



Sport for Confidence and Stay Connected: Creating an online physical activity service

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Description

Sport for Confidence CIC is a unique and innovative organisation, which brings together occupational therapists and specialist sports coaches to provide activity-based assessments and interventions for marginalised groups across Essex. Sport for Confidence typically operates within leisure centres, but during the coronavirus pandemic the Stay Connected service was created - an online service that utilises occupational therapists and sports coaches to provide support to marginalised populations, such as disabled people and people living with long-term conditions.

Context

The Stay Connected service enables participants to access and engage with a wide range of online interest groups, low and high intensity physical activity groups, and vocational groups. The occupational therapists enhance this offer by providing additional telephone contact, occupational assessment, active listening, empathy and personalised advice. The service also works in partnership with care and community providers to enhance resilience and accessibility of existing provision, supporting them to develop and embed sustainable and inclusive online solutions.

The Stay Connected service was originally commissioned in April 2020 for 6 months, to offer immediate support to disabled people living within Essex due to the pandemic. The service proved successful, and an extension was granted. Stay Connected is a person-centred service, which focuses on meeting the needs of individuals who face barriers in initiating, accessing and sustaining contact with support services. This is because these individuals are often the most at risk of experiencing a deterioration in their mental and/or physical health, exacerbated by the requirements to socially distance, shield and/or self-isolate. These individuals are also known to encounter inequalities in sport and physical activity participation, which has consequences for their health and well-being (English Federation of Disability Sport, 2013; Sport England, 2016). The service recognises the broader context of people's lives and how this relates to their health and well-being. Therefore, assessment and support is also offered to those in a caring role (whether paid or unpaid) to reduce the risk of carer breakdown. This further supports national policy that seeks to enable people with health conditions and impairments to live an active lifestyle (English Federation of Disability Sport, 2016).

Method

The service started with telephone and email contact and developed to providing regular Zoom exercise classes alongside occupational therapy assessment and support. The following demonstrates key stages in the service improvement:

- Started with a basic service telephone and email contact service
- Awareness raising sessions (live social media events, providers and health and social care workers)
- Strengthen existing and new partnerships and referral pathways (e.g. Enhanced Social Care Support for Adults with LD/Autism team).
- Reviewed and changed measurement to qualitative data collection only to enhance rapport building and connection with the member of staff.
- Gradually increased and adapted the offer to include: personalised support ranging from, a short phone call to regular and lengthy contacts subject to needs assessment, signposting, email contact, personalised physical activity videos, zoom sessions, resources sent/recommended.
- Posted infographics of monthly contact via social media
- Provided a weekly zoom timetable
- Co-created resources with Team Create (includes participants with lived experience of disability/mental health/LD) to use within sessions (e.g. 'How to start a conversation about PA')

Outcomes

- The service was initially measured using self-rated measurement tool but feedback from the participants led to qualitative measurement, using feedback and case studies.
- Total referrals April 2020 – Feb 2021: 1157
- Current Caseload as of 1st March 2021: 129
- Total Zoom sessions delivered for January 2021: 41
- Total Zoom sessions delivered for February 2021: 41
- Total attendance at Zoom for January 2021: 576 interactions (average attendance of 14)
- Total attendance at Zoom for February 2021: 668 interactions (average attendance of 16)
- Average 0 – 10 rating given by participants on service provided: 9.7

There are many examples of what has changed, including:

- **Increased access to physical activity** (e.g. 5 days a week rather than 2x week in prior to covid)
- **Challenged assumptions** around people with a learning disability/Autism using digital platforms, we have enabled participants connect with new and old and stay connected with all.
- **Increased opportunity** for people to make independent choices about what activities they want to join. A choice of 14 different sessions a week was something that was not previously an option for the majority.
- Enabled participants to **safely try different sports and activities** they may not have tried before- enabling us to grade their exposure online and work towards them trying new things face to face in the future.
- Provided participants with **structure and routine**

Client feedback:

"This service has been helpful / useful by just knowing they are a phone call away in this difficult time of lock down uncertainty... keep up your amazing work! I am grateful to you all for your help and support and the belief you all have in me to achieve and grow as a person".

Family feedback:

"My son has Down's syndrome and attends a Sport for Confidence session; the therapists have kept these going each week via Zoom. This has allowed him to keep in touch with everyone, which given his additional needs he would not have been able to do... the variety of activities is great... the care and attention put in by the therapists is outstanding".

"Everyone at SfC has been amazing, all the team are so caring. My son is a completely different person since participating in the Stay Connected service."

Carer Feedback:

"The team have made me feel part of the 'outside world indoors" Thank you.

Provider feedback:

"We have been given lots of suggestions and physical activity information. Our client has now been offered a fantastic Video Carephone thanks to Stay Connected and they have been supporting one of our clients regularly".

The extension and how the service is evolving suggests the service is respected and valued by the commissioners who want it to remain. The consistent number of referrals suggest the service is of value to health professionals and participants.

Key learning points

- Learning to evolve with time and acting quickly, Covid has been a roller coaster ride and we have had to exhaust all our innovative creations to ensure that we can adapt to support the participants at their own pace.
- A single point of access has been a real important learning experience, something extremely valuable and as a consequence results in participants gaining efficient, sensitive and consistent support.
- Technology is difficult to navigate, however, it can be done with attention and care.
- The iterative approach we have taken has enabled us to adapt and change our approach as we go, therefore we have consistently followed check, challenge and change principles.
- It's clear there is a long term need for virtual and face to face delivery, to promote choice and independence for participants.
- To explore how this service becomes a long-term plan as part of Sport for Confidence and the participants we see.

References

English Federation of Disability Sport (2013) [Microsoft Word - Active Together Report V6 \(sportanddev.org\)](#) Accessed in April 2021

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