

Ballyrunners

Rachel Lillis*

Summary: This paper describes the author's experience of the development of an initiative in the Ballymun area¹ that began as a simple idea of engaging young people in structured activities over the summer months and grew into a 10-week accredited health and fitness programme called 'Ballyrunners'. The programme was facilitated by existing interagency networks.

Keywords: Young Persons Probation, Equal Youth, Ballyrunners, Probation, Inter-agency, Activity.

Introduction

Professionals working in the youth justice system are highly aware of the need for young people to engage actively in structured activities that not only alleviate boredom but also teach life skills and promote pro-social activity. During the summer months in particular, marginalized young people are more vulnerable to getting involved in anti-social/criminal activity.

In an effort to tackle this issue in the summer of 2009, the author had the idea of devising a group work programme focused on health-related fitness, incorporating information sessions on exercise, nutrition, substance misuse and stress management. The plan was that the group would culminate in the participation by the young people in a charity-based fun run. As Young Persons' Probation (YPP) works from an inter-agency ethos and has well-established networks in the area, the merits of

* Rachel Lillis is a Probation Officer with Young Persons' Probation (YPP), Dublin North. YPP is a dedicated region within the Probation Service working to implement requirements of the Children Act 2001. Email: rmlillis@probation.ie

¹ Ballymun is an area in North Dublin with a significant level of social and economic disadvantage.

engaging other agencies to help make this vision a reality seemed worth while.

Programme development

YPP in the Ballymun area is a member of the local Equal Youth Committee. Equal Youth is an inter-agency initiative comprising the following organisations: YPP, Ballymun Regional Youth Resource Centre, Ballymun Job Centre, Department of Social Welfare, Ballymun Read and Write Scheme, Youthreach, Don Bosco's Residential Unit (HSE) and a Community Training Centre.

The Ballymun Job Centre (BJC) co-ordinates the Equal Youth inter-agency initiative. It brings together a number of agencies in the local area working with young people aged between 16 and 24 years who are disadvantaged in the labour market. The aim of Equal Youth is to encourage agencies to work together to assist this group in accessing the education, training and employment that they might not achieve if the agencies were working independently.

As part of the Equal Youth process, practitioners from various agencies involved in the network meet on a monthly basis to discuss clients' progression and issues arising. A comprehensive client list is discussed and plans are implemented on a needs basis. Many of the young people targeted by this initiative are early school leavers and without training/employment; some would have a criminal and/or drug history.

Equal Youth established the Ballyrunners group in response to the need that had been identified for young people in Ballymun to participate in constructive activity over the summer months. It was designed as a 10-week health and fitness programme to help young people make constructive use of their leisure time, promote healthy lifestyles and eating and positive mental well-being, and reduce substance misuse and anti-social behaviour.

Aim and objective

The primary aim of the Ballyrunners programme was to engage young people in a constructive activity that alleviated boredom and promoted life skills and pro-social activity. Additional benefits were firstly, that their involvement in the programme would help to increase their physical fitness and promote healthy lifestyles including reduced drug and alcohol

intake. Secondly, the programme had the potential to support participants in developing personal skills/attributes (confidence, motivation and self-esteem) to increase opportunities for access to training and employment.

It was agreed that the Ballyrunners programme should align itself with an accredited training programme. The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 3 Health-Related Fitness was the module selected for the programme.

In strategically planning for the group, the Equal Youth Committee agreed that it was important for the Ballyrunners to have an overarching group goal to work towards. To achieve this, it was agreed that the participants, the Equal Youth Committee and staff from local services and agencies would partake in a five-mile run for the Simon Community. Such an endeavour not only heightened the young people's awareness of homelessness but also promoted their social responsibility.

Funding

The programme was funded by the Probation Service, the Department of Social Welfare, the Ballymun Job Centre and the Ballymun Local Drugs Task Force.

Total funding amounted to €8,000. This covered the cost of tutors' fees, gym fees, room rentals, materials/equipment, race admission and field trips. As staff were released from their own organisations to assist in the facilitation and supervision of the programme, the cost of human resources was kept to a minimum. Where possible the Ballyrunners utilised local facilities, provided at a reduced cost.

It is worth noting that no payment was given to participants: their involvement in the programme was entirely voluntary.

Referral process

Referrals were taken from the existing list of Equal Youth clients as well as direct referral from local agencies and service providers. Some applications were self-referrals, as the programme was widely promoted in the local area.

Given the high level of interest and over-subscription to the programme, interviews were held to assess suitability and commitment.

Prospective candidates were scored with regard to merit and need. The consumption of alcohol and/or drugs did not prohibit/impede eligibility to the programme. Candidates were advised, however, that they would not be allowed to attend the programme under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.

Many of the participants had been out of education and training, and so their involvement in the Ballyrunners programme marked their re-entry into a group work learning dynamic. Concentration levels and literacy skills were low and required additional assistance.

A total of 12 young people, male and female, commenced the Ballyrunners programme. The mean age was 17.6 years. All were living in the Ballymun area. Three of the participants were under the supervision of the Probation Service.

Programme content

Ballyrunners was a 65-hour programme delivered over 10 weeks aimed at achieving a the FETAC award mentioned above. It included:

- gym workout in the local Dublin City Council gym in Ballymun – two hours per week
- physical fitness training in a variety of locations including Ballymun, the Phoenix Park, Fairview Strand – two hours per week
- information sessions on substance misuse, stress/anger management, diets and health eating, career guidance and first aid, plus motivational talk – two hours per week
- healthy eating – lunch was provided one day a week in the local youth resource centre.

Equal Youth Committee members actively participated in the programme and so could provide a high level of support on a regular, informal and immediate basis. This aided in maximising the potential of the young people and reduced the propensity for drop-out. Throughout the programme there was a weekly review of the functioning and progress of the group. Equal Youth Committee members were required to attend this meeting.

Outcomes

- Nine participants successfully completed the programme and attained the FETAC Level 3 award.

- Feedback from the participants confirmed that they enjoyed and valued the programme and the input from staff. They indicated that the experience had promoted positive changes in their lives.
- Pre- and post-programme psychological assessments demonstrated that participants were more confident in their ability to find a job/course and expressed a commitment to the process. A decrease in the use of cigarettes and alcohol was also reported.
- As a result of participants' success and the high demand for further training from the group, the Equal Youth Committee approached FÁS (Ireland's national training and employment authority) with the proposal of funding and facilitating FETAC Level 4, Health-Related Fitness. This was agreed, and six of the nine participants advanced to and successfully completed that training programme.
- More recently, these six young men have applied for college courses in health/fitness-related fields.
- The three remaining participants are all job-placed in various areas of work.

Of the nine young people that completed the Ballyrunners programme, three were under the supervision of the Probation Service.

Given the age range and poor concentration levels of these young people, one-to-one interventions with a Probation Officer were not always the most effective means of engaging with the young person. Through my direct involvement in the delivery of the programme – in a classroom, over lunch or on the running track – the therapeutic/working relationships were enhanced as the perception of the 'Probation Officer' changed. Meeting clients in a different milieu, out of the office environment leads to more relaxed and open communication. The frequency of the contact – meeting clients three times a week – served to reinforce positive behaviours and provided opportunities to challenge any negative behaviours should they arise.

Feedback from An Garda Síochána indicates that there was some evidence of a reduction in anti-social behaviour from Probation clients during their participation in the programme. This could be attributed to the fact that these young people were provided with constructive activities and were associating with non-offending peers, supported by staff and making a positive contribution to society.

Conclusion/Way forward

Ballyrunners is a universal programme not confined to areas of need/disadvantage. It endeavours to promote healthy living and mental well-being and to raise social awareness and responsibility. It could be replicated in many settings (schools, youth clubs, sports clubs) as it is low-cost and easy-access.

The success of Ballyrunners could be credited to inter-agency work and commitment. In designing the group, existing services were utilised and the responsibility for the programme was shared.

The Equal Youth Committee believes that the Ballyrunners group could be easily replicated. It is low-cost and, as a result of inter-agency involvement, funding could be divided among different agencies. The focus of Ballyrunners was health and fitness. Running was the chosen activity as it does not require skill or previous training and can be easily facilitated. It is an activity that the young people could practise/advance individually and without personal financial cost.

Following on from the success of the Ballyrunners programme, the Equal Youth Committee is to embark on a second programme in the summer of 2010. Once again, funding has been sourced from a variety of service providers in the Ballymun area including the Probation Service. It has been decided to expand the content of the course to cater for the interests of a wider target group. It is envisaged that they will undertake drama and horticultural modules as well as health and fitness.

The key learning from the programme is located in the principles underpinning effective interventions with young people. In promoting better outcomes for young people, selected programmes must:

- demonstrate that they work
- be located in the local community
- operate on an inter-agency basis
- maintain momentum and meet established expectations.