

Time in
Mind

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Learning from practices in
mental health support for
young people in community
sports groups

December 2021

Hayley Jarvis, Head of Physical Activity at Mind: "Sported's *Time in Mind* report is a timely and insightful window into the important role community sports groups play in supporting young people's mental health. The report shows how projects run by sport and physical activity groups can help in a variety of ways. From upskilling staff and empowering young people to build social networks with friends and peers, to providing safe spaces for them to talk about their wellbeing, and ultimately helping achieve positive change in their lives.

"We know from our research at Mind that the sport community can play a powerful role in supporting mental health. In our recent *Physical Activity Impact Report 2018-2021* we recommended promoting success stories and examples of good practice in this sphere. The *Time in Mind* report does just that, revealing the brilliant work done by the project groups and exploring key learnings that can – and we hope will – inform other models of mental health support among community groups in the future. We have free support resources available and they can be found on our website: www.mind.org.uk/sport."

Executive Summary

Setting the scene

The Covid-19 pandemic has, in the words of the Children's Commissioner for England, **'turned the lives of children upside down'**.¹

This has exacerbated an existing mental health crisis among young people in the UK, which has over a number of years seen growing rates of mental health disorders and increasing demand on public services. In England, for example, rates of probable mental health disorders among young people are now roughly 17.4% for 6-16 years olds (up from 11.6% in 2017) and 17.4% for 17-19 year olds (up from 10.1% in 2017).² In Scotland, the quarter ending June 2021 saw an 11.1% increase in children and young people starting treatment at Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) compared with the previous quarter, and an increase of 28.3% from the same quarter in 2020.³ These statistics, as well as those from charities from across the UK, are a real cause for concern.⁴

Importantly, evidence shows that participation in sport and physical activity supports positive mental health outcomes for children and young adults. Physically active young people have six times better levels of resilience compared to non-active peers, a 25%

¹ Children's Commissioner, [The state of children's mental health services 2019/20 – January 2021](#).

² NHS Digital, [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 – wave 2 follow up to 2017 survey](#).

³ [Public Health Scotland, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services \(CAMHS\) waiting times – Quarter ending 30 June 2021](#).

⁴ Young Minds, [Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs – Survey 4, February 2021](#), The Mix, [Quarterly Trends Q1 and Q2 of 2021](#), and Kooth, [Pulse Report 2021](#).

decreased risk of anxiety, and 52% lower levels of depression.⁵ Furthermore, community sport groups are seen as having a critically important role to play in providing safe spaces for young people to connect with their peers and engage with trusted adults.⁶

Sported's grassroots groups and their communities' mental health

Sported works closely with organisations who provide such important spaces, empowering the local heroes running these groups by providing professional expertise, resources, and operational support, free of charge, to help their group survive and thrive. Our network of community sport groups is fully aware of the difficulties young people face with their mental health. In our recent Pulse survey (October 2021) of our membership, 27% of group leaders identified mental health as the biggest challenge facing young people in their communities, making it the most frequently cited cause for concern.⁷ Recognising this, and understanding that mental health support is a key priority across our network of community sport groups, Sported created the Time in Mind project to help our groups improve their knowledge, understanding, and confidence so that they could create the appropriate environment and support mechanisms to benefit young people's mental health.

Time in Mind project

Time in Mind saw 23 pilot projects trial different approaches to supporting young people's mental health in their communities. The groups were based across all four nations of the UK, and their projects worked with young people from a range of age groups, ethnicities, economic and social backgrounds, and mental health needs. Community groups' main sport and physical activities were wide-ranging, from football to table-tennis, boxing to basketball, through to surfing, equestrian, and multi-sports.

Projects included: (See next page)

⁵ Made By Sport, [Why We Do It](#).

⁶ Street Games, [Sport for Better Mental Health](#).

⁷ Sported, [Community Pulse – October 2021](#).



Training for coaches, designating young people as Mental Health Champions, providing mental health support booklets for young people, and delivery of CAMHS sessions.



Training for volunteers/coaches, mental health leaflets and info for young people, and guest speakers for mental health sessions.



Boxing sessions and digital wellbeing sessions delivered by a life coach (and boxing coach).

Bringing young people together after lockdown through sports sessions and using this participation to help young people access one-to-one support and mentoring.



Therapy through surfing activities



Walk and talk sessions with ethnically diverse young women.



Working with South Asian young men to design and produce a comic around mental health problems in the community.

Expansion of football sessions to provide safe space and promote inclusion and friendships for young people, as well as the opportunity for conversations with coaches around problems.



Combining mindfulness, creative art, healthy cooking, and sports to support mental health.

Employing a behavioural psychologist to upskill volunteers in mental health support, discuss problems, and develop strategies for coping.

Support for less academic young people and those struggling due to Covid-19.



Drop-in sessions for young people and volunteer training using the Emotional Logic Model.



Provision of counselling hours and development of community space for future support.



Delivering a targeted social media campaign and providing additional mental health training sessions aimed at young offenders.

Youth mental health first aid awareness training and workshop.



Wellbeing-focused dance sessions for girls.



Use of indoor space to increase frequency of activity sessions, and also developing more information sharing.

Support for young people at difficult stages in their lives through one-to-one mentoring with young people who pass along table-tennis skills to their mentor.



Working with a local football club to deliver mental health support for young people.



Post-lockdown wellbeing re-start programme with four one-hour sessions focused on mindfulness, empowerment, nutrition, and physical activity.

Working with a third-party mental health support provider to design and deliver a programme incorporating equine activity and mental health support.

Tailored mental health support programme, working with 12 young people through physical activity sessions and sessions focused on identify, bullying, friendships, etc.

Purpose of the research and research methodology

The purpose of this research was to capture the outcomes and learning from the Time in Mind project groups to identify those elements of the projects that might usefully inform a model of good practice for other community groups interested in developing mental health support structures. It then aimed to propose a potential model of good practice based on this learning for consideration and use by the sector.

A short desk research exercise established existing insight into the current need for mental health support for young people in the UK and the roles community sport groups play in supporting mental health in their communities. Primary research was also conducted through the completion of 16 in-depth interviews with community group leaders and two with third-party service providers involved in their respective projects. We also carried out one focus group with young people from a Time in Mind project and one with a group of young people from a non-Time in Mind mental health support project.

We recognise that language around mental health can be confusing, particularly as different organisations use different wording. Quotes included in this report and taken from the primary research reflect the language deployed by group leaders. Elsewhere in this document we use the phrase “mental health problems”, as many people feel this is helpful for them.

Key findings

Outcomes for young people and community group leaders:

- Increased confidence among young people to engage in conversations about mental health, supported young people to recognise where their friends and peers are struggling with mental health problems, and helped build peer-to-peer support structures.
- Increased young people’s resilience, self-confidence, and motivation for physical activity and other parts of their life, and improved team building and communication skills.
- Empowered young people to identify and replicate mechanisms for mental health care in their every-day life, supporting longer-term positive mental health impact.
- Upskilled community sport group staff, increasing their knowledge and understanding of mental health support and growing their groups’ capacity to help young people achieve positive mental health outcomes.

A potential model of good practice could include:

- **Consideration of how implicit and explicit forms of mental health support can be used, recognising that both are of value, either singularly or combined:** some activities favoured more explicit models of support, with support involving the active disclosure and discussion of problems, or where young people were encouraged, or felt safe to approach community group staff with requests for support. However, implicit forms of support were also effective approaches. This occurred where sessions did not require a specific focus on mental health or direct engagement between young people and staff to achieve positive mental health outcomes. The simple act of attending a trusted space and participating in group activities can demonstrate to young people their position in a network of valued others. The positive emotional response to this, rather than an explicit intervention or discussion of their problems, can produce beneficial health outcomes. This approach may be especially useful as young people re-connect following lockdowns or other periods of isolation, because it helps them find emotional comfort through group interaction that may have previously been missing.
- **Identify specific needs within a group in advance and continue to monitor activities to ensure they adapt to new issues:** the success of the Time in Mind projects was rooted in the way community sport groups responded to their local context and the community's needs. They learned about these issues through several avenues, including drawing on the deep knowledge of group leaders, feedback from young people, and input from parents. Understanding the needs of the community in which groups operate through regular feedback processes will not only help create effectively targeted programmes for mental health support but ensures those programmes can adapt to the changing needs of participants on an ongoing basis. To determine the efficacy of projects, Mind recommends the use of validated mental health outcome measures. Examples of such measures are available through Mind's [tools for measuring changes in mental health and wellbeing](#).
- **Ensure sessions are of a size that promotes interactivity among participants and allows them to feel comfortable in contributing:** many Time in Mind groups reported positive outcomes where sessions and activities were conducted with small numbers of participants or on a one-to-one scale. In smaller groups, participants feel more at ease and better able to connect with those around them, whether this is their peers, group leaders and staff, or external mental health mentors and coaches. It also



I think for some young people, they don't really want to do that [talk about issues] and they're just there to play football. But other kids see that this is the only positive interaction they have with adults during their week. I think it provides a good escape for them."

Group Leader



allows those charged with supporting the activities more capacity to direct attention to those with particular needs, especially where resources are limited.



[We] get them to work in the small groups that they're very comfortable with, and then it will lead onto them having all sorts of discussions amongst themselves: shopping, cooking, clothing, concerns about family overseas because of Covid-19, or other health issues and concerns. And then they really come up with solutions amongst themselves, because their confidence was developing amongst themselves."

Group Leader



- **Empower young people to contribute to support structures through defined roles or processes that incorporate and recognise their contributions:**

children and young adults who took on the mantle of mental health champions at their groups, or who felt they were giving back to those helping support them, gained confidence, self-belief, and satisfaction. An effective model of support puts young people at the heart of activities, entrusting them to help those around them, providing spaces for their skills and talents to drive projects, and allowing their contributions to build self-confidence and self-worth. It can also empower young people through creating environments where power is balanced between the young person and the mental health professional. Where young people are encouraged to take on roles relating to mental health support, training and ongoing support should be provided to ensure they are fully supported with these responsibilities.



The young people are more aware of not only their own well-being but also their peers, so when they see somebody around them they can pick up on these little soft hints that we've talked about. It has a hundred percent raised the knowledge and understanding and signposting. They are now young people who can signpost to professionals, for example in their schools. Then the schools bring other people like us in."

Group Leader



- **Involve third-party service providers where specific expertise, extra capacity, or a new perspective is helpful:** many Time in Mind group leaders and staff had existing knowledge of mental health problems and solutions, developed formally through training resources and informally through lived experience in their groups. Third-party support, however, plays an important role in providing more specialist knowledge and experience. It can also build opportunities to develop existing, or create new ways of supporting mental health by having a fresh perspective on activities. It is also critical to develop relationships with external organisations for

signposting young people to further mental health support outside the community sport group environment. Therefore, where resources allow for it, consider drawing on outside support to design, implement, and/or evaluate models of support.

- **Frame mental health support in the language and lived experience of participants and their community:** doing so increases accessibility for participants and better connects solutions to their day-to-day lives.
- **Give participants time to acclimatise to activities and conversations around mental health:** many of the Time in Mind projects demonstrated that building confidence levels among young people to discuss difficult problems takes time. Community sport groups already have the benefit of providing a trusted space for young people, but opening up about mental health problems can nevertheless be challenging for children and young adults. The implicit support that community groups provide for young people in ensuring a safe space for them to engage with trusted adults is already an important first step in supporting mental health within the community, but building on that foundation and empowering young people to achieve positive mental health outcomes can take time and patience.



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