

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

**Assessment of Education
in places other than Recognised Schools**

**Independent School
Preliminary Assessment Report**

Name of School

TFA Elite Cork

Address

Mayfield Sports Complex, Old Youghal Rd, Cork

Name of Principal/Director

Mr. Tommy Heffernan

Name of Assessor/s

Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

19th December 2024 – Remote Interview
28th January 2025 – Onsite Visit

Date of Final Report

25th June 2025

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------|----|-------|
| Opening Time: | 09:00 | | |
| Closing time: | 15:00 | | |
| Main breaks during the day: | 10:30 | to | 11:00 |
| | 12:30 | to | 13:20 |

Is school in operation for more than five years?

No

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

September 2024

1.2. Name(s) of principal and/or other teacher(s) interviewed

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Mr. Tommy Heffernan

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

This preliminary assessment report is based on the following sources of evidence:

- Information furnished in the R2 Annual Update Form 2024-25 completed by the principal
- An interview with the principal, Mr. Tommy Heffernan
- A visit to the school location and a review of the facilities available
- A visit to the classrooms/sports facilities while classes were in session with teachers and students
- Discussion via remote meeting and onsite about the educational programme
- Review of programme curriculum and programme plans
- Review of samples of students work
- Review of the programme website

Section 2 General Information and School Context

TFA Elite Cork began operations in September 2024. It is the second programme to be set up by the CEO, Mr. Tommy Heffernan. Mr Heffernan started the first TFA Elite-High Performance programme in Limerick in September 2023.

The TFA Elite Programme in Cork is designed to cater for Transition Year Students from a number of local Department of Education secondary schools. Students applying for this programme have completed their junior cycle of education. They are students that have an identified desire to develop their talents and skills in football prior to returning to mainstream education to complete the senior cycle. In the majority of cases, students obtain commitments from their respective schools that a place will be available for them to return to complete their senior cycle and leaving certificate exams.

The aim of the TFA Elite programme is to provide a learning environment where students can not only develop their football skills but also have an opportunity for significant personal development. These outcomes are achieved through a targeted approach of goal setting and personal responsibility for learning.

TFA Elite Academy states that the objective of the programme is *to foster students' holistic development, improve their performance in highly competitive environments, and prepare them for adult life.*

The premise of the programme is that learning across educational core areas can be integrated into an immersive sports programme. The programme curriculum is designed and coordinated to maximise the attainment of football skills and physical development and maintain and develop learning in core educational areas, while developing key skills in team building and goal setting. In addition, key aspects of the programme include work placements, guest speakers, and opportunities to access professional networks and learn about the football industry.

The programme approach facilitates talented young footballers to pursue their football ambitions in a setting that promotes their educational development. The selection of students for the course is based on sporting and football ability, assessed by means of football trials, along with a demonstration of the appropriate commitment. TFA Elite students are considered to be football players with real potential, and many are signed to League of Ireland clubs. The programme offers students opportunity to participate in international tours to play against professional academies such as Atletico Madrid, FC Barcelona, and Rayo Vallecano.

Parental support and involvement is encouraged. Parents and students have access to an online platform to track progress through the programme. The course is funded by the fees charged to the students.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

There are two full-time members of staff, the CEO and founder Mr Tommy Heffernan, and the Programme Director. Both are qualified teachers and are shared across the TFA Elite programmes in Cork and Limerick. In addition, the programme employs a Head of Academy, and two coaches are employed part-time. There is an administrator who carries out administrative tasks for both the Cork and Limerick programmes.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school operates for 160 days in the academic year. School closures during the academic year are in line with mainstream schools. The day begins at 9am and classes finish at 3pm. There are two breaks during the day. The morning break is between 10:30am and 11:00am. Lunch time is from 12:30pm to 1:20pm. On Friday classes finish at lunchtime.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The TFA Elite Programme in Cork is located in the Mayfield Sports Complex. The complex provides high level facilities suited to programme delivery. The facilities include a full sized 4G Astro turf pitch and access to a 25 metre swimming pool. There is access to a modern and well-equipped gym and indoor sports halls. The programme also has use of a lecture room where the more academic aspects of the programme are delivered and where students can store their personal items and subject resources. While the sports complex has provided all the requirements to deliver the programme to the required level, the programme director stated that ideally, he would like to have a facility that is for the sole use of the programme. He has already identified potential locations and it is his intention to secure such a facility in the near future.

Students are provided with a full TFA Elite branded and crested sports kit, which they wear for the duration of the programme.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

Learning in core areas, including literacy and numeracy, are integrated into the overall programme. All subjects maintain a clear link to the topics of football, fitness, nutrition, and physical education. There is a strong emphasis on critical thinking and analysis, along with personal development and team building skills. The development of team building and collaborative working skills are extended from the sports aspect of the programme into the academic elements of the programme.

The timetable, calendar, and programme plan were provided. The day is structured around six learning periods that are 40 to 45 minutes long.

The first two timetabled sessions are focused on one class of either Maths or English along with a class of Journalling/Injury Rehab/Physiology/Leadership/Nutrition. The double period after the morning break is focused on a pitch session four days a week and includes a multi sports session one day a week. Afternoon sessions include daily coach education and gym sessions with one period of yoga and recovery. Friday classes end at lunch time.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

There is provision for learning in language and literacy skills in the areas of writing, reading, and oral language development.

The curriculum in language and literacy is designed to complement learning in the overall programme, and to facilitate students to maintain and develop academic levels in reading, writing, oral and aural skills. The TFA timetable includes one 40-minute designated period for Journalling and two 40-minute English classes per week. Opportunities for development of language and literacy are available across multiple subject areas.

The lesson content and specific learning outcomes are identified for each lesson planned. The curriculum includes subject matter for writing development including, an introduction to and analysis of sports writing, report writing, analysis of commentary and stories (fiction and non-fiction), and practical writing. Comprehension is developed by critical analysis of selected sports texts and investigation of different genres of writing including newspaper articles, biographies, opinion pieces.

A number of written assignments are regularly presented to the wider student group through oral presentations. Oral skills are further developed through the inclusion of public speaking and debating skills on identified controversial sports topics.

The English course includes aspects of marketing and multimedia skills that are related to football and sports, along with personal reflection and goal setting.

6.3. Numeracy

A comprehensive programme in mathematics is included in the programme curriculum plan, which was provided at the time of the assessment. Maths classes are delivered in line with higher level junior cycle course content. There are three 40-minute periods allocated to maths each week. Course content is designed to maintain and develop levels of knowledge that will allow students to progress from the TFA Transition Year programme to the senior cycle maths curriculum in preparation for the Leaving Certificate.

The TFA programme covers a range of mathematical concepts and features of the programme include sports analytics, financial management and performance analysis, which all support the curriculum in the area of numeracy.

TFA Elite have partnered with the Tuition Centre to provide all students with free access to Maths grinds, which the programme website states *will provide students with on demand access to specialist lessons.*

6.4. Irish

Irish is not part of the curriculum at TFA Elite.

Children attending an Independent School should be afforded opportunity for the study of Irish, however the study of Irish is not a requirement for registration under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. Where Irish is included in the provision, an Independent School may identify students attending that they consider would qualify for an exemption from the study of Irish. Independent Schools can make decisions in consultation with parents regarding arrangements for these children. Any arrangements made in relation to the study of Irish does not entitle students to an exemption from the study of Irish in the event of a subsequent enrolment at a Department of Education recognised school.

Parents of children attending an Independent School should be informed of and acquaint themselves with implications of not taking Irish and/or having a second language. Parents seeking information should consult with the Department of Education www.education.ie and/or the State Examinations Commission www.examinations.ie with regard to the requirement for Irish and/or an additional language.

6.5. Other areas of learning

In addition to learning in literacy and numeracy the timetable identifies the other learning activities in which students receive tuition in the school. Areas covered include physical development, strength and conditioning, player development, coach education, injury rehab, diet and nutrition, leadership, physiology, yoga. Elements of the programme are targeted at the overall development of the students in their capacity as elite sports people. The TFA Elite staff team are focused on providing and facilitating present and future sporting opportunities that may be available to the students.

Underpinning the programme content is a high emphasis on individual and reflective practice and goal setting through personalised profiles and Individual Development Plans (IDP). The programme identifies that the IDPs *provide insights into strengths and weaknesses to enhance decision making in competitive settings*. A message from Mr Heffernan on the TFA website states the programme *is about more than just football – it's about helping young people develop as individuals, equipping them with the skills, discipline, and mindset needed to succeed in life, whether that's in sport, academics, or their future careers*.

The programme includes opportunity for students to gain FAI (Football Association of Ireland) coaching qualifications (PDP1 and PDP2 coaching badges) and coaching experience. FAI PDP1 and PDP2 coaching badges are part of a structured pathway for football coaches. This training is designed to help students develop skills and knowledge in coaching young players. PDP1 is for coaches working with Under 6 to Under 9 age groups, PDP2 is for coaching Under 10 to Under 12 players.

6.6. Special educational needs

There are currently no students attending the programme that have Special Education Needs. Information provided to by the school identified that an Individualized Education Plan (IEPs) may be used by students presenting with special needs or learning differences. The TFA identifies that - *the IEP outlines specific goals, accommodations, and services needed to support their learning and development. IEPs are typically reviewed and updated regularly and progress towards the goals outlined in the plan is monitored and assessed*.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

Details of assessment and record keeping were provided as part of the school information provided. It outlined the approach to the assessment of progress as outlined below.

Assessment of progress through teacher observations, which may be recorded through anecdotal notes, checklists, or rating scales. Assessments of project work will be used to measure performance in language, literacy, or math skills, or any of the subjects listed in the timetable.

TFA identifies that formative assessments are used to monitor progress and may include quizzes or classroom discussions that help teachers identify areas where students may need additional support or clarification. These assessments are carried out throughout the school year. Summative assessments are identified as a means to evaluate performance at the end of a learning unit.

Records of students' progress are maintained by the school and can help, track a child's progress over time, identify areas of strength and weakness, and inform instructional decisions and interventions

Regular progress reports are available to parents through information provided on the online platform regarding the student's performance and development across the different areas of the programme.

Students are also encouraged and facilitated to carry out self-assessment across the duration of the programme.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

The School Initial Information form provided documents and declarations as required including

- The school calendar and timetable for the current academic year
- The Health and Safety Statement
- Declaration of Garda vetting in accordance with Part 3, Article 12 National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012.
- Storage and administration of medicine policy
- Details of Fire Safety Policies
- Details of insurance policy
- The Child Safeguarding Statement (CSS) as required by the Children's First Act 2015 was provided and is displayed in a prominent position onsite. The statement identifies the Designated and Deputy Designated Liaison Persons (DLP and DDLP). Details of the required procedures identified in the CSS were evidenced as part of the assessment.

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

In my opinion, the education provided to the pupils in TFA Elite (Thomond Football Academy) can be characterised as "*a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social*". The reasons I have formed this opinion of the educational provision in the school are as follows:

- The leadership, commitment, and skills in programme management, displayed by the principal/programme director.
- The knowledge and experience of the principal/programme director from a previous teaching role and through the experience of programme management and delivery of the TFA Elite Cork sister programme in Limerick.
- The employment of a suitably qualified staff team, who have the required expertise, experience, and commitment to deliver the programme to a high standard.

- The aims and objectives of the programme are clearly identified, defined, and measurable through specific outcomes.
- Curriculum planning and a considered programme content is delivered in a structured manner through timetabled sessions and classes.
- The cohort of students are carefully selected in a fair and transparent manner to ensure suitability for the programme and best opportunity for positive outcomes.
- Positive links are formed and maintained within professional football communities at both local, national, and international levels.
- Resources are available to enhance course delivery, aims and objectives.
- The principal is ambitious in his intentions for programme development and expansion, including the intention for the programme to move to a designated building.

The findings of the assessment were discussed with the participants on the date of the assessment. The participants were advised that the decision regarding registration would be made by Tusla – the Child and Family Agency: Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS).

Following the assessment, a draft report is provided to the principal, along with a Factual Accuracy and Feedback Form, which may be submitted within a specified timeframe, in response to the content of the draft report. The report, along with any information provided on the feedback form for consideration, is brought to the AEARS Registration Panel. The Registration Panel make decisions regarding registration of children in receipt of the education at the Independent School.

Section 10 Discussion of Finding of Report with Principal

The findings of the assessment were discussed with Mr. Tommy Heffernan, principal. It was stated that the recommendation would be to register the pupils of TFA Elite Cork.

The final decision regarding registration will be made by the Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Panel - Tusla, Child and Family Agency.

Section 11 Outcome

Outcome of Tusla Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service Panel Regarding Requirements for Section 14 Registration of Children Attending the School

Following the Assessment, the Registration Panel decided that children attending TFA Elite Cork will be registered on the register of children receiving an education in a place other than a recognised school as required by Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

Registration is subject to a periodic review by the Child and Family Agency