



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

MERTHYR TYDFIL

INTRODUCTION

The 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 Welsh Government's Healthy and Active (HAF) Fund, the FEP operates in 7 Local Authorities in South Wales.

Merthyr Tydfil's FEP began in September 2020 and is coordinated by Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association (MTHA). The aim is to deliver family interventions that meet the needs of tenants and to ensure there is connectivity between existing services and that vulnerable families are able to access the support offered.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

HAF projects have been engaging with target audiences in a variety of ways, often through organisations who can act as gatekeepers to identifying potential participants. As well as engaging via the Housing Association, families are identified through colleagues who have an existing trusted relationship with local residents and understand which families might be furthest away from engaging in physical activity. Partners with direct access to families include Merthyr County Borough Council's Multiple Intervention Assistance team (Team around the Family), Youth Services, Youth Offending and the Gypsy Traveller site worker.

Being based in a Housing Association means that the FEP officer has a broad remit which overlaps and intertwines with FEP aims. There is connectivity with MTHA's work to address food poverty, and local Fit and Fed sessions provide another opportunity to meet families and signpost them to FEP activities. As well as Fit and Fed, the team run a community food co-operative and support families on low income and who are eligible for healthy start vouchers. The project officer hopes to set up another local pantry model in Troedryhiw, integrating with the local primary school. Families who attend the school and pantry may also benefit from FEP activities.



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Understanding the barriers: A primary barrier for families is owning suitable recreational clothing and trainers that enables people to take part in physical activities comfortably and safely. A specific challenge for females has been not owning sports bras and the project is seeking to develop a relationship with Shock Absorber to look at possibilities of getting them on board.

FEP funding was used to purchase clothing and kit to distribute directly to families, which will allow them to participate in their own time: The project has so far distributed:

100

pairs of trainers,
joggers and
jumpers

100

Activity
Trackers

40

Family sports,
fitness and
exercise bags

Operating in the pandemic: During 2021, Covid-19 has continued to be the main challenge in delivering the intervention. Case rates have remained particularly high in the Local Authority, including at the Gypsy Roma Travellers site which had been an intended focus area for the FEP. Families have been concerned about taking part in group sessions and confidence levels have been affected. The project has therefore continued to provide a virtual offer and support for families to take part independently. Walking challenges have been set up, with medals and wrist bands as incentive prizes.

Digital challenges and motivation: One of the emerging challenges for projects has been maintaining interest and the practicalities of being creative while operating within Covid-related restrictions. Virtual provision worked to start with, but digital fatigue has increased as people continue to work remotely: remaining online during leisure time is not appealing. Digital poverty also affects participation. Many families can't always afford expensive data on their phones to access virtual offers.

The project recognises that offering variety is key – and activities and provision need to evolve and change to maintain people's interest, regardless of whether the offer is delivered face to face or remotely.

Supporting healthy behaviours

The FEP has introduced healthy eating approaches alongside physical activity suggestions and challenges. During 2021, families have been provided with slow cookers and weekly recipe cards. The team have developed a six-week slow cooking pack that includes:

- A starter pack with a baking tray, garlic crusher, cooking thermometer and a timer.
- Weekly ingredients with a recipe card and QR code to take you to a step-by-step video of how to cook the recipe.
- Weekly Autumn bingo card to encourage families to walk.
- Weekly family workout videos.

The bingo cards can help motivate young children and help them enjoy walks with challenges to spot different leaves, wildlife, puddles. The project will continue to add new ideas, such as activities that can be incorporated into short walks in darker Winter months. Updating the challenges will help maintain participation levels.

This work supports wider organisational aims of helping families who might experience food poverty. Using the slow cooker as an alternative to putting on the oven shows families how they can reduce their utility bills and at the same time use less fuel. A variety of slow cooker recipes are available on the Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association YouTube channel.



SUSTAINABILITY APPROACHES

Empowering people to participate – a legacy of equipment

The HAF is exploring the different approaches to sustainability adopted by different projects. The FEP in Merthyr Tydfil is focussing on sustaining individual behaviours and supporting participants to be active long term, rather than an approach that requires ongoing funding. For this reason, the focus has been on empowering families by providing them with kit and sports bags rather than paying for a gym membership or similar, which would likely be left to expire once external funding ended. Equipment includes cricket wickets and bats, footballs, tennis sets, skipping ropes and so on. Project staff worked with a local gym to develop a fitness programme that made use of this equipment around core body strength. The programme can be done at home with props and exercises to establish skills like weightlifting techniques and ways of developing muscle memory for future participation.

Connecting services and signposting

As well as working closely with partners to engage with communities, Merthyr's FEP is looking at exit routes based on demand and feedback from participants. Connections are being made with other sport, health and wellbeing programmes. Through collaboration with Active Merthyr, the FEP has signposted a group with learning needs whose favourite activity is swimming to local free swimming sessions. The group are now participating in swimming provision that is funded through the Sport Wales Free Swimming Initiative. Having supported these participants to access this existing local opportunity, there is now capacity freed up to work with further groups and families. A further obvious link is help FEP families to access Doorstep Sport clubs and make that transition. However, there is a perception that signposting between services might not always work as effectively as it could – a sense that some projects like to keep 'their' participants 'in-house' – an unintended consequence of judging success by numbers of target participants organisations and specific projects work with, rather than achieving successful outcomes for those participants.

Gathering evidence on long term impact

Being able to evidence the impact of FEP can support sustainability by demonstrating outcomes to funders and decision makers. One way this is done by MTHA is to use the HACT social value bank and toolkit and demonstrate the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of interventions to support families. The organisation has previous experience of using SROI to show the impact and value of Fit and Fed provision. This approach can highlight the financial value of taking people on a journey from sedentary lifestyles into physical activity: calculating the potential cost savings for the NHS, the avoidance of crime, the development of volunteering capacity and so on. Project staff have observed how SROI evidence can open up conversations with the Council, the Health Board and senior decision makers. Demonstrating financial value can make the case for further funding to continue to offer services.

Learning points

The FEP officer recommends thinking about the longer-term outcomes that project activity can support, beyond the initial aim of getting people more physically active. In developing this thought process, not being scared to ask questions of senior representatives to help develop an understanding of how FEP can contribute to wider policy agendas and organisational strategies – and the ability to speak confidently about these connections. This insight can then be drawn on when building relationships and collaborative approaches with other partners.

“The project is proving that ‘Housing’ is more than just bricks and mortar. Projects such as these are intertwined with regeneration. There is so much going on with Public Health Wales and the Health Board’s obesity strategy that FEP can fit into. It also fits into the Youth Work Strategy and raising aspirations, and the Housing Association’s strategy of creating happy resilient streets to live on... For the Housing Association to mainstream such a project we need to do things like demonstrate to the wider outcomes achieved by the FEP and by being active”. Several cross departmental benefits could be highlighted if sustainability is achieved by marketing 'FEP' to other Housing Associations, such as:

- improving civic pride and community cohesion;
- supporting residents' mental health;
- fewer incidents of anti-social behaviour;
- reduced tenancy turnover and void costs for associations;
- contributing to Public Service Board wellbeing plans.



¹<https://www.streetgames.org/fit-and-fed>

²<https://gov.wales/public-services-boards>

NEXT STEPS

As the majority of the population have now been vaccinated, the expectation is that families may become more reassured and regain interest in taking part in face to face activities and group sessions. Therefore, a blended, seasonal approach to delivery is being considered. The Winter months lend themselves better to supporting families with a virtual offer and doorstep support. From Easter to October, outdoor provision becomes more viable and popular.

Further collaborative working, using an Asset Based community Development (ABCD) approach will be the focus of 2022. The ethos is around empowering families and not what people can't do, but what they can. The FEP will continue its aims of building confidence and skills and maximising the linkages between people and the community assets that are on their doorstep.

