

Introduction

This case study presents a new initiative, Engage, introduced by Meath Partnership in 2018 under Goal 2 of SICAP in collaboration with the Navan School Completion Programme, CYPSE, Probation Services' JLO and Navan Young Peoples Development Project, Education Welfare Officers, SUST Counsellor and LMETB Youth Officer. This case study highlights the positive impact that inter-agency collaboration can have when the objectives of multiple agencies are aligned for the benefit of disadvantaged young people.

Project Description

The Engage Project is an out-of-school support programme for school refusers, early school leavers and those at risk of early school leaving between the ages of 15 and 16 years old. Using established youth work approaches, this voluntary programme is open to young people living in County Meath who have disengaged from mainstream education on either a short or longer term basis.

In 2017, a number of youth and education providers came together with Meath Partnership to discuss the gap in supports for young people not managing in formal education settings. In the majority of cases, young people were disengaged from school at a young age and despite community agencies, schools and statutory agencies working in the best interest of young people, we were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the young people in school. At this point in time, there were 34 young people registered with schools but presenting with chronic non-attendance, some with more than 100 school days missed in the academic year. The agencies also identified a significant link between the young person's lack of engagement in school and their involvement in crime which was supported by the Juvenile Justice figures at the time.

Set against a background of the third largest and growing county youth population nationally, chronically low levels of investment, 13% of the national average, through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with Meath as the second lowest recipient of funding, and the re-design of the SICAP programme; 2018 presented an opportunity for the agencies to work together to design and introduce Engage.

The initiative would be a preventative needs-based, tailored support programme that could assist young people to develop the social and emotional awareness to allow them to connect with education and further training options.



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To support the design of the Engage Project, we visited a number of out-of-school and special education projects in Dundalk, Dublin and Limerick and gleaned a huge amount of knowledge and information in terms of their referral protocols, admission policies, programme designs and engagement strategies with the young people and their families all of which helped Meath Partnership to create the framework for the Engage Project.

At the heart of all of these projects, was the employment of a dedicated and experienced youth worker with an educational focus that would be available to drive the project forward and more importantly engage with the young person on a one-to-one basis.

Working with the steering committee in early 2018, Meath Partnership developed a job description for this new role and with SICAP funding guaranteed, launched the recruitment process. In June 2018, the Engage Project was launched with the employment of a dedicated Education Youth Support Officer (EYSO) and work got underway to reach out to the referral bodies and identify 12 young people that would be supported by the project in year one.

The first step in the collaborative process was to forge alliances and create a network of referral agencies, support services and educational and training facilities that could be accessed to deliver Engage. Presentations were made to more than 15 agencies and stakeholders and referral protocols put in place. Strong links were also established with Youth Work Ireland (YWI), Meath Volunteer Centre and Gaisce offering community-based alternatives for these young people. The EYSO took up a representative seat on both Comhairle na nÓg and the Economic Security Working Group within the Children and Young People's Support Committee (CYPSC) promoting the project and networking with relevant bodies.

The Engage Project

Engage, which is fully funded by SICAP, provides a tailored programme aimed at enabling 12 young people from county Meath to re-engage with education and/or training and employment, to develop life skills that foster good relations and build self-confidence and resilience. The EYSO works directly with young people, their referrers, families, schools and other agencies to support the individual needs of each young person based on an agreed personal action plan.



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Referral process

The referral process and programme planning cycle is highlighted in the graphic below:



The support and activities offered by the project are grounded in evidence-based interventions and comprise a mix of individual sessions and small group work and activities. We are using a range of tools and educational resources to support young people with literacy, numeracy and digital skills, communication and conflict management, life skills such as cooking and craft-making, personal development and goal setting. The Write-On programme, a fully accredited online learning platform developed by NALA is being utilised with great effect with some young person given the flexible and dynamic nature of the programme. We are measuring and tracking the soft outcomes achieved by the young person and re-enforcing these achievements to build confidence and validate skills.

In October 2018, we commenced a short programme of group activities bringing together participants for the first time. This programme is delivered in two hour sessions across eight weeks focussing on confidence and resilience building, self-advocacy, pride of place, upskilling and community involvement. This training is provided by external trainers working alongside the EYSO and is fully funded by SICAP.

Challenges experienced and how they were addressed

From the outset, attendance and continuity with some young people was somewhat challenging in that their prolonged period without a time table or structure, lead to a number of missed appointments and a stop-start feel to their initial engagement. It was evident that many of the young people engaged with had an overwhelming fear of failure, inadequacy, and where waiting to be excluded from the programme as that had been their experience of other initiatives previously. The need to establish boundaries given the one-to-one nature of the work and also to need to earn the young person's trust went hand-in-hand with the set-up work in the early stages of the project. Finally, we had to ensure that Engage did not

become an “off-load” initiative for other agencies and that the collaborative responsibility to work together for these young people was maintained and deepened.

To overcome the initial challenges, we recognised that it was of paramount importance that the EYSO must be a positive influence in the young person’s life, be punctual, reliable and regular in appointments and to model positive behaviour. We introduced a “buy-in” form for both parents/guardians and the young person establishing the expectations of all parties. The EYSO sent regular texts to remind the young person (or parent/guardian) the evening before and morning of a scheduled meeting and this proved helpful in reducing the number of missed sessions. If engagement with the programme was proving difficult for the young person, lines of communication with the EYSO were open and we actively encouraged suggestions for changes in our approach. Finally with regards timetabling of one-to-one sessions and group activities - we made an attempt to compromise and meet the young person in the middle; beginning at the young person’s current timetable, often in the afternoons and moving towards that of Engage over time i.e. 11am.

Ongoing and open communication with the young person and their parent or guardian is essential in terms of offering support and reassurance. As far as possible the EYSO provides a wrap-around support service calling on family members and other support services for assistance where necessary acting as a broker for the many services working with the young person.

Through the collaborative nature of Engage, the referral and support agencies that comprise the steering committee have been excellent in problem-solving, making additional resources and space available to deliver the project and also intervening when necessary to organise case-conferences to discuss new problems or emergent issues for the young person.

Outputs and Outcomes achieved

Our targets for 2018 were to establish Engage and support 12 young people between the ages of 15 and 16 years to remain in school or begin to consider their next steps in terms of education and learning. To date we are actively working with 12 young people and have a growing waiting list of other young people that meet the criteria that would benefit from the initiative. All 12 young people have agreed personal action plans in place and actively engaged and committed to the programme; attendance levels are at 85% for both appointments and activities and a number of young people have achieved accreditation through the Write-On programme.



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To support this case study, we have asked a participant, parent and the relevant referral agencies to assess the impact of Engage in its first year of operation. For the purposes of anonymity, the name of the client has been changed and some background details amended. Permission has been secured to use direct quotes as presented below:

A Participant's Story

The first referral and client of Engage was a complex case. Once the referral was received from the Education Welfare Officer and NYPD the Garda Diversion Project, the EYSO arranged to meet with Sue¹'s mother in order to forge a working relationship, carry out the initial assessment and to gain insights and perspective into the current situation. With Sue's mother's permission, the EYSO arranged to meet with Sue at Oberstown Children Detention Centre to plan for Sue's next steps once she was released from Oberstown.

From the beginning of the process, it emerged that there was an extensive network of services engaged with Sue and her family. In the six months previously, she had been expelled from her school, briefly engaged with Youthreach Foundation and subsequently left, was in trouble with the Gardaí on a weekly basis and was before the courts on a number of occasions. Drug and alcohol-use were also present and preventing Sue from accessing the help and supports she needed. In conversation with the Bail Supervision Officer from Extern, NYPD and EWO, it was agreed that a monthly meeting would take place with Sue's parents, her Drug and Alcohol Counsellor, the Community Garda and the above mentioned support services facilitated by the Engage EYSO. After the first meeting of the agencies, Sue wanted to be involved. With support from the EYSO, Sue began to participate at these meetings and it was valuable for Sue to receive the encouragement and see the efforts being made on her behalf. It also gave Sue the opportunity for the first time to have her voice heard.

At these meetings, each agency provided a progress reports as well as raised issues, shared suggestions for improve and encouragement and collaboratively planned the next steps. Between these meetings the EYSO worked with Sue on a weekly basis through one-to-one interventions focusing on academic and personal development skills.

Testimonials² from collaborators in case conference: Sue, Sue's Parents, the Educational Welfare Officer and Bail Supervision Officer.

¹ Name has been changed

² All testimonials were gathered between 25th and 28th September 2018

Sue: “For me it’s the morning start at 11am, not 9am and you can have breaks. There’s a lot of one to one which helps to make learning easier for me. The flexibility is much easier than normal school. I have been learning life skills like cooking and art as well which is really enjoyable and useful”. The benefit for me is that I am now out of trouble and want to stay that way. I have a better relationship with my parents. I feel better mentally and physically. I believe all these people have my best interests at heart. I am feeling much more positive about my future.

Sue’s Mother: At the time my daughter had no school placement. No hope of furthering her education and a bleak future ahead without the much needed help. Sue has been involved with the programme since July. She looks forward to attending the sessions and has rarely missed one. She has started the Write On programme and is doing very well. But she also enjoys partaking in other activities like Art and Cooking/Baking. She likes the fair and relaxed approach. She has an Attachment Disorder and finds it hard to trust and it’s great that both herself and the EYSO have developed a good relationship”.

“Sue is involved with numerous other agencies and the collaborative approach allows all the leaders to get together and discuss in a very positive way how to help and support my child”.

Education Welfare Officer, Meath: “Each young person I have referred to Engage programme has a number of support services working with them. As a result we are working in a collaborative way with the young person to ensure that their Individual Care Plan focuses on short and medium to long-term goals. The Engage programme is imperative in giving these young people alternative educational options and a real sense of completing a formal piece of training that really brings out their confidence in their abilities to try other educational options. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the Engage programme in supporting and shaping the lives of very vulnerable young people who feel that mainstream education does not accept them. This programme is greatly needed to support these vulnerable but resilient young people once they fully commit to the programme. The EYSO has been so supportive in encouraging these young people to give their feedback on what is working for them and what we as supporting agencies need to do to help them continue to fulfil their goals”.

Bail Supervision Officer: “My initial thought was that the Engage programme sounded like the perfect programme for early school leavers – to have the flexibility to be able to tailor the programme to meet each young person’s strengths and needs and level of ability is a massive strength of the programme”. The benefits have been endless. It is wonderful to hear first-hand the work that Sue is completing so that I can reinforce her strengths and progress with her and her parents and address any issues arising as quickly as possible. Sue and her parents are benefitting greatly from collaborating with all of the professionals offering support to the

family – the collaborative approach has helped them to effectively address Sue’s negative behaviours and build upon her strengths”.