

# The role of healthcare professionals in supporting disabled people into physical activity

Research report: Executive summary

**Activity Alliance**

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# Executive summary

**Healthcare professionals are known to play a role in positively impacting disabled people's health and wellbeing through promoting physical activity.**

This research project explored the role of healthcare professionals in supporting disabled people to be more physically active.

A review of evidence found that the NHS and healthcare professionals are **trusted messengers**: a source of information and guidance on being physically active. The **exact roles or job titles** of trusted messengers were less clear, and there was little information on which healthcare professionals disabled people wanted support from.

The review also found that disabled people experience a **lack of guidance** on appropriate types or levels of activity, or suitable rehabilitation advice (impacting on pain or recovery). We also found that there may be **key moments** where interventions are more impactful (or where an individual's level of physical activity is more likely to decrease).

We looked at the above areas in our research, and explored what interventions worked for people, and whether these are scalable.

## Good practice case studies

We wanted to research **areas of good practice**, and develop case studies of where healthcare professionals were successfully supporting disabled people into physical activity.

Six examples of good practice in local areas were developed into case studies (from a long-list of over 40 potential projects and approaches).

The projects featured in our good practice case studies were: Access to Exercise and Wellbeing (Cheshire); Health Improvement Practitioner in community stroke team (Greater Manchester); Move to Include (Somerset); Parkinson's Disease exercise group (Greater Manchester); Super Mash Up! at the Manchester Children's Hospital and the Middlesbrough Powerchair Football Club.

From these case studies, we identified **six key features of success**:

- Cross-sector collaboration.
- Lived-experience leadership.
- Commitment to inclusion.
- Community creation and mental wellbeing.

- Personalisation and staying in touch.
- Upskilling through education, awareness and training.

## Disabled people's experiences of positive support

Sixteen disabled people attended focus groups to share their experiences of being supported by a healthcare professional to be more physically active.

Participants were supported by **various healthcare professionals**, including GPs, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and social prescribers.

Overall, there were five key features of successful support into physical activity:

- **Personalised support**, understanding individual needs while conveying an informed clinical understanding of their impairment or condition.
- **Trusted relationships**, built on common ground, with professional who demonstrated condition-specific clinical knowledge.
- A **multi-disciplinary** approach which reinforced positive messaging about physical activity.
- **Gradual, realistic progression** with a personalised plan.
- Connecting into the **community**: Most interactions took place within local **primary care** settings, acting as gateways to broader community activities.

For some participants, community-based and community-building activities were a key part of success.

**Timing** was important for the delivery of a successful intervention. People needed to be at a point of being open to taking action to improve or protect their physical and mental wellbeing. This was sometimes after they had had time to process a changed situation, or when they felt that their physical or mental health could be about to decline.

## Opportunities for scaling up

Opportunities for scaling up include:

- **Working in collaborative 'physical activity' partnerships** across healthcare, the voluntary sector and sports and physical activity providers.
- Working in **local, place-based partnerships** where local people can benefit from professionals who have knowledge of local community needs, and can match these to local resources.
- Accessible and **streamlined referral systems** to facilitate efficient and seamless integration of physical activity services into clinical care pathways.
- Embedding **Physical Activity Champions** in neighbourhood teams through identifying and commissioning roles to enable patient transitions into activities and ongoing support.

Scaling-up of **funding** represents a challenge but is essential to move beyond pilot projects. Suggestions include exploring grants for one-off capital costs and commitment from local systems to work together to fund projects and evaluation.

Resources to help healthcare professionals and systems understand how to support disabled people into physical activity are also suggested: this report includes **Top Tips for healthcare professionals**, and a **checklist for Integrated Care Systems** for suggestions of 'what good looks like.'

Ideas for **action at a national level** includes working with respected key players in the sector to raise the profile of the work, establishing a standardised training framework for key professionals, and coordination of centralised support hubs and peer networks, alongside an awareness of the importance of a diverse workforce.

Overall, we conclude that our research shows that there are **reasons to be positive** about the tremendous potential within the current landscape for the scaling up of supporting disabled people into physical activity. These findings show that positive and collaborative change is possible, and will aligns well with current healthcare priorities.

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