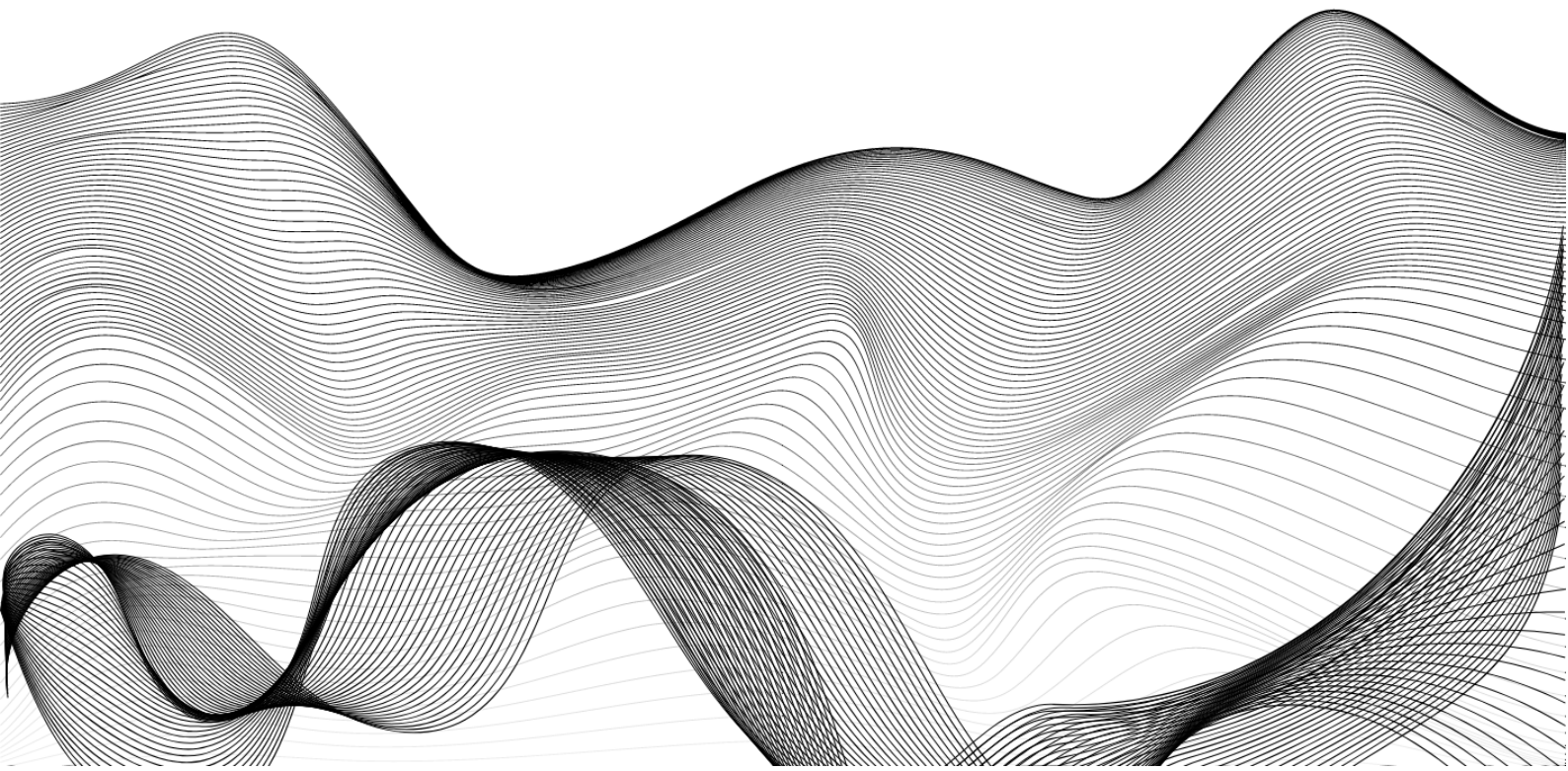




# Evaluation of Project Connect's Stay Connected Programme

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This evaluation was undertaken by Black Box Research and Consultancy Ltd. It details qualitative and quantitative data obtained through observations, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with participants who attended Stay Connected: Newport between July 2023-April 2024.

Black Box is a nationally recognised criminal justice consultancy specialising in modern slavery with a specific focus on forced labour and criminal exploitation. The principal objectives of Black Box are to provide support to victims of modern slavery and to enhance public awareness both in domestic and international settings. By leveraging its knowledge in expert witness testimony, training and grass-roots evaluation, Black Box endeavours to equip professionals with the necessary tools to assist children, young people and vulnerable adults experiencing exploitative environments and contact with the Criminal Justice System.

Stay Connected, delivered by Project Connect, is a continuation of the 'Get Connected' programme, designed to sustain and enhance collaboration among professionals working to prevent youth violence. It focuses on maintaining strong relationships, regularly updating action plans, and ensuring accountability among partners. By building on the momentum from 'Get Connected', it aims to achieve long-term success in youth violence prevention efforts.

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# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of Project Connect's Stay Connected programme, delivered in Newport, Middlesbrough. Building on the success of the Get Connected programme, Stay Connected is designed to maintain the engagement and strengthen collaboration among professionals and agencies involved in youth violence prevention. The programme focuses on sustaining relationships, regularly updating action plans (the SAYVE plan<sup>1</sup>), and holding partners accountable for their commitments. By fostering ongoing partnerships, Stay Connected aims to ensure that the positive outcomes achieved in earlier programmes are sustained and expanded.

## 1.2 Methods

A mixed-methods qualitative approach was utilised for this evaluation, incorporating observations, surveys and interviews. The sample consisted of ten participants, who completed seven surveys and three interviews, representing various stakeholders involved in youth violence prevention in Newport. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes regarding the programme's effectiveness and to develop recommendations for improving future iterations of Stay Connected.

## 1.3 Key Findings

- **Collaboration and Partnerships:** 70% of participants reported increased collaboration following their participation in Stay Connected. The programme enhanced knowledge exchange, shifting participants' perspectives towards a more contextual understanding of youth violence and bridging the gap between top-down and bottom-up organisations.
- **Enablers:** Participants identified three categories of enablers that facilitated the programme's success:
  - (1) **Facilitator-Focused:** Joe and Carlus, the project leaders, were praised for their ability to adapt to participants' needs and create a supportive learning environment.

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<sup>1</sup> The SAYVE plan is a collaborative framework developed during the "Get Connected" programme. Facilitators guide participants in identifying key issues within their locality and co-create a shared action plan, focusing on tangible outcomes. The plan encourages stakeholders to align on strategies and responsibilities aimed at reducing youth violence and addressing community challenges.

(2) Participant-Focused: Having the right individuals involved, particularly those committed to improving their local area, was key to effective collaboration.

(3) Programme-Focused: The local focus on Newport's specific challenges and the alignment with Locality meetings were cited as essential to the programme's success.

- **Barriers:**

- The absence of school staff was a significant limitation, as their involvement is crucial for contextually relevant action plans.
- There was a lack of youth representation, which limited the programme's ability to fully address youth violence from their perspective.
- Staff turnover within agencies was another challenge, disrupting continuity in partnerships and collaborations.

## 1.4 Recommendations

- **Incorporate Youth Voices:** Actively involve young people in the programme's design and delivery, as their unique perspective can lead to more relevant strategies and sustainable outcomes.
- **Enhance Engagement of Educational Professionals:** Increase the involvement of school staff, whose participation is crucial in addressing youth violence. Consider holding sessions outside school hours or assigning community representatives to engage with schools.
- **Strengthen Stakeholder Engagement:** Encourage broader participation across departments to mitigate the impact of staff turnover on partnership continuity.
- **Sustained Support from Facilitators:** Provide ongoing support and guidance from facilitators post-programme to maintain momentum and ensure the practical application of action plans and collaborative efforts.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Project Connect

Project Connect was established in 2021 with the objective of fostering meaningful connections to help develop strategic vision and mission by leveraging the expertise of individuals in both statutory and third-sector organisations. This is achieved through Project Connect's 'Get Connected' and 'Stay Connected' programmes, both of which have been implemented in Newport.

### 2.2 Stay Connected: Newport

This evaluation focusses on the Stay Connected programme conducted in Newport, Middlesbrough, from July 2023 to April 2024. Newport is a ward within Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire, with a population of 10,778. It is under the jurisdiction of the Middlesbrough North Policing Neighbourhood, who operates as part of the Cleveland Police Force area.

### 2.3 Get Connected: Newport

The present research builds on findings from a previous evaluation of the 'Get Connected: Newport' programme. This initiative consisted of five sessions conducted between 2022 and 2023, designed to unite local stakeholders to enhance awareness and understanding of the factors contributing to crime and youth violence in Newport. Participants were guided in creating a 'SAYVE plan' with actionable targets aimed at implementing effective strategies. All organisations were encouraged to facilitate future violence prevention strategies to improve the lives of young people within their community. The structure of the sessions included:

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

Table 1: Structural Plan for Topics Covered Throughout Get Connected: Newport

Black Box's 2023 evaluation of 'Get Connected: Newport'<sup>2</sup> included interviews with participants who attended the programme. Findings produced in this report provide a snapshot of positive outcomes achieved through participation. Participants noted that their involvement in the Newport sessions fostered increased multi-agency collaboration and a better understanding of professional roles within the local area. Joe and Carlus, as programme facilitators, were recognised for their effectiveness in maintaining engagement and promoting critical discussion. However, the absence of senior leaders and influential figures, challenges in balancing discussion time, and limited guidance upon the programme's conclusion were identified as limitations. These findings informed our recommendations for future iterations, including:

1. The need for greater engagement and attendance of senior and influential local stakeholders across all relevant sectors.
2. The allocation of a single point of contact to oversee concerns related to collaboration after the programme's conclusion.

## 2.4 Violence in Newport

The implementation of Stay Connected in Newport is primarily due to the rising incidents of criminal and violent behaviour recorded in recent years. According to figures published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), for the year ending March 2023, The Cleveland Police Force - responsible for Middlesbrough - reported a 15% increase in crimes compared to the previous year<sup>3</sup>. In Middlesbrough specifically, this was matched by a 24.6% increase in crime incidents recorded between July 2021 and July 2022<sup>4</sup>, significantly higher than the 1.1% increase across England<sup>3</sup>. In total, 27,127 crime incidents were reported in Middlesbrough in the year ending July 2022, an increase of 5,356 from the previous year<sup>3</sup>.

In terms of violence, Cleveland Police Force reported in 2020 that it had the third-highest rate of violent crimes in the country<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, according to Middlesbrough's Community Safety Partnership, 1 in every 12 violent crimes in the area are serious violence offences. As shown in Figure 1, violence against the person made up 36% of all recorded offences in Middlesbrough up to June 2023. A 2021 report by Crest Advisory

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson, G., Pippard, J. and Robinson, D. 'Get Connected: Newport Evaluation', Black Box Research and Consultancy, 2023, <https://blackboxresearchandconsultancy.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Get-Connected-Newport-Evaluation-May-2023.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Officer for National Statistics, 'Crime in England and Wales: Police Force Area data tables', 2023, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/policeforceareadatatables> (accessed 31 August 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Varbes, 'Crime in Middlesbrough', Varbes, 2023, <https://www.varbes.com/crime/middlesbrough-crime>, (accessed 30 August 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland, 'Preventing & Addressing Serious Violence in Cleveland', *Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland*, 2020, <https://www.cleveland.pcc.police.uk/content/uploads/2020/10/Appendix-A-Violence-in-Clevelandredact.pdf> (accessed 30 August 2023).

found that at least 37% (4,335) of young people in Middlesbrough were at risk of becoming involved in violence, being victims of violence, or witnessing violence<sup>6</sup>. This was the highest proportion of young people at risk within a specific area across the country.

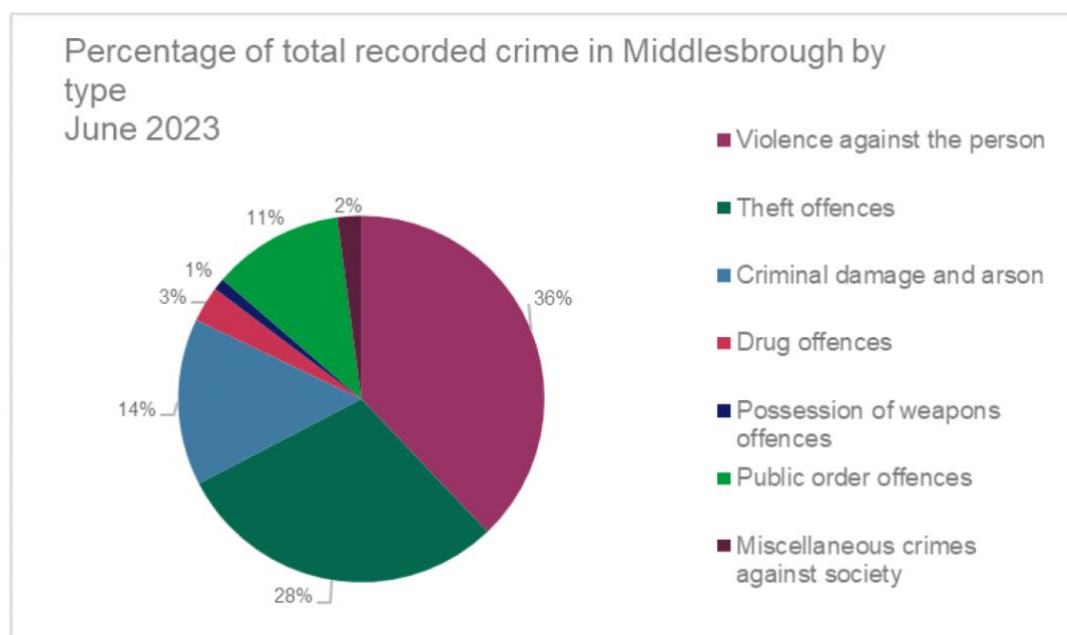


Figure 1. Recorded Crime by Type in Middlesbrough<sup>7</sup>

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to highly stressful or traumatic events that occur during childhood or adolescence. These can be isolated incidents or ongoing threats to a young person's sense of safety. Examples of ACEs include abuse, neglect, substance misuse, loss of a parent/caregiver and poor mental health within the home environment. There is a plethora of academic research linking involvement in the criminal justice system to the presence of ACEs. Indeed, the more ACEs an individual has, the higher their risk of negative outcomes, such as interaction with the criminal justice system, increased vulnerability to exploitation<sup>8</sup>, school exclusion<sup>9</sup>, and a greater likelihood of engaging in harmful behaviours such as substance use and self-harm. Cleveland Police have reported high rates of looked after children and school

<sup>6</sup> Crest Advisory, 'Violence and Vulnerability, 2021, [https://64e09bbc-abdd-42c690a858992ce46e59.usrfiles.com/ugd/64e09b\\_5abf5bb2228a4b77a23237ba80ef86a4.pdf](https://64e09bbc-abdd-42c690a858992ce46e59.usrfiles.com/ugd/64e09b_5abf5bb2228a4b77a23237ba80ef86a4.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> South Tees Health & Wellbeing Board, 'South Tees Joint Strategic Needs Assessment', 2024, <https://middlesbrough.gov.uk/media/lb1ddyby/south-tees-jsna-live-well-violence-reduction.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Home Office, 'Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines' (*Home Office*, 20 October 2023) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines#:~:text=%E2%80%9CCounty%20lines%E2%80%9D%20is%20a%20violent,locally%20or%20in%20other%20counties.>>

<sup>9</sup> Office for National Statistics, 'The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system: May 2022' (ONS, 11 May 2022) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationandsocialcarebackgroundofyoungpeoplewhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/may2022>>

exclusion, both of which are predictors of involvement in crime. Additionally, 33% of children in Middlesbrough live in income-deprived households, making it one of the most impoverished areas of the country<sup>10</sup>. The combination of high levels of deprivation, school exclusions, and ACEs significantly increases the likelihood of young people in Middlesbrough becoming involved in crime. Addressing these underlying factors is crucial for reducing youth violence and improving long-term outcomes for the area's most vulnerable children.

## 3. Methods

For this evaluation, a mixed-methods approach was employed. Black Box have utilised observations, surveys and interviews to collect information from participants who attended the 'Stay Connected: Newport' programme. These methods were chosen primarily for their practicality in data collection, rather than for triangulation purposes. Throughout the data collection process, researchers faced challenges in recruiting participants for interviews, as many were unwilling to commit time or felt they had limited input due to their minimal engagement in the project. Those willing to participate were given the choice between contributing via surveys or interviews.

### 3.1 Sample

In total, ten participants took part in this evaluation, with seven completing surveys and three participating in interviews. The profiles of these participants are detailed in Table 2. Recognising their significant roles in the project, researchers specifically targeted 'Recommendation Leads and Champions', who were responsible for coordinating and implementing objectives outlined in Get Connected's 'SAYVE plan' outside of the sessions. Due to the limited number of responses, the same questions were utilised for both interviews and surveys to ensure consistency and allow for comparative analysis during data analysis. The uniformity of the data facilitated drawing comprehensive conclusions reflective of all participants' input. The surveys and interviews focused on four different areas:

1. Participants' contribution to youth violence prevention in Newport
2. Techniques and practices employed by project leaders
3. Structure of the programme

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<sup>10</sup> Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland, 'Preventing & Addressing Serious Violence in Cleveland', 2020, <https://www.cleveland.pcc.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Appendix-A-Violence-in-Clevelandredact.pdf>

#### 4. Outcomes of participation

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software. Researchers employed an inductive thematic analysis approach, identifying themes through coding. These themes were then used to formulate conclusions on what was effective and why, as well as to provide recommendations for improvement.

| ID | Sector          | Sessions Attended | Participation in Get Connected | Directly Engage with Young People | Work specific to Newport | SAYVE Plan Role         |
|----|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1  | Local authority | 1                 | No                             | Yes                               | No                       | None                    |
| 2  | Police          | 4                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | Recommendation Lead     |
| 3  | Education       | 1                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | None                    |
| 4  | Police          | 4                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | None                    |
| 5  | Local authority | 1                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | Recommendation Champion |
| 6  | Third-sector    | 4                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | None                    |
| 7  | Local authority | 1                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | Recommendation Lead     |
| 8  | Local authority | 4                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | Recommendation Lead     |
| 9  | Local authority | 4                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | Yes                      | Recommendation Champion |
| 10 | Third-sector    | 4                 | Yes                            | Yes                               | No                       | Recommendation Champion |

Table 2. Profiles of Interview Participants

### 3.2 Limitations

While this evaluation provides valuable insights into the Stay Connected programme, a few limitations and challenges were encountered during the data collection process:

1. Participant Recruitment: A key challenge was recruiting a sufficient number of participants for both surveys and interviews. Despite outreach efforts, some stakeholders were unable or unwilling to

participate due to time constraints or limited involvement in the project. This may have led to non-response bias, where the views of those not participating could differ from those who contributed.

2. **Small Sample Size:** The sample size for the evaluation consisted of ten participants, which, although representative of key stakeholders, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the wider community. The insights gathered were highly valuable, however the small sample size could limit the generalisability of the findings.
3. **Data Collection Methods:** Given the limited pool of participants, the same questions were used for both the surveys and interviews to ensure consistency in responses. While this approach provided a uniform evidence base, it also restricted the range of data that could be gathered.
4. **Time Constraints:** Due to the limited duration of the evaluation, the depth of data collection was restricted. More longitudinal data over an extended period could provide deeper insights into the programme's long-term impacts and sustainability.

Despite these challenges, the evaluation provides a clear and robust analysis of the Stay Connected programme's effectiveness in fostering collaboration and addressing youth violence in Newport.

## 4. Findings

The evaluation findings from the Stay Connected programme in Newport between 2023 and 2024, show an increase in collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders involved in preventing youth violence. This section details how participants engaged with each other both during and after the programme. These outcomes were driven by key enablers identified by participants, which enhanced the effectiveness of collaborative work facilitated by Stay Connected. The enablers are categorised into three types: facilitator-focused, participant-focused, and programme-focused. Facilitator-focused enablers highlight the techniques and practices employed by Joe and Carlus (Project Leads) to foster network development among Newport-based stakeholders. Participant-focused enablers emphasise the importance of having the right personnel who are committed to improving their local area. Programme-focused enablers identify the structural components of the project that improved accessibility and facilitated beneficial interactions among participants. The barriers to collaboration identified by participants will also be discussed to inform recommendations for future improvements.

### 4.1 Facilitator-Focused Enablers

Ninety percent of participants identified Joe and Carlus as effective project leaders who significantly contributed to increased collaborative work among stakeholders. A key enabler noted by participants was

Joe and Carlus' ability to adapt to the diverse needs of participants during sessions. Given the variety of backgrounds and knowledge levels, they were flexible and accommodating, allowing participants to understand the content at their own pace. Participant 8 stated:

*'It wasn't rigid. We did stay on point, but they did allow for that sort of additional information stuff to get people [on board]. That's the whole point. Everyone sort of arrives at things at different paces. So, I think to maybe slow someone down or catch someone up. They did use that quite well I thought.'*

Participants emphasised the importance of having an external facilitator to initiate change. Some professional relationships were initially strained due to bureaucratic barriers, preventing open communication due to fears of criticising the work of different organisations. However, Joe and Carlus' neutral position enabled critical discussions, helping alter previously resistant viewpoints. Participant 8 observed:

*'I also personally liked the fact that it was someone not directly associated with Middlesbrough, they sort of professionally challenged on uncertain thought processes, and then it did give time for that difference of opinion to be talked through in the right way. Especially in Newport, about sort of links to children's services and maybe feedback to other services, and that was quite challenging as a conversation, but it was facilitated quite well I thought, everyone got a chance to stay professional.'*

## 4.2 Programme-Focused Enablers

The structural components of Stay Connected, implemented by Joe and Carlus, were key enablers that increased buy-in and collaboration among stakeholders. Participants agreed that the hyperlocal focus on youth violence prevention in Newport was a core strength. Although only one participant's work was focused on Newport, the project's localised approach fostered a shared understanding of the area's contextual factors contributing to youth violence, aligning participants to a common goal which benefitted the local community. Additionally, one participant noted that showcasing the positive impact of collaboration within a smaller community is particularly effective, especially considering the limited financial resources available to implement such initiatives on a larger scale.

Participants also identified the link between Get Connected and Stay Connected as beneficial. While both programmes aimed to increase collaboration, they served different purposes that contributed to Project Connect's success in Newport. Get Connected provided a structured programme which allowed initial discussions and informal relationships to form. Upon conclusion of the programme, a working plan of action (the SAYVE plan) was developed. Stay Connected built on these outcomes, consolidating relationships and holding partners to account, making adaptations to the plan where necessary.

Another beneficial component was scheduling Stay Connected sessions alongside locality meetings. These meetings, already occurring in Newport, involved local professionals focused on safeguarding the community. Aligning these meetings encouraged stakeholder participation in Stay Connected sessions, leveraging their existing presence. As Participant 8 mentioned:

*'It was almost like a little side project linked to locality [meeting]. Oh, I'm in this meeting, and now I can see, so one of my actions from this meeting is I'm going to go and do that. Joe and Carlus could see maybe some of the good stuff that was happening in those [locality] meetings and probably could give some advice.'*

### 4.3 Participant-Focused Enablers

The programme's hyperlocal focus was also evident in participant-focused enablers, where participants demonstrated that involving stakeholders committed to improving Newport's safety increased engagement and buy-in. A perceived 'community spirit' among stakeholders made it easier for everyone to align with the programme's goals. Participant 9 comment:

*'I think it was the buy-in from the employees, the people that were there, the workers, as to how this could benefit their existing work and how it would make it better. I think for me that's what the driver was, that people that were there, they wanted a good outcome. And they were willing to put the time and the effort in to get that.'*

Participant 8 attributed this to ensuring the right stakeholders were involved, saying, 'I think one of the biggest drivers was the people that we got round the table had the passion for the place.' This was partly due to the project facilitators' efforts, as noted by participant 2, who highlighted Joe and Carlus' role in identifying relevant partners.

## 4.4 Outcomes of Participation in Stay Connected: Newport

Participants agreed that collaboration improved as a result of participating in Stay Connected sessions, with 70% of participants stating that they had engaged in greater partnership work since attending. Additional collaboration efforts involved the council working more closely with the local housing authority. This collaboration was in response to another outcome identified by participants – knowledge exchange. This sharing of information helped alter pre-existing perspectives and narratives. Participant 8 highlighted this shift in perspective:

*'We're dealing with one issue with stuff but it's not really one issue, because we're here and because of the network, we've got, it's not just that, it's not just anti-social behaviour, there's a housing issue. And then, you know, just an operational delivery issue.'*

Participation in Stay Connected shifted this participant's perspective towards addressing a key risk factor for youth violence: the poor living conditions experienced by some disadvantaged young people. Evidently, Stay Connected contributed to greater collaboration between the local council and the housing authority, leading to shared resources, intelligence, and personnel.

The programme also enabled interactions among stakeholders who would not normally engage with each other, filling gaps in professional relationships. Before participating in Stay Connected, there was often limited necessity or opportunity to contact other professionals, particularly across different levels of seniority. Participant 8 described the positive impact that Stay Connected had on fostering collaborative relationships:

*'It really helped us sort of firm up some of those relationships, really helped us identify some of the gaps in professional relationships ... they felt a little bit more equal; you know, we didn't want anyone to feel unequal, but I'd be daft if I didn't acknowledge that exists.'*

Similarly, Participant 9 noted the challenge of connecting with some of their more senior police colleagues:

*'So, there were services there I hadn't worked with before ... I didn't know who [Participant 2] was. I had a strong relationship with the PCSOs, but because I wasn't on that level ... I used to see the community police more and I had a very good working*

*relationship with them and some of the other officers with the Newport. But higher up, I would say I didn't know who people were, which I am now more aware of.'*

The mixing of individuals from different organisations and sectors was key to forming these new relationships. Face-to-face interaction was also identified as a key enabler for building these connections. Participant 9 explained the value of in-person engagement:

*'It also gave people an opportunity to meet face-to-face. Because a lot of meetings now take place by [Microsoft] Teams. So, we don't have that interaction of meeting people, and you know having a chat like a general chat.'*

Collecting data after the programme's conclusion allowed participants to see how they have applied their partnership work beyond Newport. A recent restructuring of Middlesbrough Council's operations enabled the use of skills in partnership work gained from Stay Connected to be applied to wider contexts across different districts. Participant 9 discussed the impact of the restructuring and their appreciation of being able to apply learning from Project Connect to Middlesbrough more broadly:

*'I don't think it's diluted it, if anything we're probably stronger now because we've got a wider area and more people, and the restructure has made it very clear what roles people have. And so, I think from the knowledge of Project Connect we're able, well I know I am, I'm able to apply that to the work that I'm doing now in North Middlesbrough.'*

## 4.5 Barriers Limiting the Programme's Success

Despite the positive outcomes, several barriers were identified that limited the programme's impact. One significant barrier was the absence of school staff. This absence had been a limitation in previous sessions and continued to affect Stay Connected's impact. Although schools in the area were encouraged to participate, time constraints were used as a primary reason for non-attendance. Participant 4 stated:

*'Schools didn't bother which is a disgrace, using the excuse that they were too busy! We are all busy, but some are happy to sit in a room with other agencies that may have difficult questions for you to answer. Schools are a major factor in this and they rarely, if ever turn up.'*

Another barrier was the sustainability of partnership work achieved through Stay Connected. Only 40% of participants agreed that partnerships would continue without ongoing sessions. Participant 4 noted concerns that key outcomes attained through participation had already been lost since the completion of Stay Connected:

*‘Some will fall away as they always do ... Stay connected needs to be incorporated into another regular meeting possibly that the partners attend so that it isn't forgotten about.’*

The risk of diminishing collaborative efforts after Stay Connected sessions is partly due to a lack of leadership to sustain these practices. Four participants noted that the absence of a dedicated leader to champion the Stay Connected learning has hindered the continued application and expansion of the benefits they had achieved. Participant 3 emphasised this concern, saying:

*‘The only doubt over their continuation is that there is no one person who will be responsible for organising and coordinating an event to keep the momentum going.’*

Similarly, Participant 7 expressed:

*‘Without a host and facilitator my concern is that motivation will dip over time.’*

While there was concern among professionals about the need for sustained contact with a representative to oversee the programme after Stay Connected ended, there was also call for more support in implementing the recommendations in the SAYVE plan throughout the programme’s duration. The SAYVE plan, co-created by members of Get Connected, outlined specific tasks for individuals to complete in alignment with the set recommendations. Despite this, participants found it challenging to implement these tasks when their regular duties took priority. Although Joe and Carlus provided valuable guidance during sessions, participants felt there was a need for more consistent support in executing the strategies agreed upon in sessions. As participant 10 stated:

*‘Having a SAYVE plan was definitely something that we needed. Better coordination of the SAYVE plan is what was lacking. We didn't have someone there to coordinate it properly, to make sure that that SAYVE plan is being taken into consideration and being actioned ... having that support, having that guidance and having someone there. I*

*mean, we meet quarterly, but you could be too busy. To me that coordination was what was lacking.'*

Another challenge to the outcomes of Stay Connected was the turnover of personnel, with whom strong professional relationships had been established. When key practitioners left their positions or were promoted, the partnerships often became ineffective. This change in personnel created a barrier to the continued success of collaborations, as individuals who had built connections were no longer involved. Participant 4 expressed this concern:

*'Unfortunately, people move about and those people you know in certain roles today, will be gone and others will come in their place.'*

Lastly, the sessions largely lacked input from young people. Participant 10 emphasised the value of including youth perspectives in the discussions, noting that young people could provide important insights into the issue of youth violence prevention. Involving them more actively could not only enrich the discussions but also empower them by allowing them to influence change in their communities.

*'One thing that I think, Stay and Get Connected was lacking is basically the voice of the child ... having a young person there to be part of the whole thing. Once topics have been discussed with the different tables, having a young person's voice there. So, we say, 'oh, there's this there, there's this here'. Having a young person there will probably change the narrative about a lot of things.'* (Participant 10).

## 5. Discussion

This evaluation highlights both the strengths of the Stay Connected programme and the areas where improvements are needed. By fostering collaboration between various local stakeholders, the programme has created a platform for addressing youth violence, but certain barriers have limited its full potential. This discussion will explore the key findings in relation to the programme's objectives, compare them with insights from the Get Connected programme, and suggest broader implications for future initiatives.

## **1. Strengthened Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange**

A significant outcome of the Stay Connected programme is the improvement in collaboration among stakeholders. Seventy percent of participants reported that partnerships were strengthened following their involvement, leading to enhanced information exchange and improved alignment across agencies. This increase in multi-agency cooperation aligns with the programme's goal of building a connected network of professionals dedicated to preventing youth violence. Compared to the Get Connected programme, where the foundation of these collaborations was initially laid, Stay Connected took these relationships further by ensuring continued engagement. However, while collaboration improved, the absence of key stakeholders, such as school representatives and young people, was a limiting factor. This gap suggests that while the programme has successfully engaged some statutory and third-sector professionals, more work is needed to involve educational professionals and community groups such as the young people who are most affected by youth violence.

## **2. The Role of Facilitators**

The facilitators, Joe and Carlus, were repeatedly highlighted as key enablers in the success of the programme. However, participants expressed concerns about the sustainability of these collaborations without ongoing leadership. This points to a potential gap in the programme's structure: while the programme effectively creates partnerships, it lacks a mechanism to sustain them long-term without facilitator involvement.

## **3. Barriers to Participation**

One of the key challenges identified was the difficulty in engaging certain stakeholders, particularly school staff and young people. The absence of school staff, noted as critical for understanding the educational context of youth violence, hindered the programme's ability to develop comprehensive action plans. Similarly, without direct input from young people, the programme was unable to fully capture the lived experiences of those most vulnerable to violence. This limitation is not unique to Stay Connected, as similar issues were raised in the Get Connected programme. However, future iterations of the programme must prioritise the involvement of these key groups, as their perspectives are vital for creating contextually relevant and effective interventions.

## **4. Long-Term Sustainability**

While the Stay Connected programme has had a positive impact on the immediate collaboration between stakeholders, concerns remain about the long-term sustainability of these partnerships. The high turnover of personnel within participating organisations presents a significant risk, as relationships built during the programme may disappear when key individuals leave their positions. Participants expressed concerns that

without continued leadership and a formal mechanism for sustaining partnerships, the momentum generated by the programme might decline. To address this, the programme could consider establishing a dedicated role responsible for maintaining and developing partnerships beyond the formal programme sessions. This would help ensure that the collaborative efforts initiated during Stay Connected continue to deliver results over time.

## **5. Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings from this evaluation have broader implications for policy and practice in youth violence prevention. The success of the Stay Connected programme in fostering collaboration between agencies is a promising model for other localities facing similar challenges. However, engaging educational professionals and young people, ensuring long-term sustainability of partnerships, and addressing the barriers posed by organisational turnover are critical to achieving sustained impact. For policymakers, this evaluation highlights the importance of embedding mechanisms for ongoing collaboration and leadership within violence prevention initiatives. Programmes like Stay Connected must not only create partnerships but also provide the resources and support needed to maintain them over time.

## **6. Recommendations**

Based on the findings from this evaluation, the following recommendations are made to strengthen the programme's future impact and ensure sustainable collaboration among stakeholders:

### **1. Incorporate Youth Voices**

It is essential to actively involve young people in both the design and delivery of future programmes. Youth participation can provide valuable, firsthand insights into the issues affecting their communities and help shape more effective solutions. Practical steps could include:

- Creating youth advisory panels to consult on programme content and strategies.
- Inviting young people to attend key meetings and contribute to the development of action plans.
- Providing opportunities for young people to lead on specific activities, which can also empower them as agents of change within their communities.

### **2. Enhance Engagement of Educational Professionals**

Engaging school staff is critical to achieving the programme's goals, as schools are often the first to identify vulnerable youth. To address the challenges faced in securing their participation:

- Schedule meetings outside school hours or provide more flexibility in session timings to accommodate teachers and school leaders.
- Establish a designated liaison to regularly engage with schools and integrate their perspectives into programme planning.

### **3. Strengthen Stakeholder Engagement Across Departments**

To mitigate the effects of staff turnover, it is important to build stronger, multi-layered connections within organisations. Recommendations include:

- Encourage the participation of multiple representatives from the same organisations to ensure continuity if key individuals leave.
- Establish cross-departmental working groups to ensure ongoing collaboration, even in the absence of formal Stay Connected sessions.
- Facilitate regular follow-up meetings with participants to ensure momentum is maintained and that partnerships continue beyond the life of the project.

### **4. Sustained Support from Facilitators**

While facilitators like Joe and Carlus played an instrumental role in guiding collaboration during the programme, ongoing support is essential to maintain the progress made:

- Consider appointing a dedicated coordinator to oversee the implementation of action plans (SAYVE plan) and monitor stakeholder engagement after programme sessions end.
- Develop a system for continuous facilitator support, including quarterly follow-ups and check-ins with stakeholders to ensure alignment with the programme's goals.
- Provide additional resources, such as toolkits or best-practice guides, to help stakeholders continue the collaborative work independently.