



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

StreetGames' Family Engagement Project (FEP) aims to engage with families who are inactive, isolated or who have challenging circumstances which may impact on their health and wellbeing. Funded by the Healthy and Active Fund (HAF), the FEP operates in 7 Local Authorities in South Wales.

In Blaenau Gwent, Aneurin Leisure Trust (the Trust) acts as a facilitator for FEP and works with a range of local partners, including Ty Calon Housing Association, Youth Services, Arts and Sports Centres and Valleys Gymnastics Academy. This joined up approach aims to create a more streamlined project. The benefits of partnership working include lower costs and improved communication – organisations can share resources and avoid duplication of effort and families should benefit from a seamless local offer.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Delivery model: The project's original plan was to set up a hub model with 4 primary schools, but as with all projects, the delivery approach was adapted during 2020 in order to adhere to Covid-19 restrictions. At the end of 2020, a decision was made to not return to the school hub model for 2021 as there was not clear understanding of when schools would be allowed to open to external providers.

The project team therefore created a simple referral pathway with Families First, Flying Start, Social Services and Health Visitors, and via the Trust's facilities which include sports centres, libraries and action learning centres. Families could be referred if they were struggling with an issue or if they could benefit from FEP activity as a tool to help improve physical or mental wellbeing. This process revealed the extent of the demand and need for such provision and the process quickly reached capacity with 52 family referrals: **"We were in inundated; it was absolutely incredible. We had to shut referrals down"**.



52

FAMILY
REFERRALS

36

FAMILY
MEMBERSHIP
CARDS

16

FAMILIES
ACCESSED BESPOKE
SUPPORT

FAMILY
MEMBERSHIP
CARDS USED ON

878

OCCASIONS

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

The right people: Key members of staff enable the project to be a success: Some of the funding is used to commission the services of an activity provider who does a lot of one to one work and is regularly used by the Trust. The member of staff contacts the families and arranges to chat to them to get to know them and help them participate. **"People who were unsure or anxious, people who have struggled, she would sometimes be phoning people for weeks and weeks and then they would finally have the confidence to meet in person. Some families don't know what's out there and get referred in – e.g. working parents with no time and don't know what clubs, free lessons there are for their kids."**

There is a good level of understanding about FEP provision across the organisation. Facility staff and receptionists play an important part in making the FEP work effectively. The project lead was conscious that part of the role would include raising organisational awareness of the project and ensure communication was clear and effective so that facility staff could signpost members of the public to the offer.



"All the sports staff knew about it, so if a receptionist got talking to a member of the public they would know to say: 'can we help with anything?' That relationship developed, there is the in-work poverty issue and a few referrals came from that informal conversation with centre staff. The Trust stepped up. Joining things up has been one of the most pleasing things about this."

Project lead

"I first heard about the Family Engagement Project through a member of staff at Tredegar Sports Centre. The member of staff informed me about the amazing aims and objectives of the project... I thought it was a brilliant idea. I have 3 children and I'm also a foster carer, therefore it was very difficult for me to afford a membership for myself and my family. The FEP has enabled us to use all the facilities at the sports centres, and even attend altogether which has never happened before. The FEP has certainly helped the positive relationship between myself and my foster child due to attending the sports centres together. I have seen many improvements in not only myself but in my children also. I believe we're more active, more supportive to each other, have greater confidence from taking part in different activities due to what the sports centres have to offer, and able to positively socialise with others at the sport centre. My daughter visits the gym with her friend, so the FEP has increased her confidence in attending the sports centre where she's recently said, she would rather go to the gym than go out with peers in the cold and the dark. Since the FEP began, the staff at the sports centres have been very friendly and are always very approachable. Due to the positive environment where staff are always on hand, I feel confident in my children attending the sports centres independently. I really like attending the classes and try to get in as many as I can in the week. The FEP has enabled me to feel younger, fitter and much healthier. I've also had a knee injury in the past where I feel this has also helped with the recovery process. To conclude, the FEP has enabled me and my family to attain a much-improved physical, mental and social wellbeing, I cannot thank the member of staff enough for introducing me to the project and also providing continuous help and support along the way. My family would not have gained the improvements that they have if it wasn't for being a part of the FEP."

Mother and foster carer



Affordability and access: FEP funding was supplemented with the use of Sport Wales recovery funding and match funded by the Trust to offer free, three-month family memberships. Those memberships would allow access to all leisure facilities; including swimming, gym, fitness classes, racket sports and spa suite for the entire family. For example, a family swimming session costs £18 and for many, this is not affordable on a regular basis. Every three months, the project staff review how many families are using the membership offer and other kinds of support offered by the organisation. If families aren't using the card then other new families can be added.

In one example, the Covid-19 pandemic had caused temporary hardship: **"We covered the swimming lessons for a period of time to ensure those children remain active. It's that kind of the holistic approach - every family was different. For example, we had a foster carer who took in different short term fostered children regularly, so we kept her membership open, so whoever she was caring for at the time had access to the facilities. They as a family unit have used those facilities 137 times so far."** In another case, staff became aware that some families did not have appropriate clothing to take part in physical activity, so organised a basket of trainers that could be collected from a primary school. This meant that all members of the community could safely and comfortably join in local walking clubs and take part independently. Not all families want facility membership but might be better supported via talking to someone and being signposted to other kinds of offers in the community. The response from staff was bespoke and adaptable so that families could access the provision that fitted their needs.



SUSTAINABILITY

Mainstreaming. Over the past two years, the need for the project has been demonstrated and the project lead has worked hard to highlight the importance of the work within the Trust to ensure that there is a legacy of activity as soon as external FEP funding provision ends. The project lead was able to talk about the work at a senior level, present the approach to the Public Service Board and raise the visibility and profile of the work.

This has resulted in two key organisational changes to ensure project activity can be sustained long-term:

- 1 Family engagement work now features in the organisational business plan. A new Community Engagement Officer role has been developed where the job specification has been changed to include family engagement work as a key responsibility.

"The Trust have honoured and understood the benefits of family engagement, so part of the remit will continue to be family engagement which is written into the ten year business plan. Ultimately our strategy is 'improve community life' and FEP is it in a nutshell."

Hannah Winmill – Sport Development supervisor.

- 2 The Trust has recognised that external funding will not be sufficient to keep providing free memberships to families. Post April 2022, the Trust will offer half priced membership to those families whose first experience of membership was accessed through FEP. The cost was recognised as a barrier and these families will be able to carry on their membership for half price indefinitely. This benefits both the families and the Trust – it would be unlikely that all families who received three months free would be able to take out a full price membership, so offering it at half price provides a source of income for the Trust that would not be collected otherwise. They can use it for family swim, slides, sauna, gym and one to one sessions and the offer covers all sites.

Supporting independent activity and behaviour change:

In Year 4 of the provision, the team will organise 'wellbeing days' for those who have engaged in FEP. The approach will be tested with 10 families to begin with where there is space to accommodate workshop activities. The wellbeing day will be a chance to consider the longevity, cost and affordability of FEP activities. Families will be able to do circuit activities that can be replicated at home and will be introduced to an aqua class. The aim is to familiarise people with the pool and to develop activity know-how, ensuring they are comfortable and confident enough to access their local facilities.

Other planned wellbeing day activities will include nutritional and meditation workshops for adults who can take home resource booklets and menus. **"We want to provide families with tools for behaviour change, because some are coming in with anxiety. Develop positive habits, know what ingredients to buy for healthy meals, know a few relaxation and breathing techniques that might help them."** All 52 families involved to date will be invited to wellbeing days and catered for across the year before the project begins working with a future cohort of families and look at reopening the referral system. The behaviour change will hopefully be long lasting for those families and children for life.

Linking with other national programmes: Where connections can be made with other programmes and funding streams, participating families can be signposted to these to free up capacity to work with new families. One example has been to link with the Sport Wales Free Swimming Initiative to set up the Flying Start swim-only project. Via Free Swimming, 15 families were referred and allocated 10 swimming sessions that were preloaded onto membership cards. This helps to avoid the stigma that might be attached to asking for a free swim at reception in a queue. Names of referred families are shared with reception staff and receptionists can check their database against the name and give out a preloaded card. These can simply be swiped for a free swim the next time the family comes in. Swimming continues to be an activity that is popular and in demand across Wales and this offer has demonstrated that need and demand in Blaenau Gwent. Of 150 possible funded sessions offered by the Trust at a cost of £1,500, by the end of February 122 sessions had been accessed. Each family has used the card at least 4 times. In 2022-23, a further £6,000 will be allocated to family swims. Links have also been made with Fit and Fed, the StreetGames holiday hunger programme, where two groups are transported to the Sports Centre to have a lesson or recreational session.



“When I first heard about the FEP I couldn’t help but think how it could really help me with my mental health, weight management, and provide opportunities for my young son. I was really excited to start attending the sports centre to give all the different kinds of classes a go and also take my son swimming. Before the pandemic, my son loved being in the water, but he then struggled to enjoy his swimming sessions where he continued to cry and just wanted to get out of the pool. The FEP has allowed me to take my son more often, to slowly improve his confidence and rekindle his love for the activity since restrictions have eased. Now he absolutely loves going swimming where his ability has also improved.

Furthermore, the FEP has definitely improved my mental health, it’s enabled me to feel good about myself and to positively socialise with people and friends at the centre. At first I was quite nervous attending by myself where I would have to go with a friend. Due to the positive environment and the support from staff I’m now able to attend on my own which is a great personal achievement. I’m still looking to improve with my weight but the FEP has supported me in the right direction, leading to the positives which I have gained so far. The staff at the sports centres have been very helpful and has been in contact continuously to see if they could help with anything.”

Mother



NEXT STEPS

The pandemic resulted in the approach to the FEP changing considerably. The new way of working is considered to be a far better than the original plan which wouldn't have been bespoke or allowed the team to find out about some of the barriers families faced. The project limited the amount of families that can be referred to make sure those involved have high quality provision and that there is the staff resource available to deal with any eventuality. Future work will aim to ensure there is a team around the family - a partnership of people so that families can be signposted to the right kind of supporting organisation, community group or help. “You don't have to know everything but be aware of someone who does. Be realistic in what you can deliver”.

The original plan of developing the hub model and working with children first will now be supported through additional Doorstep Sports Club (DSC) funding that became available in 2021. Links across programmes will continue to be made and children involved in FEP will be introduced to these hubs and new DSC provision, providing an additional exit route and local opportunity to be active.