
SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH PILOT EVALUATION PHASE 1



INTRODUCTION

Severe mental illness has serious social and economic costs. People with mental ill health are **2.7 times** more likely to attend A&E and are more likely to live in a more deprived area of the country. The cost to the economy in England alone is estimated at **£118 billion per year**. There are a growing number of studies demonstrating that early interventions can result in significant cost savings through preventing the escalation of mental ill health. [A recent study](#) by the Mental Health Foundation, London School of Economics and CPEC stated that exercise “can be cost-effective in reducing anxiety and depression in people already identified as having these conditions”.

BACKGROUND

Through the development of our [Step Up Strategy](#), Together Active identified mental health as a key issue for young people in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. [In Stoke-on-Trent, 12.8% of 5-19 year olds have a mental health disorder](#). There have also been increases in A&E attendances for self-harm.

As an Active Partnership, we were aware of the benefits of physical activity for mental health and wellbeing but were conscious that it’s not always included as part of the toolkit for supporting young people who are struggling. We wanted to prove the case for physical activity, particularly in terms of prevention of mental health issues, and potentially increase investment in this area.

“I have learnt how to control my emotions and how exercise can allow me to release this in a positive way”

BUDGET

The project came in considerably under budget, with cost savings achieved due to the day of the week and time of day the sessions were held as well as block booking.

The additional budget will be put towards a second phase pilot to collect additional data on the impact of the intervention.

Pilot	Budget	Actual
St Peter's Academy		
Activity 1, 2 instructors, 1.5 hrs each for 7 weeks	£1,200	£560
Activity 2, 1 instructor, 1.5 hrs for 3 weeks plus travel	£500	£450
Additional kit and resources	£50	£0
St Thomas More Academy		
Activity 1, 2 instructors, 1.5 hrs each for 7 weeks	£1,200	£560
Activity 2, 1 instructor, 1.5 hrs for 3 weeks plus travel	£500	£450
Additional kit and resources	£50	£0
Total Budget	£3,500	£2,020*

**Equivalent to £5.18 per student per session (39 students attending)*

CRITERIA

We wanted to be targeted in our recruitment of young people to ensure we were reaching our priority demographic. We are also conscious of societal risk factors for increased probability for the development of mental health issues. We first selected schools and then identified the young people.

School Criteria

- Within the boundaries of Stoke-on-Trent
- High proportion of pupils with English as a second language
- High proportion of pupils on Free School Meals
- Linked to the Schools Mental Health Team

Schools Mental Health Team Linked

The Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) work within educational provisions to deliver evidence-based early interventions for children and young people experiencing mild to moderate mental health problems. We selected schools with this support in place to aid with the identification of the young people who would most benefit from the intervention.

Young Person Criteria

- Currently in years 8 or 9
- Within an area with a low score on indices of multiple deprivation
- On the CAMHS waiting list or at risk of being referred
- Low level mental health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, and low self confidence

THE INTERVENTION

- 10 weeks of free after school activities
- 1 to 1.5 hours in length
- Co-designed with the students
- Delivered by Stoke-based partner organisations with training in mental health awareness

The activities would give the young people the opportunity to develop relationships and feel comfortable talking about their emotions, while taking part in physical activity.

Being active has been shown to help alleviate low-level mental health issues such as stress and anxiety and improve self confidence and self-esteem.

Working with the Educational Mental Health lead in the school, we would be able to signpost participants identified as requiring additional support to services.

Objectives

- Increased physical activity level
- Development of a support network
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Increased understanding of how to support mental health with physical activity

“Friends don't judge can laugh at mistakes together so try harder and new skills. I felt safe in the group to have a go and make mistakes.”

THE PROGRAMME

Following workshops with the students, the following activities were selected:

St Thomas More Academy

- Multisport activities
- African Dance and Drumming

St Peter's CofE Academy

- Boxercise
- African Dance and Drumming

The sessions would take place immediately after school on a Monday on school grounds, making it easier for the students to attend as transport was not an issue. The day was decided collectively by the students taking into account any other commitments they may have.

The sessions would be split between the two activities, with more emphasis put on the sporty activities with taster sessions of the African Dance and Drumming.

This equated to 7 sessions of sport activities and 3 sessions of African Dance and Drumming per school. The selected providers were **Engage CIC, supported by Stoke City Foundation Trust, and Joliba African Drum and Dance School.**

“I have learnt how to control my emotions and how exercise can allow me to release this in a positive way. I have also enjoyed learning how to box properly.”

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

To determine the impact of the intervention, we incorporated several metrics into the programme:

- Initial WEMWBS assessment
- Final WEMWBS survey
- Attendance over the programme
- Educational Mental Health Lead observations
- Student feedback

WEMWBS results

Prior to the intervention, the results of the WEMWBS survey showed the students reported the lowest scores in:

- I've been feeling confident (2.36)*
 - I've been feeling useful (2.49)
 - I've been feeling good about myself (2.51)
 - I've been feeling relaxed (2.54)
- *Average score out of 5*

The cohort average baseline score was 38.51 out of 70.

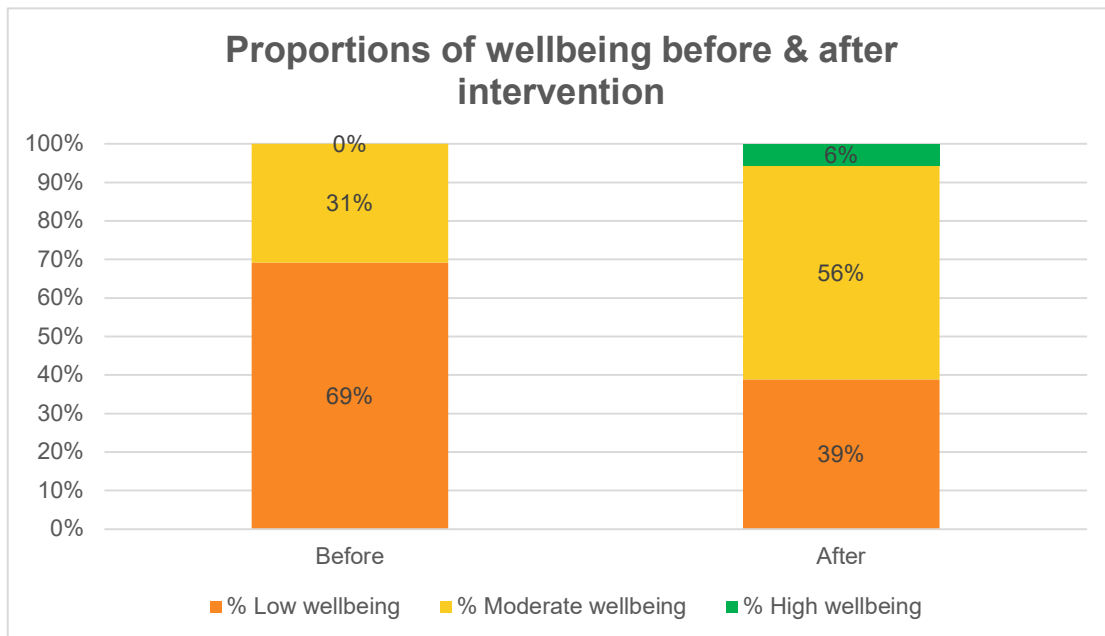
Following the programme, there were clear indications of improvement:

- I've been feeling confident (2.89)* 0.53↑
- I've been feeling useful (2.89) 0.40↑
- I've been feeling good about myself (2.83) 0.32↑
- I've been feeling relaxed (3.22) 0.68↑

*Average score out of 5

The cohort average score was **43.83 out of 70, a 14-point increase.**

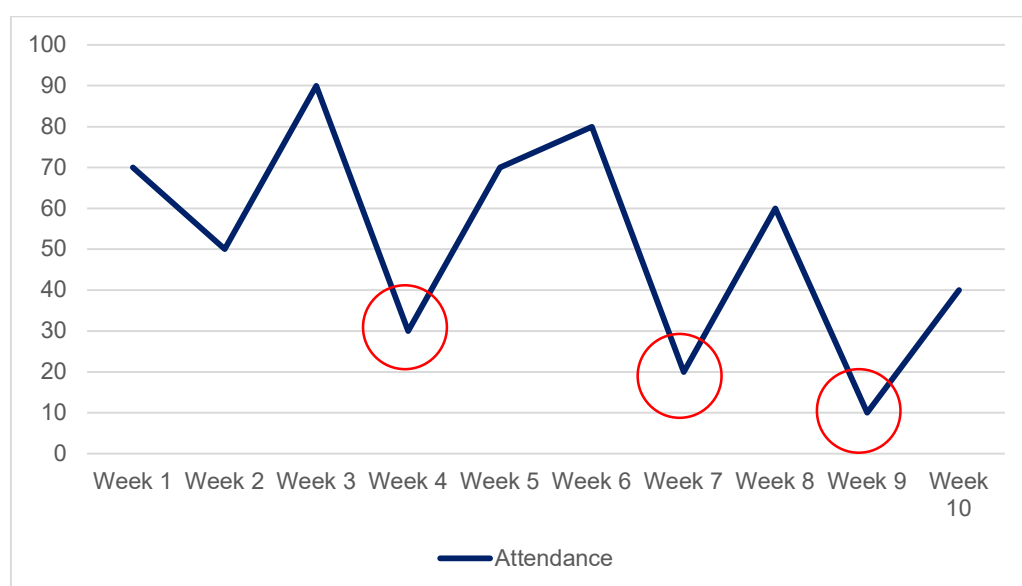
There was a significant shift from students classed as having low wellbeing into moderate wellbeing, with 6% achieving high wellbeing scores following the intervention.



“It really helped my mental health as it was an outlet, and always left me feeling more energized and positive, even if I had not felt that way during the day.”

Attendance

A total of 39 young people joined the sessions across the two schools. There was variation by week at both schools on attendance, which tallied with both external pressures the students were facing but also their enjoyment of the different types of session.



There was feedback from both schools that the students did not enjoy the African Dance and Drumming as much as the sporty activities. The main reasons were difficulty building a relationship with the instructor and a lack of confidence in ‘performing’ in front of others.

The break in routine this created, on top of natural breaks such as half term and bank holidays, may also have contributed to students dropping out of the programme as the weeks progressed.

Educational Mental Health Practitioner Observations

“The Together Active team have been working with our young people for 10 weeks, with the overall objective of helping them feel more confident, be part of a supportive community and learn how to look after their own mental health and wellbeing.

“The students who participated were chosen because they struggled with social anxiety, low self-esteem or were lacking confidence, self-belief, and resilience.

“21 students attended the first session on 25th April 2022. After a couple of weeks, the number of students attending did dwindle slowly, however over the period of 10 weeks 11 students continued to attend the sessions regularly.”

– Maria Rubin, St Peter’s CofE Academy

Positive observations

Observation	Detail
Relationships	The sessions helped build positive relationships and trust. They encouraged social interaction and confidence for students who may not always feel comfortable in busy social settings. One girl who was initially very shy and is usually reluctant to engage in a group setting gradually began to talk and take part in the activities. She appeared to be outwardly more confident and interacted positively.
Expression	Provided a safe place where the students could express their feeling and ‘be themselves’. The group leaders were supportive and encouraged inclusivity. Throughout the sessions, all students enjoyed themselves and could be seen laughing and having fun.

Observation

Detail

Engagement

Some of the students usually refuse to take part in PE lessons or are reluctant to join in. During these sessions all the students actively engaged in the physical sessions because they said they were made to feel comfortable and accepted within the small group.

Some of the students tried sports that they would not normally feel comfortable playing in a larger group setting. The students said that they didn't feel silly, inadequate, awkward or pressured by anyone else in the group which enabled them to be themselves without judgement.

The group were very encouraging and supportive of their peers throughout all the activities.

Communication

I witnessed positive interaction and communication between members of the group.

The sessions gave the students an open forum whereby the students were able to manage their emotions effectively and manage any frustrations or anger they may have in a positive way.

Encouragement

The students responded positively to the encouragement, positive affirmation & praise from the group leaders.



Negative Observations

Observation	Detail
<p>Unsuitable activity</p>	<p>The students did not enjoy the African Drum and Dance workshops. They felt that the drum teacher wasn't particularly encouraging. They complained that individuals felt singled out which made them feel self-conscious.</p> <p>This led to a few students dropping out of the programme.</p>
<p>Rapport</p>	<p>As self confidence was an issue for most of the students, switching between activities and so instructors made it more difficult to build a strong rapport for some.</p> <p>Consistency of activities would probably have a more beneficial impact for future programmes.</p>



**African Drum and Dance at
St Peter's CofE Academy**

The group leaders were also recognised as providing a supportive and safe environment for them to try new things, make mistakes, and ask for help when they needed it.

“I don’t do any sport in or out of school except from PE lessons. I have enjoyed that it was only girls and I have enjoyed developing my skills. I have talked to new people and felt the exercise made me feel better mentally. I have slept better on the days after the boxing classes.”

Student	Feedback
1	<p>These sessions are the only thing that I do after school. I have really enjoyed it; I always feel that I have more energy afterwards and feel more confident. I think the sessions have helped me as they have allowed me to find something positive that lets me get my frustrations out. I have developed new friendships who I have spent time within school during break and lunch which has been great.</p>
2	<p>I don't do any sport in or out of school except from PE lessons. I have enjoyed that it was only girls and I have enjoyed developing my skills. I have talked to new people and felt the exercise made me feel better mentally. I have slept better on the days after the boxing classes. I have been practicing at home with my brother which has been something fun to do.</p>
3	<p>The boxing sessions have been positive as they have allowed me to socialise and talk to people, burning off energy at the end of the day. Being sociable is a huge positive for my mental health.</p>
4	<p>When I attended, I found that it really helped my mental health as it was an outlet, and always left me feeling more energized and positive, even if I had not felt that way during the day.</p>
5	<p>The sessions have helped to feel better because I have been even more active, and it has allowed me to spend more time with my friends. I always feel accomplished at the end of the sessions and have learnt different skills in boxing such as how to punch.</p>
6	<p>Adding these sessions to my week has helped me to be more sociable and I have made new friends. The sessions always make me feel good and I always feel in better mood, no matter what's happened through the day. I also think that I am getting physically stronger from the lessons.</p>

SUCCESS AGAINST OBJECTIVES

Increased physical activity level

While baseline physical activity levels varied, all the young people who attended the sessions increased the amount of physical activity they were doing per week. Those who were starting from a lower level of physical activity have stated that they feel more confident to continue being active and trying new things.

Objective score:



Development of a support network

Most of the students highlighted that they had developed or improved friendships with other students within the group. They had spent more time talking and getting to know each other than they otherwise would and felt like they could share their thoughts in a safe and supportive environment. Some have developed a better relationship with the Education Mental Health Lead meaning they are able to access additional support or services they may not have before.

Objective score:



Increased confidence and self-esteem

Shown through both the WEMWBS scores and the student feedback, confidence and self-esteem appear to have seen the biggest improvement over the course of the programme. Students state that they have felt supported, able to talk more to others, and feel more confident to try new things. They've felt able to make mistakes and learn from them with the support of others.

Objective score:



Increased understanding of how to support mental health with physical activity

Many of the students reported feeling better and more energised following the activity. Some reported improved quality of sleep while others recognised being active as a way to engage with and work through difficult emotions. They spoke about physical activity being a way to manage their emotions in a positive way.

Objective score:



KEY LEARNINGS

- Young people experiencing mental ill health may struggle to attend sessions regularly or may have varying levels of participation when they do. They appreciate understanding, compassion, and a supportive environment to help them feel welcomed when they feel able to attend and that the option is still open to them when they don't feel able to attend.
- Smaller group sessions help improve self-confidence, self-esteem and engagement.
- Consistency is incredibly important. Changes in staff or activity from week to week can make it more difficult for the students to attend by introducing uncertainty and having to begin again when developing a rapport with the instructor.
- Co-designing the programme helped the students feel involved and so were more likely to attend. Listening to when and where they wanted the sessions made it easier for them to schedule it in to their day.

NEXT STEPS

Phase 2 pilot in wider Staffordshire area to understand the potential scalability of the programme across other areas. This will allow us to collect additional data to further bolster the case for this intervention at a wider scale.

The key learning we will incorporate is to have one activity per school over the 10-week period rather than a mix, as it is felt that this led to a disjointed experience and reduced subsequent attendance.



LONG TERM VISION

Based on the evidence we have gathered through this pilot, we believe that the potential impact of this intervention when rolled out across multiple schools over a longer period will be considerable.

As an intervention, this has proven to be a cost-effective way to support young people at risk of mental illnesses to improve their confidence levels and self-esteem and learn new ways to protect their wellbeing in a supportive and welcoming environment.

We feel that this form of intervention should be available at all schools across Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire whose profiles are similar to those we identified as our criteria for the project.

The potential cost savings to the NHS by preventing presentation at A&E and frontline health services for mental ill-health, as well as the longer-term cost savings to the wider economy are considerable.

By expanding access to these evidence-led interventions, we can target investment from health commissioners into programmes which will help reduce costs elsewhere in the system by preventing mental health problems.

Working within the new ICS structure, this should become a commissioned service to support the wider prevention strategy for mental health, and that is what we will be working towards.

“The sessions always make me feel good and I always feel in better mood, no matter what’s happened through the day.”