



Beating isolation through physical activity

Single Homeless Project supports London's homeless community to make social connections and get active

Project at a glance

- Physical activity programmes hadn't been tried with homeless people in London, despite the potential benefits for beating isolation and boosting physical and mental health.
- In 2017 the Single Homeless Project secured funding from Sport England to pilot a physical activity scheme through their London hostels.
- The pilot took a while to achieve its aims, but after nine months of shaping the project through their feedback, the participants were reporting improvements to their physical and mental health.
- Now the project runs in 12 London boroughs



Listening to
people's
needs



Breaking
down barriers

The challenge

The Single Homeless Project runs hostels for homeless people across London with a variety of different needs. As well as mental and physical health problems, clients often experience isolation and live a sedentary lifestyle.

The charity saw an opportunity to launch a physical activity programme to help address some of these challenges. But this was a new idea, and the team faced many practical obstacles to making it successful.

“Reducing isolation is a huge challenge for us,” says Eloise Moller, Sport and Health Manager at The Single Homeless Project.

“Some of our clients spend 18 hours in their rooms and physical activity seemed like a good idea to bring them together. But it’s not something we’d done before and the benefits weren’t proven yet. Our clients can have chaotic lives, and some people wondered if it would be too stressful for them.” Eloise, SHP

Single Homeless Project's response

The Single Homeless Project saw a gap in the services they offered. While they had run music and art activities before, there were no physical activity sessions.

“We noticed how much time residents in hostels where spending sat down alone in their rooms,” says Eloise.

Thanks to funding from Sport England, Eloise was able to set up a pilot project for over-55s focused on clients in four London boroughs. Progress was originally slow: after spending time getting a group of five people engaged, the next week no-one would attend the session. But Eloise was determined to shape the project around the charity's clients.


The activities changed too. Clients said that they'd like to try activities the charity hadn't considered, like boxing and fishing.

“Fishing was really interesting,” says Eloise.

“Many people said that it was something they'd done with their dads and really enjoyed. So we had to find places to fish in London [they eventually found Clapham Common and the Serpentine]. We all had to think about whether it was truly a physical activity. We solved that by adding in a walk.”

“We listened to people and made lots of little tweaks as we went along.” Eloise, SHP

“When we started, the focus was just on physical activity: things like chair aerobics and walking football. Then we realised that the social element was just as important, so we started offering tea and sandwiches to get more people along.” Eloise, SHP



The results

By the end of the nine-month pilot participants were reporting benefits for their mental and physical health. The team carefully captured these through qualitative and quantitative data at three-month intervals.

“One big turning point was when we hired Crystal Palace Athletics Stadium for a sports day,” says Eloise.

“We invited all our clients and it just showed people what the project had achieved. That way all our staff could see the benefits for themselves.”

Over the next two years the project was rolled out to 12 boroughs in London. Results were positive: 76% of participants reported decreased levels of stress, anxiety and depression. Meanwhile, 62% said their health conditions had improved.

“I don't want to leave SHP because of all the activities. They give me things to do, and I really enjoy them.” – Anthony

“The cycling is great – we have a little social community and I look forward to it each week.” – Tessa

“Boxing makes me feel better in my body and my mind.” – David

Learning

- **Find the right approach**

“It sounds weird but we didn’t really advertise the mental health benefits of the project to participants,” says Eloise. “These are people who can feel ‘pushed’ into doing a lot of different things. It was more effective to say: ‘come and have some fun with other people’.”

- **Listen to your participants**

The charity made extensive tweaks to the project based on clients’ feedback. This helped participants feel part of the project and opened up some opportunities the charity hadn’t considered before – like taking people out of the hostel for fishing. “We worked on making the clients feel like it was their space: so they pick the music, the snacks and suggest new activities,” says Eloise. This kind of inclusive co-design is important for delivering successful programmes.

- **Get staff on board**

“Some people in our sector don’t have physical activity as part of their lives,” said Eloise.

“So initially it was hard for them to see the benefits. But we used clients’ stories to convince them, and the results spoke for themselves.”

- **Break down barriers**

“In a hostel where we built a gym we opened it up to staff between certain hours to break down the staff/client barrier and let staff feel part of the process,” Eloise says. Clients were also present in staff feedback sessions so everyone felt listened to.



Relevant support available

Engaging people in physical activity to support their mental health

Mental Health Awareness for Sport & Physical Activity+ eLearning

Involving people with lived experience of mental health problems in the design and delivery of your work

Sport, physical activity and mental health case studies

Single Homeless Project: The project

