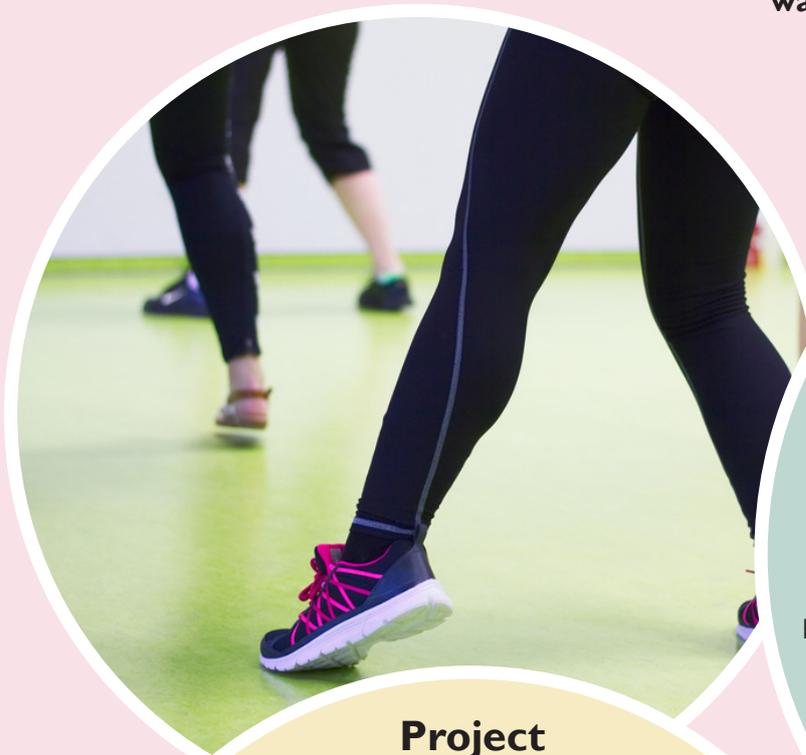


A pioneering group which helps give women on probation structure through activities approached Active Norfolk about introducing physical activity as a way to help prevent attendees from reoffending.



Project Development

Home Group, which was already providing activities for female offenders, approached Active Norfolk around embedding exercise and physical activity in to the probation service rehabilitation programme. They wanted support with accessing suitable physical activity opportunities to add this as a component to their rehabilitation programme, in the hope this could improve reoffending rates.

Active Norfolk suggested an exclusive weekly exercise session delivered at the venue where probationary meetings take place using an experienced local instructor. Consultation with service users took place and a type of activity was identified for delivery. This programme directly addresses local priorities of crime, physical inactivity and poor mental health.

The Partners

Sheryl Clark - Sheryl is a freelance instructor who delivers the sessions with a breadth of experience in dealing with people with drug and alcohol issues.

Active Norfolk - Provided funding for exercise component and educating Home Group staff on importance of Physical Activity.

Home Group - (4Women resource centre) deliver the support programme and is responsible for promoting the sessions across the probationary network in Norfolk.

Identifying the need

Although women make up only 12% of the justice system they can have more complex needs. National evidence suggests sport and physical activity can be effective in reducing the reconviction rate of offenders and also that regular structured exercise can enable offenders to build mutual support, motivation and discipline, as well as offer better health and personal development.

The 'revolving door' effect, where offenders struggle to break the habit of criminality is all too common and ruins lives, damages communities and costs the UK economy billions. Examples of good practice from other areas of the country suggest that projects providing an opportunity to become more active have been effective in using sport as a vehicle for change, engaging offenders and motivating them to take responsibility for desisting from crime.

Aims

The aims of this project were to reduce the risk of women on probation reoffending. By providing structure and helping develop skills learned through participation activities, the project aims to introduce women who have committed offences previously back into society by giving them a sense of purpose and routine with free weekly scheduled sessions.

The sessions are designed to improve the confidence of these women and their self-esteem through being more physically active. Furthermore, the appeal of physical activity and exercise sessions in a safe, separate environment is designed to encourage greater engagement across all probationary modules.

The Process and Initial Results

Active Norfolk worked closely with Home Group to source the right instructor, Sheryl Clark, and select the right activity, Zumba, before providing funding for the activity component of the project.

In total, 15 women have been attending sessions. Feedback showed that the exercise is building confidence within the women and is improving self-esteem. Other feedback suggests women are completing probation for the first time as a result of attending the weekly Zumba sessions. Uptake on other probationary sessions has risen due to the women being more engaged and more integrated with service staff.

Common messages of feedback from participants were that everyone was non-judgemental, that it helped build confidence levels and that the groups made participants less likely to reoffend.

“In the outside world I feel labelled and judged – but here I feel I can be myself and I don’t feel any different to other people”

Participant

Case Study (Female, 52)

“Prior to my conviction I was a drug user and lived a very chaotic lifestyle, I did not engage with any services and I did not access any health checks. On release I was asked to go to the 4women centre. I was initially very reluctant to come to any groups at the 4Women Centre due to my lack of confidence and anxiety. Also I didn't feel that the groups would be beneficial to me.

“Jo (Home Group staff member) offered to meet me at probation to explain what groups were running. It was very reassuring to realise that all the other women were also anxious the first time they came and I found it easy to relate to the other women in the group. I have been going for 8 weeks now and haven't missed a single week. I am really enjoying it and feel that it's really beneficial to my mental health. I would not have gone to a 'normal' exercise class as I would have felt too anxious.

“I now also attend Craft group on a Monday, Making Connections on Wednesday, WOW group on a Thursday and of course Zumba on a Friday and I really enjoy it. My family say that they have got the 'me' back I was twenty years ago. Schemes like this give offenders the chance to put themselves on the path to a crime-free life.”

Findings and Outcomes

- Providing the sessions for free has enabled women who are unemployed and even homeless to attend. This also prevents women from earning money illegally in order to pay for the sessions.
- The attendance at sessions is growing as the benefits of attending are being spread throughout the probation service encouraging those who had reservations around being physically active to attend.
- The intervention has gained recognition within a ladies' prison in Peterborough and is seen as an opportunity to look forward to upon release and entering probation.
- All women engaged in the exercise classes have stated that attending the sessions has given them a sense of purpose to take up other hobbies and by doing so feel much less likely to reoffend.
- Those women affected by drug and alcohol misuse reported they are now less likely to turn back to drugs and alcohol as the exercise has given them a boost to make correct lifestyle choices.
- Following the success of the exercise sessions uptake and engagement at other probationary sessions has risen due to increased confidence amongst service users and a stronger rapport with service staff.