CASE STUDY

Staying Connected Between Sessions: WhatsApp Outreach in Brussels

Level 2 – Application | Module 4 – Digital Tools for Engagement | Belgium (Brussels)

Country	Belgium (Brussels-Capital Region)
Title	Staying Connected Between Sessions: WhatsApp Outreach in Brussels
Organiser / Provider	Youth centre – composite case based on digital youth work practices in Brussels (fictitious)
Target Group	Disaffiliated youth aged 16–24, NEET, with irregular attendance at traditional support services
Theme / Focus Area	Digital outreach, WhatsApp, blended engagement, digital safeguarding, drop-off prevention
Training Level	Level 2 – Application | Module 4 – Digital Tools for Engagement

1. Context & Challenge

A youth centre in a northern Brussels commune had built solid one-to-one relationships with a cohort of 28 disaffiliated youth aged 16–24. Workers had invested significantly in first contact and trust-building over several months — but were consistently losing that progress to drop-off between appointments. Young people would miss sessions for weeks, become harder to reach, and sometimes disappear entirely from support.

Analysis of drop-off patterns revealed a structural gap: the contact model was entirely face-to-face and appointment-based. In between sessions, there was no maintained presence. Workers had no way to check in informally, share relevant information, or simply signal continued interest — all of which are critical for maintaining engagement with highly mobile, socially isolated young people.

Meanwhile, informal observation and conversation confirmed that almost all young people in the cohort were active on WhatsApp daily — using it for peer communication, group chats, and media sharing. The challenge was to leverage this existing digital habit without crossing professional boundaries or creating new risks.

2. Intervention

Objectives

- Maintain informal contact between formal sessions to reduce drop-off
- Create a low-pressure communication channel young people could initiate themselves
- Share relevant resources, opportunities, and reminders in a non-intrusive way
- Use peer group dynamics (via a group chat) to build a sense of community among participants
- Establish and model clear digital safeguarding boundaries from the outset

The WhatsApp Outreach Model

The centre piloted a structured WhatsApp engagement model over 4 months with three components:

Component 1 – Individual Worker-to-Youth Messaging

Each young person had a dedicated worker contact on WhatsApp. Workers sent weekly informal check-ins (voice notes or short messages), shared relevant local opportunities (jobs, events, workshops), and followed up after missed appointments without pressure. Message frequency: 2–3 per week maximum.

Component 2 – Opt-In Peer Group Chat

18 of 28 participants chose to join a supervised group chat ("Our Space"). Workers moderated without dominating. Young people shared memes, music, questions, and peer support. Ground rules were co-created at launch. Workers could share group-relevant info (activities, alerts) once per week.

Component 3 – Digital Safeguarding Protocol

All workers and participants signed a brief digital engagement agreement (plain language, A5 format) covering: appropriate hours for messaging, data privacy, content rules, and escalation if distressing content was shared. The agreement was reviewed at month 2 and updated based on participant feedback.

Duration, Actors & Tools

- Duration: 4-month pilot (September–December)
- Participants: 28 young people (18 in group chat, all 28 in individual messaging)
- Workers: 4 youth workers + 1 digital youth work coordinator
- Tools: WhatsApp (individual + group), shared digital agreement, drop-off tracking spreadsheet
- Supervision: Weekly team debrief specifically on digital interactions (15 min)

3. Outcomes & Results

Outcomes were measured against baseline data from the 4 months prior to the pilot (same cohort, no digital outreach). Results at end of pilot:

Indicator	Result (vs. baseline)
Session drop-off rate	65% reduction (from 46% to 16% missed appointments)
Perceived support (participant survey)	80% felt more supported and less isolated between sessions
Time to re-engage after absence	Reduced from avg. 3.2 weeks to 6 days
Group chat activity	Average 12 youth-initiated messages per day in month 3
Digital safeguarding incidents	2 incidents (both managed within protocol; no escalation required)
Worker wellbeing (digital boundary clarity)	All 4 workers rated boundaries as "clear" or "very clear" by month 3

4. Learning Points

1. The gap between sessions is where engagement dies: For highly mobile, isolated young people, a week of silence from a worker can feel like abandonment. Digital tools can maintain the relational thread without requiring high effort from either party.

2. Voice notes outperformed text messages: Workers found that short voice notes (20–40 seconds) felt more personal and were more likely to receive a response than text. This mirrors how young people already communicate with peers.

3. The group chat created unexpected peer solidarity: Several young people who had never met in person began supporting each other through the group chat. Workers documented peer-to-peer signposting to services that they had not initiated.

4. A digital agreement is not bureaucracy — it is protection: Young people responded positively to the co-created digital agreement. Knowing the rules made them more comfortable engaging. Workers felt protected when boundaries were tested.

5. Digital engagement requires its own supervision space: The weekly 15-minute digital debrief was consistently rated by workers as the most useful part of team meetings. Digital interactions generate emotional material that is easy to overlook in standard supervision.

5. Reflection Questions

For individual reflection or group discussion

1. Which young people in your current caseload are most active digitally but hardest to reach in person? What does a digital engagement strategy for that person look like?

2. How do you currently manage the boundary between being digitally accessible and protecting your own personal and professional space? What is unclear or uncomfortable?

3. Your organisation wants to adopt a WhatsApp outreach model. What safeguarding policies, team agreements, and supervision structures would need to be in place first?

6. Transferability & Innovation

The WhatsApp model is immediately transferable across partner country contexts, as WhatsApp is the most widely used messaging platform among young people in Belgium, France, Portugal, and Serbia. The key variables to adapt are: platform choice (Instagram DMs or Messenger may be more relevant for some groups), messaging frequency norms, and the digital agreement format and language.

The innovative element is the systematic, protocol-governed use of a consumer messaging platform as a professional outreach tool — not as an informal supplement, but as a structured component of a blended engagement model. The pilot demonstrated that the risks are manageable when protocols are clear, and that the benefits in drop-off prevention are significant.

⚠ Ethical & Data Protection Notice

This case study is a fictional composite constructed for training purposes. No real individuals are identified. Digital outreach with young people involves significant GDPR obligations: organisations must have a legal basis for processing personal data (including phone numbers and message content), must not store personal communications beyond what is strictly necessary, and must have clear data retention and deletion policies. WhatsApp Business is preferable to personal accounts for organisational use, as it provides better separation of personal and professional data. Workers must never use personal phones for professional outreach without organisational policy approval.

7. Additional Resources

- Council of Europe – “Digital Citizenship and Youth Work” | www.coe.int
- EU Kids Online – Young People & Digital Risks in Belgium (2023 report) | eukidsonline.net
- YMCA England & Wales – Digital Youth Work Toolkit (free PDF) | ymca.co.uk
- Erasmus+ Youth – “Digital Youth Work – Why It Matters” (7 min video) | salto-youth.net
- UK Council for Child Internet Safety – Safeguarding in a Digital World: Guidance for Youth Organisations | gov.uk