



Community Case Study 2025

St Helens Community

Our Active Community is an initiative across England dedicated to enhancing opportunities for people with a learning disability to be active, happy and healthy.

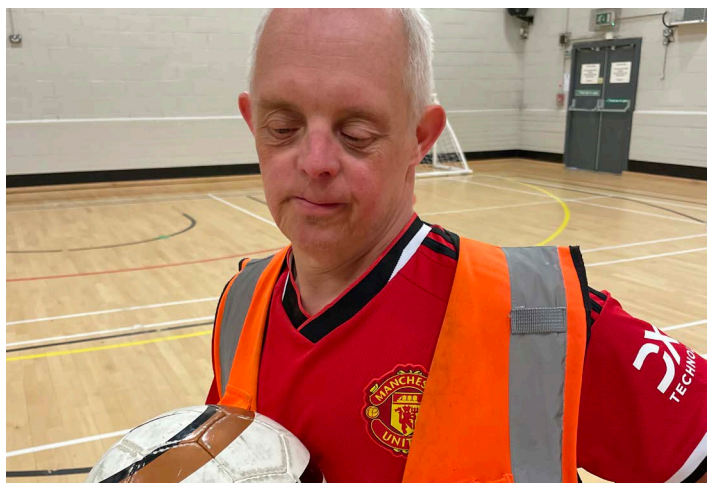
It has been created as a way for people with a learning disability, stakeholders and organisations to connect, network, seek training and provision, as well as to access resources and funding.

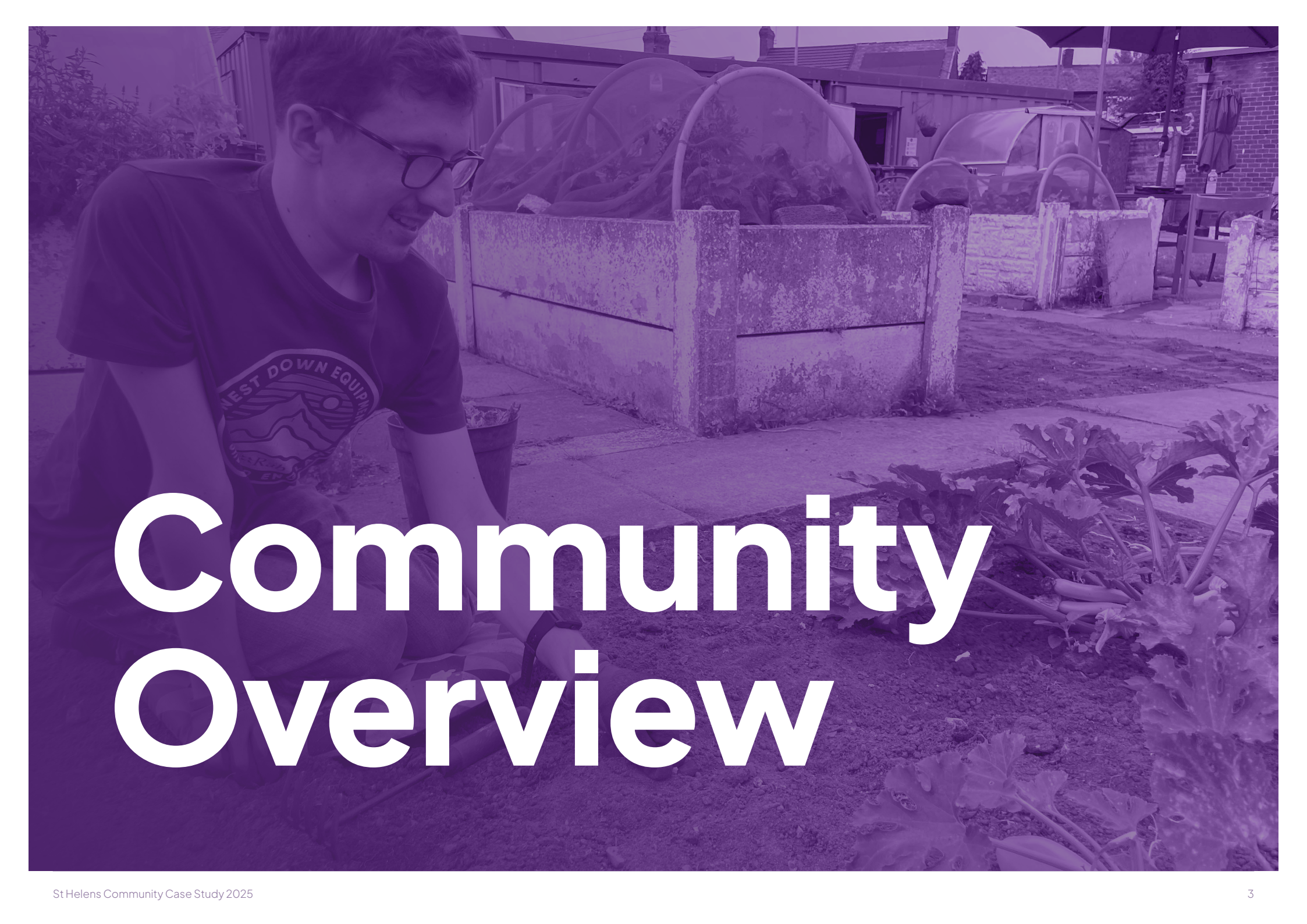
By fostering collaboration, harnessing a community-led approach, building networks and capturing the voices of people with a learning disability, Our Active Community promotes inclusion, encourages participation, and aims to empower people with a learning disability to access opportunities to be physically active in their community.

Data sources

This case study was developed based on 4 focus groups and 32 interviews or conversations with 19 stakeholders and 27 people with a learning disability from remote consultations and a research visit in August 2025.

The data informing this case study was collected between November 2023 – August 2025.



A photograph of a man with glasses and a dark t-shirt, smiling and working in a garden. He is kneeling on the ground, and there are various plants and a raised garden bed in the background. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent purple overlay. The text 'Community Overview' is written in large, white, sans-serif font across the lower half of the image.

Community Overview

Community Background

¹ Census 2021. (2022). How life has changed in St. Helens: Census 2021. Retrieved 4 November 2025, from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E08000013/>

² St Helens Borough Council (2022). St Helens – Our Borough [PDF]. Retrieved 4 November 2025, https://www.sthelens.gov.uk/media/3604/St-Helens-Our-Borough/pdf/State_of_the_Borough_Report_2022.pdf?m=637842354530370000

³ Care Quality Commission (2025). St Helens Borough Council: local authority assessment. Retrieved 4 November 2025, <https://www.cqc.org.uk/care-services/local-authority-assessment-reports/sthelens-0525>

⁴ St Helens Borough Council (2025). Green light for new expanded St Helens Transport Interchange. Retrieved 4 November 2025, <https://news.sthelens.gov.uk/article/13811/Green-light-for-new-expanded-St-Helens-Transport-Interchange>

St Helens Borough in Merseyside has an estimated population of approximately 183,200¹, with around 2,600 people having a learning disability².

Most residents identify as White British (97%), with only a small proportion from Asian (1.4%) and Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups (1.1%)¹. Positioned between Liverpool and Manchester, St Helens is described by a local stakeholder as “quite a compact borough and not a massive city”.

The area blends built-up town centres, former industrial zones and surrounding semi-rural landscapes, with 65% of the borough lying within the green belt².

St Helens faces significant deprivation, with around 43% of residents living in neighbourhoods among the most deprived 20% in England³. One local stakeholder describes one area called Parr as “a really deprived area within St Helens, there basically isn’t anything there”. Others echo similar concerns,

adding that “resources have shrunk over time”. These social and economic challenges may influence residents’ access to local services, leisure and recreational activities.

Public transport accessibility varies across St Helens. While many wards are linked by bus or train to the town centre, stakeholder feedback notes challenges: “Transport is different depending on where you live, it could be two buses to access the leisure centres, and in the evening fewer buses are running.”

A major £35 million investment in a new town-centre interchange aims to enhance connectivity and improve travel experiences, with a strong emphasis on accessibility⁴.

Despite these challenges, St Helens is often described as a “close-knit community”, with strong local networks and a sense of shared identity².

Combined with the borough’s compact geography and ongoing regeneration, these qualities provide a positive foundation for initiatives such as Mencap’s Our Active Community that aim to improve access, inclusion and wellbeing.

“St Helens is quite a deprived area”

Stakeholders

Engaging with stakeholders

Our Active Community in St Helens is led by Alex, the Community Partner, who has taken a proactive approach to engaging stakeholders.

Initially, Alex wanted to focus on building relationships with local authorities, Active Partnerships, leisure facilities, and community organisations.

Community stakeholders mention that he makes a conscious effort to meet in person, which may help to build trust and understanding.

Building relationships

St Helens benefits from a long-established sports network, which has supported Alex in building strong local connections.

Stakeholders have praised his approach, with one noting, “he’s out and about making connections”, and another adding, “Alex keeps in touch regularly, which I think is great”.

Others highlight his effectiveness in strengthening relationships across the community, helping to raise awareness of Our Active Community and local opportunities.

Next steps

Next steps for engaging stakeholders in St Helens include the possibility of forming a smaller strategic team to guide system-level changes, alongside a “forum of doers” for frontline providers.

This approach may help strengthen collaboration across networks and improve communication about the funding and opportunities, supporting more coordinated activities for people with a learning disability across the borough.

Current engagement spans a diverse range of stakeholders and organisations, including:

- ✓ Day Services, Centres or Supported Living: Buzz Hub St Helens Coalition of Disabled People (CDP), Ever Evolving, Stephenson Resource Centre
- ✓ Community Organisations and Charities: Tunza Centre, 4F Community Centre, Listen4Change
- ✓ Service Providers: Queens Park Health & Fitness, Nick Robinson Sports, FC St Helens
- ✓ Health Services: City Health Care Partnership CIC, Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust
- ✓ Local Authority: St Helens Borough Council (Day Opportunities Team, Public Health, Active Lives & Sports Development), Merseyside Sport Partnership (Active Partnership)

“Alex has worked really well at building relationships”

Perceptions and Expectations

Perceptions

Stakeholders in St Helens view the Our Active Community project positively, recognising it as an important opportunity to engage with local people and organisations.

One stakeholder reflects, “I think it’s a great opportunity for us to be involved in St Helens,” while others highlight the importance of understanding the local offer to better promote and signpost activities to service users.

The project is also understood by stakeholders as a platform to showcase achievements, including those of individuals who have trained and become accredited coaches and leaders.

Limited capacity to lead this type of work independently is acknowledged, with one stakeholder noting, “we have little capacity; we can only do so much. Hence why programmes like this are brilliant when they come around.”

Overall, stakeholders feel the project adds value to some of the existing place-based work and emphasises the importance of community engagement.

Expectations

Stakeholders hope the project will act as a catalyst for system-level change, enabling more inclusive and coordinated opportunities for people with a learning disability.

One community stakeholder notes, “there’s a lot of work to do systematically in St Helens, which I think Our Active Community could really be the catalyst.”

Expanding learning and sharing good practice is also seen as a priority, alongside joint working to reach more of the community.

Specific expectations include using funding to train staff, offering launch or information days, and increasing opportunities in schools, where activity levels are thought to have declined.

Stakeholders also express how they hope the project will support wellbeing and inclusion, along with aspirations that “at the end of this partnership with Mencap, we can proudly say that we’ve got this.”

The project is assumed by community stakeholders to create accessible, sustainable opportunities for everyone, improving both participation and community connections.

“Expanding and sharing the learning for what’s really good practice would be valuable”



Current Provision

Existing Offer

Activities at local day service Buzz Hub include:

- ✓ Football
- ✓ Rugby
- ✓ Cheerleading
- ✓ Cricket
- ✓ Boxing
- ✓ Zumba and dance
- ✓ Trampolining
- ✓ Horse riding
- ✓ Table tennis
- ✓ Darts

Other day service opportunities at Stephenson Resource Centre include:

- ✓ Chair-based exercises
- ✓ Rebound Therapy
- ✓ Swimming
- ✓ Cycling
- ✓ Mini golf
- ✓ Boccia
- ✓ Bowling
- ✓ Gardening
- ✓ Dancing
- ✓ Gym

Ever Evolving also offers day provision, which includes:

- ✓ Cricket
- ✓ Football
- ✓ Swimming
- ✓ Boxing
- ✓ Gym
- ✓ Walks
- ✓ Yoga

“We’re very lucky to have Queens Park Leisure Centre, the manager is forward thinking and inclusive”

While many stakeholders note the strongest provision for people with a learning disability comes from local day services, there are additional community-based opportunities available in St Helens.

A central offer is the AWAN (Adults with Additional Needs) session at Queens Park Health and Fitness, which includes

swimming, multisports like football, pickleball, table tennis, badminton, and basketball, along with lunch, gym access, and occasional crafts.

Sessions are open to participants from multiple local organisations and individuals, creating a strong, established community group. Staff receive specialised training to support people with additional needs, ensuring safe and inclusive participation.

Queens Park also hosts an annual mini triathlon, a sponsored event raising funds and celebrating people with a learning disability.

There are also adaptive bikes provided through Wheels4All at a cycling hub in the local park, which allows general use, and local partners like Buzz Hub St Helens CDP deliver additional inclusive sessions.

Challenges

This section explores the key challenges in delivering inclusive physical activity provision for people with a learning disability in St Helens.

While some provision exists, stakeholders highlight ongoing issues that limit its reach, quality, and accessibility.

Gaps and limitations

The general offer for people with a learning disability in St Helens is thought to be largely service-led, with much provision delivered through day services and key organisations such as Buzz Hub.

One community stakeholder notes, “a lot of it is probably targeted group provision for service users”. While stakeholders believe these services

provide a strong and valued offer for participants, they express some gaps remain beyond these established settings.

Some stakeholders describe the wider provision as limited, with one commenting, “there’s nothing really within the St Helens area for disabled or special needs kids, apart from what we do ourselves”, and others echoing the sentiment that “there’s definitely a massive gap”.

Overall, while targeted services are well-regarded, broader community provision for people with a learning disability in St Helens appears limited and unevenly distributed, though some of this may reflect a lack of awareness rather than the absence of opportunities.

Tailored offer

Stakeholders note how there are fewer options specifically suited to people with a learning disability.

They express the need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and acknowledge that, while on the one hand this approach is viewed as essential, this may make providing tailored provision challenging.

As a result, more investment may be needed in training, resources, and staff capacity, to ensure providers can offer activities that are suitable, safe, and inclusive for people with a learning disability across the borough.

Access and safety

Stakeholders also highlight limited transport options including safety concerns as key barriers to providing community-based activities for people with a learning disability.

These challenges could restrict opportunities for participation and make it more difficult to deliver inclusive, accessible provision beyond familiar or supported settings.

Top Challenges:

- ✗ Providing community provision
- ✗ Lack of tailored options
- ✗ Limited transport

Opportunities

Stakeholders identify a range of opportunities to enhance physical activity provision for people with a learning disability in St Helens, highlighting ways to improve inclusivity, access, and support.

Many feel there is scope to build on current provision and create more opportunities for participation.

Inclusive practice

Stakeholders highlight the potential for clubs and providers to become more inclusive and welcoming, not just for people with a learning disability, but for the wider population in general.

One community stakeholder shares how, “there’s definitely an opportunity to learn and know more about that space”.

Training

Training is viewed as key to giving providers and support staff confidence to make activities accessible.

Small adaptations, such as changes in communication or session delivery, are thought to be able to improve participation and encourage more active options for service users.

Activity directories

Stakeholders also highlight the need for accessible, easy-to-use directories as essential to help people and families find local opportunities.

This is because community stakeholders express how current systems, such as the Live Well Directory, can be challenging to use and inconsistent, which could limit awareness and engagement.

Independent travel training

Community stakeholders also suggest that independent travel training could help people with a learning disability access a wider range of activities, as one notes that enabling independent travel “can lead to more opportunities”.

Areas to improve:

- ✓ Improving inclusive practice
- ✓ Upskilling staff
- ✓ Providing an accessible activity directory
- ✓ Offering independent travel training

“Probably a bit more training for providers, just so they’re confident”



Community Needs

Motivation and Confidence

People with a learning disability in St Helens describe notable positive emotions about taking part in physical activity.

Feelings of happiness, relaxation, and belonging are commonly expressed, and activities such as swimming, walking, bowling, and dancing make participants feel “good”, “relaxed” and “loved”.

Being active is perceived as helping them to feel calm and connected, particularly when surrounded by friends or familiar faces.

For many, physical activity is not just about movement but also about inclusion and emotional wellbeing.

Motivation

Social connection and enjoyment appear to be the strongest motivators for people with a learning disability to take part in physical activity.

They describe enjoying activities shared with friends, valuing team experiences, friendship, and being

part of something together. Community stakeholders, mainly those who work closely with them in day services, echo this, explaining motivation is often “social first, winning last”.

They emphasise that activities which are fun, engaging, and supported by encouraging staff are key to sustaining participation.

Confidence

Confidence levels seem to vary widely. Some individuals express feeling capable and proud, “I’m good at table tennis” and “I feel confident and strong at football”, while others express anxiety or shyness, especially in unfamiliar settings or with certain sports.

Insight suggests support from trusted staff or friends helps build confidence and encourages participation. Stakeholders emphasise that reassurance, familiarity, and non-judgemental environments are key to enabling people with a learning disability to feel safe and capable when trying new activities.

Top Motives:

- ⬆️ Enjoyment and fun
- ⬆️ Encouragement
- ⬆️ Support from trusted staff
- ⬆️ Social connection and friendship
- ⬆️ Sense of belonging and inclusion
- ⬆️ Shared and team experiences

“I like playing as a team and playing with my friends”

Barriers to Participation

Conversations reveal that people with a learning disability in St Helens face various barriers when accessing physical activity opportunities.

These include issues linked to awareness, accessibility, cost, support, and confidence.

Support and staffing

Community stakeholders explain how many people rely on carers or support workers to attend activities, and without this assistance, opportunities can be missed.

Initial encouragement and consistent support are also often described as needed to build confidence and establish routines.

Access however is often seen to be influenced by the availability and motivation of support staff, which may just reflect wider systemic challenges in the care sector.

Awareness and information

A lack of clear and accessible information about local opportunities is described as possibly limiting participation.

Stakeholders note activities are “not always promoted”, and some are “quite closed groups”, making it difficult for those not already engaged to know where to start and how to find suitable, inclusive options.

They also highlight that information “isn’t always accessible for them to understand” and emphasise the importance of having reminders to attend activities.

Cost and transport

Transport and affordability seem to be persistent barriers. Community stakeholders discuss how public transport varies across the borough, and confidence in using it can be low for people with a learning disability.

One local day service shares how they link with a local bus company and Northern Rail to support their members with travel training.

Even though some low-cost activities exist, additional support needs, such as one-to-one assistance, can make engaging in activities more expensive, regardless of the cost of the activity.

Safety and independence

Community stakeholders mention how feelings of vulnerability and safety concerns can prevent some people with a learning disability from joining community-based activities, particularly those that require travel or take place further from home.

Stakeholders also highlight that people living independently, or with limited carer input, can “slip through the net” without the structured support often available in day or supported living services.

Scheduling of activities

The timing of activities also seems to present a significant barrier.

Many sessions are scheduled during daytime hours, leaving limited opportunities in the evenings, weekends, or school holidays.

Parents and carers report a shortage of inclusive physical activity during these times, particularly for young people who are no longer in full-time education but still require structured, supported opportunities to be active.

Enabling Participation

There are some ways people are being supported to be physically active in the community and to access opportunities, but feedback from participants suggests there are other ways that could make it easier for people with a learning disability to participate in physical activity.

People with a learning disability express how skilled coaches can provide instruction and help build confidence, while friends, family, or support workers offer motivation, reassurance, and practical help to access activities.

Stakeholders also highlight the value of a “support package” that allows individuals to gain skills and confidence within familiar settings, which may then encourage participation independently or outside service hours.

Accessible approaches described as “gentle” and focused on low-intensity activity are also highlighted by a stakeholder as important for helping

everyone engage at their own pace.

People with a learning disability want more access to:

- + Darts
- + Boxing
- + Archery
- + Basketball

“There’s a lot of barriers, such as transport and cost, and whether they need any one-to-one or two-to-one support”



A photograph of a man standing outdoors in a garden. He is wearing a white t-shirt with 'VINTAGE Super Dry' and Japanese text printed on it. The background shows a brick wall, dense foliage, and a shed. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent purple overlay.

Developments

Community Partner

Each Community Partner involved in Our Active Community plays a vital role in identifying community strengths by listening to local individuals, engaging with stakeholders and organisations, and facilitating meaningful connections that support growth.

By increasing awareness, bridging gaps in accessibility, and promoting inclusion, the Community Partner plans to ensure more people with a learning disability can engage in physical activity.

Their role focuses on support, utilising seed funding, capacity building and ensuring sustainability.

“He’s building a community, and I think that’s really good”

Views of the role

Stakeholders describe the Community Partner Alex as “personable”, “supportive”, and “brilliant”, highlighting his role in building community connections and engaging people with a learning disability.

His role in the community is seen as timely, effective, and fully supported in bringing groups together, with stakeholders looking forward to continuing the work he is leading.

Progress

Alex has been proactive in building relationships and connecting with the community, regularly keeping in touch with groups and stakeholders.

He has supported funding applications, visited local organisations, and presented Our Active Community at council strategy meetings.

One stakeholder shares, “he’s out and about making connections,” reflecting his hands-on approach and strong engagement in supporting people with a learning disability across St Helens.

Challenges

Despite progress, Alex highlights ongoing challenges, including engaging across multiple community areas, as he also serves as Community Partner for Bradford and District. Coordinating his time to attend activities and events across both areas can be difficult.

Additionally, communication barriers within some organisations can limit awareness of the available funding and opportunities.

Community Connector

Mencap's Our Active Community is recruiting a Community Connector in each community to identify and advocate for the needs of people with a learning disability, share lived experiences and help shape inclusive activities and opportunities.

Recruiting the Community Connector

Local community charity Buzz Hub St Helens CDP offered to host the Community Connector role, recognising its value for local people with a learning disability. With strong community links and existing networks, Buzz Hub is viewed as well placed to lead and embed the role within the local area.

Views of the role

Stakeholders in St Helens strongly support the Community Connector role, describing it as "a brilliant step in the right direction".

They see it as vital for bringing lived experience to decision-making, ensuring people with a learning disability have a genuine voice.

The role is viewed as "the glue" that connects people and organisations, offering a relatable role model and valuable paid opportunity that can promote inclusion and strengthen community links.

A local community organisation has even been inspired by the Our Active Community model, creating a similar Community Connector-type role within their own organisation.

Hopes and concerns

Community stakeholders express strong hopes that the Community Connector will act as a bridge between communities, local government, and organisations, promoting sessions, sharing ideas, and uncovering opportunities across St Helens. They hope the role increases visibility and strengthens collaboration.

While concerns are minimal, some note the importance of choosing the right person, ensuring ongoing support, and securing long-term sustainability beyond current funding to help embed the role effectively within the community.

Feedback of the Community Connectors

Feedback on the role has been resoundingly positive, and stakeholders describe the appointed Community Connector, Liam, as supportive, approachable, and a trusted local contact.

They have observed his confidence grow significantly since starting, with one community stakeholder noting he has become the "go-to person" for local connections and a valued presence within the St Helens community.

"That sounds exactly like what towns and communities need. What town doesn't need that role?"

Community Connector profile:

Liam

Joined in March 2025

Receives support from:

- + Alex (Community Partner) and Health and Wellbeing Lead at Buzz Hub St Helens CDP

Personal motivation:

- ✓ Wants to create a brighter future for St Helens and meet community needs
- ✓ Aims to make the town more active, happier, and healthier
- ✓ Passionate about improving wellbeing through fun, inclusive opportunities

Hopes and aims:

- ✓ Encourage people with a learning disability to take part in more community activities

- ✓ Hopes to build confidence and social skills through participation
- ✓ Bring energy and enthusiasm to inspire others to get involved

Early achievements:

- 🏆 Conducted a survey on accessibility, inclusion, and how people are listened to in the community
- 🏆 Met with organisations to expand activity options, including Funky Friends at Tunza Centre
- 🏆 Supported groups with funding applications and provided feedback

Future plans:

- + Reviewing additional funding applications and offering support
- + Organising a community forum to bring people and organisations together

“I love being a Community Connector, working with different groups, and alongside Alex, Chris and Dave – they’ve been really supportive”



Network Developments

Networking and community development in St Helens is being led by Alex the Community Partner, and Liam the Community Connector.

They attend meetings, share project updates, share information and encourage collaboration. While some stakeholders note limited time to continually engage in the project, there is a clear willingness within the community to connect and develop opportunities.

Community forum

The community forums in St Helens are considered to be a valuable space for collaboration, networking, and sharing ideas. The forums have been well attended, though attendees were predominantly local authority representatives with some day services and community organisations. One community stakeholder reflects, “everybody was really positive and wanted to get things moving and coming up with great ideas.”

The forums are viewed as providing a space to bring people together, build supportive networks, and identify gaps in provision. One stakeholder praises the forums for “that supportive network that it appeared to create”.

Attendees appreciate the opportunity to meet others with similar purposes, with a stakeholder adding, “we are all trying to achieve the same thing, so if we can do that together, it should be easier for everyone.”

Community forums have also supported practical outcomes, such as identifying the need for adapted bikes, connecting with allotments for activities, and linking with services addressing unmet health needs.

Stakeholders also value the networking opportunities, with one stakeholder stating, “from the forums, we’ve made connections and new people now come to our sessions.” The interactive, hands-on format using questions, paper, and discussion is praised for promoting engagement and idea-sharing.

There are however some challenges with the community forums, particularly in ensuring attendance is diverse and representative.

Future plans focus on broadening participation to include a wider range of community groups, organisations and people with a learning disability, while ensuring the momentum from forums can encourage systemic change.

St Helens community forums are:

- ✓ Building collaboration and networks
- ✓ Expanding local connections
- ✓ Sharing ideas and identifying gaps
- ✓ Raising awareness of opportunities
- ✓ Supporting new activities and partnerships

“Nothing better than being in person and making connections”

A photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, smiling broadly. He is wearing a dark-colored long-sleeved shirt with three white stripes on the sleeve. He is sitting in a gym, with various exercise machines and equipment visible in the background. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter. The word "Successes" is written in large, white, sans-serif font across the lower half of the image.

Successes

Seed Funding

The seed funding element of the project has been well received, described as “fantastic” and accessible by stakeholders. The Community Partner and Community Connector provide guidance on applications, which are generally perceived as straightforward and user-friendly.

Stakeholders nonetheless would value further hands-on support, such as working together during the application process to save time and make it more practical, rather than going back and forth, as well as seeing tangible examples of success.

Community stakeholders also describe a shared aim of using funding to create sustainable, impactful opportunities in the community, such as upskilling coaches.

Four successful applications:

Mini Buzzers

The Mini Buzzers football sessions, launched by Nick Robinson Sports in May at Ruskin Drive for children with special educational needs, are receiving funding to support equipment and facility hire.

Attendance continues to grow steadily, with regular weekly participants.

Future plans include expanding the programme to 11–15-year-olds and creating a pathway into an inclusion league, with additional funding to support coaching fees as participation increases.

Silent Discos

Buzz Hub introduced silent disco walks using Our Active Community-funded headsets, enabling members hesitant to exercise publicly to get active.

Initially tested with a set from the local leisure centre, sessions have run in parks and on-site, receiving positive feedback from their service users.

Listening to music while walking has motivated participation, making physical activity enjoyable and more accessible for members.

Funky Friends

Funky Friends at Tunza Centre, launched in the summer, offers an after-school dance group for children with special educational needs. The funding covers room hire and a skilled dance teacher who adapts the sessions to ensure they are accessible.

Families are encouraged to join in, thereby building confidence and enjoyment.

Fundraising events are also planned to help sustain the activity post-funding, keeping costs low and affordable while planning performances, such as a Christmas show.

FC St Helens

FC St Helens has newly been awarded some funding for an inclusion group, covering set-up, coaching the coaches, facilities, and equipment, with plans to make the sessions sustainable through a nominal participation fee.

“We’ve been able to encourage more members to get out and be active”

Other Partnerships and Activity

“Moving them would make it more accessible”

Further seed funding applications

Further funding applications aim to expand inclusive opportunities.

Queens Park Health and Fitness will seek support to purchase new equipment, while TheraFit plans to use seed funding to enhance therapy and sport sessions for children with special educational needs, including equipment and coaching support.

The Local Cultural Educational Partnership has applied for funding to involve community members in the Step Forward: St Helens Borough Dance Festival through performing, workshops, volunteering, and marketing.

Forge Fitness plans to launch a weekly multisports and activity hub offering adaptive fitness and sensory-based sessions for adults with Down Syndrome, neurodivergence, learning disabilities, and physical disabilities.

Community adapted cycling hub

Plans had been underway to improve accessibility and community engagement for the adapted cycling hub, which houses adapted bikes from Wheels4All.

Discussions have focused on relocating the hub from a hilly park to a flatter, tarmacked area at Ruskin Drive cricket pitch, using Our Active Community funding to facilitate the move.

The voluntary cycle group is supportive, and the relocation would allow day services and some leisure teams to access the bikes more easily. The new site would also offer café facilities and a safer, more inclusive environment, though participants may still need car or bus transport.

Additional training would also be planned to support wider use. Although the move was supported and its benefits recognised, it has not been possible to proceed at this time, and it might be something that could be explored again in the future.

Try it, Like it, Do it

St Helens is planning to host a “Try it, Like it, Do it” event in 2026, drawing on the successful Bradford model.

The Bradford event in 2025 offered a wide range of inclusive activities, such as seated sports, boccia, dance, and mindfulness, alongside information stalls and guest speakers.

It provided people with a learning disability the chance to try new activities while increasing their awareness of other opportunities for physical activity in the community.



Challenges

Overview of Challenges

St Helens Community Challenges

As discussed within this case study, people with a learning disability in St Helens face a range of community barriers to accessing physical activity.

Transport and accessibility can be difficult, with some leisure centres requiring multiple buses, and there is limited activity in the evenings.

Many activities rely on carers or support workers, making consistent attendance dependent on the support workers' availability.

Awareness of opportunities is also a challenge, as sessions are often service-specific or poorly advertised, while cost and limited scheduling can further restrict participation.

Broader community-based options remain unevenly distributed, and tailored provision for people with a learning disability is still developing.

Our Active Community-specific challenges

The Our Active Community initiative also faces specific challenges.

Ensuring funded activities, including seed-funded projects and the Community Connector role, are sustainable beyond Mencap support is a priority.

Achieving diverse attendance at forums is difficult, with some meetings dominated by local authority representatives.

Coordinating across multiple organisations and services requires careful planning, and maintaining momentum and engagement is essential to deliver inclusive, sustainable opportunities across St Helens.

“I think that sustainability element feels like it’s really key”

A photograph of two women standing on a badminton court. The woman on the left is smiling and holding a badminton racket. The woman on the right has a neutral expression. They are both wearing athletic clothing. In the background, another person is visible on the court, and a net is stretched across the middle. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Summary of Key Findings

“People’s lack of knowledge and awareness of what is out there, or how to find out about how to be more active”

- ✓ Physical activity opportunities include football, swimming, gym, cricket, boxing, dancing, Zumba and cycling.
- ✓ Provision is described as largely service-led, with day services like Buzz Hub St Helens CDP and community organisations providing the bulk of activities; broader community provision remains uneven.
- ✓ Transport, scheduling, cost, and need for carers/support workers appear to be significant barriers to participation.
- ✓ Awareness of available opportunities is thought to be low, as directories or accessible information appear to be limited.
- ✓ Confidence and motivation levels of people with a learning disability can vary, therefore social connection and fun are perceived as key motivators.
- ✓ Community Partner (Alex) and Community Connector (Liam) are identified as playing a crucial role in relationship-building, advocacy, and connecting people with opportunities.
- ✓ Community forums and networking events are described as increasing collaboration, awareness, and practical outcomes.
- ✓ Seed funding is assumed to be enabling sustainable opportunities, but ongoing support and long-term sustainability remain concerns.
- ✓ Challenges identified include ensuring diverse attendance at forums, embedding funded activities beyond Mencap support, and coordinating across multiple organisations.

Next Steps

- ✓ Explore ways to reach and engage people not currently accessing structured support, to ensure they are included in opportunities and community provision.
- ✓ Ensure that new or existing activities prioritise the key motivators for engagement: fun, enjoyment, and social connection, to encourage lasting participation.
- ✓ Seek to address some transport barriers through travel training, accessible routes, and guidance.
- ✓ Consider strengthening staff training within general service provision to improve confidence in delivering inclusive activities.
- ✓ Consider with local partners further possibilities to create inclusive activity opportunities beyond existing community services.
- ✓ Explore ways to enhance promotion of inclusive activities through accessible formats, newsletters, and community channels.
- ✓ Continue with peer-led or interactive sessions to increase participation and lived experience input.
- ✓ Consider further ways to provide organisations with practical, hands-on seed funding guidance to create sustainable initiatives.
- ✓ Maintain support for the Community Connector role, including any further mentoring, training and role guidance.
- ✓ Explore ways to strengthen engagement from community organisations and service providers, possibly by clearly communicating the value, outcomes, and shared purpose of attending community forums, and how it could benefit them.
- ✓ Ensure to continue to use forums to maintain momentum, share good practice, and consider the possibility of creating system-level, sustainable changes.
- ✓ Consider planning for long-term sustainability beyond Our Active Community to support the delivery and continuation of funded projects.

“I think that community engagement is a real key focus for this”

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