

# Case study: Access to Exercise and Wellbeing

## What is this case study about?

This case study is about the Access to Exercise and Wellbeing Programme, which helps patients with neurological conditions from across Cheshire and Merseyside to become more active. The project is led by the [Neuro Therapy Centre \(a charitable organisation\)](#), in partnership with health, leisure services and other voluntary sector services.

## What does the approach aim to do?

- Support neurological patients to be more active in the community, to improve their physical and mental wellbeing.
- Slow the progression of neurological conditions through physical activity.



"Particularly with neurological conditions, you have that point of diagnosis which has the impact – you can lose motivation or be supported to gain it. I always think: once you've grieved, exercise."

## How does the approach work?

This is a collaboration between the NHS, voluntary sector partners and the leisure sector, and guided by a lived experience Steering Group.

Patients are referred into the service by healthcare professionals, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, clinical psychologists, the Pain Management Team and GPs. They can also self-refer. There is a simple online referral form which streamlines the process. Patients are then supported to be more active through physical activity sessions, such as exercise classes, and through specialist rehabilitation equipment.

## What makes this approach work?

**Informing patients about physical activity:** While patients were given information and choice around their medical treatment, they were not always given the same amount of information and choice around physical activity. This project aims to give patients more choice.



**Time to develop relationships and process between partners:** Ensure ample lead-in time as coordinating stakeholders can take longer than anticipated.



**"It took a good 18 months to get the key stakeholders meeting together."**

**Improving accessibility through digital options:** Following the Covid-19 pandemic activities went digital, a useful option for many service users.



**"Even during lockdown, some people stayed engaged with the project – we went digital – and their wellbeing scores went up and their movement and mobility developed."**

**Specialist training:** The project made use of the training programme 'Exercise for neurological patients', to fill a gap in training provision. Working with the Neuro Therapy Centre patients also improved the understanding of local physiotherapy teams in supporting patients with neurological conditions.

**Committed leisure partners:** Brio leisure was committed to being an accessible leisure centre for the whole community. Staff were trained in disability awareness and thoughtful inclusion measures installed (like clips on walls to hold people's sticks and platforms to lower wheelchairs into the pool).

## Success smash

The project is piloting a specialist Functional Electrical Stimulation (FES) exercise bicycle, which uses electrical impulses to stimulate muscle contractions, so patients can pedal. It helps people with mobility impairments to exercise their leg muscles.

## Who is involved?

The project was initially funded by Sport England and run by the Neuro Therapy centre up to 2022 (as of 2024 the project was funded by the Big Lottery). The project is now led by the Neuro Therapy Centre, working with The Walton Centre and Brio Leisure. Greenbank Sports Academy and The Brain Charity in Liverpool are delivery partners, and the project is being evaluated by Sheffield Hallam University.

Other stakeholders involved in the project's success include physiotherapists, occupational therapists, clinical psychologists, the Pain Management Team, and primary care (GPs).

## Opportunities for scaling up

**Leverage partnerships across regions:** This project shows the benefits of working across organisational boundaries. To scale, similar partnerships could be established in other regions, to replicate the existing model while reflecting local needs.



**Simple referral systems:** The online referral form is a strong asset for the project, allowing for easy access. Sharing information about this process could help other areas overcome implementation challenges.

**Specialised training:** the success of the program partly stems from utilising specialist training, a key opportunity for scaling up. Online modules or a certification course would be an effective way to achieve this on a larger scale.

**Integrate into local health systems:** embedding the program within clinical pathways for neurological patients has the potential to provide sustainable long-term funding and support.

**Partner with leisure centres who are inclusion champions:** Brio Leisure were a key partner in improving accessibility and supporting the programme. Over 200 leisure service staff have been trained in the [Wright Foundation CIC course Exercise for Long-term Neurological Conditions](#). Partnering with sports, physical activity and leisure providers who show a commitment to inclusion is key, especially if additional investment may be required for accessibility improvements. Other approaches might be to seeking out existing facilities that are more accessible.

## Top ideas for inspiration

- **Embed patient leadership:** Involve a Steering Group of people living with the condition, particularly before the project starts.
- **Upskill using available resources and toolkits:** Use available toolkits, like the Neuro Therapy Centre's [Get Active toolkit](#) for organisations supporting people living with neurological conditions.
- **Training:** It can be a challenge to get the right training courses for healthcare professionals, do your research first.
- **Monitor impact:** Surveys and focus groups are a key part of continual improvement and external evaluation will help with appealing to funders. (This project is carrying out externally funded evaluation.)

