

# Case study: Middlesbrough Powerchair Football Club

## What is this case study about?

This case study is about the effective informal supporting relationship between the John Walton Muscular Dystrophy Research Centre (The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust) and the Middlesbrough Powerchair Football Club.

## What does the approach aim to do?

- Improve mental and physical health of people with muscle weakening conditions.
- Reduce social isolation and improve community connections.



## How does the approach work?

People with muscle weakening conditions from the Middlesbrough Powerchair Football Club play a pivotal role in raising awareness of local activities among healthcare professionals in the research centre. That led to referrals for many young service-users to the club.

The success of the club has been through word-of-mouth. Members of the club have acted as ambassadors for the club by sharing their enthusiasm with healthcare professionals. This happens organically due to the positive experience that so many members have had with the club, particularly as many of them had experienced exclusion from sport and physical education at school.



**“We want to make sure that people know about it, because sport for people with my level of impairment, historically, people didn’t just play sport or anything active [...] I think it’s just assumed that you can’t do anything.”**

Due to this awareness-raising, research centre healthcare professionals are now aware that patients (particularly those experiencing mental health challenges) can be referred to the club. Healthcare professionals ask questions to explore patients' interest in sport and football. The healthcare professional then refers them on to Middlesbrough Powerchair FC or suggests they get in touch with their local football club.



“Two people in particular have been referred by the specialist nurse and they said they've been struggling with their mental health. And [the nurse] said, ‘Do you like football? You should get in touch with Middlesbrough Football Club.’”

## What makes this approach work?

**Invested healthcare professionals:** The research centre team is invested in finding out about their patients, and they understand the value of physical activity for mental health. They advise patients on suitable activity levels or returning to activity following injury, encouraging them to return to powerchair football to support mental wellbeing, rather than discouraging activity saying it would be dangerous.



“They ask about what you do, what you do at work, what you do in your free time.”

**Club locations:** There are five powerchair football clubs in the region served by the research centre (two in Newcastle, two in Middlesbrough, and one in Darlington). This enables healthcare professionals to refer patients to the closest one.

**Combatting socio-economic disadvantage:** Middlesbrough is the fifth most deprived local authority in England<sup>1</sup>, and the club feels strongly about enabling people to participate. Unlike some other clubs, Middlesbrough Powerchair FC has its own powerchairs, van and trailer, so players aren't disadvantaged by having to provide their own.

**Diversity:** The club hosts women-only events and local schools' outreach, as there are few women playing and this has not been targeted nationally. The club has some ethnic diversity among its players, and players encourage people in their communities to join.

## Who is involved?

The research centre (a Muscular Dystrophy UK Centre of Excellence) delivers clinics for patients across the North of England<sup>2</sup>. They are a team of physiotherapists, clinicians, doctors, and specialist nurses. The specialist nurses have been particularly active in referring people to the Club.

Local family support workers have also been known to refer people to the club, although players do not have the same personal relationships with them.

## Opportunities for scaling up

There are over 30 **powerchair football clubs across England**<sup>3</sup>, presenting opportunities for a similar patient-led approach in different regions.

<sup>1</sup> [Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019: Middlesbrough Council](#)

<sup>2</sup> [John Walton Muscular Dystrophy Research Centre – Newcastle Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Find A Club – The Wheelchair Football Association](#)



As a **patient-led** approach, developing local ambassadors could be effective at a large scale even in the face of resource constraints in the healthcare system. Support organisations could encourage service users to proactively share their knowledge of local activities with their healthcare professionals.

**Funding** would enable powerchair football clubs to provide more support for players – chairs cost upwards of £5,000 and there are also travel and league costs. The club is run by volunteers and does not receive any regular funding from government bodies, healthcare, or sports organisations. Engagement by **wheelchair providers** would support players requiring chair adaptations for their specific driving approach (lip, thumb, foot, or mini joysticks), as that increases costs and production time.

Further growth in powerchair football would better enable referrals to activities locally and support inter-club competition. Currently clubs face significant travel distances to compete as there are generally only a handful of teams in a region – unlike other sports where there might be hundreds of teams.

### Top ideas for inspiration

- **Organic relationship building:** The connection between the club and the research centre team happened organically and informally, as healthcare professionals showed genuine interest in their patients.
- **Make it mutually beneficial:** Both the club and the healthcare system benefit – the club relies on referrals as it doesn't advertise, and the healthcare system benefits through improved patient outcomes.
- **Keep it social:** The club arranges social activities when they travel to compete (like bowling, dinners, or touring Manchester United stadium).

