

Get Connected: Newport Evaluation

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CLEVELAND
POLICE



Project
Connect

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This project was undertaken by Black Box Research and Consultancy, whose members attended the final session of Get Connected: Newport in January 2023 to conduct interviews with a sample of attendees for the purpose of this evaluation.

Black Box is a nationally recognised criminal justice consultancy with a focus on Modern Slavery, specifically forced labour, criminal exploitation and County Lines drug supply. The central objective of Black Box is to provide support to victims of Modern Slavery, as well as enhance public awareness of this issue both domestically and internationally. By leveraging its expertise in expert testimony, training and grass-roots evaluations, Black Box endeavours to equip organisations and professionals with the necessary tools to assist children, young people and vulnerable adults who are ensnared in exploitative environments and entangled in the Criminal Justice System.

Get Connected is a nine-to-twelve month interactive program offered by Project Connect that brings cross-sector professionals and community members together. Consisting of criminal justice professionals and those with experience of being in the Criminal Justice System, the team guides participants in creating a mutual understanding of the particular issues within their locality and how to tackle them by developing a shared action plan with tangible outcomes.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of Cleveland Police.

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Executive Summary



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Introduction

This report highlights the findings of an evaluation of Get Connected: Newport (Middlesbrough). Get Connected's aim is to increase collaboration between local organisations engaged in the reduction of community youth violence.

Methods

A qualitative approach was used, whereby six semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who attended all, or at least four of the five, Get Connected: Newport sessions. One professional from each of the organisations attending Get Connected: Newport was selected as a representative from the said organisation. These included the local authority, police, children's services, education and the third sector. Thematic analysis was adopted to identify themes on what worked and why, and how Get Connected could be improved.

Findings

1. Participants agreed that multi-agency collaboration had increased subsequent to their attendance of the project
2. Increased understanding of the roles of the professionals' working in Newport resulted in improved efficiency in day-to-day operations. Participants now know who to contact and reported connecting with individuals who were previously unknown or difficult to reach. Fundamental to this was having influential community leaders in attendance who could promote and encourage change
3. The actions of Joe and Carlus (project facilitators) proved fundamental to the success of the project, whereby they promoted critically reflective discussions, where participants were challenged to think about the effectiveness of current youth violence prevention efforts in Newport. Participants benefitted from self-reflecting, and refocusing their goals and practices to solve local issues in different ways
4. The project facilitators' ability to adapt the structure of the project enabled valuable discussion to digress away from the strategic plan when required. Gaps between the five sessions allowed for crucial periods of reflection
5. Joe and Carlus' experience and dynamic was key to maintaining engagement and promoting critical discussion, with Carlus' lived experience cited as a powerful conduit for highlighting the importance of challenge in multi-agency working
6. Relationship building and partnership working was improved, however participants reported that there were a number of senior leaders and influential figures who failed to attend. Such individuals were earmarked as playing a crucial role in enabling the success of Get Connected. Reduced attendance across the five days was noted as a factor which could limit successful future multi-agency collaboration
7. Despite allowing time for critical discussion, a balance must be achieved. The project facilitators were criticised for both cutting people off too quickly, as well as not enabling enough time within the programme to allocate for certain discussions

Recommendations

- Greater promotion of Get Connected is needed at senior level for the specific locality
- A single point of contact should be designated before commencement of Get Connected. The single point of contact should act as a facilitator during and after delivery of the project
- Project facilitators would benefit from introducing and integrating single points of contact from each locality across the country
- Representatives from all organisations addressing crime and youth violence must be in attendance of Get Connected
- More time is needed during sessions to allow for attendees to engage in deeper conversations, case studies and examples of their experiences of working to address crime and youth violence
- Get Connected must be rolled out nationally, with a particular focus on localities experiencing high levels of crime and youth violence



Introduction

Project Connect was founded in 2021 with the aim of creating meaningful connections to help develop strategy, vision and mission through harnessing the power of people within the statutory and third sector. This is enabled through Get Connected workshops which run over a period of six-to-nine months via five interactive full-day sessions. This evaluation is based on interviews conducted with attendees of Get Connected: Newport, which ran from the end of 2022 to the beginning of 2023.

Newport is a region within Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire, with a population of 10,778 people and is under the jurisdiction of the Middlesbrough North policing neighbourhood, who operate as part of the Cleveland Police force area.

Get Connected: Newport was conducted over five days within different public sector buildings in Middlesborough. Each session sought to bring together local stakeholders to increase awareness and understanding of the contextual factors contributing towards crime and youth violence within Newport. Attendees were supported in the creation of an action plan that contained actionable targets towards the implementation of achievable goals. All organisations were encouraged to effectively facilitate future violence prevention strategies that improve the lives of young people within their community. The structure of the sessions included:

Day One	What is a Gang	Developing a Strategic Approach
Day Two	Mapping the Problem	Partnership Working
Day Three	Assessment and Referral	Targeted and Effective Intervention
Day Four	Community Mobilisation	Local Leadership
Day Five	Breaking the Cycle	Lessons Learn and Implementation

Methods

The findings that form the basis of this evaluation have been identified through interviews conducted with six participants who attended Get Connected: Newport. The six participants held different roles within the community, working within the local authority, police, children's services, education and the third sector. Each participant attended at least four out of the five sessions. Semi-structured Interviews present a snapshot of participation in the project, with data collection occurring during the final session of the Get Connected five-day structure. Interviews lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes and were recorded using a mobile recording device.

Participants were asked to reflect on their previous experiences of multi-agency working and the extent to which collaboration had improved since attending Get Connected, whether they thought this had already had an improved affect on the locality-specific issues in Newport, the roles of Joe and Carlus as project facilitators, the structure and delivery of Get Connected, and any improvements that could be implemented in future iterations of the project across the UK. Qualitative data analysis was conducted via the use of NVivo 12. Researchers carried out inductive thematic analysis which identified emergent themes via coding. These have been used to formulate conclusions on what works and why, and recommendations for how the project can be improved.

Findings



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Interviews conducted with six local stakeholders who had attended Get Connected: Newport provided evidence which cited that participation had increased frequency of contact and collaboration between other Newport-based professionals. These comprised professionals who shared a commitment to preventing youth violence within the locality. This facilitated improved implementation of services within the local community, with specific reference made to how the project's structure, in addition to the role of the project facilitators, appeared to be fundamental to the project's success. However, the project was not without the need for improvements. Indeed, participants suggested recommendations which would see the successful delivery of future iterations of Get Connected across the UK.

Collaboration

'There was definitely people more embedded in what we were doing before Get Connected, and maybe those that were sort of on the periphery or whatever. But through attending this, I think it's helped sort of centre some departments to get back involved. So there's definitely been more joint working since we started this year.' (Participant 4)

The main goal of Get-Connected is to increase collaboration between organisations in a given area of focus, in this case within Newport, Middlesbrough. Multi-agency collaboration is fundamental to any potential success in reducing youth violence, and this sentiment was shared by participants:

'We can't do it on our own, I've tried, it doesn't work.' (Participant 1)

Collaboration was not only aided by what participant's described as an increased frequency of contact between organisations since the project had started, but also through creating a space that generated greater awareness and understanding of the role each organisation and professional played in the local youth violence landscape.

Making Connections that Others Do Not See

It was reported that contact between organisations and people who, whilst vitally important, were otherwise unknown prior to attending Get Connected had improved:

'I can definitely see new partnerships forming from the wider resource that we've got. A lot of emails can pass my desk and I'm seeing people email people that I didn't see before.' (Participant 4)

'It opened my eyes to how many agencies were working in that small area, I didn't appreciate how much went on there, how many people were invested in Newport.' (Participant 6)



Focused Networking

By providing a space for new connections to form, alongside generating an understanding of the roles key stakeholders played in reducing and preventing violence in Newport, focused and targeted networking was cited as a major benefit to organisations who faced lengthy delays in implementing initiatives or seeking much needed support. As a result, communication was more stream-lined and goal-driven, ensuring that information and the appropriate sources of support are attained with greater speed and ease:

'It's certainly improved our connections; we now know who to go to when we need support and if it's the wrong person they seem more open to steer us in the right direction.' (Participant 5)

'I do believe that if you speak to the right people, and they put you to the right person, you'll get a better and quicker response than what probably would have been done before when someone said I'll suddenly get in touch, phone down, go home forget about it, and we're sat three-to-four hours waiting for a social worker or an appropriate adult to get back to us. The contacts that we've made here were able to sort of bypass that.' (Participant 3)

Programme Delivery

Greater collaboration achieved through participating in Get Connected: Newport was facilitated by specific aspects of programme delivery, mainly coordinated and determined by the abilities of its facilitators, Joe and Carlus.

Focused networking, which enabled participants to streamline services through a greater understanding of specific roles within the community, was aided by Joe and Carlus' ability to attract and involve the correct members of the community. Likened to a police officers 'utility belt', Joe and Carlus held influential cultural and social capital within Newport which was used to benefit and facilitate other organisations in the pursuit of preventing youth violence.

'I've done quite a lot of multi-agency working in my time with youth offending. I think the difference between what I have done and what this has brought to light is you're sometimes not meeting and digging with the right people in a multi-agency arena.' (Participant 1)

'I'd liken it to if you were in the police, we have utility belts, where you'll have your spray or whatever. It's another tool that we can go to. I know now, if we picked up a job tomorrow and we started developing it, and we have had it where we've had a lad who needed social services and I was able to speak to one of the contacts we met here, who then gave me the right number to speak to, it was like a match on one of the consoles, and you need a big match, and that was it. Where I might previously spend hours and hours and hours on a phone trying to ring somebody.' (Participant 3)



Facilitator Dynamism

Most participants were reciprocal of the environment Joe and Carlus had created within the sessions. Engagement is key, especially in a programme structured around participation over an extended period of time. The connection between Joe and Carlus, and their relaxed approach to the delivery of Get Connected was key in facilitating this. This resulted in establishing trusting relationships with participants which encouraged knowledge exchange and permitted more honest and open responses to the current challenges experienced within Newport:

'I never find it a boring day. I have been to as many training and these things, and you just sit there and you've lost, and genuinely, someone might say, "Well, what have they just said for the last half an hour?" and I've said, "Have you even listened?" That hasn't been the case with these guys, I think that they work well together. You know, the different personalities in that, and that sort of brings a little bit of light heartedness which keeps people engaged.' (Participant 3)

Lived Experience

Carlus' lived experience in particular was cited as a powerful engagement tool that supported the project's motivations and cemented confidence in its outcomes:

'I think Carlus in general, just sort of his story as well, I think that it's really solid, [it's] engaging for people who come on as well.' (Participant 4)

'It's good that Carlus has got lived experienced and the way he brings that in with the case studies. It's really good as a case study, and it's a shocker for people, especially when you've got police in the room who are pro-punishment. It's interesting to hear how Joe's supported him from a young age, I think that should be leaned on more in sessions 'cause it's powerful, Joe could go into more depth with how he supported him. Especially with probation, we've got no one here from probation, they should be involved. Lived experience is powerful and Carlus' journey from where he was to now is inspirational. I know he won't want to show it all but I think it gets people to look at things differently. Other people are more regimental and one-track minded, they have tunnel vision.' (Participant 2)

Constructive Discussion

Joe and Carlus' relationship was most beneficial when promoting constructive discussion. This was core to the success of the programme, where common misconceptions were confronted by those at the forefront of the challenges. Joe and Carlus' relevant lived experience required to educate those involved encouraged participants to divulge their teachings to other group members who could challenge any assumptions and misconceptions. Coming from a respected, neutral position, Joe and Carlus were able to probe participants with questions that were sometimes difficult and uncomfortable to answer, using their experience to sift impactful answers that guided and directed the action plan towards effective solutions.



The dynamic was again noted, with Joe playing 'good cop' and Carlus 'bad cop'. This was effective in aiding buy-in from the attendees and supporting group discussion:

'Content has been good, [Joe has] hit some good points, I like how they challenge me and other people. Where they have no allegiances, they can fire from the hip and they should be more brutal with that. Now people have better understanding after being challenged.' (Participant 2)

'Any sort of like multi-agency conference that you've got, people tend to skirt around the too hard questions and Joe and Carlus haven't. I think it's made one or two people uncomfortable when we've had to answer something. But then, as the weeks have gone on, you can see people understanding why we're asked the questions that we're asked, and the benefit that that's had to us as a group of people coming together.' (Participant 1)

Reflection and Refocussing

Joe and Carlus' promotion of constructive discussion permitted both reflection and refocusing. By challenging common narratives held by participants; empathy for both stakeholders and the children and young people with whom they interact with was increased. This was alongside an appreciation for how one, as a key agent of change, was currently contributing. This period of reflection enabled individuals to re-align the goals and practices that they were more focused towards addressing:

'I've definitely seen changes in my team in terms of their approach to certain areas. We are now considering a lot more vulnerability. Pre-Get Connected we were very much enforcement minded. Whereas Get Connected has made us think about vulnerability and exploitation more, so it's definitely helped shape a culture in our team. It's certainly changed my perception of Newport. I had quite a negative perception of it prior. That's probably because as police we see a small proportion of the community that cause problems. It's made me see how many connections there are, how many professionals there are who are committed to working, and who are passionate, and it's definitely changed my perception, something I might have thought was a hopeless cause.' (Participant 6)

'I think it probably helped me revisit the other side of the conversation point. I think we've mentioned it in here, sometimes you do get bogged down in your deliverables or your long term, medium term whatever. But I think for things to work as they should, you need to incorporate other people's as well.' (Participant 4)

'What Get Connected has done is made me realise, like I said, that I'm probably not working with the people I need to be working with, and I need to be linking in with a lot of other people to understand more about what's going on in the communities. We all have our own thoughts on what's going on out there in the community, but unless you're dealing with the right people, you're probably not getting the right story. So it has made me stop and think a lot more about who I'm telephoning, who I'm sending an email to, who I'm inviting to such and such a meeting, and after so long in youth justice, I thought I had it, but I honestly hadn't.' (Participant 1)

Structure



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The beneficial refocusing and reflection process that occurred through constructive discussion was enhanced by the project's structure, with specific reference made to time allocations. Sessions that span the whole day allowed Joe and Carlus a certain level of adaptability to structural constraints when a topic of interest inspired lengthy discussion. Joe and Carlus were praised for their ability to judge when to interject in these discussions, when they were too long, or when the main point was lost. This maintained engagement. Though, this is not without criticism; Joe was criticised for cutting people off both too early, as well as allowing discussions to continue for too long, where the main point of the exercise was in the distance. This appeared to be a constant battle that Joe and Carlus as project facilitators must address. In this instance, it is vitally important that facilitators use their experience to implement a structure, where a balance between creating a space for open discussion that does not detract from the main argument is achieved, otherwise participants will begin to feel unheard or uninterested, dependent upon which side of the spectrum their perception lies:

'Both Joe and Carlus are really good at understanding their audience, and if they see somebody struggling or they don't think we've had enough time, then they will always allow.' (Participant 1)

'Sometimes people could have a bit more time to talk, that would help, more so with Joe, sometimes he rattles through things because he's got his agenda. Sometimes you need more time for people to talk and get the point, he'll reign me in 'cause I'm a good talker, I'm a deep thinker and logical, we're talking about small pieces of the pie, I'm talking about bigger pieces of the pie.' (Participant 2)

'It's a hard one because I would say more structure, but yet to allow people to open up and talk, it's that balance, you've got to let that go, and sometimes it's not that clear what the objective actually is. But I do think that's because you've got to let people go, and they will naturally go their own ways. I am aware that somebody has mentioned about Joe cutting people off, or cutting somebody off but I sympathize with him totally and he needs to do that, because he's got to let them go but then reign them in when it starts becoming unproductive.' (Participant 3)

Although there was some contention regarding the successful implementation of a structure, the extended period of time between sessions was praised for its ability to promote reflection and refocussing. Participants were able to slowly absorb the information in each session, understand how it influenced their work and how it could be acted upon within their own daily practices:

'I thought the time in between events was really important. It'll be interesting to see the difference between Hemlington and Newport. I think it's allowed people that space, it's allowed people to engage, come away, digest it, reflect on it in the workplace and come back refreshed ready to go again. You don't change perceptions in an area or gain an understanding of the problems overnight, I thought it was really important that we took our time, it shows the commitment that everyone has and I think it'll promote buy-in.' (Participant 6)



Future Partners

Whilst Joe and Carlus were praised for their ability to aid collaboration amongst those working to prevent youth violence in Newport, many were quick to note that some key stakeholders were missing from attending the project. If they did attend, it was reported that their attendance declined towards the end of the project which impacted upon overall numbers and, whilst not the sole responsibility of the facilitators, a certain level of commitment should be advocated:

'I have been involved in conversations with professionals in Newport who weren't aware that Get Connected was going on, [although] I know Joe and Carlus have been involved in the early stage of trying to promote the project. I just wonder if we'd have done some comms at the early stage, it would've captured everybody and would've been a slower burn of building up momentum. Rather than ambushing professionals at a late time. If I was to go back again, I would look at comms in the workshop stages, make sure people know what we're trying to achieve and to attract community leaders and other professionals who maybe haven't heard about Get Connected.' (Participant 6)

Location, Location, Location

Whilst involving hyperlocal actors can be beneficial when discussing the local nuances required to inspire change and commitment to a contextually specific action plan, individuals from organisations whose daily practices covered larger areas challenged the feasibility and replicability of this project to the wider Middlesbrough area:

'The only downside is that Get Connected in Newport, which is in Gresham, is quite a specific small area, and resources wise, I'm part of a small team and we can't give everything to that area. I couldn't attend every Get Connected in Newport because then there would be potentially one in Hemlington, one in Brammall's Farm and that's Middlesbrough alone. There's Middlesbrough, Stockton, Hartlepool and Redland, Cleveland. It's fantastic but it's quite specific and quite centralized to one area and really it should be. What we should be trying to do is roll it out county-wide, so that we almost have a point of contact from each Get Connected and Newport, Hemlington or whatever, attending a regional meeting. There they can say, 'We've picked up a job today in Redcar, and I know that the Get Connected representative for Redcar is also serving them' and then say, 'Look, there's an issue in and around certain youth, blah, blah, blah, can you reach out to your, you know your people and try to get some information?' Rather than, I know if there's problem in Newport, I know exactly who I need to speak to. But I wouldn't even know where to start in Redcar'. (Participant 3)



Conclusion

It was agreed among the six participants interviewed that attending Get Connected: Newport enabled them to increase collaboration with other stakeholders involved in reducing crime and youth violence. A greater understanding of the problems experienced within Newport, increased awareness of the role each organisation and representative played in dealing with these problems, and the building of partnerships between those otherwise unknown, facilitated more meaningful contact between organisations, subsequently improving the efficiency and effectiveness of daily practices across and within organisations. The formation of these working partnerships were supported by the project facilitators, who accordingly adapted the structure of the project and encouraged critical reflection. Through discussions aiding in the creation of an action plan which addressed common misconceptions and guided stakeholders towards achievable outcomes, shared youth violence prevention measures were developed.

Limitations

Despite participants coming from a wide array of roles within the community, those included in this evaluation were not representative of everyone who attended Get Connected: Newport. Findings were drawn from professionals who attended most or all of the sessions. Dwindling attendance figures as the project progressed was cited as a pitfall that could impair project success. To aid future iterations of Get Connected, an evaluation would benefit from obtaining the views of those who ceased attendance of the sessions, in order to gain an understanding into what factors contributed to a lack of engagement.

Data collection was conducted during the fifth and final session of Get Connected: Newport. This limited the potential to understand the effect of Get Connected's aims of improving collaboration, and what impact this had on reducing crime and youth violence. Future evaluations would benefit from adopting a longitudinal method to understand how opinions and collaborations have evolved over the course of the five sessions and beyond.

Recommendations



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1. Greater promotion of Get Connected is needed at senior level for the selected locality
2. A single point of contact should be designated before commencement of Get Connected to allow for the promotion of the project and to build awareness of its aims. The single point of contact should remain a key facilitator during and following the conclusion of the project, and should be available to respond to the queries of professionals within the locality, signpost to appropriate agencies and professionals in times of need, and facilitate contact between other localities
3. The project facilitators would benefit from introducing and integrating the single points of contact from each locality across the country, through regular sessions designed to promote awareness, networking and collaboration
4. Representatives from all organisations addressing crime and youth violence within the selected locality need to be in attendance of all of the five Get Connected sessions in order to set a leading example and promote engagement
5. More time is needed during sessions to allow for attendees to engage in deeper conversations, case studies and examples of their experiences of working to address crime and youth violence within their locality
6. In order to improve multi-agency working at national level, Get Connected must be rolled out nationally, with a particular focus on localities experiencing high levels of crime and youth violence