



Case Study: Better Me - Goal 2– Mental fitness programme

The Better Me programme was fully funded by the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme in 2023. The programme was run in The West Cork Development Partnership's Bandon/Kinsale area. This narrative is in addition and in conjunction with the video case study submitted.

From prior intervention work and on-the-ground SICAP activities – it was noted that a high number of 16–24-year-olds were presenting high levels of anxiety and depression and lack of confidence along with social isolation from their environment, community, and peers.

The West Cork Development Partnership's experience identified a need for a group format approach that used a strengths and evidence-based model to support individuals under 25 on their journey to build Mental fitness and resilience.

Two development officers were the leads in the conception, creation, promotion and implementation of the programme. Both development officers have their own skill set, one being a Boxing Coach with experience and qualifications in various sporting disciplines as well as a wealth of experience working as an under-25 dedicated SICAP Development Officer. The other is a Psychotherapist and trained in Coaching psychology. Both development officers are additionally, trained as facilitators in a variety of Programmes such as; WRAP, Parent Plus Programmes: Parenting when Separated, Working Things Out programme, Parenting Adolescence, Parenting Children with Special Needs, and NVR.

The upskilling in these facilitated programmes was funded by SICAP as part of the Development officers' Continuous Professional Development.

An important aspect of the Better Me programme was to ensure it comprised a mixed-ability and mixed-background group. The pre-development work involved talking through the programme with local service providers and putting the concept to life as well as advertising across areas using posters.

The course was additionally advertised publicly on social media as well as through collaborative organisations such as *West Cork Travellers*, *National Learning Network*, *Youth Reach* and *Family Support Centres*. This ensured that we received smart referrals using community development principles to achieve participation with those who were most marginalised.

Development officers followed this by going into each organisation and giving a talk to the young people there to explain and promote the programme.



"A BETTER ME" 5 DAY MENTAL FITNESS COURSE

WHAT WILL I GET FROM TAKING PART ?
AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD YOUR MENTAL FITNESS IN THIS FREE, SHORT PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

WHO IS IT FOR ?
THOSE AGED BETWEEN 18-24YRS OLD

WHEN IS IT ON ?
RUNNING IN JULY AND AGAIN IN SEPTEMBER

WHAT WILL I BE DOING? ?
LEARN SKILLS TO HELP YOU COMMUNICATE BETTER.
TAKE PART IN PRACTICAL FUN ACTIVITIES
LEARN TEAM BUILDING SKILLS

WHERE IS IT ON ?
WE ARE ACCEPTING INDIVIDUALS FROM ACROSS WEST CORK. TRANSPORT WILL BE PROVIDED

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST ?
IT'S FREE !

HOW DO I SIGN UP ?
Call Mark Gaffney on (087) 1630 780 or Jimeve O'Neill on: (086) 735 6340

Logos at the bottom include: European Union, West Cork Development Partnership, and various local organizations.

(Poster used for promotion)

There were limited places available on the programme and those who expressed an interest in part-taking were interviewed on a one-on-one basis, allowing Development officers to complete a screening process to ensure those that would benefit the most would obtain a place on the course ensuring a balance between capacity for learning and active participation. Not all participants who expressed an interest were able to part-take.

A mixed-ability group were formed with a range of backgrounds, experiences, and social inclusion barriers across the territory. The Group comprised 7 males and 8 females. 16 participants were enrolled all with diverse needs such as; Neurodiversity, living in Foster care, Travelling community, Early school leavers, and NEETs.

The Better Me Programme ran for One week, 5-day course starting at 9 am and finishing at 4 pm consisting of a variety of structured daily activities that were adapted to suit the ability and needs within the group. We endeavoured to use evidence-based strategies throughout the weeklong programme.

Day One- An Sanctoir: Here we came together as a group for the first time in a calm and peaceful setting, allowing the group to form and bond. Development officers gave a demonstration of communication styles, using the five levels of listening and participants then role-played using the styles. Psychoeducation was provided on understanding how our brain and nervous system work in times of stress, passing around tools such as a model of the brain, while explaining the parts of our brain that get activated in times of stress, along with strategies to manage these responses and reduce anxiety. A mindful walk was completed, and a sound map was created by everyone.

The Development officers both come from disadvantaged backgrounds and were able to share something personal about their own difficulties in education, communication, and confidence issues.

This set the tone and allowed for connection and permission for others to share and be authentic. The development officers were not delivering the course as experts with the answers but more as part of the group while holding space for shared learning, giving permission for vulnerability and authenticity.

Day two -Kinsale: Comprised of activity-based interventions: Learning to mindfully draw in a calm space with an experienced artist leading the workshop. In the afternoon leadership skills were developed through activity on a boat trip around Kinsale harbour, each participant took a turn steering the boat, some were nervous but were encouraged by the other participants to do it. They engaged in fishing, connecting with nature, and changing perceptions about their own ability as well as others.

Day Three- Cork City : A trip to experience cultural activities such as Shandon Bells and Cork City Gaol and a visit to The Marina Market. Some individuals had a fear of heights and small spaces and had moments of panic. The responses of the group to these individuals were amazingly supportive, encouraging, and empathetic really stretching to support others in times of stress. In the city centre there were opportunities to navigate and lead using tour maps around the Goal which helped to build trust and confidence in each other. This activity also afforded an opportunity to deepen awareness of Irish culture and history strengthening a sense of belonging and identity. Being in the city also opened awareness of potential opportunities outside of their immediate environment.

Day Four – Dunmanway: Day of Sports- We engaged in Individual and team games; walking soccer, badminton, boxing, and meditation this activity promoted the benefits of physical development, and fundamental movement skills which help increase cognitive repair.

Day Five – Skibbereen : An Sanctoir– A Group pottery exercise was undertaken allowing individuals to engage with their creative side and partake in a drumming circle and campfire. Ending the week with an opportunity to show appreciation and celebration of individual and team accomplishments. Participants were given time to identify the things that made them feel good in the week and explore takeaways from the course. Throughout the week Fruit and lunch were provided through SICAP funding, with a focus on self-care, eating well and promoting the benefits of eating with others at all mealtimes.

Journey of change

Clients self-rated their personal and professional skills at the beginning of day 1 using the distance travelled tool, **My Journey**, and again at the end of the course on day five. The results in Table 1, show the progression across all areas captured by the distance travelled tool; *Literacy and numeracy confidence; Goal setting and self-efficacy confidence; Connection to others, general work readiness and communication skills.*

The Better Me course's main objective was to connect individuals with others and build Mental fitness and resilience and grow self-confidence, the data captured on the distance travelled tool shows that this impact was achieved. Interestingly the course didn't focus on any elements of numeracy or literacy skills, however, data captured from the tool showed that 33% felt more confident in their maths ability, 26% more confident in form filling by the end of the course, this evidences the power and importance of connection, support, belonging and partaking in along in

physical movement and mental health education to enhance individuals' self-belief and foster a can-do attitude.

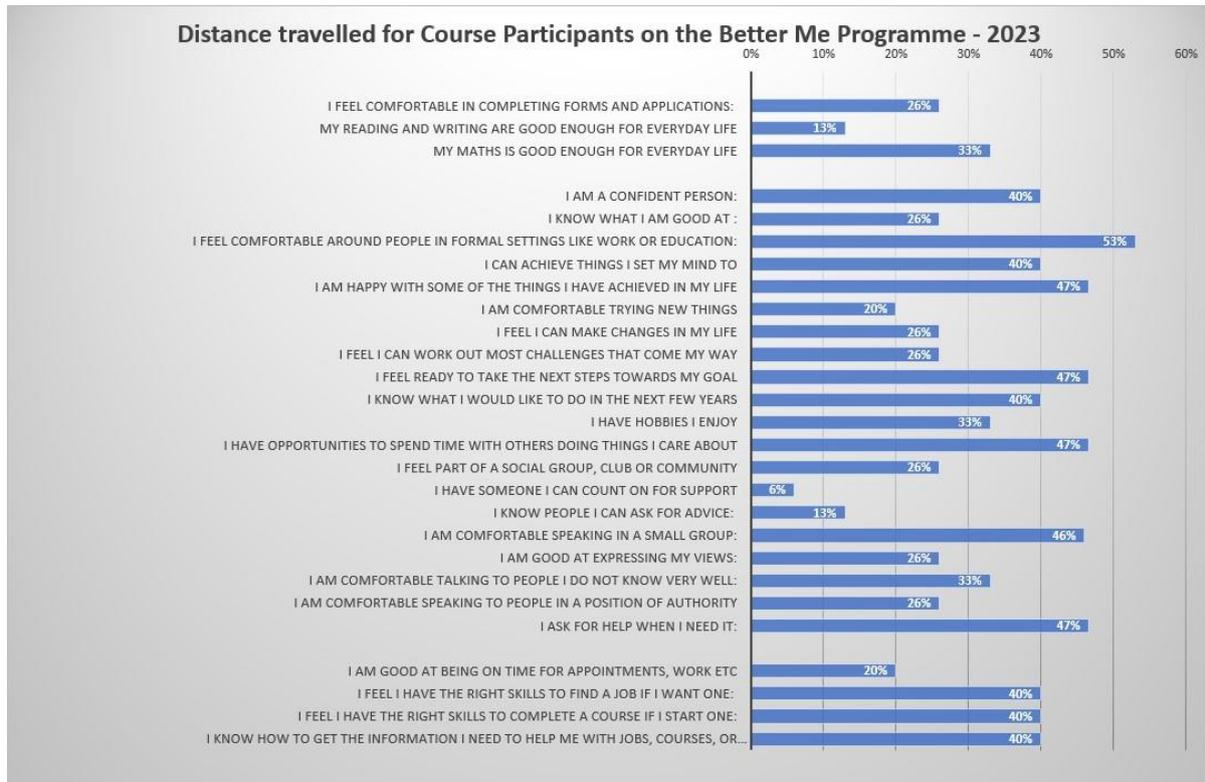


Table1.

By the end of the course, all participants spoke about how they now felt empowered to connect with others and felt happier in themselves, with more confidence. A WhatsApp group was formed during the course and individuals remained active and connected within it many months later.

Development officers are aware of one of the participants becoming homeless in recent times and when looking for support turned to another participant, with whom they had no prior relationship, for guidance and received excellent signposting, which in turn ended with the individual being rehomed and now employed.

The deep and meaningful connections forged within the group offered a space to be who they are in the world, with the abilities and barriers they face being accepted by those around them. It provided an opportunity to be authentic with others in how they are feeling. Share experiences of what it is like to feel limited, deal with judgement and disconnect, while also having an opportunity to share strategies and tips on how they deal with certain negative thoughts and experiences.

It allowed individuals to see and experience first-hand that each person has their own difficulties to overcome when navigating the world. The mixed-ability group offered individuals an opportunity to meet the people behind diagnoses and Social Stigmas, offering a change of perception and an opportunity to support another in times of struggle. Fostering a sense of community, connection and inclusion.

Challenges: Given the territory in which the programme is rolled out, transport is always an issue for individuals living in rural areas. Many participants had to leave home two hours before the start of

the course to reach the main meeting point at 9am. 16 participants were enrolled and 15 completed the course. One participant had to drop out at the end of day one because of transport logistics. However, the commitment and personal drive to continue the course shown by some individuals throughout the week went above and beyond expectations with a continued engagement by all 15 participants.

Individuals in this age group can struggle with motivation and consistency, commitment can be difficult to maintain. Often there is an expected level of dropout as the date of the course gets nearer, and/or during the course due to participants' capacity to make things work; intrapersonally and circumstantially. However, we didn't have anyone late or no-show after the first day, this allowed a real insight into how engaging this course was and what it meant for participants to be part of it.

Having a mixed-ability group brought challenges for the SICAP Development officers, understanding individual needs as they arose and dealing with limitations from severe anxiety; issues around Partial sightedness, Autism, Sensory issues and Fears and Phobias. The week had to be flexible in its approach allowing time for reassurance and ensuring safety elements were adapted and always considered. To this end, development officers and participants had to work together for the good of all, so although a challenge at times it also created a cohesiveness within the group.

Feedback from individuals, families and organisations has been nothing but phenomenally positive. It was an uplifting and inspiring programme. The courage and risk that each young person stretched themselves to was very commendable. The care, support, and generosity that they displayed to one another was extremely heartening to observe. They came as individuals navigating their own difficulties and left as friends who understood supported and believed in each other.



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