



COPING THROUGH FOOTBALL

Evaluation Report 2013

The London Playing Fields Foundation



North East London 
NHS Foundation Trust



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During Phase 2 this project was funded by:

The Henry Smith Charity



The context

Mental illness is the single largest cause of disability in the UK with one in six experiencing mental illness at any one time. With suicide being the second biggest killer of 18 – 25 year old males and the annual social and economic cost of mental health problems in England calculated at £105 billion, the need for an innovative way of engaging with young to mid life adults with significant and enduring mental health problems was the motivation behind the creation of the Coping Through Football project in Waltham Forest.

Within Waltham Forest it is estimated that in any given week 11% of adults will experience depression which is higher than the England average (8%) and similar to the London average (11%). Overall, the need for inpatient services for Severe Mental Illness in Waltham Forest is 50% higher than the national average. There are large ethnic inequalities in admissions to adult psychiatric inpatient services in the borough. The admission rate for white ethnic groups in Waltham Forest is similar to the England average, whilst the admission rate for black ethnic groups in Waltham Forest is almost double the England average.

In addition, there is a recognition that those with psychotic conditions suffer from significantly worse physical health:

- The prevalence of Type 2 diabetes in this client group is 2-3 times higher than the general population
- Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder reduce life expectancy by an average of 16 - 25 years
- People with severe mental illness are twice as likely to die from heart disease as the general population
- 61% of people with schizophrenia smoke compared to 33% of the general population

Since its launch in 2007 the development of the Coping Through Football project has in some ways pre-empted the Government's "No Health without Mental Health" implementation framework (2012) in that it:

- Adopts a collaborative, local and multi-agency approach
- Provides an innovative service
- Tackles inequality in provision with a focus on BME communities
- Promotes service user engagement
- Is oriented around recovery
- Focuses on improving physical health including an emphasis on smoking cessation, weight management and tackling drug and alcohol misuse



Responding to the need

The Coping Through Football project set out to use sport to transform and improve community mental health services particularly for BME service users who had not historically engaged with the statutory services. Phase 1 of the project (2007 – 2010) was wholly externally funded, with the aim of having the project mainstreamed and integrated as part of the recovery programme for service users. This has been largely achieved in Phase 2 with North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT) providing the role of Project Coordinator from its own funds. Funding was also sourced from Man Group Charitable Trust, Henry Smith Charity and LB Waltham Forest to cover the full project cost.

Adopting a multi-agency approach, the success of the project has been based on a partnership between two sporting charities, the London Playing Fields Foundation (LPFF) and Leyton Orient Community Sports Programme (LOCSP), and the NHS (in the shape of North East London Foundation Trust). Together they have established a sustainable recovery model that engages with and improves the well-being of young to mid life adults with enduring mental illness. Over the last five years Coping Through Football has demonstrated how sport can:

- help tackle stigma and discrimination
- work together with health on shared agendas to reduce inequalities
- be a tool for engagement with hard to reach groups
- assist in the recovery of those with mental ill health

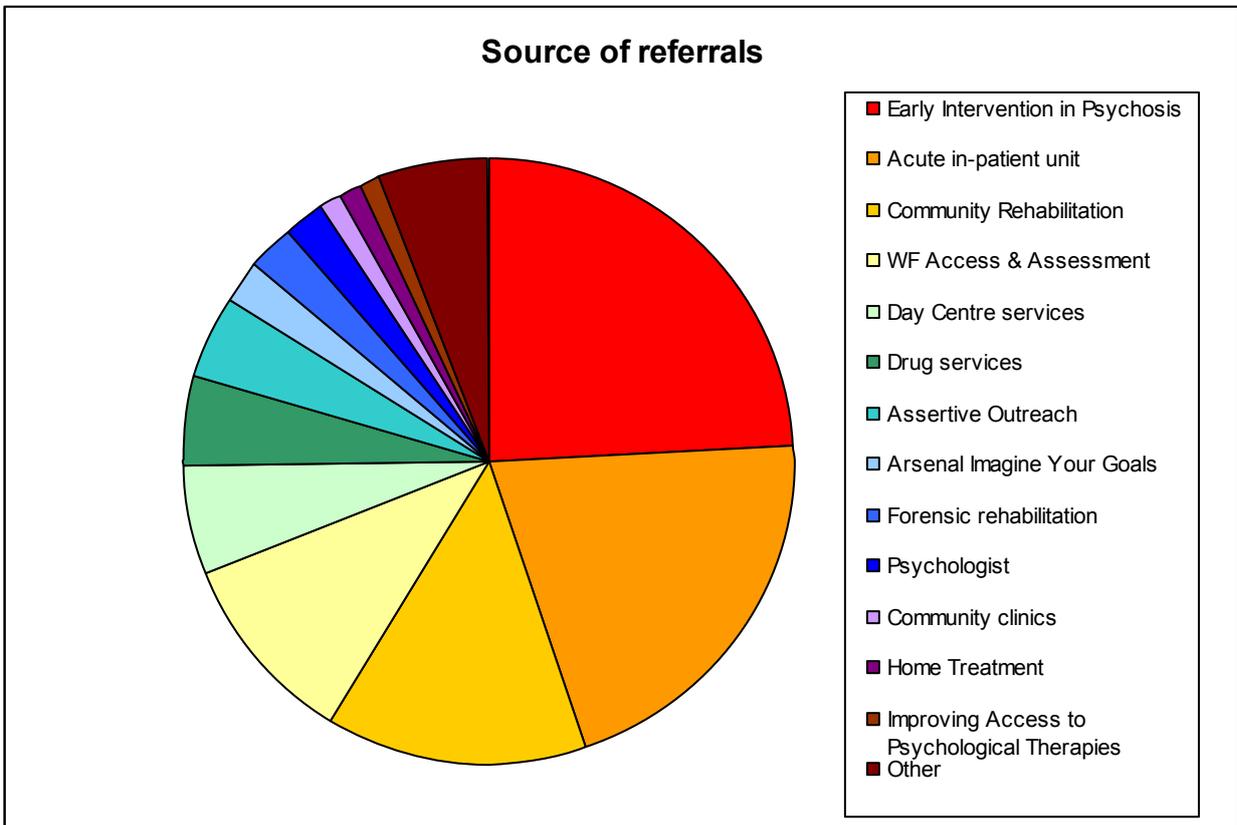
What makes Coping Through Football successful is not the football as this is merely a hook for stimulating the interest of the target group. It is the environment created around the twice weekly football sessions at a community facility that makes it special. Firstly service users feel a sense of belonging where everyone is welcome. Secondly they are not traditional mental health sessions but are about coming together in a normal way to play football. The same coach, accompanied by the Project Coordinator, is always present and this provides a reassuring continuity for the participants. The sessions are energetic encompassing some work on developing football skills followed by a game. The coach aims for maximum involvement with an emphasis on enhancing self-esteem so that when the session ends the participants leave with a greater sense of self worth. In addition to the coaching sessions there are also visits to Football League matches and outings to other mainstream community leisure facilities.

During Phase 2 a new Project Coordinator and Lead Coach were recruited following the resignation of Matt Howard-Jones and Rob Tromans from NELFT and LOCSP respectively. The new appointees both had previous experience of working with the project and this has ensured continuity of delivery: Project Coordinator Sonia Smith had attended sessions in her former role as Occupational Therapist at the acute inpatient unit and Howard Gould, an experienced, qualified LOCSP coach had also covered Coping Through Football sessions.

The numbers

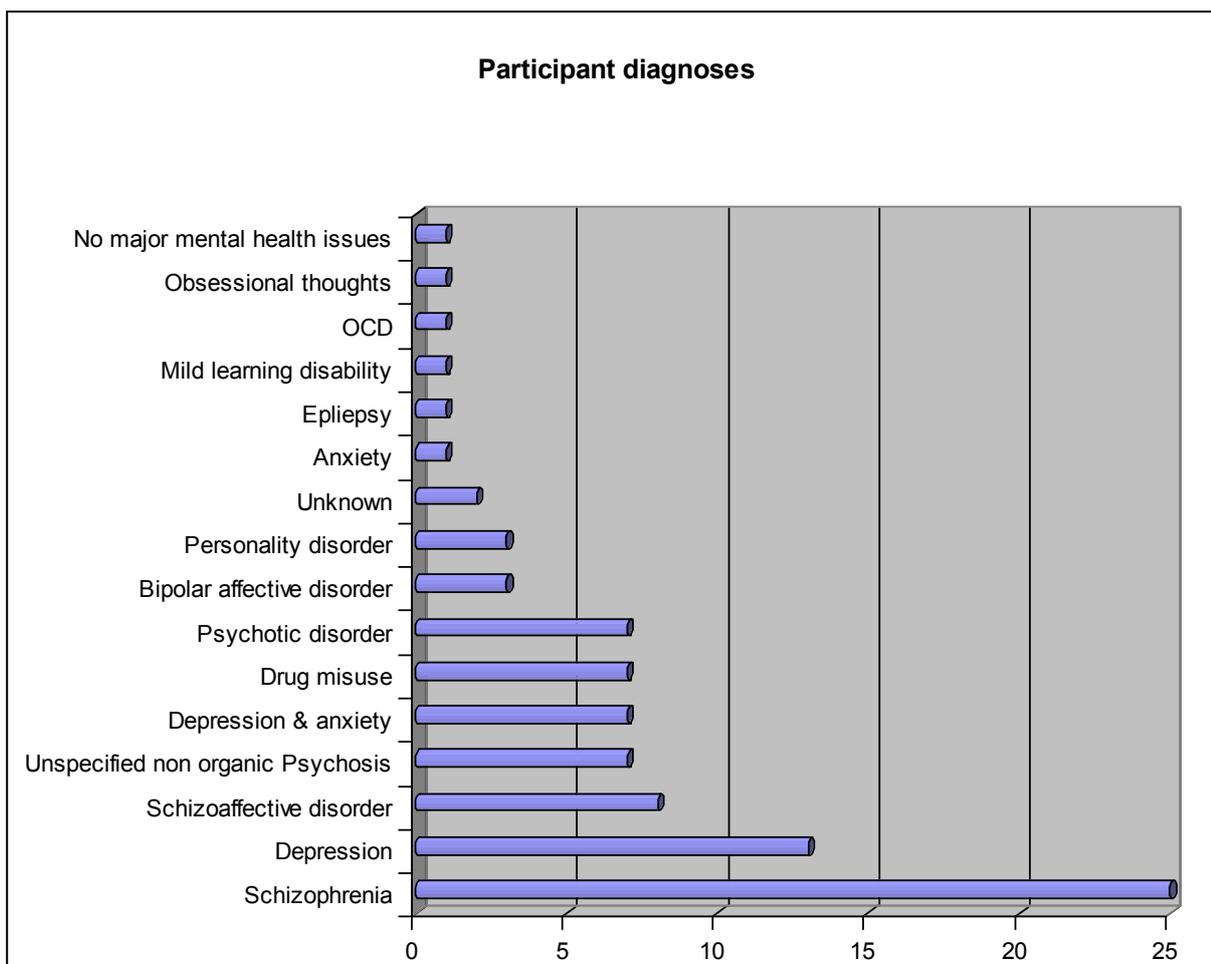
Referrals

Since May 2011 ninety two service users have been referred to Coping Though Football from a variety of sources. Almost half of clients were referred from the Early Intervention in Psychosis team (24%) or the acute inpatient unit at Naseberry Court (21%). Other notable sources of referral included the Community Recovery Team (14%) and Waltham Forest Access and Assessment Team (10%). One of the key success factors in engaging with and sustaining the participation of service users has been the support provided by NELFT staff. Clinicians from the Early Intervention in Psychosis Team attend at least one session a week to support their service users, whilst the Project Coordinator works as part of the Access and Assessment Team and is therefore able to engage with clients at an early stage in their illness.



Service user profile

28% of participants had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and a further 9% have schizoaffective disorder. 15% had been diagnosed with depression and another 8% have a mixed diagnosis of depression and anxiety. 8% have unspecified non organic psychosis and 8% had been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder.

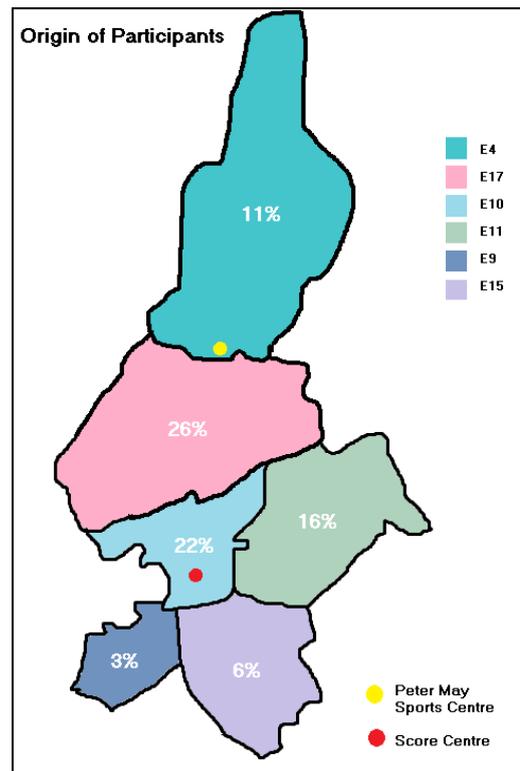
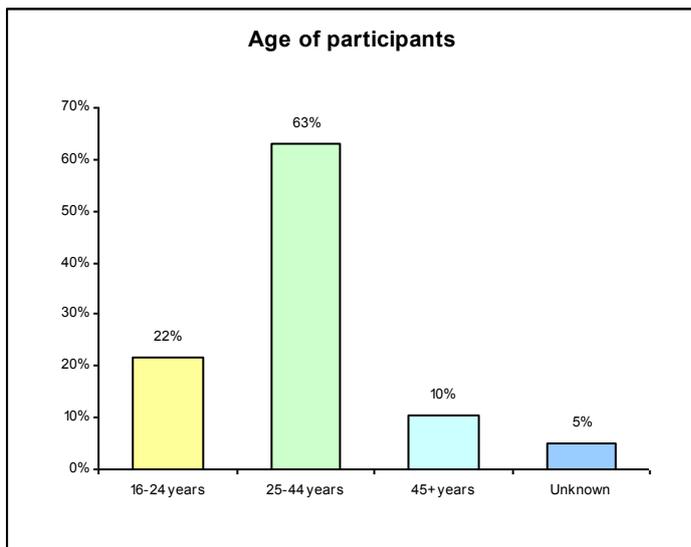


The majority of participants (63%) are aged 25 – 44 years, but with the increase in referrals from the Early Intervention in Psychosis team the number of young people aged 16 – 24 years increased by 9% from Phase 1 to 23%. Given that the highest rate of male suicides is among 30 to 44 year olds and the significant rise in the proportion of men aged 45 to 59 killing themselves, the project has not implemented an upper age limit for participants. 11% of service users are aged over 45 years, an increase of 6% since Phase 1. A number of the participants have been referred from the older people's service.

40% of attendees are White, 27% of Black origin and 19% Asian, which correlates with the wider borough ethnicity data. 10% of participants were of "other" ethnic origin and 4% were unrecorded. This would indicate that the project has continued to be successful in recruiting Black, Asian and minority ethnic service users for whom successful engagement by mental health services has often presented a significant challenge.

The two football coaching sessions are delivered in the north and south of the borough in E4 and E10 respectively. The site in the north of the borough is a London Playing Fields Foundation facility which was chosen due to its proximity to the then acute inpatient unit.

The origin of participants indicates that 26% travel to sessions from Walthamstow (E17) in the centre of the borough, with 22% from Leyton (E10) and 16% from Leytonstone (E11) in the south. Only 11% of participants lived in Chingford (E4) in the north of the borough. A decision was taken in January 2013 to transfer the E4 sessions to an LPFF site in Walthamstow which has the benefits of a new 3G surface on its artificial pitch.



Attendances

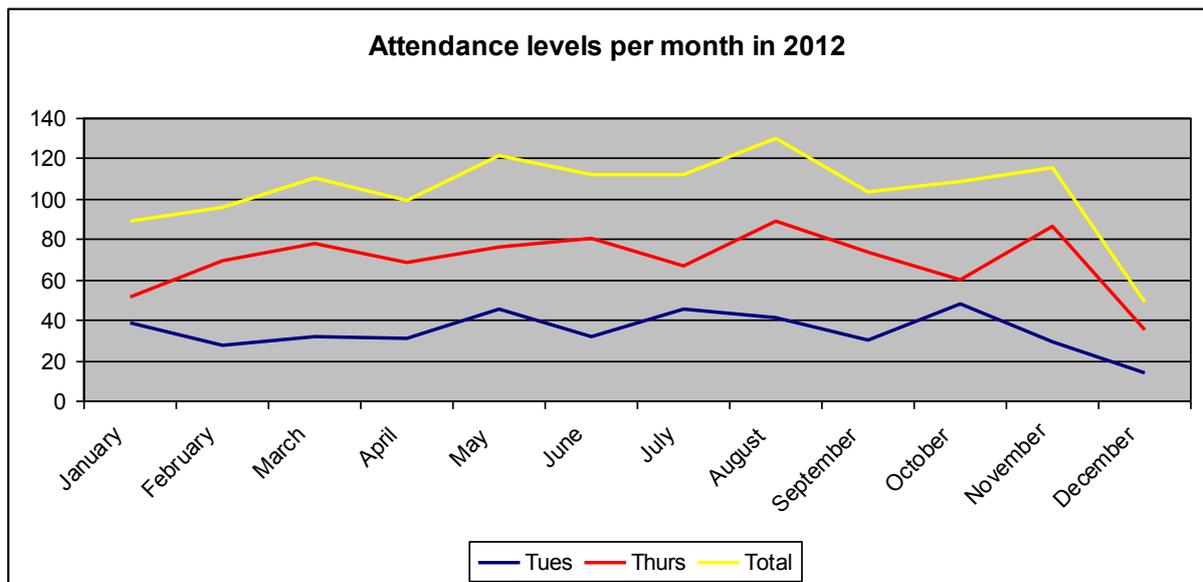
The length of clients' attendance at the project is variable. Some service users who have attended the project for a long period of time view the sessions as an integral part of their recovery plan, with 22 people having attended 30 or more times. However, some participants use the sessions as a means of building their self-esteem and confidence, and will move on to volunteering, paid employment, study or training opportunities.

Over the last two years 21 people attended three times or less, often these would be clients who were accompanied to the sessions from the inpatient unit. It is anticipated that there will be an increase in attendance at the Tuesday sessions in 2013 with the move to a venue in the centre of the borough. The slight dip in participant figures in December 2012 is related to the fewer number of sessions delivered during the month.

Coping Through Football

When explaining why service users returned time and again to the project the following benefits were highlighted:

- For fitness
- Exercise and fresh air
- Enjoy team sports
- To meet new people
- To meet people with similar problems
- To pass the time



Measures of success

As a key aim of the project was to provide Coping Through Football as an integrated part of each service user's recovery plan, success has been measured against physical health, well-being, social skills and employment / training outcomes.

Physical health

- One service user, who weighed 160kg on joining the project, has lost to date 50kg. Two other service users also reported significant weight loss of 18kg and 30kg.
- Since participating in this project several service users demonstrated a commitment to increase their activity levels by joining local football teams or enrolling at a gym.
- A self-reporting survey held in December 2012 showed that:
 - ◊ 96% of respondents felt fitter since joining the project
 - ◊ 83% were now able to participate for longer in the sessions
 - ◊ 68% reported a loss in weight
 - ◊ 86% stated that the sessions had encouraged them to adopt a healthier lifestyle. This is evidenced by two thirds reducing the number of cigarettes they smoked, eight out of ten reporting a reduction in the amount of alcohol they consumed and nine out of ten saying that they had reduced their drug addiction.

Robert's* story

I have chronic Schizophrenia and had been using drugs for many years. I was referred to Coping Through Football by Drug and Alcohol services who suggested that the project could help me get fitter and feel better as before joining the project I had not done any exercise for years. All my friends were to do with drug use and I wanted to meet new people that were not involved in using drugs.

I started attending the football project once a week and even though my fitness was poor I enjoyed the activities and the social contact. I wanted to improve my fitness so I could play longer in the match at the end of the session so I started attending the group twice a week. I am a keen football fan and enjoyed attending the Leyton Orient matches when the project obtained free tickets.

On the day before each football session I started to cut back on the drugs I used and started saving the money I would have spent. I have now stopped taking drugs and I volunteer within the group, taking responsibility for the kit and providing refreshments for the group. I also attended the Healthy Lifestyles workshop to tell others how drugs and a poor diet had affected my fitness levels.

I think that Coping Through Football has saved my life. It has motivated me to keep off drugs and I have improved my physical health and made new friends too.

* all names have been changed

Well-being

A self-reporting survey held in December 2012 indicated that 86% of service users had noticed a positive change in their mental health since joining the project. Nine out of ten respondents reported that their confidence levels and self esteem had increased, that they had made new friends and felt more positive about these relationships. 81% had been inspired to take up a new physical activity outside the project.

Participants made the following comments about the positive effects of the project on their well-being:

“It has greatly improved my physical health. Healthy body, healthy mind”

“I feel confident and positive. Taking medication regularly on psychiatric advice”

“Football keeps me busy and happy”

“In training and playing with the group I find it keeps me more alert and to get on top of things and become more independent”



Social skills

One of the outcomes for the project was to increase opportunities for socialisation. This was a particular focus for clients who were referred from the acute inpatient unit which was located near to the session at Peter May Sports Centre. As these adults come towards the end of the acute phase of their mental health problems the ability to access an activity delivered in a community facility provides them with a reduced sense of social isolation and stigma. The project forms an essential part of their recovery by giving them the opportunity to socialise in a friendly and supportive environment, one that they could continue to attend after leaving acute care.

The camaraderie experienced amongst the group develops naturally as the service users begin to form friendships. Members of the group volunteer to welcome and mentor new attendees. The sessions provide an opportunity for peer support where service users can discuss their symptoms and medication with each other and be inspired by the progress made by their colleagues. Away from the project the service users continue to socialise together, meeting for a meal after sessions or attending Leyton Orient FC matches.

For some service users the Coping Through Football sessions have become an integral part of their weekly routine, providing the sole opportunity to venture out and meet with other people. Even in bad weather it is critical that these sessions are not cancelled and alternative arrangements are always made. This ensures that service users are able to meet together, even if they are unable to undertake any physical activity. Service users who are injured or not feeling well enough to actively participate still attend and enjoy watching the sessions and socialising with the other participants.



Jake's* story

I got involved [in the project] after being referred to a mental health centre. I suffer from a mental health issue. Coping Through Football was suggested to me to help me recover by socializing with others.

My condition makes me isolate myself more and avoid going out by myself. But attending Coping Through Football means I have somewhere to go, by myself, and because there are people there to socialize with I don't feel isolated. Also it helps knowing that the people at the project have been through something similar to my condition, which makes me feel more comfortable. Also it gives me a chance to stay in touch with the mental health coordinators. At a time I experienced side effects from my medication there were members of staff around to help me at the sessions.

Coping Through Football compared to the psychological services I receive is different. It focuses on my physical health, helping me keep fit, and takes my mind off of my condition. Whereas the psychology I receive focuses on my mental health more, helping me to overcome mental issues and managing my anxiety.

*all names have been changed

Jake's family

We found out about Coping Through Football through the Early Intervention in Psychosis Team. We think that it has made a massive difference to my brother. In the beginning of him learning about his mental health condition he was very uncomfortable and did not like being outdoors as it added to his anxiousness, but going to Coping Through Football and being around others who have, or are going through similar things to him, allowed him to become more comfortable and to have somewhere to go every week.

As time has gone by it has helped with his confidence, fitness and stamina. The project is a place where he can go and just play a sport and socialise.

It is different from the other forms of treatment my brother receives because it is more on his terms. He can go and play football without having to talk about his mental health. He can also approach the members of staff with anything that might be bothering him when he wants to.

Coping Through Football is also not too one-on-one like most of his other treatments. It is a group activity that allows for team work and working off his worries physically.

* all names have been changed

The project also provides opportunities for the service users to try new group activities thereby helping them to gain confidence in new environments. In June 2011 the group was invited by the Football Association's National Disability Manager to participate in the Champions League Festival in Hyde Park. The Project Coordinator commented that:

"Many of the clients rarely venture out of the borough, let alone travel into central London to take an active part in such a high profile event, so in terms of recovery and social inclusion the experience could not be bettered. For the participants it was simply a great day, many saying it was a fantastic, positive experience."

Training and employment

The latest self-reporting survey showed that 41% of the respondents had undertaken volunteering opportunities. Half of respondents had started a college or vocational course and a quarter had returned to employment.

- Examples of clients securing employment include those who have:
 - ◇ completed a security licence and worked as a steward during the Olympic and Paralympic Games
 - ◇ secured paid employment as a support worker within mental health
 - ◇ gained a boxing coaching qualification and now works as a paid coach in a club

- Some service users have taken steps towards employment including:
 - ◊ moving from Employment and Support Allowance to Job Seekers Allowance or signing up to a Job Intensive work programme.
 - ◊ attending a beginners computing course and seeking work as a literacy mentor. This individual had not previously engaged in work/study for 15 years before joining the project.
- A number of service users have undertaken volunteering opportunities, particularly coaching roles with Tottenham Hotspur Foundation and within the Coping Through Football project.
- Service users have attended courses ranging from Maths and English literacy, a BTEC in Sports & Fitness and a degree in architecture. The project had also supported two candidates through their Level 2 Certificate in Coaching Football.

Ben's* story

I have been unemployed for a number of years and was experiencing depression and anxiety. I avoided social situations as I found this made my anxiety worse. My G.P referred me to Solutions for counselling and during this time I read about Coping Through Football in the local Waltham Forest newspaper. I had enjoyed football in the past and realised that exercise could help me feel less depressed. I mentioned the project to my Occupational Therapist who encouraged me to contact the project.

Despite feeling very nervous and anxious about attending the group for the first time I attended the session and felt reassured by the fact everyone else there had similar problems. I attended the sessions regularly after this as I wanted to break my routine of staying in the house and avoiding people.

I found that meeting people in the same situation as me or sometimes worse helped me to realise that I wasn't alone and my problems were not as bad. I found it inspirational to see other clients improving their lives and going on to get work or attend college courses.

After attending the session for a few months and setting myself goals with the Project Coordinator I decided to do the FA coaching courses so that I could return to paid work as a football coach. I found the fact that other clients had completed the coaching courses very inspiring.

The Level 2 coaching course was hard but the fact that I knew other people on the course helped to reduce my anxiety. The support from the project coach, coordinator and other clients in the group was very helpful as I could practise coaching and obtain advice.

I have been attending the project for two and a half years; I now feel more confident and find it easier to talk to people in social situations. Although I still experience anxiety at times I am now able to manage the symptoms. My weekly routine has more structure and I feel I now have a purpose and when people ask what my job is I can tell them that I am a football coach.

* all names have been changed

Summary

Coping Through Football has successfully demonstrated how two sporting charities and the NHS can work together to deliver a project which increases the well-being of service users. Using the medium of sport to engage with a hard to reach group, the project has delivered an alternative service for clients as part of their recovery plan. The regular activity sessions enable service users to improve their physical fitness, socialise and receive peer support in a safe, non-stigmatising environment; and significantly they provide an opportunity for clinicians to have valuable contact time with their clients.

As Project Coordinator (2007-2012) Matt Howard-Jones indicated this project provides a service with a difference:

“The favourite part of my job is getting to play football with the clients and witnessing their recovery. It’s very rare as a clinician that I get to have fun with clients, see them so animated and laughing. In terms of their recovery I have seen them become more confident, talkative, improve their fitness and form social networks. Also to see some of them move on to paid employment, become football coaches and so on has been so rewarding.”

The success of the project has not been measured in terms of football outcomes, but by the degree in which the service users have been able to cope more effectively with the stresses of modern living and lead more independent lives. Improving their physical health and well-being, increasing self esteem and confidence, and finding a route back to volunteering, employment and training was seen as being critical to this goal. The project gives back to clients a sense of choice, control, and empowerment, which had been lost as a result of their illness.



Ongoing challenges

The last twelve months of Phase 2 has witnessed a shift in the type of referral sources. There have been an increased number of clients attending from the Early Intervention in Psychosis team which is a clear indication of the perceived value of the project as a preventative measure.

Whilst welcomed, the increase in referrals from the Early Intervention in Psychosis Team was not a specific target. However, with the need for 50% more inpatient services for severe mental illness in Waltham Forest than the national average, focussing on young people before they start developing long term mental health problems has to be a priority. Consequently in the next phase of Coping Through Football (2013 – 2016) there will be an additional focus on early intervention. This ambition should resonate with public health commissioners who are committed to reducing the dependence on acute care services. Given that mental health conditions account for 23% of the disease burden in England but only receive 13% of the NHS budget, a multi-agency approach targeted at keeping people with mental health problems out of inpatient wards deserves full support.



Notes

Further information on the project is available from:

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