



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

NEWPORT

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 Healthy and Active Fund (HAF), the FEP operates in 7 Local Authorities in South Wales.

In Newport, County in the Community, Newport Live and StreetGames have been engaging with families through links with two primary schools. The planned approach of school-based provision was adapted during lockdowns while schools operated under Covid-19 restrictions and were reluctant to bring external providers on site. These limitations continued through the majority of 2021 and the project has adapted its original plans accordingly.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

In 2020, FEP staff provided direct doorstep support to families during lockdowns, distributing activity packs and sports equipment, food and essentials, including homework from schools – becoming a key link and friendly face. This had the unintended benefit of increasing the visibility of the project and raised the profile of the FEP with local communities and other partners. As the pandemic unfolded, remote provision in the early part of 2021 remained a substantial part of project delivery.

The project team continued to liaise with school Family Engagement Officers (FEOs) to reach families that might benefit from FEP provision. Over the past year, they have provided doorstep, digital and outdoor family engagement opportunities. The team devised and supplied the schools with online content and resources. During the period January to March 2021, digital content was sent directly to FEOs, who were able to ensure that resources get to the right people in the local community.

Provision of digital content continued to run through April to June 2021. The content shared is specific to health and wellbeing and is simple and user friendly. The team are aware it is being used by families from the feedback given by FEOs. As restrictions and the vaccination programme finally began to allow more scope and confidence, October to December 2021 was a positive period in terms of the project being able to offer face to face provision. This face to face element of the project allows the team to build relationships with families and get to know their needs.

Newport Live and County in the Community then signpost families to relevant services in the area. The partnership between the two organisations works well as collectively, the officers are fully aware of the services that are available in Newport. Both organisations have different connections, skill sets and the ability to connect families to different kinds of opportunities that might appeal to them. Pop up sports activities, sport in the park events and a broad range of health and wellbeing offers have been provided, with pop up multi-sports regularly available in school holidays. Some families have continued to engage with the project across the last two years, along with natural turnover as children become older and move through the primary school years.



ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Managing Covid-19 risk: Projects that were devised to work via school partnerships have continued to operate in challenging circumstances, as schools manage the Covid-19 risk for staff and pupils. ***“The issue is not the concept of the FEP – everyone knows that it works and there is a need for it, but the concerns from schools about doing it in the safest possible way to avoid transmission.”*** The management of this risk has meant that for many projects, the numbers of families they were able to engage with have been smaller than intended. Capacity to cater for lots of families has been reduced due to restrictions on indoor space, numbers of adults allowed in group sessions and on minimising the occasions where people can mix.

Contributing to partner goals: FEP provision can play an important role for schools fulfilling their obligations and supporting challenges they also face: ***“Generally, family engagement is a massive part of the school-make up which they struggle with. Little projects like this give them (schools) an opportunity for Heads to bring families and communities to their school. It (family engagement) is something that trustees at the schools always ask about, they want to know what is happening on the ground.”***

Addressing the increasing levels of food poverty: Families have experienced big income drops in the last year. In Newport, a third of children are living in poverty (33%), just above the level for Wales overall (31%). FEP projects are increasingly combining physical activity opportunities with healthy eating and nutrition, often through connections to Fit and Fed, StreetGames' holiday hunger programme and through new interventions. One of these took place at the end of January 2022, with four weeks of cooking sessions for families. This was a mix of face to face and online provision, so that as many families as possible could be supported.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Operating in the right place: The logistics of organising FEP in the right places and spaces is a key part of the role. ***“The big bit (to organise) is where we deliver it and then we have the opportunities to meet people and make people aware of what else is on and have some engagement and signpost through that contact. That is where you will have the most success, it gives opportunities for conversations and you can see the same kids two or three times in the week and chat with parents and see what families want to get out of it”.*** For example, there has been recent success with workshops on bullying and parental awareness of this.

Partnership working: The two organisations have established a strong and positive partnership and the team recognise that this works well: ***“organisations can offer different opportunities and different skill sets and it works when you get together. Delivering together opens up the extent of the exit routes available.”***

An example of one community-specific incentive for regular engagement is match day visits. Families have been given the opportunity to attend Newport County Football home games, visiting as a FEP group, having a meal at the stadium and meeting some of the players. This has provided an opportunity for families to have a day trip and create positive memories together. This reward is proving popular amongst families, and one that County in the Community are keen to continue to provide. ***“Don't underestimate the power of the football club, that is massive and that is an experience that can be offered through match day visits, visiting the facilities and so on”.***

FEP valued by the organisations: Focusing on the family unit is important to both organisations with existing connections via Families First. The team feel that FEP is ***“just a little bit different. Not just a sport programme. The importance of it is very clear. We know that other programmes' scale is a lot bigger but this certainly is valued.”*** Project staff spoke about how FEP tackles some of the underserved communities and how the pandemic has accelerated that thinking and need. There is internal as well as external accountability for delivering FEP effectively. FEP updates form part of the overall feedback on family engagement and learning is captured internal reporting processes.

Flexibility and listening and consulting: The flexibility of FEP is a key enabler and activities can continually adapt and evolve. Project staff are always keen to listen to what the needs of families are - and be as participant-led as possible - rather than being too prescriptive about what they put on. ***“We would have lost families if we had sat there and spoken at them. Implementing that (listening) approach would be one bit of advice. And being adaptable – that is important.”*** The team have developed the confidence to be flexible when communicating schools and have the capability to react to any emerging issues or problems faced by families because of their connections and experience.



SUSTAINABILITY

'Exit routes' and signposting: The role of FEP teams has increasingly become one of 'signposting' to other services and opportunities, as well as delivery and putting on specific sessions. The FEP then has the ability to become a seamless part of overall community provision rather than a standalone project that would have limitations on the numbers of families that could be supported: ***“Signposting opportunities are endless and this can always be done – no limit on numbers.”*** This approach enables families to be able to maintain their own participation and access to opportunities to support their health and wellbeing and free up staff time to engage with new audiences or adapt to emerging issues.

School partnerships will be a priority for the future and Newport Live and County in the Community intend to continue working together beyond the HAF programme. Additional schools can also benefit from the FEP offer, including those that might not be categorised as being in 'underserved' areas, but will have pupils that have encountered adverse childhood experiences (ACES). The need for family engagement work will remain and while it might not be called 'FEP', the concept and approach will still exist. The aim will be for schools to take a role in identifying the families that can be supported through a FEP approach.

Seeking additional funding: This avenue will be discussed with schools and a continued funding cycle will be necessary to maintain some aspects of the provision. While funding is available, it is used to create additional sessions and opportunities to what the team could do already. The funding has allowed the cooking course to take place and given opportunities for the team to have conversations with schools and understand their needs and continue to build and then maintain trusted relationships. Staff are currently working with one school on a £5k bid which makes use of the framework of the FEP project: the range of support that is offered and the signposting element.

Sustained learning: Finally, there is a legacy of learning from the project about how to reach families, how to connect with people remotely and the importance of being agile and flexible in the ways people work.

NEXT STEPS

Project staff are keenly aware of the continued need for the FEP. Over 10,300 children in Newport were living in poverty in 2019/20, with levels increasing since 2015. Almost a quarter of children (23%) in Newport are eligible for free school meals in the local authority. The FEP is a positive way of helping to address health inequalities in the area. It complements and connects with the food support available through Fit and Fed and the broader offer of support across the local authority.

The FEP team intend to gather direct feedback on the families' experiences of the project, to add to the feedback from teachers on the resources that have been provided. First-hand conversations will help the team assess the provision and shape next steps. The four week block of delivery will be opportunity for project staff to do that. Staff are also working with the local community centre to restart provision – a fantastic opportunity right on the school's doorstep to lead on from the school day. Finally, the FEP team are engaging with other stakeholders in relation to the new Health and Wellbeing area of learning in the school curriculum. Through its school partnerships, the FEP can contribute to and complement this part of the learning experience.

