

Exploring how physical activity can be better utilised within NHS Talking Therapies services to help improve mental health outcomes



Context



Approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year¹ and research show adults with a mental health, disability or long-term health condition are more than 1.6 times as likely to be inactive.²



There is a growing body of evidence that physical activity is shown to alleviate symptoms of common mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.



NICE guidelines for depression recognise the value of physical activity interventions as an effective treatment option.*

In England, there are [155 NHS Talking Therapies](#) (formerly IAPT) service providers offering free support for adults with common mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Yet, despite the evidence base of the benefits of physical activity on mental health, physical activity is not routinely a part of treatment.

Led by [Transformation Partners in Health and Care](#), alongside [Sport England](#) and [Camden & Islington NHS Foundation Trust](#), we set out to explore how physical activity could be better utilised within NHS Talking Therapies services to help improve the mental health outcomes of service users. Along the way we listened to NHS Talking Therapies staff, service users (lived experience), commissioners and experts in the sport and physical activity sector to understand aspirations and barriers, learnt from approaches that have worked well and explored potential ideas to implement.

¹ McManus, S., Meltzer, H., Brugha, T. S., Bebbington, P. E., & Jenkins, R. (2009). Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007: results of a household survey. The NHS Information Centre for health and social care.

² compared to people without a diagnosed mental health condition Sport England Active Lives survey 2020-2021.

* with persistent subthreshold depressive symptoms or mild to moderate depression.

Key Findings

Physical activity is widely acknowledged as important in improving outcomes for people with common mental health conditions

99%

of NHS Talking Therapies staff say it's very important

12 of 13

commissioners say it's very important

91%

of service users strongly agree or agree

Methodology

A series of surveys, interviews and focus groups were delivered to capture insight.

Our collaborative included nearly 400 people, who shared their experiences, thoughts, and ideas (including NHS Talking Therapies staff, community physical activity providers, commissioners and service users).



There's widespread appetite to do more to increase physical activity levels through NHS Talking Therapies services

17%

of NHS Talking Therapies staff are satisfied with the support their service offers to service users to help increase their physical activity

9 of 13

commissioners are NOT satisfied with the support on offer to increase service users' physical activity

82%

of service users strongly agree/ agree that physical activity is important to them

Key Findings

There are examples of emerging innovative physical activity approaches in NHS Talking Therapies services. Examples included incorporating physical activity into therapy sessions and working with local partners to co-deliver education and activity sessions. However, this is limited to a small number of services.

Time-pressured services often focus on their core offer, and achieving clinical targets which physical activity is not a part of.

The most mentioned barriers to increasing service users' physical activity by NHS Talking Therapies staff were:



advising people with a long-term condition on suitable physical activity



lack of session time and frequency



engaging and motivating people who are less active



unaware of local services and partnerships to signpost or refer to

The most mentioned barriers to being active for service users were:



lack of time



symptoms of their long-term health condition



motivation

Despite the barriers, service users want more information and physical activity initiatives.

There's a perception amongst NHS Talking Therapies staff and service users that there isn't enough suitable community physical activity provision available that meet the needs and interests of service users.



Recommendations

Our collaborative came up with a number of ways physical activity could be better utilised within NHS Talking Therapies services to help improve the mental health outcomes of service users.

These include practical ideas for implementation by the sport and physical activity sector and NHS Talking Therapies services:



1 Review and refresh national NHS Talking Therapies guidance and incentives to recognise physical activity as a priority for NHS Talking Therapies services.

For example, embedding physical activity as a priority within the NHS Talking Therapies Manual and protocols, and measuring the impact of these interventions on clinical outcomes.



3 Facilitate collaboration and sharing of expertise between NHS Talking Therapies services and local partners to achieve shared goals.

For example, strengthening relationships between NHS Talking Therapies, Active Partnerships and local authority sport development leads, and exploring the role of Physical Activity Champions within NHS Talking Therapies services.



2 Equip and empower NHS Talking Therapies staff with the knowledge and skills to give advice on physical activity and motivate service users to move more.

For example, exploring new or existing training opportunities for NHS Talking Therapies staff and sport and physical activity providers, and raising awareness of suitable digital and local sport and physical activity opportunities and pathways.



4 Develop a joint plan to better promote best practice and emerging work in this area with credible partners in physical activity and mental health.

For example, developing physical activity positive-practice guides, webinars and developing communities of practice.