



Transforming Lives Through Physical Activity & Sport

How to engage women in physical
activity & sport



Single Homeless Project
Preventing homelessness
Transforming lives



“

It's given me confidence to want to join a walking club and be social again.” Denise

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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.

We help single Londoners by preventing homelessness, providing support and accommodation, promoting wellbeing, enhancing opportunity, and being a voice for change. From supporting people in crisis to helping people take the final steps towards independence and employment, we make a difference to 10,000 lives every year across all 32 boroughs.

In 2017 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 over who were experiencing homelessness and associated needs. Since its launch, the Sport Project has grown its offer to include all adults across Single Homeless Project services.

Physical Activity For All

The Sport Project believes that everyone deserves equal access to physical activity and sport. We also believe that the introduction of physical activity into core homelessness provision is essential to bring about positive change, transform lives and prevent homelessness.

Our work has shown that regular physical activity can bring significant improvements in physical and mental health, social connection, and overall quality of life.

That's why we've launched the Physical Activity For All initiative, consisting of information sharing toolkits, roundtable events and webinars, and sport bags. This toolkit will set out how we engage women with physical activity and sport.

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.

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 offer
- 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



Why this toolkit is for you

Are you looking to engage more women in physical activity and sport?

Are you looking for ways to remove barriers for women in physical activity and sport?

Are you looking for practical solutions to support women to engage in physical activity and sport?

Are you wanting to understand more about women's participation in physical activity and sport?

Are you looking for ways to improve the physical and mental health of the women you work with?

Since 2017:

800 Engaged 800+ participants

62% Participants improved overall quality of life

130 Worked with 130+ Volunteers & Freelancers

76% Participants improved stress, anxiety and depression levels

Women in Sport – Why is this a focus?

We know that **women are less active than men**, and this gender gap starts with girls being less active from a very young age

39%

of women aged 16 and over are not active enough to get the full health benefits of sport and physical activity

313,600

There are 313,600 fewer women than men who are regularly active

13m

When asked, 13 million women said they'd like to do more sport and physical activity

Domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence are “near universal experiences” for women experiencing homelessness

60%

Nearly 60% of girls aren't meeting recommended exercise guidelines

Women are more likely to experience hidden homelessness

Women experiencing homelessness are living in a state of survival, often without access to services and in high-risk environments where they are frequently subjected to violence and abuse

More men do sport and physical activity than women at almost every age group

Meet Denise

Denise is a resident at one of our services where we began offering physical activity sessions. It has recently become a women's only service. She was sceptical at first due to it being something she had not tried before, in addition to her ongoing back pain and use of a walking stick. Denise was not engaging in any activities and struggled to make friends or trust other people. A member of the Sport Team met Denise several times before starting the sessions and explained Denise could do any activity she felt comfortable with; she spoke about chair-based exercises and going for walks.



Denise has been engaging with the Sport Project for a year now and it is clear to see the positive changes in her physical and mental health. Prior to beginning these sessions, Denise explained how she hadn't walked without her walking stick for 30 years; she is now walking for 20 minutes per session without her walking stick and improving each week. Denise has also spoken about how participating in physical activity has made her feel happier due to feeling better physically and because of the social aspect of the sessions.

Participating in sports sessions can often be a bridge to further health care and improving other aspects of life. Denise explained how these sessions give her confidence to start thinking about engaging with health services once again so she can receive the treatment she needs for a better quality of life.

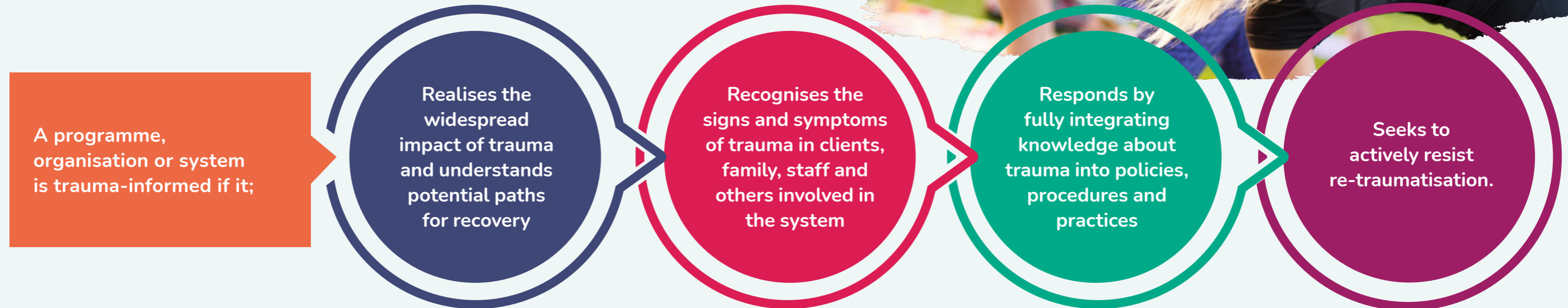
Recently, Denise shared that she has been feeling less stressed and feels happier, something which she attributes to feeling less physical pain and having someone who she trusts to speak to each week. She feels more confident and believes she is heading in a positive direction.

“

I feel like my body is improving for the first time in years. I can't believe my pain is actually getting less.”

Trauma-informed approach

The main purpose and goal of a trauma informed practice is to inform and teach staff/coaches/freelancer about trauma and the huge impact it can have. Alongside informing around trauma the aim is to ensure those working with people who have experienced trauma do so in a way that prevents the re-traumatisation of clients during sessions that are there to aid their healing and progress.



A trauma-informed approach aims to pursue this way of working in all areas of its delivery to prevent any replication of traumatic dynamics or experiences among clients and staff and avoids adding to the stress and trauma people are experiencing.

5 Key principles of a trauma-informed

Rather than following a prescribed set of policies and procedures, a trauma-informed approach adheres to key principles:

1. Safety – In all elements of the support clients and staff feel physically and psychologically safe. Including the setting and personal interactions.

2. Trustworthiness – All decisions and organisation is carried out with transparency and the aim of developing trust between clients and staff.

3. Collaboration – Aiming to work in a way to remove any hierarchy and work in an equal sharing and learning environment, splitting the decision making and power levels.

4. Empowerment – Recognising individuals' strengths, both clients and staff and building upon these, validating new skills and providing training where appropriate.

5. Choice – Striving to strengthen clients' choice and recognise that everyone's experience is unique and requires individualised ways of working.



Barriers for Women in Physical Activity and Sport

Women face multiple barriers when trying to access physical activity and sport. As we know regular exercise improves the quality of life of those that take part.

Here are the main barriers we've experienced in the Sport Project when working with women.

We've separated these into three sections and provided more in-depth examples and solutions in each section.

Practical barriers

1. Childcare
2. Clothing and equipment
3. Personal safety
4. Finances
5. Facilities

Personal barriers

1. Confidence/fear of being judged
2. Appearance/body image

Social and cultural

1. Stigma in society
2. Cultural differences

Practical Barriers

1. Childcare

Childcare can prove to be very challenging for women wanting to participate in physical activity and sport. The cost of childcare can be very expensive and often makes taking part in physical activity and sport unfeasible for many women even if they are very keen to take part.

Potential Solutions:



- Create sessions where children can be brought along – also provides a positive environment where women can interact with their children
- Specificity in volunteer/freelancer adverts is very important to ensure an appropriate facilitator is found – this means detailing the qualifications and experience necessary in addition to exactly what the session will consist of

2. Clothing and equipment

Specific clothing for physical activity and sport can be very expensive and be a huge barrier for many people. Not having appropriate clothing can lead to a lack of confidence and people not wanting to participate.

Potential Solutions:



- **Partnerships** – Partnerships with external organisations have provided a large range of sports clothing, such as Decathlon, Google, and Chelsea FC Foundation
- **No uniform expectation** – Make it known that not having the right clothing will not be a barrier to them getting involved. It sounds simple, but to some people this could make sessions more accessible

3. Personal safety

Getting to and from sessions or facilities provides a barrier for some women wanting to engage with physical activity and sport. This can be for a number of reasons such as financial barriers for transport, feeling unsafe outside of daylight hours, fearful of being seen alone outside, or having to travel through areas they aren't safe in.

Potential Solutions:



- Speak individually with the women you are working with and asking how best you can support them
- Consider time of sessions – daylight hours
- Going to and from activity spaces with participants to provide support throughout the session
- Offer financial support to take public transport where possible
- Create in-house gyms and activity spaces in services

Meet Sandra

Sandra is a client at one of our women's only services who has recently started to engage with the Sport Project. She was originally hesitant about the session as she wasn't too sure what it consisted of and what the expectations were. When speaking with Sandra, something she said would make her feel more comfortable to participate was having the right sports clothing to take part.

The Sport Team were able to pass on brand new sports clothing from donations from partner organisations to allow Sandra to feel more comfortable. She has since engaged with the physical activity sessions at her service and attended our annual Sports Day.



4. Finances

Finances are a barrier that can affect all demographics, whether this is the cost of travelling to a session, or the cost of the session itself. This can be exacerbated for women, as there are fewer women only sessions in leisure centres, and therefore women may have to travel slightly further to access opportunities that suit them.

Potential Solutions:



- **Volunteers** – Using volunteers as session leaders is a great way to reduce session costs and create sessions that are more affordable. We have found success using the Team London website which advertises volunteering opportunities across London. You can find more out in our volunteer toolkit <https://www.shp.org.uk/physical-activity-for-all>
- **Partnerships** – If you are a charity/organisation, forming partnerships with local leisure centres/community centres is a great avenue for acquiring discounted session spaces
- **Location** – Providing sessions within walking distance could remove the financial barrier of travel. Providing sessions in outdoor spaces can reduce the cost of venue hire
- **Apply for funding** – Although not all funding applications will be successful, providing more physical activity opportunities for women is a widely desired movement and could result in funding for your organisation



5. Facilities

Accessing facilities including leisure centres, sports centres, and outdoor playing fields can provide a series of challenges for many women. These can include the cost of using facilities, a lack of confidence going to and using facilities and a lack of support and guidance when using facilities.

Potential Solutions:



- Taking participants to local gyms and supporting them through exercise programmes
- Creating in-house gyms and activity spaces within services
- Creating partnerships with community spaces to use their facilities
- Taking participants to venues prior to sessions to ease anxiety

Meet Cynthia

Cynthia is a participant who has been regularly attending sport sessions for over two years. Prior to this, she was doing lots of walking but wanted more structure and to attend sessions led by others. However, financial constraints meant attending a lot of sessions that were on offer was unattainable. Cynthia saw an advert to come along to a group chair aerobics session that we had an offer that was free of charge and provided the social element she wanted. She now attends two sessions a week and also attends trips and events we run. Cynthia has been able to get the regular exercise classes she wanted and in addition has made some great friends along the way.



The sessions give me something to do and I get to see my friends.”

Personal Barriers

1. Confidence/fear of being judged:

One of the main reasons why women do not take part in physical activity and sport is because of a lack of confidence or through a fear of being judged. This is a huge problem and is enough to stop women taking part in any physical activity.

Potential Solutions:



- **Women only sessions** – we introduced women only sessions through discussions with the women we work with who highlighted this would encourage them to participate
- **Catering for all abilities** – adapting sessions to ensure all abilities are catered for
- **1-to-1s** – providing sessions one to one to remove the barrier of judgement from others

2. Appearance/body image:

How a person perceives their body image and appearance can be a major factor in determining whether or not they want to participate in physical activity. Someone with negative thoughts of their body image may be put off exercising as they don't feel like they look the way they should when taking part in physical activity and sport. In a recent Sport England study, it was reported that 75% of the women surveyed had a desire to take part in sport but were hindered by a fear of being judged on their appearance and ability. It becomes a vicious circle as the more self-conscious women are of their bodies, the less likely they will get involved with sport, despite sport itself being something that could have a positive effect on women's perceptions of their bodies.

It is therefore essential to create an environment where women feel comfortable, encouraged and want to get involved in physical activity.

Potential Solutions:



- **Offer 1-to-1 sessions if appropriate** – aims to remove social pressures
- **Clothing** – Provide appropriate and correct sizing of sports clothing if participants want it
- **Changing rooms** – Ensure women can have privacy in changing rooms and facilities
- **Advertising** – If advertising the sessions with posters/fliers, be mindful of the images you use

Meet Ella

Ella is a resident at one of our services who has wanted to take part in physical activity but struggled with confidence, motivation, and fear of judgement.

Ella originally began working with the Health Lead based in her service, who in discussion with Ella's GP, recommended it would be beneficial for her to take part in physical activity. The Health Lead arranged a time to meet with Ella and a member of the Sport Team to make introductions and create a plan which she was happy with. Since then, Ella has been regularly completing walks of increasing difficulty on the treadmill and doing some boxing in the gym in her hostel. These activities were chosen based on what she wanted to do. We do these activities 1-to-1

as Ella feels more comfortable exercising without others around. She also enjoys boxing in the gym located in her hostel as it provides a safe space where she can relax and enjoy her exercise. This reduces her fear of judgement and helps with her confidence.

For Ella, it took a long time to build trust and develop a relationship with the Sport Team, this was achieved by joining her for coffee each week and having a conversation with her. She previously had little engagement with any activities and spent a lot of time on her own. She recently said,

“ I love that I can do boxing here - it's good to come just to talk sometimes.”

Social and cultural barriers

1. Stigma in society

Despite recent ground made with challenging gender stereotypes, the reality is they still exist. One of the stereotypes that widely impacts opportunities for women is the expectation of femininity. This can influence how comfortable women feel lifting weights, sweating or engaging in certain sports. It also can affect people's perceptions on what sports women want to get involved in. As a result, there are less opportunities for women in certain sporting activities.

Potential Solutions:



- Strive to address it systemically from an organisational point of view – actively pushing opportunities for women
- Talk to the women about gender stereotypes within your organisation and how this can be improved

2. Cultural differences

When it comes to participation in sport, the gap between men and women is greater among some minority ethnic groups. Assumptions about minority groups and their involvement in certain sports can be limiting to their opportunities to get involved in sport.

Potential Solutions:



- **Cultural/religious awareness** – Ensure all staff undergo training in ethnicity and diversity
- **Religious timetable** – Be aware of cultural/religious festivals such as Ramadan, Divali and Eid
- **Sporting practises** – Be aware of different practises that different cultures and religions keep with regards to sport.
- **Clothing practises** – Certain religions have certain clothing practises, which can subsequently be associated with barriers to involvement with physical activity.



Importance of Personnel/ Session Leaders

How to choose the right person for the role:

A session leader is arguably the most important consideration when implementing a physical activity session for any target group. This is because they can have a direct influence on the participants in areas such as;

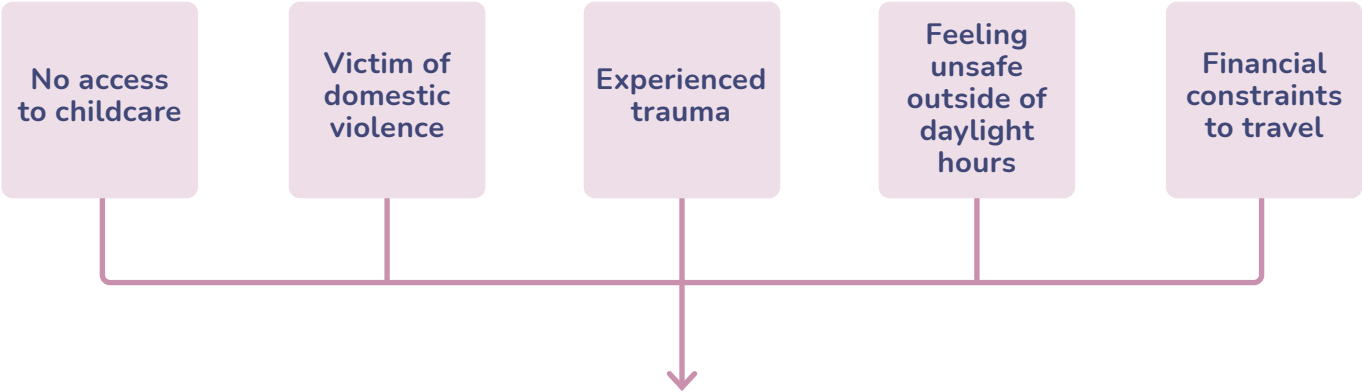
- Feeling comfortable
- Feeling motivated
- Feeling safe
- Feeling inspired to come back

This can become an even larger consideration when looking to engage more women in physical activity, as the majority of women face more barriers in accessing sport and exercise opportunities than men. Having the right person running the session could be the key to overcoming these barriers for some women.



Key considerations when recruiting a session leader

Common barriers



Possible solutions



Meet Carmen

Carmen runs our weekly yoga sessions in partnership with Solace Women's Aid and is a great example of the need for advert specificity when choosing an instructor. We formed a partnership with Solace in order to expand the offer of our sessions to a wider network of vulnerable women. Prior to advertising the role we spoke with those living and working within the respite service and identified necessary considerations for advertisement. This included a female instructor due to the women fleeing domestic abuse, but also highlighted that many of those who expressed interest in participating had concerns around childcare during the sessions. Therefore, the volunteer advert we created specified that we required a female instructor who specialised in mother/baby yoga.

Through doing this it meant that Carmen was a perfect match to run the sessions. The success of advertising for someone who had mother and baby experience was clear to see in the success of the session as it took no time to see consistent numbers.

Since starting the sessions, Carmen has engaged nearly all of the women residing in the service, and feedback from the staff suggests that she is making a huge difference to the lives of the women.



“

I got the opportunity to volunteer with SHP and it's a beautiful and rewarding experience. Giving a bit of your time, helping others and learning for myself at the same time - it's worth it. Thank you for this opportunity” - Carmen



Importance of Collaboration

Throughout our project, we have learnt the importance of collaboration and using the specific expertise of different organisations to provide the most effective service possible. It is important to recognise that there will be other services that are better equipped in certain areas:

An example of how we did this



Session implementation:

- Single Homeless Project Sport Team – Expertise in delivering physical activity/sport for vulnerable groups
- Recognised that we were the experts in the area of homeless specific sport sessions



Target group:

Although we do a lot of work with women and have engaged many women in our sessions, we recognise that utilising someone else's expertise in this area can optimise our offer.

- **Solace Women's Aid – Expertise in working with women.**
- **Solace case study** – Solace is a London based charity providing safe refuge and move on accommodation to women and children made homeless through domestic or sexual abuse. We formed a partnership with Solace which would see us lead the way in providing exercise sessions, while learning from them on how to better engage vulnerable women.



Venues

Due to safety we were unable to run the sessions within our spaces and recognised that Solace's communal spaces were too small. Therefore we formed a partnership with the local YMCA centre offering charity discounted rate for their sports hall.



Session leaders:

Although our recruitment process brings in many excellent volunteers who provide a life-changing service, we recognised that a women specific instructor with experience working with mother and babies alongside those who have experienced trauma would be best.

- **The Movement Charity** – Expertise in providing trauma informed, women volunteer recruitment.
- We formed a partnership with The Movement Charity who helped us recruit the specialised volunteer we required and delivered trauma training to other volunteers and freelancers we had recruited to work with women.

Summary of Practical Tips



- Speak to your target group – what do they want?
- Introduce women's only sessions where appropriate
- Consider location and time of day – support with transport or activities on participants' doorsteps
- Consider how you're speaking about physical activity and sport – the word 'sport' may be off-putting for some
- Promote other benefits – socialising and mental health benefits
- Get the right people to run programmes/sessions with specific expertise (trauma informed? Female? Mother/baby sessions?)
- Be aware of cultural/religious calendars in order to run sessions at times/days that are more inclusive
- Collaborate with other organisations to utilise the expertise of others and strengthen your physical activity offer to women



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.

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

- How to engage adults 24+ in physical activity and sport

Find our published Toolkits here: www.shp.org.uk/physical-activity-for-all

Email: sport@shp.org.uk Website: www.shp.org.uk/sport



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