



Evaluation report of the Barnardo's Cymru Blaenau Gwent Community Connections service

Vikki Butler

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Barnardo's Cymru Policy and Research team - Elaine Speyer - fieldwork collection and collation

C.A.R.P. COLLABORATIONS EVALUATION TEAM

Vikki Butler: project manager, fieldwork design, analysis, report production and dissemination

Hattie Hendra: fieldwork and dissemination

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SECTION 1: EVALUATION RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

About the Blaenau Gwent Community Connections Service

The Blaenau Gwent Community Connections Service was delivered by Barnardo's Cymru and funded between August 2013 and August 2015 by the Big Lottery People and Places Fund. The project was working to four outcomes and ten indicators, but generally aimed to work with young people aged between 14 and 21 raising confidence, building social networks and enabling the young people to access socialising opportunities to build positive personal skills for a successful transition to adulthood.

Over the two years, the Barnardo's Cymru Community Connecting Service has worked with 50 young people (this may increase due to the project undertaking a new intake of young people between April and August 2015). However, 22 of these young people chose to work with the project over the two years in order to focus upon different skill outcomes. When this is taken into account, the project worked with a total of 31 young people in year 1 and a total of 45 young people in year 2. The project also initiated contact with another 11 young people but, after family visits, and introductory one to one sessions, the young people decided not to become further involved with the project. The project has worked with 29 males and 21 females.

The project has undertaken a variety of different activities. It has provided group courses and activities for young people, undertaken one to one support for young people, arranged visits to community spaces and venues to familiarise young people with their community and deliver informal training to community venues to be welcoming to disabled young people, supported work placements, sought and supported volunteering opportunities and delivered formal training to mainstream practitioners.

Evaluation purpose

The aim of this evaluation is to:

1. Assess the extent to which the Blaenau Gwent Community Connections Service has met the four outcomes and ten indicators described within its funding bid to the Big Lottery in 2013.
2. Provide additional analytical comment regarding the effectiveness of the service, unexpected outcomes and recommendations for progressing community connecting in Blaenau Gwent.
3. Provide analytical explanations based upon qualitative data regarding the possible reasons behind outcomes and indicators that have been exceeded or not met.
4. Produce a clear report for circulation to funders, project partners and other interested parties where appropriate.
5. Ensure that the voices of young people and their parents can be clearly heard throughout the evaluation report and contribute to the dissemination of good practice via the evaluation.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluators have used a combination of methods to analyse the extent to which indicators and outcomes have been met. In addition to the Blaenau Gwent Community Connections Service supplying quantitative information regarding targets, evaluators have also undertaken qualitative work in order to assess the context and personal impact of the successes of the project.

In terms of methods and sources of data, the evaluators have undertaken the following:

- Summaries of the personal action plans for the year for each young person the project has worked with. Evaluators received 39 individual action plans in total. The action plans detail the personal outcomes that the young people wanted to work on and their own assessment of the distance travelled towards their personal outcome.
- Monitoring data and feedback collected by the Blaenau Gwent Community Connections Service.
- Four participatory focus groups with between seven and twelve young people who have completed at least one of the group courses that aim to build personal skills. Some of these young people had undertaken more than one course and some of them were also receiving one to one support.
- Service fun day evaluation. This involved ten parents, six siblings and nine project participants. Evaluators designed two evaluation workshops using creative methods for participants and their families enabling them to discuss the four outcomes of the project.
- One end of project focus group with eight parents.
- Data from a service self-evaluation session.
- Evaluation forms of training offered to young leaders, youth workers and other professionals. These forms were designed so that questions directly corresponded with the outcome objectives.
- A participatory feedback session. Evaluators met with young people to check that the analysis of the project was correct, hear any outcomes that the young people wanted to stress, hear what they would want to say to different audiences for the report and ensure that the report structure fitted their experiences.

This evaluation is based upon the data collected from all of these methods, and rather than report on the findings from each method, the data is organised into the indicators that were agreed for each outcome. In this way, funders and partners can clearly identify the successes of the project, targets that have been exceeded or not met and reasons behind that, as well as clearly identify good practice and possible progression in community connecting within Blaenau Gwent.

Locating information specific for different readers of this report

In the participatory feedback session with young people, we discussed the structure of this report. The evaluators outlined what the project's outcomes were, and young people's opinions regarding the

outcomes are discussed within each section. However, we also looked at what the purpose of this report is and what different audiences may want. Young people felt that this should be clear and presented at the start of the report.

Message from young people to Funders

Young people felt that you would want to know that your money has been spent on the right things and, therefore, you would be interested in the whole report. They particularly wanted to draw your attention to the number of different things that they have been doing that they have not had the opportunity to do before and will be continuing to do after the end of the project. The young people stressed these new experiences have been much fun and are highly valued because they have given positive emotions and feelings. Of all the project outcomes, they felt that the differences in their confidence and having friends outside of school time were the most important aspects of the project. Whilst this report does not offer a budgetary analysis, all of the sections relate to the different activities that have been undertaken and they hoped that the money would be considered to have been well spent. The information regarding outcomes 1 and 3 are the most important from the young people's viewpoint.

Message from young people to parents and family members

The young people felt you would want to know that they have been looked after properly and how well staff have interacted with them. Young people's comments regarding staff are in section 6 regarding unexpected outcomes. They also felt that family would want to know that the project has been fun but challenging; but that the new experiences have brought happiness, new friendships and significantly raised their confidence. This information is discussed in outcomes 1 and 3.

Message from young people to management of Community Links and within Barnardo's Cymru

Young people felt you should hear about how well the staff within Community Links undertook their job roles. They particularly stressed patience, supportiveness, and fun, and stated that they have been like family. More regarding staffing is written in section 5 regarding unexpected outcomes.

Message from young people to other organisations who work with young people

The young people felt you may be interested in the different activities they have undertaken, but that it is important that you also hear about how they have worked with the young people on an individual basis and supported them to access new experiences. They wanted to highlight the achievements they have undertaken outside of school including: performing; writing songs; involvement in forums and decision making, including going to the Senedd and speaking at conferences; creating digital stories; and many risk sports. They felt that without the staff's skills in communication and patience, they would not have developed the confidence to do these things. More about young people's participation and control in life is in outcome 1; and learning from the project, including good practice, is detailed in relation to outcome 4 and Section 6 regarding unexpected outcomes.

Message from young people to Welsh Government

Young people wanted more opportunity to talk directly to Government about the things they need to succeed in transition to adulthood. Issues of direct government funding to support projects were discussed; particularly for young people who need support to attend mainstream leisure activities and gain independence skills. Young people felt that Government should be interested in the whole report.

ASSESSING OUTCOME 1: YOUNG PEOPLE WILL HAVE IMPROVED SOCIAL NETWORKS, REDUCED ISOLATION AND HAVE MORE CHOICE AND CONTROL OVER THEIR LIVES

This outcome is divided into three different indicators. The analysis and commentary below draw upon the different data sets outlined in the introductory section. Indicators 1 and 3 are very similar and involve the same research information and they are therefore reported upon together.

Indicator 1: Number of young people who report an increased participation in social, leisure and/or work related activities (target 70-100)

Indicator 3: The number of young people who report positive changes through accessing new community venues, resources and support services (target 80-100)

The project has undertaken a large number of different activities all of which have enabled young people to have increased participation in social, leisure or work related activities, and enabled positive changes. Unanimously, in focus groups with young people and parents, participants reported positively to both these indicators. The action plan data does not directly relate to these two indicators but, through inference of the outcomes young people identified that they wanted to work towards in their action plan, all the data strongly suggests that all 50 of the project participants have an increase in participation in activities and report positive changes such as having learnt new skills, developing new friendships and feeling they have more in their lives.

Whilst the project has not yet finished and therefore the numbers of participants may increase, at this stage, indicator 1 has been met by 71 per cent and indicator 3 by 63 per cent. Although this is below target, it is of note that all of the young people, who have participated in the project, report positive outcomes for indicators 1 and 3. Additionally, to properly assess the extent to which these indicators are met, it is necessary to undertake an examination of the qualitative data as well as the numerical data.

The project comprises two different elements that contribute towards these indicators. Firstly, they have provided group activities for project participants that, in themselves, have enabled increased participation in social, leisure or work related activities and, secondly, they have undertaken individualised community connecting work beyond the group work which has led to an increase in social leisure and work related activities outside of the service. Regardless of whether the increased participation in social, leisure and work related activities has occurred through group activities or individual community connecting, all of the young people reported positive changes in terms of practical skills, personal skills and gaining friends.

Project group activities

The project has facilitated a range of group activities including days out, creating clubs and delivering courses. These are detailed below.

Group Courses

Music courses: these ran in both years and involved playing musical instruments, recording voices and using music technology to create songs. Some young people also took photos or video and, through using IT, created videos to accompany the songs.

Independent living: after an introductory session, the young people chose what they wanted to learn during the course from a list of options. Young people chose learning about money, hygiene body and

health, household chores, anxiety and stress and dealing with bullying. This course has been run regularly throughout years 1 and 2 of the project and maintained generic parts but with scope for participants to choose certain aspects.

Summer Residential: a two day residential occurred in the summer between years 1 and 2 and involved an overnight stay, risk sports and holiday activities.

Physical activity: all of the participants of the evaluation session attended this one day course that involved archery and canoeing.

Come dine with us: this was a six week course which taught participants food hygiene and how to cook six different main courses and desserts. Five of the evaluation participants attended this course, but more young people attended the course than were able to attend the evaluation session.

Road Safety: crossing roads and starting independent travel.

Job club: this ran in year 1 to help young people with their CVs, explore job preferences and find work experience.

Personal Safety: awareness of strangers, coping with bullying, positive friendships and cyber safety.

Christmas craft club: making decorations, budgeting, creating a market stall and dealing with customers.

Two participation events for families: these are for siblings, project participants and parents to be able to input into the service delivery; have fun as a family and meet other families and friends who have also attended the project activities.

Participation group: this enables any project participants to come to monthly meetings to have a voice in the delivery of the service and for forum representatives to report back to the wider group.

A summer programme of events: this will be for young people to be able to maintain friendships during the holidays and will include outdoor activities and partnership working with the Gwent Wildlife Trust.

Sex and relationships training: this is a course that is due to run at the time of writing this report and consists of weekly sessions for young people and a separate single session for parents that has been delivered in partnership with Contact a Family.

Visits to community venues or places

To support young people to become familiar with their local area, the project has facilitated visits to, or activities in, community based venues and has supported young people to be involved in community events. Whilst not directly involving young people in mainstream clubs, these visits and activities have provided a progression for the project participants to begin to know their local community and help raise confidence when in mainstream settings. All of the visits and activities are listed below.

Group outing to a local fireworks display: this activity was not only to socialise within the local community but also to put into practice skills that had been learnt on some of the other courses, such as road safety, money management and confidence building.

Stall at the Christmas craft fayre: this enabled young people to meet community members, other stall holders and sell the crafts they had made in craft club; thus involving an array of personal skills as well as budgeting and enterprise.

Use of community venues and resources: groups of young people have visited local community centres such as Kidz R Us, Brynmawr LAC, Ebbw Vale Institute, and Winchestown Community Centre. They have also visited local resources such as the job centre, the local Brewers Fayre restaurant, McDonalds, Big Pit, supermarkets, the cinema, leisure centre and local parks.

Whilst these may seem mundane places to be visiting or to use for group settings, the aim behind this is threefold. Firstly, to facilitate a group session that will build confidence and skills but, secondly, to enable young people to become aware of what is available for them and acquaint them with the staff and the building and, lastly, to build capacity and confidence with existing staff to enable them to confidently support young people with learning difficulties who use their resources. This is an effective way of working since it encourages participation in social activities through familiarity, without taking up vital group session time and enables practically learnt skills for staff. It is also worth noting that many of the young people had not visited any of these places without family, and therefore the places were unfamiliar to them. Young people reported continuing to use these community resources after visiting them with the project.

Community connecting work

Twenty nine of the project participants have joined mainstream groups and activities individually and another five young people are currently joining mainstream groups before the project finishes, making a total of 34 individual connections for approximately two-thirds of all participants. The community connecting work has been undertaken on a one to one basis and has involved supporting young people to join a group or undertake an activity of their choice. Some of these young people had initial support to attend the mainstream activities, some had ongoing support, and some accessed community activities independent from the project.

The list below details the community activities young people have chosen.

- Five young people have joined one club or activity: a trampoline club, choir, horse riding, guitar lessons and gymnastics.
- Two young people attended the Learning Disability Wales annual conference where they had the opportunity to meet with other service providers and other young people.
- One young person has joined the Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum.
- Four young people have joined mainstream youth clubs and continue to attend independently.
- Five young people took supported employment placements - one at a café, two at Terence Garden Welfare Park, one at a cinema, one at a local craft store.
- Three volunteering - some of the supported employment placements have developed into volunteering placements to offer longer term work experience and work related skills. The cinema and the craft store have continued to retain young people on a volunteer basis to enable them to have work experience. One young person who volunteered at a local charity shop and is now a paid member of staff.
- Two young people joined a community education course: pottery and cake decorating.
- One young person joined two sports clubs: street dance and tennis.
- One young person volunteers in community services: radio station.

- Two young people have been supported to join the youth service editorial group. The group maintains the youth service website and meets on a monthly basis and the young people now attend independently.
- Three young people joined a local drama club, have continued attending without support and performed in the local pantomime.
- Three young people were supported to develop a lads' club: they now communicate independently and arrange to meet at different community venues (swimming, gym, cinema, etc) on a weekly basis without support.

The final stage of the project will include work placements for five more young people, which are a hairdressers, dog grooming, a charity shop, and a wildlife project.

Assessing the success of meeting indicators 1 and 3

The project has not worked with enough young people to be able to meet the numerical target. However, the qualitative data highlights the huge distance travelled for many young people. To succeed in establishing 35 community connections for young people who have not travelled alone before, have had limited social lives, and self-identify that they have low confidence, is highly significant.

Additionally, the project has clearly made a large effort to ensure that young people choose what they want to do, as shown by the large number of different community resources worked with and the number of different group activities that have been offered. Data is not available regarding how many young people have accessed the community venues and resources independently, since they are informal meeting places but, through acquainting young people with the community around them, the service is taking the necessary steps to enable young people to participate in social activities.

Indicator 2: Young people demonstrate improved independence skills following input from individual sessions or groups

The target number for this indicator was 80-100 young people over the course of the project. All 50 young people have demonstrated improved independence, even though not all of the young people identified improving independence within their personal action plans. Since the project worked with 50 young people, this indicator has been met by 63 per cent. The data for this comes from action plans, focus groups with young people and parents, and project monitoring data. Young people stressed that gaining independent skills was one of two priorities for them (the other was increasing confidence, which is examined in outcome 2).

Out of the 39 personal action plans, 35 young people chose increasing independence as their personal goal. When engaging with the project, young people would score how independent they felt they were and then reviewed this every quarter year. Over time, the score should increase.

Score increase	Number of young people
New to project so no second score yet	5 young people
No increase or decrease in scores	2 young people
Score increased by 1 point	8 young people
Score increased by 2 points	12 young people
Score increased by 3 points	6 young people
Score increased by 4 points	1 young person

This table shows that young people themselves felt that their independence had increased and, for some young people, this was a large increase.

The qualitative data shows large gains in independent skills after young people had received group or individual support. It was particularly pronounced for young people who had the opportunity to participate in independent living skills and had then undertaken further activities designed to implement the skills learnt. Additionally, those young people who had been with the project over both years showed a higher increase in their independence than those who had been with the project for less time. There is a paradox here as it may be expected that young people who gain independence would not need the support of a project. Through being with the project for two years, young people were able to take steps of independence and branch out in their own time. This would not have been the case if the project had been time limited for young people. Young people who had accessed combinations of activities i.e. more than one course, showed the highest gains in independence.

Parents unanimously spoke about the increased level of independence that they felt the project had given their young people and they reflected that this should be a priority within the work that Barnardo's Cymru Community Connections Project undertook. Parents described two circumstances that changed for young people when they had gained more independence. Firstly, they described how the young people were more self-sufficient and undertook age appropriate tasks at home without being asked. Secondly, they stated that the experience of trying new things and learning more life skills enabled their young people to think more about their future and to develop aspirations that could be realised. Parents felt that this was a marked change, particularly for those young people who had experienced work placements, volunteering and attended community activities and spaces unaccompanied.

The summer residential appears to have been very successful in raising independent skills. For many of the young people, it was their first time having a night away from home and having to be in control of their own routine (washing, breakfast and washing up, making bed, etc). Parents described how they were particularly moved to see their child have this experience and hear about the independence that the young people had achieved. This was a large milestone for many parents because disabled children do not always share in the milestones that non-disabled peers have. For example, non-disabled peers may have been undertaking sleepovers from primary school age, but many disabled young people have not had this opportunity in everyday life, so staying away is a highly significant step in independence.

It is clear from the data regarding accessing new community activities and resources (outcome 1, indicator 1) that some young people are beginning to access mainstream community resources independent of their families or other support. This has occurred for more than 50 per cent of the project participants and was particularly pronounced during year 2 activities. The achievement for these young people should not be underestimated because almost all of the young people had never previously been to any mainstream activities unsupported; demonstrating a very high level of independent skills, learnt in a short space of time. The evaluators anticipate that more young people may be achieving similar outcomes, but that it cannot be measured because these activities are occurring outside of any Barnardo's support.

Regardless of within which elements of the project the young people had participated, it is clear that the independent skills that have been learnt are also being implemented in everyday life. They all described how good it felt being able to put into practice the skills they had learnt - they contributed to household tasks through laying the table, washing dishes and tidying up; they maintained their personal hygiene and did the shopping using healthy living knowledge, making choices and using money.

Summary of outcome 1

Whilst outcome 1 can be assessed through the three associated indicators, it has three specific elements: improved social networks, reduced isolation and more choice and control over their lives. The assessment of each indicator demonstrates that the project has clearly improved social networks and reduced isolation, with young people clearly stating that they now have friends and feel able to do more for themselves. One parent's comment summarises what many parents felt:

'My son has something to do and somewhere to go now. Before, he just sat in his room. There was nothing.'

Families clearly felt that the project had provided a new avenue for young people to gain skills and make friends whereas, before, their lives were empty once they came home from school and during the school holidays. A few parents stated that the group activities had given their children a reason to get up in the morning during the holidays; and all family members said that they were watching their young person have friends for the first time in their lives.

The three indicators for this outcome do not enable due consideration to 'Choice and control over life'. Both the individual and group work have led to greater choice and control in day-to-day life that should not be overlooked or taken for granted. In all group evaluations, the outcomes 'I have more choices about my future' and 'I feel I have been listened to and have control over what I do' were ranked joint first in terms of the most achieved outcome of the project from young people's viewpoints and the most important. Young people explained that they feel more able to talk to adults in their lives generally and, therefore, have more confidence to say what they think and give opinions. Young people said this was more important to them than undertaking new activities. This is crucial in terms of having control and making choices but is not captured in the target numbers. The quote below exemplifies how choice and control can impact upon existing life:

'I always went to cadets but since being with Barnardo's, I am doing really well there. I talk more, join in, and feel able to do more. It's great, we do camping. Flying. Flying gliders and I am now part of it.'

Additionally, since year 1, when young people were involved in recruitment processes for staff, the young people have started to be involved in decision making forums and have become more aware of different ways to exercise choice and control. From understanding political parties and voting through work undertaken in year 2, through to participating in national conferences and forums, the project has enabled young people to begin to make links between choice and control within their individual life options, but also how that connects to having a voice in decisions that affect them. The development of a participation group and having representation within the local authority youth forum have both enabled the young people to tangibly make these links. Some of the evaluation methods used for this report and the planned dissemination of this report aim to contribute towards the young people having control and choice over their lives.

To conclude, whilst the numerical targets for outcome 1 have not been met, the outcome has been achieved in terms of the quality of the work undertaken. Young people report that choice and control is the most important thing they have learnt, although this is not captured within the indicator data. The group work and individual community connecting have provided highly significant life experiences and skills to the participants, with the impact upon life experience, confidence and aspirations being profound.

ASSESSING OUTCOME 2: COMMUNITY GROUPS WILL BE MORE INCLUSIVE AND WELCOMING TO A WIDER GROUP OF DISABLED YOUNG PEOPLE

This outcome relates to the capacity building with community groups that the Blaenau Gwent Community Connections Service has undertaken. There are three different indicators to this outcome:

1. One which discusses the community connecting that the project has undertaken with young people (building on the data within outcome 1, indicators 1 and 3)
2. One which discusses the capacity building the project has undertaken with community groups, venues and resources
3. One which analyses the success and effectiveness of training provided by the Community Connections Project.

The data used to assess this outcome is a mix of primary data collected by the evaluators and monitoring and feedback data collected by the service and compiled and analysed by the evaluator. It includes data within the personal action plans for young people who have joined mainstream groups, evaluation forms from training courses, evaluation forms from community groups, and staff observation.

Whilst this outcome states 'community groups', the evaluators have included community resources where people may come together to socialise within statutory, voluntary or private sectors. Being able to participate in community life by, for example, having a cup of tea with a friend in a café, using the leisure centre, or going to the cinema, is as important as having hobbies within established groups.

Indicator 1: The number of community groups which report an increased number of young disabled people attending their activity (30-50 groups)

This indicator can only be discussed in terms of young people's reported increase in attending mainstream community activities as the data is not available from community groups themselves. This indicator builds upon the information regarding community connecting given in outcome 1. Whilst young people started to join community groups and use community spaces in year 1, the end of year evaluation progress report identified that the community connecting work could have a stronger emphasis within the overall project activities. In year 2, there was a sizeable increase in the community connecting activities, with a total number of 33 groups now including disabled young people, owing to work from the project.

- 8 community venues for informal groups: Brynmawr Cinema, Terence Garden Welfare Park, a café and cake shop, leisure centre, park (where young people hang out), local gym, Brewers Fayre restaurant and McDonalds, supermarket with café
- 4 community learning centres: Ebbw Vale Action Learning Centre, Brynmawr Learning Action Centres, Ebbw Vale Institute and Winchestown Community Centre
- 1 local attraction: Big Pit
- 3 community resource organisations: community radio station, youth service editorial group, Gwent Wildlife Trust
- 4 youth clubs: Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum, two statutory mainstream clubs and a church youth group.
- 2 music groups: choir and guitar lessons

- 5 sports clubs: street dance, tennis, trampoline club, horse riding, gymnastics
- 2 community education courses: cake decorating and pottery
- 2 performing arts: Kidz R Us, Encore theatre group
- 2 community events: local fireworks display and Christmas market.

The large variation in community groups, venues and events that young people are attending demonstrates the implementation of a person centred approach rather than a formulaic group approach. It should be noted that young people are choosing to attend community venues and events together and that the project has actively enabled young people to make arrangements to see each other and travel independently. Additionally, most of these community groups and resources are accessed by the young people travelling to them alone and not being supported to attend. Barnardo's Cymru Community Connections has worked with some, but not all, of these groups and venues in order to build their capacity in welcoming disabled young people. This indicator is over target by 13 per cent, and may increase still as the project continues to work with community groups and young people until August 2015.

Indicator 2: Community groups identify that they feel more able to welcome disabled young people into their venues following input from the project (40-50 groups)

The Community Connections Project has worked directly with a variety of venues and staff groups to increase their skills in welcoming disabled young people. Whilst this partly relates to the groups that report an increased number of disabled young people attending their activities, it also includes training and other capacity building that the project has undertaken to support welcoming community spaces. The indicator target number was to build capacity with 40-50 groups or venues and, therefore, this indicator has been exceeded by 35 per cent (14 groups), with the total number of community groups reporting that they feel more able to welcome disabled young people being 54. This breaks down as follows:

- 15 community resource places: Winchestown Family Centre, Integrated Children's Centre, Ebbw Vale Institute, Bryn Bach Parc, Festival Park, Big Pit, Fire station, Millennium Stadium, job centre, radio station, local supermarket, Ebbw Vale Action Learning Centre, Brynmawr Learning Action Centre, Ebbw Vale Institute and Winchestown Community Centre
- 8 mainstream community based venues: cake shop and café, Terence Garden Welfare Park, cinema, leisure centre, park (where young people hang out), Brewers Fayre restaurant, McDonalds, and local gym
- 14 sports clubs: trampoline, street dance, tennis, horse riding, gym and 9 from young leaders programme
- 2 music clubs: choir and guitar lessons
- 2 community education courses: pottery and cake decorating
- 9 youth clubs: the youth forum, two integrated youth clubs, church youth club, 5 clubs through formal training to youth workers
- 2 performing arts: Kidz R Us, Encore theatre group
- 2 community events: local fireworks display and Christmas market.

The project has enabled a wide range of places, resources and groups to become more welcoming and has included, but reached beyond, community groups, courses and youth groups. The project has employed three methods for enabling community groups to welcome disabled young people:

1. Individual young people have been supported to attend a group of their choice. Support workers have enabled the young people to learn how to travel without needing support, supported the group or venue to understand any specific needs of the young person, and built confidence with the young person and the venue or group so that they can continue to attend without support.
2. Supply training in disability awareness and skills for inclusion to staff groups and young volunteers.
3. Support young people to find out about a group of their choice and actively encourage and support them to try out something new.

Communication from the groups and venues that the project has worked confirms that they feel more able to welcome disabled young people and this is demonstrated by the evidence of disabled young people joining those groups and visiting the venues. The project has utilised numerous creative mechanisms for building capacity of staff in mainstream settings, some of which has been from meeting groups of young people, some from directly delivering formal training and some by building individual staff capacity to support specific individual young people.

Indicator 3: Numbers of people who identify improved disability awareness following training sessions provided by the project (200)

Training sessions have been provided by the project in a variety of different ways. The project has delivered formal disability awareness training to young people and organisations; formal community connecting training to youth workers; formal disability, sex and relationships training to cross sector professionals in partnership with the family planning association; and informal training to staff teams in one to one support placements and venues for group activities.

The service has delivered formal training courses to a total of 124 young people to encourage peer support, 17 youth workers and 15 cross sector professionals: 156 people in total. Additionally, 58 (36 in year one and 22 in year two) staff members have received informal training and at least another four organisations will receive informal training before the project finishes, taking the total number of people to receive informal training to at least 62. Regardless of the type of training received, and if the informal training that is planned is included, the total number of people who identified improved disability awareness will be 218. The target for this indicator has been exceeded by approximately nine per cent.

Data analysis regarding informal training

The informal training has been progressive to ensure it is tailored to the learning of the particular organisation or venue and supportive to the specific young person. It is commonly known that one of the difficulties with formal training is that the learning can be hard to implement into everyday work practice. Therefore, to enable supported employment and inclusive spaces, it can be more effective to provide job specific, task related training that relates to an individual's specific support needs in order to effectively support individual young people to join community groups, use community venues or undertake work placements.

Data and analysis regarding the formal training

One hundred and fifty six people received formal training, 123 of whom completed detailed evaluation forms and 33 undertook informal or activity based evaluation.

The training delivered to young volunteers aimed to raise their awareness of disability rights and enable the young people who volunteer in youth sports clubs to support disabled peers.

The table below summarises the results of evaluation questionnaires distributed after the training, although not all the participants answered all of the questions.

Question about the disability awareness training for young leaders	Yes	No	No answer
Will the training be useful in your volunteer roles?	104	3	1
Has the training increased your awareness of disability and inclusion issues?	98	3	7
Do you feel more able to welcome young people with disabilities into activities and groups?	96	2	10
Did the course provide you with the skills needed to facilitate inclusion in your activities and groups?	86	4	18

These findings were echoed by the 33 young people who undertook informal evaluations. They stated that the training would help them to know not only how to support disabled young people but also how to introduce them to a group and ensure that they felt welcomed and included.

Seventeen youth workers received training in disability awareness and community connecting. A minority of the course participants did not have any prior knowledge of disability issues and had not worked with disabled people (colleagues or young people) before. They unanimously felt that the course had provided them with the practical tools needed to implement inclusion and 14 felt that they had more awareness of disability and inclusion. Respondents also reported that the training enabled them to offer positive support and be more confident in their existing skills.

The 15 professionals trained in sex education and positive relationships also found the training useful, as detailed in the table below. Additionally, a large majority felt that the training would work towards all of the project outcomes once implemented in their work practice.

Question about the sex and positive relationships training	Yes	No	No answer
Will the training help you in your work role?	14	1	
Has the training increased your awareness in how to support disabled young people in positive relationships?	14		1
Has the course provided you with the training you think you need to support disabled young people and parents in positive relationships?	14		1
Will the training work towards increasing young people's confidence?	13	2	
Will the training help increase young people's social networks?	11	4	

Summary of outcome 2

Both the numerical data and qualitative data point to outcome 2 having been exceeded. The project staff have worked with a wide range of community groups and venues and, through a mix of informal and formal training, they have raised awareness of disability, enabled venues to be more supportive and welcoming of disabled young people, not just as users of that particular resource but also within staff teams through work placement and volunteer opportunities. The level of work in the community appears to be outstanding.

ASSESSING OUTCOME 3: YOUNG DISABLED PEOPLE WILL HAVE INCREASED SELF CONFIDENCE AND IMPROVED SOCIAL SKILLS

This outcome was unanimously the most important to both young people and their parents and young people specifically requested that this report stressed the impact that the project had had on them regarding raised confidence and having friends, both of which have greatly increased social skills. The data for this section includes data from focus group evaluations with participants, focus groups with siblings and parents, compilation and analysis of personal action plans, project monitoring and staff observation.

Indicator 1: The number of young people who report increased confidence (70-100)

Increasing confidence was very important to all of the young people. Thirty eight young people had completed actions and all of them had chosen increasing confidence as one of the outcomes they wanted to work towards. The table below details the distance travelled, as identified by the young people themselves. Young people chose what outcomes they wanted to work towards within the project and gave themselves a score between 1 and 5 regarding the level they felt their confidence lay on. This score was reviewed with the young people every quarter and re-evaluated by them. If they felt their confidence had increased, they would increase the score that they had originally given.

Score increase	Number of young people
New to project so no review undertaken yet	7
No score increase	2
Increase by 1 point	6
Increase by 2 points	16
Increase by 3 points	7

Confidence building has been at the heart of the group activities and the one to one support offered by the project; contributing to healthy living agendas, personal relationships, work, risk sports, money management and other areas of life. Additionally, the project supported one young person to attend a confidence building course and they achieved an Agored Cymru accreditation. It is also clear from the data that an increase in confidence has life changing effects. The data shows that the young people have gained a deep level of confidence and report not being scared to, for example, meet new people, try new things, visit new places or be independent. Many of the other indicators within this report crucially rely upon this one indicator of increasing confidence, particularly with reference to outcome 1.

In some focus groups, young people were actively encouraging each other to talk about the increase in their confidence. The comment below exemplifies the impact that this has had for the project participants:

‘I’m learning to speak my mind now. I’m not there yet. But it’s better and I’m trying. I don’t just copy everyone.’

Young people told the evaluators many stories regarding what increased confidence meant to them. These included being able to speak out in a large group, being able to go into a shop and buy things, household tasks such as cooking, not being afraid to learn new things, overcoming fear via risk sports, being able to have friendships.

Additionally, other family members talked about the increase in confidence and the positive changes they had seen. Siblings described the things that the project participants now do which they had not done before, such as help with cooking and cleaning, generally being more talkative in family life and having the confidence to choose to do things rather than being persuaded. Parents were also full of praise for the way in which the project had enabled their children to gain confidence. They cited situations such as ‘being able to leave X alone to do their own thing’ and expressed surprise at the achievements their children had made because of the increase in their confidence.

The qualitative data provides some important learning regarding how young people have gained confidence. Young people reported gaining confidence through learning in three distinct activities:

1. From being more aware of themselves through self-exploration and reflective understanding on topics such as personal hygiene, healthy living or learning to listen.
2. From undertaking group activities and trying new skills that involved physical risk or effort.
3. Through creative activity that produced a concrete outcome (e.g. cooking, digital diaries, songwriting).

Whilst the quality of the project work regarding confidence is extremely high, this is not reflected in the numerical data. The target number for young people reporting increased confidence was 70-100. The project to date has worked with 50 young people and action plan data is only available for 38 of these, 29 of whom report high increases in confidence. Although the action plans have not yet been reviewed and some young people have yet to complete them, other project data would suggest that approximately 40 of the young people report increased confidence. Numerically, the project has partially met this target by 57 per cent. However, given the strength of the qualitative data and the fact that action plans will be reviewed and completed after this report is completed, the evaluators are confident that nearly all of the young people will report positively to this indicator and that whilst it will still be partially met, it will be at a much higher rate.

Indicator 2: Young people demonstrate improved social skills (70-100)

This indicator was the second most important to young people and parents, and young people wanted the impact upon them of having friends and social skills stressed within this report. For many of the participants, having a friend outside of school was a completely new experience. Additionally, many of the participants had never had school friends to their house, had not undertaken a stay over or gone out to a community resource with a friend. Given that many of the participants were so isolated before the project, it is unsurprising that making friends has had a huge impact upon lives and contributed to raising confidence and having impetus to acquire more independence. Young people described making friends with each other, but also having the skills to make new friends at school and in community settings.

Within the action plans, 36 of the 38 young people chose improving social networks, improving social skills or improving peer relationships as personal goals to work towards. The table below details the distance travelled as identified by each person.

Score increases	Number of young people
New to project so no review score yet	6
No increase or decrease	1
Increased by 1 point	7
Increased by 2 points	13
Increased by 3 points	7
Increased by 4 points	2

In the focus groups it was clear that young people felt they had improved social skills, regardless of whether they had actually made new friends. The ability and confidence to be sociable was highly valued and young people who had not made friends were not concerned about it because they felt better able to be sociable more generally. Social skills specifically cited included dealing with nerves, team work, communication, how to make friends and listening. Work placements, volunteering and attending community events were described to be effective in gaining social skills more generally, beyond making friends.

The qualitative data unequivocally suggests that this indicator is highly important and has been met for the young people involved in the project. However, this is not reflected within the target numbers. Action plan data reveals that 29 young people demonstrate improved social skills and other monitoring data suggests that the total number is approximately 38, so this target has only partially been met by 54 per cent. However, it should be noted that action plan reviews are due after this report is completed and the project will be working with more participants, so it is highly likely that this margin will increase positively.

Summary of outcome 3

Raising confidence and gaining social skills are the two issues that young people wanted to highlight in terms of the positive impact the project has had on them. They are also the two issues that parents felt had been most achieved. Whilst the numerical data does not completely reflect this level of praise, the qualitative data suggests that the project work has had a life changing impact for the young people because of their raised confidence and increase in friendships and social skills more generally.

ASSESSING OUTCOME 4: LEARNING FROM THE PROJECT WILL INFORM STATUTORY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR PROVISION AND HELP TO DEVELOP BETTER MODELS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG DISABLED PEOPLE AS THEY MOVE INTO ADULTHOOD

Indicator 1: The completion and circulation of an annual evaluation report

The Barnardo's Cymru Community Connecting Service in Blaenau Gwent was supported by the Barnardo's Cymru Policy and Research Unit to gather monitoring data from the outset of the project. In year 1, a progress report was produced by Barnardo's Cymru and circulated to partner organisations of Blaenau Gwent Community Links, and other regional and national partner organisations which had an interest in the work. The first year progress report was also available to download in both Welsh and English from the Barnardo's Cymru website. At the end of year 1, a presentation and question and answer session regarding the evaluation and project progress was given to the project steering group. This final evaluation report is also being circulated to project partners and other regional and national organisations and will be available to download in Welsh and English from the websites of Barnardo's Cymru and C.A.R.P. Collaborations. The Community Connecting Service is hosting a conference at the end of the project and the evaluators are giving a presentation regarding the learning from the project. Additionally, the evaluators are working in partnership with Barnardo's Cymru to explore avenues for giving presentations with the young people who have participated in the project at national policy forums. These activities constitute more than the circulation of a report and, therefore, this indicator has been exceeded.

Indicator 2: Interventions made by the service to remove barriers to young people's participation and inclusion in community activities and improve support services (70-100 interventions)

The project has undertaken long term, individualised interventions with 50 young people, 39 of whom have had personal action plans (some of these young people started with the service at the time of writing this report). Referrals were received for a further 11 young people who chose not to engage with the project after receiving information and initial home visits. Through its formal and informal training, the project has worked with a total of 217 people including non-disabled young people, staff at community resources and groups, and professionals in mainstream statutory services. This makes a total of 267 interventions, vastly exceeding the target number of 70 interventions.

Additionally, the project has ensured regular contact with other local service provisions through the project steering group. The steering group consists of representatives from social services, youth service, health, Careers Wales, advocacy services, Families First and voluntary sector, all of whom attend bi-monthly meetings. This approach has supported the development of the project and enabled positive partnership working and relationships to be developed. In conclusion, this indicator has been exceeded.

Assessing outcome 4

Both indicators from outcome 4 have been exceeded. The project has achieved effective partnership working and has developed good and innovative practice that is of quality and interest to service providers and other sectors at a national level.

SECTION 6: UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES AND IDENTIFIED GOOD PRACTICE

Whilst the project has had specified outcomes to work to, there are a number of unexpected outcomes that are important in terms of shared learning and good practice. This section summarises some of the successes and achievements of the project which are not captured within the four specified project outcomes.

Reduced family isolation

Whilst the project aimed to increase socialising opportunities for young disabled people, it also enabled parents to have reduced isolation. Through providing support to young people to leave the family home without parents, parents reported that their own time was freed up a little, enabling them to have a break from caring duties and have the option to socialise themselves. It has also enabled a minority of parents to make friends with other parents whose children were participants in the project, enabling peer support and friendship.

The importance of work placements and volunteering

Young people's comments during focus groups highlight how important work placements and voluntary placements are in terms of changing self-perception of capabilities and aspirations. All of the young people who had attended work placements were very proud of the achievements and some went on to have paid work. Work aspirations were clearly something that the young people were beginning to develop, and the young people who had successfully undertaken work placements acted as encouragement and role models for other young people, making a significant contribution to raising confidence and self-belief.

Applicability of work across the voluntary sector and education

The sessions used in disability equality training with young people were disseminated at a national anti-bullying seminar hosted by Children in Wales in year 1. The focus of the seminar was about the role of equality education in preventing bullying behaviours and how this needs to happen in community groups as well as in schools. The disability equality training being delivered to non-disabled young people and elements of the personal safety course delivered to project participants are highly relevant to the education sector and advancement of equalities in the light of the Welsh Government document *'Tackling Hate Crimes and Incidents: A Framework for Action'* (2014) and Estyn's thematic report *'Action on Bullying: a review of the effectiveness of action taken by schools to address bullying on the grounds of pupils' protected characteristics'* (2014). The development of increasing choice and control via decision making and forums is also replicable across sectors and in other community groups.

Applicability across age groups

The project focus is to work with young disabled people in transition to adulthood. However, from training form evaluations and feedback from community venues, the work is equally applicable to primary aged children and there is a need for community connecting across all age ranges.

Strategic use of group work

The project has not just undertaken activities because the group courses and activities are more than face value. A well designed group programme is more than just learning skills: it has socialising skills, team building and independent skills built into it. For example, a young man explained that the best day for him was a trip to the Millennium Stadium. However, this was far more than a trip out to have fun or expand horizons. The young man explained it was amazing because he bought his own train ticket for the first time and with no support. He explained that it was a surprise to him that it was not difficult to do. Many of the young people were excited by trips out, not just because of the activities but because they would make their own sandwiches. The combination of skills taught through the group courses cannot be underestimated and were highly valued by the participants. Similarly, the residential provided a huge boost to independence and confidence but was still an opportunity to be with friends and have fun.

Innovation in community connecting

Often, community connecting projects support individuals to access activities of their choice and focus upon the skills needed for that specific connection. The project has been innovative through taking groups of young people to 'informal meeting places' i.e. community venues where people commonly congregate. One common difficulty that is often found within community connecting is enabling young disabled people to be included in informal groups in community spaces. Through taking young people to community venues, the project is taking the first steps to addressing some of the difficulties. It has also enabled groups of young people to meet up together in community venues without support rather than solely relying upon a group or activity approach.

Level of skill implementation among the project participants

The analysis of the indicators and outcomes omit a focus upon the level of skill implementation being undertaken by the young people. During focus groups, young people stressed that one of the most enjoyable things from undertaking the group work was being able to do new things without help. One young woman explained how much fun it is being able to Hoover and bake at home. All the young people stated that they had learnt new things that they were going to keep doing. These varied, including making short films on a daily basis, travelling to places alone, following up music courses and options at the local college, and attending community groups such as drama.

The impact of the project upon the young people's lives is clearly transformative as shown in the comments below in response to the question 'What do you plan on doing from September and over the next year?'

'Clean the house and keep the hygiene knowledge I have learnt.'

'I'm going to go shopping and learn more money skills. I will do cooking and more PE to be healthy.'

'I like going bowling. I like going to the cinema. I like going to the museum. I hope to go with a friend one day and not be taken.'

'I make films a lot. I am going to do more art and music. I have joined a tennis club and now do street dance too. I'm going to do all of this in the next year.'

When asked about long term aspirations, young people spoke about wanting to work, having relationships and enjoying themselves. Over the course of the evaluation, it is apparent that aspirations have changed and become richer.

Offers life outside the family

Many of the young people and their parents reported that they had nothing to do outside of family and school before the Community Connecting Project started. Parents said things such as:

'I've never seen her have friends.'

'He'd come home from school and just sit in his room. There was nothing for him. And no one around him.'

The majority of parents stated that it was the first time that their child had had a chance to undertake hobbies and activities in their spare time and they especially valued the fact that the project enabled choices regarding activities and things to do and did not rely upon family support for the young person to be able to do it. They explained it was their first real social experience. This had led to the project being highly valued by both young people and parents, but runs the risk of the project being perceived as a lifeline service rather than a community connecting service, raising issues of sustainability after the life of the project. It also highlights how much capacity building is needed within community settings.

Quality of work from Barnardo's Cymru staff

Young people felt that this report should highlight the quality of the support they had received from Barnardo's staff. Unanimously, young people, siblings and parents gave high praise for the work of Barnardo's Cymru staff. Comments were collected through an anonymous comments' box to enable people to speak honestly and, in focus groups, staff left the room to enable the young people to directly talk about the support they had received without staff being present. Most commonly, parents were very positive about the quality of the service, how it had enabled young disabled people to have a social life and the level of confidence it had helped young people achieve. Example comments are listed below. These are cited to show consensus opinions.

'We have had excellent service for X. Staff are FAB and always helpful - they put her needs first. Top class, thank you!'

'Barnardo's have given my 2 children a boost of confidence and shown them things that have helped them both. Thank you, you're fab.'

'The summer programme was so well organised and positive for the children! Our family has really benefited from your service. Thanks for looking after our children so well!'

'Absolutely fantastic! Great friendly staff and amazing work.'

'This is the best thing that could happen for Blaenau Gwent.'

‘She now talks to me about things that aren’t just family or school.’

Young people’s comments included:

‘They make things interesting.’

‘They are nice to be with. They are like friends or brothers and sisters. They are like our family.’

‘They are good at listening and patient. They have really helped me and [my parent] out.’

Many young people spoke of the hope that staff in other organisations would work with them in the same way as Barnardo’s workers. The most important attributes for good practice were patience, encouragement and celebrating successes.

Mix of focus

The focus of the Community Connections Project is threefold. Firstly, the project focuses on the individual young person’s learning and development; secondly, on community resources to build capacity and, lastly, upon the young person’s family. Most projects focus on one of these three but rarely all three. This holistic focus is necessary to enable sustainable community connecting to occur. Parents felt that including the family was a priority and particularly welcomed the visit made to the family home prior to joining groups, and the fact there were family fun days and good communication so that they knew what was happening. Parents also enjoyed being able to spend time with other families who had a disabled member, gaining a sense of solidarity and thereby reducing family isolation. Unanimously, parents felt that the project should be focused upon the young person doing things beyond family life but they welcomed the way in which the project had worked with them. They also welcomed some of the friendships that had developed from meeting other parents on the project.

Siblings also mentioned how they appreciated the family focus. As may be expected, they enjoyed the days out, but also spoke about the team building they had done and how it was good to know that their brother or sister was excelling and getting out enjoying themselves. In evaluation workshops, they created a newspaper front page which reported on a family day to Chessington Zoo. The siblings commented upon team building as well as the fun they had being able to run about with other families and their siblings. Their headline message was ‘Well done Barnardo’s for supporting families!’

Complexities regarding community connecting

There were some tensions within the project with regards to community connecting. At the end of year 1, the project was behind target in relation to community connecting activities but has enabled rapid progress in year 2 to exceed targets and establish a number of wide reaching community connections for 35 young people. In year 1, three clear barriers arose with regards to community connecting, which led to the project having to undertake a large amount of preparation work before any community connections could be achieved. These barriers were:

1. The Community Connections Project had to build significant levels of confidence and community capacity before being able to undertake individual community connecting. Some of the youth

workers in training commented that they had never worked with disabled young people before and parents reported that young people had never had socialising opportunities. It was, therefore, imperative for the project to undertake a large amount of work before community connections could become a realistic, sustainable possibility. It was apparent that many existing mainstream groups were not equipped for inclusion.

2. The project needed to focus upon group work in order to raise individual aspirations and confidence. This was crucial for young people to feel able to join a mainstream social setting and succeed in learning new things, such as being in unfamiliar places, travelling alone, or learning a new skill.
3. In year 1, the majority of parents cited one benefit of the project was that 'it is not mixed in with other groups currently running' and stated that, 'Whilst all parents were very positive towards the project, some parents were not supportive of inclusion in mainstream settings.' As the project has progressed and more young people have successfully joined or used mainstream community resources, this concern has reduced for some parents. However, by the end of year 2, some parents still felt that 'our children can't go to local youth clubs or whatever' and explained that open access policies, lack of personal support, lack of staff knowledge and expertise, and fear of bullying all contribute to concerns about mainstream groups.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TAKING COMMUNITY CONNECTING FORWARD AND LEARNING FROM THE PROJECT

Meeting targets and quality of work

The numerical targets have been exceeded for outcomes 2 and 4 regarding awareness raising and increasing capacity of community groups and for ensuring dissemination of good practice. The project has not worked with enough young people to be able to meet numerical targets relating to outcome 1 and outcome 3. When evaluators inquired about referral processes to the project and joint working, it became apparent that some services and organisations were more forthcoming with support than others. Over the two year period, the project did not receive any referrals from four secondary schools in the area or adult social services, despite having had meetings and contact with relevant organisations. This may partly be because, often, young people within this age group are between child and adult services and can therefore fall through gaps in provision. Through these initial inquiries, it is clear that the project reached out for referrals and undertook good joint working with a variety of organisations local to Blaenau Gwent.

Additionally, numerical indicators appear lower than the target because young people could choose which outcomes they wanted to work towards. The project has attempted to work towards pre-identified project outcomes, Big Lottery programme outcomes, and still enable young people to meaningfully self-identify outcomes they want to work towards. Many projects do not enable this element of choice because young people may not choose outcomes that align to organisational or funders' specifications. This is why the qualitative data is also important. The qualitative data suggests that the project outcomes have all been exceeded and that work regarding community connecting and raising confidence was particularly outstanding.

Recommendations for developing the community connections work in Blaenau Gwent

1. Continue with the current focus, but work on developing exit strategies for the young people. Roughly ten young people have left the project since it started. The evaluation data is clear that the young people needed a long term support but, to enable sustainability, young people need support to exit using a service. Additionally, if the project were to continue, the focus could be on resilience and independence, enabling more young people to socialise and take opportunities in mainstream settings with less support where appropriate. A project such as this should be the vehicle for creating inclusion, not become the primary mechanism for inclusion.
2. Parents still have concerns regarding mainstream settings. If the project were to continue, it could focus upon community connecting, with parents inputting into inclusion training for staff and meeting staff in mainstream settings to both reduce the concerns and continue to build capacity in community resources. If parents do not want their children attending mainstream settings, their concerns need to be properly listened to and worked with in order for community connecting to happen. Capacity of community resources could also be built through offering mentoring placements.

3. Make greater use of supported employment work placements. The volunteering and work placements had a profound impact upon the participating young people. A new project could focus upon reducing the number of young disabled people who become not in education, training or employment, through continuing to focus upon the personal skills but accompanying it with supported placements.