

Streetwise Community Circus CIC Fit for Olympics 2012 Evaluation

Everton Centre



The ETC Club
Our Voice, Our Choice



Belfast Health and
Social Care Trust

Streetwise Community Circus CIC
is supported by the following
funding organisations:



Summary

In conjunction with **Extending The Choice (ETC)**, and funded through the **Public Health Agency, Streetwise Community Circus CIC (Streetwise)** ran a series of 11 circus workshops with adults living with learning disabilities, culminating in a final public showcase on 29th March 2012.

The project was considered to be successful by participants, support staff, audience members, and Streetwise tutors.

Despite only 3 of 6 centres returning evaluation forms, feedback from staff was generally very positive. Information from the returned forms elaborated on general positive feedback with specific examples of how this project benefitted the participants, and why the project was so effective (see pp. 11-13.)

Positive impacts were observed across the realms of fitness/activity, performance skills, self-belief, confidence, and general health. Positive impacts regarding socialisation with other groups were also noted.

The **Belfast Health and Social Care Trust** staff involved considered the project to be generally well managed by Streetwise tutors, and made some very favourable comments regarding their approach.

The concept of an individual learning plan for each participant was trialled on this project and was seen by Streetwise staff to be very useful to the overall project management. It should certainly be considered for future projects.

The idea of a 3-tier approach to project management (see p.4) was also very effective, and should be considered for future projects.

Difficulties regarding clear lines of responsibility and communication were raised, but not at a level that was overwhelmingly detrimental to the project as a whole. Nevertheless, there were lessons learned which could have a positive impact on future projects run by Streetwise.

Problems regarding the collection of more formal feedback from all parties involved should also be considered for future projects. Despite encouraging the return of feedback forms both face-to-face and in subsequent telephone conversations with tutors and support staff, the return rate was poor. It should be noted how much time and effort is required to gather feedback in future, and more effective means of collecting data should be put into effect.

Despite these minor setbacks, and certain issues with logistics and timekeeping, the project as a whole was clearly successful.

Most notably, the success of this project lies in the positive response to the possibility of participants continuing to learn circus skills through Streetwise Community Circus CIC.

Background

Streetwise Community Circus CIC was employed to provide a series of circus workshops that would have a positive impact on the fitness of the chosen participants, all of whom are individuals living with learning disabilities.

The ETC club applied for, and managed the coordination of, the financial aspect of the project; and put the project together. This was piloted on a smaller scale in year one, and developed further in year two. Staff at the ETC club devoted considerable time and effort to support this project, and to drive the project through to successful completion.

The practicalities of the project were designed collaboratively between Streetwise and ETC club, and several tutoring tools were piloted on this project that will impact on good practices for both parties in future projects. ETC provided evaluation form blueprints for gathering feedback from participants. The remaining data was gathered using the author's questionnaires and participant observation.

This project ran for 11 weeks, from January to March 2012. The workshops took place in the Everton Complex on Thursdays from 11 am to 12:30 pm (this was a change of time following an earlier unworkable schedule of 11:30 to 13:30 that included a lunch break).

There were 23 regular participants who attended (see appendix A), although there were also occasional one-off participants who attended for a variety of reasons – largely due to staff supervision issues.

The participants were chosen from 6 separate day centres across Belfast, known to Streetwise as Everton, Mica drive, Suffolk, Fortwilliam, CDS north and CDS west. Most of the participants had attended taster workshops provided by Streetwise Community Circus in 2011, although some had no experience of circus workshops at all.

The following information consists of observations made by the lead tutor on the project, and includes formal and informal feedback from participants, support staff, and Streetwise tutors.

Why circus?

The potential benefits of learning circus skills are becoming increasingly well-documented. These benefits span the physical, emotional, cognitive and social domains of an individual's development, and circus programmes can be designed to focus on one or more of these areas.

The 'Fit for Olympics' project that ran at Everton was designed to increase activity amongst participants by creating a fun and different context for non-sedentary behaviour, and an opportunity to publicly showcase some of the skills developed throughout the process.

It should be noted that Streetwise staff are not qualified to assess any individual's level of fitness or develop personalised fitness schedules. However, Streetwise staff are experienced professional tutors and performers who recognise the potential benefits of engaging with circus skills in a safe, creative, inclusive, and enjoyable context; as such this project focussed on maximising the potential for increased activity levels amongst participants on an informal basis, rather than on a therapeutic or medical level.

For example, greater focus was put into warm-up and warm-down exercises on this project, and we all discouraged participants from spending time merely sitting around and observing others practicing their skills.

One of the strengths of social circus programmes such as this is the variety of props used and skills learned. Individuals who take part in circus projects tend to find the prop that they enjoy the most, and subsequently develop their own skills with that prop over time. However, Streetwise were encouraged to provide a more thorough breadth of skills for each individual on this project. This was a result of previous longer term projects wherein participants had seemed to become restricted to a single prop or skill, whilst seeming to neglect other skills.

This project was designed to encourage all participants to attain a level of competence across all of the skills provided in the first few weeks, before choosing a skill to focus on for the final performance in the latter part of the project. The impact of this decision was overwhelmingly successful, and has had a positive impact on projects run by Streetwise with other user groups.

Project Schedule

The project was designed to include 3 stages of circus skills:

- Introduction (weeks 1-4)
- Development (weeks 5-8)
- Performance (weeks 8-11)

Introduction to skills, weeks 1-4

Streetwise tutors enabled participants to try 2 skills each week, by dividing the group into 2 groups. Whilst group 1 learned one skill, group 2 learned another. After 30 minutes each group performed their skill to the other group, and then swapped skills. This gave the participants an achievable goal (to perform the skill) and maintained interest levels.

This also meant that by the end of week 4, all participants had achieved a good level of competence with a range of skills. This level of competence gave the participants a much more thorough understanding of all the skills on offer and enabled them to make a more informed decision as to the skill or skills that they would like to focus on in the showcase event.

In addition, restricting the mini-showcase events within the workshop to 2 group showcases resulted in less time sitting and watching than there would have been if each *individual* had performed their skill, therefore reducing sedentary behaviour¹.

Development of skills, weeks 5-8

These weeks were designed to allow each participant the time to develop their chosen skill or skills further. It also meant that tutors could introduce skills that require one-to-one supervision, e.g. strap-on stilts.

Throughout this period a number of participants continued to try new skills, whilst others began to focus on one or two skills alone. Tutors noticed that most participants were able to find some time to practice on their own and in small groups. Having grasped the basic elements of each skill in the first few weeks allowed for greater independent learning at this stage, enabling tutors to tailor learning according to ability.

For example, an individual who was happy to develop their own skills with poi could be given a few pointers and left to practice for 15 minutes or so with only occasional intervention, whilst tutors could then devote more time to less independent participants who needed more time to develop their skills.

¹ E.g. if 20 people are showing off their skill individually, and even if each piece takes 1 minute to show, that is at least 20 minutes for each person spent sitting watching or waiting. If you add to this the time it takes to get to and from the stage, organise props, etc. or overrunning allotted times, this process can take up to half an hour. In a 90 minute workshop, this is simply unacceptable. But, if 10 people are showing off a skill for one minute to the other 10 people, and then vice versa, each group is only sitting watching for 1 or 2 minutes.

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Through this period, tutors were able to help participants to develop their own performance pieces according to skills chosen. Most participants were involved in the development of more than one performance piece, either as an individual or as part of a group routine.

Performance skills, weeks 9-11.

The final weeks were devoted to polishing and honing the performance pieces. More time was devoted to each individual's skills, and this period became essentially a rehearsal time.

By this stage all participants were comfortable with the idea of showing off their skills in a supportive environment, and levels of enjoyment and enthusiasm appeared to be very high.

All participants were aware of the skill they had chosen to showcase, and appeared to be generally happy to keep perfecting their piece. Although there were occasions when some participants chose to take a break from rehearsals, or opt to watch from the side lines, every effort was made by tutors and support staff to encourage them to return to the floor.

By ensuring that all workshop sessions were as much fun as possible, with no overt pressure put on individuals to 'keep working', we saw an overall positive approach to this project. Even those individuals, who appeared to be most reluctant to join in at first, soon embraced the spirit of the project and became excellent performers, in a very brief time frame.

Week 11 saw the final showcase held at the Everton Complex to a public audience of around 100 invited guests.



Individual progress reports

At the request of our partners at ETC, Streetwise staff kept weekly records of each individual's progress throughout the project. This enabled us to monitor the development of skills, and helped us to build a good idea of how to integrate individual skills into small group pieces.

These progress reports were new to Streetwise staff, and a more intensive exercise regarding monitoring and evaluation; however, it was generally felt that this was a positive exercise, and one that should be introduced across other projects.

The information gathered was brief, but taken over the whole project gave a fairly useful account of the progression of each participant. This information was largely used by tutors to tailor each subsequent session in order to build on the skills developed (or rejected) by each participant.

For example:

Gary (CDS North)		
<i>Week</i>	<i>Skills practiced</i>	<i>comments</i>
1	Juggling scarves Plates	X2 in a shower pattern Got spinning with help, and passing
2	Hats Poi Juggling balls	Good! Got most of the tricks straight away X2, both planes, propellers, helicopter, fish. Passing with Michael, 1 and 2 balls
3	Juggling balls Diabolo	Ok. Seemed v. quiet today. Did some passing with Nick and Caibhoin. Helped Gary with his diabolo
4	Flower stick Plates	Passing, throw and catch, working on half flips Got spinning 2 different ways, passing and working on finger spin
5	Juggling balls poi	Passing face-to-face with Jo 3 balls, and 2 balls in a cascade pattern. Also side-by-side 2 balls. X2 forwards and backwards
6	Hats Juggling Plates	Excellent! Got all tricks in routine – remember to leave arm straight for roll down. Side-by-side 2 balls. Passing behind the back
7	Diabolo Hats	Spinning well, catching throws from Jo, attempting throws and catches. Getting most tricks in routine
8	Hats	Whole routine fine

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	Juggling	2 ball side-by-side and 2 ball cascade
9	Hat routine juggling	Side-by-side
10	Hat routine juggling	
11	Performed hat routine, juggling, and diabolo.	

From this table it is clear that Gary focussed his efforts on a group hat routine and a side-by-side juggling act that involved working alongside a tutor. He was clearly capable enough with a diabolo to take part in a routine that involved the whole group. Gary also became adept at flowerstick and poi, and took to spinning plates quite well. In short, Gary was a wonderful performer who joined in every week, and even took to helping other participants. By monitoring his early interest in hats and juggling it was easy for tutors to engage with Gary using these props and to help him develop a performance piece in a relatively short amount of time.

The kind of data gathered in this table is often collected informally by tutors on projects, through conversations with colleagues; however, it is seldom recorded and the process is rarely formalised. This is in part due to the difficulty of recording such data in the midst of a busy workshop. Clearly there needs to be a balance between actually doing the job and analysing the work done. However, even recording the simplest accounts of individual progress after a workshop resulted in a better quality of project in this case, and should be considered as a vital element of future projects run by Streetwise.



Feedback from participants

Although some effort was made to collect formal responses to the project from all participants, only 9 completed evaluation forms were received. However, informal responses together with a very high attendance record for almost all participants, and high levels of engagement throughout the project, point to a generally positive response from those involved².

Everton:

2 out of 3 participants from Everton Centre described the project as Brilliant. (The 3rd did not answer the question)

The best part of the project was learning tricks, running with the group, doing the 'funky monkey'³, and the staff involved:

"It was the best thing I had done from myself and most of all is you. Thank you for you. All activities"

None of the 3 considered there to be any 'worst part of the project'

The following comments relate to achievements made as a direct result of the project:

"Confidence in stilts"

"Enjoyed the tricks"

"The people I had was emotional to me. Had reaction. Great fun to do. Thank you."

2 of the 3 stated that they would like to do this project again.

Suffolk:

2 described the project as brilliant, 1 as good.

The best parts of the project included meeting new people, having one-to-one interaction, having fun, and the warm-up/cool down exercises. In addition, one respondent said they enjoyed spinning plates, diabolo, and counting.

The only respondent who mentioned the 'worst part of the project' referred to finding a seat at lunchtime.

Achievements include increase confidence, having fun, meeting new friends, and:

"An avenue for excess energy which meant I am more settled in the afternoon."

All 3 said that they would like to repeat the project, quite emphatically.

² See also the reference to speeches made by participants at the final showcase event

³ A warm-up and warm-down exercise

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CDS North:

2 participants described the project as brilliant, 1 as good.

2 saw juggling as the best part of the project, 1 of whom also mentioned the 'funky monkey', the 3rd respondent stated that the best part was:

"Having something new to try"

One respondent stated that hat tricks were the worst part of the project, whilst the remaining 2 said that there were no negative aspects at all:

"Can't think of any bad things about it"

The positive achievements from this group were very well articulated:

"I met new friend"

"I learned to juggle. I learned to be less shy"

"I learned some really cool tricks to show my family"

All 3 participants would like to do the project again.



In short, and in conjunction with the informal verbal feedback from so many of the participants, it is fair to say that this project had a direct effect on the health and well-being of those involved. Throughout the workshop sessions there was a good deal of non-sedentary behaviour. All participants were given the opportunity and encouragement to succeed, and none were forced to take part.

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Of the 23 participants, only those from Mica Drive failed to complete the whole project, and this was apparently due to staffing issues at the centre, rather than a negative reaction to the project as a whole⁴.

One of the reasons that this project was so successful was the amount of support and enthusiasm shown by staff from all of the centres involved. As such, feedback from these participants was also encouraged.

⁴ According to telephone interview with the staff involved post-project. The individual did say that all the participants loved coming to the project, but that it had become impractical to actually get them there.

Feedback from Health Trust Staff

Staff feedback throughout the project was generally positive. The only negative issues that arose were concerned with logistics and timekeeping, all of which were dealt with satisfactorily. The lead tutor on this project took responsibility for liaising with carers and support staff, and this appeared to be an effective form of communication. However, with 6 centres, and a variety of staff to deal with, it was often more administrative work than a circus tutor is necessarily used to! Perhaps a clearer line of communication should have been established prior to the project. The lead tutor was often at a loss whether to contact staff directly, or via the Streetwise office, or even via our partners at Extending The Choice.

Of the 6 centres involved, only 3 returned evaluation forms. One of these centres had 2 staff involved in the project, the others had only 1.

The responses are overwhelmingly positive, and raise some excellent points regarding the benefits of teaching circus skills to individuals living with disabilities.

The only concerns I had with these responses were that the support staff perceptions of the aims and objectives of this project are not the same as those described to the tutor team. We were under the impression that this project was focussed on raising fitness levels, whereas feedback from the groups here point to different aims and objectives. Everton staff assumed the aims were to increase confidence and performance skills, whereas Suffolk staff assumed that the focus of the project was more social – i.e. mixing with new groups, and *“an opportunity to take part in an activity that we would not be considered able to do”*. CDS North made the following comment:

“To increase clients’ self-confidence, self-esteem, and to challenge their perceptions of what their limitations are”

Although these were not the precise aims of the project, they are positive impacts, and should be considered useful when developing future projects.

Everton:

Staff here saw participants display an increase in independence, confidence and learning new skills.

In addition, there was a positive change with regards to fitness, performance skills, self-belief (especially through stilt-walking), and general health.

Participants from Everton had taken part in the NØW project, but felt that the circus project was unique due to the circus tutors themselves:

“Humour aids engagement”

The project was seen to be managed well, and all participants and staff would be keen to take part in other circus skills projects in the future.

“Excellent staff; engaged brilliantly with all groups and were empathetic toward everyone”

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Suffolk:

Staff at Suffolk saw positive changes in fitness, performance, self-belief, confidence, and general health:

The most interesting part of these responses was the way in which these positive changes were observed by the staff:

“Positive body language to indicate increase in confidence”

This would not necessarily have been apparent to any of the circus staff on the project, and it is an issue we are often at pains to understand. When we work with individuals with limited communication it is important that we make the best use of professional expertise from staff such as those at Suffolk to enable us to better understand the impact of our work.

Participants from Suffolk had not taken part in any comparable projects, but considered Streetwise staff to be the unique factor in this case:

“Staff – were brilliant!”

“Staff – very patient with our members”

Other observations made by staff referred to an increase in confidence and enjoyment, and the way that the project as a whole was:

“Beneficial physically, emotionally and socially”

CDS North:

Staff from CDS North saw positive improvements in fitness/activity, performance skills, self-belief, and confidence. The project saw some participants with low motivation levels become highly motivated, and the weekly showcases had a positive effect.

“I watched one of our very shy clients grow in confidence each week. By the end, he was walking into the hall and joining in the group with no prompting whatsoever.”

When asked whether the participants from this group had taken part in any similar activities, the response was:

“There are drama groups etc., but nothing else like this group that I have ever come across”

The way that circus skills enable participation regardless of ability was seen as unique. In addition, the fact that this was a project with a clear goal at the end (the showcase) kept interest levels and motivation high.

The project was seen to be well managed, with *‘always enough circus staff to go round.’* And the staff noted a real sense of achievement from successfully completing the project.

“It also allowed them to meet new people and practice social skills”

Staff at CDS North would ‘definitely’ like to take part in other circus skills projects in future.

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The following comment is also very encouraging

“I have been working in learning disabilities for 10 years now, but this really made me re-evaluate, and realise that our clients can be capable of things that we wouldn't have thought they could do. I think it will make me try new and more adventurous activities with my group in future.”

It should be noted quite how much support this project received from host staff at the Everton Centre itself. Without the encouragement and enthusiasm of individuals here, this project, and the showcase event in particular, would not have been nearly as successful. Thank you.



Feedback from Streetwise tutors

3 tutors were present on each of the workshops on this strand of the project, with extra volunteer staff on the final day of the performance.

Streetwise tried to maintain a sense of continuity with staff on these workshops and 2 tutors were present for all 11 sessions. The remaining post was shared between 3 other tutors according to availability.

Formal feedback was recorded from 2 of the 5 tutors involved, in addition to my own observations as lead tutor.

Both tutors were aware of the focus on fitness and fun in these sessions

Tutors felt that the project had a positive effect on participants in terms of self-worth, achievement, learning new skills, and socialising with other groups. Once again, an increase in confidence was observed:

"I wasn't there at the very start of the sessions, but I definitely felt they were all more relaxed and open to trying things at the end than when I started."

Participants seemed to relate well to each other and socialised between groups, the sessions were seen to have a

"Good atmosphere for cooperation, all learning new skills made for good sense of equalness (sic) between all involved."

One tutor was often frustrated by the fact that this was a project that brought together individuals from so many groups – and my own observations support this sense of frustration, particularly regarding the logistics involved in getting so many people from across the city to the same place at the same time. There were occasions where some centres did not attend, which had an impact on group routines, and it was often the case that we started late and finished early in order to accommodate the needs of several different groups.

"It was good to get the experience of working with groups from many different centres. Some of that was good and some was frustrating. I think it's important for different carers and clients to meet, it helps to keep things fresh but it's harder to organise and keep on top of."

Having said this, the benefits of bringing diverse groups together were clear, and every effort should be made to continue with this ethos; just so long as some of the minor issues can be dealt with in the planning stages of future projects.

From my own perspective as lead tutor on this project I was very impressed with the level of enthusiasm, the hard work, and the flexibility of all the tutors who took part in this project. It often felt that we were attempting to do the same amount of work as other projects, but with twice the number of participants, and in half the time. However, the weekly evaluation sessions kept us all focussed on keeping the project moving, and allowed us to develop a showcase that effectively demonstrated how much fun we all had and how much work all participants put into the project.

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All of the tutors on this project agreed that the high levels of participation and enthusiasm shown by almost all of our performers was infectious, and highly rewarding. Tutors themselves learned new skills and routines that they will be able to disseminate through future projects, and we are very hopeful that some of the participants who took part in this project will be able to continue learning circus skills with Streetwise⁵.

⁵ At the time of writing, this looks ever more hopeful, as some participants have expressed an interest in our flagship Summer School project, whilst others will certainly benefit from our proposed regular Tuesday and Thursday circus workshops that will begin later in 2012.

Showcase

The project ended with a group performance showcase which took place in the Everton Complex on 29th March 2012.

At this performance all participants were able to show off at least one circus skill, with all participants taking part in an additional group diabolo routine at the end.

Several performers were involved in 2 or 3 acts.

The showcase incorporated a talk about the various strands of this project, including a display of the stained glass work designed and produced by some of the participants.

The circus skills showcase seemed to be very successful, and I believe that we created a context of fun and enjoyment that was contagious enough to make our audience laugh and clap in all the right places.

We were able to perform a wide range of skills; diabolo, juggling, hat manipulation, poi, flowerstick, and we even had 2 stilt-walkers greeting the audience as they arrived (sadly before the camera arrived!)

Although audience evaluation forms were distributed, no mention was made of them in the showcase, and none were returned complete. As such, it is difficult to assess the precise nature of the audience reaction to the show. Having said this, it was clear that the audience were having fun throughout the performance, and were pleasantly surprised by the levels of skills on display. In a telephone conversation with one of the staff at Everton complex, it was noted that many of the audience members were very excited by what they had seen, and were keen to find out where they could learn to do circus in the future.



For Streetwise staff in particular, the most fitting mark of this project's success was the way in which several participants chose to make inspired, and heartfelt speeches once the final act had

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completed. We are all very grateful that so many of the participants on this project seemed to benefit so much from it, and we should be committed to finding new ways to continue engaging with those who wish to further develop the skills that they have learned.



Conclusions

The Everton centre circus skills strand of the 'Fit for Olympics' programme developed by ETC was seen to be a great success by those who became involved in it. As Streetwise continues to develop ways and means of recording the potential benefits of social circus programmes like this, it is encouraging that we are able to draw upon the expertise of professionals in the field of learning disability. We are particularly interested in showing how circus skills projects such as this are having a measurable and noticeable positive impact on individual's physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains.

Responses from participants to this project are also very encouraging and seem to confirm that the approach taken by Streetwise tutors was invaluable to the success of this project. All of the benefits of social circus are potential, but having an experienced and enthusiastic team of tutors, who are always willing to learn as much as they teach, makes these benefits much more likely to occur.

There are several reasons why circus workshops have these positive benefits, and social circus groups across the globe are slowly beginning to realise the need to record them. Through working in conjunction with professionals at ETC, and through the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Streetwise are realising the benefits of needing to provide more evidence-based research for our partners, and we hope that this evaluation contributes to further academic investigation, in addition to having a positive impact on our participants.

On a more practical note, it is now crucial to ensure that everyone who became involved in this circus project should be given an opportunity to be able to continue to develop their circus skills in the future. It seems somewhat unfair that we have sparked an interest in this media, encouraged a group of individuals to develop a range of skills (including several who have found it difficult to join in on other projects), and produced a successful showcase event; but are now merely expecting our performers to return to their prior routines. The development of 2 Belfast-based, long-term circus projects at Streetwise is only a partial answer to this situation. As more outreach projects are developed through groups such as ETC club, we expect the demand for high quality circus workshops to increase, and Streetwise should continue to explore means to meet this demand effectively.

Appendix A

Participant attendance

Name	19/01	26/01	02/02	09/02	16/02	23/02	01/03	08/03	15/03	22/03	29/03
CDS NORTH											
Michael	X	X						X		X	X
Mo	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gary	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
CDS WEST											
Bernadette	X	X			X		X	X		X	X
Richard	X	X			X		X	X			X
Catriona	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Seamus	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X
Grainne	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Sonya			X	X	X	X				X	X
Janine			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
EVERTON											
Mark	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Jim	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tommy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
FORTWILLIAM											
Tara	X	X	X			X		X		X	X
Ruth	X	X	X	X		X		X		X	
Gerard	X	X	X	X		X		X		X	X
MICA											
Conor	X	X	X	X							
Caibhain	X	X	X	X							
Kevin	X	X		X							
Michael	X	X									
SUFFOLK											
Jenny	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Gary	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Conor	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X