



Connect 4 Project - Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Introduction

I'd like to thank the Committee for their invitation to present here today. My name is Paul Perth, and I'm the team leader of Connect 4, a pilot project under South Dublin County Partnership. My colleague is Grace Hill, who is co-ordinator of the Tallaght Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force.

Connect 4 is a pilot project which uses street work to engage young people aged 10-24 in Tallaght. Our target group would be young people who are disconnected from community, family, and themselves, often due to drug use, poverty, poor mental health, or trauma.

Youth work in Ireland - street work vs. centre-based youth work.

Currently, I believe there are huge numbers of "at risk" young people not being reached by youth services in Dublin. A common phrase heard in youth work is "*work with young people where they're at*". However, I believe an unacceptable percentage of youth work is not succeeding in its mission because it is failing to follow this principle.

Over the years, youth work in Dublin has become increasingly based out of centres. What I mean by this is that there is a building where the youth services are set up, and young people are required to attend the centres in order to access the services. Youth workers do not tend to leave the safety of their centres, and instead hope that young people will come to them.

Many young people do not want to come into these centres for many different reasons. When we invite young people into our spaces, it's always on our terms and of course we are the ones with a huge majority of the power. This creates a level of discomfort and distrust for young people who may already be distrustful of authority. In my experience, many young people tend to stop engaging with these centre-based services around the age of 14 - that's if they have engaged at all.

So, once young people disengage from centre-based services, how are we as youth workers supposed to reach them? The answer, I believe, is through street work.

Street work means youth workers going out into the community attempting to engage with young people where they actually are, rather than hoping they will take the initiative to come into centres. This is primarily what we do at Connect 4. Street work is a tool that we passionately believe is an

effective way of positively engaging with a large section of our young people. We have seen incredible results through street work at Connect 4.

To give you an example of one intervention - We identified a lot of young men in West Tallaght who would have been eligible for medical cards or social welfare but for many different reasons, including a lack of confidence or undiagnosed mental health issues, had not made applications. We put in a successful funding proposal for a mobile marquee to support these young people with filling out forms. We also provided tea and hot noodles which was much appreciated. This helped to start them on the path of financial independence and self-care, and introduce them to the many training opportunities available to them. This has been a huge success and has allowed some of the most disconnected young people in our society the chance to reconnect. This is just one small example of the street work we do, and I have provided more examples in our written submission.

Street work shifts power back to young people. Engaging with young people in their social spaces, within their rules, allows them more opportunity to be themselves. I firmly believe that by providing more resources for street work, we will see significantly better outcomes and engagement from youth work. While youth work has become a lot more educated and skilled as a sector, I believe we are not utilising these assets to their full potential unless we leave the safety of our centres and go out to engage with young people.

Through street work, we can genuinely meet young people where they're at, and build these crucial relationships with them. Through these relationships, young people can become empowered to make informed choices and further change their lives.

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