

Learn2b Active Pilot Project

Project Evaluation

July 2017

1. Background

The number of people who are affected by mental health is rising. In 1990, 416 million people suffered from depression or anxiety worldwide - these numbers rose to 615 million in 2013 (World Health Organisation, 2016). Current figures state that each year in Britain an estimated one in four adults will experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem, though only 230 of every 300 who need help will actually visit their GP.

Exercise is one of the most effective ways to improve your health. Regular exercise can have a profound positive impact on depression, anxiety, ADHD and more. It relieves stress, improves memory, helps improve sleep and boosts overall mood. Research indicates that modest amounts of exercise can make a difference.

Studies show that exercise can treat mild to moderate depression as effectively as antidepressant medication, but without the side effects. It promotes all kinds of changes in the brain, including neural growth, reduced inflammation, and new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and wellbeing. It also releases endorphins, which energise spirits and make you feel good. Finally, exercise can also serve as a distraction, allowing you to find some quiet time to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed depression. Active people are more likely to find it easier to deal with life's problems and challenges. Exercise can also help people cope better by improving how they feel about themselves and getting together with other people. (Mental Health Foundation).

Learn2b Active was a new pilot project developed jointly by Northamptonshire Learn2b Service, Northamptonshire Sport and Corby Borough Council with the aim of providing a community based intervention of informal learning with physical activity for people experiencing poor mental health, particularly mild to moderate disorders such as depression, anxiety and stress.

2. Project Aim

To develop a structured educational and physical activity focussed course providing a range of physical activities at a level that suits the individual, in a safe, supported and social environment with the aim of improving overall mental wellbeing.

3. Objectives

- To overcome the barriers an individual with mental health issue may face when wanting to become more physically active.
- Provide participants with the opportunity to try a range of physical activities.
- Help participants identify how physical health can have a positive effect on mental wellbeing.
- Help participants create a Personal Activity Plan.
- Encourage participants to pursue a healthy and more active lifestyle on completion of the programme.
- Provide participants with development opportunities such as volunteering and sports leaders qualifications.

4. Programme Outline

The co-produced pilot consisted of a community based programme of informal learning combined with physical activity. Individuals who are experiencing poor mental health particularly mild to moderate disorders (e.g.: anxiety, stress and low level depression) were referred to the initiative. The programme was designed to support the recovery process through learning - to build (or rebuild) confidence and develop coping strategies for everyday situations even if the symptoms are in the past.

The pilot was run at Hazelwood Neighbourhood Centre in Corby, which was easily accessed via public transport from the town centre and also provides a good range of indoor and outdoor facilities, which are fully inclusive. The centre is located in Kingswood Ward which is ranked 88th nationally in the Education, Skills & Training Domain for Indices for Multiple Deprivation.

The range of activities provided were those that were readily available locally, providing sustained exit routes to enable continued engagement once the 12 weeks was completed. Activities included: A health walk, walking football, boxercise, short tennis, badminton, Nordic walking, archery, table tennis, walking netball, Zumba and short mat bowls.

These physical activity sessions were delivered by qualified instructors and coaches from Corby Borough Council, Northamptonshire Sport, local sports providers and clubs appropriate to the different levels of ability and confidence to sustain links for continued participation. The mental health informal learning was delivered by qualified Learn2b tutors, all of which have lived experience of poor mental health. Peer mentoring support was also provided at each session to assist with any additional needs such as hearing/sight impairment/emotional needs or literacy skills. Additional signposting is available for dyslexia support.

The pilot was delivered over 12 weeks from January to March 2017 consisting of 12 x 2.5hr sessions. The weekly sessions included:

- 1 hr theory (informal learning)
- 1 hr practical – physical activity or sports session
- Half hour social / refreshments

The pilot was designed to encourage wellbeing, provide an opportunity to have some 'time out', learn something new and start to gain confidence in a social setting with like-minded people. The theory element of the course included developing coping strategies for handling anxiety etc., such as mindfulness, relaxation breathing.

5. Scope

The project also incorporated the following:

- Mental Health First Aid training was delivered to the local sports providers and coaches to ensure they were equipped and confident in supporting individuals with mental health issues. It also helped them to improve awareness and reduce stigma around a range of mental health issues which can act as a barrier to participation.
- Participants completed a 'Personal Training Plan' booklet to keep a record of their support and help them find something that fits in with their abilities, interests and schedule.
- A celebration event/activity was run on the final week to enable the participants to celebrate their achievements, successes and reflect on what they have learnt throughout the course of the 12 weeks.
- Participants were encouraged to continue regular participation in physical activity outside of the weekly sessions and once the 12 weeks has been completed.
- Participants were offered the opportunity to undertake leadership training such as a Sport Leaders Qualifications, Walk Leader Training etc and will be offered volunteering opportunities in sport and physical activity.

6. Target Audience

- Adults aged 18years+ living in Corby and surrounding areas.
- People suffering from mild to moderate mental health issues.
- Those willing to use physical activity and sport as a means of improving their mental health and wellbeing.
- Those who find starting something new difficult or those lacking motivation or confidence to participate in sport and physical activity.
- Those who may need a 'buddy' or someone to support them to attend.

7. Project Outputs and Outcomes

The aim is was to attract 15 participants for the initial pilot. Participants would be referred by Health Professionals and First for Wellbeing Health Advisors. Participants could also self-refer. Interested candidates were asked to enrol through the existing Learn2b dedicated phone line or email address to ensure the initial assessment takes place and if additional support needs are identified the Adult Learning Service will provide an additional Teaching Assistant.

7.1 Outputs

- 10 participants initially booked on the course, 8 attended and completed the 12 week programme; 2 Male, 6 Female.
- The main mental health problems were anxiety and depression. 6 of the candidates had other health conditions; COPD, Fibromyalgia, diabetes and regular migraines.
- The ages range from 20yrs to 75yrs plus.
- One lady was supporting her husband on the project who had COPD and depression.

7.2 Outcomes

- There was a significant increase in participation levels in physical activity by all participants over the course of the 12 weeks of the course, (measured by IPAQ).
- 4 of the participants indicated that they would be interested in local sport and physical activity opportunities post intervention. The same 4 individuals declared an interest in community volunteering and the Sports Leaders qualification.
- All 8 participants indicated that their mental health during the 12 weeks of the course had improved, (measured by SWEMWBS).
- Participants completed a personal journal each week to recognise and capture their own progress and development throughout the course, including feedback:

"I have loved being able to try so many different sports. I have enjoyed them all, some of which I would not even of thought of trying".

"I have taken part in other Learn2b courses but I like the way this course is run over 12 weeks because it allows us all to get to know each other and make friendships."

"I have really enjoyed this course so far, trying the different activities with likeminded people, in a safe and non-threatening environment has been really good".

"I would probably avoid joining a team sport, club or group class because I wouldn't have the confidence. I was apprehensive to join this course at first, but as it was Learn2b I knew the people in the group would have similar issues like me"

"I know that when I attend a Learn2b course the tutors are knowledgeable, friendly and have an understanding for people with mental health conditions".

8. Successes

The programme design and format seems to work well with the participants. Each session started with a 30mins social / drink and concluded with another tea/coffee break. The social element was an important part of the programme and helped to put the participants at ease.

Combining the different sports tasters along with the theory aspect seemed to be effective and was welcomed by the group. It introduced like-minded candidates with similar barriers to a variety of sports in a safe and supportive environment. Furthermore, workforce providing the activities are up-skilled in mental health, but are also supported by professionals working in the field, which was needed.

9. Challenges

Some of the qualified level 2 club coaches and exercise instructors lacked confidence, experience and practical knowledge in making sessions inclusive for people with physical disabilities.

10 The Learning

- Working with a recognised mental health providers such as 'Learn2b' had many benefits: Their brand was well recognised and trusted by the target audience and they had existing structures and proven methods for recruitment; they had the expertise in programme design; they have tutors who have the knowledge, understanding and skills to support the candidates, particularly if they have a 'wobble' as they are able to offer a solution and keep them motivated in a sympathetic but assertive way.
- Establishing a group and introducing that group to range of activities prior to introducing another challenge has proven to have a much more positive response and prolonged engagement.
- Developing a group and combining different sports tasters alongside theory elements helped to increase confidence and introduce like-minded candidates with similar barriers to a variety of sports in a safe and supportive environment. People with mental health conditions are more likely to consider coaching/activating roles once they have built up their own self confidence in an active, safe, friendly and welcoming environment. Continual peer support and encouragement was essential in order to achieve this.
- Providing Mental Health First Aid training to the coaches working with the people with mental ill-health helped to increase their awareness of the types of issues they may encounter and make them feel confident about delivering to this audience although there was still a huge skills/knowledge gap.

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