Canterbury Christ Church University

Our Active Community
and Mencap Active Community
Interim Report 2025

The Centre for Sport, Physical Education & Activity Research (SPEAR) is based at Canterbury Christ Church University.

SPEAR undertakes a range of evidence-led analyses, from critical commentaries and reflections on current policy and practice, to commissioned research, evaluation and consultancy.

The Centre's research has been funded by a range of national and international funders such as the International Olympic Committee, World Health Organisation, Terre des Hommes, Department of Health, Department for Education, Mencap, Youth Sport Trust, Wolverhampton Wanderers Foundation, Chance to Shine, Sport Birmingham, parkrun UK and Sport England.

Recent work has focused on sport, physical activity, health and wellbeing in schools and communities.

Research conducted by SPEAR helps guide and inform public policy by contributing to the wider evidence base used by policymakers, providing a rationale for government and commercial investment, and steering programme improvements that enhance the experience of practitioners and participants.

Our Active Community research undertaken by SPEAR and commissioned by Mencap.

Interim Report produced by SPEAR

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February 2025

About Our Active Community

Mencap's 'Our Active Community' is designed to support people with a learning disability access and participate in physical activity within their communities.

The initiative is taking place in nine communities across England.

Communities are supported by Community Partners, each of whom, bar one, support a pair of communities.

Community Partners' roles are to listen to the needs of communities, identify local assets and work with stakeholders to improve physical activity opportunities. Their goal is to create active ecosystems that empower people with a learning disability to stay active, happy, and healthy.

Community Connectors are individuals with a learning disability who bring lived experience to their role. Some have already started and will work closely with Community Partners to advocate for physical activity and inclusion.

Mencap Active Community; a nationwide network developed and facilitated by Mencap, provides national reach and supports wider stakeholders.

Underpinning Our Active Community is a commitment to enable people with a learning disability, and the communities in which they live, to be active, happy and healthy.

Our Active Community aims to expand community engagement, strengthen relationships, and create inclusive activities. These opportunities are to be sustainably funded through a clear understanding of community assets and available resources.

Throughout this report, 'stakeholders' refers to individuals and organisations engaged in Our Active Community.

Community stakeholders are delivery and non-delivery facing, strengthening physical activity awareness and opportunities for people with a learning disability.

Stakeholders also include people with a learning disability co-creating and engaging in Our Active Community.

About the research

SPEAR has been commissioned to research and evaluate Our Active Community from September 2023 to March 2027.

The research explores stakeholders' experiences and perceptions to capture evidence of outcomes achieved. It also draws out lessons learnt about empowering communities, organisations, and people with a learning disability to co-produce solutions to support activity, health and happiness; increase equity, diversity and inclusion; and drive systemic and sustainable change.

This report summarises the research from March 2024 to February 2025 and outlines remaining work.

It provides an overview of the current landscape in each community, including engagement with stakeholders, organisations, and people with a learning disability.

It explores the role of Community Connectors, tracks developments across communities, and evaluates what is working well and the remaining challenges.

The report will also highlight key successes, such as new activities, resources, funding, and any impact on people with a learning disability to be active, happy and healthy.

Data informing this report originates from 156 focus groups, interviews or conversations, deriving from consultation with:

98 stakeholders

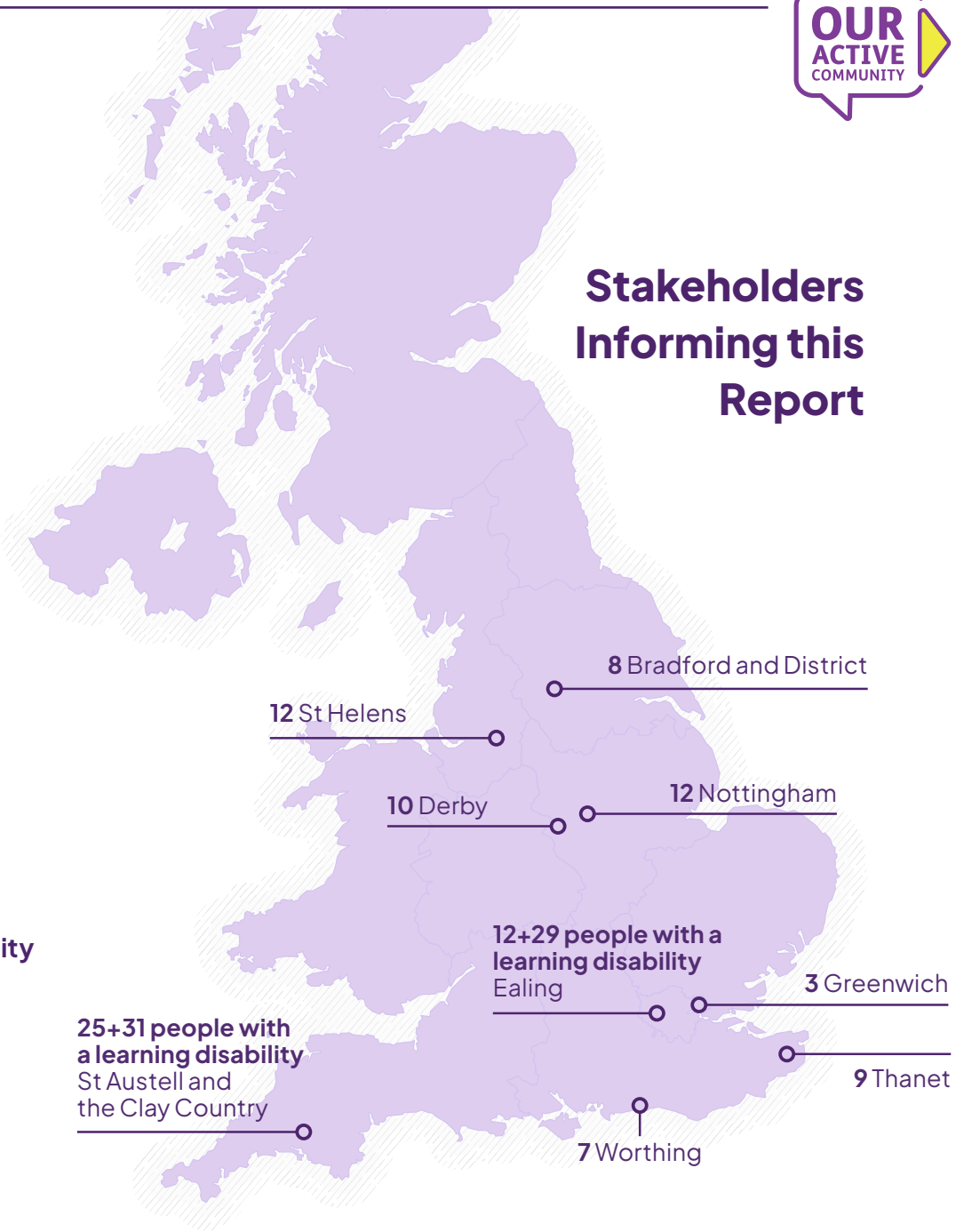
60 people with a learning disability

4 Community Connectors

6 Community Partners

+ Mencap's Network Development Partner

Stakeholders Informing this Report



Our Active Community Research: Progress and Planning

	Progress to date	Work remaining
Welcome Pack	✓ Our Active Community Welcome Pack distributed to Community Partners and stakeholders	✓ Continuing to distribute to new stakeholders engaging in Our Active Community and the research
Remote Stakeholder Consultation	✓ Remote stakeholder interview proformas developed ✓ Remote consultation undertaken with the 6 Community Partners, 4 Community Connectors and 98 stakeholders from the 9 communities ✓ Remote consultation includes interviews and focus groups with Community Partners, Community Connectors and community stakeholders	✓ Sustained telephone/video consultation with Community Partners, Community Connectors (if in post), and stakeholders from the 9 communities ✓ Remote consultation with individuals, groups and organisations part of Mencap Active Community nationwide network ✓ Conversations will explore and track experiences and perceptions across Our Active Community and Mencap Active Community. Data will inform Community Case Studies and Interim and Final Reports
Research Visits	✓ Research visit proformas developed ✓ Research visits to St Austell and the Clay Country, and Ealing ✓ Research visits include observation of activities, interviews and focus groups with Community Partners, Community Connectors (if in post), stakeholders and people with a learning disability	✓ Research visits to Nottingham and Derby by May 2025 ✓ Research visits to Greenwich, Worthing, Thanet, St Helens and Bradford by February 2026 ✓ Second research visit to all 9 communities by February 2027
Secondary Analysis		✓ Secondary review and analysis of Mencap's monitoring and survey data
Delivery of Reports Case Studies & Community Video Snapshots	✓ 2024 Interim Report completed ✓ 2025 Interim Report completed ✓ 2 Community Case Studies	✓ Completion of 16 Case Studies (2 tracking case studies for each of the 9 communities), 9 Community Video Snapshots, 2026 Interim Report and 2027 Final Report



Community Engagement

Stakeholder Engagement

Who's involved?

Our Active Community is engaging a diverse range of organisations and stakeholders across its nine communities.

Councils at district and county levels are involved in all communities, alongside the NHS and community healthcare organisations in Greenwich, St Helens, Nottingham, Ealing and St Austell. Day centres, integral for Our Active Community, are involved across Worthing, Bradford, St Helens, Nottingham, Derby, and St Austell. Mencap Network Partners, Services, and Support have a presence in Thanet, Worthing, Ealing, St Austell, and Nottingham.

Active Partnerships are supporting in Thanet, Worthing, Bradford, Derby, Nottingham, and St Austell, and Community Partners are connecting with Special Educational Needs schools in Thanet, Bradford, and St Austell.

Additionally, charities and advocacy groups and a parent-carer forum in St Helens, further strengthen the networks.

Our Active Community is also working with community hubs and a local radio station.

How were they involved?

Community Partners began engaging stakeholders in the nine communities by asset mapping, identifying growth opportunities, and building relationships through regular in-person presence.

This immersion supports the community-led and place-based approach but also presents challenges, as one Community Partner notes, "there was quite a bit of work to do in clarifying what the communities process is, the approach and what community-led means in terms of creating something sustainable."

Community Partners found some stakeholders initially struggled to understand the project's purpose, while others saw funding as a key driver for engagement. This suggests while the initiative offers long-term community benefits, some stakeholders may have primarily been more motivated by immediate, tangible incentives rather than the broader strategic objectives of Our Active Community.

Furthermore, engagement levels varied at first, especially in communities that were less established or where Community Partners were less familiar, highlighting the need for existing relationships and local infrastructure to facilitate participation.

Ongoing challenges reported by Community Partners are engaging Special Educational Needs schools, sustaining momentum and broadening stakeholder engagement.

Expectations

Conversations with community stakeholders reveal they are engaging with Our Active Community to create meaningful impact by improving access, raising awareness, and building networks and partnerships.

A key focus is a desire to expand opportunities and ensure inclusivity, as one Thanet stakeholder highlights, "we want to enhance opportunities and grow reach - we are really keen to make sure what we are offering is inclusive," reflecting a commitment to accessibility and efforts to include diverse voices.

Collaboration also plays a vital role, with a stakeholder in St Austell emphasising the importance of bringing partners together and "joining up the dots." Across all communities, the shared goal appears to be building capacity, connecting people, opening doors, creating lasting impact and empowering people with a learning disability.

Networking and partnerships

Stakeholders cite how Our Active Community is growing partnerships while creating new connections and shared learning across communities.

In Ealing, "different people have now been talking and working together," while Derby also acknowledges the importance of "making connections," illustrating how Our Active Community is bringing together community stakeholders who may not have been previously engaged with each other. This can lead to more integrated community engagement and possible cross-sector collaboration.

In Thanet, stakeholders see "so much potential and so much scope" in these collaborations and appreciate the opportunity to "learn from all the other communities as well," reflecting a recognition of the possible broad and long-term impact of Our Active Community.

Viewing Our Active Community as a catalyst for continued growth and innovation as well as an opportunity for knowledge-sharing through peer learning. While Worthing stakeholders highlight the value of external support, "there isn't always capacity for everyone to organise these things."

Collectively, these insights underscore the project's role in bridging gaps, facilitating collaboration, and strengthening community networks.

"We want to build connections."

Community forums

Due to the necessary time needed to build relationships and grow attendance the community forums were launched last autumn. These are a space for stakeholders to connect, gather insights, and drive local initiatives.

The forums emerged from asset mapping and stakeholder engagement efforts by the Community Partners.

These forums develop partnerships, highlight existing resources, and inform funding applications. In Thanet, stakeholders appreciate the opportunity to "find out what's already going on" and explore ways to make information more accessible.

Worthing's forum was praised for its networking, with one stakeholder stating, "I think the networking we've had in the forum has been really good," while another notes, "there's a real want from everyone around the table to be providing something."

St Helens saw strong engagement, with stakeholders eager for action, while in St Austell, forums are seen to provide valuable connections.

Community Partners note wanting to engage more community stakeholders, particularly people with a learning disability and "hope to grow the forum and use it as a place that will benefit the progress of Our Active Community."

Some stakeholders, despite perceiving the forums as positive, report having limited capacity to attend the forums, whether in person or virtually.

This suggests while the value and potential impact of the forums are recognised, there are underlying challenges in engaging fully with them, indicating a need for greater flexibility in how the forums are structured or their accessibility considered further.

Beyond these forums, Community Partners have integrated into existing disability networks or formed specialised working groups, broadening their potential impact with Our Active Community.

This demonstrates a strategic extension of Our Active Community's influence beyond its community forums, embedding its principles within established networks.

By aligning with existing disability networks, Community Partners are able to leverage pre-existing relationships, expertise, and resources to enhance their reach and effectiveness.

"I think the networking we've had in the forum has been really good."

Community Partners

The Community Partner is a role in Our Active Community to drive the work within designated communities, each typically supporting two locations.

Community	Community Partner
Bradford and District	Alex Craddock
St Helens	
Nottingham	Mat Richardson
Derby	
Ealing	Kaylee Robinson
Greenwich	
Thanet	Laura Appleton
Worthing	
St Austell and the Clay Country	Chris Ballett

Positive perceptions and experiences

Stakeholders emphasise the Community Partner role as instrumental in forging connections, sharing information, and driving collaboration within communities.

Many express positivity about its potential impact, reflected in one stakeholder's comment, "we feel Mencap have been really supportive, I'm really optimistic about what we can achieve."

This sense of support and encouragement from Mencap indicates the project is being perceived as both a facilitator and an enabler of change.

In St Austell, local authority stakeholders hope collaboration with the Community Partner will help them "understand what the voices of people with a learning disability say about the council's priorities," ensuring people with a learning disability can actively inform decision-making.

Similarly in Ealing the role is seen as a valuable link to other organisations with one stakeholder stating, "it's been great, we've connected with other organisations and stakeholders," underscoring Our Active Community's function as a connector which can lead to a more integrated approach to addressing community needs.

In Worthing and Thanet, the initial Community Partner's efforts in establishing meaningful connections were recognised: "we are working really well with Sarah, she's made some great connections."

Since then, the interim support from Mat and Chris has been well received while awaiting Laura, the new Community Partner to start in late January.

Overcoming concerns and challenges

There was however some initial uncertainty about the role, one Worthing stakeholder admits, "I am probably still a little unsure as to what the role of the Community Partner is, while in Nottingham there was "confusion over the role and their responsibilities."

This suggests while Our Active Community and the Community Partner role holds potential, its early stages may have lacked clarity in communication or definition of the role.

Despite initial uncertainties, regular updates, sharing of information, and ability to build on previous work demonstrate the value of the Community Partner's role to stakeholders.

Furthermore, Community Partners express a long-term vision of sustainability, hoping by the end of Our Active Community, they will be "invisible, with the communities having created systemic sustainable change and taken on these lead roles, so there is no longer a need for us."

This ambition highlights the initiative's focus on empowerment rather than dependency, ensuring communities can self-sustain the progress made.

"It's been great, we've connected with other organisations and stakeholders."



The Communities

This section explores the current landscape within the nine communities focusing on existing physical activity provision.

It also explores stakeholders' perceptions of the needs and preferences of people with a learning disability, particularly barriers they face, their confidence and motivation to be physically active, and how best to improve their access to opportunities.

Current provision

Conversations with community stakeholders highlight provision for people with a learning disability to be physically active varies across the nine communities, with some offering more opportunities than others.

Despite existing options, stakeholders frequently describe provision as "insufficient" and "limited" suggesting gaps remain.

They also note how opportunities are not always "inclusive" or "accessible". In St Helens and Derby, day services attended by people with a learning disability appear to offer many opportunities, but stakeholders remain unclear about accessible opportunities beyond these settings.

Insights from stakeholders indicate most provision occurs during the day, with a noticeable lack of options in the evenings and on weekends, which may further limit engagement.

Across communities, stakeholders identify football as the primary activity for people with a learning disability, followed by swimming, walking, adapted cycling, cricket, and basketball.

Rugby and table tennis are available in four of the nine communities, while three others offer Zumba, dance, trampolining, boccia, horse riding, and multi-sport sessions. Worthing and Bradford are linked to the Special Olympics, while boxing is available in Bradford and St Helens. Worthing, St Helens, and Derby host dedicated gym and swim sessions.

Additional opportunities include climbing, gardening, yoga, bowling and taster sessions.

Community needs

Stakeholders across most communities acknowledge limited provision for people with a learning disability and emphasise the need for more inclusive and accessible opportunities.

Key barriers mentioned by stakeholders include accessibility challenges, transport issues, a lack of inclusive options, and reliance on carers or support workers.

Transport issues, reported in six of the nine communities, may continue to hinder engagement with current and new provision. Similarly, six communities cite accessibility challenges, particularly for those seeking independent access.

Many people with a learning disability across the communities rely on carers or support workers, whose availability and influence can directly impact engagement. A stakeholder from Worthing highlights the need for "access and transport and someone to support them to get there."

More broadly, stakeholders in Worthing, Bradford, and St Helens note sporting activities in particular often lack inclusivity, making mainstream sports provision difficult to access as a way to be physically active.

A Bradford stakeholder states, "I don't think many sports provision is inclusive; there is no resource or skill to help improve the sessions," underscoring the need for inclusive coaching and staff training."

"Need help to get there."

Additionally, limited times and locations, particularly for swimming in Thanet, Worthing and Ealing, may further restrict access, as well as some leisure centres report not being fully inclusive.

Confidence to be physically active

Confidence in being physically active varies among people with a learning disability as stakeholders suggest some feel self-assured while others may need additional support, either to access the activity or feel confident in their ability.

Some community stakeholders suggest a trusting relationship with activity providers and caregivers may play a crucial role in building confidence, as would the effort of greater inclusivity of people with a learning disability.

These conversations with stakeholders highlight the needs of people with a learning disability, to engage in, and access opportunities to be physically active.

Motivation to be physically active

Insights from stakeholders suggest activities should be enriching, diverse, fun and enjoyable to support the engagement of people with a learning disability.

Stakeholders recommend offering options like dance, yoga, and outdoor experiences to cater to different interests.

Many stakeholders note making activities fun and socially engaging is key, as people with a learning disability are often motivated by friendships and social connections.

A stakeholder from Bradford further emphasises how initiatives should be "driven by people with learning disabilities" to support engagement.



Community Connectors

The role of a Community Connector

The Community Connector role within Our Active Community is for individuals with a learning disability who have lived experience and can amplify the voices of their peers.

Funded by Mencap until 2027 but hosted by community-based organisations to ensure long-term sustainability of the role.

Community Connectors will work closely with a Community Partner one day a week while employed by the host organisation, receiving additional support where needed.

Recruiting Community Connectors took place after the initial phases of Our Active Community, as Community Partners first needed to engage stakeholders, build relationships, and identify organisations interested in hosting the role.

So far, four Community Connectors have started their roles across three communities, two in Bradford, one in Ealing, and one in St Austell, while recruitment continues for the remaining six communities.

Community	Host Organisation	Community Connector
Bradford and District	Summat Creative	Jason and Barney
St Helens	BuzzHub	
Nottingham	Me Time Mencap	
Derby	Umbrella and Community Links	
Ealing	Ealing Mencap	Ibraheem
Greenwich	Volunteer Centre Greenwich and Brighter Futures	
Thanet		
Worthing	Worthing Mencap	
St Austell and the Clay Country	Cornwall Neighborhoods for Change	Wendi

Finding a host organisation

Time was taken to find host organisations with Community Partners stressing the need to select the right host and ensure there is available support.

Host organisations, now selected in 8 of the 9 communities, are enthusiastic about the role, viewing it as a chance to enhance inclusivity, strengthen local networks, and create a lasting impact.

Community Partners suggest its structure, "being employed by somebody in the community," will help sustain its impact long-term.

Ealing Mencap is "excited to take on the role" as an opportunity to increase employment of people with a learning disability, while in Bradford, there is a strong commitment to "help and make it a success."

Despite initial disappointment among organisations in Worthing over the selection process, there remains eagerness to support and integrate the role into the community. However, concerns about capacity and expertise were commonly voiced by community stakeholders.

In Greenwich, many organisations wanted to host but feel they lack resources to "support the person to be the best they could be." Similarly, in St Austell, some organisations hesitated over their ability to provide adequate support.

An organisation in Thanet wanting to be the host organisation voiced feeling nervous about stepping into an unfamiliar role, acknowledging other organisations have more experience.

Despite these concerns, the shared commitment to making the Community Connector role successful is evident among all host organisations. Insights from community stakeholders demonstrate the recruitment process was inclusive and supportive.

Thanet stakeholders want to ensure the Community Connectors have clear guidance, as one notes, "we've linked with Mencap's Community Support Group to help us in developing an Easy Read staff handbook for the new Community Connector," demonstrating efforts to ensure the role is accessible.

Perceived benefits & concerns

The Community Connector role is widely praised for elevating lived experience and promoting inclusion.

Worthing stakeholders call it "brilliant" and "fantastic" for bringing in someone with lived experience, while in Ealing, it is seen as "leading by example" by placing people with a learning disability in paid employment. Bradford stakeholders highlight its role in "increasing workforce capacity" and sharing good practice, while St Austell stakeholders reinforce the importance of centring people with a learning disability perspectives, "it's for people with a learning disability, so why wouldn't we gain advice from them?"

The role is widely seen as transformative and enhances inclusion by valuing lived experience, being praised for promoting a person-centred approach where people with a learning disability actively shape services.

However, there are concerns about responsibilities, support, and sustainability. Thanet stakeholders acknowledge it as "a great idea," but are potentially worried about pressure on the individual.

Stakeholders in St Austell and Worthing raise concerns over clarity of responsibilities and support, especially if Community Partners are away.

Community Partners emphasise the need for training and reasonable adjustments, suggesting support from Mencap or similar organisation which improve accessibility.

These concerns highlight the importance of contingency planning, training and support for the Community Connectors and host organisations.

Community Connectors' motivations and hopes

Conversations with Community Connectors, who have started their role, indicate strong motivation to support others and improve opportunities in their communities.

In Ealing, Ibraheem sees the role as an opportunity for skill development and to help people with a learning disability be more physically active. In Bradford, Barney emphasises the difficulty of finding employment, stating, "it's hard to find anywhere for anyone with a learning disability, like proper paid employment," and hopes to "give others the encouragement to get out and about."

Jason shares a similar motivation, saying, "I wanted to do something to give back to people with a learning disability."

In St Austell, Wendi is passionate about improving engagement, saying, "I like to help people as much as I can." These insights reflect a collective commitment to advocacy, empowerment, and creating more inclusive opportunities for people with a learning disability.

"I applied for this job to prove I could do it and prove that people with a learning disability can do these things."

Community Connectors' achievements and plans

Community Connectors have taken on key roles in engaging their communities, facilitating events, and discovering local initiatives.

In Ealing, Ibraheem has delivered presentations, reviewed funding applications, and is appreciating support from his Community Partner, saying, "we have a really lovely time, we are always laughing." In Bradford, Barney led an Our Active Community event which received "high praises" and is working on mapping accessible spaces, while Jason is focused on setting up a junior parkrun, saying, "I am enjoying what I am doing, I didn't think I'd like it as much as I do."

In St Austell, Wendi has been part of the walking group and is helping to create a community dance group for people with a learning disability, whilst connecting with local stakeholders.

There is positive feedback on their ability to share experiences and engage others, as one stakeholder notes, "as long as there are things in place to support them, they really do get a voice."

Their efforts show clear progress in building confidence, making connections, and shaping more inclusive opportunities, enabled by the support of the Community Partners and host organisations.

Community Partners have also taken steps to establish a monthly meeting for Community Connectors across the nine communities. These meetings serve as a platform to provide updates, exchange best practices, voice concerns, request additional support, learn new skills and celebrate achievements.



Developments

Network Developments

Across communities, Our Active Community has formed and developed valuable networking opportunities, leading to further partnerships and collaborations.

In Derby, involvement with Our Active Community has strengthened connections with one stakeholder noting, “getting involved with Mencap has helped me build bridges with other organisations, I’m doing a bit more work with Active Derbyshire.”

In St Austell, networking through Our Active Community has led to partnerships in inclusive sports. A key example is the football collaboration with a local leisure centre, county football club and a learning disability charity which was already established but gained additional momentum through further connections at one of the Community Forums.

In Greenwich, the Community Partner has supported the development of a co-produced dance taster session after meeting a dance instructor at another forum, highlighting the increasing impact of Our Active Community in developing networks and partnerships.

These relationships have opened doors to cross-sector collaboration, creating links that might not have otherwise formed as another stakeholder notes, “we are having meetings with a couple of different organisations we’ve met through Our Active Community, otherwise we wouldn’t have necessarily crossed paths.”

These network developments highlight the impact of facilitated connections in strengthening community collaborations and expanding opportunities for people with a learning disability.

“The forum is useful to connect and meet others.”

Seed Funding

How it works

Our Active Community provides funding as part of the project, with up to £60,000 available per community over the project's duration, averaging £20,000 per year.

Seed funding is to be used to support activities that promote physical activity and inclusion. An Easy Read information sheet explains guidelines, and organisations are informed through forums, emails, and meetings.

Applying can take time, but support is available to help organisations submit applications likely to be successful. A Community Partner notes how it is, "worthwhile having the time to get the applications right" and how the focus is to "ensure money is spent in the right way," so funds are directed toward projects that have measurable community impact.



Funding guidelines

Our Active Community advises seed funding applications should promote physical activity for people with a learning disability and consider long-term sustainability.

Applicants are also encouraged to collaborate with other community organisations, address community needs, hear from people with a learning disability and add something new or different to the community. Additionally, they should consider the potential benefits for the wider community.

Funding panel and decision-making

Funding panels are being created in each community to review applications, one stakeholder comments when asked about their thoughts, "I think the idea of the panel to make the decisions is fantastic."

Funding panels include actively engaged stakeholders, but people with a learning disability play a key role, holding equal or majority representation.

Their participation should ensure funded projects reflect the priorities and experiences of those they aim to support. Panels review applications with a focus on feasibility, inclusivity, and sustainability.

While some communities currently lack a panel, existing ones have been described as "positive," "engaging," and "interesting."

Ensuring funding decisions are driven by those directly affected by projects strengthens the impact of Our Active Community, making it a truly participatory initiative and community-led.

Seventeen funding applications have been approved so far across the communities, with further applications to be reviewed in 4 of the communities. Worthing is yet to submit any applications, with the Community Partner voicing, " We hope to get funding through soon."

"It was great to hear about the available funding."

Community	Approved	Other applications *(awaiting approval or unsuccessful)*
Bradford and District	✓ Learning disability gym sessions ✓ Boccia ✓ Boxercise classes ✓ Mixed ability cricket	✓ 1 application unsuccessful due to not being in line with funding guidelines
St Helens	✓ Football sessions, holiday camps & upskilling of coaches	✓ 1 application for football sessions
Nottingham	✓ Rebound therapy & multi-sport sessions ✓ Dancing sessions ✓ Guided walks	
Derby	✓ Non-contact boxing sessions	✓ 1 application for getting active through community gardening
Ealing	✓ Multi-sport sessions	✓ 1 application unsuccessful due to not being in line with funding guidelines ✓ 1 application for a multi-sport festival for disabled young people
Greenwich	✓ Yoga sessions ✓ Creative dance sessions and performance ✓ Zumba sessions ✓ 12–week sports leaders course	
Thanet	✓ Supporting people to access community gym facilities	✓ 1 application for skateboarding, circus skills & judo sessions ✓ 2 applications unsuccessful due to not being in line with funding guidelines
Worthing		
St Austell and Clay Country	✓ New adapted bike ✓ Table Tennis sessions and community outreach	✓ 4 applications – Dance sessions, watersports sessions, Clay area multi-sports sessions, Clay area dance sessions

mencap ACTIVE COMMUNITY



Mencap Active Community

Establishing the Wider Network

Mencap Active Community is a nationwide network designed to reflect, broaden, and build upon the work done in the nine communities, while also supporting initiatives beyond these areas.

This wider network brings together organisations, groups, and individuals committed to increasing opportunities for people with a learning disability to be active, happy, and healthy.

By expanding beyond the initial nine communities, Mencap Active Community connects partners nationally as part of this network, sharing best practice, learnings, and successes. It also strengthens links between the care services and sport sectors, providing shared resources and promoting initiatives that improve participation among people with a learning disability.

How Mencap Active Community came about

Mencap Active Community emerged from conversations with 27 organisations, including people with a learning disability, day services, providers, councils, network partners, and Active Partnerships.

Many of these connections stemmed from Mencap's previous Round the World Challenge and the ongoing Our Active Community project.

These discussions revealed a strong demand for greater access to resources, training, networking, and shared learning. By responding to these needs, Mencap Active Community hopes to expand the impact of Our Active Community, creating a wider movement for change and inclusion across the UK.

What partners want from the network

For partners involved in Mencap Active Community, a strong sense of community and additional support were key factors to their engagement.

Many value the opportunity to connect, learn from others, and gain insights from different regions, with one partner sharing, "we're keen to learn as much as we can," while another highlights the importance of "sharing knowledge across the communities."

A key priority is widening access to physical activity for people with a learning disability, alongside securing funding, building partnerships, and advocating for change. Training, practical resources, and shared learning were also seen as vital, with partners recognising the importance of collaboration rather than duplicating efforts, one partner comments, "let's share best practice rather than everyone re-inventing the wheel."

Webinars

The Mencap Active Community webinars create a space for partners to connect, share best practice, and explore key themes.

Shaped by their needs, the sessions highlight regional projects and encourage open discussions.

The first webinar in December 2024 laid the foundation for ongoing engagement, with around four planned each year. Partners value the format, with one noting, "having those spotlights on particular regions or projects is a really good way of being able to share best practice," while another says, "I'm definitely planning on attending the next one."

These webinars may not only strengthen connections but also drive collective progress in increasing opportunities for people with a learning disability.

Web portal

The Mencap Active Community web portal has been designed to be a central hub for partners, providing easy access to resources, training, and key information.

Designed for announcements, events, and news, it serves as a collaborative space for sharing knowledge and opportunities.

Before launching the web portal, 15 people signed up, showing early engagement and interest. While challenges exist in integrating open data sharing, the platform continues to evolve.

One partner notes, "I'm looking forward to seeing how the portal develops as I think it would be a really good resource for people to access," while another highlights the value of its features, saying, "the training element would be really useful."

The Learning Disability and Sport workshops

This workshop delivered by Mencap is offered through Mencap Active Community and equips individuals with knowledge and confidence to better support people with a learning disability in sport and physical activity.

Co-led by tutors with lived experience, these sessions provide valuable insights and practical strategies for inclusive delivery.

Since September 2023, 24 workshops have trained 356 people, with plans to run 12 annually and expand the co-tutor workforce.

Partners recognise their impact, with one noting, "we've done the training for sport with people with a learning disability, which was really helpful," while another highlights their importance for those new to inclusive coaching, saying,

"it is perhaps useful for people who want to reach out and work with people with learning disabilities but lack confidence."

"Interested to see what's going on across the other regions."

Plans and Next Steps

Mencap Active Community's next steps focus on strengthening connections, expanding resources, and increasing opportunities for people with a learning disability to have a voice.

Plans include regular webinars, fully launching the web portal, and creating more networking opportunities, both online and in person.

While geographical spread presents challenges, partners see value in occasional face-to-face meetings, with one noting, "even once a year it would be a great opportunity to network as it's easier when you are face to face."

Involving people with lived experience remains a priority, as another partner highlights, "bringing in people with learning disabilities will be really helpful to give opportunities for them to have a voice."

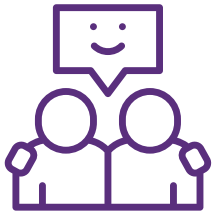
With these plans in place, the network is set to grow and evolve, as one partner comments, "I think the plans sound really robust." Mencap Active Community is building a practical, collaborative network that improves learning, resource-sharing, and inclusion for people with a learning disability.

It should create a sustainable framework for better access to physical activity for people with a learning disability across England.

"If we can bring people in as much as possible, that would be great!"



Headline Findings



Community Engagement

Stakeholder engagement

Our Active Community is engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including councils, NHS and healthcare organisations, day centres, Special Educational Needs schools, charities, and advocacy groups.

While enthusiasm is high, some stakeholders initially struggled to understand the project's purpose, and engagement levels varied across communities.

Networking, partnerships and community forums

Our Active Community is encouraging collaboration between stakeholders, creating new connections and shared learning opportunities.

Community forums are emerging as key spaces for engagement, though some stakeholders face challenges in attending.

External networks and disability groups further support Our Active Community's long-term impact.

Community Partners

Community Partners play a crucial role in building relationships, sharing information, and embedding Our Active Community within communities.

While their role was initially unclear to some, ongoing engagement has demonstrated their value.

Their long-term aim is for communities to sustain progress independently beyond Our Active Community.

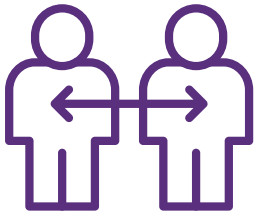


The Communities

Provision for people with a learning disability varies across communities but is often described as “insufficient” and lacking inclusivity.

Barriers such as accessibility, transport, and reliance on carers further limit engagement, while low confidence and motivation highlight the need for more inclusive opportunities.

While football, swimming, and adapted cycling are common, stakeholders stress the importance of offering diverse activities like dance, yoga, and multi-sport sessions.



Community Connectors

Community Connectors are empowering people with a learning disability by amplifying their voices, encouraging inclusion, and shaping accessible opportunities.

While early progress is promising, with Community Connectors engaging in events and advocacy, challenges remain in ensuring support, clarifying responsibilities, and ensuring long-term sustainability.

Despite these concerns, stakeholders widely praise the role as transformative, with many seeing it as a step toward greater employment and leadership opportunities for people with a learning disability.

Developments

Our Active Community is strengthening cross-sector partnerships, with networking efforts leading to new collaborations and inclusive sport opportunities.

Seed funding supports physical activity initiatives, guided by community-led panels where people with a learning disability hold key roles.

While most communities have active panels, some are still developing them.

Stakeholders praise the process for its transparency and impact, ensuring funding is directed toward sustainable, inclusive initiatives that meet local needs.

Mencap Active Community

This wider network initiative is strengthening national networks, connecting organisations and individuals to share best practice and expand opportunities for people with a learning disability.

Webinars, a web portal, and training workshops support knowledge-sharing and inclusion, while plans for in-person networking and greater lived experience involvement continue to evolve.

With growing engagement, the initiative is building a sustainable framework for increasing access to physical activity for people with a learning disability.

Recommendations

Develop consistent communications

Work towards providing consistent and clear communications regarding the Community Partner role at the outset.

This will avoid initial uncertainties among new stakeholders particularly about the Community Partner's roles and responsibilities.

The regular meetings and updates for all stakeholders are useful and successful because they continue to improve consistency of understanding of Our Active Community's aims, roles, and progress. Consider exploring new platforms or alternative methods to further enhance communication and engagement across communities

Continue to invest in capacity building

Continue to offer training and support to smaller or newer organisations, because this helps them build confidence and capacity to be able to engage with Our Active Community.

Consider creating a mentorship network that might pair up experienced organisations with newer ones, to foster problem-sharing or solving, collaboration and ongoing capacity development.

Enhance community forums

Grow attendance and participation further by offering flexible formats such as providing hybrid or rotating meeting times, to enable participation for stakeholders facing attendance barriers.

Consider sharing meeting agendas, background information, tasks and other relevant materials to all community stakeholders prior to the meetings, to ensure that everyone can participate, regardless of their ability to attend in person.

Strengthen support for Community Connectors

Continue to provide Community Connectors and host organisations with ongoing training and accessible resources.

Continue to provide clear guidance, signposting for support, and comprehensive training, while establishing contingency plans for when Community Partners are unavailable.

Enhance provision of a diverse range of physical activities

Continue to support and enhance the provision of a wider range of physical activities to include activities such as dance, yoga and outdoor experiences catering for a range of interests.

Foster social engagement

Emphasise the social benefits of physical activities, recognising that some people with a learning disability are motivated by friendships and social connections.

Consider monitoring responses to activities focused on team sports, group challenges or community events that incorporate social aspects as part of the activities and opportunities to be active, to see if these are well received and could be offered more regularly.

Encourage sustainable activity development

Consider supporting projects with funding for continuation and growth, beyond seed funding, including shared delivery and local investment strategies to ensure longer-term sustainability

Strengthen strategic planning

Continue to plan strategically with a short-term, medium-and long-term plan to develop strategies for handing over leadership to communities, to ensure self-sufficiency and sustainability in the long term, including vision and growth planning.

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