

Evaluation of the Connect4 Detached Youth Work Pilot Project



South Dublin
County Partnership
Páirtíocht Chontae
Átha Cliath Theas



Final Report

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Section 1: Introduction

This section introduces Connect 4 and provides a context for this evaluation.

1.1 Context

Connect 4 is a pilot project, developed by South Dublin County Partnership (SDCP) and Tallaght Drugs & Alcohol Task Force (TDATF), to engage with detached young people in West Tallaght. While there is a broad menu of youth services in the Tallaght area, it was regularly noted by such services in Kilinarden and Jobstown that there was a cohort of young people not engaging and who probably would never attend a formal youth service. Terms such as “hard to reach” “untouchable,” and “lawless” were frequently used to describe this group. Many are involved in risky behaviours (including but not limited to drug use, drug dealing and other drug related crimes) and contributing to the overall feeling of unsafety and lawlessness in both areas.

SDCP, through the TDATF structures researched the underpinning reasons for this. Models such as “Easy Street” which originated in Sweden and was adopted by the TRY Project in Dublin 8 and Ballymun Regional Youth Resource (BRYR) were visited. This informed a proposal for a detached street work pilot project, focusing on West Tallaght, where the concentration of complex youth issues was most intense. Funding for the pilot which began in April 2022 and running until October 2023, was secured from the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) delivered by SDCP.

West Tallaght is in the South Dublin County Council area and ranks as the eleventh most affluent in the state. There are affluent Electoral Divisions (EDs) and Small Areas (SAs) which mask several clusters of extremely high levels of deprivation. Further analysis of 240 SAs in the TDATF¹ area reveals that one third are disadvantaged and 12% very disadvantaged with most of these areas situated in West Tallaght.

Cross referencing census data with SA deprivation, there are circa 4,000 people in West Tallaght living in EDs comprised of SAs with high levels of disadvantage. (Deprivation score of -20 or lower) It is the area with the highest level of youth unemployment, youth dependency and one parent families in Tallaght. All schools in Killinarden have DEIS status², 23% of young people did not complete their Leaving Certificate in 2018 and only 7% of Leaving Certificate students progressed to third level education in 2018.

¹ TDATF Strategic Plan 2022-26

² The DEIS programme is the Department of Education’s main policy initiative to respond to educational disadvantage. It focuses on targeting additional resources at those schools with the highest concentrations of students who are at risk of educational disadvantage.

1.2 Evaluation Methodology

To inform future planning and sustainability, SDCP commissioned Business Improvement Solutions (BIS) to undertake an independent evaluation of Connect 4. The work to undertake this evaluation took place over the months June to August 2023. The evaluation methodology adopted by BIS to meet the terms of reference for the evaluation encompassed.

- A desk review of reports, funding applications, presentations, submissions, and positioning documents.
- Facilitated workshop with the Connect 4 Advisory Group with eight members in attendance.
- Semi-structured discussions with the Connect 4 staff team of four including the team leader.
- Semi-structured 1-1 discussion with the SDCP Chief Executive Officer.
- Semi-structured discussions with School Completion Programme Officers in primary and secondary schools in West Tallaght.
- Semi-structured discussions with a Counsellor Psychotherapist from the HSE Youth Drug & Alcohol (YoDA) service.
- Analysis of survey completed by 38 external stakeholders.
- Analysis of survey completed by 41 young people supported by Connect4.
- Ongoing liason with the TDAF Coordinator throughout the evaluation.

Section 2: Connect 4 April 22 to October 23

This section will explore the development of the project in the funding period.

2.1 Set Up

The pilot commenced in April 2022 and the initial months were focussed on recruitment of staff and putting governance structures in place. The day to day management is overseen by the TDATF Coordinator and team leader with strategic oversight from the SDCP CEO.

Rosters, daily check ins, weekly meetings, staff supervision (internal and external), training, and team building are now established processes.

An Advisory Group comprising personnel from Tallaght Probation Project, Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board, HSE YoDA service and community drug services was formed which meets every six weeks. At a planning meeting in February 2023, terms of reference for the Advisory Group were refined as below.

- To guide, advise and support the project and rather than manage it or the staff, the responsibility for which lies with the Management Group (TDATF and SDCP)
- Identifying and addressing risks to the effective delivery of detached street work.
- Identifying new and emerging needs in the Tallaght area.
- Contributing to and identifying partnership agreements and collaborations necessary for the development and delivery of coordinated responses to meet the needs of young people at risk.
- Ensuring there is cognisance of the capacity in the community and making every effort to scope out existing resources ahead of developing new ones.
- Contributing to the gathering of evidence re: outcomes of the initiative.

The resource plan was for four street workers (one of whom would be the team leader) to deliver the project on the ground, however recruitment and retention challenges were such that it was Q2 2023 until the full complement of staff was in place. Figure 1 presents the logic model for the project.

Problem Statement

At-risk and marginalised 10-24yr old young people who congregate in specific areas of West Tallaght who are known to be 'unattached' and on the cusp of involvement in illegal activity and/or substance

Logic Model Diagram: Connect 4

Goal

To provide street presence support to unattached young people in Killinarden, Glenshane & McWilliam

Long-Term Outcomes

Young people have developed positive relationships with staff
Increase in pro-social behaviours
Increase of young people availing of activities and supports available to them

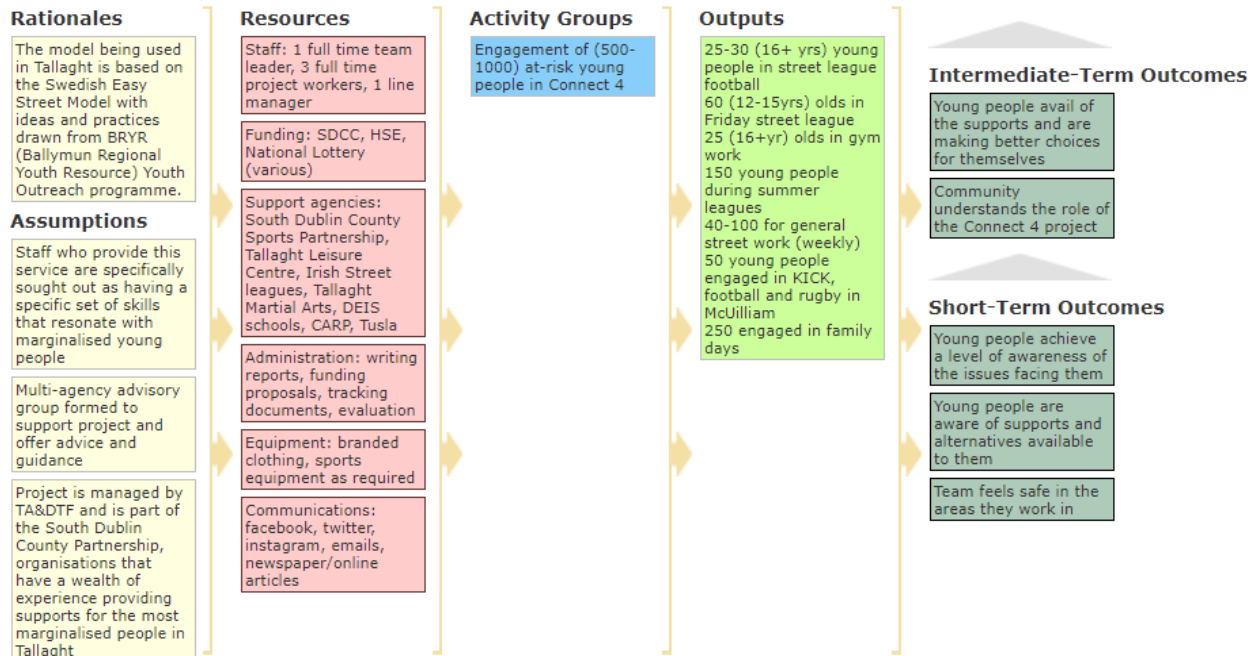


Figure 1: Connect 4 Logic Model

2.2 Connect 4 Model

Figure 2 provides an illustration of the Connect 4 model framed around street work with young people from age 10 who are deemed to be 'at risk' or disconnected due to substance misuse, gang influence, non-school attendance, or trauma. When a young person engages, the team either offer interventions or signpost to services or supports. This determination is based on an initial assessment carried out by the team which identifies the needs of the young person and the environment within which they can achieve positive outcomes. Interventions are provided to individuals and/or groups. After a period of working with the young person, Connect 4 will either signpost or formally refer the young person to services.

Connect 4 Model

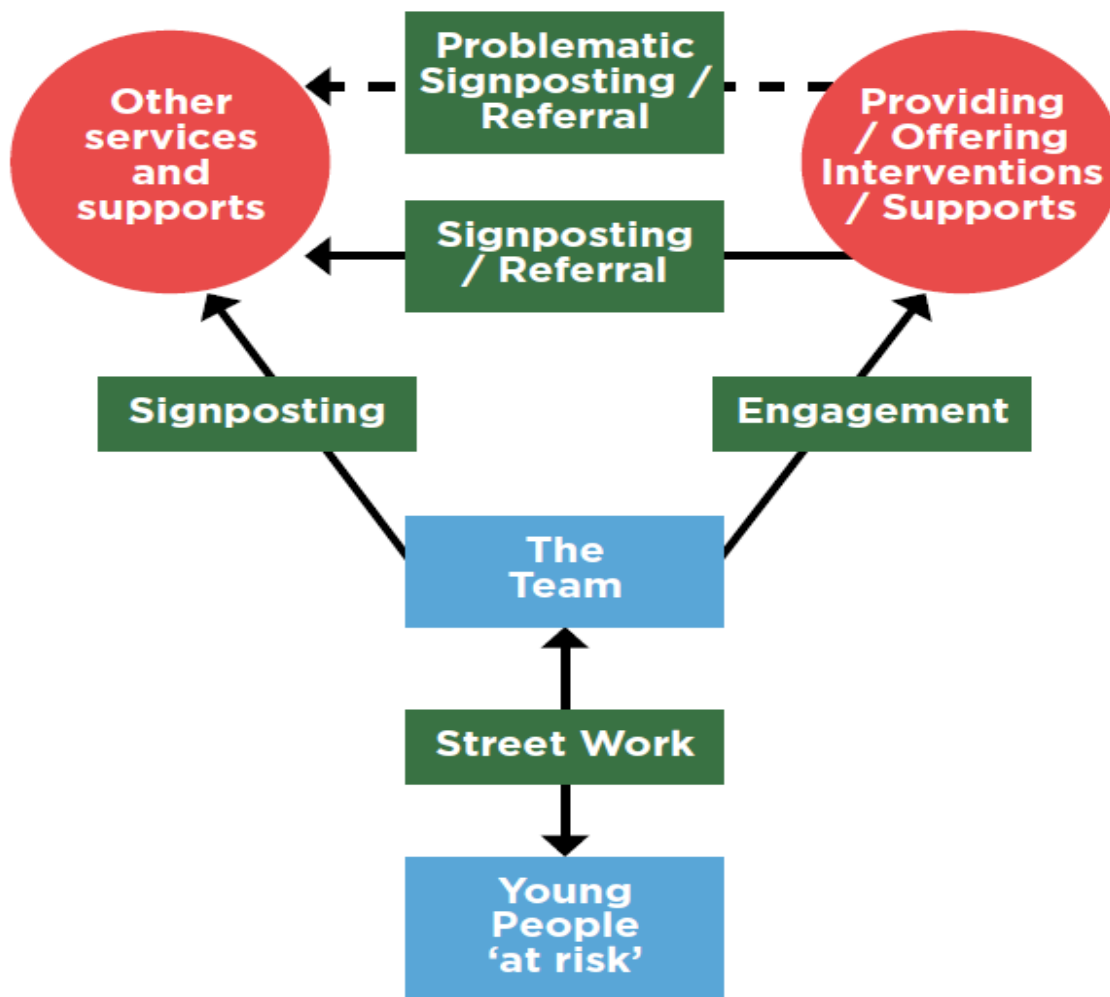
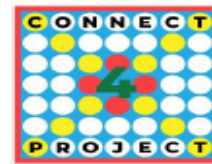


Figure 2: Connect 4 Delivery Model

2.3 Outputs

This section describes the outputs in the period from April 2022 to October 2023.

- Monday night football in Kilinarden with an average of 30 young people of all abilities aged 16-25 participating in a fun, competitive and safe place. Participants have gone on to take part in trials for the Homeless World Cup Street Soccer League.
- Friday night football with an average of 100 young people aged 12 to 15. 80% of participants are male and 20% female.
- Weekly gym sessions for 30 young people (1-1 and groups) in Tallaght Leisure Centre. 90% of attendees are male and 10% female (See 2.3.1)
- Girls football in St. Thomas' school with average numbers of 20.
- Male martial arts group for ages 10-12 with six regular attendees.
- Mixed gender martial arts group with 12 (6 male and 6 female) engaging on a consistent basis.
- In April 2023 Connect4 ran two Easter Egg hunts in the community, one in Glenshane and one in McUilliam with 100 young people and parents taking part.



2.3.1 Gym Access



Young people from Jobstown and MacUilliam expressed a desire to get back to a healthy lifestyle. With funding from South Dublin County Council (SDCC) Sports Partnership, weekly gym passes were secured for young people. This enabled them to improve their confidence and self-esteem through positive body image and build relationships.

Four young people who had been engaging with the project

for a couple of months had never accessed a public gym before and were persuaded to go with Connect4 staff. They were encouraged to use the shower and pool, and staff gave them hygiene packs. These young people are now attending the gym regularly on their own and three of them are now employed.

2.3.2 Transforming the Area

Connect 4 have mapped out their work area across West Tallaght. With support from SDCC to keep the many grass areas maintained in the estates they marked out football pitches and tennis courts. The aesthetics have been transformed with young people regularly playing on these spaces. Through funding from Sláintecare, Connect 4 procured a marquee which they strategically erected in areas of the West Tallaght area often deemed hotspots and unsafe.

Staff were hearing from many young men in these areas that they were taking drugs “just to feel normal”. Some had undiagnosed mental health issues such as ADHD and many lacked awareness of or had trouble engaging with state services and struggled to keep appointments. Connect 4 provided support to fill out forms relating to social welfare, medical card, and housing. With hot tea and pot noodles added in, these have been transformed from “anti-social” to “pro-social” spaces.



Connect 4 Marquee, funded by Slaintecare Healthy Communities, Tallaght

2.3.3 Addressing Anti Social Behaviour



Following anti-social behaviour in the West Tallaght area resulting in Dublin Bus suspending some services, Connect 4 took the initiative to address this issue. Through working with the local schools, they identified many of the young people engaging in the anti-social behaviour and organised a day trip and competition with Shamrock Rovers.

Dublin Bus kindly provided a bus and a route with organised collection points was set up around West Tallaght to get young people to the competition with Shamrock Rovers. This helped them to realise that without Dublin Bus they wouldn't have been able to get to the venue which in turn fostered appreciation for bus services. A community Garda gave out meals which for many young people was their first positive experience with the Gardai. The competition which 72 young people from West Tallaght took part in led to the set up of a Friday night league for 12-15 year olds supported by the FAI who fund some of the equipment and local schools.

2.3.4 Gender Based Approach

Connect 4 recorded high numbers of interactions between young men and women where there is an unequal power balance with males attempting to control females with verbal or physical aggression. Staff noted cases where young females disclosed that there were areas that they could not go in because of fear of sexual assault. Through, raising awareness of this issue, discussing it with young males, positive role modelling and building positive gender relationships these occurrences have decreased. Connect 4 has set up a WhatsApp group for young females who are fearful about personal safety or who just need connection. With support from SDCP an education and social programme for young females has been developed.

2.4 Inter-Agency Work

Connect 4 engage with the hardest to reach young people who are in most cases totally disengaged from other services. Their referral of young people to the Tallaght Probation Project, the HSE Youth Drug and Alcohol (YoDA) service and SDCP programmes provides a legitimacy for such services to the young person rendering them more likely to engage long term. Testament to this, is that YoDA³ for the first time since its formation had to create a waiting list in the summer of 2023 and three of those on the waiting list are young people referred by Connect 4.

Staff refer families to local family support projects, many of whom are impacted by drug related intimidation. Diverting young people into education, using links in SDCP for safe pass and manual handling courses and other training opportunities has led to an increased awareness of employment options. 25% of referrals to the project are word of mouth or from the “bring a buddy” initiative. Referrals also come from, Barnardos, JADD and the Community Addiction Response Programme (CARP).

Connect 4 referred five young people to the Youth Employment Support programme in Kilinarden and are working with SDCC Sports Partnership to develop a FETAC accredited course in health and fitness for young people with an interest in pursuing this as a career. Local intelligence on drug trends such as cannabis use, vaping and nitrous oxide is valuable for TDATF in identifying emerging need. Connect 4 has worked very effectively with Tusla where targeted street work support was needed to engage the most vulnerable young people and staff attended Meitheals as part of the inter-agency response.

“In Meitheal meetings where Connect 4 workers attended, they were always punctual, compassionate and professional and their expertise really made a difference in helping the attendees understand better the needs of the young people, helping some professionals see how things look like if they were in the shoes of the young person” (External stakeholder)

³ Covers HSE CHO6 (Wicklow, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin South East) and CHO7 (Kildare/West Wicklow, Dublin West, Dublin South City, Dublin South West) areas

2.5 Schools

Connect 4 works with schools through the Home School Liaison (HSCL) and School Completion Programmes (SCP). Their staff went into primary and secondary schools in West Tallaght to raise awareness of the activities available. They have been pivotal to a suicide awareness programme rolled out for older teenagers. The staff through the street work felt that there was significant intergenerational trauma in the area. They linked with the schools and the HSE South Dublin Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention and through a 'Circles of Vulnerability'⁴ identified that there were many young people 'at risk' in the area.

A 'Connecting for Life'⁵ (CfL) group was set up and teachers and front line community based staff were trained in safeTALK⁶. The CfL group worked with the South Dublin Social Prescriber to develop a package of activities for young people including physical exercise, gym, football, music and DJing. In October 2023, the CfL group coordinated a Mental Health Fair in Jobstown Community Centre with 27 services (local and national) showcasing the supports they offer. Young people and their parents were able to find out more about the services available locally.

Teachers who contributed to this evaluation emphasised the importance of the work with young people over the summer and the "activities on the green". Connect 4 staff have undertaken targeted work with young people identified by teachers who were disengaging from school. They met them initially in the school and introduced them to Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) in the gym and Friday night football. This is part of an integrated approach with HSCL and SCP who support the families. As a result the school attendance, participation and attainment of the young people improved.

"I am so grateful to Connect 4 for working with me and our school. I can ring them at anytime and they will come and meet me or meet students etc. This is the first time I can get support for a teenager so quickly that is out of school time. This rapid response is so important. I can flag teenagers to staff to check in on when they are out and about. This makes such a difference to me as that reduces the chances of that teenager getting into trouble and increases their chances of linking in to something positive. The connections they make, the way they do it makes all the difference to our young people, and this can save and change lives". (Teacher)

⁴ <https://headspace.org.au/assets/School-Support/Suicide-contagion-web.pdf>

⁵ National Suicide Prevention Strategy

⁶ Half day workshop designed for those in the community who need to be suicide aware in their job roles

Section 3: Stakeholder Consultation

This section provides a thematic analysis of the semi-structured consultations with the Connect4 Advisory Group and staff, TDATF Coordinator, SDCP Chief Executive Officer, and SCP staff in primary and secondary schools in West Tallaght. Also included in this analysis are the results from surveys completed by 41 young people supported by Connect 4 and 38 external stakeholders with knowledge and insight into the project. For clarity and ease of reference, we will present the findings based on themed sub section headings.

3.1 Innovative Model

SDCP has over 20 years' experience in delivering universal early intervention programmes to young people. This is the first time that they have ventured into a targeted approach to engage those most at risk and who have fallen through "*the cracks*." Detached street work is still a very niche and specialised area of work and there are only a small number of projects in Ireland adopting the model.

For SDCP and the Department for Community and Rural Affairs to commit funding to pilot such a programme was exceptional and demonstrates the joined up thinking that exists between community development, drug prevention, harm reduction and probation agencies in the area. There is no other youth service championing such a frontline approach to youth engagement in West Tallaght. The Connect 4 team leader and TDATF Coordinator addressed the Oireachtas Youth Committee in March 2023 to raise awareness of the project and the value and impact of detached street work was recognised as part of the Citizens Assembly on Drug Use.

Contributors highlighted the innovative approach adopted by the staff who recognise that they are working in the territory of the young person and have waited respectfully to be invited into the community. They have met the young people where they are at, took their time building relationships and are always visible in the identified areas. The uptake of young people and numbers of engagements and interventions described in Section 2 is evidence that the service is working and that the need exists, in West Tallaght and beyond.

Connect 4 is aligned with current policy and practice. The Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Report on the Future of Youth Work (July 2023) recommended embedding and prioritising detached street work in future policies relating to young people and youth work and that additional investment in detached street work should be separate to existing programmes to aid it's roll out throughout the country⁷.

⁷ Recommendation 5, Page 10.

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_children_equality_disability_integration_and_youth/reports/2023/2023-07-11_report-on-the-future-of-youth-work_en.pdf

3.2 Youth Diversion

Gaining the trust of young people has underpinned the foundations for meaningful and impactful work. Creating fun and safe environments for young people to get physically active reduces the likelihood of involvement in deviant behaviours. Connect 4 builds relationships with the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in West Tallaght, that are not connected with any other youth service, all to divert them from risky behaviours.

The 500 young people engaged since April 2022 through the football, gym, pop up marquee, community based initiatives and streetwork have built relationships, feel better about themselves, are healthier and are more likely to progress in education, training, and employment. (See section 3.6). Young people engaging are themselves acting as positive role models for their peers and in some cases breaking the cycle of inter-generational drug use and related crime. The success and visibility has been a catalyst for the involvement of others such as Shamrock Rovers who produced a video for TDATF in recognition that they too are positive role models for young people.

3.3 Community Safety



While youth engagement and diversion are the main priorities of Connect 4, making communities safer is an added benefit. Parents and community residents reported feeling reassured by the presence of positive adult role models. Due to increased activities, there are fewer young people hanging around in groups outside shops or in parks.

While every group of young people is not a gang, we do know that “gangs” can be intimidating for people, particularly older generations. Seeing young people play gaelic, soccer, fun games, basketball and rugby on the greens and courts of West Tallaght projects a sense of optimism in an area that has been stigmatised for many years. At a recent meeting of the McUillium Residents Association it was highlighted that parents in the area feel much more comfortable letting their children out. The fear of their child being intimidated or exposed to anti social behaviour has greatly diminished.

3.4 Effective Service

In the 18 months since commencement, the project has been warmly received by the communities it serves. The presence of, the four uniformed Connect 4 street workers, positive role models and access to activities and supports has been transformative for young people. The visibility and approachability of the street workers was acknowledged by many groups in the areas including schools, political reps, community reps, other youth services, and SDCC. 90% of respondents to the external stakeholder rated the service effective or very effective. The parents of the young people Connect 4 are targeting have endorsed the work.

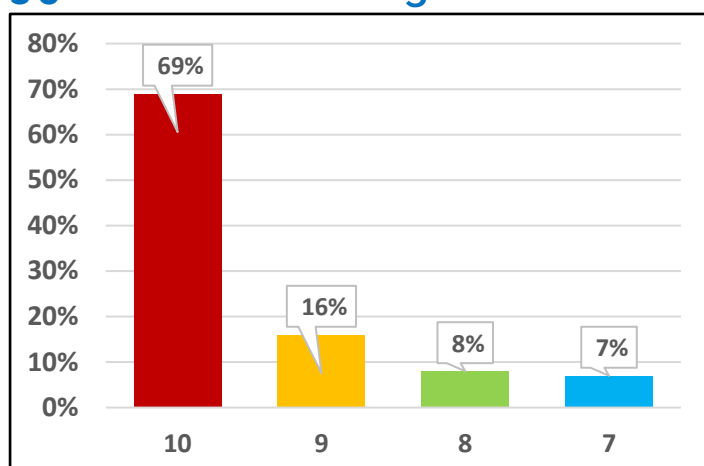
The Connect 4 team started litter picking in Glenshane and now it is done regularly. They make regular reports to the local authority regarding refuse, dumping and drug related litter. They have been the connector on the ground for so many organisations. Their work on the CfL group was instrumental in the creation of the 'Tallaght Talks' pilot project to address intergenerational trauma in Jobstown.

"The Connect Four project has in a relatively short time established itself as a vital and effective service delivering positive interventions that involve young people into sport and activities that they would otherwise not undertaken. The energy and enthusiasm of the Connect 4 staff team is also a vital part of their success. The team have engaged some of the hardest to reach young people in a very disadvantaged community. The model works and the benefits for young people in the community are already evident". (External stakeholder)

"The Connect 4 service should be provided with long-term sustainable funding as it is meeting a significant gap in services. Should it not be supported on a long-term basis, the implications for these young people and the community as a whole will be more drug problems, crime, and wider societal problems that directly impact everyone". (External stakeholder)

The relationship with Connect 4 is reciprocal, they may identify someone who could benefit from our service, and we work together to support their engagement and equally we may have young people who maybe are not ready for talk therapy but who are at risk in the communities that Connect 4 cover, and we will approach them where appropriate to seek support for the individual. (External stakeholder)

3.5 Voice of the Young Person



41 young people (or their parents) supported by Connect 4 completed an on-line survey about the impact of the service. On a scale of 1-10 on the effectiveness of Connect 4⁸, 69% scored at 10, 16% at 9, 8% at 8 and 7% at 7. This suggests that the young people have derived significant benefits. Connect 4 enabled, 88% of respondents to achieve better physical health, 57%

to improve their mental health, 37% to build relationships and 28% to progress in education or employment.

"It's been a great experience and so good for confidence building and mental health, especially in the darker winter months. Good laughs, gain soccer skills, improve self-esteem, gain in confidence, improve fitness, gain a sense of connection to the community, increase endorphins, and keep depression and boredom at bay. Plus improves fitness. What's not to love? There are ONLY positive outcomes, the lads run a brilliant programme". (Young Person)

"I do the kickboxing with connect4 in TMA to lose weight and I have thanks to Dave, Rob and Paul and I'm way more confident in myself and my body I would really like to continue doing the gym/kickboxing with the boys" 🙌 (Young Person)

"I've cut down on my drug use I use the gym 2 times a week also kickboxing I've seen huge success mentally and physically I've picked up hobbies like the football/ running that they provide and there's less people up to no good in our community" (Young Person)

"I've given a 10 cause connect 4 has showed me that there's no good in standing on corners and doing nothing all day so instead I started to go to the gym with connect 4 and play football too and that changed everything I do". (Young Person)

"Connect 4 have been amazing in mac Uilliam I've never seen all the children play so happily together, all the children and parents I know have all benefited from having connect 4 here working with families they are all so lovely and will always help with issues even when not in working hours id really appreciate if they had more funding to stay on". (Parent)

"My 2 boys 11 and 14 loved taking part in the connect4 activities and the team are brilliant with the kids they went out of there way for the kids in d area fair play and a big thank you my kids will miss you guys" (Parent)

⁸ 1 not effective and 10 very effective.

3.6 Challenges

Staff recruitment has been a big challenge, for most of period since its launch Connect 4 has been operating with three or less staff. Such difficulties are not unique as it is a sectoral wide issue. The personal safety of staff can sometimes be at risk, and they use codes to communicate when a situation becomes dangerous. They must remove themselves if they feel there is the potential for any illegal activity taking place.

The benefits and potential of collaboration with youth services and youth justice projects in the West Tallaght area has not been fully realised which could be due to several factors. Current funding structures and qualifying criteria are such that tensions always exist between community based youth projects operating in the same areas. Working collaboratively can be interpreted by some as recognition that other services may be the best fit for “our young people” which can weaken future funding applications.

It appears that in the explanation of Connect 4, the differentiation between the detached street work model and mainstream centre based youth work has been interpreted by some youth services as a criticism of their work and approach. In the submissions to the Oireachtas and other briefing documents, it was necessary for clarification and understanding to distinguish between both models. This does seem to have inhibited relationships with some services but can be resurrected. It is important for peer learning and personal development to mix the very hard to reach and those with lesser needs.

Connect 4 are committed to working with all youth services in West Tallaght and acknowledge that detached street work is only one approach that compliments others to achieve positive outcomes for young people. Connect 4 worked effectively with Foroige who have a significant remit around youth diversion and youth justice in the area to assist in the resolution of the Dublin Bus issues. This type of partnership needs to become more embedded. Connect 4 collaborate regularly with the CARP youth project as they have a crossover of young people engaging with both services. They facilitated the induction of a new CARP youth worker by allowing them to shadow the Connect 4 staff in their street work to develop familiarity and relationships with young people in the community.

Youth services can be a referral pathway to Connect 4 for those young people involved in drug use and criminality. Conversely, youth intervention or prevention programmes from a youth service might benefit the young person engaged with Connect 4. Though the gender balance of participation in Connect 4 is above average at 75-25, challenges remain with engaging young females.

Section 4: Learning & Discussion

This section discusses the overall findings offering enablers for success and key learnings based on the body of qualitative and quantitative data made available to and generated through this evaluation.

4.1 Impact & Outcomes

Access to Connect 4 has in a short period of time (18 months or less) changed the lives of many young people aged 10-24 in the West Tallaght area who previously congregated in groups, were on the cusp of criminality, had drug issues and were not attached to any services. Through engaging with Connect 4 and other supports available, young people have, become more aware of their issues, built positive relationships, are making better choices, and progressing to employment. Parents who felt helpless and that there were no supports available to meet the complex needs of their children have been reassured and fully endorse the model.

The visibility of the staff in the community has contributed to a sense of safety and security not just for young people but for families and older residents. With trends pointing towards introduction to drug use and criminality at much younger ages, Connect 4 in their work with children as young as 10 are providing effective early intervention for many who have never availed of public services. There is also a growing sense that the prevailing narrative of “there is a group of lawless, out of control, untouchable young people who won’t engage with anyone” is being reversed. Green areas and public spaces in Kilinarden and Jobstown in the summer months were populated by young people playing football and other sports which brought vibrancy and hope to the community.

4.2 Enablers

The fact that Connect 4 staff are on the street including at times when there is no one else there and when it might be dangerous was perceived to be one of Connect 4’s biggest enablers for success. This facilitates that all important first contact and demonstrates that staff will work at the level of the young people they meet. It demonstrates that there are no barriers and that there is a respect for the youth in the community.

Stakeholders felt that Connect 4 benefitted from a “*certain degree of independence from the sometimes very formal community structure*”. Referral and assessment processes while robust are not unduly burdensome. The staff are approachable and engaging while the activities and programmes are flexible and innovative. The on the ground knowledge and insights of the Connect 4 staff is useful for data validation and trend identification for SDCP, TDATF, Advisory Group members and the CfL Group.

The competence and experience of the staff team and their ability to build relationships in a community like West Tallaght traumatised by impacts of intergenerational drug use, poverty, and criminality are key enablers. The process by which they gradually introduced themselves to the area, becoming more visible and making connections with young people was balanced and proportionate. Staff are trained in European Drug Prevention Quality Standards, Trauma Informed Care, Tusla Always Children First, Conflict Resolution and Restorative Practice.

The community and statutory agencies know why there is a need for Connect 4 in Tallaght and why it must be sustained, they are invested in the story and want to be part of its success and development. Connect 4 street workers have used opportunities and networks to increase profile and connect with young people e.g., Dublin Bus, The FAI, Shamrock Rovers, Homeless Soccer leagues, and Schools.

Legitimising the anger and alienation felt by young people about the lack of opportunities has been both therapeutic and empowering. Connect 4 communicate with young people as equals, they ask them about their interests and build events around these. Young people supported by Connect 4 were recently consulted for the 'Citizen's Assembly on Drug Use' to help gather the views of young people in respect of drugs issues. This was a noteworthy development in that street work was recognised as a valuable medium for engaging and consulting with young people.

Connect 4 have created a safe place within the community for young people to link in with the service on their terms. Engaging young people at risk not accessing local services and having support that is meeting them where they are at both in terms of their environment and personal development is vital. These are key tenets of the 'No wrong door' and 'never give up' principles enshrined in the Youth Justice Strategy⁹.

Through street work, young people are more open and engaging because they are at ease in their own space. By gaining this trust in the young person's space, Connect 4 can then signpost and sometimes accompany them into relevant services. Such interventions are highly unlikely to have taken place without the initial engagement and trust-building of street work.

⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3670e-youth-justice-strategy-2021-2027/>



Connect 4 team, June 2023

4.3 Value for Money

Funding for the Connect 4 pilot came from the Dept of Rural & Community Development through the Social Inclusion Community Activation (SICAP). It was a balance that was left over from COVID in the SDCP SICAP allocation. The minister agreed that SDCP could use the surplus for this project, and this was approved by the LCDC. A total of €167,000 was made available to Connect 4.

The numbers reached (more than 500) and the outcomes accrued discussed in Section 4.1 point to good value for money. This case is further strengthened by the long term positive impacts of diverting young people at an early age away from criminality and substance misuse and into prosocial behaviours and employment. It assists community cohesion, reduces crime and associated costs for the criminal justice and healthcare systems.



Section 5: Recommendations

Based on the research carried out for this evaluation and our knowledge of this sector, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration.

5.1 Programme Funding

The findings from this evaluation clearly evidence the positive impact of the Connect 4 pilot project for a range of stakeholders. To sustain this, we recommend that SDCP and TDATF seek funding for four staff and a team leader on a three year basis which is on a par with the funding duration for UBU youth projects.

While applications to the Department of Health Prevention and Education and the Community Safety Innovation Funds have been unsuccessful, SDCP should continue to explore funding avenues related to health and wellbeing and community safety. Any further applications to agencies in these sectors must highlight the impact of Connect 4 evidenced in this evaluation in respect of improved physical and emotional wellbeing and people feeling safer in the communities of West Tallaght. Connect 4's work in diverting young people from criminality renders it relevant to the Department of Justice (DoJ) and SDCP are actively exploring the potential for funding from DoJ.

The future funding strategy of Connect 4 should be cognisant that it is a youth work project, consequently the responsibility for sustainable funding rests with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) through UBU funding channels. This is validated by the July 2023 Report on the Future of Youth Work that recommended embedding and prioritising detached street work in future policies relating to young people and youth work and that additional investment in detached street work should be separate to existing programmes to aid its roll out throughout the country.

The possibility of funding separate projects in Kilinarden and Jobstown should be explored. To expand on the outdoors aspect of the provision, transport to take the young people out of Tallaght for outdoor pursuits, hiking and hill walking would add value for participants.

5.2 Strategic Group

While acknowledging that future governance of Connect 4 will be shaped by the lead organisation, we recommend consideration of a high level strategic group with membership from policy makers, community influencers and academia. This group would be responsible for the strategic development of the project in respect of sustainability, impact measurement, programme design and promotion. An operations group is also recommended with oversight on the delivery of the project. Building the capacity of young people supported by Connect 4 to input to the operations group should be a priority. All the youth justice and youth diversion projects in the area should be invited onto the operations group.

5.3 Staff Development

Staff are aware of the risks of working in this environment and are trained accordingly. Having a stand-alone team leader whose role does not include project work would free up time to develop clear protocols for self-care to protect against burn out and personal risk. Guidance on how long Connect 4 should work with a young person must be put in place and there should be a key working option for more sustained 1-1 engagement with young people which may necessitate additional training for staff.

5.4 Reporting

Recording and reporting of Connect 4 activity requires further refinement. Any future DoJ funding of the service may require data in respect of offences and probation orders. Differentiation between one off group activities and 1-1 interventions must be clear and recorded. The outcomes in the logic model in Figure 1 should be adopted as the project outcomes with data collection tools such as surveys in place to capture achievement. Ongoing reporting of Connect 4 impact should be structured around activity, process and the difference made to stakeholders.

Future messaging and promotion of Connect 4 does not have to major on the differences between detached street work and youth work. Recent research, briefings and submissions to the Oireachtas has increased awareness of the different models. It is not an either/or as both models have their merits. What is evident though is that street work is the most effective medium for engaging hard to reach young people and this should continue to be the niche for Connect 4.

Appendix 1 – Case Studies

Case Study 1 - Referrals

Connect 4 had three different referrals from schools, Barnardos and JADD. All were aged 10-12, two were on reduced hours in school because of bad behavioural issues. Connect 4 met with all individually and formed a group using the team's youth work skills and the skills of one of our team who is a martial arts instructor. Through this process Connect 4 have secured a venue for 3 boys and meet twice weekly, building positive relationships and having fun. Connect 4 are currently learning the group new skills and using antibullying techniques to challenge them and their behaviours.

Both boys are now back in school full time. We have attended mediators for both and along with other agencies are key to implementing a plan for them to achieve positive goals in school. We have also introduced one of them to the Strengthening Family Program. We have seen a huge difference in all 3 young people in terms of their emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and boundaries.

Case Study 2 - Group

We targeted a march in February set up to rally local people to oppose the migrant/refugee centres in Tallaght. We had concerns about these marches as there were some young people attending who we would believe to be extremely vulnerable to Far Rite Activists. Through strategic street work we were able to engage with 6 young men aged 16-18 somewhere wearing ski masks and all appeared to be involved in the anti-racist chants.

As we spoke to these young men, we challenged them on why they were at the protest and what their thoughts were. We redirected them in conversation and left the march to go to the local gym where we have access too. The 6 lads have all been supported and redirected, 4 have been successful in receiving their safe pass and all are fully engaged in gym sessions with the team weekly. They have not been to an anti-refugee march since.

Case Study 3 – Jimmy (not real name)

Jimmy was referred to our team by JADD around 7 months ago. Jimmy presented with mental health and drug issues and was not easy to engage with at the start. Jimmy had a suicide attempt not long after engaging with us. The team used their ASSIST Training intervention skills. This allowed us to engage more positively with both the young person and his family. Jimmy has a good relationship with the team now and engages with us through physical activities at least 3 times a week. He is also engaged in mental health services which he attends with one of the team regularly. Jimmy has stabilized his drug use and there is constant contact with his family who are re-assured by us working with him.

Case Study 4 – Joe (not real name)

The Team have been working with 1 young man 18 for the past 4 months.

we met "Joe" on street work 1 evening while he was watching a football event we had set up. "Joe" was open that evening and we discussed the issues he is facing and the choices he had been making. 4 months on, Joe is regularly at our football events, meets us at least twice a week to do gym sessions, is linked in with Deonach and is slowly becoming a positive role model to his peers. Having told me he has "handed his phone back" and no longer engaged in illegal activity, Joe is a volunteer on a Friday evening where he referees games attended by young people aged 12-15 averaging 90-100. "Joe" is awaiting a court appearance but is fully focused on moving forward and making positive life choices.

