IMAGINE YOUR GOALS

IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH FOOTBALL
Imagine Your Goals was a two year project to improve wellbeing through sport. Running from 2010-2012, it aimed to help people’s physical and mental health; increase the social inclusion of people with mental health problems; and tackle the stigma and discrimination people with mental health problems experience. Sixteen Imagine Your Goals projects were delivered by community trusts and schemes affiliated to Premier League football clubs, and the Premier League and Sport Relief jointly funded the programme.

Time to Change, the anti-stigma and discrimination programme, managed Imagine Your Goals. Time to Change is England’s biggest programme to end the stigma and discrimination faced by people with mental health problems, and is run by the charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness. From 2007-2011 Time to Change was funded by £36m from the Big Lottery Fund and £4.5m from Comic Relief, and from October 2011 it has been funded by the Department of Health and Comic Relief.

The Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College London provided evaluation of Imagine Your Goals, which focused on the impact of the physical activity and social contact. The evaluation looked at whether attending sessions improved the wellbeing of participants; if it increased their engagement with their local community and if it decreased stigma and discrimination. In addition to this, participants and staff completed evaluation forms (196 received in total) and projects submitted monitoring reports. This completed the picture of how projects were making a difference to participants and the overall success of Imagine Your Goals.

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All projects ran physical activity sessions designed to improve health, increase confidence and decrease isolation for people with experience of mental health problems. Most projects delivered football sessions, but some only ran them in combination with other activities and a few did not do football at all. Liverpool FC Foundation, Tottenham Hotspur Foundation, Stoke City Community Trust and Wigan Athletic Community Trust were amongst those that ran a mixture of activities. Participants varied widely - some projects only accepted referrals from NHS services; some accepted anyone with experience of mental health problems; whilst others focused on people at risk of experiencing mental health problems in the future. Two of the projects, Blackburn Rovers Community Trust and Tottenham Hotspur Foundation, had a particular focus on young people.

Projects also aimed to create situations where social contact could take place. Social contact in this context is a conversation that specifically involves one person describing their experiences of mental health problems to another person that has not had that experience. Conversations need to take place in a fair and equal environment. These types of conversations are helpful for breaking down barriers, helping people without mental health problems to see people with mental health problems for who they are. This type of social contact is commonly used in anti-stigma and discrimination activity.

Finally, projects promoted Time to Change campaign messages about mental health stigma and discrimination. Projects responded to this challenge innovatively, making good use of their profile and reach. Some campaigned on match days, handing out flyers to fans (for example Chelsea Foundation); several did as Pompey in the Community and profiled Time to Change on their website; and others arranged for their club to sign the Time to Change pledge publically. Projects often made use of their links to clubs - for example, when Manchester United Foundation arranged for two players to attend a session and talk about their own wellbeing to the local press.

We wanted to measure whether attending sessions increased the social capital of participants. Social capital is a measurement of the networks that someone has with their local community. It takes into account the engagement individuals have with other people, particularly people that fulfil specific roles or create further links in a community. People who are accepted by their community and feel comfortable are more likely to have high levels of social capital, so this can help show how much discrimination they are experiencing. Participants were also asked about their own roles in their community and the ways in which they created links or connections. It was hoped that Imagine Your Goals would lead to an increase in social capital.

The evaluation showed that participants had improved social capital by taking part in the projects (though some aspects of social capital were not statistically significant improvements). When they started attending participants scored much lower on social capital than the general population, highlighting the potential need and value for projects like those funded by Imagine your Goals. Interestingly, these participants scored slightly higher for social capital than a control group of people with depression, suggesting that they are slightly more engaged with their community. Although the difference was small and could have been due to chance, it warrants more examination.

The most significant change to the participants’ social capital was their improved ability to access help (via their social network) to carry out a skilled task: i.e. fix a car. This was also the lowest scoring aspect of participants’ social capital when they started attending projects and in turn, showed the most improvement overall. Their capacity to carry out a skilled task for someone else also saw a small increase, though not large enough to be statistically significant. In summary, taking part in these projects was enabling people to create more networks with their local community.
Might not happen, but these fears proved unfounded. Wannid and hoped for more social interaction, worried that it would increase it in their lives. On the other hand, they also stated that the project "saved my life". Another participant said that the group gave him "something I've never had before - a sense of belonging, which I really look forward to". Participants also felt that their confidence had increased; they found the atmosphere positive, with a welcome sense of equality between coaches and participants.

The value participants gave to the projects was clear in the sense of distress expressed when discussing the possibility of projects ending. Participants voiced fears that they would lose their weekly structure or they would lose opportunities to socialise and ways to express frustrations in a safe environment. One person explained "If you take that away the (project)... you'll go back into yourself again, you'll have nothing to come out for, you know, and you'll just be spending more time back in your own world again". Attendees valued sessions and felt they could be valuable for others, unanimously agreeing they would recommend projects to others.

Attendees were asked in focus groups what they had wanted to gain from the projects and why they decided to attend. For many, the main pull was football and the profile of the club, though people also gave other, more emotional reasons: they wanted a regular activity that gave them a reason to get out of the house, meet people, and have a more fulfilled social life. Engagement with the projects was also seen as a way of having more purpose in their lives.

Participants said that before attending sessions they had worried about meeting new people because of their previous levels of social isolation, but they also hoped that sessions would increase their social interaction and help them make new friends. Though they worried social interaction might be difficult, participants valued it enough to risk it going wrong to increase it in their lives. On the other hand, they also stated that they did not expect to experience such high levels of social interaction and for people to be so friendly. Participants wanted and hoped for more social interaction, worried that it might not happen, but these fears proved unfounded.

Focus group participants highlighted personal and tangible practical benefits of taking part in physical activities, namely, improved fitness, weight loss and improved football skills. The staff running projects also highlighted improvements in physical and mental wellbeing. As with participants, these included predictable elements like weight loss, but also wider ranging and more subtle impacts.

Examples were given of people who spoke out at football sessions but nowhere else, or people that felt positive enough to attend two weeks in a row where normally they would not even be able to leave their house two weeks in a row. Stories abounded of the projects affecting people in unexpected and exciting ways. Bolton Wanderers Community Trust was particularly proud of the fact that 21 participants (out of a total of 112) completed a qualification during the project. Amongst others, Birmingham City FC Community Trust, Blackburn Rovers Community Trust; and Wigan Athletic Community Trust all highlighted participants that had gone on to volunteer, and in some cases find paid work as a result of their engagement with the projects.

Many projects sat within larger organisations that provided wider support to attendees, including advice on stopping smoking, getting a job or sexual health. Some unexpected benefits were unique to these projects because of their links to Premier League football clubs and their organisational structure. Special mention was made of trips to see professional clubs play, and the opportunities people got to travel to tournaments and matches, in some cases abroad.

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Tackling stigma through social contact

Social contact is the creation of situations where someone with experience of mental health problems discuss their experiences with someone without experience of mental health problems in a full and open conversation. Both parties need to feel that they can ask questions and encourage or curtail the conversation if they wish. We know that this can break down barriers by creating links between people, leading to a better understanding of mental health problems. These types of conversation help people without experience of mental health problems to see people with experience of mental health problems for who they are.

It took time for projects to fully grasp how to facilitate social contact effectively. Although social contact is simple in concept, it can be difficult to explain and understand, and it was often misinterpreted as social interaction. It was not always clear how much social contact took place, and when asked projects sometimes gave examples that could not be described as social contact. Many of the projects ran tournaments where people with and without mental health problems played each other, but unless there was clear time for conversations about experiences of mental health problems this is not social contact. For some projects all their sessions included people with and without experience of mental health problems, but again, unless they created space specifically for discussion about personal experiences of mental health, this could not be classified as social contact in the way Time to Change and the funders looked for.

At events the evaluation team attended, the numbers of people without mental health problems that met someone with a mental health problem and completed an evaluation form were too small to glean information from, so it was not possible to draw any conclusions about the effectiveness of the projects using social contact to tackle stigma and discrimination. The evaluation did find that projects seemed to help participants feel empowered to challenge stigma and discrimination through other means. As a result of attending 78% of attendees with mental health problems stated that they felt more confident to challenge stigma and discrimination. Imagine Your Goals projects helped empower participants to challenge discrimination when they come across it, perhaps by making people feel a part of a team community and group.

Social contact case studies

Liverpool FC Foundation ran a series of social contact events where volunteers with experience of mental health problems started discussions about their experiences of mental health with people that did not have experience of mental health problems. The project purposefully created a space for informal discussions where people without experience of mental health problems could ask questions, hear stories and get more information on mental health. The project used activities like bingo and quizzes to engage people’s interest and reached 95 people without experience of mental health problems through these events.

Another project, Arsenal in the Community, went to three Time to Change road shows where session attendees took part in social contact. At each event participants spoke to members of the public about their experience of mental health problems, the impact it had on their lives and how stigma and discrimination affected them, using promotional materials and table football to attract attention and start conversations. The club’s profile caught the attention of people that might not normally talk about mental health or attend a mental health event.

Campaigning case study

In April 2011 Wolves Community Trust ran a campaign with a variety of activities to reach people with messages about the impact of mental health stigma and discrimination. They produced pledge boards and encouraged staff, management and players to make a pledge on how they personally would tackle mental health stigma and discrimination. Wolverhampton Wanderers FC then publically signed the Time to Change pledge during the half time break on a match day. Match day programmes included information on stigma and discrimination, with a message of support from the Chief Executive, Jeff Moxley. The Time to Change advert was shown throughout the concourses, so that on that one day alone over 30,000 people saw the Time to Change messages in different ways multiple times.

“I found that the project helped me find what I wanted out of my life and it gave me a platform to start a new journey.”

Bolton Wanderers Community Trust participant
The difference these projects make

- These types of projects can increase the interaction of participants with their community by helping people feel an accepted part of a community.
- Projects created highly valued opportunities for increased social interaction.
- Projects like this can help people feel empowered to challenge stigma and discrimination, although in this instance they did not do this through social contact.
- Projects affiliated to football clubs at this level can reach huge numbers of people with key messages about mental health stigma and discrimination.

The challenges they face

- It can be difficult for projects focused on sports and mental health to create situations where discussions about mental health take place, particularly those situations where people with and without experience of mental health problems can share their experiences.
- Participants relied on the projects and showed distress about the possibility of them finishing, showing a need for project staff to plan for future funding. If this is not possible, exit strategies for people accessing the service need to be prepared.
- The most effective projects did the following:
  - Created open and welcoming atmospheres where issues could be raised and resolved quickly. Sessions allowed time for social interaction and informal discussion.
  - Had strong referral pathways in place so projects could focus on project delivery (rather than recruitment of participants) and ensure they attracted the participants who would benefit from the project.
  - Used the links they had with Premier League clubs effectively and with purpose.
  - Considered the logistics carefully so transport was not a problem, and sessions ran regularly and consistently come rain or shine.
  - Encouraged a sense of pride, achievement and progression. This could mean improving football skills, arranging trips to see matches, or supporting people to gain qualifications or work. Having activities that allowed people to build up to them (such as tournaments) was consistently referenced as important.
  - Designed social contact activity separate from their physical activity sessions, encouraging participants with and without experience of mental health problems to share their experiences.

The practicalities

The coaches and their relationships with participants are vital to the success of projects. For this reason, staff needed support from colleagues and their peers for this project, as many of them were inexperienced in mental health. Those involved in Imagine Your Goals valued networking days for additional support and guidance.

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“The project has changed my life. I used to be more anxious and I didn’t have many friends, but I’m now friends with everyone on the team. I wouldn’t be doing anything without football, I wouldn’t do exercise and I’d get fat from my medication.”

“I couldn’t run before. I used to run and I’d get knackered, now I can just run the whole pitch.”

“You’ve got to have these places to come and talk your troubles out, haven’t you? And realise that most of us are all in the same boat. We’re all human; we all have the same problems.”

Time to Change is England’s biggest programme to end the stigma and discrimination faced by people with mental health problems.

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Sport Relief is an initiative of Comic Relief, registered charity 326568 (England/Wales); SC039730 (Scotland).