



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

Introduction

I'd like to thank the Committee for their invitation to make a submission. My name is Paul Perth, and I'm the team leader of Connect 4, a pilot project Managed by South Dublin County Partnership

Connect 4 is a pilot project which uses street work to engage young people aged 10-24 . There are four workers in the program. Our target group would be the most at risk and disconnected. Often, this means young people who are disconnected from community, family, and themselves due to drug use and trauma. The pilot is funded by SICAP (Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme) and South Dublin LCDC (Local Community Development Committee)

Before becoming team leader of Connect 4, I was involved in youth work for around 20 years. I started in the North Inner City with the Garda Diversion program, and later moved into mainstream youth work with the local drugs task force in Bluebell/Inchicore.

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 statement heard in youth work is "working with young people where they're at". However, a lot of youth work 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 in order to access the services. Youth workers do not tend to leave the relative safety of their centres, and instead hope that young people will come to them. This, we believe, goes against the principle of "working with young people where they're at".

Many young people do not want to come into these centres, or indeed may not have the skills or confidence to do so. When we invite young people into our spaces, there is an instant imbalance in power. It is our rules and regulations by which they must abide. We can ask young people to leave when we want. This creates a level of discomfort and distrust for young people who may already be distrustful of authority. Usually when we invite a young person into one of our centres, if they don't like what they see, aren't interested in what we're doing, or don't conform to our rules, there is an instant breakdown between the young person and the services. In my experience, young people tend to stop engaging with these centre-based services around the age of 14. Some, through no fault

of their own, find themselves unable to abide by the rules of the services, and so end up restricted from coming back to centres at all.

So, once young people decide not to attend a youth centre, or disengage from a centre-based service, 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 on the streets and 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 The Connect 4 Project. Street work, although not a new concept, is a tool that I believe passionately is the most effective way of positively engaging with a large section of our young people. Street work is an extremely effective way to build authentic, positive, healthy relationships with young people while using the tools of youth work.

Why is street work so important?

The difference between 'youth work' and 'street work' is largely about power. When we invite young people into our spaces, we are the ones with power. The power dynamic completely changes with street work. You are seeking to enter their space, and you have to ask "is it okay to come and talk to you". Engaging with young people in their social spaces, within their rules, allows them more opportunity to be themselves. It challenges youth workers to have the humility to request to enter the space of the young person.

For hard-to-reach young people, the relationship with the youth worker becomes very different in a street work context. We try to understand the code of the streets and use different language, while being sure to maintain our own personal and professional boundaries. We have found through this process, young people are more likely to open up, and be themselves. Through our street work, I have had young people disclose things to me that they've never spoken about before. We've identified the reason for this increased openness is because they are a lot more at ease in their own space, and this makes them more comfortable. By gaining this trust within the young person's space, we can then signpost and sometimes accompany them into relevant services. These interventions are highly unlikely to have taken place without the initial engagement and trust-building of street work.

I believe the focus of policy change regarding youth work should be to move resources towards street work. It is our duty to go out and engage with young people. Despite the fact that many young people do not want to come into centre-based services, I personally have never encountered a group of young people through street work that didn't engage in some way. I firmly believe that by finding more resources for street work, we will see significantly better outcomes and engagement from youth work. While youth workers have 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.

Challenges of street work

- **Safety:**

Of course, street work can have many challenges. We need to use all our skills as youth workers to maintain our professional boundaries. Our personal safety can sometimes be at risk, and we have codes to communicate with one another when a situation becomes dangerous. We have to try to pre-empt if drug dealing is going to be taking place, and we have to remove ourselves from the situation and come back later in order to avoid

accidentally colluding. It's important not to be seen by the community to be complicit in any illegal activity.

- **Training:**

There are barriers for youth workers when it comes to moving towards street work. These barriers can be overcome with training. Workers need to learn the skill of approaching young people, the skill of de-escalation, and how to make young people feel safe. You have to use humour, and always ask for permission. These skills need to be learned over time. I believe more resourcing should be provided to develop street work skills for youth workers across many organisations.

- **Funding:**

As a pilot program, we are currently uncertain of the future of our funding. We have applied for the Department of Health Prevention and Education Funding Program and are waiting anxiously to hear back. It is important that as we expand street work programs, they are reliably and adequately funded. Current funding structures and applications create tension and competition between community projects who would be able to make a much more positive impact by working together.

Examples of our work

Some of the examples of successful street work by Connect 4 are as follows:

- **Marquee in West Tallaght:**

We have received funding from Sláintecare for a marquee which we have strategically erected in parts of the West Tallaght area often deemed unsafe. We were aware of a lot of young men in the area, many of whom tell us they are taking drugs "just to feel normal." Some we suspected to have undiagnosed mental health issues such as ADHD, etc. There is a large cohort of young people we identified would have had trouble engaging with State services or would struggle to keep appointments. We set up the marquee in a place where these young people hang around, and provide support to fill out forms, such as social welfare, medical card, and housing forms. We also provide some hot tea and pot noodles. These spaces have been transformed from "anti-social" to pro-social spaces.

- **Funding for gym access:**

We received funding from SDCC Sports Partnership to get gym passes for young people to use when accompanied by us. Over the past eight months we have engaged, on average, 25-30 young men and women weekly who have benefitted from this program. The gym allows us to engage with young people where we can promote issues such as positive mental health and body image, build relationships, act as role models, and challenge young people's attitudes and prejudices when deemed necessary. This has allowed us to work with many young people and enhance relationships, while using our skills to identify any needs and work appropriately. For example, we had 4 young men from one of the most disadvantaged areas in Dublin and tried to engage them positively for a couple of months. Eventually they agreed to come to the gym with us. Their personal hygiene would have been at a very low standard. We encouraged them to use the shower and pool, and gave them hygiene packs. A few months later, those men are attending the gym 3 or 4 times a week, and 3 of them are now employed.

- **Irish Street Leagues:**

We invited the Irish Street Leagues to West Tallaght for the first time. On average, we continue to engage 25-30 young people of all abilities each Monday night, and get them involved with sport in a fun, healthy, and competitive safe space.

- **Shamrock Rovers, Dublin Bus, An Garda Síochána**

Following ongoing anti-social behaviour in the West Tallaght area, we took initiative to address issues around the postponement of Dublin Bus into some of our areas. After working with the local schools, we identified some of the young people engaging in this behaviour and organised a day trip for a competition with Shamrock Rovers and 72 young people from the area. Dublin Bus kindly provided a bus and we set up a route around West Tallaght where we had organised collection points. We had a community guard giving out medals. For some, this would have been the first time ever having a positive experience with the guards. This also helped young people to realise that without Dublin Bus we wouldn't have got that experience, so this in turn created appreciation for bus services. This has also led to a Friday night league for 12-15 year olds where we average 60 plus young people.

Conclusion

Through youth work, many young people gain positive life experiences, learn so much through informal education, and are empowered to be their best selves.

Unfortunately, there is a huge cohort of young people who will not be afforded these opportunities and will not have the chance to find a safe space or a positive role model within their community. The current model of mainly centre-based youth services means that many young people are not being reached by youth work.

There are many ways to reach young people, just as there are many different needs of young people. All young people have a story, and are just looking for the right circumstances, and someone they can trust to tell it to. 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 further change their lives.

Sustained funding for more long-term street work projects throughout Dublin, including training for youth workers, could deliver very positive results for the most disengaged young people in extremely disadvantaged communities.

<https://twitter.com/Connect4Project>



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