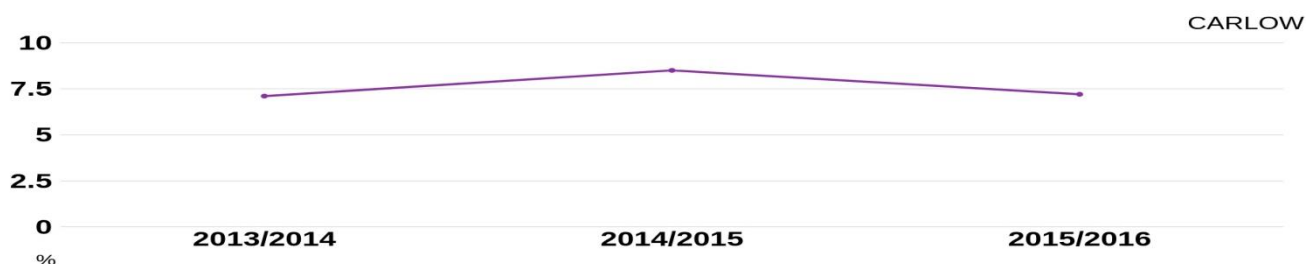
It is compulsory to stay in school until the age of 16 in Ireland. However, it has taken nearly 100 years to see an Ireland where the majority of its youth have a second level education. In 1926, with the new Free State establishing itself, the first School Attendance Act was introduced. This Act required all children to attend school from aged 6 to 14 years old. Efforts were often concentrated on the more urban areas of the country while rural governance lacked. The 1960s saw the introduction of free second level education. At this point, roughly one-third of children were leaving after primary school and less than 60% of pupils aged 15 were staying in school.

In 1972, the compulsory age was changed to 15 years old. The retention rate for Ireland from the 1995 entry cohort (2000 examination) was 78% with just under a quarter leaving school after Junior Certificate if not before. It was not until the Education Welfare Act (2000) was introduced that this age increased. The new Act raised the age to the current minimum of 16 years. It prohibits under-18s from leaving school until they have completed three years of secondary education (the Junior Certificate). This education can be sought in school, via home-schooling/tuition or otherwise as long as it meets the appropriate standards as noted in the Education Welfare Act. In 10 years of this Act, retention rose by 11.5% (89.5%). This act also included a law which governs the legal obligations of parents to make sure their child receives education from the age of 6 to the age of 16. Where children or young people have missed 20 days or more in one school year the school must contact the Educational Welfare Services (EWO) of the Child and Family Agency.

The average mean number of pupils absent under 20 days from school in Ireland is around 7% with very little change for the past five years. For Carlow, during 2014/2015 absentees rose by nearly 1.5%.

Figure 4.1: Attendance in Carlow (2013-2016) and Ireland (2011-2016)





Source: Tusla

During this same period, retention rates up to leaving Certificate in Carlow were the lowest in the country. It can be surmised that absenteeism was a contributor to early school leaving and retention rates. In this same period, 17.5% of pupils missed more than 20 days of school and the mean average of pupils being suspended was 4.44%. School attendance is a precursor to retention and this is explored further throughout the research.

Governance and Policy

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is the Department with the responsibility for education and training. The Department's mission is to facilitate individuals through learning so they can achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development. This department covers all stages of education and curriculums within these systems (primary, post-primary, further education, third-level education, life-long learning). The department has set out 5 goals:

1. Improve the learning experience and the success of learners.
2. Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs.
3. Help those delivering education services to continuously improve.
4. Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community.
5. Improve national planning and support services .

Determined by the Minister for Education and Skills and advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the curriculum sets out what will be taught and how particular subjects will be assessed. DES supports the development of overall policy relating to assessment, curriculum and guidance.

The Education Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory authorities which manage and have the responsibility for education and training and youth work. They manage and operate second level schools, further education colleges, multi-faith national schools and other adult based education centres throughout the country. Sixteen boards operate the post-primary and further education infrastructure in Ireland. First set up in 2013, the boards are responsible for all aspects of operation. Carlow and Kilkenny have a joint board known as the KCETB (Kilkenny Carlow Education Training Board). The Kilkenny and Carlow ETB are governed under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013.

Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board enables learners to achieve their full potential and contributes to the social, cultural and economic development of the area and of the country (www.kilkenny.carlow.etb.ie). As stated on their website, the ambition for the future is to:

Lead the development of education and training opportunities throughout our two counties by engaging with learners and communities, creating positive learning environments and experiences for people at all stages of lifelong learning, and contributing to social and economic development.

They go on to state that in everything they do, they aim to be:

.... the education and training service that others use as a benchmark of excellence.

TUSLA, the Children and Family Agency (CFA), set up in 2014, is an independent legal entity comprised of the HSE Children and Family Services, the Family Support Agency and the Educational Welfare Board (EWB). It incorporates psychosocial services and offers support in other areas which involve children and families. The CFA is the national agency which ensures that every child attends school regularly or receives appropriate education through home-schooling or otherwise. Although education is compulsory in Ireland, there is no absolute legal obligation for children to attend school or parents to send them to school. Due to this, it is important to have an agency which monitors who is in school and who is out-of-school to make sure that a child or young person is receiving an adequate education.

The CFA emphasis is on helping families, children and, schools rather than simply imposing penalties for non-attendance in school. The Education Welfare Officer (EWO) is the designated person in each county for this. They are the first point of call when absence is becoming a challenge for a child or young person's education or when challenges arise which may result in a child or young person not getting an adequate education. Carlow currently has two EWOs.

The School System

Primary education covers 8 years of compulsory education and, in essence, the curriculum is designed to get children ready for secondary education from an academic perspective as well as a social one.

The post-primary education sector comprises of secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed. Vocational schools are state-established and administered by the ETBs, while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management or similar.

Post-primary education is typically a 6-year cycle split into 2 halves. The junior cycle lasts for 3 years. To register in a secondary school the pupil must be 12 years old. During secondary education parents are legally bound to send their children to secondary school for 3 years (up to Junior Certificate), or until they are 16 years old. The senior cycle can be either 2-3 years depending on whether a pupil does transition year. The junior cycle equips young people for the Leaving Certificate, while the Leaving Certificate equips them for further education.

The Post- primary Senior Cycle Curriculum

Students have three options within the school setting when choosing a route to certification.

These include:

- Leaving Certificate (traditional)
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)
- The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA).

The traditional Leaving Certificate examination is the final examination of post-primary education. Syllabuses are available in more than 30 subjects and students are required to take at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish unless an exemption is in place. The LCVP is similar to the traditional Leaving Certificate Programme, with a concentration on technical subjects and some additional modules which have a vocational focus. The LCA

Programme is a self-contained two-year course, intended to meet the needs of those students who are not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate programmes. It is a person-centred course involving a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject based structure. Like the junior cycle, subjects come under six headings. Students must sit a minimum of 5 exams to attain certification. Subjects which students can sit an exam at Leaving Cert level can be seen in the table below.

Table 4.2 List of post primary Leaving Certificate exam subjects

Group	Subjects
Practical	Construction studies, Engineering, Design and Graphics, Technology
Science	Agricultural Science, Maths, Applied Maths, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Chemistry, Computer Science, Physics
Artistic	Art, Music
Humanities	Arabic, French, Hebrew studies, Japanese, Spanish, Classical Studies, Irish, History, Latin, English, German, Italian, Russian, Ancient Greek, Other language
Social	Geography, Home Economics, Religious Education, Physical Education, Politics and Society
Business	Accounting, Business, Economics, Agricultural Economics, LCVP, Economics

Source: Department of Education and Skills

The National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) has 10 levels of qualifications which can be obtained via various educational institutions. In accordance with the NFQ completing the junior cycle allows the student to obtain a Level 3 qualification. Completing the senior cycle would give the pupils a Level 4 or 5 qualification depending on the number of higher-level subjects taken. The NFQ can be seen in the appendices (appendix 1.1).

Early Intervention Practice and Strategy for Young People at Risk of Leaving School in Ireland

Currently, two main frameworks are governing early intervention methods in Ireland for the period 2014-2020. In 2014, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2012-2020)* was launched by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is the first national, cross-government policy framework for children and young people. The policy applies to all children and young people up to age 24 years. Five national outcomes were outlined in this framework and they can be viewed in the appendices (appendix 1.2). In regards to learning, an emphasis was placed on the role of prevention and early intervention to improve outcomes for children. The framework also highlighted the importance of *'educational transitions for children and young people and the need to strengthen transitions throughout the education system through methods such as consistency in curricular approaches and the use of peer mentoring initiatives'*. The *National Youth Strategy (2015-2020)*, *Better Outcomes, Better Futures* reinforces the needs to strengthen methods used for transition in education throughout the system. It places an emphasis on the need for greater cooperation between formal and informal learning sectors with the aim to support people at risk of educational disadvantage and early school-leaving and enhancing employability and entrepreneurship.

The School Completion Programme (SCP) was set up as part of the Department of Education and Skills DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Strategy. An early intervention initiative, it aims to:

.... Increase the number of young people staying in primary and second level school, and in doing so improve the numbers of pupils who successfully complete the Senior Cycle, or the equivalent. SCP work focuses on targeting and providing supports to young people identified to be at risk of early school leaving. - TUSLA

DEIS is the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion and was launched by DES in 2005. The plan focuses on children and young people from disadvantaged communities from pre-school right up to secondary school. At primary level in 2016/2017, the DEIS programme was funded in 640 schools. At second level, this number is 3 times lower with only 185 schools getting the extra resource.

Afterschool homework clubs and breakfast clubs are methods of early intervention and they have shown great success throughout Ireland and Europe. Children and young people who participate in after-school programmes can reap a host of positive benefits in a number of interrelated outcome areas, including academic, social/emotional, prevention, and health and wellness (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). Currently, research is being carried out by Carlow Regional Youth Service exploring the effects of the 3 afterschool programmes operated by them. The full results are yet to be published but to date, findings suggest that retention rates up to LC have increased for the cohort they work with. This indicates that this early intervention has been successful in regards to young people fulfilling their educational goals. This research will be published later in 2020.

Alternative Post-Primary Education

Youthreach was launched in Ireland in 1988 with a vision to be a two-year programme of education, training and work experience for unqualified early school-leavers in the 15-18 years age group. Initially, it was a temporary and experimental plan but by 2017, it had grown to over 100 centres throughout the country. Young people have the opportunity to complete second level education in a student-focused environment. Class sizes are smaller than mainstream schools; one-to-one support is offered if the need arises, and they work at the pace which best suits students' needs. The importance of programmes like Youthreach and those offered by other training centres under SOLAS is that they offer young people the extra support they require. Emotional or academic help is provided to give young people the opportunity to explore who they are and what they want from their life.

The Youthreach programme is generally considered to be a model of educational reintegration (Cedefop, 2010; Nevala & Hawley, 2011). However, it could also be thought of as a prevention and intervention measure. Its purpose is to keep young people in education. Youthreach is comprehended as a further-education training programme but in many respects, it is more like an alternative form of post-primary education. According to DES, in 2014, 795 young people moved directly from mainstream to training centres with over half of the entry cohort retaining a Leaving Certificate Applied or a QQI Level 4, which represents an upper secondary qualification. For young people who leave mainstream school early, those who go on to achieve upper secondary education (or higher), 60% do so through a vocational education training-oriented programme (European Commission, 2014). If Youthreach learners can successfully arrive at the same place as their secondary school peers, the issue is less about early school leaving and more about early leaving from education (McHugh, 2014).

5. Carlow in Context

Demographics

Carlow is an inland county in southeast Leinster, bordered by Wicklow, Wexford, Kildare, Kilkenny and, Laois. Since the 2011 census the population of Carlow has grown by 4.1% (CSO, 2016). Its population in the last census (2016) was 56,932 people living in both rural and urban areas with 20,537 family units throughout the county. 20.3% of these families are one parent families. Carlow town is the largest urban area with 23,985 inhabitants. It has 6,165 family units. According to the 2016 Census, the unemployment rate for Carlow was below the national average of 12.9%. In the census, 17% of the population were found to be unemployed. This was the third highest rate of unemployment in Ireland.

5.1 Education in Carlow

School aged population in Co. Carlow

By law, it is compulsory to start primary education at age 6. Nowadays, it is very common for parents to enrol children as young as 4 years old. Children complete 8 years of primary education before entering secondary education. The total population of primary aged children (aged 4-12) in Carlow is 7,217 according to the CSO (2016).

Table 4.3 Number of children aged 4-12 in Carlow

Age	Male	Female	Total
4	416	392	808
5	400	411	811
6	442	407	849
7	386	457	843
8	418	408	826
9	412	360	772
10	401	362	763
11	415	360	775
12	397	373	770

Table 4.4 Number of young people aged 13-24 in Carlow

Age	Male	Female	Total
13	360	351	711
14	361	323	684
15	341	328	669
16	345	321	666
17	336	319	655
18	378	354	732
19	351	317	668
20-24	1,877	1,739	3,616

Source: Central Statistics Office (2016)

In 2015, the CSO showed that Carlow had 6,053 second level students. In 2016, it saw a slight increase to 6,192. In one year according to CSO data, the population of second level education decreased by over 600 students to 5,490 students. The figures for 2018, show a slight rise in population to 5,572 students in second level education.

Post- Primary Education in Carlow

There are 11 secondary schools in Co. Carlow offering junior and senior cycles and post Leaving Certificate programmes.

- Carlow town has 6 secondary schools. These include St. Leo's College, Gaelcholaiste Ceatharlach, Presentation College, St Marys Academy CBS, St Marys Knockbeg College and Tyndall College.
- Bagenalstown has 2 schools, De La Salle Presentation and Vocational College Bagenalstown.
- Tullow has 1, Tullow Community School,

- Borris has 1, Borris Vocational School
- Hacketstown has 1, Colaiste Eoin.

As a county, it offers 4 support and education training programmes which work specifically with early school leavers or those at risk of early school leaving. These include;

- 1 Youthreach centre based in Carlow town,
- 2 School Completion Programmes (Carlow town and Tullow),
- 1 Youth Training Centre (Carlow Town).

Carlow has 7 primary level schools with DEIS status, 4 in the Rural Band and 3 in the Urban Band 2 category which in this case is Carlow town. The numbers drop considerably at post-primary level with only 2 schools with DEIS status in Carlow. Carlow School Completion and Tullow School Completion offer outreach programmes throughout the county. Currently, Carlow has only 1 Youthreach Centre and it is based in Carlow town. It has the capacity to take up to 25 pupils, all at different levels, but all with the same goal, completing the LC.

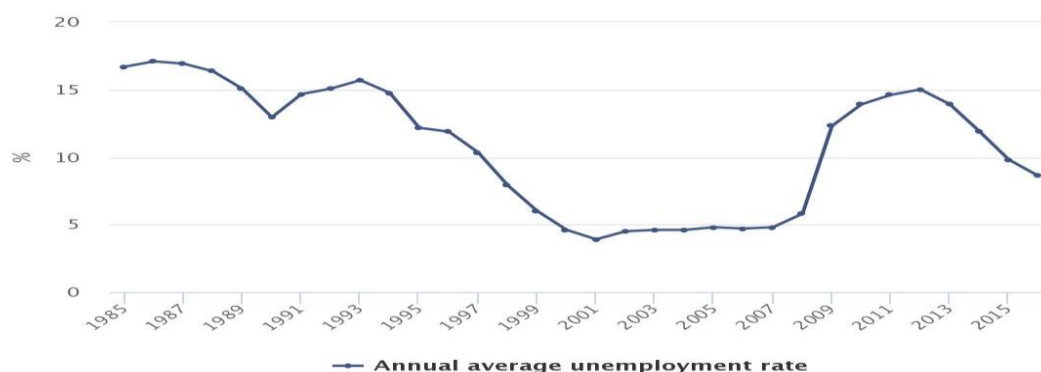
5.2 Retention in Ireland and Carlow

Retention and Employment in Context

A rise or drop in retention can be due to several factors, including the economic circumstances of a country. To truly understand retention rates and early school leaving, knowing the environment and circumstances of the time period are crucial. In a small space of time, Ireland has seen an economic boom, an economic crash and a slow but steady come-back from what was an economic crisis. The economy of a country and its labour needs affects retention rates and this is explored below.

From the mid-nineties right up to 2007/2008 Ireland went through what was called the 'Celtic Tiger'. The graph below shows Ireland's unemployment levels from 1985-2016 and the figures are in line with what was happening economically.

Figure 5.1 Annual unemployment rates in Ireland from 1985 - 2016

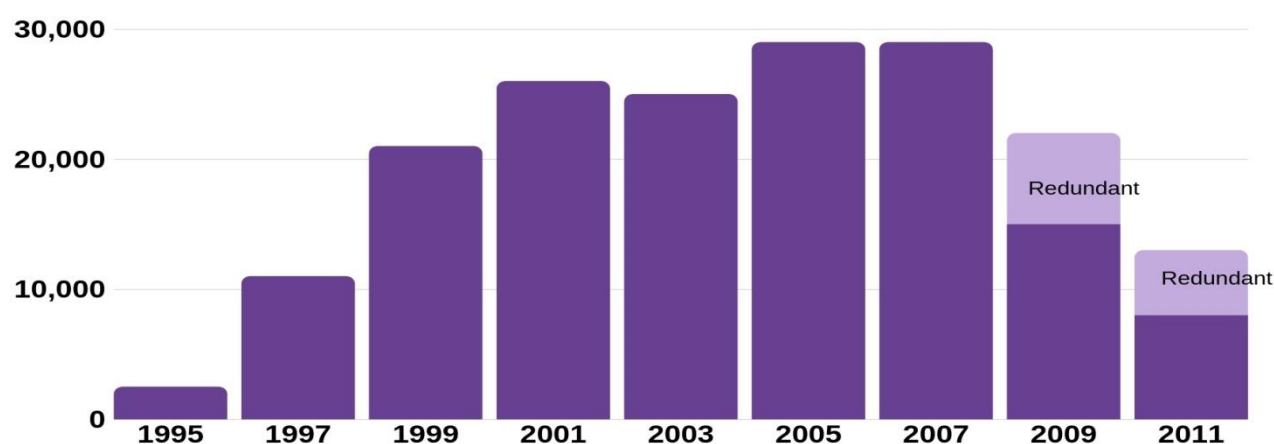


Source: Central Statistics Office

By the late 1990s, the construction industry was beginning to flourish and it needed a workforce. When looking at retention, it is important to look at what is on offer to young people besides school and obtaining a Leaving

Certificate. A paper published by DES (2013) showed that a quarter of participants in the apprenticeship scheme had only obtained a Junior Certificate. This scheme gave young people an option of leaving school at 16 years of age to train but to earn a wage while doing so. As can be seen in the graph below, in 10 years the numbers of those doing apprenticeships training rose from roughly 2,500 people in 1995 to 29,000 in 2005.

Figure 5.2 Increase and decrease in apprenticeship uptake in Ireland between 1995 and 2011



Source: Department of Education and Skills

During the 2000-2005 retention rates up to leaving Certificate in Ireland only rose by 2% but in the period from 2005-2010, they increased by 9% . Uptake on schemes such as the apprenticeship have not been as strong of an option for young people in the past 10 years and this is contributed to a greater emphasis has been placed on remaining in school up to the LC ever before.

From 2000-2007, unemployment was at its lowest rate ever. Retention up to the leaving certificate remained similar to post 2000. The uptake of apprenticeships saw 25% of its cohort being education only up to Junior Certificate. The crash occurred and unemployment peaked at 15%. Apprenticeship employment dropped by nearly 20,000 people and retention levels to Leaving Certificate began to rise significantly. Retention in third -level education also increased in this time period. This shows how retention rates are potentially dependent on economic circumstances and if employment is not there, school education becomes more important for society. Between 2017-2018, apprenticeship take-up increased by 25% since previous years. However, only 2-3% of school leavers are opting for an apprenticeship in comparison to countries like Germany, where up-take is around 60%.

Understanding Retention Data

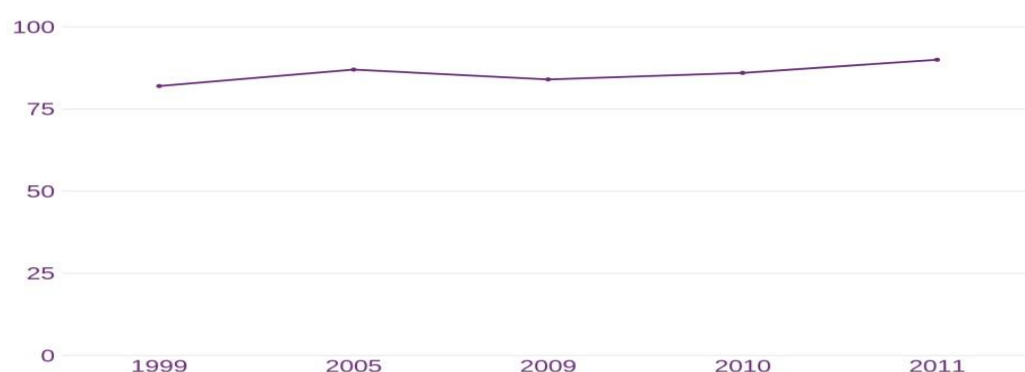
Retention rates are obtained by the Department of Education on a yearly basis. On reporting on data, the data from the first-year cohort right up to leaving certificate are gathered. When studying retention, it is rare that primary school retention is studied and, in most cases, nowadays, the junior cycle retention rates are less reported on than they once were. Reviewing the cohort number at the beginning of the post-primary years and comparing it to the numbers in each year up to the LC, is important in understanding retention rates. Due to European strategy and pressure to remain on the European stage for education, the pressure to increase the rate of people entering third level has become dominant in discussions. This pressure has likely contributed to the decreasing rate of junior certificate retention across several counties in Ireland including Carlow.

Table 5.1 Junior and leaving certificate retention rates in Carlow for entry cohorts: 1999-2011

Carlow	1999 cohort	2005 cohort	2009 cohort	2010 cohort	2011 cohort
Junior Certificate	97.5%	95.8%	94.5%	95.1%	-
Leaving Certificate	82.6%	87%	84.6%	86.2%	90.6%

Source: Department of Education and Skills

Figure 5.3 Steady rise of Leaving Certificate retention rates in Carlow



Source: Department of Education and Skills

As can be seen in the graph and table above, **Carlow has had a steady rise in Leaving Certificate retention rates since 2009**. Of the cohort who entered first year in 2005, 87% of them completed the leaving certificate. The entry cohort of 2009 saw a drop in retention while the entry cohort of 2010 rose by 2%. The 2010 cohort brought retention rates back to the 2005 cohort rates and the 2011 cohort saw retention rise by 3.6% in one year to 90.2%. There are several factors which contribute to increases and decreases in retention rates, other than better exam performance. Cohort size is one contributor. DES note that from the 2011 entry cohort that *'as the total cohort in some counties was small the retention rate is liable to fluctuate based on small changes from year to year'*. For example, the 2010 entry cohort, had 863 students sitting the leaving certificate who completed it and passed it, while the 2011 entry cohort had 897 students sitting the leaving certificate who completed it and passed it. When the population changes in a county, it is very likely that retention will be affected. For example, Carlow's population has risen by 4.1% between 2011 and 2016 (CSO 2011,2016) and this is a potential factor which saw an increase in retention.

This is a very positive increase over the years and even though it is still below the national average of 92%. **It indicates that Carlow has the potential to move out of the bottom 10 counties and into the top 10 categories in a relatively short amount of time.**

Retention up to Junior and Leaving Certificate

Retention up to Junior Certificate has not been examined or explored in the same context as the Leaving Certificate in previous years. In a report by the Department of Education and Skills of the 2011 cohort, 97.5% of these pupils sat their Junior Certificate in Carlow. Table 5.2 below shows the total pupil number beginning the post-primary cycle in Ireland in 2011 and the retention rate for each accompanying year. A remarkable five thousand young people within this period left school. From the 2011 cohort, 1 in 12 pupils had left the main-stream school system by Leaving Certificate.

Table 5.2 Cohort number and retention rates of Leaving Certificate for entry cohort 2011 (Ireland)

Milestone	Cohort number	Retention Rate %
Entry Cohort	59,641	100
Junior Cycle Year 2	59,147	99.2
Junior Cycle Year 3	58,719	98.5
Junior Certificate	58,175	97.5
Senior Cycle Year 1	57,128	95.6
Senior Cycle Year 2	55,221	92.6
Leaving Certificate	54,642	91.6

Source: The Department of Education and Skills

Table 5.3 shows data from cohorts starting first year in 1995, 1999, and 2005. The cohort which started in 1995 were students at the beginning of Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' period. The 2005 cohort entered second level education just before the economic crash and by the time they completed school, Ireland's economy had totally plummeted.

Table 5.3 Retention rates in Ireland from first year entry cohort up to Leaving Certificate in Ireland (1995-2010)

Cohort Year and Milestone	Cohort number
1995 Entry cohort	67,254 (100%)
1995 Junior Cert	94.6%
1995 Senior Cycle Year 1	90.9%
1995 Leaving Cert	78%
1999 Entry cohort	60,786 (100%)
1999 Junior Cert	94.6%
1999 Senior Cycle Year 1	92%
1999 Leaving Cert	80.5%
2005 Entry cohort	55,253 (100%)
2005 Junior Cert	95.9%
2005 Senior Cycle Year 1	94.4%
2005 Leaving Cert	89.5%
2009 Entry cohort	58,088 (100%)
2009 Junior Cert	96.6%
2009 Senior Cycle Year 1	95.3%
2009 Leaving Cert	90.2%
2010 Entry cohort	59,221 (100%)
2010 Junior Cert	97.3%
2010 Senior Cycle Year 1	95.3%
2010 Leaving Cert	91.2%

Source: The Department of Education and Skills

For these periods shown, both Junior and Leaving Certificate retention rates rose in Ireland. From the 1999-2005 cohort Leaving Certificate retention rates rose by nearly 10%. Economic security and job security may have been a

factor in the increase across Ireland during this period. In the same period, the Leaving Certificate retention rate in Carlow rose by nearly 5%. From the 2009 - 2011 cohorts, retention has risen in Ireland only by 2%. In Carlow for the same period, it rose by 6%.

Comparisons with similarly populated counties

Populations, Surface Size and Retention Rates

Carlow is one of the smaller counties per square metre in Ireland. It has a similar population to counties Monaghan, Roscommon and, Sligo but differs in surface size considerably. It is for this reason they are being used as comparison counties for the purpose of this research and to greater understand retention rates. Table 5.4 shows both population and surface area of the counties. All four counties have a large agricultural heritage and apart from Sligo, they are all inland.

Table 5.4 Population and surface size of Carlow and comparison counties

County	Population	Surface area
Carlow	56,875	897km squared
Monaghan	61,170	1,295km squared
Roscommon	64,436	2,548km squared
Sligo	65,357	1,838km squared

Data source: Education Statistics Database

Even though the population is similar, figures from the Education Database for the period of 2014/2015 (2009 entry cohort), shown below, **show a striking difference between Carlow and the other comparison counties retention for the 2009 entry cohort:**

Table 5.5 Leaving Certificate retention rates for Carlow and comparison counties for entry cohort 2009

County	2009 Cohort
Carlow	84.6%
Monaghan	91.6%
Roscommon	90.2%
Sligo	91.1%

Data source: Education Statistics Database

Table 5.6 shows data from the 2011 cohort. Research released from the entry cohort of 2011 shows an increase in these figures especially for Carlow in a short space of time.

Table 5.6 Leaving Certificate retention rates for Carlow and comparison counties for entry cohort 2011

County	2011 Cohort
Carlow	90.6%
Monaghan	91.3%
Roscommon	92%
Sligo	93.8%

Data Source: The Department of Education and Skills

The factors which result in one county performing better in the Leaving Cert in comparison to another county with a similar population are not clear, but it is unlikely that it is due to just one single factor. It is safer to hypothesise that several factors could be potential contributors. These are explored below.

The Number of Schools

Carlow has 12 post-primary schools across the county. Table 5.7 represents the type of school ethos offered at post-primary level within each county. The figures shown are from both state-aided schools and fee-paying schools.

Table 5.7 Post-primary school types in Carlow and comparison counties

County	Secondary	Vocational	Community	Fee paying
Carlow	5	6	1	0
Monaghan	6	6	0	0
Roscommon	5	3	1	0
Sligo	7	5	1	1

Date Source: Central Statistics Office

Roscommon has the lowest number of post-primary schools with 9 in total. The difference is due to pupil number (see Table 5.8). As a county, it has 1,500 fewer pupils than Carlow and is triple the surface size. Carlow and Monaghan have the same number of schools and very similar pupil numbers. While Sligo has the only 600 fewer pupils to Carlow, it has 2 extra schools.

Table 5.8 School numbers and pupils enrolled in Carlow and comparison counties (2016 census)

County	School Total	Pupils enrolled
Carlow	12	5,572
Monaghan	12	5,315
Roscommon	9	3,822
Sligo	14	4,938 (+ 449 from private schools)

Date Source: Central Statistics Office

The Deis support system was introduced to assist schools with greater need for financial and resource aid. Table 5.9 shows the number of Deis schools at post-primary level per comparative counties. Carlow has half the number of Deis post-primary level schools than its counterpart Monaghan. Sligo has 3 schools with Deis status and Roscommon has currently 1 school. At primary level, Carlow has 7 Deis status schools, 4 within the rural band and 3 within the Urban Band 2.

Table 5.9 Post-primary schools with Deis status per county

County	Deis school number
Carlow	2
Monaghan	4
Roscommon	1
Sligo	3

Source: Education Statistics Database)

Having options such as Youthreach is crucial for young people at risk of leaving the school system, or who need an alternative to mainstream school. **Monaghan has 3 times more Youthreach programmes offered to young**

people than Carlow. Table 5.10 represents Youthreach centres and School Completion Programmes in each comparative county. Carlow has 2 School Completion Programmes, Monaghan has 3, and Sligo and Roscommon offer 1. The Roscommon School Completion Programme is shared with Leitrim. Leitrim has a retention rate of 90.1% and a population of 32,000. Leitrim has never had an alternative like Youthreach and has only recently been approved its first centre.

Table 5.10 Number of Youthreach centres and School Completion Programmes for Carlow and comparison counties

County	Youthreach	S.C.P.
Carlow	1	2
Monaghan	3	3
Roscommon	2	1 (shared with Leitrim)
Sligo	1	1

Data source: The Department of Education and Skills

Attendance

Attendance is related to early school leaving, but Carlow does not seem to have a significant problem in this area. Data from the TUSLA Attendance Report (Attendance Report 2014/2015, 2015/2016) shows that Ireland is still struggling with attendance throughout primary and secondary school. The percentage of overall student/days lost through absence in a school year was 5.9% at primary school and 7.9% at post-primary (TUSLA, 2016). For Carlow, post-primary absence was lower than the national average for both periods. **The percentage of students who missed 20 days or more in County Carlow was 14.5%. This was also lower than the national average of 14.9% for the period of 2015/2016.** The average mean for Leinster at the time was 8%. Carlow is slightly above average but lower than comparison counties Monaghan and Sligo. 17.5% of pupils in Carlow were absent for 20 days or more throughout the school year.

Data published by TUSLA for the period of 2014/2015 showed Carlow to have higher expulsion rates than Monaghan and Roscommon.

Table 5.11 School absence for Carlow and comparative counties for 2014/2015

County	Mean % absent	20 days absent	% Expulsion	% Suspension
Carlow	8.5	17.5	0.04	4.44
Monaghan	8.8	15.3	0.01	4.02
Roscommon	7.2	17.4	0.00	3.50
Sligo	9.0	17.8	0.00	5.37

Data Source: TUSLA

Data published in 2015/2016 showed absences from school had decreased in Carlow right across the board. Figures show a 3% decrease in pupils missing 20% or more of school that year. Even though slight, it is a positive improvement on the figures from the previous year. The Leinster average for this period rose to 8.3% with Carlow showing percentages below the national figures for 2015/2016.

Table 5.12 School absence for Carlow and comparative counties for 2015/2016

County	Mean % absent	20 days absent	% Expulsion	% Suspension
--------	---------------	----------------	-------------	--------------

Carlow	7.8	14.6	0.04	4.30
Monaghan	8.2	18.1	0.20	4.80
Roscommon	7.8	17.5	0.07	3.52
Sligo	8.4	18.9	0.00	4.35

Data source: TUSLA

Retention rates in Carlow for the same time period also rose. The percentage of young people obtaining a leaving certificate rose by from 86.2% in 2015/2016 for the entry cohort of 2010, to 90.6% in 2016/2017 for the entry cohort of 2011 (as seen in Table 5.12 above). In the case of Carlow, it is possible that the rise in attendance is a potential contributor to increasing retention rates.

5.3 Support Services for Young People in Carlow

Youth Services

Carlow Regional Youth Service (CRYS) is a local voluntary service affiliated with Youth Work Ireland. Set up in 1988, CRYS provides direct programmes and services for young people at risk aged 8-23 years old.

Interagency work is at the core of CRYS with strong partnerships held with the HSE, Regional Drug Task Force, County Carlow Council, School Completion agencies, the Childcare Committee, Youth Diversion Projects and many more. A list of services and supports which CRYS provides is shown in Appendix 1.2.

Carlow Regional Youth Service offers further initiatives for young people in the county. One of these is Comhairle na nÓg. These are children and youth councils representing the 31 local authorities throughout the country. Young people have the opportunity to be involved in decision-making at a local level. For young people under the age of 18, it empowers young people to voice their opinion and it acknowledges their point of view. In Carlow, Comhairle na nÓg meets twice monthly and they explore ongoing issues/challenges for young people in each local authority area.

FRIENDS is an evidence-based programme developed in Australia. It is recognised and recommended by the World Health Organisation. A programme designed to reduce anxiety, CRYS have gained the licence to carry out the programme throughout the county. This has made it available to all young people attending youth projects within their service.

Mental Health Service Provision in Carlow.

Even though outside the core scope of this research, the rise in mental health issues among young people is a growing concern. Research indicates that mental health issues are related to ESL, and hence it is relevant here to explore mental health provision in Carlow. *A Vision for Change* (2006) is the main model used in mental health provision in Ireland. It is a framework for Ireland to build and foster positive mental health across the entire community and for providing accessible, community-based, specialist services for people with mental illness.

We have already noted that the rates of suicide among females in Carlow is the highest in the country. **Across Ireland the CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) saw a 26% increase in the number of referrals to them between 2012 and 2016.** However, in 2018, even with the rise in need, numbers working in youth mental health services fell by 4%. Areas affected included Carlow, South Tipperary, Wexford, Waterford and Kilkenny (Community Health Organisation 05). **CHO -05 saw a drop of 9 posts across the counties.** Carlow is one of 15 counties across the country which currently does not have an out-of-hours psychiatry team.

In the *Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service 2017 Inspection Report*, published in 2018, over 10 years on from the publication of the *Vision for Change*, findings showed a major shortage in staffing. For the CHO 05 area, the *Vision for Change* framework recommended that the area (5 counties) be covered by 10 mental health teams. **In reality it has only 7.6 WTO (Whole Time Equivalent).** CAHMS has 2 child and adolescent mental health teams working out of St. Dymphna's Hospital in Carlow Town. It is also recommended that the area should have 10 consultant psychiatrists when it actually has 7.6; 20 psychologists, when it actually has 8; and, 20 social workers to cover the counties when currently it has 6. Finding these extra staff will be a challenge with only 0.4 approved vacancies for psychiatrists and 0.8 approved for psychologists, and with a moratorium on recruitment in the HSE. **According to the Inspection Report, 46 young people were waiting for appointments for between 3-6 months.** In situations where the case is urgent, children or young people wait a minimum of 1 week. In the case of first assessment, the waiting time was 6 weeks to 6 months before the next appointment.

25% of the population of the CHO 05 area are under 18. **The budget for 2017 was €5,199.563 which equates to €39.53 per child.** Recent increases have been minimal, with Budget 2018 only allocating a further €15 million to mental health services across the county. The CHO 05 area is the second most deprived in the country which can lead to more complexities and challenging needs. The consultation for the *Connecting for Life* plan for suicide prevention (2017-2020) in Carlow, found that,

It was widely emphasised that the culture within schools needs to be more open, with all staff appropriately trained and programmes/systems in place that ensure vulnerable children and young people receive adequate support while also acknowledging the key role of education settings, from pre-school to 3rd level.

Priority groups in Carlow were identified as young people, NEETS (young people who are not engaged in education or employment), older people, men, the LGBTI community, the Traveller community, unemployed people and those experiencing financial difficulties.

This action plan was designed for adults with mental health difficulties but it stressed the needs of young people in Carlow also. Currently, Carlow does not have anything similar for this age group.

Other agencies provide mental health care for children and young people. Carlow Regional Youth Service (CRYS) offers a free counselling service for young people aged 12-18. With a short waiting time, young people can avail of one-to-one counselling as the need arises. CRYS also offers a programme for the LGBTI community called *My Unique Individuality* which provides a safe space for young people to meet new people. It is part of the *Belong To* network. Barnardos offers one-to-one sessions and support groups for young people and families. The Family Resource Centres in Tullow and Bagenalstown offer a counselling service but it is more family-specific. The Rainbows Programme is a 12-14-week programme for young people who have lost a parent through bereavement and it is facilitated in several centres throughout the country on an ongoing basis. Carlowmentalhealth.ie, which is operated by the Carlow Mental Health Association is also a good resource for young people in Carlow. In partnership with Mental Health Ireland, a positive mental health week called the Mensana Fest is held every year.

6. Statistical Figures and Measurable Data based on Stakeholders' who Left School Early: Experiences and Views

Summary of Key Statistics from Stakeholder Group(age specific)

- The age range of this target group was 16-19 years old. 55% were under 18 and 45% over 18.
- 33% of young people participating were 16, 22% were 17 years old, 22% were 18 years old and 22% were 19 years old.
- All reported struggling in school socially and emotionally from 1st/2nd year.
- 22% tried transition year (TY) stating they thought it would help them stay in school - that was not the case and at this point they left mainstream school.
- This group self-reported mental health issues, difficult relationships with teachers and pupils, bullying, exclusion classes and exclusion from other regular school events, as being contributors for leaving mainstream schooling before completing the Leaving Certificate.
- 77% said they knew what they wanted to do in third-level education, while 33% wanted to go on to third level but they were still figuring out - included sports and fitness, animal care, social care/community work and the arts.

Specific to age group (under 18)

- 11% of 16-year olds left school at 13/14 years old and did not return to education until they were 16 years old.
- 3 months was the maximum time taken for a student to transition from school to alternative education.
- Third year was the final full school year completed by most of this group.
- Half of this age group started Transition year but ceased school shortly afterwards.

Specific to age group (over 18)

- 11% of 19-year olds left school at 16 years old.
- 6-8 months was the minimum duration between leaving school and entering education again for this age group.
- 2 years was the maximum duration.
- Half of those aged 18 or over left school mid-6th year.

Key findings:

- Over half of participants felt classes were too large and a third stated that this affected their participation and concentration.
- A third felt that they needed more academic help but did not receive it, leading to problems with some area of their academic work.
- Mental health issues were a significant cause for this cohort exiting the mainstream school system with **55% of participants self-reporting mental health problems.**
- A third of these felt they needed one-to-one support to help with these issues but it was not always available and when it was, it was with the guidance councillor.
- Family issues and responsibilities were a contributor to this group leaving school with 22% saying this was part of the cause.
- One fifth of this cohort felt unheard in school especially around extra academic help and in some cases when they disclosed issues with bullying.

7. All Stakeholders' Experiences and Views.

This section represents views of stakeholders, as shared through the various qualitative interactions including interviews and focus groups.

It reveals that stakeholders recognise the long-term effects of early school-leaving on the individual and on society as a whole. **It is believed by stakeholders that in order to provide the best options for young people, stronger partnerships must be created between schools and services.** It is recognised by stakeholders that the prevalence of young people requiring support is increasing and that this needs to be addressed quickly. Young people are unofficially leaving school much earlier than in the previous decade and stakeholders have agreed that increasing pressures on young people are contributing. It has been acknowledged that the needs of young people are changing and that the demographics of those in need of help is changing. **It was commonly agreed that mental health was the most significant challenge for young people today.**

Stakeholders feedback is presented below, structured as an amalgamation of the most common views among stakeholders on the challenges and barriers facing young people in the education system. Challenges facing stakeholders working with young people and early school-leavers will follow and the views gathered here assist in better understanding the needs of the school and the services working with the early school-leaver. From working within the system, stakeholders have a unique insight into the needs of young people and it is from this insight, stakeholders have noted gaps in service provision. These are presented at the end of this chapter.

7.1 Challenges and Barriers Facing Young people and Potential Contributors to Early School Leaving

According to stakeholders, the challenges and barriers that young people face are usually connected to a variety of complex issues. **There is no one contributor to early school leaving and it is not something which happens in an instant but rather over a period of time. It has been noted by stakeholders that the face of the early school-leaver is changing** and it is no longer only the child from a complex or difficult background who is at risk. It has also been shown, through discussion with a variety of stakeholders that early school leaving is occurring **much earlier** than the decade before.

Mainstream School Environment

Stakeholders reported that school and the school experience can be a very difficult time for some young people. The size of classes and school sizes is a challenge for them, especially if there are other factors at play in the class. This is especially an issue when a young person needs extra academic help. Pupil numbers are high in Irish classrooms and if a young person needs help, it is not always there and this is predominantly due to resource constraints. This was presented as a stressor for young people. In some cases, young people struggle with numeracy and maths from first year. **Stakeholders stated that extra academic support existed in primary school along with other person-centred resources. When young people get to secondary school this support is not present which can result in a bad experience for the young person, if they are struggling.** The support they have had throughout primary school is not there and stakeholders stated that this has lasting effects. The stress generated because of academic ability or other struggles escalates and manifests itself in misbehaving in class, anger and in some instances school refusal. **Young people reported that they had extra help in primary school and that when they went on to secondary school this extra help was not there (22%).**

'I would have stayed if I had received a bit more help, I liked school'

- Anon, 16

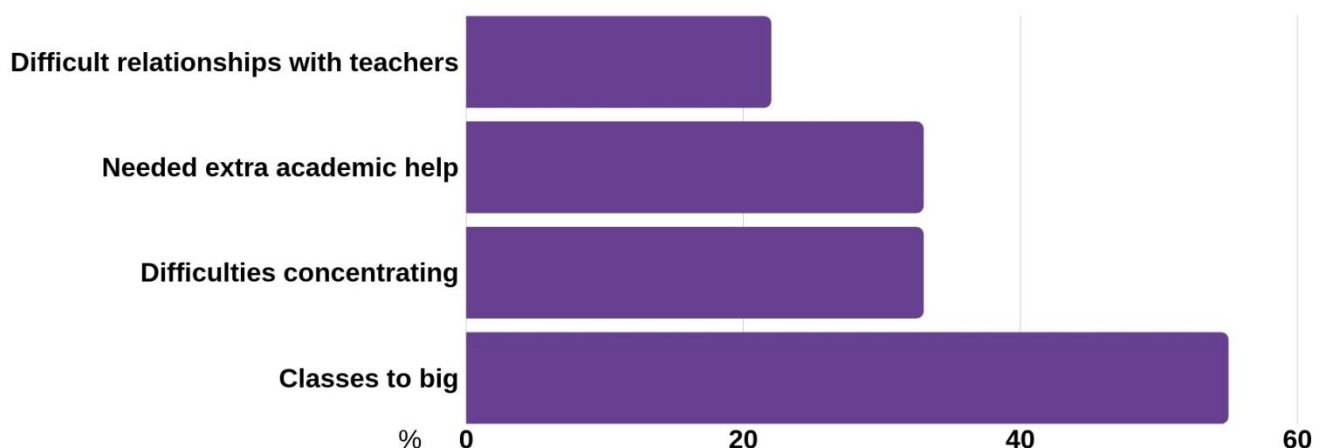
Difficulties in concentrating on studies in large classes was also something that young people reported as a barrier. Class numbers and the constant moving around from class to class was a reported contributor to this. If the young person is struggling with concentration or focus, this constant demand on them to learn a mass body of information throughout the day becomes overwhelming. For those who had Dyspraxia or ADHD, not being able to concentrate prevented them from keeping up with the class and this was especially frustrating for them. This at times would lead to difficulties with teachers.

Difficulties and poor relationships with teachers were reported as a challenge for young people especially if it is a daily occurrence. Young people expressed the frustration of poor communication with adults. In some instances stakeholders reported bad relationships with teachers from first year and if an encounter occurred at this time, any animosity generated at this point continued right up until they left school. Some reported going into school every day and at least one teacher commenting negatively on them.

"There is a need for better communication"

- Anon, 17

Figure 7.1 Challenges and barriers of mainstream school for young people



Undiagnosed Learning Needs

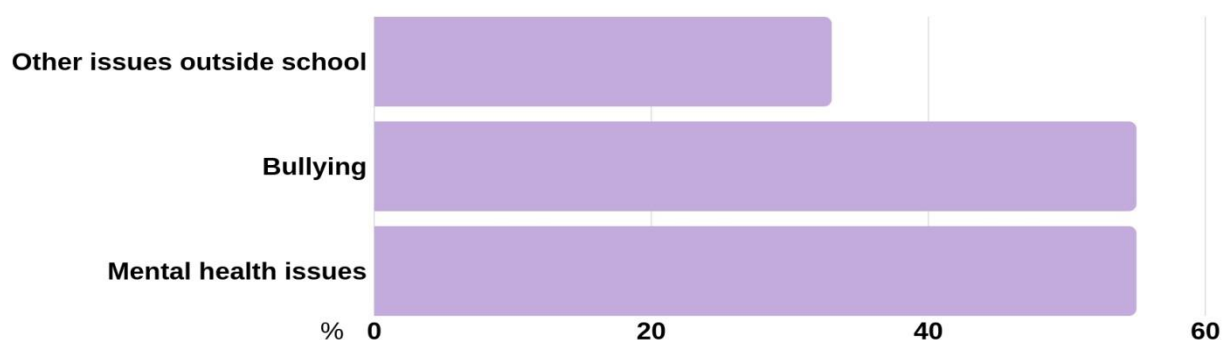
One third (33%) of ESL self-reported needing extra academic help and this was not available to them at the level they needed it in school. Stakeholders reported that if learning needs were not met in primary school, by secondary school the young person is 'lost'. This is especially the case where numeracy and literacy issues exist. They are unable to catch up and because the secondary cycle is content-heavy and moves at a very fast pace, these young people never catch up. According to stakeholders, a numeracy and literature programme is running in schools but in some instances, some young people entering first year do not have the skills even to engage in this resource as they are too far behind.

At secondary level, it is not uncommon for parents to be unaware of the severity of the young person's needs, according to stakeholders. This is because the child had extra support in primary school and so the needs were less obvious. Another challenge which was expressed is that at primary level, in some cases, parents are aware of the child's complex needs but are reluctant to seek help beyond the resources of mainstream school. Stakeholders have reported that this is a massive challenge because, by secondary school, these undiagnosed

needs have become irreversible within the school system. **It has been noted by stakeholders in this type of case it is not uncommon for young people to disengage with the mainstream system as young as first year.**

Psychosocial Issues and Challenges

Figure 7.2 Psychosocial challenges related to early school leaving



Mental Health

Mental health was one of the main contributors for early school leaving for this group. 55% of young people reported leaving school due to mental health challenges. Stakeholders stated that in as little as five years, social anxiety has become a massive problem for young people engaging in services. **Young people self-reported having gone through a period of anxiety and this became a contributor to leaving school or taking time out. A third reported a need for one-to-one support but the type of help they needed was not available in the school-setting.**

Stakeholders reported that young people struggle with self-esteem and anger issues. It was reported that low self-esteem was more prevalent in girls than boys. Issues related to internet and social media use are common and rising expectation on young women was stated as a potential contributor to this rise in low self-esteem. Stakeholders confirmed that the inappropriate use of the internet and the constant engagement in social media affected mental health and young people's views of themselves. Of the young people who self-reported anxiety, **social anxiety was more prevalent in young males** with and some reported struggling in school for months and not talking to anyone, not even their peers. **Females also struggled with social anxiety but in most cases, it was not only mental health issues which made them leave but problems with bullying and poor pupil-teacher relations.** Issues with anger were something both sexes struggled with according to interviews.

Stakeholders working directly with young people have stated a rise in chronic anxiety surfacing in the primary years. In their opinion, this is resulting in school refusal and non-attendance. Cases where the anxiety is so severe that the child would not leave their bedrooms at all were reported. According to stakeholders, once these young people get to secondary-school age it is very difficult for them to try to attend if they have already been out of the system for some years. **Self-harm and suicidal ideation are also a growing concern for stakeholders working with young people.** A rise in the prevalence of these behaviours was noted, with some children starting to self-harm at primary school age.

The reasons for the rise in mental health issues was attributed to the overall pressure on young people in modern society. Having an understanding of how mental health begins to affects school life or how school life affects mental health is something that stakeholders stressed as important. Young people expressed that not knowing

what was happening to them at the time was the most difficult part for them. The heightened expectation of young people by society, by family, by peers, and by schools has been noted as contributing to mental health issues by stakeholders working directly with young people. The mechanical nature of the school setting and results-focused ethos has a massive impact on some young people's self-worth according to stakeholders. The lack of person-centred supports for young people in the school setting is also contributing to the rise in mental health challenges with a third of young people stating the help they needed was not available to them.

Stakeholders stated that complexities these young people face cannot be managed by the school as the proper facilities and personnel are not available in schools. Stakeholders have also stated that this is a resource issue. Limited support is available for parents on mental health which contributes to parents not knowing what to do when their child is not-at-ease was stated as a resource challenge.

Issues around sexuality, gender and belonging is something which is surfacing more with young people and at a younger age. Struggles which accompany telling friends and family or 'coming' out to those around them can be a confusing and daunting time for young people and in some instances, it is contributing to mental health problems.

Bullying / exclusion

Bullying was a definite issue and a contributor to early school leaving. Young people from the Travelling community reported this challenge more than those from the settled community. For the Travelling community, in particular, it was not until fifth or sixth class that the bullying began. By secondary school, the bullying still occurred but the severity sometimes depended on whether other young people from the Travelling community were in the school.

22% of all young people involved reported that they felt like they did not fit in or felt excluded from the everyday routine of school. According to one young person, school should be

".... a space where kids can really express themselves and not just fit in"

- Anon, 18

This feeling of not fitting in appeared to escalate in TY for some, with young people stating that they thought it would help their needs but often it made them feel even more marginalised. It was at this point that they disengaged with the mainstream school system.

Personal, Social and Economic Factors

A third of the participants stated that one contributor to them leaving was that they had other issues going on outside of school. These included family issues or family responsibilities. Stakeholders stated that, in some instances, young people leave school because they needed or wanted to get a job. In cases where a child came from a background with a limited income, some young people and families put more emphasis on a job than education according to stakeholders. Stakeholders reported that this occurs more when other members of the family have left education prior to leaving certificate. Acquiring a job is often needs-based for these young people and it can assist them sooner than acquiring an education. Within the Travelling community, some young females, if required at home, opt out—of-school for the time they are needed. In some cases, these young people went back to education to attain a leaving certificate or a FETAC qualification. In other cases where females from the community left school early, they were as young as thirteen or fourteen when they left and, in most cases, but not all, they got married at sixteen years of age. For young males of the Travelling community, stakeholders reported that leaving school in sixth class is not uncommon but with the new focus on school attendance in recent years, more young Traveller males are staying until Junior Certificate. It is still rare for a young male from the Travelling community to stay in school until leaving certificate in comparison to young females from the community.

Stakeholders have said the community is at a massive loss since losing the 'visiting teacher' service for the community.

Marginalisation

Marginalisation of the Travelling community is still a problem in Ireland and may impact upon education provision to young people from the Travelling community. It was reported by several members of the community and other stakeholders who have worked with the community that **it was not uncommon for young people from the Travelling community to be placed in the one classroom regardless of age or needs.** In one instance a young person reported asking for help in some subjects. They were placed in a 'Traveller only' learning support class and at times, very little teaching occurred. Young people from the community reported having up to four free periods a day. They reported it as frustrating because they genuinely wanted to learn. **Stakeholders who work directly and indirectly with marginalised groups have stated that marginalisation does occur for certain groups of young people including the Travelling community, not just in the school system, but in the community and the county as a whole.**

Stereotypes and Expectation of Young People (Strengths versus Weakness)

According to stakeholders, lower educational expectations may be placed on young people who have certain attributes or behaviours or who are from a certain background. This may flow from inherited stereotypes and cultural discrimination of these groups for decades. Stakeholders noted experiences in several different counties throughout Ireland where the expectation of children from low-socio economic backgrounds or from the Travelling community was lower than their counterparts.

"School tars people with the one brush, it doesn't always play to your strengths".

- Anon, 16

Stakeholders also stated that this may contribute to the fact that young people themselves begin to expect very little of themselves and this results in them not setting goals for the future and in a lot of cases, not committing to their education. Young people reported feeling a disconnect to their counterparts in the school setting, and they felt they were treated differently to other young people and even excluded from some activities such as being picked for sports teams. This difference in expectation, according to stakeholders, is detrimental for the young person as it impacts upon self-worth and engagement in the education system especially if they feel incapable or disempowered.

Stakeholders reported that young people who had issues in the school setting often blossomed in an afterschool setting at primary level and in youth services at secondary level. What is learned in these settings empowers them and helps them cope with the stressors of everyday school life. Stakeholders' experiences showed that if a young person has a constant flow of negativity directed at them with very little positive interaction, they become disengaged with society, e.g. school, services, employment.

Young people themselves have stated that often their strengths are overlooked in the school setting and it is not until they went to a training centre or enter youth services that they began to realise their potential.

"My confidence has increased massively since I've come here. I'm actually really grateful".

- Anon, 18

The benefits of smaller classes, one-to-one academic help, one-to-one counselling when required, and, an overall more positive personal experience were all factors which young people associated with feeling more

accepted, confident and able to continue education. The feeling of being a member of something positive and involved on a person-to-person level was reported as important to this group and **all young people reported feeling happier and more able to focus in this environment.** Young people noted that schools do not have enough teachers to help everyone who needs help.

Support Systems and Information-Sharing

All participants stated that their main support while leaving school and finding an alternative route to Leaving Certificate was a family member, and in particular, the support of their mothers. When asked if they were connected to any other service or support, **just over half had extra support from services throughout the county.** The afterschool programme facilitated by CRYS was indicated as a significant support for young people who needed extra help, but this support does not extend after primary school. One participant who had left school due to mental health issues reported using counselling services in the county but only received two sessions, after which the contact ended, despite attempts to maintain the support. Services like St. Catherine's Community Centre, The Vault, Carlow Regional Youth service and the School Completion outreach team were also reported as having a positive impact on the young person while going through the transition of leaving mainstream school.

"The Vault is a safe space where you can just be yourself". - Anon, 16

7.2 Challenges Identified by Stakeholders Working with Young people and ESL

Changing Needs of Young People

It was stated by all stakeholders that the needs of young people have changed rather considerably over recent years. This is particularly noticeable over the last 5 years in the number of young people presenting with **mental health issues**, with anxiety being the most prevalent. It has been noted by services as presenting in children at primary level and not just secondary level.

Challenges appear to be surfacing at a much younger age throughout all the services including youth diversion, youth mental health, and youth drugs programmes. **School refusal is occurring at primary level** while at secondary level stakeholders have stated that some **young people are unofficially leaving school as young as 12 and 13 years of age.**

The description once used to describe ESL is no longer as relevant in regards to prevalence and even though in some cases the same issues occur, **challenges appear to be surfacing in young people regardless of their academic ability, their background or family structure.**

Demographic Shift

Stereotypically, young people in Ireland who leave school early are presumed to be from a marginalised or deprived background. However, according to our research, young people presenting with issues or challenges regarding school are from all backgrounds and family types. In recent years, Carlow has increasingly become a commuter town and county and this has impacted upon the demographic of ESL to some degree. It may have some correlation with the fact that a proportion of young people who present now with extra needs are from

middle class families where both parents have highly-skilled jobs, without excessive financial problems. In these cases, it is reported that mental health issues are the biggest challenge, and in particular, anxiety. **Services in this area were traditionally aimed at the young person from a low-socio economic background and there is a need for a change in strategy to respond to the new profile of the young people who are struggling.**

Mental Health

According to stakeholders working in services, **young people feel disempowered in many ways and do not feel listened to or heard, especially around issues which affect them.** The lack of **resilience among young people is a concern** for those working with young people. As one stakeholder noted, *"young people lack coping skills which is leading to all kinds of challenges for them"*. During some consultations, stakeholders stated that girls appeared to struggle more with coping skills and held on to stressors rather than deal with them. Low self-esteem was reported as more of a struggle for girls, with some stakeholders stating that having a negative self-image contributed to this. For some young people who have left the mainstream system, stakeholders noted a struggle with motivation to try new experiences or to push themselves. Self-determinism was a particular struggle for this group which in turn affected their commitment to education.

It was stated strongly, by both service providers and schools, that the rate of mental health issues among young people is increasing. It is true that some young people self-report mental health challenges. A significant number of others, however, suffer alone for a long period of time before they seek help or someone else seeks help for them. For some young people in the school setting, the school itself takes on the role of seeking support if the parent is not engaged. **Stakeholders reported a growing number of parents who struggle with parenthood and the stressors that come with it.** This has an impact on how the young person dealt with life and what they were going through. However, where parents and children worked together with services, stakeholders report significant results in the areas of mental health or school refusal.

Attendance and School Refusal

Attendance and school refusal are a growing concern according for stakeholders, especially for the 13-15-year-old group. Stakeholders working with young people and ESL identified two main reasons for attendance issues and school refusal. As noted above, the first is chronic mental health problems where the young person could physically not go to school anymore due to social anxiety. The second is that the young person with extra academic needs has struggled since moving from a *"highly resourced primary school setting to a very large secondary school setting where they got 'lost' in the transition"*. Stakeholders stated that when anxiety presents in the school setting, often something more complex is going on in the background. According to stakeholders, anxiety can mean that some young people are out of the school setting for a long period of time. In some instances, even after the anxiety eases, the young person becomes habituated to being at home and habits form which result in them staying out of the school system. Stakeholders reported particular concerns with the younger cohort who are absent from the school routine **from first year in some cases. Some of these young people are not returning to school for some time, if at all.**

7.3 Challenges facing schools and services.

School Needs

It was generally agreed that **schools do not have the support they need to respond to the complex needs of young people, especially those at risk of ESL**. The needs of schools extend well beyond being an educational institution. With issues of teach-pupil ratio, class sizes and needs of young people becoming more complex and prevalent, stakeholders emphasised that schools need support from outside services which are not education-focused. As noted, school attendance and mental health issues are the biggest challenges for schools in relation to those at risk, while academic ability, family background, behavioural issues and, poor social skills were also referenced. It has been noted by some stakeholders that some young people need extensive academic support and that schools do not have the extra resources to help them. Even though literature and numeracy classes are offered in secondary school, some young people need more. **100% of schools who participated in this research stated that they do not have the support or the resources to deal with the complexities of all young people in relation to schooling. A need for greater funding was emphasised by schools and it was agreed by all stakeholders that schools are under-resourced.** A need for a more child-focused approach to challenges facing young people in the school setting was agreed, including the need for a mental health service or support system. **Having better access to the National Educational Psychology Services is also something stakeholders agreed to being a crucial step in helping young people at risk.** Positive mental health programmes were also identified as a benefit to schools and students.

Partnerships and Relationships

It was agreed by all stakeholders working with young people that greater networking and better partnerships would benefit the responses to young people in Carlow. 50% of schools stated that they had solid connections to training centres and youth services, while 50% stated they did not have any concrete relationships. It was generally agreed that relationships are often personality-based. For example, it was stated that in some cases, specific people may have developed a good relationship with a school but if that person left the position, the concern is that this crucial link to the school may also cease. Where relationships have been developed, they are strong and utilised. However, **stakeholders agree that relationships are often developed in response to situations rather than in a preventative approach.**

In some instances, stakeholders stated that there can be a trust issue between services, training centres and schools. Currently, there is no statutory or service-level system or strategy in place between schools and services even though some stakeholders expressed the desirability of it. Some schools and services have developed informal linkages around areas such as drug-use and awareness. However, there are limited initiatives in place in relation to mental health or the overall management of young people with complex needs within the school-setting where services support them. **According to stakeholders, an inter-agency, strategy-based initiative which is preventative, transparent and child-focused is required.**

Referrals and Waiting Lists

According to stakeholders, if referrals are not made once a risk is identified, it is more difficult to keep that young person in the mainstream school system. It has been stated that referrals to services often occur when it is too late for services to have an impact at mainstream level. As shown above, referrals are most commonly reactionary and usually when something significant has occurred. However, it was noted that this is much less likely in the case of those schools monitored by the SCP where the young person is identified much sooner as

being at risk of ESL. A need for linkages like that with the SCP could benefit all schools and prevent the effects of reactive referrals. A need for a more efficient process was generally identified by all stakeholders. A great risk awareness is something which would assist in identifying potential negative behaviours or challenges.

The lengthy waiting lists for mental health services has a significant impact upon services working with young people. In one example, one service stated that they supported a young person with severe mental health issues for up to two years before statutory services could be accessed. The concern here for stakeholders is that these young people need clinical psychological help. **Even though stakeholders are highly trained, they themselves have stated that they are not in a position to offer specialized support. While acknowledging that the support offered by agencies has proven to be a lifesaver in many cases for some young people, all stated that it is not a substitute for adequate statutory mental health services for children and young people.**

Alternative Educational Options

The potential of training centres has been noted by stakeholders. *"They have an important role in the education and training opportunities for young people in Carlow".* However, it was stated by stakeholders that their potential has not been utilised enough in the past few years. This is felt to be especially the case for specific training like apprenticeships. It was agreed that there has been a downgrading in the importance of acquiring 'a trade' among educational institutions, perhaps due to an over-emphasis on the importance of the Leaving Certificate nationally and a focus on higher education from Europe.

All stakeholders agreed on the need for other options to be available to young people from the age of 16. It was noted that the training centres have the potential to help young people who do not fit the mainstream cycle. **It was noted that if a young person does not want to attain a leaving certificate and wants to do alternative training, there are limited options for them. It was also noted by the stakeholders that training centres, unlike post-primary school, do not have guidance counsellors assigned specifically to guide young people in their career or study options.**

Another area which stakeholders saw as a challenge was that **often young people did not know they could go back to the mainstream system** and that they had the option to return even if they have left for some time. **Sometimes young people need a time-out or a break from the stressors but currently, there is no programme of this type for young people.** If they are out-of-school for some time, returning seems like a difficult task. A flexibility to allow young people room to breathe and recalibrate was something stakeholders saw as desirable. It was noted that the person-centred teaching methods of Youthreach, in particular, helped young people significantly and this is a great opportunity to build confidence in young people who have previously been troubled by the education settings.

Challenges related to Services for Specific Age Groups

Two challenging specific age groups were identified: the 13-15-year-old early school leaver group and the 16 plus age group who have not engaged with any training centre.

Stakeholders articulated the concern that the younger group are staying out-of-school and they do not seem to be returning to the mainstream system. **Currently, there is no alternative response to the 13-15-year-old age group and in the view of stakeholders, this is having a knock-on effect.** According to stakeholders, if these young people had some service to attend on days they should be in school, analogous to home-schooling, it may help them to return to mainstream education. The main issue seems to be, as mentioned above, a habituation to being

at home and developed behaviours which interfere with going back to school. Developing a methodology to link these young people to school and services is something which stakeholders have stressed is needed.

With regard to the older cohort, **aged 16-18, the main concern is that there is no statutory body monitoring this group.** For example, if they register with a training centre but for some reason leave before completing the programme, there is no mandatory follow up process, *"Young people up to 16 are monitored by TUSLA but this latter group, if not engaged anywhere, can get lost in the cracks"*. Stakeholders reported following up themselves but this was generally non-formal and based on a personal connection formed with the individual.

Need for a Cultural Shift

Even though services and schools are seeing a change in the needs of young people, the perceived view of ESL and youth training centres has not changed.

According to stakeholders, training centres are *'not viewed as an opportunity but more as a last resort'* and this inhibits some young people from attending. **While training centres have equal status to post-primary schools, they are not given the same appreciation and support as schools in the education of young people.** This disconnect is creating a potential barrier for young people to completing post-primary education as some stakeholders have stated that referrals to training centres do not always take place. **It was noted by stakeholders that this disconnect is cultural** in that training centres are usually based on the outskirts of towns, in spaces which are not always positive for young learners, and often separated or marginalised from the community. Stakeholders believe there is a vital need for a cultural shift, not only on the views of training centres but also in the view of the early school-leaver. **The main concern around stereotyping young people who attend training centres is that it decreases the chance of a positive outcome for that young person.** It has been noted already that stakeholders believe that less is expected from certain groups and that this view is detrimental to outcomes.

An asset-based approach, which builds on young people's strengths, was identified as key to helping young people stay in school. Normally there is a correlation between negative overall experience in school and negative interactions with either teachers or peers. A persistent focus on limitation is a common experience reported by many of the young people interviewed, resulting in disempowerment. According to stakeholders, focusing on strengths gives the child the opportunity to see their potential which in turn helps them address their weaknesses. **The expectation of young people is often underestimated and this is especially the case if they come from certain groups, areas or ethnic minorities according to stakeholders.**

7.4 Gaps Identified by stakeholders

The gaps identified by stakeholders include:

- Schools need extra resources to deal with the complexities that are facing young people today. A gap exists in mental health services in the school setting.
- There is no mandatory infrastructure between schools and youth services in relation to referral or support in complex cases.
- There is no link worker specifically responsible for engaging young people back into the school system.
- A gap exists in overall inter-agency work concerned with ESL e.g. schools, youth services, Youthreach and Training Centre. The relationships are personality-based and there is a need for a consistent procedure.
- No transition programme outside of the school setting for young people who have had support at primary school but who do not have the same support in secondary school (e.g. After School's initiative).
- There is a gap in child-focused approaches in the school setting and this gap appears to be most evident in times when a young person is struggling and needs to be '*heard rather than told*'.
- Referrals to services are often reactionary. There is a gap in preventative measures, risk awareness/assessment gap and a procedure gap.
- Currently, no educational or social programme exists for the 13-15-year-old group who are not in the mainstream school system.
- There is a gap in alternative education options for young people overall. The options are limited for those who do not want to finish the leaving certificate or carry out an employability course. This is partly due to the fall in interest in doing apprenticeships and the lack of apprenticeships and similar options available.
- There is no transition programme for young people leaving the mainstream system and entering training centres.
- There is a gap in a guidance-counsellor service in the alternative education settings.
- There is a gap in counselling services in schools.
- A more positive awareness of training centres is required.
- Monitoring of 16-18-year-old group who have not engaged in any programme after leaving school does not occur.
- A gap exists in services for young people aged 16 and up who have not engaged in a training centre.

There are clear resource issues affecting education, youth services, and young people's mental health services. This is a nationwide problem but impact some counties even more than others. Carlow has seen a significant reduction in resources, especially in the area of mental health, while experiencing a population increase of over 4% between 2011 and 2016 and a rising referral rate. The decrease in retention up to Junior Certificate is a cause for concern and the lack of services in place for the younger cohort could that problems could persist for this cohort. The shortage of Educational Psychologists is a major concern for stakeholders. Resource levels across education have not returned to the levels seen before the cuts in the period 2010-2014, when 10% of funding was lost and only 4% restored since. Despite schools and education bodies carrying out fundraising themselves to make up the difference, it is insufficient to cope with ever-increasing needs and demands.

8. Analysis and Recommendations

8.1 Analysis of Data

Main research findings Research Findings

- The retention rate for the Junior Certificate has been decreasing since the 1999 entry cohort (1999 entry cohort 97.5% - 2011 entry cohort 95.1%). The lowest it has been in this period is 94.5% which was for the 2010 entry cohort.
- Retention for leaving certificate has been increasing since the 1999 entry cohort (1999 entry cohort 82.6% - 2011 entry cohort 90.6%).
- Low Junior Certificate retention rates indicate that the 13-15-year-old age group are at a greater risk than previously thought. School refusal for personal reasons being an issue among this group.
- Currently, **no service or intervention exists for the 13-15-year-old group who have ceased attending the mainstream school system**. Stakeholders are concerned because some of these young people are not leaving their house at all due to anxiety or other issues and this may result in greater social challenges for them in the long run.
- The demographics of Early School Leaving has changed. It is no longer just the young person from a low socioeconomic background who is at risk but rather all young people who are potentially at risk of leaving school early.
- The school environment and the challenges of the curriculum (see below) are contributors to ESL for some young people. Class sizes, lack of one-to-one support, poor relationships with teachers and the feeling of not being accepted all appeared in interviews as contributing.
- Numeracy and literacy issues do appear to be a problem for some young people entering secondary school. There are considerable extra supports at primary school level. By secondary school, unless they have been diagnosed with learning needs, little support is available. This is a resource issue.
- Issues of school refusal, attendance and even school expulsion with children at primary level are evident from consultation with stakeholders.
- In the past five years, the **rise in mental health issues** presenting to Youth Services has been noted; schools are also seeing this.
- Chronic anxiety, including social anxiety, is present in children at primary age according to services and this is resulting in attendance issues and school refusal.
- **Over 50% of the young people** who left mainstream school early attributed this to mental health issues. It was not until they had dealt with them that they returned to alternative education.
- Services and schools have a major concern over the lack of mental health services for children and young people through state bodies but also through schools and local services.
- Services do not have the capacity to deal with mental health challenges and in some instances, certain services are engaging and helping young people manage mental health problems for up to 2 years before adequate psychological support is offered.
- Referrals to services are reactive, not preventative. This is a challenge because often the young person has suffered for months if not years, and at the point of contact with the service, it has gone too far and leaving school is the only option. A more preventative referral approach was emphasised.
- SCP is only available in DEIS schools but this research shows that the needs are changing and so are the demographics of the ESL.

- Partnerships between schools and services could be improved. Currently, relationships are often based on the personality of the staff member in question and not service-based. The issue here is that if the person leaves a post, the connection is often lost.
- The use of youth work models in the school setting alongside the regular curriculum was a common solution offered by stakeholders. This would enhance relationships but also act as a supportive structure for the young person. It would assist risk awareness and referrals when the issues begin.
- Unhelpful attitudes towards the Travelling community are still present in schools and County Carlow according to stakeholders. Issues have been raised about the views of the public towards the community.
- For other ethnic minority groups, some challenges were related to language issues but stakeholders appeared to feel supported and included.
- Prejudice towards training centres and the young people who attend them is a county and cultural issue. In some instances, it was stated that referrals were not occurring because of the historical view of centres and the young people who attend them.
- Stakeholders agreed that training centres present a great opportunity for young people but because of prejudice, and also because of the lack of information given to young people who are not from the historical 'at risk' groups, young people who would benefit from them are not being made aware of them as an alternative to mainstream school.
- Stakeholders stated that the expectation of some children and young people from various 'at risk' groups are disabling in that the expectation of them is lower. Stakeholders pointed out the effects of this on the young person and have noted that young people they meet who are ESL or at risk are disempowered.

8.2 Recommendations

These recommendations are based on the consultation with stakeholders and through a comprehensive exploration of the literature. They also take note of the reservations expressed by stakeholders in relation to strategies which are never implemented. These recommendations therefore aim to provide potential solutions which are attainable and consistent with needs. The author has suggested recommendations which are feasible and achievable and, if accepted, can be implemented in a relatively short space of time. These recommendations could have an almost instant effect on early school-leaving and in turn retention rates.

School Policy

1. The KCETB have stated that their aim is to *'lead the development of education and training opportunities throughout the two counties by engaging with learners and communities, creating positive learning environments and experiences for people'*. They have also stated that they want to be a *'benchmark of excellence'*. Currently, in Ireland, youth services are not structurally linked to schools by policy. By contrast in the UK more varied connections have resulted in greater results and stakeholders here have stated the need for such a partnership.

It is recommended that Individual schools should input models based on youth-work into the school environment and policy. This could allow an inter-connectedness between school and youth agencies in a more formal, organised way. The ETB's have the freedom to explore and initiate this in the schools that they manage and develop a pilot which interlaces elements of youth-work in a school setting. This would be one way of responding to the need for greater support expressed by the young people themselves. This represents a significant leadership opportunity for the KCETB.

Alternatively, individual schools have the option of independently creating a combined policy and establishing connections independently.

Mental Health

2. Mental health challenges are increasing in the school setting and within services. Schools do not have a dedicated counsellor with expertise in mental health and often positive mental health programmes are limited due to a lack of resources. The importance of agents working together in a budget-tight environment is more crucial now than it has ever been.

Currently, CRYS has trained coordinators of the FRIENDS programme, which is a recognised anxiety awareness programme for young people, with international evidence regarding its effectiveness. At the moment CRYS carry this out with young people within their service but there is potential to carry this programme out in a school-setting also. Funding would be required to train more coordinators but as this programme would be countywide it is possible that several services could take part in training and delivery.

A 'Meitheal' intervention specific to education, school refusal, and mental health challenges was advocated by some stakeholders. From the data gathered it is clear that there is a correlation between the school challenges and mental health issues, Carlow has no inter-agent partnership which deals specifically with either. This would also increase the possibility of early referrals and result in the young person getting the help they need sooner.

It is recommended that the link between schools and the *Connecting for Life* Strategy be strengthened, building on the intention of that Strategy to “enhance the supports for young people with mental health problems or vulnerable to suicide”.

Younger 'at-risk' Group

3. The decrease in Junior Certificate retention in recent years indicates that a gap in services for the 13-15 year old age group exists. Members of this cohort who have dropped out-of-school have no service dedicated directly to them and their needs during the school day. This is a major concern for stakeholders as in some instances these young people are only accessing up to 7 hours of home tuition a week.

This research shows that the ethos and approach of the “Afterschools” programme where the young person explores education and personal growth was very beneficial. A programme like this, occurring twice weekly during the day could benefit this group substantially.

It is recommended that this be explored on an inter-agency partnership was set up, between the education, youth services and other agencies to maximize resource limitations. Rooms in existing facilities not completely utilised at different times of the day could be availed of.

A service similar to Youthreach for this young age group should be explored on a pilot basis. This would require significant funding and resources. This research will feed into a greater awareness of the issue at national level.

Disengaged Youth

4. 1 in 10 young people leave school early in Carlow..Under the Education Act (2000) TUSLA has the responsibility to monitor young people's attendance up to age 16. Concern exists about the number of young people aged 16-18 however who are not engaged in any education or training. Youthreach has only 25 places, which is not sufficient for needs of the county. The Youth Training Centre is course-specific and even though it offers a range of education options, it cannot cater for all young people's needs or indeed employment or training interests. The National Youth Strategy '*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*' states that all young people should have the opportunity to achieve in all areas of learning and development. The system offers does not always, however, suit the needs of all young people and if they do not want to engage in mainstream education or training, they have limited options.

There is a need for a dedicated service or link-worker to work with the 16 – 18-year-old group specifically to keep them engaged in education or even in the labour market.

The idea of a modified 'special CE scheme' was advanced by stakeholders. This scheme would have education, employability, and personal development elements, like Youthreach or Training Centres but the young person could get work experience and training in a desired field of their choice and also work part-time. A programme like this already exists in in Carlow for adults in Recovery where participants can stay on the scheme up to 3 years with room to extend the position if required. Partnerships could be

made with CCDP and local enterprises and services to create positions more suited to the needs of young people.

Changing Needs, Changing Views

5.

The only options in Ireland for the early school leaver are Youthreach or Youth Training Centres. With the changing needs of young people and the changing demographics of the ESL, a more positive view of the centres is required. Young people are not aware of the opportunity the centres hold and parents are not always aware that young people can receive the exact same education in Youthreach.

A countywide campaign outlining the opportunities such programmes present should inform the young person from 'non-targeted' background about their options.

Stakeholders have stated that young people are often not aware they can go back to main-stream school if expulsion was not a factor. It has been noted by young people that in times of needs, they sometimes need a break from the norm of school to deal with what is going on. Youthreach in particular addresses both educational and personal needs and it is often that one to one support that that child needs.

Stakeholders have emphasised a need for a flexible programme which is 4-8 weeks which allows the young person to step out of the mainstream system and take time to deal with what is going on all while still obtaining support in education and personal growth. This should be explored with the relevant stakeholders.

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Appendices

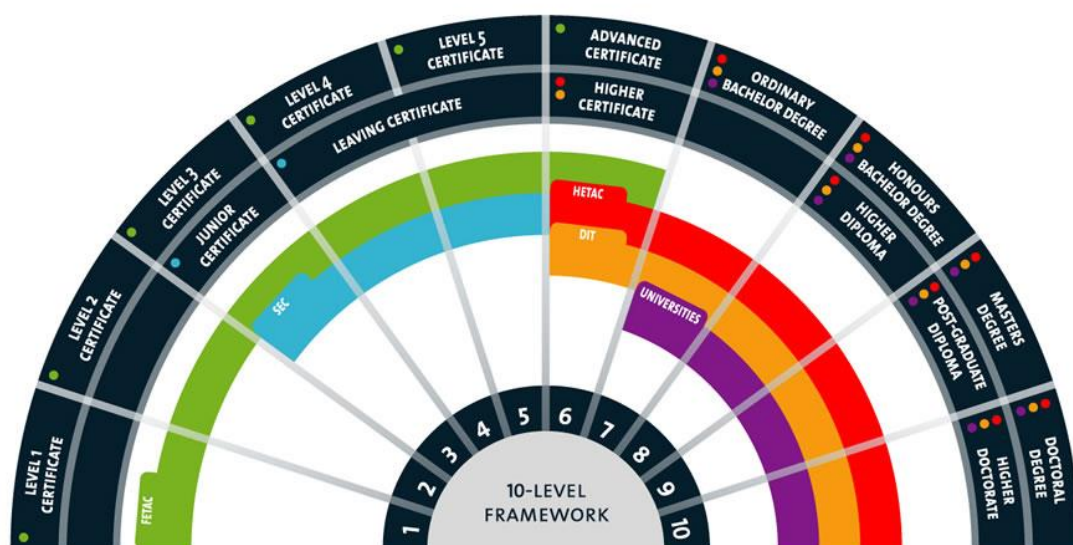
Appendix 1.1 : NFQ Chart

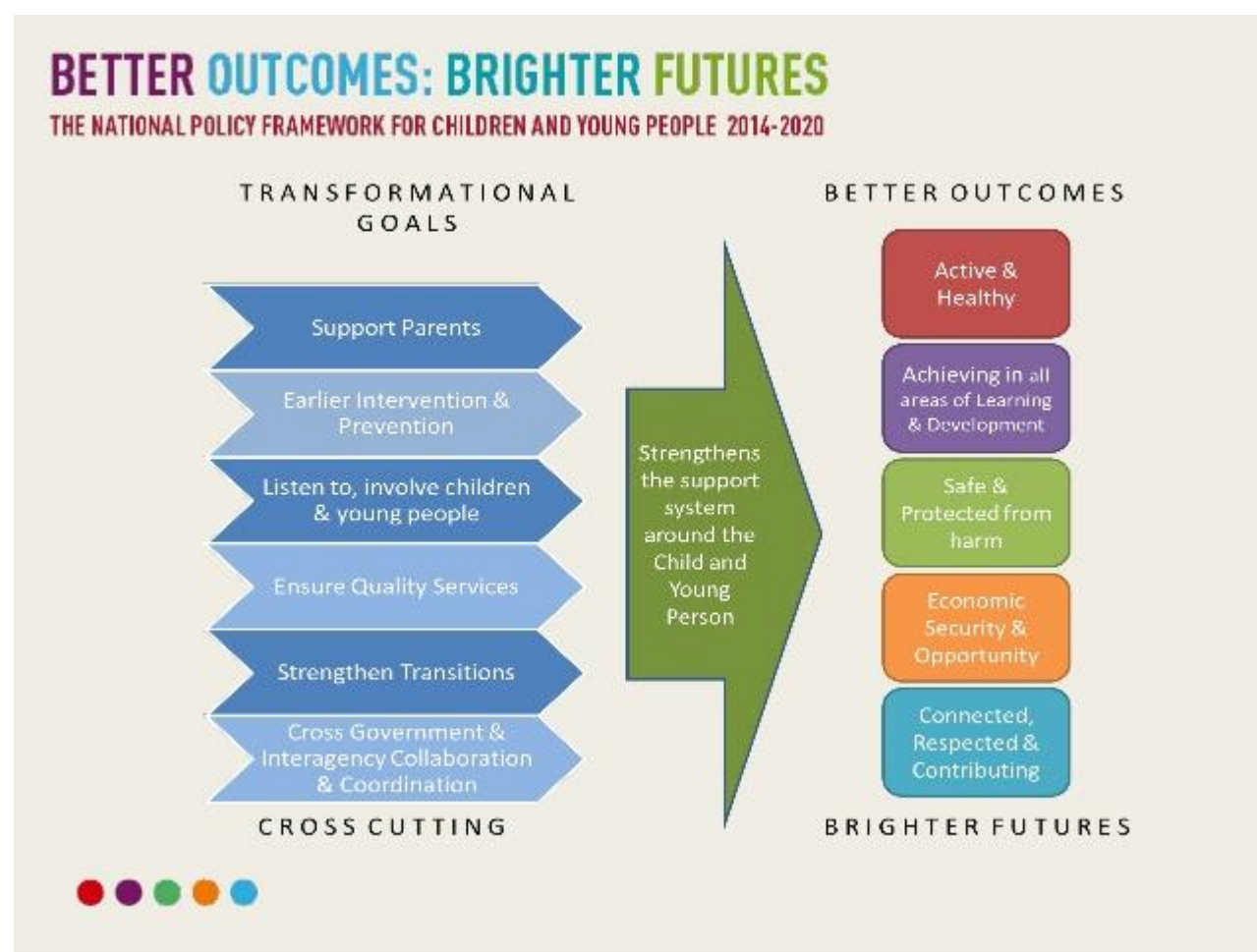


AWARDS IN THE FRAMEWORK

KEY

- FETAC - Further Education and Training Awards Council
 - SEC - State Examinations Commission (Department of Education & Science)
 - HETAC - Higher Education and Training Awards Council
 - DIT - Dublin Institute of Technology
 - Universities
- new Framework awards





Appendix 1.3 : Services for Young People in County Carlow provide by CRYS

Service	Location	Age	What they offer
The Vault Youth Project	Carlow Town	12-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drop in Youth Cafe • Summer Programmes • Youth Leadership • Programmes including STEM, Sow and Group and Movie Cloud • Music and arts-based programmes • Sports programmes • Information and advice (young people and family) • LGBTI Support group
Graigucullen Youth Project	Carlow town	10-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Committee • Junior Rock School • Community Drop-in • Computer Coding classes • Positive mental health programmes • FRIENDS programme
Bagenalstown Youth Project	Bagenalstown	10-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy/girl specific programmes • Drop in service • Programmes such as gardening, baking, and filmmaking • Music and arts programmes • Sports programmes • Information and advice for young people and families.
Carlow Youth Sports Development Project	County wide	10-21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provides a safe environment for young people to meet and avail of sports and activity-based programmes. • The project aims to reduce substance misuse by engaging young people in sports and recreation.
Tullow Youth Project @ Cafe Jamrock	Tullow	6th Class and up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun, safe, inclusive environment • Age specific programmes • Mental health programmes • Arts programmes • Sports programmes

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coding programmes
Follaine Counselling Service	Carlow Town	12-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to one counselling
After-school programmes	<p>John Sweeney Park Afterschool, Carlow town.</p> <p>Cill an Oir Afterschool, Graiguecullen, Carlow town.</p> <p>Askea Afterschool, Carlow town.</p>	8-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework support • Personal and social development
The HUB Garda Youth Diversion Project	Carlow Town	12-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to one personal development work • Small group work • Needs based • Work experience integrated module
New Oak/ Tullow Road Youth Project	Carlow Town	10-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junior programme • Special interest programmes for teens (music, art, animation) • Day trips • Summer camps • Community outreach
County Carlow Drugs Initiative	Carlow Town	12-18 (This service also works with adults)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to one support • Supportive/informative phone service • Facilitate 'Reflect' Drug and Alcohol Awareness Programme • Needs based service • Health promotion programmes for young people
Synergy (Probation project)	County wide	16-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Supportive and informative service for young people who are linked to probation but are not engaged in any other service. Its aim is to open

			pathways to agencies for the young person.
The YARC Project	Countywide	12-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works specifically one to one and in group form with at risk. • Focuses on at risk behaviour and how to recognise and manage them. • Personal and social development ethos
Traveller Youth Project		10-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • One to one • Group work • Programmes which aim to decrease 'at risk' behaviours