



Transforming Lives Through Physical Activity & Sport

How to use physical activity to combat
loneliness and social isolation



Single Homeless Project
preventing homelessness
transforming lives

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**“I feel like a human again,
before I felt invisible.”**

David



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, socialisation, 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 sport bags. This toolkit will set out how to use physical activity and sport as a tool to combat loneliness, and social isolation – as well as improve participants mental health and overall quality of life.

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



**10
minutes**

of exercise can
improve your mood
and reduce your
anxiety

Why this toolkit is for you

Are your target group experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation?

Are you looking for ways to combat loneliness and social isolation?

Are you looking for a tool to increase socialisation amongst your target group?

Are you looking for a tool to improve your target group's 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?

Would you like to offer a variety of skills and activities to your target group?

Are you looking to create more consistency for your participants, and a safe and comfortable setting?

Are you looking to facilitate the opportunities for deeper friendships within your target group?

Are you looking for practical ways to increase engagement with your target group?

Since 2017 we have:

600

Engaged 600+ participants

62%

Participants improved overall quality of life

76%

Participants improved stress, anxiety and depression levels

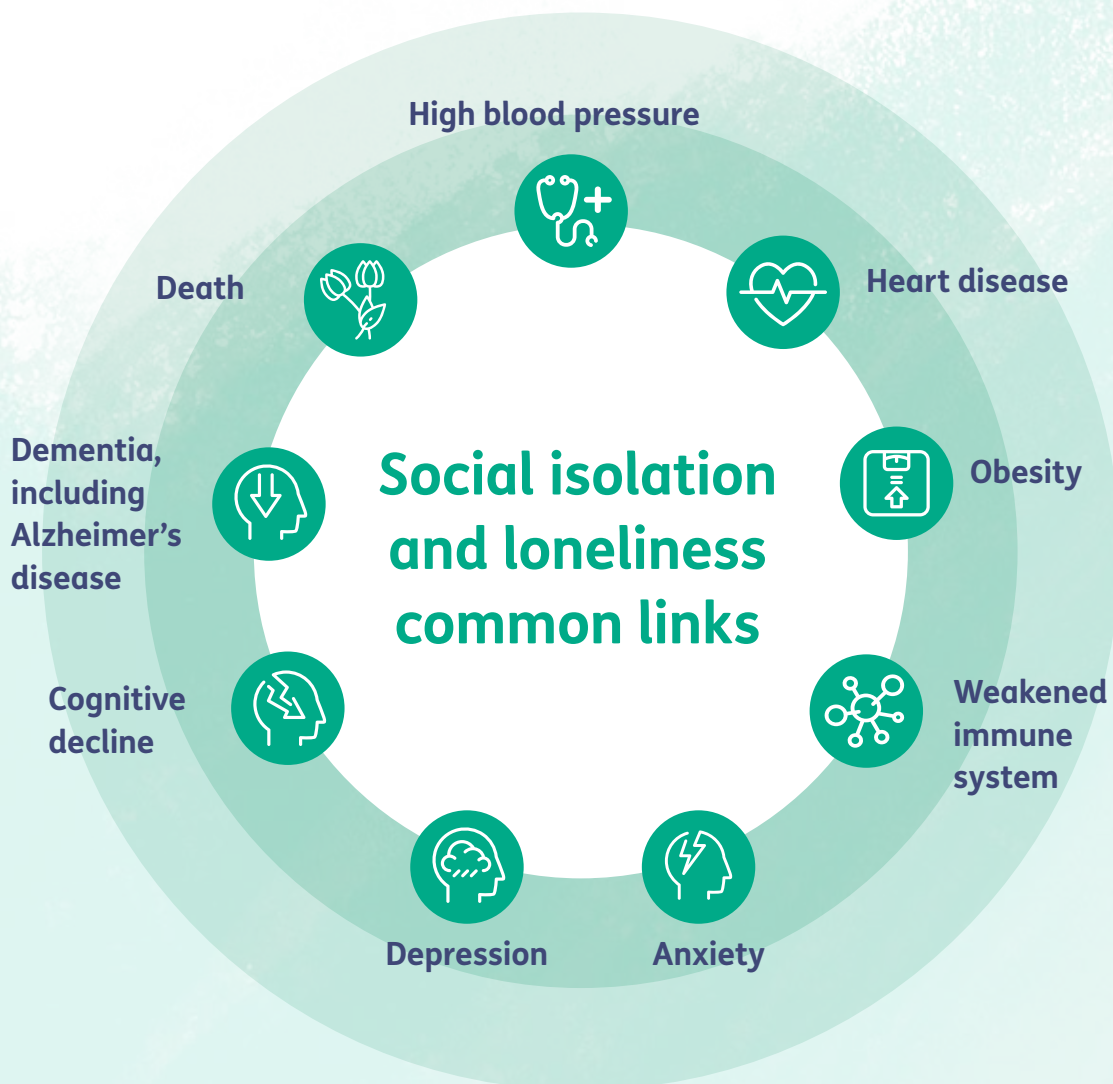
Key terms and types of socialisation

Definitions and how they link

Loneliness and social isolation are different, but related.

Loneliness is a subjective feeling about the gap between a person's desired levels of social contact and their actual level of social contact. It refers to the perceived quality of the person's relationships.

Social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that people have. It is about the quantity and not quality of relationships. You can live alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated, and you can feel lonely while being with other people. People who are socially isolated or lonely are more likely to be admitted to hospital or to a nursing home.



Different types of socialisation

The table below outlines the different types of sport sessions that incorporate socialisation and when may be best to use them.

Type of socialising	Definition	When you might use it
1-2-1	Coming together with one other person. This allows for more personal, quality socialisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a participant suffers from social anxiety • First time engaging in sport • Adaptations are needed
Group	Coming together as three or more people. This allows for interaction over a common goal or activity and allows shared ideas and thoughts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar level of ability • To help aid social connections • Similar aims and goals • Build friendships and independence
Online	Using technology such as phones, tablets, and laptops to facilitate group or 1-2-1 online live sessions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reach those who are isolated • To reach those who cannot travel
In person	Meeting both 1-2-1 or in a group in a mutual setting. For example, a community space, hostel, green space, or public space.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To add in an extra social element to the session • To add in human interaction • Help build relationships within the group • To aid conversation in the group sessions
Peer to peer	Online and in-person meetings between others in the same hostel, housing, situation, or group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To add in extra level of support and lived experience
Session leader to participant	Interactions between session leaders and participants that involves communication for a significant period of time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low confidence • Social anxiety • Extra support, mobility issues • Not comfortable exercising around others • Poor relationships with others
Gender informed	Group or 1-2-1 time which involves only those of the same sex. For example, women only or men only.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous trauma • Religion • Low confidence or high anxiety • Body confidence

Sport as an accessible bridge into social activities

Sport can be the first step into broadening a social network and equipping people with the motivation to engage in further socialisation.

Sport sessions act as a bridge between people experiencing isolation and people moving on into social activities. For many people, the sporting activities we deliver are the first time they come together to socialise with other residents within their hostel.

However, as the emphasis is on sporting activities, the socialisation and building relationships part of the session comes

as a by-product. This helps remove the social pressure and anxiety that residents often feel and allows a more natural process to building relationships with other participants.

The next section of this toolkit suggests methods that encourage participants to build their confidence around socialisation and helps reduce anxiety they may have.

Meet Denise

Denise is a resident at one of our services where we recently began offering physical activity sessions. 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 with any activities and struggled to make friends or trust other people. A member of the Sport Team met Denise several times and explained we could do any activity she felt comfortable with; she spoke about chair-based exercises and going for walks. Denise explained how she had been wanting to have someone to go for regular walks with for a while.

Denise has been participating for around six months and it is clear to see the positive changes in her mental health. 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. **“It’s given me confidence to want to join a walking club and be sociable again.”**



Common causes of loneliness and the solutions through exercise:

1. Social Anxiety

The link to loneliness/social isolation:

- When people find social situations anxiety inducing, such as an exercise class, the instinct is to avoid them – leading to isolation and loneliness
- This is a catalyst for poor mental health, as stress becomes the default response in each outcome

What to look out for?



Avoidance - Showing intent to come to a physical activity session, then not turning up

Nervousness – fidgeting when they're speaking to you

Body language – not facing you or looking at you whilst speaking. Body turned to the side or holding the door, showing intent to end the conversation quickly

Solutions:



The key to success is gradual exposure by using a stepping stone process:

Is there a staff member or person they trust?

YES

Invite them both to an exercise session with no one else

NO

Build up trust and rapport through multiple visits

1. Have a 1-to-1 exercise session

2. Invite them to a small group session

3. Invite them to a larger group session

Client stories

Meet Bernie

Bernie is a 63 year old client that SHP supported into his own flat. He suffers from social anxiety and as a result has reported having feelings of loneliness and feeling socially isolated.

Initially, his project worker brought him to a chair aerobics session after expressing a desire to address his loneliness, but was too nervous to join a group on his own. When Bernie attended the small group he was very shy, did not speak to the other participants, sat with a cup of tea and listened to the others chat before getting involved in the chair based exercise. The exercise acted as a useful tool for Bernie to feel like he was participating without having the pressure to uphold conversation. Bernie continued attending the sessions and the transformation in his confidence and self-esteem was remarkable. As the weeks went by he was getting more and more involved in the conversations laughing and joking with the other participants, and it was clear to see he was beginning to make friends. Bernie has since attended all 3 of our annual sports day events with hundreds of people, which is something he never could have envisioned when he first got involved. After the first lockdown, Bernie's social anxiety resurfaced so we offered him 1-to-1 exercise sessions in the park and it built up his confidence again to re-join the group sessions.



Did you know...

Regular moderate intensity exercise can improve memory, reasoning and cognitive function.

Someone with physical health problems may have worse mental health outcomes as a result; for instance, someone experiencing long-term pain, loss of independence or social isolation because of poor physical health is at higher risk of depression.

People who are socially isolated or lonely have an increased risk of a serious health condition.

2. Memory loss

Link to loneliness and social isolation:

Memory loss can make consistent routine difficult which can result in participants spending a lot of time on their own in their rooms. It also makes building relationships difficult as there may not be any recollection of names, faces, or conversations, which can isolate people. Memory loss can result in confusion around sessions so without the correct support, participants can become distant and disengaged.

What to look out for?



General confusion

Forgetting names/people/locations (sessions)

Difficulty completing everyday tasks

Misplacing things

Personality change

Solutions:



Reminders

Sometimes one reminder of a session isn't enough and so regular communication with multiple reminders can be beneficial. Reminders can be done face to face or via phone calls/emails.

Escort to sessions

Travelling with participants to sessions is a useful engagement tool as it can be common for them to forget the time or location.

In-house

By having sessions based within your organisation/services it can help participants to build routine and familiarity with the sessions.

Persistence

It's important to be aware of the extra time and care it may take to engage individuals. By persistently reminding and reiterating the time and place of sessions, it helps build the session into their routine.

Meet William

William is a client at one of our hostels who suffers from Korsakoff syndrome (alcohol induced dementia). He becomes easily confused and this has resulted in William spending much of the day in his room alone.

To combat this, persistence and perseverance was key as this enabled William to build his relationships with the Sport Team and the other residents. Through in-house gym sessions, William has been able to build familiarity and routine into his week. To aid his involvement, the Sport Team regularly remind and escort him to the session so that he attends safely. William has found it hard to build relationships due to his memory loss as people's names and faces can escape him, but as he attends consistently and so do a few other participants, he has been able to bond with them. William has built meaningful friendships with other residents which is testament to his commitment and resilience.



3. Lack of financial flexibility

Link to loneliness and social isolation:

Lack of financial flexibility can restrict life in a number of areas, including being less equipped to travel or pay for opportunities to socialise such as group physical activity.

What to look out for?



Wearing the same clothes all the time

Never going further than they can walk

Not engaging in exercise sessions despite wanting to

Self-reported financial difficulty

Solutions:



Eliminate travel fees, by:

Bringing sessions to them – provide physical activity sessions in-house or within walking distance. Encourage and support with alternative forms of transport, i.e. build-a-bike workshop. This is something we have had great success with (see case study below).

Improve awareness

Make free community sessions known to them. Often people do not know they are out there, so research community groups within their area.

Partnerships

Partner with community and sporting organisations to offer free and discounted opportunities. Sport centre managers and community development officers are useful contacts.

Incentives

You could use incentives such as free sports clothing to encourage them to come along and give them the opportunities to socialise.

Meet Gary

Gary is a participant in one of our hostels. He is a great example of eliminating financial travel restrictions as a barrier to socialisation.

Since we first met Gary, his motivation to get up and out of the hostel has been evident, however Gary was struggling to socialise due to geographical isolation. We introduced a weekly bike mechanics session, in which participants were taught to build their own bike from old parts. Gary has been the most committed member of this session, building it into a core part of his weekly routine. Not only did this provide the opportunity for Gary to socialise within the sessions, but also a means of transport and the freedom to travel. He now cycles to an English class in a different borough twice a week. Gary now has the confidence to lend a hand helping new participants build their bikes, encouraging other participants to socialise.



4. New living environment

Link to loneliness and social isolation:

When moving, it is hard to maintain previous relationships. Participants have to build new relationships when moving.

What to look out for?



A change in socialisation with others or self-reported loneliness

Any change in behaviour that may be detrimental to recovery

Less engagement in the exercise sessions

Solutions:



- Creating a progression plan for participants when they are due to move on to ensure physical activity remains part of their routine. This could include participants travelling to stay in the session or creating links with local community sessions in their new area.
- Consistency from your organisation with regular communication. Participants have built relationships and trust and keeping regular engagement can ease the transition.
- Continue extending offer of external trips and events where appropriate.
- Introducing new sessions – speaking with participants to see what form of physical activity they may be interested in.

Meet Danny

Danny is a client at one of our accommodation services. He attended a weekly cycling session when at a previous SHP service before moving to the service where the cycling activity takes place.

This meant Danny had already established relationships with staff and clients at his new accommodation due to attendance in the sport session. He has regularly attended this session for over a year now and speaks so highly of the Project. The Sport Project eased the transition for Danny when moving to a new service and outlined the importance of having a social framework in place before a change in living environment.



“We’ve got a little family here now, I look forward to seeing them every week.”

5. Injury/illness/terminal illness

Link to loneliness and social isolation:

Injury/illness can have a detrimental effect on mental health which can lead to isolation.

- Injuries can result in a person becoming sedentary and spending more time in their rooms.
- Time carries more weight for people who are terminally ill, therefore they may be more aware of time spent alone and feelings of loneliness could be heightened.

What to look out for?



Any physical injury

Change in weight

Change in appearance

Change in personality

Solutions:



Session adaptations

To make sessions more accessible, this may involve providing seated variations of the session, for example seated boxercise or chair aerobics.

Health check-ins

starting each session with health updates from the participant.

Tailored exercise programme

Create an exercise programme tailored to participants to support recovery from injury. Effective physical exercise programmes can reduce the effects of some injuries/illnesses.

Social promotion

Even if a participant is unable to join in, promote the social aspect of the sessions. For example, participants can still come along for a cup of tea and a chat, or they can spectate.

Meet Anthony

Anthony is a participant in one of our hostels who engaged in weekly group cycle rides. He suffered a severe injury and was hospitalised for several months.

He became lonely and isolated in hospital, and this continued when he returned to the hostel. Anthony would spend long periods of time in his room and was nervous about socialising again following his injury. After building up social relationships with the team again Anthony took part in a 1-2-1 cycle ride with his physiotherapist to build up his confidence. Following this, he came along to a session and we were able to adapt the session to meet Anthony's needs. An additional member of the Sport Team attended sessions and worked one-to-one with Anthony, ensuring his stability on the bike, and providing a familiar face to make him feel more comfortable in the session. Anthony was very happy to see session leaders and other participants once again. Anthony has now consistently attended the cycling session for six months post-injury and is also engaging with other SHP activities and community groups once again.



6. Abuse

Abuse can lead to:

Loneliness - If people have been victims of abuse, this can often lead to trauma which can subsequently hinder their ability to trust new people and can create difficulty opening up in social situations. This can lead to loneliness, even if they are able to be around people and social isolation is not an issue, as deeper connections are less frequent.

Social isolation – In instances of domestic abuse, the victim will often need to remove themselves from their current living situation and move to somewhere safer, for example, in a refuge. It therefore becomes difficult to integrate with the community and socialise.

Solutions:



The following ideas outline how to use physical activity sessions as safe spaces to build trust and form social connections for survivors of abuse in a psychologically informed environment.

- **Provide Specialised instructors:** Take into account the needs of your target group and consider whether the instructor has the skills necessary to run the session. Specify the needs of the target group to help find an instructor that is the right fit. Able to adapt and understanding towards needs.
- **Consistency and regularity:** The nature of exercise is that it's not seen as a one-off opportunity, but something to regularly engage in. Therefore, running sessions on the same day and time provides consistent social connections needed to build up trust with others.
- **Awareness:** Being aware of what individuals have been through can inform session leaders about potential triggers for them and how to adapt the environment to suit their needs.
- **Familiarity breeds friendship:** Create exercise sessions that are exclusively for people who have had similar experiences to provide a safe space without their experiences being the focus. If participants can relate to each other, trust is more likely to grow.

Solace

Our partnership with Solace is a key example of providing safe spaces, consistency, and specialised instructors for women in refuge from domestic violence.

We run a weekly yoga session, with several sensitive considerations in place. Initially, sessions were run in the hostel in order to create a safe space. Additionally, we hired a female instructor with experience working with vulnerable women. After the first few weeks, at participants' request we moved the sessions to a local community space. This represents a great example of physical activity being an avenue for re-integrating people into the community and facilitating opportunities to socialise.



Engagement incentives:

When we first introduced physical activity sessions, loneliness and social isolation were big barriers we had to overcome. Below are a few approaches we used to combat these barriers:

Sport
Reward
Cards:

17%



increase in the average attendance of one of our gym sessions

31.5%



increase in the average attendance of one of our bike mechanics sessions



Planning

Each target group is different, so it is important for each project to adapt how many sessions warrants a reward. The design should also be tailored to the particular target group, e.g. stickers may be more appropriate for certain individuals, and just ticking the card may suit others more.

In preparation for the distribution stage, providing an information card alongside the reward card is important to provide context as to how the reward card works.

Distribution

Distribution of the cards will vary depending on your target group.

- If all of the target group are based in a hostel – put a loyalty card and information card under the door of each resident
- If target group live independently – send the reward cards to their homes
- If sessions are open to anyone – keep a number of reward cards in the sessions to give out to new participants

In Use

Each session attended, warrants a sticker/tick on the back of the reward card.

The requirement of attendance time relies on a judgement of the session leader and depending on the target group, either the participants can keep the reward cards on them for each session, or the session leader can bring all the cards (useful in cases where the participants have memory loss).

Completion

Rewards could be in the form of:

- Group trip out – If a group of participants finish the reward card at a similar time
- Buying an individual reward – If the budget allows for purchase of a requested reward
- Utilising donations – If you have any suitable donations from corporate partners

Development

If participants are completing the reward cards quickly, then a progression system could be put in place, increasing the number of sessions required for a reward.





Engagement incentives: Open days

The idea around open days are that they remove some of the barriers faced when starting physical activity. The open days are a great way to engage people in their step to taking part in physical activity while reducing some of the anxiety they have around this. Benefits of open days include:

- Allows people to come and find out more about sessions without the pressure of signing up
- Removes time pressure by being a day event
- Removes financial pressure as there is no cost to come along
- Open to all, participants can come alone or with someone
- People can come and go as they like, so it's less of an overwhelming large group activity
- Other activities involved in the day helping to remove the pressure on sport



How to run an open day

Key things to consider

- Location – make it as accessible as possible
- Timing
- Size
- Adaptable activities
- Staff – friendly welcoming faces
- Refreshments
- Make it fun – balloons, bunting, music

Location

Find the best location for your target audience this may include a hostel communal space, a local community centre or a garden. Try to make the venue look as inviting and exciting as possible, bunting, balloons and music are always a good start.



Timing

Run the day for at least a few hours to remove any time pressure and to allow people to come and go throughout the day. Consider your target audience, is early in the morning or late in the evening appropriate? We find an event over the middle of the day including food at lunch has the most success with engaging more of our target group.



Activities

Arrange a range of activities and taster sessions, make sure to include a variety of physical activity to cater for different interests and abilities. Consider including other fun activities such as an art activity or gardening to help engage more people.



Refreshments

If you're hosting the event over a meal time or for a prolonged period of time, refreshments are a key selling point and help to engage people for longer and to improve socialisation. Make sure to include places where people can sit down and have a break and a drink.



Practical example

An example of this is a summer open day we held in a hostel garden, we put on a BBQ, had a range of tables set up that covered a variety of activities including sport, gardening, art and music. By including other activities, we pulled in a wider group of participants that wouldn't normally have the confidence to come to just a sports open day. Every table had a taster activity that people could take part in alongside leaflets about the sessions they offer and members of staff for them to meet and chat to.

Creating a session that encourages socialisation:



It's one thing getting people into sessions, but there is no guarantee this will reduce their loneliness, and in some cases could even make them feel lonelier. Here are some ideas of how you can create an environment that encourages people to make meaningful social connections and consequently reduces loneliness.

What you can do:

Tea/coffee to start – It's important to encourage a social aspect to the sessions, not just framing them solely as exercise. This can be in the form of having some time at the start of the session that is allocated to catching up over refreshments.

Sharing phone numbers – One of the most effective ways to build meaningful relationships is consistent and regular contact. Attending a session once a week may not be enough, so encourage participants to exchange phone numbers, creating the opportunity to meet up outside of the sessions.

Encourage peer facilitation - One of the most effective ways to create a thriving, social community within an exercise environment is to create opportunities for the participants to help/encourage each other throughout the sessions. This can be achieved by allowing them to work together with their exercise choices – whether this is doing chair exercises in pairs, engaging in team sports, or spotting each other during exercises in the gym. Another way to achieve this would be to empower participants by facilitating peer led aspects of the session, in which participants lead a warm-up or the social introduction to the session.

Do sessions in community spaces – The advantage of running sessions in local community centres/spaces is that it creates a platform to connect your target group to additional community projects and sessions. Community centres act as a hub for community integration and expose participants to a wide variety of opportunities to socialise, with staff and posters/flyers advertising what is on offer.

Group trips – We have found that sometimes deeper connections are made when variety is added to the weekly sessions, as it creates the opportunity for participants to transfer the social skills into a different environment and out of the safety of the weekly sessions. Facilitating trips out such as Ice skating trips has proven a useful tool in growing the relationships which have begun to develop in sessions. It also increases the likelihood that participants will meet up outside of a session, due to them being more comfortable in different environments with each other.



Maintaining socialisation - beyond your programme/sessions:



Inevitably, your target group will not be able to attend your sessions forever. How can you ensure the progress made in tackling loneliness and social isolation can create sustainable change in the lives of your target group?



Linking them up with move-ons / community groups

It's important to build up a network of community connections, to refer your participants onto outside of your sessions. This allows participants to continue their personal development and link with others in similar circumstances.



Building up their confidence by empowering them within sessions

Building the confidence of participants is key to developing their socialisation. It is important to empower participants in sessions through social interactions with both staff and others taking part, in addition to creating an environment where they feel comfortable to express themselves.



Run our sessions in community spaces

This means that participants have already started building connections with others in their community, developing relationships with staff and with other people using the community spaces. For example, at one of the community centres we use, the participants have received invites to other events they host due to the relationships that have developed.



Voluntary opportunities in spaces/sessions

Taking part in your sessions can lead to opportunities participants did not know were previously available to them. Through participating in one of our gym sessions, Jason developed the motivation to want to go on and help others. We supported him to contact a local boxing gym, where he volunteers regularly in one of their sessions. He has gone on to make a great impact in the community.



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.

Email:
sport@shp.org.uk

Website:
www.shp.org.uk/Listing/Category/sports-project

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

- How to break barriers and bridge the gap between the homeless and physical activity sectors
- 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



Single Homeless Project
preventing homelessness
transforming lives