



Transforming Lives Through Physical Activity and Sport

Toolkit: How to engage adults
55+ in Physical Activity & Sport



Single Homeless Project
preventing homelessness
transforming lives

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Who we are

Single Homeless Project is a London-wide charity. Our vision is a society where everyone has a place to call home and the chance to live a fulfilling life.

At the start of 2017, and as part of Sport England's Active Ageing Initiative, Single Homeless Project launched the Sport Project. This introduced physical activity into the daily lives of those aged 55 and above who were experiencing homelessness and associated needs. Since its launch, the Sport Project has grown its offer to include all adults across SHP services.

On average, those experiencing homelessness die 34 years younger for men and 40 years younger for women than the general population. As a charity we had a larger older population and we wanted to help them achieve a good quality of life.

Since 2017 we have:

600

Engaged over
600 clients

30

Partnered
with over **30**
organisations

130+

Worked
with **130+**
volunteers

Sport Project - Our Vision:

- To share our experience, insights and findings
- Engage, grow and nurture a network of enthusiastic partners
- To encourage organisations to introduce sport and physical activity into their offering
- Influence and inspire others to join the conversation around the positive impact sport and physical activity have on the lives of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness



62%

Improved quality
of life of 62%
participants

Physical Activity For All

The Sport Project believes that the introduction of physical activity into core homelessness provision is essential to bring about positive change, transform lives and prevent homelessness.

Since 2017, our Sport Project has transformed the lives of over 600 people, improving participants stress, anxiety, and depression levels by 76% and overall quality of life by 62%.

That's why we've launched the **Physical Activity For All initiative, consisting of:** information sharing **toolkits**, roundtable **events** and **sport bags**.

This toolkit will set out the work and findings of the Sport Project's first three years (2017-2020). It will give information about how we got started and will highlight areas our future toolkits will focus on.

Our work during the first stage of the project highlighted some key findings, evidencing that **regular physical activity can bring significant improvements in physical and mental health, socialisation, and isolation.**

We hope by sharing this and future toolkits we will inspire organisations to join us in using physical activity and sport to transform the lives of people throughout our communities.

Why we introduced Physical Activity & Sport

Those who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness are some of the most excluded people from society and face multiple barriers and exclusions on a daily basis compared to the general population. This is evident in a range of areas: from not being registered with primary health care such as a GP or dentist to experiencing long term loneliness and isolation.

Our residents were spending 18 hours a day sat down alone in their rooms. When asked, 92% reported high feelings of isolation and loneliness, and despite living within a hostel setting, the majority were not interacting with others within the hostel or joining in on activities outside of their rooms.

Our clients face a range of barriers when accessing physical activity and sport, from digital exclusion and financial constraints, to low confidence and mental health issues. People experience social stigma and negative pre-judgement about their interest in, and ability to engage in physical activity.

Those who experience homelessness are at a higher risk of developing certain health conditions and often experience multiple and complex physical and mental health issues at the same time.

When completing health checks on those taking part in the Sport Project, baseline measures showed that 85% had a health condition that affected their daily lives, 73% had blood pressure outside of the recommended range and 89% experienced stress, anxiety and/or depression. It is shocking that in light of this, and the early mortality rates found in homelessness populations, that physical activity is not considered an integral area of work by health professionals, sports providers or the homelessness sector generally. This area is often not discussed or referrals made into programmes such as **social prescribing or exercise referral schemes**. The same is not mirrored for the general population, where the benefits of physical activity are widely recommended and often prescribed to help improve specific health conditions such as diabetes, Parkinson's, and high blood pressure alongside depression and stress.

“I think the willingness of clients to get involved breaks down social perceptions that suggest those who are experiencing homelessness don't want to get involved in sport, whereas in fact they do, they just don't have the opportunities to do so.” Sam Sainsbury, Sport Manager



How we delivered the Sport Project

Over a three-year period we introduced physical activity into the lives of our 55+ clients in our hostel and floating support services, building the project up to cover 12 boroughs, delivering 36 sessions a week.

The sessions covered a range of activities from chair aerobics to boxing and were decided upon based on participants interests and abilities.

All sessions were run on the same day and time each week allowing for consistency. Each session was delivered following the same structure, allowing time for participants to arrive, have a chat and get comfortable, followed by 30-60 minutes of physical activity and then time for a cup of tea and socialisation.

All sessions were set up in a group setting as a result of assessments carried out prior to the project starting.

The majority of participants had not taken part in physical activity for a considerable

period and were facing multiple barriers when it came to accessing physical activity.

To help remove barriers, sessions were run in hostel spaces. This allowed participants to engage in physical activity for the first time in the comfort of a familiar atmosphere, creating safe spaces and removing the fear and anxiety experienced around visiting a gym.

In addition to hostel sessions, four weekly sessions were run using outside spaces and six sessions using community spaces. This allowed for participants to progress as their confidence and trust grew and to build towards independence and the exploration of community sessions or the gym on their own when they moved on.

“We saw an opportunity to positively influence the lives of those we support by providing access to physical activity in a way that formed lifelong habits, created friendships and improve overall quality of life.”

Eloise Moller, Department Head of Health & Sport



Client stories

Meet Peter

When Peter first came to the Sport Project, he joined the chair-based exercise sessions that were hosted in one of our services.

He was nervous about being active due to mobility issues and didn't know anyone else within the session. With regular session participation, Peter's confidence grew and started to make friends who encouraged him to try new exercises and become less dependent on being sat down to complete the exercises. Over time with his newly formed friendships, Peter and others moved on to another Sport Project session that was hosted in a community centre away from Single Homeless Project Services. The boost in Peter's self-esteem inspired him to take part in activities outside of the Sport Project sessions, such as art groups with his new friends. Peter continues to engage in the community-based session and has also gone on to attend weekly yoga sessions outside of Single Homeless Project that sees him sitting on the floor and standing up and is completely confident in his ability to perform exercise without being seated.



"I truly believe that the exercise sessions are slowing down the process of my Parkinson's."

Meet Jason

Jason came to Single Homeless Project during the pandemic, he had been sleeping rough and was moved into a Covid protect hotel run by our organisation.

Jason engaged with our Sport Project during the pandemic and participated in 1-2-1 personal training sessions twice a week.

After two months, Jason's confidence and self-worth improved and he introduced running into his weekly physical activity routine. Jason was moved on into a hostel with a gym inside. He progressed from his park personal training sessions into weekly gym sessions, alongside building his running up to 5k. Jason reconnected with his love of boxing and started volunteering in a local boxing club. He is now undertaking a Sports Rehabilitation course and hopes to go on to work in the Sport Sector while volunteering back with our Sport Project.



Key findings

An evaluation of our Active Ageing Initiative consisting of our 55+ participants regular sessions over the three-year period 2017-2020, discovered these encouraging findings:

1 Socialisation

The majority of regular participants listed socialisation and friendship as one of the main reasons they attended sessions. Participants started to talk to other people that lived in the same hostel and discovered common interests. Participants explained that they attended weekly sessions because they felt like other people were depending on them and they enjoyed chatting and catching up with other participants.

"It is because of this project that we became friends." Cynthia

2 Improved Mental Health

A significant improvement in mental health was observed over the project with participants reporting improvements in Depression, Anxiety and Stress alongside improvements in isolation and loneliness.

"I've been really depressed recently and doing the exercise definitely makes me feel better, I didn't want it to stop." Danny

3 Improved Physical Health and Activity

As part of our evaluation, participants completed questionnaires and had their parameters such as weight, blood pressure and handgrip strength measured quarterly over a year. The results showed that participants experienced improvements in weight, handgrip strength, quality of life and primary care engagement. In addition to this the results showed that 97% of participants reported improved physical activity levels, and 87% were engaging in the recommended activity levels.

97%

Participant's activity levels improved

87%

Engaged in recommended activity levels

4

Reduced Substance Use

Regular participants reported decreases in substance use for several reasons including better use of time, caring for their health, wanting to be sober and present for the sessions, improved mental health and friendship.

“You can see the benefits of it echo out in other areas of their lives.”

Rachel, Recovery Opportunity Coordinator

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Improved Engagement

The Sports Project provided safe spaces for participants to build confidence and start to talk about their wellbeing. As a result, those who regularly engaged in sessions went on to further engage in socio-therapeutic activities such as art, music and gardening, alongside ETE (education, training and employment) and key worker sessions. All building blocks to our participant’s recovery and supporting attendance to substance misuse and primary care appointments.

“I think the aim of our sessions isn’t just to improve physical health but to give them the social skills to develop past sport.”

Billy, Sport Coordinator





A guide to getting started

The Team

Implementing a separate team specific to physical activity was key to establishing participant buy in and consistent engagement. One of the key factors that saw our project become a success was the introduction of a new team, those delivering the sessions were coming into the services specifically to run physical activity sessions, ensuring the lines weren't blurred between the Sport Team and our participant's support staff. By doing this, we separated sport sessions away from conversation around rent, substance use, and move on options that residents normally have with staff and created safe spaces to talk all things health and deliver fun engaging physical activity sessions. However, understanding the financial constraints of implementing a new team, we hired a small team that consisted of one Programme Manager, a Coordinator, a Sport Assistant and established a strong community of volunteers and freelancers to help us deliver weekly sessions.

Volunteers

To establish our volunteer community, we used Team London, a free website that allows you to post volunteer adverts for ongoing and one-off roles. It's simple to use with step-by-step instructions and friendly staff.

Over time we learnt the more specific, open and honest you are in the adverts, the more success we had with our recruitment. In addition to recruiting external volunteers, we've supported participants over the years to go from taking part, to sport champion roles, into volunteering with the Sport Project. Look out for our next toolkit specific to volunteers coming out in Spring 2022.

"I don't want to leave SHP because of all the activities. They give me things to do and I really enjoy them."
Anthony

Encouraging Engagement

- **Become a friendly face:** Make in-person introductions in hostels, spend the time to knock around resident's rooms and introduce yourself and your new project.
- **Taster sessions:** When introducing physical activity into hostels we would run a series of taster sessions to allow participants the opportunity to try out new physical activity sessions without the commitment or anxiety of signing up to a regular weekly session.
- **Ease of accessing and removing barriers:** Ensuring the session covers everything from providing equipment and clothing, to water and snacks, meaning the only thing residents have to do is come along, say hi and have a look at what the session has to offer.
- **Reminders:** Bright and easy to read posters and email reminders to staff.
- **Visible sessions:** Running the initial sessions in a space that is visible to residents to encourage interest and enquiries.
- **Staff buy in:** Running sessions for staff so they believe in the project and can talk first hand to residents about what it has to offer.
- **Loyalty cards:** To help sustain engagement, using these cards can track sessions and incentivise through awards. For example, eight stamps over 12 weeks could award new gym gear.
- **Field Trips / Excursions:** We ran a series of external trips across the year such as Go Ape and Ice Skating. These sessions acted as both a fun introduction to physical activity for those who had not come to a session and a celebration social event for those already engaged in sessions.



Communication and Language

We found that the language we used when promoting the Sport Project and talking to both staff and participants was important. If we used the wrong language or did not explain the project well we lost participants before they had even come to the first session. We quickly learnt the following:

- Do not use the word 'Sport' use 'Physical Activity'.
- Emphasise the cup of tea, chat and social side of the project over the activity element.
- Do not talk about commitment to attending to regular sessions.
- Share simple, concise information about the sessions that's positive.
- Peer promotion is the most successful method to engage in first sessions.



“If I didn’t have these sessions I would be isolated, it’s the only thing I go to. It’s like a home away from home, we’re like a little family now. If it wasn’t for these sessions me and Cynthia wouldn’t be friends.” Dawn

Maximising socialisation

Socialisation was one of the main reasons participants came regularly to the sessions, with many stating they made friendships within the sessions. However, we saw first-hand that these relationships take time to build and that initial sessions can bring around a lot of anxiety for participants. We wanted to share a few tips we found useful on helping to remove some of the anxiety felt by participants and create a social environment for those in the session.

- Tea, coffee and biscuits help to break the ice with participants and session leaders.
- Holding space before and after sessions for a chat and a drink, allowing participants to ease into sessions and to chat once the session has finished so they feel more comfortable.
- Play music quietly from the start of the first session and use it as a conversation starter asking participants for suggestions and their favorite songs.
- Starting sessions small, initially inviting smaller numbers to sessions, to allow for a less overwhelming feeling when participants are attending first sessions.
- Leading introductions for participants within the sessions, taking the pressure off the first session for everyone.
- Introducing gentle partner work and group activities.
- Hosting trips and activities outside of services.
- Hosting social events alongside major sport events. For example, enjoying strawberries and cream whilst watching Wimbledon as a group, introducing a social element outside of sessions but still for a common theme of sport.

How to attract partners in the community



Corporate Partners

To maximise the offer and variety of sessions we were running alongside providing progression and move on options, partnerships become an integral part of our project. We formed several partnerships both within the corporate and charity sector alongside local communities. Through partnering with corporate organisations such as Decathlon and O3E we were able to grow our equipment and clothing resources. In addition to this, through strategic partnerships, we built out gyms within some hostels with corporate sponsored and co-sponsored gyms.

Community Partners

Partnerships with local community centres, leisure providers and churches allowed us use of free space that were better equipped for the sessions we wanted to run, such as the use of a spin and gym studio in a leisure centre in Islington. These amazing opportunities aided participant progression - from sessions within hostels to similar sessions within new settings which helped prepare them for move on into community sessions or independent physical activity.

Peer Partners

The final set of partners we formed were with similar charities and organisations to share our work and to expand our reach. In some cases where we hosted similar sessions with our peers we combined our efforts to maximise the reach of these sessions, such as cycling in Westminster with charity partner, Sustrans.

“As we think more about what the future of London holds, this sort of work is only going to become more and more important. We have been so proud to know Single Homeless Project, and quite frankly very often blown away by the impact of the work they have and we just wish them all the very best for the future, we really do.”

Chris Scott, London Sport

Addressing challenges



Digital Exclusion

Not only is digital exclusion a huge barrier within the homeless sector but also within the older population. Therefore, when establishing sessions, we ensured that digital exclusion was not a barrier to participation. We created printed promotion material both in poster and leaflet form, sessions were run in person and virtually, reminders were delivered in person and not by text and sign-ups for external trips & excursions were shared in printed forms in the hostel reception area.

Staff 'Buy In'

Every project faces challenges, especially when trying to establish something new. We placed heavy emphasis on ensuring residents engage at the start of the project, that we overlooked putting measures in place to get hostel staff onboard and comfortable talking about the project with residents.

At first, we were met with resistance and staff struggled to see why in the chaos of our clients lives that they would be interested in coming along to a physical activity session. To encourage staff buy-in, we ran physical activity sessions specially for staff who worked with residents daily. The sessions explained the benefits of physical activity, but also provided taster sessions of what we planned for residents to support staff to engage potential participants through first-hand experience.

In addition to this, by including staff in external trips and our annual Sports Day, these opportunities provided staff to witness first-hand the benefits the participants received from the project. These collaborative experiences played an important role in staff - client relationships and role reversals, allowing participants the opportunity to show staff how to do tasks and help them in an activity.

Resources

Sport England: www.sportengland.org

Single Homeless Project: www.shp.org.uk

Sport Project: www.shp.org.uk/sportproject

Team London: www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/volunteering/search

London Sport: www.londonsport.org

Homeless Link: www.homeless.org.uk

Kings Fund: www.kingsfund.org.uk

Partnership resources

To establish partnerships within the local community, homelessness and physical activity sectors we attend conferences, networking events, and approach places of interest both virtually and in person. A few key events we found useful and websites to find events are below;

London Sport Connect Series: www.londonsport.org/our-events/connect-series

Active London: www.londonsport.org/our-events/active-london/

London Sport Awards: www.londonsport.org/our-events/london-sport-awards

Why Sport Conferences: www.whysports.blog/conference

Homeless link: www.homeless.org.uk/events

Kings Fund: www.kingsfund.org.uk/events

Our future Sport Project - Physical Activity For All - Toolkits are as follows:

- How to build a network of Volunteers & Freelancers
- How to combat isolation and encourage socialisation
- How to break barriers & bridge the gap between the homeless and physical activity sectors
- How to engage women in physical activity & sport
- How to engage Adults 24+ in physical activity and sport

Summary

Our Sport Project has proven that by introducing regular physical activity and sport into the lives of those experiencing homelessness, we can dramatically improve the quality of life of participants.

We hope that this toolkit has shed light on the positive outcomes of the Sport Project and has offered insight into how you can introduce physical activity into your organisation, and those that you support.

We look forward to hearing from anyone who is interested in receiving additional support, guidance and/or facilitation in introducing physical activity and sport into your offer.

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