



# Transforming Lives Through Physical Activity & Sport

How to use physical activity  
& sport to improve health



**Single Homeless Project**  
Preventing homelessness  
Transforming lives

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“

I feel so good after I leave this room. It has reduced the pain in my legs, it's good to get moving.” Brian

# 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 you can use physical activity and sport as a tool to engage people with and improve their health.

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 your target group experiencing physical health issues?

Are your target group experiencing mental health issues?

Are you looking for a tool to help improve your target groups physical or mental health?

Are you looking for ways to inspire your target group to engage with other opportunities to improve wellbeing and overall quality of life?

Are you looking for ways to reduce inactivity and sedentary behaviour within your target group?

Are you looking for ways to integrate health into your services?

Are you looking for helpful tips and tricks to transition health into your services?

Are you struggling to engage your target group in health services?

Are you looking for practical ways to improve your target group's health?

Would you like to support your target group's health through sport and physical activity?



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

# Introduction

## What is physical activity

WHO (World Health Organisation) defines physical activity as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure. Physical activity refers to all movement including daily activities i.e. cleaning, during leisure time, for transport to get to and from places, or as part of a person's work. However, only moderate and vigorous-intensity physical activity have been proven to improve your health. The harder the intensity of the activity the better the health benefits. For example, there is evidence that vigorous activity will bring around health benefits over and above that of moderate activity.



**Moderate physical activity** - Physical activity that involves you moving quick enough to raise your heart rate, breath faster and feel warmer. You should be able to talk but you will not be able to sing the words to a song.





**Vigorous physical activity** - Physical activity where you are breathing hard, and your heart rate has climbed considerably. You can only say a few words before you need to stop for a breath.

To stay healthy, the UK Physical Activity Guidelines, state that adults should try to be active every day and aim to do at least 150 minutes of physical activity over a week, through a variety of activities.

## Cardiovascular physical activity

The UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines recommend that each week, adults should aim for:

 at least <b>150</b> minutes of <b>moderate</b> <b>intensity</b> physical activity	or	 <b>75</b> minutes of <b>vigorous</b> <b>intensity</b> physical activity	or	 even shorter durations of <b>very vigorous</b> <b>intensity</b> physical activity	or	 a combination or <b>moderate</b> , <b>vigorous</b> and <b>very</b> <b>vigorous</b> intensity physical activity
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# What is inactivity and sedentary behaviour



## Inactivity – Less than 30 minutes of moderate activity per week

Inactivity is described as a “silent killer”. Evidence is emerging that sedentary behaviour, such as sitting or lying down for long periods, is bad for our health. Not only should we try to raise activity levels, but we should reduce the amount of time spent sitting down.



## Sedentary – Periods sitting or lying down while completing tasks.

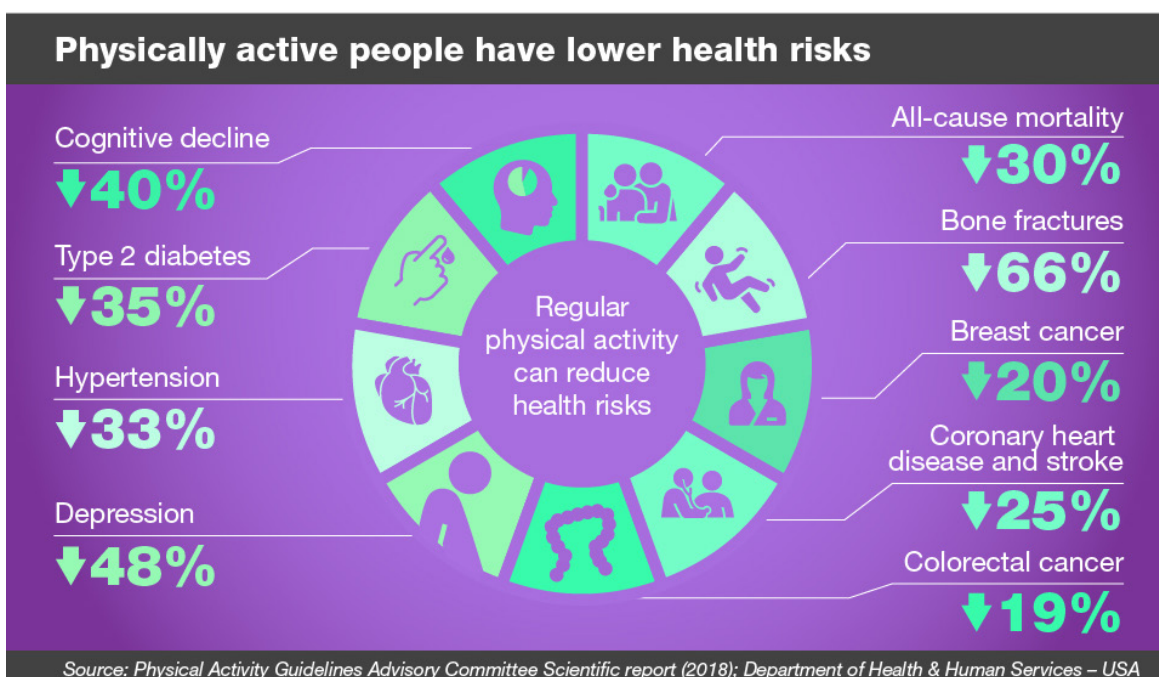
Common examples of sedentary behaviour include watching TV, using a computer, using the car for short journeys and sitting down to read, talk or listen to music.

Sedentary and inactive behaviour is thought to increase your risk of developing many chronic diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes, as well as weight gain and obesity. Crucially, you can hit your weekly activity target but still be at risk of ill health if you spend the rest of the time sitting or lying down.

## Benefits of physical activity on physical health

Physical activity has been deemed an essential part of life if you want to live a healthy and fulfilling life into old age. With those who are physically active exercise regularly having a lower risk of developing many long-term (chronic) conditions.

Exercise has been proven to reduce your risk of major illness.



## Benefits of physical activity on mental health

Research shows that physical activity can also boost self-esteem, mood, sleep quality and energy, as well as reducing your risk of stress, clinical depression, dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

## Challenges/barriers to introducing physical activity

Those experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantages encounter numerous barriers when it comes to accessing physical activity and some of these include:

An orange line-art illustration of a person climbing a set of stairs. The person is on the left, leaning forward with their right foot on a higher step than their left. The stairs are on the right, going up. The background features a large, faint orange circle.

**Not having a GP**

**Undiagnosed or untreated medical conditions**

**Have not engaged with health care for a long period of time, unsure on their safety to exercise**

**Serious physical health conditions restricting ability to take part in exercise**

**Substance use or alcohol**

**High anxiety**

**Low self esteem**

**Low confidence level**

**Low mood**

**Fear around exercise**

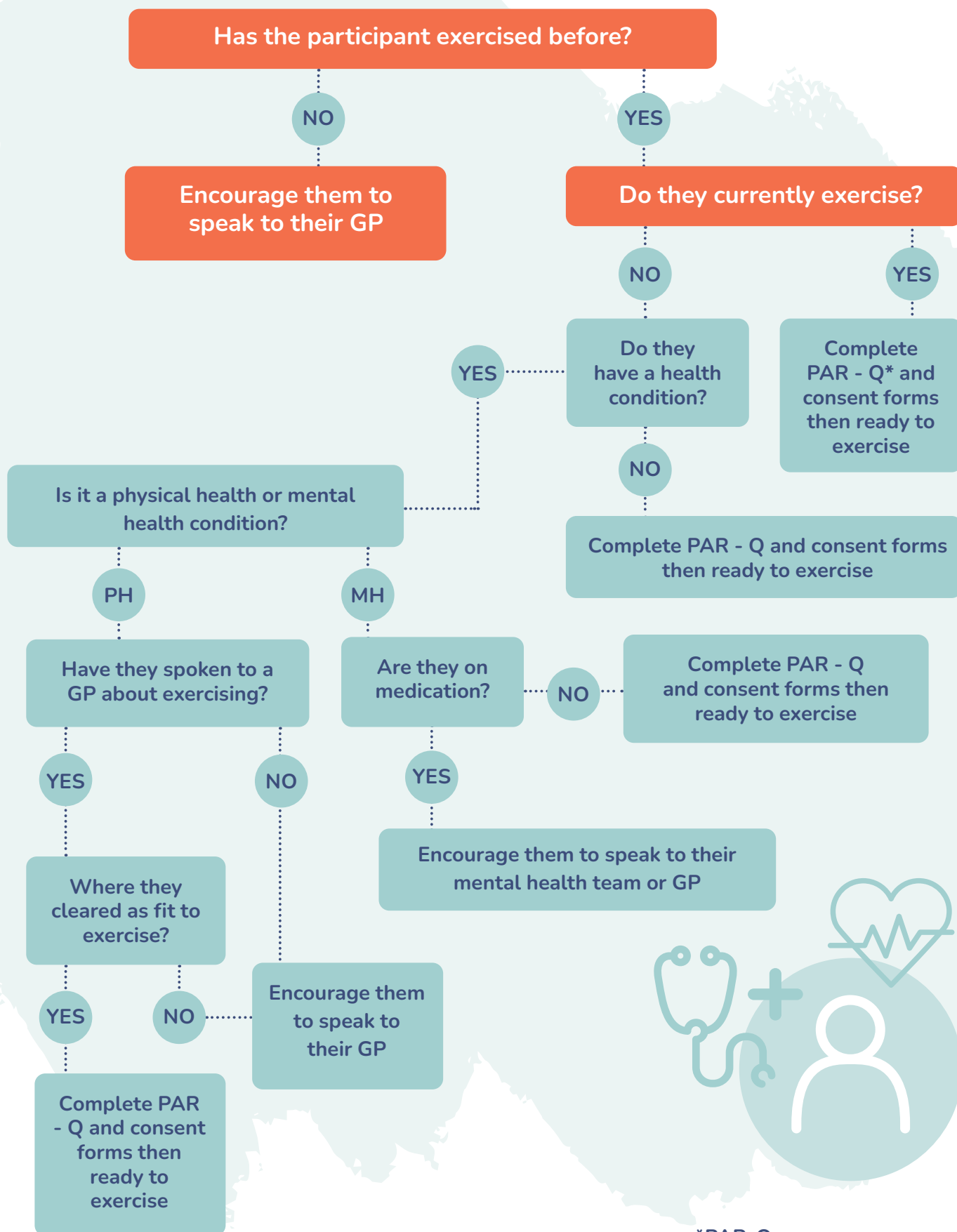
**Social anxiety**

**Low body confidence**

**Depression**

**Stress**

# Complete the flow chart below to help someone safely start their exercise journey



\*PAR-Q  
Physical Activity  
Readiness Questionnaire

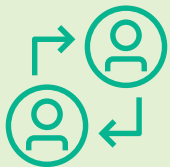
# How we linked up Sport and Health

When we started our physical activity project, we initially had the focus on just physical activity and sport but soon discovered that physical activity and health came hand in hand.

Not only did we need to know a basic background around participants' health and their needs but also, we found that the participants started to use the physical activity sessions as a safe space to disclose health concerns and issues. We wanted to ensure that participants needs were met on all fronts and try to link up physical activity and health as much as we could so we implemented the following ideas;



**Health checks** – We ran health checks and wellbeing questionnaires at the start of a participant joining in the sessions and quarterly after this. This allowed us to monitor improvements in participants health and wellbeing and for any issues to be picked up. Our health checks included blood pressure, heart rate, height, weight, handgrip strength, and our questionnaires included the DASS-21 questionnaire measuring depression, anxiety, and stress, alongside a questionnaire on overall wellbeing.



**In house** – As an organisation we have an internal Health Team that work across some of the same hostels as the Sport Team. In these boroughs we created a referral system between the two projects where if the Health Team were working with a client they thought could benefit from sport they would refer them into the Sport Project. Equally, if the Sport Team had a participant who had bad health or who they were concerned about, they could refer into the Health Project. The Sport and Health Team work within the same wider department and therefore can joint work and introduce one another to participants to help remove any anxiety around health and show a friendly face.



**External services** – The Sport Project formed partnerships with local health providers from healthy eating and smoothie making sessions to nurse drop-in clinics and vaccination days.



These were developed in a few different ways. For some of our health drop-in sessions we took areas that participants were interested in such as healthy eating and put out volunteer adverts.

For others we reached out to local health providers and charities such as Prostate Cancer UK and the local vaccination centre to see if they would come and deliver a session in the hostel in partnership with us. We delivered these sessions in the spaces we run the physical activity sessions in to try and create a familiar vibe and safe space for the participants getting involved as we know health can be an anxiety-inducing and fearful topic.

We also run all sessions in a friendly, informal way with tea, coffee, and biscuits to help keep everyone comfortable and engaged with the session.



“

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” Dawn

# Mental health



Mental health conditions are very common in the population we work with, with some of the most common conditions being depression, anxiety, bipolar, personality disorder and schizophrenia. The effect these mental health conditions can have on people's physical activity levels are vast and can act as a major barrier.

We often find that the common barriers we see within participants with mental health challenges are:



## Solutions



- Taking things slowly and applying no pressure
- Integrating participants slowly and encouraging them into conversations around topics they are comfortable with
- Gain feedback on a regular basis from the participants making sure to find out how they feel
- Building relationships with staff and encourage them to come to sessions so the participant can have a friendly face reminding them about the session each week
- Invite the participants along to watch a session, allowing them to visualise it before taking part

## Meet Conrad

Conrad is one of our participants residing in a mental health accommodation in Hammersmith. Conrad has really struggled to engage in many things and finds it difficult to meet new people. Due to his mental health diagnosis, Conrad often feels isolated and spends a lot of time sedentary in his room.

As part of the sport programme, Conrad has engaged consistently in football and tennis sessions, making friends within the sessions and advocating for how important these sessions have been for him.

Having consistency in his week has helped him make better use of his time, and he now brings one of his friends to the session!



“

It's been great, I've really really enjoyed myself I find it quite difficult to meet people and the fact that SHP has activities as well as providing housing is a real bonus. It's so much better than just sitting in doing nothing on your own in a room”

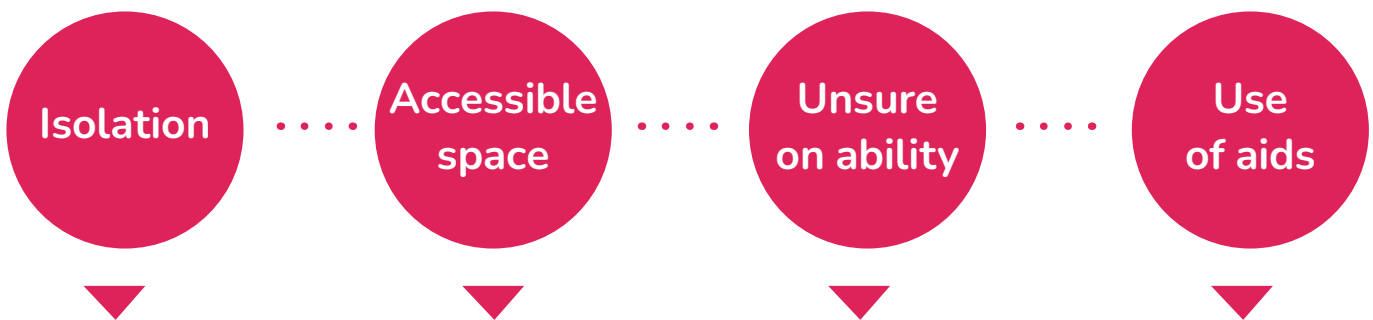
# Mobility

Within our population group a major health concern we see is mobility issues. This is down to early ageing, poor living conditions and ongoing health issues.

This can seriously affect the willingness and ability to join in exercise.



We often find that the common barriers we see within participants with mobility issues are:



## Solutions



- Adapt sessions to suit the participants needs using aids or extra staff
- Deliver sessions in house to remove travelling to and from sessions as a barrier
- Start off with 1-2-1 sessions to gauge ability level, and to help the participant gain confidence going into the group sessions
- Keep open communication with the client to gain feedback on how they are finding the sessions

## Meet Michael

Michael is a 71-year-old male that lives in one of our complex needs hostels. Michael had been engaging with the Sport Project for a few months taking part in chair-based sessions in the gym that was built in the hostel. However, Michael started experiencing pain and swelling in his legs and was hospitalised. Following a period in hospital Michael returned to the hostel and stopped engaging in sport sessions.



He said he was scared of the pain coming back in his legs and started to isolate himself in his room. The Health Lead spoke to our Sport Coordinator and informed them Michael's consultant had said that he needs to spend at least an hour on his feet every day to help reduce the swelling and encourage blood flow. The Sport Team introduced a new weekly activities session into Michael's hostel, which created the opportunity for Michael to play pool, darts, and table tennis.

These activities encouraged him to stand up for 30 minutes to an hour which was great for blood circulation in addition to keeping his mind stimulated doing something he loves. Michael now takes part in weekly games of pool which often see him standing and walking around for long periods of time. It also removes the anxiety he feels around exercise as he is enjoying the game and the competitive element, so is unaware how long he is standing for. The swelling in Michael's legs has drastically reduced and he experiences minimal discomfort and pain. He enjoys the session and has been socialising a lot more.

“

The activities get me out of my room and they keep me fit, its sociable, easy going, undemanding and that's it”

# Lack of medical history

Within our population group we often find that a substantial proportion of participants do not have a GP or have not engaged with care for a significant period of time, alongside being inactive for a substantial period and experiencing substance misuse. Therefore, as part of the project we ensured that people were medically fit to take part in physical activity sessions with no extra risk being placed on their body or health before they started the sessions.



As a result of our participants not engaged with health care the common barriers we see are:



## Solutions



- Form partnerships with local health services and link in health checks with exercise sessions
- Try to use sport as an incentive to engage with health services
- Have a chat with previous organisations or staff members that have worked with the participant to see if they can hand over useful information
- Host introduction meetings and conversations around health in a comfortable safe space
- Invite friendly faces along to the meeting and sessions to help participants feel relaxed

## Meet Richard

Richard lives within one of our complex needs hostels, moving in after being discharged from hospital following surgery on both legs. This required him to wear knee braces on both legs and crutches to aid him walk. Richard faced multiple barriers when it came to accessing sport and physical activity, he had very limited movement in his lower body, pain in both his legs and unstable without his crutches. Richard came out of hospital after being moved around multiple hospitals and having a GP outside of London. We were presented the challenge that we did not know Richard's medical history and he did not know if he was able to exercise following his surgery.



The Sport Coordinator had a chat with Richard during which he expressed his love for football and running and how upset he's been as he's unable to play. The Sport Coordinator told Richard about the weekly boxing sessions that were happening in the hostel and explained different ways they could adapt the session so Richard could take part.

These adaptations included using the punch bag and upper body only exercises so Richard could stand stationary. The Sport Coordinator was always on hand to offer support if Richard felt uneasy on his feet.

Richard was linked in with the Health Navigator and registered at a local GP, where he was cleared to exercise to aid his recovery from surgery. Due to sessions being run in-house, this reduced the distance Richard had to walk which eased any strains or tiredness placed on his legs. Richard has been attending boxing sessions regularly and had the opportunity to go on our trip to watch boxing at the Commonwealth Games.

“

When I wake up I don't have energy, but when I do some boxing I feel so much better”

# Isolation & Stigma

Often people have experienced previous stigma and presumptions about their ability or desire to access physical activity. This often leads to isolation and a breakdown in pursuing interests. This is very common within our participants with a lot of organisations and sporting clubs presuming that those experiencing homelessness would not be interested in taking part in exercise.



As a result of our participants feeling isolated, the common barriers we see are:

No Self-belief

Hard to engage

Bad past experience

## Solutions



- Run 1-2-1 sessions with the participant to help improve their confidence
- Whenever possible try to positively talk up the participants and their effort and engagement
- Celebrate successes with participants no matter how small
- At the beginning of someone engaging organise regular meet ups to build a positive rapport and relationship
- Hold sessions in a safe space
- Run sessions in the service to help participants feel comfortable
- Set routine, run sessions at the same time and location each week
- Document improvements and changes so participants can look back at how far they've improved

## Meet Denise

Denise is a resident at one of our women's only hostels. Denise has sciatica and nerve damage and uses a walking stick. Denise was told she would always need a stick to walk and did not believe she'd be able to take part in physical activity and she struggled to trust people she did not know.



The team implemented some of the above solutions and met with Denise multiple times in a relaxed setting in the hostel getting to know her and building trust and relationship. After a few months the team started 1-2-1 sessions with Denise so they could adapt and accommodate to her needs. Ensuring sessions were at the same time each week as Denise liked to have a set routine.

Denise now walks without the use of a stick and takes part in weekly group physical activity sessions. Denise has 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. Denise explained how these sessions are giving 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. She has 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.

“

It's nice to have someone to speak to and something to look forward to each week”

# Long term health conditions



A key reason and barrier why many do not participate in exercise or physical activity is the presence of long term or chronic health conditions. Some of these reasons include fear of exacerbating symptoms, unsure on their ability, thinking it's not possible or have not had the opportunity to access exercise. Our participants often experience long term or chronic health conditions ranging from diabetes, asthma, COPD, cancer, and wounds.

As a result of our participants having long term or chronic health conditions the common barriers we see

Declining health

Lack of interest

Fear of making illness worse

## Solutions



- Discuss the risk of exercising with medical workers
- Provide a friendly face within the session, as talking about health can be personal and upsetting
- Take the conversation and sessions slow and steady
- Spend some time to educate yourself and the participant around their health condition and benefit of health
- Place the emphasis of the session on socialising and not on the sport itself

## Meet Peter



Peter was referred by his project worker and had a new health diagnosis of Parkinson's. Peter hadn't taken part in exercise since his early twenties and had recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's. He required a walking stick and was experiencing tremors in his hands. Peter had very low confidence and high anxiety around taking part in physical activity and socialising.

The Sport Coordinator arranged to meet Peter 1-2-1 to find out a bit more about him and tell him about the sessions. Peter's project worker was invited along to the meeting, so he had a friendly face and felt comfortable from the start. They arranged to meet at the venue where the sessions would take place so Peter could see the space and lower anxiety prior to the first session. The meeting was hosted in a very relaxed manor, and they had a chat over tea and coffee and discussed ways in which Peter could get involved. These included a chair-based aerobics sessions which was aimed for people around a similar age as Peter. The Sport Coordinator also provided sports clothes and trainers, so Peter had them for the first session helping him to feel more comfortable and get into the exercise.

Peter came to the first session in his new sport wear and got chatting to a few of the participants over coffee and took part in the session. Peter has been coming every week since for the last 4 years and feels the sessions have helped slow the progression of his Parkinson's and helped maintain the strength of his muscles. Peter has also experienced a massive improvement in his mental health in the areas of isolation, confidence, socialisation, anxiety and self-esteem. Peter plans to attend our annual Sports Day and has signed up to take part in multiple events including the egg and spoon race!



I truly believe the exercise sessions are slowing down the progress of my Parkinson's"



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

Find our published Toolkits here:  
[www.shp.org.uk/physical-activity-for-all](http://www.shp.org.uk/physical-activity-for-all)

Email: [sport@shp.org.uk](mailto:sport@shp.org.uk)

Website:  
[www.shp.org.uk/sport](http://www.shp.org.uk/sport)



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