'*It was the first step of so many good things*'

Boxing Clever Ballymun: Facilitating Supportive Opportunities and Environments

(2012-2024)

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Boxing Clever Ballymun is a 20-week integrated fitness and education substance-use rehabilitation programme that focuses on elements of physical, social, educational and community capital that supports those currently or historically engaging in problematic substance use. Boxing Clever originated in Ballymun in 2012, and since then it has been incorporated into treatment and rehabilitation services or initiatives throughout Ireland. Since its inception, 150 participants have engaged with the programme. Ballymun Youth Action Project (BYAP) manages and co-ordinates Boxing Clever Ballymun in collaboration with local services and supports.

The aim of the current research was to explore the role and contribution of the Boxing Clever Programme in terms of facilitating supportive progression opportunities and environments at a participant and community level (2012-2024). These research aims were achieved using a qualitative methodology. Nine in-person or online focus group interviews were conducted with 32 key stakeholders during May-November 2024. More specifically, this research sought to:

- Determine the extent to which participants perceive Boxing Clever as making a difference in their lives,
- Highlight factors that may have complemented or restricted the level of programme impact and outcomes over time,
- Explore how relational connections can drive initiatives like Boxing Clever in Ballymun and other communities,
- Present opportunities for further capacity building or development arising from the collective impact of Boxing Clever participants and graduates locally,
- Illustrate how Boxing Clever fits into the broader recovery movement and within an integrated approach to responding to drug and alcohol use.

The findings in this study illustrate that Boxing Clever contributed to the cultivation of personal, social and community capital, with participants describing a host of internal and external capacities that contributed to their wellbeing, quality of life, and social inclusion. This research further describes how intertwined each component of personal, social and community capital is and the findings shine a light on these interactions, especially the role of community capital in developing personal capital. Of interest, the findings are suggestive of an added benefit of the impact of the programme for those who took part while living in the Ballymun Community. This was especially pronounced in how community capital influenced personal capital.

Boxing Clever Ballymun is structured in such a way as to allow participants access community resources and, in doing so, participants began to cultivate new emerging identities, develop self-regard, and view themselves more positively connected to the community in general and, in some cases, to the recovery community specifically. Moreover, past participants and peer mentors described Boxing Clever as a critical factor for progressing into further training, education and employment.

Peer mentors were identified across focus groups as integral to Ballymun Boxing Clever. Peer mentors provide participants with hope that they can complete the programme, that they can attain recovery, and provide supports from an experiential perspective which are valued by participants and practitioners. Peers described how the mentoring role helped them to develop various skills, knowledge and work experience to aid their own progression. However, this was often framed in terms of it being a difficult learning process, with several challenges faced by peer mentors related to role preparedness, role ambiguity, and the need for more formalised support structures.

As Boxing Clever has evolved and been disseminated into other communities nationally and also has noted international interest, the intervention has broadly maintained 'fidelity' to the initial features and characteristics of the programme first implemented in Ballymun. However, as is the case with knowledge transfer and the uptake of evidence-informed practices, some minor adaptations have been made to Boxing Clever to fit different contexts and service provision. The National Network group emerged as an important structure that can support other communities and services seeking to implement Boxing Clever, and it can also act as a knowledge hub to promote new adaptations and research relating to Boxing Clever. Based on the findings from this research, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen existing supports for peer mentors in areas such as a formal introduction to participants; and ongoing supervision to support personal and professional development.

2. Examine potential fundings streams for a part time co-ordinator and peer mentor in Ballymun Boxing Clever.

3. Consideration to be given to formal team meetings in Ballymun Boxing Clever that include peer mentors.

4. Strengthen existing supports provided to Ballymun Boxing Clever participants for literacy issues.

5. Consider providing additional/continuing supports for participants post-Ballymun Boxing Clever. This can be linkage to other services, and/or an aftercare group.

6. To evidence the ongoing benefit of Ballymun Boxing Clever, questionnaires with strong psychometric properties should be utilised as outcome metrics. An assessment should be made regarding the benefit of using a Recovery Capital questionnaire as a practice-based evidence-outcome metric.

7. Develop a strategy for communicating about Boxing Clever nationally. The National Network is ideally placed to lead on this. This strategy can assess the potential benefit of developing protocols and training based on the specific ingredients of Boxing Clever to support other communities seeking to implement the programme.

8. Policy makers and commissioning bodies may wish to consider these findings and the implications for funding Boxing Clever as an evidence-informed national substance use intervention. Existing treatment and rehabilitation structures can be utilised to support implementation if ringfenced funding is made available. The Boxing Clever Programme model offers very promising results as a progression pathway and possibilities for further resourcing and development nationally (in line with recommendation (32) of the Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use, 2024:17).

Background & Context

The community of Ballymun has a long history of providing innovative community research to respond to substance use (e.g. Loughran & McCann, 2006a; 2006b; Morton, O'Reilly, & O'Brien, 2015; O'Brien & Foley, 2017; O'Reilly & Mac Cionnaith, 2019). It has been nine years since the first evaluation of Boxing Clever in Ballymun was conducted (Morton, O'Reilly, & O'Brien, 2015). Since then, the policy and treatment landscape has changed with several factors of importance emerging. Firstly, in the subsequent years, Ireland's national policy response has evolved to have more of a focus on a health-led approach to substance use (Department of Health, 2017). Secondly, in addition to this comparatively progressive policy response, drug use patterns and prevalence have changed (Lynch, Condron, Lyons, & Carew, 2023; O'Neill, Lyons, & Carew, 2023), as have treatment initiations (Kelleher, Condron & Lyons, 2022; Lynch, Condron, Lyons, & Carew, 2024).

Thirdly, existing treatment and rehabilitation paradigms have been critiqued in an Irish context (Ivers, Larkan, & Barry, 2018; Mayock, Butler, & Hoey, 2018; Mayock & Butler, 2022; Gorman, 2020), and international research has further converged on the importance of recovery capital and its role in recovery communities (Best & de Alwis 2017; Best & Ivers, 2022; Patton, Best, & Brown, 2022). Finally, since the last Boxing Clever report, the Recovery Academy of Ireland has been established (Lynn, 2017), and Recovery Month is making recovery more visible in communities. It is within this policy and practice backdrop that the current research seeks to explore the contribution of the Boxing Clever programme at a participant and community level from the period 2012-2024.

The Boxing Clever Programme

Boxing Clever is 'a twenty week integrated educational, substance use recovery and fitness programme' that focuses on elements of physical, social, educational and community capital that supports those recovering from problematic substance use (Morton et al., 2015:8). Boxing Clever aims to build more resilient identities, whilst encouraging physical fitness, educational engagement and a reduction in risky and harmful behaviours. Boxing Clever was developed through a collaboration between Ballymun Youth Action Project and the Rehabilitation Integration Service of the Health Service Executive. Supports were further developed through a steering group composed of inter-agency practitioners.

Ballymun Youth Action Project (BYAP) manages and co-ordinates the Boxing Clever Programme in Ballymun in collaboration with local services and supports. The Boxing Clever programme is based within the community and uses an inter-agency and peer mentor approach. Now in its 10th cycle, participants attend for 12 hours over five days each week, with a mix of educational modules, fitness classes and recovery focussed sessions.

Since its inception in 2012, 150 participants have engaged with Boxing Clever Ballymun. The programme has undergone evaluation (Morton et al., 2015; Morton, O'Brien, & O'Reilly, 2019), and been disseminated into other communities across Ireland (e.g., Brennan & Wright, 2024). Programme data available highlights positive retention with almost three in four of participants who commence the Programme having successfully completed. Participants are provided with support and follow-up should they withdraw from the programme and are also given the option of engaging in a future programme. Overall, higher numbers of men have engaged in the Programme, however some programmes have illustrated equal numbers of men and women participating.

Participants study for two QQI National Framework of Qualifications awards in Community Addiction Studies (Level 5), and Health-Related Fitness (Level 4), in addition to physical training: boxing skills and tailored fitness training. Boxing skills and fitness training is delivered in the Dublin City Council (DCC) gym. The nature of the programme is innovative, due to its open and flexible criteria that participants can apply to take part regardless of their substance use status, once they can meet the other commitments of Boxing Clever. Based on individual assessment, Ballymun Boxing Clever offers tailored recovery processes, if desired, with regards to recovery initiation, addiction recovery or recovery rehabilitation.

As part of the programme, participants attend key working supports consistent with the National Rehabilitation Framework (Doyle & Ivanovicz, 2010). This framework describes service provision to consist of assessment, care planning and psychosocial interventions through an inter-agency approach. The rationale for an inter-agency approach stems from the understanding that service users may present with diverse needs, including treatment, education, vocational training, employment support, and accommodation, and that no single agency can cater for all possible needs (Doyle & Ivanovicz, 2010; Ivers & Barry, 2018). As mentioned previously, Boxing Clever is run through an inter-agency collaboration in the community which utilises and draws on resources within the Ballymun community.

Research Aims & Objectives

As noted previously, Boxing Clever has been evaluated and disseminated into other community contexts. However, as the research, policy and intervention landscape evolve, and other communities implement Boxing Clever, this presents ideal circumstances to reflect on the evolution of the programme since its inception, its current relevance, and where Boxing Clever sits within the overall response to substance use locally and within Ireland. These research aims will be achieved through the following objectives:

1. To determine the extent to which participants perceive Boxing Clever as making a difference in their lives,
2. To highlight factors that may have complemented or restricted the level of programme impact and outcomes over time,
3. To explore how relational connections can drive initiatives like Boxing Clever in Ballymun and other communities,
4. To present opportunities for further capacity building or development arising from the collective impact of Boxing Clever participants and graduates locally,
5. To illustrate how Boxing Clever fits into the broader recovery movement and within an integrated approach to responding to drug and alcohol use.

Conclusion

This section of the report has provided the background and context to this evaluation of Boxing Clever, while also highlighting the composition of the programme. In addition, the research aims and objectives have been presented, along with the specific questions guiding this research. In the next section of this report, relevant literature is discussed and analysed, including previous Boxing Clever research, literature on evidence-informed substance use and recovery, and the national policy context in Ireland.

Review of Relevant Literature

In this section of the report the historical policy context of substance use in Ireland is briefly considered. This is followed by an examination of treatment data collated at a national level, and a discussion of various evidence-informed approaches to treatment and recovery from problematic substance use. An overview of previous research on Boxing Clever is presented, exploring outcomes associated with this programme. Finally, implementation factors, as they relate to Boxing Clever in other communities, are outlined.

Policy Context

Ireland's national policy on drug and alcohol use has evolved over the last several decades. Some of the first policy responses in Ireland sought to provide treatment based on an abstinence approach, embedded in the medical model (Butler, 2002, 2011). However, the policy landscape evolved to be inclusive of harm reduction interventions delivered within the community throughout the 1980s which, according to O'Gorman (1998) was a result of the spread of HIV within the intravenous drug-using community. Of course, neither of these responses consider the role of socio-economic factors in the initiation or maintenance of substance use (Murphy, 1996; O'Gorman, 2004). Policy began to shift perhaps, in part, due to the grassroots community development movement in the mid-1990s. As groups in marginalised and socially excluded communities mobilised, the Ministerial Task Force on Measures to Reduce the Demand for Drugs (1996) concluded that poverty is a causal factor in substance use.

As part of the response to the substance use issue, Local Drug Task Forces were established across marginalised communities where substance use was identified as problematic. The Local Drug Task Forces are composed of members of the public, the community, voluntary and statutory sectors and form an innovative inter-agency response to community substance use (O'Gorman, 2020). Since the establishment of the Local Drug Task Forces, Regional Drug Task Forces have been developed to reach geographical areas not covered by Local Task Forces. In addition, in 2009 the government merged the alcohol strategy with the National Drug Strategy 2009-2016 and, later, the Local and Regional Drug Task Forces added alcohol to their title and remit.

Morton et al. (2015) evaluated Boxing Clever towards the final years of the life of the National Drugs Strategy 2009-2016 (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2009). Since then, a new iteration of Irish substance use policy has been adopted. Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery (2017-2025) sets out, for the first time in a policy context, a commitment to a health-led approach to substance use in Ireland (Department of Health, 2017). Indeed, a move towards a health-led approach to substance use is consistent with the cross-Government adoption of the Healthy Ireland Framework (2013-2025) (Department of Health, 2013). A further change from the last Boxing Clever report is witnessed in the national prevalence of drug and alcohol use in Ireland (Condron et al., 2023; Lynch et al., 2024; O'Neill et al., 2024), and patterns of substance use in Ballymun specifically (O'Reilly & Mac Cionnaith, 2019).

Substance Use Prevalence and Treatment

The statistics on substance use treatment available during the last Boxing Clever research were from 2005-2010, with opiates recorded as the most common treatment presentation (Bellerose, Carew, & Lyons, 2010). In comparison, the most recent statistics available for this research from the National Drug Reporting System (Lynch et al., 2024), illustrate the highest annual number recorded to date (13,104) for cases of problematic drug use, with cocaine the most common drug reported in 2023 at 37.6%. In addition to drug treatment episodes, 7,421 cases were treated for problem alcohol use in 2022 (Condron et al., 2023). These statistics demonstrate the entrenched problematic relationship Ireland has with alcohol and substance use and highlights the need for innovative and evidence-informed psychosocial approaches such as Boxing Clever.

Evidence- Based Interventions

Debates about treatment and rehabilitation responses are not new in the literature, and are often driven by ideological imperatives, constituting a dichotomy between harm reduction and abstinence (Galanter, 2018; Olsen & Sharfstein, 2014). As noted previously, historically, Ireland's main response to substance use was based on abstinence treatment models (Butler, 2002). Of course, abstinence, as one method of promoting recovery, is important, and has an evidence base in the international (Beaulieu, Tremblay, Baudry, Pearson, & Bertrand, 2021) and Irish literature (Babineua & Harris, 2015). However, abstinence is not always the correct approach for a person at a given time, and harm reduction may be more appropriate and beneficial for some people, some of the time.

While harm reduction remains an important evidence-based component of treatment (Deschamps et al., 2021), some of the treatment systems that it is delivered in have been critiqued within an Irish context as often lacking a recovery and human rights orientation (Healy, Goodwin & Kelly, 2022; Keane, McAleenan, & Barry, 2014; Mayock et al., 2018). For example, Mayock et al. (2018) found that as many as half of the individuals in their study who were receiving Methadone Maintenance Treatment (MMT) did not avail of psychosocial supports, and individuals often felt stigmatised and marginalised within the treatment system. While some individuals in their study did attend for counselling, and there is an evidence base for psychosocial interventions (see Bates et al., 2017), symptom amelioration is often the criteria used to measure success. While an important component of treatment for some, medical and psychological approaches alone will not improve many of the life circumstances (poverty/social exclusion) in which substance use is often rooted (Murphy, 1996). Consequently, a reorientation towards more recovery-based approaches has been called for (Keane, McAleenan, & Barry, 2014).

Recovery Capital

Since the last Ballymun Boxing Clever evaluation, the recovery capital concept (Granfield & Cloud, 1999, 2001) has gathered further pace in Ireland. Recovery capital was introduced to the literature as a way of explaining 'natural recovery', that is, an explanation of how individuals recovered from substance use without using professional or peer-based supports. This highlights the many pathways that there are to recovery (Sheedy & Whitter, 2009). Other research supports the recovery capital concept of natural recovery; for example, in their study, Kelly, Bergman, Hoeppner, Vilsaint, and White (2017) found that 46% of people recovered without using supports of any kind.

Best and Laudet (2010) describe recovery capital as consisting of three elements: personal recovery capital, social recovery capital, and community recovery capital. Personal recovery capital refers to resources possessed by individuals that aid in their recovery journey. These resources include personal attributes and abilities such as specific skills and competencies, the level of dependency severity, motivation for change, as well as physical factors like health and financial stability (Best & Laudet, 2010; Bunaciu et al., 2023). Social recovery capital encompasses the social connections of an individual, and the degree to which they receive support and acceptance from these connections, particularly within friendships.

Community recovery capital pertains to the level of assistance accessible within the broader community, encompassing aspects like housing, job opportunities, educational programmes, as well as access to treatment and support groups for self-help (Best & Laudet, 2010; Laudet & White, 2008). Evidence suggests the presence of a "social contagion" effect in communities regarding recovery, which may influence the transmission of hope and the belief in recovery even among those not yet committed to abstinence. Additionally, this visible recovery may enhance community cohesion, challenge stigmatization, and reduce the exclusion of individuals in recovery populations (Best & de Alwis, 2017).

In Ireland, community drug projects have a long history and evidence base of providing supports to those experiencing substance use issues (O'Gorman, 2020). Moreover, the community and voluntary sectors delivering these supports are named as key partners in the national drug and alcohol strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery (Department of Health, 2017). Community drug projects can act as key enablers to assist individuals build recovery capital. For example, Community Employment rehabilitation schemes operating in the community through an educational, psychosocial and inter-agency approach can support the development of recovery capital. It is within this wider context that the present Boxing Clever research is situated.

Boxing Clever Evidence Base

An outline of the Boxing Clever programme structure and composition has been provided in the previous section of this report. Thus, at this point, an overview of the evidence base for the programme is considered. Several studies on the Boxing Clever programme have been conducted since its inception (Brennan, 2024; Brennan & Wright, 2024; Morton, O'Reilly, & O'Brien, 2015, 2016; Morton, O'Brien, & O'Reilly, 2018), though it must be noted that these studies utilised two datasets. Notwithstanding this, the Boxing Clever programme has demonstrated a host of outcomes for participants.

Morton, O'Reilly, and O'Brien (2016) argue that the Boxing Clever programme evaluated in their research builds recovery capital. Specifically, the findings suggest that personal recovery capital was developed through education, wellbeing, and physical fitness. These findings are supported in the extant literature. For example, in a systematic review and meta-analysis of exercise and its relationship to substance use. Wang, Li, and Zhou (2014) found that physical exercise reduced substance use severity and improved psychosocial outcomes. Physical fitness can aid

individuals in developing personal capital (Pareja-Galeano et al., 2023). Similarly, education has been identified as a key component of personal recovery capital (Keane, 2011).

Boxing Clever further offered participants an opportunity to build social capital which was developed through a renewed reflection and understanding of relationships with friends and family (Morton, O'Reilly, and O'Brien, 2016). Moreover, Boxing Clever assisted participants in developing alternative identities that were not based on the idea of being an 'addict', but that of an emerging 'boxer' identity (Morton, O'Brien & O'Reilly, 2018). The programme also helped develop an awareness of the impact of drug use and related lifestyles on the community (Morton, O'Reilly, and O'Brien, 2015) and supported participants to engage with the community with a new worldview and value base (Morton, O'Reilly & O'Brien, 2015).

The role of peer mentors emerged as an important component of the Boxing Clever programme. Mentors in previous Boxing Clever research were experienced as essential to the programme and as role models illustrating examples of progression into further education, and community integration (Morton, O'Reilly, & O'Brien, 2016). Again, this speaks to the importance of the role of social contagion in recovery (Keane, McAleenan, & Barry, 2014). More broadly, in the Irish context, Peer Support Work (PSW) is emerging as an important component to substance use treatment. However, while research is still in an early phase it is suggested that Peer Support Workers have various needs, such as role preparedness, role clarity, training and supervision (Mahon & Sharek, 2023; Wright & Mahon, 2024).

In their previous research, Morton, O'Reilly, and O'Brien (2015) make a strong case for physical and educational components to substance use recovery. Since then, Boxing Clever has been implemented in various services across Ireland. Furthermore, there is now a second evaluation of Boxing Clever conducted in Cork (Brennan, 2024; Brennan & Wright, 2024). The findings from this formative evaluation reflect many of those from the original Ballymun research - participants described improvements in quality of life, the development of recovery capital, and the importance of peer support. The evaluation further described adaptations made to the programme to fit the context of its implementation.

Implementation Science (IS), the study of methods and strategies to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and evidence-informed practices into regular use by practitioners and policymakers, aims to understand the behaviour of professionals, organizations, and systems to identify factors that can influence the successful implementation of innovations or best practices in real-world settings (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). As is

often the case with the implementation of evidence-informed practices, adaptations may need to be made to programmes due to contextual factors (Naoom et al., 2005). However, when adaptations are being made to evidence-informed interventions, it is essential to maintain the specific/active ingredients thought to be core components (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009). For instance, Brennan (2024) reports changes to the Cork Boxing Clever programme duration, with the programme being run over 30 weeks, as opposed to 20 weeks in Ballymun, while the weekly hours participants attend were set at seven, in contrast to twelve contact hours in Ballymun.

Conclusion

Responding to problematic drug and alcohol use is a complex endeavour and necessitates a multi-dimensional approach. Ireland's main policy response is set out in its national drug and alcohol strategy (Department of Health, 2017). Despite the enactment of a national policy response, substance use remains an ongoing and entrenched health concern; indeed, treatment initiations are among the highest ever recorded. While there are various psychosocial and medical responses situated within an evidence base, Boxing Clever has emerged as an innovative and integrated educational and fitness response that has been shown to support individuals build social, personal and community capital. As Boxing Clever is further disseminated across Ireland, an opportunity presents itself not just to examine how the programme has evolved in Ballymun, but also in other jurisdictions. Thus, in the next part of this report, the methodology used to investigate how Boxing Clever has evolved, and the outcomes associated with the programme, are discussed.

Methodology

A qualitative, descriptive approach informed the study design (Bryman, 2015). This design was utilised to ground the findings in the language of the participants (Richie & Lewis, 2003), while also staying in close proximity to the surface of the phenomena. A Research Advisory Group (RAG) composed of key community and programme stakeholders helped guide the study research aims and objectives, design the questions to be asked during the fieldwork, reviewed draft themes and acted as gatekeepers for accessing research participants.

SAMPLE

A nonprobability, purposive sample was employed to access key stakeholders (Campbell et al., 2020). The sample (N=32) consisted of former participants, peer mentors, practitioners and members of the Boxing Clever National Network who were willing to take part in the research. The rationale for the purposive sampling method is based on the unique characteristics and experiences of Boxing Clever that the different type of participants will have.

Participants were accessed using the following contact methods: Members of the Research Advisory Group circulated the Invitation Leaflet & Informed Consent Boxing Clever research form to key stakeholders, based on prior knowledge of them taking part in previous Boxing Clever programmes as participants, practitioners, peer mentors or members of the National Network; and, in addition, a call to participate was made on social media platforms to reach former participants of the programme, or service providers, who are familiar with people who may have participated previously in Boxing Clever. Community promotion of the research was also undertaken throughout various locations locally.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected through in-person and online focus group (N=9) interviews (Luke & Goodrich, 2019). A semi-structured interview schedule for each cohort, participants, peer mentors, practitioners, and network members were developed to guide the focus group questions, with follow-up questions asked based on responses from the group. Focus groups were composed of between 2-8 participants and lasted approximately 1-2 hours.

DATA ANALYSIS

In-depth, qualitative focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to NVivo 12 software for analysis. Content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2017) was used to develop codes and themes. Specifically, inductive themes were developed from focus group data highlighting the experience of key stakeholders. The researcher read and re-read transcripts to become familiar with the data and then conducted a line-by-line open coding of transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data were then subjected to axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Key words, sentences and chunks of text related to the research aims and objectives were coded. Codes were then merged to develop more abstract themes that described the text, with constant comparisons being made between codes and themes to ensure the data was an accurate fit. Themes were further evaluated by the Research Advisory Group, which included three members who also took part in focus group interviews. Thus, member-checking contributed to the trustworthiness, validity and credibility of the findings in this research (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

Four key themes emerged from the data analysis as presented below.
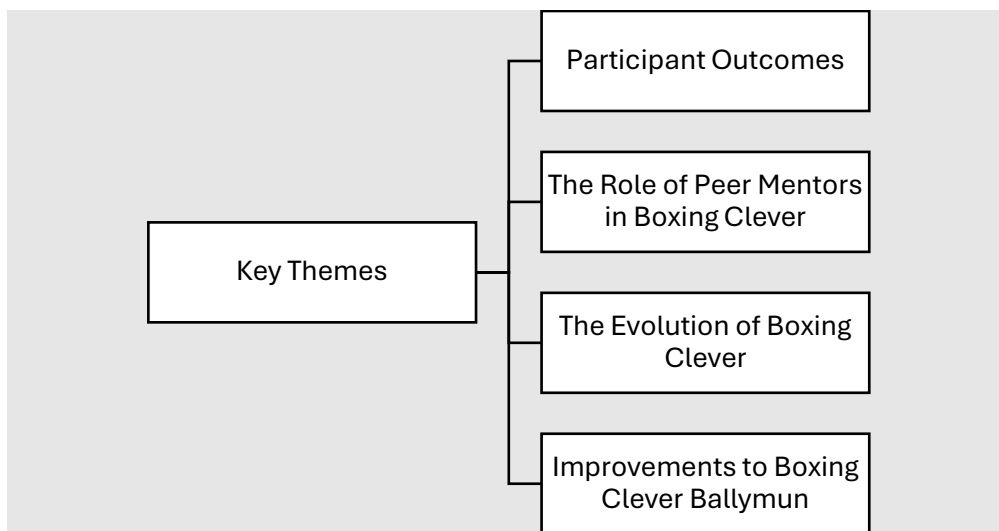
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was granted from the Ballymun Youth Action Project's Research Ethics committee. Participants were provided with an Invitation Leaflet & Informed Consent Boxing Clever research form (Appendix II) outlining the rationale for the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw data, the scope of confidentiality, and how data would be stored and managed. Participants were provided with an opportunity to ask questions and to seek clarification on any aspects of the research that they wanted more information about. The researcher and participants both signed the form to say that they understood and agreed to take part in the research. The location for the interviews took place in a community venue in Ballymun. Boxing Clever programme items such as gloves and tracksuits worn over the different years were present to support recollection. Participants were offered an opportunity to de-brief post-interview, or should they feel the need, during the interviews if they became upset. A designated and qualified professional was onsite to deliver these supports.

Conclusion

This section of the report has outlined the methodological design informing this research. A qualitative, descriptive approach underpinned the research design, consisting of focus groups that were subject to content analysis to develop themes related to the aims and objectives of the research. This research sought to examine how Boxing Clever Ballymun facilitated the building of supportive progression opportunities and environments since its inception in Ballymun and, more broadly, in Ireland. The outcomes associated with the programme from key stakeholders' perspectives will be explored, in addition to where Boxing Clever fits within the recovery movement in Ballymun.

Section 4 Findings

Findings

This section of the report presents the findings from the primary research. Findings are derived from focus group interviews and grounded in a qualitative, descriptive approach. Four themes were extracted from the data and, together, they illustrate that Boxing Clever is an evidence-informed programme valued by all stakeholders. The data in this theme describes how Boxing Clever helped former participants to cultivate personal, social and community capital.

THEME 1: PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

> "I find a knock-on effect for my family life. My daughter was young, she started school when I started Boxing Clever, and we started to learn to spell together".

The data in this theme reports on participant outcomes from engaging with Boxing Clever. The findings illustrate that participants developed a host of internal and external resources, throughout and after their engagement with the programme, and that for many past participants the experience was life changing. For reporting on these outcomes, the experiences of participants are described using personal, social and community capital. The data in this theme describes how inter-twined each component is; this was especially pronounced in how community capital influenced the development of personal capital, and this was most pronounced for those living in the Ballymun community.

Personal Capital

For this analysis, personal capital is divided into two categories, *soft* and *hard* outcomes. The data to emerge across all focus groups identified that the Boxing Clever programme contributed to a range of hard and soft outcomes for participants across the years 2012-2024. Soft outcomes refer to a host of physical, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills linked to personal development, while hard outcomes are described in terms of course completion and progression into education and employment.

In many cases, participants in the focus groups further identified how the development of soft skills were essential in the journey towards the attainment of hard skills:

> "We could talk all day about the benefits. I think it was the first step of so many good things, I couldn't do anything else without it" (Focus Group Participant).

Soft Outcomes

Reflecting on the development of intrapersonal skills this tutor highlights what could be termed the 'hidden curriculum' that Boxing Clever cultivates:

> "*I certainly found with participants that the confidence levels in people to talk really increases ... I think the health-related fitness compliments and, vice versa, where there's a lot of group work, a lot of feeding back, they are developing their capacity for public speaking as well without even realizing it sometimes. I was absolutely blown away by the confidence...*" (Focus Group Practitioner).

Similarly, this past participant highlights how their experience of the programme and public speaking developed in a safe environment: "*It brings out a lot of confidence in you as well; you don't have to speak if you don't want to speak, but I think the more you speak, you feel better in yourself*" (Focus Group Participant).

Reflecting on how engaging in the programme helped their confidence this participant states:

> "*I started to feel comfortable around the area because I hadn't for a long time, when you're in active addiction, for me anyway, I spent most of the time hiding, isolating, hoping people didn't see me, and then, it was different. I was holding my head up saying hello to people*" (Focus Group Participant).

Feelings of self-worth emerged as important benefits of the programme. Participants identified how the programme's structure helped them to cultivate positive feelings about themselves: "*self-worth, that hits the nail on the head*" (Focus Group Participant). Self-worth was cultivated in many ways, with physical fitness an important component. Describing the benefits of the physical fitness, this participant reflects:

> "*You could see the transformation after a couple of weeks; that meant a lot to me - you could see the results, rather than feel them*" (Focus Group Participant).

This positive self-regard was further enhanced through the fostering of an emerging identity as an alternative to 'the addict'. Speaking about the role of the Boxing Clever uniform in fostering this identity shift, this practitioner states:

"*Boxing Clever did give those people, when they're wearing their hoodies and their tracksuit with that sense of identity, of being able to, or working towards, creating or constructing this different identity that wasn't how they were typically known in the community*" (Focus Group Practitioner).

Similarly, this participant speaks about the role that the uniform has on helping to cultivate an emerging identity and positive self-regard:

"*Boxing Clever over the years built a bit of a reputation for itself, you wear the jacket with pride, there was a bit of credibility in Ballymun when you done it, especially for someone like ourselves that's in substance abuse, you started something, then you finished it and passed it with pride*" (Focus Group Participant).

The structure of the Boxing Clever programme, and its use of community resources to implement the programme meant that participants were provided with access to services that they may not have previously used. This Tutor explores how accessing these services may have contributed to the cultivating of a different view of self, supporting the emerging identity:

"*Coming in here to sit on the third floor, the same way as other people are coming in, to do their Level 5, Level 6 or Level 7, you're no different. We go down to DCU in the Community doing the same things there as anybody else who's just going into the gym. I think it helps to shift people's mindset in how they view themselves*" (Focus Group Practitioner).

These former participants reflect on how the supportive nature of Boxing Clever helped them to connect with education and begin to view the education process from a different perspective. The programme helped participants to view themselves in a new way and opened up opportunities to explore other educational paths, through the normalisation of the educational process:

"*I love learning, but didn't realise 'til I went into Boxing Clever and I said, "maybe I like this", and when I started getting good marks it gave me a bit more confidence*" (Focus Group Participant).

Another participant also noted the change in relation to their literacy levels as a result of the Programme:

> "*I couldn't read and write when I went in. I knew the answers but couldn't put pen to paper; they helped me. I didn't like it first; then I fell in love with it*" (Focus Group Participant).

Similarly, the educational process helped participants develop awareness and insight into the dynamics of addiction, the processes involved, and how addiction impacted the individual, their families and the community. While this was sometimes a painful experience for participants, it was described as a cathartic process in this instance:

> "*I did pull* [names person] *aside for support because I was struggling, you know, and I realised what I put my family through*" (Focus Group Participant).

The educational content helped cultivate personal capital in several ways. Participants found the content rewarding and insightful, helping them to build an awareness of their family dynamic;

> "*It's just like when they were explaining different roles that kids take in families, and I could see myself; that's what was great*" (Focus Group Participant).

The knowledge gained on the programme was described as helping participants to change the way they viewed self-care, and this participant describes how the learning is still part of their daily routine many years after completing Boxing Clever;

> "*We had nutrition, as well, which was hugely interesting...it made me more interested in the physical end of it, the eating habits stuck, I'm still very good with what I'm eating now*" (Focus Group Participant).

Hard Outcomes

Many participants in the focus groups spoke about the importance of Boxing Clever in helping them to progress into further education and employment. Participants spoke about how the nature of the programme provided the correct types of supports to empower participants to progress:

> "*I started third level college in 1998. I did this course in 2013; my college graduation in 2018 took me 20 years to get that degree. I wouldn't have got it without this* [Boxing Clever] *- it gave me the tools*" (Focus Group Participant).

This participant makes comparisons between Boxing Clever and previous education, noting that the tailored supports they received helped them ultimately progress onto further education and employment:

> "*I went to college to do Level 5 Social Studies and then they gave us assignments. I didn't know how to do that because of dyslexia; I just came here, and they supported me with it. I did the addiction Level 5, I went onto Level 7 and I done the fitness, and I'm working in both areas*" (Focus Group Participant).

The progression by participants is noted by this practitioner, who identified successful outcomes across the last several iterations of Boxing Clever:

> "*I just see huge motivation in people, and I've seen that over the last couple of programmes as well, people moving onto third level, people going back into employment, people moving into further education*" (Focus Group Practitioner).

The following two participants discuss the importance of Boxing Clever as a foundation in their progression into higher education. Boxing Clever provided the supports and progression pathway:

> "*It gave me the skills to get onto the Trinity College Access course, and I'm now doing a degree in Trinity College* (Focus Group Participant).

> "*I did a few more courses after that and last year I graduated with a Masters in Psychotherapy. I still see this (Boxing Clever) as my most important one* (Focus Group Participant).

While not all participants subsequentially moved onto further education, or training and employment, engaging with the Boxing Clever programme, gaining skills, learning structure, accountability and receiving certificates is considered a hugely valuable outcome for many participants:

> "*I think those benefits of finishing a program with a Level 4/5 QQI qualification under your belt, when you maybe haven't done anything like this before, gives them that confidence to say maybe I can go on and do something else because nobody handed me this certificate…" (Focus Group Practitioner).*

Certificates Awarded to Boxing Clever Participants

The following service data presents statistics on certified Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) training completed by participants since Boxing Clever inception (2012-2024). The data reports on two awards, Community Addiction Studies level 5, and Health Related Fitness level 4. There was a total of 202, (M=20.2) QQI certificates awarded to students since Boxing Clever began. As not all participants who have completed the programme gained certification the data should not be viewed as the total number of Boxing Clever graduates. Analysis should also consider that during the years 2020-2021 (COVID-19) there was no intake of students.

Chart 1 illustrates the numbers of students broken out by each year Boxing Clever was delivered. The total number of participants certified in Community Addiction Studies to date is 96 (M= 9.6).

Chart 1: QQI Level 5 Community Addiction Studies

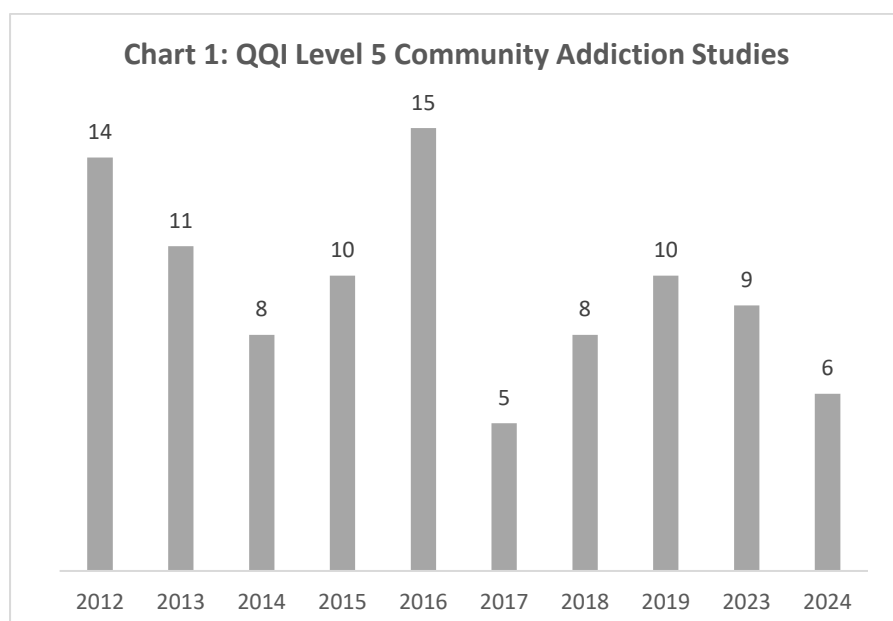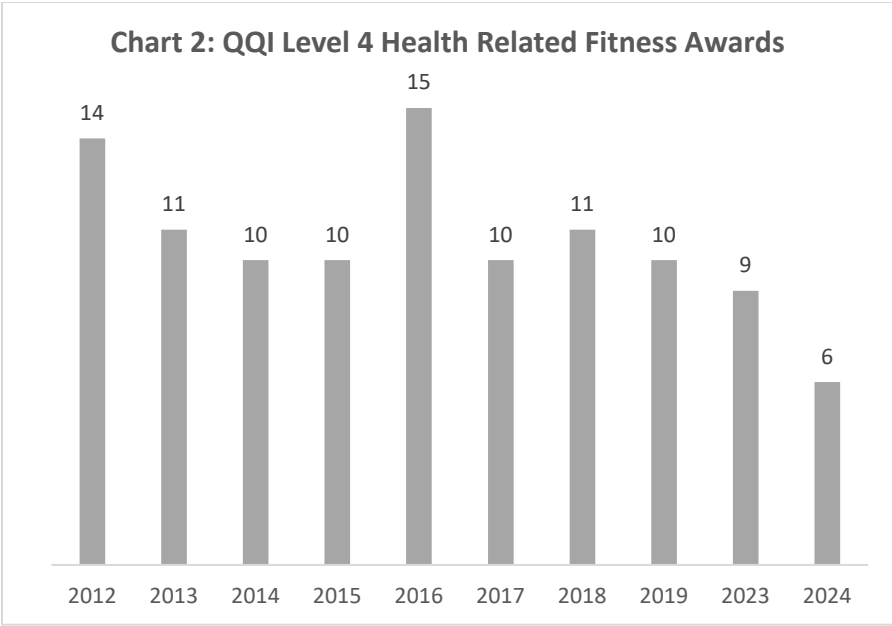| Year	Number
2012	14
2013	11
2014	8
2015	10
2016	15
2017	5
2018	8
2019	10
2023	9
2024	6

Chart 2 illustrates the number of students achieving certification in Health-Related Fitness. A total of 106 (M=10.6) participants completed this qualification and were certified. One possible reason for the disparity in numbers completing each qualification could be that the Health-Related Fitness award is at a lower level than the Community Addiction Studies.

Chart 2: QQI Level 4 Health Related Fitness Awards

Year	Value
2012	14
2013	11
2014	10
2015	10
2016	15
2017	10
2018	11
2019	10
2023	9
2024	6

Social Capital

The data to emerge describes the role of Boxing Clever in assisting participants to develop social capital: "*It got me out from isolating.*" Participants described a range of ways that social capital was developed, and the benefits that this provided them with. The data elucidated that participants on the various Boxing Clever programmes found the group experience to be supportive and characterised by cohesiveness and teamwork:

> "What *I remember strongly was the sense of welcoming from the class; I was blown away with how welcome I felt... I was part of a group that I felt like I was part of, for years*" (Focus Group Participant).

This sense of welcoming and cohesiveness allowed participants to develop relationships conducive to working as a group and in developing teamwork skills:

> "*We were always a team; when I knew things, I passed it on; when I struggled, people helped me*" (Focus Group Participant).

Participants spoke about the benefits of engaging with Boxing Clever and "*a knock-on effect for my family life*". Boxing Clever helped members to cultivate their capacity to engage with their family in new ways. These two participants described how making changes to their lives helped them develop their parenting capacity:

> "*My daughter was young; she started school when I started Boxing Clever, and we started to learn to spell together*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

"I had a child as well, and I had more energy for them to run around; I was getting out and doing things that before I couldn't do" (Focus Group Participant).

Developing relationships with new people is often described as essential for those seeking to make changes to their substance use status. Several participants reflected on how Boxing Clever helped them to develop relationships with a new cohort of people:

"*A huge impact that I found was that Boxing Clever was the first step into recovery for me, building that connection up with people that were in recovery*" (Focus Group Participant).

Community Capital

A strong theme emerged on community capital, and how through engaging with the community, participants developed personal capital. Through involvement in Boxing Clever, participants began a journey of self-reflection, discussing how their lived experience of substance use impacted their feelings of self in relation to the community. Boxing Clever allowed participants to engage with community resources and this engagement helped participants to build and connect with recovery, gain employment opportunities, and move on to further education. Although all participants discussed the benefits of community resources, an 'added' benefit for those living in the community emerged in the data.

Participants described how engagement with community resources offered a chance to re-evaluate their position in the community and how this impacted on their sense of self. Engaging with services in the community helped participants to think about themselves and the community in alternative ways. The data here points to community resources acting as mediators of personal capital by helping to cultivate feelings of connection, belongingness and a positive self-image: "*yeah, the integration in the community, self-worth rocketed after that, hard to put into words*" (Focus Group Participant). Reflecting on their experience, the following two participants describe how engaging with community resources helped them to feel more connected to the community:

"The whole community, just to be able to go and have a cup coffee or lunch in the (names organisation), that I would never have of done. I felt a part of the community. Focus Group Participant).

"It gives you that sort of a strength that they are there for you, community is there for you, the gym and all that, it helps a lot" (Focus Group Participant).

This peer mentor compares their experience of the community pre-post Boxing Clever. The data illustrates how engaging in the programme has been a transformational experience for them:

> *"I destroyed this community back in the day. So, to be able to rebuild and put something positive back into it, it was life-changing for me, and it was a good feeling to be able to do that. Back in the day people used to look down on me; now, a lot of people approach me. It's down to this (Boxing Clever); you feel good walking around in your own community. I feel I'm putting a lot more positive into the community, in stepping up from participant to mentor"* (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Boxing Clever opened new avenues of opportunity in the community for members. For example, this participant describes how Boxing Clever helped them to become aware of what resources are available within the community:

> "*it's after opening the community as well, all through the Boxing Clever, getting to know* [names service], *getting referred up here, getting brought over here for lunch, it is a new world for me*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

For this participant, engaging with resources in the community provided them with an opportunity to seek and gain employment:

> "*The funny thing is Boxing Clever led me to the (Names organisation) and that's why I have the job that I now have*" (Focus Group Participant).

This participant reflects on their journey and how through engaging with Boxing Clever they became more aware of services, and more confident in attempting to access courses and employment. The following quote exemplifies this and illustrates a changing identity:

> *"I would have been in about four different buildings around the area and then feeling a bit more confident going into other areas and asked to go to the (Names organisation) … and then trying to do some courses and sticking my neck out and seeing is there any grants. I wouldn't have been a safe bet before that, but to have people trust in my abilities, and that just grew and developed"* (Focus Group Participant).

Boxing Clever assisted participants to become aware of opportunities in the community to engage with other services and become part of recovery communities in Ballymun. This was evident in the data in how the role of the mentor was discussed, and in how Boxing Clever led some participants into other recovery- orientated services "*A gateway to recovery-to-recovery*

services it was for me" (Focus Group Peer Mentor). This practitioner describes how the programme is beginning to draw on such communities, offering participants further pathways directly in the community:

> *"You know the cycling club; there's a few participants coming on to that now. The mentor is in a recovery committee over in [names organisation] so it's kind of developing a bit more than it had been. So, trying to bring that so there's other recovery activities around. I'm bringing the Boxing Clever crew into those places" (Focus Group Practitioner).*

Reflecting on the role of Boxing Clever in their recovery journey, this participant describes how their view of recovery has evolved, leading them to become immersed in the Ballymun Recovery Community:

> "I *wasn't into recovery at all 'til I did Boxing Clever; now I'm on the Recovery Committee; I'm doing the Recovery Cycle every week as well*" (Focus Group Participant).

The data describes how mentors play an important role in the community. Boxing Clever has helped cultivate opportunities for peers to influence others in the community through role modelling and acting as a gateway to community services for those needing support:

> "*It was a good opportunity to have mentoring opportunities in the community that probably weren't there before"* (Focus Group Practitioner).

This peer describes what this process looks like in the community, discussing how they act as a form of community capital:

> "*People see me as a link to* [names addiction service], *going around getting people assessments and linking them in with what's available. They see the jersey and ask me how I'm getting on; you're being part of the community*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

THEME 2: THE ROLE OF PEER MENTORS

You don't feel as embarrassed looking at him or talking to them - he is one of us.

Peer Mentors were discussed across focus groups as integral to Boxing Clever. Peers provide participants with hope that they can complete the programme, that they can attain recovery, and provide supports from an experiential perspective which are valued by participants and practitioners. Peers can help motivate participants and provide examples of how they can engage in the programme based on their prior experience of being participants themselves. Peers described how the role helped them to develop various skills and knowledge which was often framed in terms of it being a challenging learning process. The data describes several challenges faced by peers related to role preparedness, role ambiguity and the need to further strengthen support structures.

The role of the peer was discussed as important, as it brings the added value of lived experience into the programme. Participants used various metaphors to describe how they felt about the peers lived experience: "*they walked the walk*". This experience was viewed as different to that of the professional, because "*you're not talking out of a book*". As such, participants experienced peers in a different way than that of the professional, and these dynamics allowed participants to see peers as "*an inspiration.*" This can be seen in the description provided by the following participant:

> "*It's always that thing, one of our own, when you're talking to someone that's one of our own, and the transformation in them*" (Focus Group Participant).

Focus groups reflected on the role of the peer and underscore the role that peers play in helping participants to settle into the programme, through a certain level of informality:

> "...*to have someone that has gone through it, is brilliant; it puts you at ease. The mentor kind of eases the pressure a little, less formal than a school or college setting*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

These two participants describe how peers can help instil hope that recovery is possible through the sharing of their personal story and journey:

"*Yeah, hearing his story was, like, he's normal, and there is a way out, and for years we never could see a way out, and he got out the other side - gave me hope*" (Focus Group Participant).

Another participant added:

"*It showed me recovery was available if you wanted it and put the work in; I used to use drugs with them; when I did the Boxing Clever, they were sober*" (Focus Group Participant).

This practitioner discusses the importance of the mentor role and the opportunity that it provides for progression:

"*I also think it's an important part of the programme for mentors, to allow people to step into a space which is a progression for them... I don't think it would work without a mento*r" (Focus Group Practitioner).

Similarly, this participant spoke about the benefits of being a mentor, and the various opportunities for personal and professional development that came with the role:

"*A benefit of being a mentor is getting the responsibility of someone trusting you, something that you never had before; to be given that, is great*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Although mentors enjoyed the role and the various opportunities that it subsequentially helped them gain: "*I did it for 2 years... I'm after doing two Level 7 and I'm on a Level 8* [course] *no*w", the role itself was not without challenges. Some of the peers described a range of self-limiting beliefs, and sometimes a lack of role preparedness/clarity, that impacted on their practice within the programme. Understanding the mentor role and having clarity around its boundaries and practice context is essential. When there is a lack of clarity, peers can be left feeling unsupported and unclear on how to proceed, as described by these participants:

"*I had one incident where someone was affected, and it wasn't caught by a staff member. I didn't know what to do with it... This person got a bit aggressive, the way they were interacting with people, so others got triggered, I couldn't say, "you're affected, leave the group"* (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

"*I suppose internally the personal challenges is that imposter syndrome and when you want to help or support someone, you're not really sure what your role is, a big*

thing is not saying or doing the wrong thing giving someone advice I had to be clear with (names person) what my role was" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Making the transition from participant into the role of mentor was described as challenging; limiting beliefs can impact on the self-efficacy of the peer:

"*Ye probably a lot at the very start, self-sabotage who am I to be telling them what to do, or doing other people's thinking? I didn't know any other way - it was early days for me*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

However, this was contrasted with the benefits of pushing through uncomfortable feelings and the personal rewards that this entailed:

"*I got great growth out of it; back then, I wouldn't have been very comfortable putting myself forward for anything, I stayed quiet in the background. I felt there was a great growth*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Support structures for peers are essential. Supports can help peers ease into the role, provide clarity on tasks, orientate the peer towards processes and procedures and offer emotional support in what can often be a challenging role. This mentor describes regretting not taking up an opportunity to be more involved in the orientation phase of the programme:

"*When I started, they offered me a chance to sit in on the interviews for people before they got their places. I said no, I'm sorry I didn't*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Peers spend a lot of time with participants, some of whom are still early on in their recovery journeys. One peer described how they felt unsure in the role and the impact that this had on them:

"*I had challenges with the staff in (names organisation), that lack of communication and stuff that frustrated me. What am I responsible for? I had to say, "this is what I want to do, does that fit in with what you want me to do?" I had to make my own of it...I had to get additional support through supervision, because I wasn't getting it*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

"I think in terms of the philosophy and the ethos of it, I think it's important that it doesn't become, or seen to become, I'll use the word, recovery programme"

Boxing Clever is now in its 11th iteration in Ballymun, and several other communities across Ireland are also running the programme. The data in this theme suggests that Boxing Clever has evolved in Ballymun during the last decade. The programme has evolved naturally, based on the profile of participants attending. Some concerns were expressed within the data as to how, and if, the threshold of the programme is changing, while also noting that Boxing Clever is being implemented with some adaptations in other communities. The National Network group has emerged as an important resource that can support the dissemination of the core ingredients of Boxing Clever to services seeking to implement the programme.

The Origins of Boxing Clever

Boxing Clever is a grassroots programme, developed in the community to respond to needs that were not necessarily being met. At the time, a group of practitioners, noticed that some individuals who were drug free were supporting those still using substances by including them in sporting activities, and bringing them to support group meetings. During this period, services tended to deliver supports based on substance use status, with groups segmented based on whether service users were abstinent, or still using a substance. As such, at that time, bringing these cohorts together in one group was seen as *innovative* (Focus Group Practitioners). However, in 2012 there was little funding available for new programmes, so the practitioners involved in setting up Boxing Clever looked toward existing services in the community and established *an inter-agency approach to support implementation* (Focus Group Practitioners).

Core Ingredients of Boxing Clever

Four different communities that are delivering Boxing Clever and are part of the National Network group discussed their ideas and experiences about the core characteristics and features of the programme. The Network was established in 2024 by Ballymun Youth Action Project to support further dissemination of Boxing Clever into other services.

Broadly speaking, all the ingredients that were part of the original Boxing Clever Ballymun programme can be found in iterations run in other communities. There was unanimous agreement by the National Network that core ingredients include: *"educational components",*

"gym work", *"the study support"*, *"the mentor"*, *"structure"*, *"the tracksuits"*, *"the recovery community"*, *"it's them coming together"*, the *"sense of belonging"* (National Network Group).

One other ingredient emerged as important but, at different levels, in the respective communities. Key working was initially an essential ingredient in Ballymun, whereby participants were provided with key workers in the host organisation, in line with the National Rehabilitation Framework (Doyle & Ivanovic, 2010). However, the various services running Boxing Clever nationally don't have key working supports, as they are not services designed to deliver these types of interventions, though the coordinators do act as a support and deliver brief interventions: *"I have very limited keyworkers involved, to be honest, never, and only if I ring them"; "I thought it would be like a helicopter coordinating it and, no, it's very time consuming"* (National Network Group).

The Threshold of Boxing Clever

Although the profile of participants attending Boxing Clever has evolved across the last 12 years, the data illustrates a concern for the potential of the programme moving away from a low threshold-based intervention. The conceptualisation of recovery in Ballymun is discussed by this participant as having developed in a unique way, and it is this way of understanding recovery that drives Boxing Clever:

> *"In Ballymun, recovery isn't that abstinence space; so, to be really clear about that, it is low threshold too. At the recovery cafes, everybody's welcome. I think the recovery in Ballymun is used a bit differently"* (Focus Group Practitioner).

Reflecting on how the programme and the demographics have changed over the last 12 years, this participant notes:

> *"I think back to the earlier stages, the majority of people were still using, where I think it has kind of swung the other way now"* (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

The importance of maintaining the original Ballymun philosophy of Boxing Clever is discussed by this participant. Maintaining a space for those who are often most marginalised through substance use is seen as integral to how Boxing Clever should be delivered:

> *"In terms of the philosophy and the ethos of the programme, I think it's important that it doesn't become, or seen to become, I'll use the word, recovery programme. Recovery in the sense that the person consciously makes that decision and that's where they are going, because I do believe that through the programme people who*

you probably never would have felt could have got to that point, they did" (Focus Group Practitioner).

Participant Profiles

The data to emerge describes a changing demographic of participants attending the programme. Changes in geographical location, substance use status, educational attainment, and age of participants and gender were all noted to have changed across the last 12 years: "*A lot of the participants now have some sort of education; when I started hardly any of us had any education*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor). However, it is not just the level of education that has changed. This participant captures the essence of the changing demographics:

> "*I've seen the age increase, I've seen a lot more older people, a lot more women, a lot from outside the area, some had a bit of fitness beforehand...when, the first time I did it, it was a bunch of heroin addicts; this time around, it's a lot more wider, the kind of substance used by participants*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Evolution of Boxing Clever in other Services

As Boxing Clever has evolved nationally and been disseminated into other areas the programme has largely maintained consistency with the core ingredients. Although one service did describe delivering Boxing Clever to only abstinent-based participants: "*our Boxing Clever is for those that are in recovery, so they're not using any substances*".

The importance of having participants at various stages of the continuum was highlighted by this National Network member:

> "*I'll keep going back to that chap that's on the clinic, like, to see the transformation in him and see how much he's come along by mixing with people who are much further on in their recovery journey, like, it's magical*" (National Network Group).

Other adaptations to the programme have been largely added based on identified participant needs. Some of these adaptations include extending the duration of the programme: "*it's 30 weeks";* adding further educational components to support literacy – "*we've added in a QQI 3 or 4 in Computers";* or courses to promote participants' personal development: *"we've added a QQI 2 Mindfulness Meditation course".* Post/continuing Boxing Clever supports were also discussed as important: "*what people are asking for is a Boxing Clever Aftercare".* This is being facilitated in several ways, such as preparing participants for post programme-life: "*a Career*

Guidance Officer made the agreement that she would also see our participants", or through *"collaborating with another organization around a getting ready for employment course"* (National Network Group).

The National Network is a new support structure established in 2024, which is utilised as a support and knowledge hub for those seeking to implement Boxing Clever. All participants in the Network spoke about the usefulness of the group. Participants described how the Network acted as a resource, "*taking little nuggets from everyone"; "how the group lends supports"; "just that reassurance that you're doing things right"* (National Network Group).

The Network were also conscious of how the various outcomes experienced by participants were evidenced and, here again, the Network acts as a resource for shared learning:

> "*We probably didn't have the depth of outcome measures, so that's what we've learned from Cork is that, actually, we needed to add more measurements in terms of people's progress across the programme".* (National Network Group).

The Network also spoke about the use of an app that can support participants to connect with the programme and monitor their progress in real time:

> "*Within the app there is, you can create your own goals, so goal setting; there are wellbeing indicators, so, on a scale of 0 to 10, elements of wellbeing, whether it's sleep, mood, and if you're hungry, if you're training, how sore you are, energy levels, etc., that people can rate daily"* (National Network Group).

While each service receives some funding from the Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces, and the education funding is provided by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the coordinator roles of Boxing Clever are generally added on to existing duties. In terms of the evolution of Boxing Clever, the National Network discussed the sustainability of the various programmes into the future, identifying potential blocks and barriers to programme delivery: "*Boxing Clever takes up so much time, far more than you'd expect"; "we have 10 grand less this year than what we had last year".*

The different funding models in the respective services means that there is an inequality in what service providers can achieve with Boxing Clever. While one region is seeking to *"bring in a Boxing Clever graduate in a paid capacity",* another provider has had to cut the paid mentor role "*I had to make it clear that if you're coming to be part of Boxing Clever from last year, it's in a voluntary capacity*". Participants presented ideas on how Boxing Clever could be funded nationally: "*ring*

fence some Department funding". This could then be used to fund roles in different communities: "*and let each adapt it whatever way they need, because everything needs to be localized and adapted*" (National Network Group). Network Group members discussed that having a sustainable funding allocation could also help services to deliver "*two rollouts a year, because we have people asking about it; but the next one won't be for another 6 months…*" (National Network Group).

THEME 4: IMPROVEMENTS TO BOXING CLEVER BALLYMUN

Although all participants spoke about how much they value the course, and the people involved in it, the data to emerge in this theme identifies various possible improvements that could be made to the delivery of Boxing Clever Ballymun. Participants described the importance of communicating Boxing Clever to stakeholders, while also noting the importance of communication within the programme. In addition, participants highlighted the importance of ongoing supports post-Boxing Clever, in terms of some type of aftercare initiative, while further supports for peer mentors to assist with role clarity and job preparedness were also identified as important.

The Importance of Communication

Communication *within* the programme and communication *of* the programme emerged as important factors during focus groups. While in general, Boxing Clever has been disseminated throughout various spaces, participants still felt that more could be done; "*advertised more*" to reach potential participants. This participant discusses possible ways to communicate Boxing Clever to a wider audience:

> "*I don't think enough people know about it; maybe it's about rolling out the flyers in meetings or fellowships or something - there's so many people who could benefit from this. How do you get those people that can't be reached?*" (Focus Group Participant).

Similarly, communication within the programme was identified as needing improvement. Speaking about the importance of key working as a core component of Boxing Clever, this participant highlights a gap, due to more participants accessing the service from outside Ballymun and, while they may have key workers in other services, a continuity of communication

within the programme can be impacted. This participant explores a need for more robust communication strategies at the team level:

> "*I think that's great if they have their keyworker, but the facilitators should sit together and say I've noticed so-and-so hasn't turned up to the fitness classes... and the mentors should be sitting in on them meetings too to make it run more smoothly*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Assessing Participants' Literacy Levels

Participant focus groups identified that there are often challenges related to individuals' level of literacy, and while there are supports available to participants, this may still have a negative impact on how participants engage with the course.

This participant reflects on their experience, noting that while there were struggles with literacy, there were supports available:

> "*I couldn't read and write when I went in. I knew the answers but couldn't put pen to paper; they helped me*" (Focus Group Participant).

Practitioners also note some of the difficulties that they encountered regarding assessing literacy levels, and the types of supports participants may need, as this practitioner states:

> "*And, sometimes it was difficult to kind of assess what level people were at, and difficult to know what sort of educational support to put in for them. You tried different things; but it was very hard* "(Focus Group Practitioner).

Another practitioner added:

> "*I think that's another challenge that we encountered, and it was probably something that every year we discussed at meetings; so, the Community Addictions Studies course is a Level 5, and we always had this kind of debate: is that too big a leap for some people?*" (Focus Group Practitioner).

Supports Post Programme

Participants spoke about the importance of continuity of supports post-Boxing Clever. This was discussed in the context of the programme taking up considerable amounts of time in their lives, while also offering structure, connection to others, and providing opportunities for socialising with others. The data suggests that further supports post-Boxing Clever would be beneficial, and

help with *"what do I do now?* Extending the programme in some way, as a form of aftercare, was identified as something that could provide additional supports.

This participant highlights their experience post-Boxing Clever: "*To me, a bit of an aftercare. I found that I dipped a few weeks after; I went back into old behaviour - no structure*" (Focus Group Participant).

The focus groups provided various ideas on what continuing supports could look like in the context of post-Boxing Clever. For example, this participant identifies drawing on activities already taking place within the community: "*it might be what already exists. You can't have Boxing Clever going on for five years for somebody - what else is in the community? Maybe it is something like the cycling, or the running club*" (Focus Group Peer Mentor). "*Something like those Thursday mornings, continuing them for about 4 week*s" (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Resourcing the Programme

To continue to deliver an optimal and sustainable programme, the correct resources and programme structures for the peer and Co-ordinator role should be considered. When initially developed, the Co-ordinator role was "*absorbed into an existing role with it being resourced*" (Focus Group Practitioners), and this has an impact on programme implementation as the *Co-ordinator position takes up about 2-3 days a week* (Focus Group Practitioners).

As discussed in the previous theme about peers, the role of mentor can be challenging, especially when there is role ambiguity or lack of role preparation for the peer. In theme 2 it was identified that there were informal supervision arrangements in place. Similarly, supports for peers can be provided through the provision of an orientation day, in addition to a more formal introduction of the peer to participants, and clarity on role descriptions and duties:

> *"I think, in the introduction week for the participants to be told what the mentor role is, ... so no one is surprised if you are pulling them up. It's briefly talked about in the slides, it would be good for a mentor day to say, 'look, I've been where you all were: my role is..."* (Focus Group Peer Mentor).

Conclusion

This section has presented the four themes arising from the data analysis. The findings from the themes discussed in this section illustrate that Boxing Clever is a worthwhile, evidence-informed intervention that is as relevant now as when it was first introduced to the practice landscape 12 years ago. This is evident by other communities taking up this intervention within their own

context, and the recently formed National Network group. Within the context of Ballymun Boxing Clever, the outcomes experienced by participants speak to a holistic intervention that has helped participants develop personal, social and community capital which helps improve their wellbeing, quality of life and social inclusion. Peer mentors are experienced as important members of the team, and they can play an important role in the programme.

Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative descriptive study utilised nine focus groups (N=32) to examine how Boxing Clever, a 20-week integrated educational, and substance use programme has evolved, and the associated outcomes for participants since its inception in Ballymun in 2012. The research also explored how Boxing Clever has been disseminated into different communities in Ireland, and the experiences of those involved in its delivery in the National Network group.

For the purposes of this discussion section, personal, social and community capital are considered within the recovery capital framework. Boxing Clever contributed to the cultivation of personal, social and community capital, with participants describing a host of internal and external capacities that contributed to their wellbeing, quality of life and social inclusion. This research further describes how intertwined each component of Recovery Capital is, and the findings here shine a light on these interactions, especially the role of community capital in developing personal capital. Embedding Boxing Clever within the Ballymun community may provide an added benefit for those who complete the programme where they live.

The type of capital developed by participants in this study is consistent with how Recovery Capital is described in the extant literature (Best & Hennessy, 2022; Best & Laudet, 2010; Jadovich, Viera, Edelman et al., 2024; Laudet & White, 2008). Sports and the education experience were key in this study to the development of personal Recovery Capital, reflecting that of previous research (Wang et al., 2014; Keane, 2011). Participants' confidence developed based on the supports provided in Boxing Clever and, this acted as a pathway for those on the programme to go on and cultivate more personal and social capital through education and employment, indicating how intertwined the components of Recovery Capital are (Jadovich et al., 2024; Jurinsky, Cowie, Blyth, & Hennessy, 2022).

Best and Hennessy (2022) make the case that there is limited evidence on the interaction of the components of Recovery Capital. The findings from this study are strongly suggestive that community capital can act as a key process in the development of personal capital, not just by assisting individuals to go on to employment and further training but, rather, through a psychological process and change in identity.

Boxing Clever is structured in such a way as to allow participants access community resources and, in doing so, participants began to cultivate emerging identities, develop self-regard, and viewed themselves more positively connected to the community, in general, and, in some cases, to the recovery community specifically (Best & De Alwis, 2017; Best & Ivers, 2022). While this trajectory (community to personal capital) has been outlined conceptually in previous research (Best & Colman, 2019; Best & Ivers, 2022), these interactions between community and personal capital, and the depth of examples in the findings are novel, especially when compared to prior research in this area (e.g. Jadovich et al., 2024; Jurinsky et al., 2022). For instance, in this study, through engagement with community services, participants described abstract concepts such as feelings of belonging and connection to the community or feeling like they have gained the trust of members of the community which, in turn, improved personal capital such as self-regard, self-efficacy and identity formation. As such, the research suggests that Ballymun Boxing Clever can promote social inclusion for some of the most marginalised individuals.

While Boxing Clever as a programme helps participants to cultivate an alternative identity, providing participants with uniforms that they can wear seems to have an added benefit. And the findings here converge with previous Boxing Clever research. (Morton, O'Reilly & O'Brien, 2016).

Moreover, recent research with young people engaged in risky and anti-social behaviours in a Dublin community using physical activities as an intervention found that providing young people with T-shirts helped to cultivate a sense of belonging and self-regard (Mahon, 2025).

These findings also build on previous Boxing Clever research (Morton et al., 2016), by illustrating how Recovery Capital is experienced by Boxing Clever participants post-programme and through a further in-depth examination of the emerging identity process, based on the acquisition of community capital for both participants and peers. The Recovery Capital model demonstrates that recovery is a multifaceted process requiring a comprehensive approach that integrates individual, social, and community resources. Enhancing recovery capital in these areas may help individuals build a robust foundation for sustained recovery and overall well-being (Best & Laudet, 2010; Laudet & White, 2008; Sheedy and Whitter, 2009).

There is an increasing impetus to evidence outcomes in substance use programmes through monitoring and evaluation (Department of Health, 2017). Recovery capital is one metric that might be useful to use, and various questionnaires are available to capture this progress (e.g. Burns & Marks, 2013; Rettie, Hogan, & Cox, 2019; Whitesock, Zhao, Goetsch, & Hanson, 2018). Indeed, other measures, using a variety of psychometrically sound scales to fit the context of the

programme and needs of participants, are available (Mahon, Minami, & Brown, 2023; Mahon, Minami, & Brown, 2024).

Peer mentors are valuable additions to educational and fitness substance use programmes. Consistent with the wider literature in this area, peers can engender hope for participants (Francia, Berg, Lam, Morgan, & Nielsen, 2022) and motivate participants to engage with activities and programmes (Boisvert, Martin, Grosek, & Clarie, 2008). Prior systematic review demonstrated that peers' unique experience can be used to build a relationship that helps service users feel safe, relaxed and comfortable (Chen, Yuan, & Reed, 2023).

Francia et al. (2022) examined how peer support strengthens the alliance in substance use treatment, reflecting some of the findings in this study: the informality of peer support helps service users feel more comfortable engaging with the programme. Additionally, peers may act as a 'bridge' to participants building therapeutic alliances with professionals.

When peers are utilised in programmes and service provision, the experience of service users is improved, and participants are more satisfied with the intervention (Du Plessis, Whitaker, & Hurley, 2020; Eddie et al., 2019; Tracy & Wallace, 2016).

Peer mentors also face challenges, especially during early recovery when self-limiting beliefs are present. The data in this study shines a light on the impact that such beliefs can have on peers and in how they conduct their role. However, the personal growth that peers gained may help them to re-frame old identities and feelings of self-worth. The extant literature in this area aligns with the current findings; for example, peers can gain a new perspective on who they are through their role in helping others (Dhand, 2006; Guarino, Deren, Mino, Kang, & Shedlin, 2010). Peers also developed professional knowledge and skills, and gained exposure to frontline work within professional organisations, thereby increasing their employability (Guarino et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2019; Mahon, 2025). The educational component of the programme also impacted peers thinking about education and learning, influencing peers to go onto further education and training to develop vocational pathways (Collins et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2019).

To realise the full benefits of peer support, peers and organisations engaging peers to deliver services must understand the role (Mahon, 2024; Mahon & Sharek, 2023). When there is limited understanding of the role, this can impact on job descriptions (Du Plessis et al., 2020; Eddie et al., 2019). When job descriptions are not clear there can be a lack of clarity as to what the peer role entails, which can cause difficulties for peers in how they engage with the service users and programme. In their systematic review, Chen et al. (2023) postulate that one of the facilitators of

peer work in organisations is the setting of clear role expectations for peers, while training, supervision and mentoring can also act as a facilitator for implementing the peer role in organisations.

These supports are especially important for helping the peer to understand the role, and expectations of them, to provide emotional support, and for gaining competency in a host of organisational and role-specific skills (Byrne et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023; Collins, Alla, & Nicolaidis, 2019; Crisanti, Earheart, Deissinger et al., 2022). Peers can also use supervision and mentoring to work through self-limiting beliefs that may be present in early recovery, and for those who are new to the workforce. For organisations to adequately provide these supports for peers leaders and managers need to champion peer work in the organisation and equip employees with the necessary resources to allow them to support peers (Chen et al., 2023; Mahon & Sharek, 2023). Where possible, supervisory supports from others with lived experience may prove especially helpful (Chen et al., 2023; Mahon & Sharek, 2023; Mahon, 2024).

As evidence-informed interventions are implemented into new environments, it is often the case that certain programme protocols are diluted or completely dropped (Engell, Stadnick, Aarons, & Barnett, 2023; Fixsen et al., 2009; Proctor et al., 2013). The reasons for this happening are often linked to contextual service delivery factors. The findings in this research tend to suggest that Boxing Clever is being implemented nationally with closeness and consistency to the original ingredients. While it is important to disseminate the correct protocols of a programme (Engell et al., 2023; Proctor, Powell, & McMillen, 2013), it is equally important that factors that can provide added value are recognised. As such, implementation research often speaks about the required infrastructure and resources needed to achieve successful implementation at the organisational level (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Yet, what about implementation on a wider scale, involving many stakeholders nationally? Several implementation models describe utilising some type of oversight/implementation group to support the uptake of evidence-informed practices (Duda, Fixsen, & Blase, 2013; Fixsen et al., 2005). National implementation groups such as these can be used as a hub of knowledge and expertise; to support implementation on the micro level by offering training protocols; developing competency frameworks and supporting individuals and organisations to implement programmes. However, to reach this level of sustainability there is a need for these structures to have a secure funding model (Fixsen et al., 2005).

As noted in the first part of this report, Ireland's main policy response to substance use is contained in the national drug strategy, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery: A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017–2025* (Department of Health, 2017). Although this policy is coming to the end of its life, the next iteration could consider how Boxing Clever might it into its strategy, and what funding can be made available to support the programme at a national level. At the same time, *Healthy Ireland: A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013-2025* (Department of Health, 2013) seeks to implement evidence-based policies at the government, sectoral, community, and local levels, through each individual sector contributing to improving health and well-being. Boxing Clever also provides an avenue to include lived experience within service provision, which meets the objectives of other healthcare policy (Caroll et al., 2024).

Those delivering Boxing Clever may wish to examine how a funding model can be sourced from the Department of Health as the programme aligns with these policy positions. For example, having a dedicated co-ordinator in Ballymun Boxing Clever will provide more resources and take some of the extra workload from the post it is currently attached to. This post could also be used to provide valuable supports to the peer mentors, while funding allocated to a peer mentor position could strengthen the role of lived experience and provide further pathways into progression and employment for peers.

Limitations

While this qualitative descriptive research provides important insights into the experiences of key stakeholders of Boxing Clever, the research design is not without limitations. Although participants in this study described a range of benefits from engaging in the programme, causality cannot be inferred due to the lack of an experimental design. Additionally, the self-selection sampling techniques used mean that there is possibly an element of selection bias, with those who have had better experiences of the programme more likely to attend for interviews. Also, some of the participants attended the programme in 2012 which could be a factor for influencing recall and memories. Furthermore, it is possible that other factors have contributed to the outcomes described in this study. Participants could have been engaged with other support systems outside of Boxing Clever, and pre-programme levels of recovery capital may have been attributed to Boxing Clever unintentionally.

Future research conducted on Boxing Clever programmes would benefit from a prospective design using recovery capital baseline data as part of a longitudinal study.

Recommendations

This, the final section of the report, makes recommendations to further enhance the Boxing Clever programme in Ballymun, in addition to how the National Network group can support the continued uptake and dissemination of Boxing Clever nationally. Much of the practice recommendations made are suggested to improve the overall governance and implementation of Boxing Clever Ballymun. Recommendations for national policy and the potential funding of Boxing Clever are also made.

1. Strengthen existing supports for peer mentors in areas such as a formal introduction to participants; and ongoing supervision to support personal and professional development.

2. Examine potential fundings streams for a part time co-ordinator and peer mentor in Ballymun Boxing Clever.

3. Consideration to be given to formal team meetings in Ballymun Boxing Clever that include peer mentors.

4. Strengthen existing supports provided to Ballymun Boxing Clever participants' for literacy issues.

5. Consider providing additional/continuing supports for participants post-Ballymun Boxing Clever. This can be linkage to other services, and/or an aftercare group.

6. To evidence the ongoing benefit of Ballymun Boxing Clever, questionnaires with strong psychometric properties should be utilised as outcome metrics. An assessment should be made regarding the benefit of using a Recovery Capital questionnaire as a practice-based evidence-outcome metric.

7. Develop a strategy for communicating about Boxing Clever nationally. The National Network is ideally placed to lead on this. This strategy can assess the potential benefit of developing protocols and training based on the specific ingredients of Boxing Clever to support other communities seeking to implement the programme.

8. Policy makers and commissioning bodies may wish to consider these findings and the implications for funding Boxing Clever as an evidence-informed national substance use intervention. Existing treatment and rehabilitation structures can be utilised to support implementation if ringfenced funding is made available. The Boxing Clever Programme model offers very promising results as a progression pathway and possibilities for further resourcing and development nationally (in line with recommendation (32) of the Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use, 2024:17).

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