



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

HEALTHY BLAENAVON

INTRODUCTION

The StreetGames Family Engagement Project (FEP) engages 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 Fund (HAF), the FEP operates in 7 Local Authorities in South Wales.

Healthy Blaenavon's FEP project started in January 2020. The Healthy Blaenavon Officer (HBO) and StreetGames Doorstep Sports Advisor (DSA) work in partnership with Torfaen Sports Development and Torfaen Play to provide a wide range of sessions for families based around Blaenavon in South-East Wales. The project is now embarking on its third year.

WHAT'S ON OFFER?

In January 2020, the HBO introduced their 'Family Club', open to any local family interested in being healthy and active. By January 2021, around 35 participants had got involved. One year on, Family Club continues to work well, maintaining its support for 35 participants, including some who have been involved since 2020, alongside some new families. Family Club has run consistently, providing face to face sessions outside of the school holidays since Wales moved to Alert Level 2 in May 2021.

The nature of the offer means that families can book onto and drop in and out of sessions on any given week. This flexibility has been essential as families have been affected by Covid-19 or other commitments. Sessions are well attended, with a variety of different activities on offer including basketball, tennis, street golf, dance, dance ribbons, rounders and running. **"It provides something different as Blaenavon is very much big on football and rugby, but not lots of other things".** Basketball was a very popular session after when the DSA provided an indoor and outdoor session during 2021 – and there is a demand for more as there is no local basketball offer currently available. Golf has been another hit locally and there are plans to take a group to a driving range and exploring the possibility of a 'StreetGames golf club'.

The face to face element has allowed project members to build relationships with families, get to know their needs and shape the offer to remove any barriers to being active. Family Club gives participants the opportunity to exercise with their children rather than dropping them off at a session. This helps parents and guardians who don't have to find an alternative time to exercise and arrange and pay for child minding. The HBO has observed that parents who stay for their children's session in other settings don't usually join in with activity. Family Club is different.



ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Adapting approaches: The challenges of operating during a pandemic have continued throughout 2021. Although restrictions have eased, some families have naturally been cautious about returning to face to face provision and mixing with other groups. People's mental health continues to be affected and there is a need to provide reassurance and build back confidence. Like many programmes, the restrictions have meant that capacity has limited to fewer numbers of families, especially with indoor provision. However, with lots of creativity and variety, Healthy Blaenavon's FEP has been able to provide Covid-safe sessions and initiatives to try and keep families involved. One example has been to introduce the FitBit challenge. 4 families signed up and were given a Fitbit to do 10 weeks of sessions on Fitbit with various challenges and points to be earned. Points could be exchanged for prizes provided by the Sports Development team such as sports equipment and blenders. Although some families lost motivation during the stop-start nature of restrictions, there were also long-term successes. One family member spoke about successfully losing weight, which they attributed to the motivation of using the Fitbit. Having got involved with the project, they later signed up to other Healthy Blaenavon wrap around sessions.



SUCCESS FACTORS

Partnerships: Although there has been staff turnover in other agencies, there is a strong ethos of partnership working in this area which has benefited the project. As a consequence of the pandemic, there has limited involvement to date from GP Practices and Health Visitors, where there has been staff turnover, although the relationship is good and can be built on. However, the Sports Development team are a core, consistent and well-established partner and the HBO has benefited from their expertise in a sector where they don't have background experience - **"I've learnt a lot from them"**. The HBO is a member of the Healthy Blaenavon Network and this helps especially with signposting and awareness raising. The group includes Doctors, Housing Associations, Schools, Youth Services and the Police and meet monthly and share updates on work, allowing members to be able to signpost 'their' participants to other local services and opportunities, making connections and supporting community cohesion. The group uses WhatsApp to flag opportunities to each other so they know what's on in the local area.

Sharing learning: Drawing on learning and ideas from related health and wellbeing programmes has also been evident. The HBO spoke about how they had drawn on a feedback from community consultation exercise for the 60 Plus Active Leisure Scheme where they stood outside GP Practices to meet people. One simple consultation pointer was to ensure they asked families about what the best time of day was to run sessions, as well as what type of sessions. Effective programming was a key point learnt to ensure success. **"The benefit of this StreetGames funding is that it allows the money to be used as pilots and see what works, to test things for future core delivery"**.

The HBO reflected on the value of networking sessions and opportunities to speak to other FEP organisations across Wales. Having heard the idea of a sports library from Valleys Gymnastics Academy, they have now adopted this approach. The equipment can be used by Youth Services, the Police and Sports Development staff. The HBO hopes this might be extended to Family Club members in due course.

Community engagement: Over the last two years, project staff have learnt more about how best to engage with their local communities. The FEP started off with posters, now the brand has built, **"it has created a bit of movement, people recognise it"**. Having an 'open' offer rather than a referral system was felt to work locally. Families were there because they wanted to be and having a good mix of families from different circumstances has been one of the benefits observed - families 'get on' regardless of their background, and any family could attend if they wanted to. It can help bring communities together. Direct consultation as well as advertising has been key.

"In order for it to work, you need to have those community conversations with people before you start creating something, not the other way around. It doesn't have the same value otherwise...Ask people and be prepared to change. Don't have set ideas."

Meet the Morgans!

They've now completed the StreetGames Family Engagement Project and been awarded a number of prizes. The family were provided with a FitBit health and fitness tracker which monitored their activity over a 10 week period.

The family were suggested a number of walks and physical activities they could take part in. Activities had to be reported to the Healthy Blaenavon Officer each week to earn points. The Morgans have done amazingly well! They've got fitter and are now growing their own vegetables.

"The Family Engagement Project really helped motivate us into exercising" said Sianne.

"We were also complete novices at growing (vegetables) but are enjoying it all."

Dealing with behaviours: At some sessions there has been challenging behaviour to deal with from children, and coaches had struggled to deliver their sessions in these circumstances. The HBO commented that how sometimes adults see the coaches and deliverers as being responsible for their children when they get to a session and take a step back, whereas Family Club staff have encouraged a different way of operating and advocating parental responsibility and involvement. In one example, the DSA introduced their session by giving a talk about observing the rules in sport, listening and having fun. Other activity leaders have seen the benefits of this and adopted a similar approach, setting out their session with the need to listen from the outset. Introducing a 'Code of Conduct' has been raised as an option, and hearing these messages appears to have resulted in parents taking more responsibility and managing any poor behaviour.

Supporting poor nutrition and food poverty: FEP operates in under-served communities and areas where there can be high levels of poverty. These continue to be exacerbated by the pandemic. An advantage of the FEP has been the broad scope of what can be offered and drawing on the connections between being physically active and good nutrition. The HBO has highlighted how FEP sessions can be a platform to discuss and educate families about healthy eating options. One example was observing how young children were often consuming inappropriate energy drinks, which sparked an idea for the Family Club to become 'water-only' and to provide Healthy Blaenavon branded water bottles. Other ideas include introducing a Healthy Eating Wheel to some sessions, accessing funding to purchase a smoothie bike and using additional local funding to provide some cooking sessions for the Family Club members. Healthy Blaenavon has produced a 'Recipes on a budget' guide which has been shared with participants and with the wider network of FEP funded organisations across South Wales.



SUSTAINABILITY PLANS NEXT STEPS

The sessions have allowed parents to get fit with their children and take part together. Parents have enjoyed the sessions and there are examples of it inspiring them to do more, with some of the mums asking if they can have dance sessions. These ideas generated by participants could be supported from other funding and may lead to longer term behaviour changes at the level of the individual. The HBO feels that the project is at the stage where opportunities for families to be active could potentially be provided through core funding and mainstreaming provision rather than a model where participants sustain the activities themselves through volunteering. Core funding would be a decision for Blaenavon Town Council to make in the next financial year. The service provided by Healthy Blaenavon ***“is very much people led, so if people want the Family Club to continue as they do at present, I can continue to offer it and take a proposal to the Council to support it”***. This requires evidence to show the provision is working and achieving the intended outcomes, which is done through case studies and community feedback. ***“The councillors live in the area, so they are aware of it and people talk about it, they have feedback from families who love it”***. Positive word of mouth is one of the best means of encouraging interest and more families want to join in. There is a waiting list for the club and there will be capacity for more families to take part when outdoor activity becomes a viable option beyond the Winter months.

The HBO is aware of other funding sources that could be accessed and one approach would be to support the Family Club to become a constituted club and apply for grants, and/or to consult participants on whether they would be happy to contribute a nominal amount to cover coaches' costs and venue hire. In keeping with the community engagement ethos, a suitable approach may be through the Integrated Wellbeing Network Gwent. The VocalEyes Participatory Budgeting project is being run by Blaenavon Town Council with funding from Public Service Board members. Participatory Budgeting funding is available up to £5k. The process makes use of a platform where people can make suggestions and vote anonymously, with popular ideas then evaluated by a panel. With there being a local demand for Family Club provision, this could be a suggestion put forward.

Healthy Blaenavon continues to see the family engagement approach as a long-term intervention and offering something that is not currently available outside of the HAF resources. Family offers often focus on younger children, and the HBO feels there is scope to develop the FEP further and consider family in the broadest sense and try some targeted work. The project will consider how it can support community safety and work with the Police and Youth Offending teams to address some anti-social behaviour in Blaenavon. This might include providing activities for families with teenagers where there have been relationship breakdowns. FEP sessions provide an opportunity to engage and rebuild the family bond, using sport and physical activity as the mechanism.

For more information about the Healthy Blaenavon Family Engagement Project visit www.healthyblauenavon.co.uk/

