



Our Active Community and Mencap Active Community Interim Report 2026

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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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. All of them are now in post and working 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.

Key terms and roles

Our Active Community

A Mencap initiative supporting people with a learning disability to access and take part in physical activity in their local communities.

Mencap Active Community

A nationwide network that expands and supports the work of Our Active Community beyond the nine funded communities.

It connects organisations and individuals to share learning, resources, and good practice.

Community Partner

A Mencap lead working within communities to build relationships, listen to local needs, and connect people and organisations to create inclusive and sustainable physical activity opportunities.

Community Connector

A person with a learning disability employed in a paid role to share lived experience, represent others, encourage participation, and help shape inclusive activities in their community.

Community stakeholder

Individuals or organisations involved in or impacted by the project.

This includes delivery organisations, councils, health services, charities and carers.

People with a learning disability

Individuals who have a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities such as communication, social skills, or managing daily living tasks, which affects them for their whole life, and who are central to the design, delivery, and decision-making within Our Active Community.

Community-led approach

An approach where local people and organisations shape activities and decisions.

It focuses on listening to local needs and building on existing community strengths.

Inclusive physical activity

Activities designed so people with a learning disability can participate fully, with reasonable adjustments and accessible environments.

Seed funding

Small grants (up to £60,000 per community across the project) used to start or grow inclusive physical activity opportunities.

Funding decisions consider sustainability and community benefit.

Community forums

Local meetings where stakeholders connect, share information, and plan initiatives.

They help build partnerships and inform funding applications.

Co-production

Working together with people with a learning disability to design, plan, and deliver activities and services.

Sustainability

Ensuring activities and improvements continue long-term, even after project funding or support ends.

About the Research

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 and impact 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 2025 to February 2026 and outlines future plans for the evaluation.

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 82 focus groups (each comprising approximately 4–10 participants), 296 interviews or conversations, deriving from consultation with:

169 community stakeholders

273 people with a learning disability

12 Community Connectors

5 Community Partners

4 Mencap Active Community Partners

+ Mencap's Network Development Partner

Where available, additional stakeholder survey data collected and analysed by Mencap have been used to complement qualitative insights.

Community 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 and updated in partnership with Mencap ✓ Remote consultation undertaken with the 5 Community Partners, 12 Community Connectors and 174 stakeholders from the nine communities and wider network ✓ Remote consultation includes interviews with Community Partners, Community Connectors, community stakeholders and Mencap Network Development Partner and Mencap Network Partners	✓ 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 Report
Research Visits	✓ Research visit proformas developed and updated in partnership with Mencap ✓ First research visit to all nine communities ✓ Research visits include observation of activities, and interviews and focus groups with Community Partners, Community Connectors (if in post), community stakeholders and people with a learning disability	✓ Second research visit to all nine communities
Secondary Analysis	✓ Secondary review and analysis of Mencap's monitoring and survey data to inform the interim report	✓ Secondary review and analysis of Mencap's monitoring and survey data to inform the final report
Delivery of Reports Case Studies & Community Video Snapshots	✓ 2024 Interim Report completed ✓ 2025 Interim Report completed ✓ 2026 Interim Report Completed ✓ 9 Community Case Studies	✓ Remaining 9 Community Case Studies (2 tracking case studies for each of the nine communities) ✓ 9 Community Video Snapshots ✓ 2027 Final Report



Community Engagement

Stakeholders

Who's involved?

Stakeholder landscape

Stakeholder engagement across the nine communities shows a maturing but uneven ecosystem.

Local authorities, healthcare providers, day services and learning disability organisations form the core network of community stakeholder organisations in most areas, indicating that Our Active Community is embedding most strongly within existing learning disability and public-sector infrastructures.

The pie chart shows the range of different stakeholders from organisations involved in Our Active Community across the nine communities.

Public sector

In practice, local authorities remain core stakeholders in all areas, with both district and county councils supporting strategy, signposting and local connections.

NHS and community health services are actively involved in around half of the communities, particularly where social prescribing and community learning disability teams are present.

Across most the communities, Active Partnerships support coordination and alignment with wider sport and physical activity strategies, facilitate links with mainstream providers, contribute to multi-partner events such as Try it, Like it, Do it in Bradford, and help embed inclusive practice within local sport development plans.

Learning disability organisations

Day services, supported living providers and learning disability-focused organisations are among the most consistently engaged stakeholders.

They play a vital role in connecting people with a learning disability to opportunities and shaping provision around real needs.

Mencap Network Partners and local Mencap services remain central in about two-thirds of the communities, providing trusted relationships and delivery routes.

Voluntary and community sector

Involvement from charities, advocacy groups, community hubs and parent-carer forums continues to grow, increasingly acting as a bridge between formal services and community-based opportunities.

These organisations help widen reach and strengthen local networks, while in some areas, local media and communications stakeholders have supported visibility and awareness.

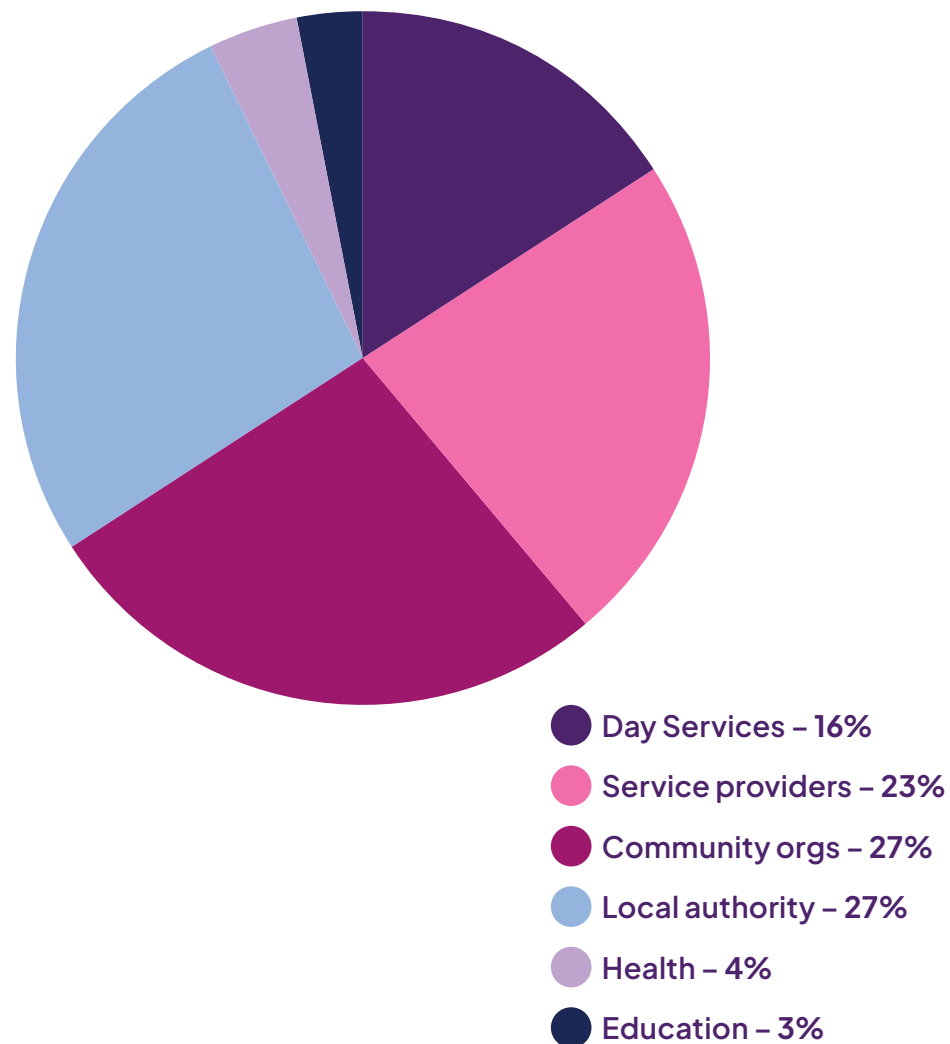
Mainstream providers and education

Engagement from mainstream providers and education settings, however, remains less consistent.

Special Educational Needs schools and colleges in particular show variable involvement, often constrained by staffing pressures, timetabling and competing priorities.

This suggests a structural barrier rather than a lack of interest and implies that expecting high engagement from schools without additional support or tailored approaches may be difficult.

Overall, stakeholder involvement has evolved from an initial core group to a more diversified network of community stakeholders engaging and contributing at different levels.



How are they involved?

Stakeholder involvement is moving from initial outreach toward more sustained, relationship-based engagement, indicating a shift from exploration to more established engagement.

Role of Partners and Connectors

Community Partners remain the primary drivers of engagement through their local presence and relationship-building work, with support from Community Connectors, who have helped to extend reach into local networks and strengthen communication with people with a learning disability.

Together, these roles are building trust and responsiveness, though progress can still be highly dependent on individual capacity and continuity.

How stakeholders engage

Stakeholders engage through forums, visits, events, network meetings, newsletters and one-to-one conversations, with some now contributing more actively to shaping opportunities. Community forums appear particularly valued.

Around two-thirds of stakeholders (65%) report engaging in Our Active Community to take part in forums, and 70% say they have attended them as an outcome of their involvement in the project.

This alignment suggests that forums are likely to be meeting stakeholder expectations and are viewed as useful spaces for networking and shared learning.

It may also indicate that structured spaces for connection remain important in community-led work, rather than engagement happening informally alone.

Understanding the project's purpose

Developing a shared understanding of Our Active Community's purpose has improved over time, across the nine communities, and continues to evolve, reflecting the time needed to embed a community-led approach.

The full purpose and longer-term aims of Our Active Community, as building partnerships, sharing learning, and the roles of Community Partners and Community Connectors, were not always fully acknowledged and, in some cases, remain unclear.

A key enabler and motivator for organisations to be involved, and possibly the main driver, is the opportunity to receive funding.

Capacity to engage

Capacity constraints have been a consistent challenge, limiting the extent to which some organisations can engage, particularly frontline

providers delivering activity, such as clubs, coaches, instructors, and leisure centres.

This is often not due to a lack of interest, but because organisations are operating with restricted staffing, time and resources.

Variations in involvement therefore, tend to reflect structural limitations rather than disengagement, underscoring the need for the project to continue adopting flexible engagement approaches and realistic expectations that accommodate differing levels of organisational capacity and local context.

Overall, involvement is deepening, but long-term sustainability will also depend on moving from partner-led relationships toward shared ownership.

Perceptions of Our Active Community

Improving perceptions

Positive perceptions of Our Active Community have developed over the duration of the project.

In several communities, stakeholders initially reported some uncertainty about the project's purpose or scope, but this has improved as the project has become more visible.

For many, understanding has grown through seeing the work in practice and with increased engagement.

Whilst recognising that community and individual experiences can vary, stakeholder perceptions of Our Active Community are now broadly positive.

Value as a connector

The project is widely valued as a connector that increases awareness of opportunities and strengthens local networks.

Many community stakeholders view it as helping to “join up the dots” between organisations and activities, supporting better coordination across local provision.

Trust in Mencap expertise

Mencap's credibility and expertise, particularly around inclusion and accessible communication, are frequently recognised.

This is helping build confidence in the project and encourages engagement from stakeholders who may not have specialist knowledge in this area.

Capacity building

Capacity-building is also recognised, with around half of surveyed stakeholders reporting both motivation (54%) and outcomes (50%) related to improving their knowledge and skills for inclusive delivery.

This suggests that learning and confidence-building are seen as meaningful benefits of engagement for many organisations.

This was echoed by a community stakeholder who specifically highlighted the need for greater capacity-building support for those working within local authorities and clubs, enabling them to feel more confident in delivering to a wider range of needs.

Capacity building is an important way through which the project achieves its wider goals, including highlighting that developing inclusive practice is an ongoing process.

It points to a continued need for practical learning opportunities, training and upskilling, shared examples and ongoing support, which are areas the project is beginning to address further through forums, workshops and stakeholder engagement.

An example from Bradford includes a local inclusive gym that is keen to train its members with a learning disability to take on delivery roles, demonstrating both ambition and a desire to embed inclusive practice more sustainably.

An example from Bradford includes a local inclusive gym who want to train their members with a learning disability to deliver.

Capacity pressures

Time and resource constraints can influence perceptions.

Where stakeholders are less able to engage, they may feel less connected to progress, even if they remain supportive.

Communication needs

Overall, evidence suggests that positive perceptions in the main, point to increasing trust and recognition of the value of the project, alongside the need for continued communication and visible outcomes.

Feedback suggests communication would be most effective when it is personal and interactive, not solely reliant on mailing lists or one-way updates.

Expectations of Our Active Community

Inclusions and access

Stakeholder expectations reflect both ambition for greater inclusion and practical priorities such as better access to activities and clearer information.

There is strong alignment around Our Active Community's core aims of improving access, increasing inclusion and raising awareness of opportunities for people with a learning disability.

This emphasis on connection is reflected in stakeholder survey data, where nearly three-quarters (73%) of community stakeholders report getting involved to connect with people with a learning disability, and 69% say they feel better connected as a result.

This pattern suggests that connection is a central expectation for many stakeholders when joining Our Active Community, and that relationship-building may be viewed as a meaningful benefit, not only as a route to delivering activities.

Information and signposting

A common expectation is clearer information about what is available locally. Stakeholders want better mapping of provision and clearer signposting so people can find and access activities more easily.

This highlights that awareness can be as important as availability.

Collaboration

Stakeholders hope Our Active Community will continue bringing organisations together, sharing knowledge and reducing duplication. This reflects its role in supporting joined-up working across communities.

Identifying gaps and barriers

Many also expect Our Active Community to highlight gaps and barriers in local provision.

This can reflect confidence in the project's role in listening to communities, gathering insight from people with a learning disability and community stakeholders, and using this understanding to identify areas for improvement.

Sustainability and co-production

Stakeholders report that sustainability is important to them. They hope the project will build local confidence and capacity, leaving stronger networks and more inclusive practice beyond the funding period.

Co-production and lived experience are also increasingly seen as priorities, with stakeholders valuing opportunities for people with a learning disability to shape activities and decisions.

73%

Community stakeholders say they got involved to connect with people with a learning disability

69%

Of stakeholders feel better connected with people with a learning disability

Percentage data presented here has been collected and analysed by Mencap.



Community Partners

About the Community Partner Role

Role of Community Partner

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

Across communities, the Community Partner role is seen as central to delivering Our Active Community.

The role functions as a connector, facilitator and local presence, helping to link organisations, share information and maintain momentum around inclusive physical activity.

Bridging local systems

Community Partners act as a bridge between people with a learning disability, services and community organisations.

Their work often includes visiting groups, attending local events, coordinating forums and supporting funding or collaboration opportunities.

This visible, place-based presence is helping Our Active Community remain responsive to local context.

Enabling local connections

In several areas, stakeholders describe the role as enabling connections that might not otherwise happen.

For example, in Worthing, one stakeholder explained how the Community Partner helped them develop a funding application and stay connected to opportunities.

In Ealing and Greenwich, the role is similarly viewed as a link between organisations and a way to widen networks.

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

Community Partner Engagement

Views of the role

Many stakeholders appreciate the relational and supportive nature of the role, and especially its focus on inclusion and accessibility.

In St Helens, stakeholders praise the proactive approach taken, noting the Community Partner is “out and about making connections” and “keeps in touch regularly”.

In Greenwich, one stakeholder observes, “Kaylee’s connecting with lots of people,” reflecting recognition of the role’s networking function.

Early uncertainty however about the role has been reported in several communities. Some stakeholders were initially unclear about its purpose or remit, particularly in the early stages.

Over time, as activities and relationships have developed, understanding has generally improve, however a small number of stakeholders still remain unclear of its purpose.

Building relationships

Relationship-building is regarded as a consistent strength across communities.

Community Partners invest time in visiting organisations, attending sessions and being present in community spaces.

This sustained visibility is seen as helping to build trust and familiarity.

Examples include attending coffee mornings in Greenwich that attract around 30 people, visiting day services in St Austell to build rapport with service users, and networking at local events and partnership boards in Worthing and St Helens. Community stakeholders often respond positively to this approach.

In St Austell, one stakeholder shares, “they’ve been really happy for me to come in and talk to service users, get to know them and build a rapport.”

These examples show that relationship-building is not only about developing the organisational links but also about direct engagement with people with a learning disability.

Progress, Learning and Ongoing Challenges

Progress

Community Partners' progress is visible in the growth of networks, increased awareness of opportunities and stronger collaboration between organisations.

Several communities report improved understanding of local provision and better information-sharing.

In Thanet, one community stakeholder notes, "I'm more aware of what is going on in the community because of Our Active Community."

In many areas, engagement has moved from introduction and mapping toward more regular collaboration. Seed funding, shared events and forums have helped stimulate new ideas and partnerships.

While progress varies between and within communities, there is a general sense that the Community Partner's work within Our Active Community is helping to strengthen local connections and create a clearer picture of opportunities.

Overcoming concerns and challenges

Common challenges Community Partners face include capacity pressures, school engagement and sustaining momentum.

Many organisations are supportive but face time and staffing constraints that limit how much they can engage.

As already raised, engagement with Special Educational Needs schools remains difficult in several areas, often due to staffing and competing priorities rather than a lack of interest.

This highlights a structural challenge that may require continued tailored approaches from Community Partners.

Some communities have also experienced disruptions, such as changes in key roles, which can affect continuity in place-based work.

In Thanet, stakeholders reflect on this period of transition, with one noting concerns about "losing momentum." The appointment of a new partner was viewed as an important step in rebuilding connections and moving work forward.

Community Partners respond to challenges by adapting their approaches, increasing visits, maintaining communication, and working through trusted networks.

Their flexibility and persistence appear key to maintaining engagement.



Community Connectors

About the Community Connector

Role of Community Connector

Purpose of the role

The Community Connector role within Our Active Community is for people with a learning disability who use their lived experience to amplify the voices of their peers and help shape more inclusive opportunities.

Community Connectors share their experiences, contribute ideas, and support organisations to better understand accessibility and inclusion in physical activity and community participation.

Employment model and support

The Community Connector role is funded by Mencap until 2027, but hosted by local community-based organisations to ensure long-term sustainability of the role.

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

Their involvement can include attending meetings and forums, advising on activities, and helping ensure the views of people with a learning disability are reflected in local decision-making.

Recruitment and rollout

Recruitment of Community Connectors has developed alongside the wider development of the project, following the initial focus on stakeholder engagement, relationship-building and identifying suitable host organisations.

All nine communities now have Community Connectors in post, although onboarding is still ongoing for those newly appointed, such as David in Thanet, who began the role in January.

Building sustainable support structures

This phased approach reflects the time and coordination required to establish the appropriate support structures and hosting arrangements for a sustainable role.

Stakeholders emphasise that recruiting people with a learning disability into supported employment involves additional and essential considerations, such as accessible recruitment processes, reasonable adjustments and opportunities for confidence-building, to ensure equitable participation.

More broadly, this learning shows that sustainable inclusion depends not only on appointing individuals, but on organisational readiness, sufficient capacity and shared alignment with the purpose of the role.

Although this approach requires upfront investment of time and resources, it strengthens the likelihood that Community Connectors will be able to contribute confidently and consistently, increasing the potential for long-term impact and sustainability.

Testing new approaches

While elements of the Community Connector role build on approaches already seen in the sector, the model is intentionally testing several important shifts in practice.

Most notably, it establishes the role as paid employment rather than volunteering, recognising the value of lived experience and potentially widening participation among people who could not otherwise engage.

Inclusive recruitment methods

The project has also trialled more accessible recruitment methods, such as video applications and WhatsApp submissions, challenging traditional hiring processes and demonstrating more inclusive ways to identify candidates.

Defining the post as a learning disability-specific role grounded in lived experience may strengthen its authenticity and influence, though it could also require ongoing reflection to ensure continued meaningful involvement.

Local hosting and sustainability

Finally, the decision for local organisations to host the roles, rather than Mencap employing them centrally, is a deliberate test of local ownership and sustainability.

Early learning indicates this can help embed the role within communities, but it also points to the need for adequate host capacity, training, and joined-up working between the Community Partner and host organisation, so that Community Connectors are supported to contribute strategically and consistently.

Table of Community Connectors

Community	Host Organisation	Community Connector
Bradford and District	Summat Creative	Jason and Barney
St Helens	Buzz Hub St Helens CDP	Liam
Nottingham	Me Time Mencap	Ben
Derby	Umbrella and Community Links	Emma and Kate
Ealing	Ealing Mencap	Ibraheem
Greenwich	Volunteer Centre Greenwich and Brighter Futures	Nicole and Abdul
Thanet		David
Worthing	Worthing Mencap	Matthew
St Austell and the Clay Country	Cornwall Neighborhoods for Change	Wendi

Understanding the Role and Identifying Hosts

“I think the connector role is really key for the project and important to being a part of the community, the Community Connector knows the real value of the opportunities”

Views of the role

Support for the role

Stakeholder views of the Community Connector role are strongly supportive across communities, indicating broad acceptance of the role within local delivery structures.

The role is widely seen as bringing authenticity, credibility and a direct link to lived experience, which appears to strengthen trust and relevance in engagement with people with a learning disability.

This suggests the role is not only valued symbolically but is beginning to influence how organisations listen to and involve people with a learning disability.

Influence on decision-making

In St Helens, stakeholders describe the role as “a brilliant step in the right direction” and even “the glue” connecting people and organisations. The presence of a Community Connector is seen as helping ensure

that decisions reflect real needs rather than assumptions, suggesting the role supports more informed and person-centred decision-making.

Representation and leadership

Evidence from communities indicates that the role contributes to paid employment and leadership opportunities for people with a learning disability, while increasing their visibility in local activity and decision-making spaces, pointing to wider representation benefits beyond project support.

This highlights a potential system-level effect where the role may challenge perceptions about capability and expand expectations around the contribution of people with a learning disability in community leadership and workforce roles.

Emerging impact

Where the role is newer or still developing, stakeholders express optimism about its potential, indicating confidence in the model even where impact is still emerging.

In Thanet, for example, the role is viewed as “key to developing opportunities” and to hear the voices of the learning disability community directly.

Support and structure

Alongside this support, stakeholders recognise that the role works best with clear guidance, ongoing support and realistic expectations, highlighting that successful implementation may depend on appropriate structures as well as goodwill.

While the role is showing success and further potential, its long-term value will depend on strong support systems and a clear place in local decision-making.

Host organisations

Identifying suitable hosts

Finding and supporting suitable host organisations is a key step in establishing the Community Connector role, as it can shape how well the role can be sustained locally.

Community Partners typically worked with local networks to identify organisations that already support people with a learning disability or have a strong commitment to inclusion.

This helped ensure the role would be embedded within trusted community settings, which appears to support early acceptance and integration.

Values and alignment

Organisations that stepped forward to host often did so because the role aligns with their values and priorities around inclusion, participation, and employment opportunities for people with a learning disability.

For many, hosting is seen as a practical way to support representation and lived experience within their community, indicating that value alignment is a key driver of engagement.

Capacity and readiness

At the same time, identifying hosts has required careful consideration. Several organisations expressed interest but reflected on whether they had the time, staffing or experience to provide consistent support.

In St Austell and the Clay Country, for example, multiple organisations were interested before Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change became the host due to its capacity to support the role.

In Thanet, stakeholders highlighted the importance of having the right structures in place, noting that the role could be “a lot for somebody to take on” without adequate support.

These experiences suggest that while willingness to host was often high, decisions were shaped by capacity and readiness, pointing to the importance of organisational infrastructure in enabling inclusive employment roles.

“We were quite cautious at the beginning about becoming hosts, but we could see the benefit to the community of having someone with lived experience”

Motivations, Achievements and Next Steps

Community Connector motivations and hopes

Personal motivation and purpose

Community Connectors consistently describe strong personal motivation rooted in helping others and sharing the benefits of being active and challenging barriers, suggesting the role attracts individuals with a strong sense of social purpose.

Inclusion and peer support

In Greenwich, motivations centre on inclusion and connection.

Abdul is driven by a desire to improve experiences for others and bring people with and without disabilities together.

He emphasises identity and equality, stating, “we are all unique and different, just because we have a disability, it doesn’t define who we are.”

Similarly, Nicole hopes to encourage people with a learning disability to be active and enjoy new opportunities, using her own experience to offer practical understanding and reassurance, highlighting how lived experience can be used as a form of peer support.

Advocacy and representation

In Bradford, Community Connectors are motivated by advocacy, representation, and supporting others through lived experience, indicating that the role is perceived as a platform for influence as well as participation.

Barney values having a paid role where he can contribute to his community and help others feel included.

He explains that he “wants to be an ambassador for the community,” and hopes to “encourage others to get out and participate in activities,” while helping to remove barriers so everyone can take part.

Jason shares a similar motivation, describing how he “wanted to do something to give back to people with a learning disability,” reflecting a strong commitment to supporting others and improving opportunities locally.

Confidence and Inclusion

In Derby, motivations centre on building confidence, encouraging people to be active and challenging stigma around disability.

Community Connectors describe wanting to help others overcome barriers, grow in confidence and take part more fully in community life. Kate explains, “I want to help people overcome challenges and gain confidence,” while Emma shares, “I’m looking forward to meeting people and seeing where the project will go.”

They hope to focus on connecting people with a learning disability to accessible opportunities across Derby, promoting inclusion in physical activity and acting as positive role models to inspire confidence and participation.

Personal development and community impact

Across communities, Community Connectors often see the role as an opportunity to develop skills, gain paid employment and build confidence, pointing to both personal and social value within the role.

Their hopes frequently combine personal development with a commitment to supporting peers and strengthening their communities, suggesting alignment between individual motivations and the project’s wider aims.



*“I’ve been wanting a paid job,
I want to do work and become
independent”*

Community Connector achievements and plans

Early contributions and progress

Community Connectors are making visible contributions within their communities, although the scale and pace vary depending on how recently the role has been established.

Early achievements are emerging in engagement, awareness-raising and supporting inclusive opportunities, alongside clear plans for further involvement, suggesting a gradual shift from introduction to active contribution.

A recent Community Connector day held in London, which brought Community Connectors together in person, was warmly welcomed.

Attendees valued the opportunity to share experiences and learn from

one another, and expressed a desire for more face-to-face opportunities where possible to strengthen peer support and collective learning.

Local achievement

In St Helens, Liam has already conducted a survey on accessibility and inclusion, met with organisations to expand activity options, and supported funding applications. Stakeholders describe him as a “go-to person” and a trusted local contact whose confidence has grown noticeably, pointing to personal development alongside community impact.

In St Austell and the Clay Country, achievements include participating in walking groups, helping to develop a community dance group and building connections with local stakeholders, demonstrating early relationship-building and local influence.

Plans focus on expanding accessible activities. One stakeholder notes, “as long as there are things in place to support them, they really do get a

voice”, highlighting the importance of ongoing support structures.

In Ealing, the Community Connector has contributed to presentations, funding discussions and local forums, helping to bring lived experience into decision-making, indicating movement beyond initial involvement toward influence.

These contributions demonstrate early co-production in practice.

Continued involvement in funding panels and activity planning is expected as the role develops.

Wider employment impact

Beyond the Community Connector roles themselves, there are small but emerging signs of wider employment impact, with 9% of surveyed stakeholders reporting that they have employed someone with a learning disability because of involvement in Our Active Community.

While currently limited, this may point to emerging shifts in employer confidence and expectations around the contribution of people with a learning disability in community roles.

It may however also highlight a continuing gap in how organisations are supported to feel confident, prepared, or resourced to employ people with a learning disability.

Community Connectors are:

- ✓ Supporting funding applications
- ✓ Sharing lived experience
- ✓ Helping raise awareness of opportunities
- ✓ Encouraging participation and confidence
- ✓ Contributing to local decision-making and co-production processes



The Communities

Provision

Existing offer

Current provision

Insight across the nine communities showed existing provision for people with a learning disability is varied and often shaped by what local learning disability organisations, day services and community groups already provide.

Many areas had some inclusive activity in place, such as walking groups, boccia, dance, swimming and multi-sport sessions, but these opportunities are not always widely available or well-known, which could limit who takes part.

“Provision is present but limited and people are often unable to access it due to barriers including transport and cost, to name a couple”

Reliance on specialist settings

Conversations with stakeholders suggest provision was often concentrated within day services or centres.

While these spaces are valued as safe and familiar, this can sometimes mean opportunities are not fully integrated into mainstream community activity.

As a result, people with a learning disability may have fewer chances to participate in everyday community sport and physical activity.

Information and visibility

A recurring theme is that opportunities exist but were not always widely known, easily found or accessible for people with a learning disability.

Families, support staff and individuals often relied on word-of-mouth rather than clear central information channels.

This may make access inconsistent and dependent on local knowledge.

In several communities, stakeholders noted that activities may have been available but not clearly advertised as inclusive, which may discourage participation.

Access barriers

Transport, staffing support and confidence were also commonly cited as factors affecting engagement in opportunities.

Rural or coastal areas in particular report additional challenges around travel and fewer local options.

Uneven landscape

While a foundation of provision exists, it was uneven and likely fragmented.

This highlights the importance of building networks, sharing information and promoting opportunities more widely, alongside creating new activities.

New offer

Emerging opportunities

Alongside existing provision, communities are now seeing a broader range of opportunities emerging.

New activities introduced through Our Active Community include creative dance sessions, boccia, walking groups, adapted fitness sessions and inclusive sport activities delivered in community venues.

Activities that combine social and physical elements, such as dance, guided walks and multi-sport tasters, appear particularly well received, suggesting that enjoyment and social connection are important features of successful engagement.

Inclusive adaptation of activities

In some areas, providers have begun offering more explicitly inclusive sessions or adapting mainstream activities, so people with a learning disability can participate.

This represents a shift from relying solely on specialist provision toward creating opportunities within community settings.

Where this is working well, it often involves supportive staff, smaller group sizes and clear communication, indicating that provider confidence and preparation can influence how inclusive opportunities are experienced.

Use of community spaces

It is also suggested that there is an increased use of community spaces such as leisure centres, parks and local venues, which may help to normalise participation in everyday environments.

Access to suitable venues and timeslots however does not always appear consistent, and some activities remain dependent on particular providers.

Communication and promotion

In several communities, stakeholders report there is now greater visibility of opportunities and clearer pathways into activities.

Community forums, Community Connector involvement and word-of-mouth promotion appear to support awareness-raising.

At the same time, visibility remains uneven, with some families and support staff still relying on informal networks to find opportunities, suggesting communication and promotion remain areas for development.

Growth and sustainability

While the scale of new provision varies, there is early evidence that the range of options available to people with a learning disability is beginning to expand.

Activities that build on existing interests, involve co-production or offer taster opportunities appear more likely to encourage sustained engagement.

Longer-term sustainability, workforce confidence and maintaining momentum beyond initial funding periods are recurring considerations.

Overall, the newer offer reflects growing local awareness and willingness to provide inclusive opportunities, complementing rather than replacing existing provision.

This suggests that embedding inclusive practice across community settings is developing gradually rather than representing a complete shift.

New provision across communities includes, but is not limited to:

New or expanded inclusive sport and activity sessions:

- ✓ Creative dance and Sosa dance sessions at Dandelion Collective in Greenwich
- ✓ Dance and Chat initiative in St Austell and Clay Country, combining dance with co-production discussions
- ✓ Funky Friends accessible after-school dance group for children with SEND in St Helens
- ✓ Salsa taster sessions for volunteers with a learning disability in Nottingham
- ✓ Inclusive boccia and boxfit sessions delivered by Summat Creative in Bradford, with parallel yoga sessions offered for parents, carers and support workers.
- ✓ Active and Able adapted fitness sessions in Bradford, providing accessible exercise opportunities tailored to a range of abilities.
- ✓ Adaptive fitness and sensory-based session by Forge Fitness in St Helens

- ✓ Support for people with a learning disability to access gym memberships in Greenwich
- ✓ Funded multi-sport programme at Skills Kitchen in Bradford
- ✓ British Triathlon-supported inclusive triathlon event in Worthing, introducing adapted multi-discipline activity
- ✓ Inclusive water sports sessions in St Austell such as kayaking and paddleboarding
- ✓ Weekly inclusive activities in Thanet, including martial arts, boxing, yoga and belly dancing
- ✓ Tailored supported gym access programme in Thanet
- ✓ Inclusive non-contact boxing sessions in Derby, offering adapted boxing-based fitness in a supported environment

Inclusive leisure and wellbeing activities:

- ✓ Inclusive walking groups in St Austell and Clay Country
- ✓ Themed guided educational walks in Nottingham, co-produced with people with lived experience
- ✓ Adapted cycling hubs using Wheels4All bikes in St Helens
- ✓ Gardening sessions in Derby promoting outdoor activity and social engagement
- ✓ Silent disco sessions in St Helens, using music to encourage walks in local parks

Engagement-focused activities:

- ✓ Regular action-focused community forums incorporating physical activity elements across communities
- ✓ Try it, Like it, Do it multi-sport events in Bradford, including seated archery, fencing, rugby, golf, dance and Kinball
- ✓ Inclusifit taster event in Ealing featuring trampolining, football, karate and sensory play
- ✓ Taster days introducing people to a range of accessible activities within several communities
- ✓ Inclusive sports days in Greenwich, bringing together local providers and participants
- ✓ Video project showcasing football sessions to engage people with a learning disability, and help break down barriers to taking part in Derby
- ✓ Inclusive gaming and sports event bringing young people with additional needs together through games, activity and social connection in Ealing

More inclusive mainstream opportunities or developments:

- ✓ Adaptations to leisure centre sessions to improve accessibility in Ealing
- ✓ Easy Read activity information developed in Nottingham
- ✓ Mixed-participation pan-disability football sessions in St Austell
- ✓ Inclusive pan-disability hockey sessions delivered at local schools in Ealing
- ✓ Capacity-building football leadership course in Greenwich, supporting inclusive delivery skills
- ✓ Installation of new floodlights to a community pitch in Thanet, increasing access to inclusive football opportunities
- ✓ Sports Buddies in Worthing that pairs people with and without a learning disability to take part in local sports and physical activities together.

Supporting Community Engagement

Building confidence

Confidence here means how comfortable someone feels about joining activities, being in new places and meeting new people.

It can include feeling safe, welcome and able to take part.

Confidence and participation

Confidence is suggested to play an important role in shaping participation for people with a learning disability.

Across the nine communities, confidence levels appear mixed, with many individuals feeling comfortable in familiar activities or settings, but less confident when trying something new or engaging with new people.

This suggests that access to opportunities alone may not be enough to enable participation if confidence is not supported.

Influence of families and support staff

Confidence is also viewed as influencing how families and support staff view opportunities, particularly where there are concerns about safety, accessibility or inclusivity.

In some cases, this can affect decisions about whether someone attends and can limit exploration of new activities.

Preference for familiar settings

Across communities, stakeholders note some individuals prefer familiar environments or structured groups.

This appears linked less to a lack of interest, but more to uncertainty or previous experiences where activities were not fully inclusive, indicating the importance of positive first experiences.

Building trust over time

Consistency and trusted relationships emerge as important factors in building confidence.

Regular sessions, familiar providers and supportive staff seem to build trust and security.

Confidence also appears to grow through positive experiences, peer support and gradual exposure to activities and settings.

Supported taster sessions and smaller groups are often identified as effective in building trust and developing the skills and confidence needed to take part.

This suggests that confidence-building is an ongoing process rather than a one-off step.

Strengthening motivation

Motivation here means the reasons why someone wants to join or keep going to activities.

It can include what makes an activity feel enjoyable, worthwhile or important to them.

Enjoyment and social connection

Community stakeholders and people with a learning disability suggest that motivation to take part in physical activity is closely linked to enjoyment and social connection.

Participation appears more likely when activities are fun, social and aligned with personal interests.

Being with friends and spending time with others is frequently highlighted as an important reason for joining activities, indicating that participation is frequently driven by social value as much as the activity itself.

The importance of enjoyment is reinforced by survey responses from people with a learning disability, with 91% saying being active makes them feel happy.

This suggests that emotional wellbeing and enjoyment are central to how activity is experienced, and that positive feelings may be a key driver of continued participation.

Sense of belonging

Feeling welcomed and included appears to strengthen motivation.

Opportunities where people experience belonging can make participation more appealing and support continued engagement over time, suggesting that inclusive environments can influence motivation to join in activities.

Wellbeing benefits

Some individuals describe feeling calmer, energised or healthier through participation, reflecting everyday wellbeing outcomes rather than formal health goals.

Practical influences

Some individuals may feel less motivated to join activities if they are unsure what to expect or if opportunities feel unfamiliar.

Practical factors such as transport, support availability and how clearly activities are explained are suggested to influence whether people choose to take part.

This indicates that motivation can be influenced by both personal interest and practical accessibility.

91%

Of people with a learning disability say being active makes them feel happy.

“People are motivated to take part in activities because of the social side, as well as having fun”

Community Needs

Addressing provision challenges

Communities suggest several challenges linked to providing inclusive physical activity opportunities for people with a learning disability, indicating the need for continued focus.

Staffing and support requirements

A recurring theme is the level of staffing and support needed to deliver activities that are appropriately tailored to participants' needs.

Inclusive delivery often requires smaller group sizes, additional supervision and more individualised support.

This can increase resource demand and costs, suggesting that inclusive provision can be more resource-intensive than standard delivery.

Workforce confidence and skills

Workforce confidence and experience also appear to influence delivery.

Some providers seem interested in being inclusive but feel they lack the

training, knowledge or experience to adapt sessions effectively or communicate accessibly.

This indicates that provider capability and confidence may influence the offer of inclusive opportunities.

Facilities and accessibility

Access to suitable and accessible facilities is another reported challenge.

Not all venues are fully accessible or designed with the needs of people with a learning disability in mind, which can limit where activities can take place, reducing flexibility in delivery.

Visibility and promotion

Raising awareness of opportunities also presents a challenge for providers.

As noted earlier, opportunities are not always widely known, and reaching beyond informal networks requires additional effort.

This suggests that visibility may be a delivery issue as well as a participation one.

Resource constraints

Funding, resources and workforce capacity underpin many of these challenges.

Providing inclusive opportunities often requires more planning, support and flexibility, and communities indicate that securing the necessary resources can be an ongoing pressure.

While challenges continue around staffing, resources and facility access, some communities now report gradual improvements in provider confidence, partnership support and awareness of inclusive opportunities, suggesting early shifts in how inclusive provision is being approached.

Reducing barriers to participation

A range of barriers is suggested to affect whether people with a learning disability are able to take part in physical activity, and these may require ongoing attention and action.

Support dependence

Support availability appears to be a key factor.

Many people rely on the availability of carers, family members or support staff to access activities, and if this support is unavailable, inconsistent or limited to certain times, participation can be restricted, and opportunities for independent access reduced.

This suggests that access often depends on support systems rather than individual choice alone.

Perceived inclusivity

Accessibility and inclusion are also seen to affect engagement. Not all activities are perceived as suitable or sufficiently adapted to meet different needs.

Where sessions are not clearly inclusive or tailored, people may assume they are not intended for them, possibly limiting take-up.

Cost and affordability

Cost presents another reported barrier. This can include the cost of activities themselves as well as the cost of transport or additional support needed to attend.

For some individuals, these combined costs can make regular participation difficult, indicating that affordability can affect sustainability of engagement.

Timing and availability

Limited availability of sessions outside of service hours is also highlighted.

Opportunities often align with day service hours, with fewer evening or weekend options in some areas, suggesting provision may not always fit around people's lives.

Information and awareness

Information and visibility are also perceived as barriers. Opportunities are cited as not always being shared in accessible formats or clearly promoted as inclusive, which can make it harder for people and their supporters to identify suitable activities.

Recent data shows awareness currently appears mixed, with 71% of people with a learning disability saying they know what happens locally to help them get active.

This suggests that while many now feel informed, a sizeable proportion may still experience gaps in accessible information or communication.

Transport challenges

Transport is also frequently mentioned, particularly where public transport is limited or where additional support is needed to travel.

Although these barriers currently remain, there are indications of gradual improvement in awareness, visibility of opportunities and inclusive practice, which may be helping to reduce some access barriers over time.



About 2 in 3 people with a learning disability say they are aware of local activity

Enabling inclusive participation

Communities highlight several factors that, with continued attention and support, could further strengthen participation for people with a learning disability.

Taster and low-pressure opportunities

Introductory and informal sessions can help people explore activities without feeling overwhelmed. This suggests that building familiarity over time could reduce uncertainty and support engagement.

Interest-led activities

Opportunities linked to personal interests such as music, dance, films or transport, are also highlighted to increase interest and engagement, indicating that relevance and enjoyment could play an important role in sustaining involvement.

Role of support networks

Attending with friends, family, carers, or buddies often makes participation more manageable.

This suggests that participation could often be enabled through social connections rather than individual access alone.

Broader availability

The timing of activities is also suggested to enable access. Activities offered beyond traditional service hours may help widen access for some individuals.

Accessible communication

Providing information in clear Easy Read formats and promoting opportunities proactively could help people understand what is available and whether it is suitable, supporting greater uptake.

Inclusive community settings

Using welcoming, community-based venues may also help normalise participation and increase visibility of people with a learning disability in everyday settings, which could also support wider awareness and acceptance.

Workforce development

Provider training and confidence in inclusive practice are additionally suggested to strengthen delivery, indicating that workforce development is part of enabling participation.

Belonging and inclusion

Feedback from people with a learning disability suggests many feel connected locally, with 78% saying they feel part of their local community.

This may suggest that efforts to create inclusive environments and reduce barriers to participation are being recognised.



About 4 in 5 people with a learning disability say they feel part of the local community



Developments

Networks, Partnerships and Collaborations

Community forums

Purpose and development

Community forums within Our Active Community are intended to support engagement, co-production and local input into inclusive physical activity.

People with a learning disability are widely viewed as making a valuable contribution to forum discussions, with lived experience informing and shaping local conversations.

In several communities, attendance has grown over time, suggesting increasing recognition of forums as a useful space, although time has been needed to develop them, particularly with a community-led approach.

Forums are also used to share experiences, identify barriers, and shape local provision. }

Voice and participation

Feeling heard also emerges as important, with 74% of people with a learning disability agreeing that people listen to what they say in their community.

This may indicate growing confidence and voice and suggests that co-production approaches are recognised by community members, potentially through involvement in forums and opportunities to share lived experience in decision-making.

Format and consistency

Formats and consistency vary across the nine communities. Many forums are intentionally informal, sometimes incorporating social or activity-based elements, which appear to support participation from individuals less comfortable with formal meetings.

Where forums have not been able to take place, alternative approaches such as information events or targeted meetings have been used.

Capacity and coverage

Effectiveness appears to be influenced by local capacity. In some communities, forums have not formed or have been less regular due to capacity constraints, geographical considerations, or challenges for stakeholders to attend.

In some cases, more localised or smaller forums have been needed to better reach people in specific areas of a community.

Networking and shared learning

Forums are commonly described as providing a valuable networking function.

They are seen to support shared learning, connection-building and cross-sector engagement, bringing together a mix of organisations, stakeholders, community members with a learning disability and carers and support workers.

Engagement is viewed as strengthening existing connections and the formation of new ones. Participation is also suggested to have contributed to improved awareness of, and engagement in, local physical activity opportunities.

Connections made through forums are also cited as inspiring further involvement in Our Active Community. Forums are additionally used to test ideas for new activities and provide signposting to relevant opportunities.

Influence on local delivery

In some areas, forums have functioned as coordination points for local action rather than solely consultation spaces. Discussions have led to practical outcomes, including linking services, identifying gaps, focusing funding, and addressing needs such as acquiring additional equipment or resources. This indicates that forums can influence local delivery where follow-up action is visible.

Broadening engagement

While forums typically involve a mix of organisations, participation is suggested as not always including all the relevant stakeholders, highlighting the need to broaden engagement in some areas.

Overall, forums appear most effective where facilitation, regularity, clear purpose and feedback loops are able to be maintained.



Network developments and building connections

Role of Partners and Connectors

Community Partners and Community Connectors appear to be central to developing local networks.

Their work often involves introducing organisations to one another, linking people to opportunities, and increasing awareness of existing provision.

Network development is typically gradual and reflects the community-led approach, with time and sustained effort needed to build trust and relationships.

Information sharing

Across communities, there are indications of increased information sharing through a range of mechanisms, including information-sharing events, newsletters, sharing of opportunities, and forums.

These approaches appear to support awareness of what already exists locally and provide spaces for organisations to connect and exchange knowledge.

Some events, however, are reported as feeling organisation-heavy, with a desire expressed for greater involvement from parents, carers and people with a learning disability.

Broadening provider involvement

Overall engagement with Our Active Community appears to involve a growing breadth of providers.

This includes learning disability organisations as well as mainstream services, with connections between these groups particularly noted.

In several communities, these connections appear to be opening up access to leisure centres, parks, and community venues, suggesting gradual integration into wider community settings rather than reliance solely on specialist provision.

New and emerging structures

In some areas, network activity has been associated with the formation of new working groups or steering groups, alongside integration with established networks.

In St Austell, a 'Getting Active' learning disability panel has formed, drawing on the wider Our Active Community network to support discussions and local decisions, and in some cases contributing to funding panel activity.

Current members are primarily drawn from a range of local day services, with plans to widen involvement to encourage individuals who are not part of a formal day service to join the panel.

These types of structures appear to expand shared understanding and create opportunities for collaboration, rather than always resulting in immediate or formalised partnerships.

Network events

Examples of network-building include Try it, Like it, Do it events in Bradford.

These events involve people with a learning disability trying activities, guest speakers, and opportunities to form new connections, and there are indications that similar concepts may be expanded to other communities.

Cross-community and national learning

Some stakeholders across the communities are expressing a desire to connect and learn from others beyond their immediate area.

This includes interest in national learning opportunities, such as understanding how other communities have implemented activities, overcome challenges, or established schemes and programmes.

Several organisations also indicate a willingness to share best practice and provide practical, hands-on advice, which could support development in other communities and inform future scaling of the project.

Overall, organisations appear to be becoming more aware of each other's roles and offers, with new and potentially valuable connections forming over time.

Network development however, remains uneven and is often influenced by local capacity and existing relationships, highlighting the time and continuity required to embed community networks.

“There are more conversations about how to improve accessibility”

Partnerships and collaborations

Working together

Partnership working continues to be a recurring feature across communities, with collaborations forming between learning disability organisations, community groups, leisure providers and local authorities.

These partnerships often involve different people and organisations working together around practical delivery, including co-running sessions, hosting activities and supporting funding applications.

Pathways to collaboration

Many partnerships appear to emerge through community forums and relationship-building activity facilitated by Our Active Community.

This has led, in several areas, to stakeholders promoting each other's activities, planning taster sessions jointly and sharing responsibility for delivery.

Expectations and experience

This collaborative focus is echoed in stakeholder survey responses, with 62% initially motivated to collaborate and 61% reporting that they have since done so.

The close alignment between intention and outcome may indicate that stakeholders experience Our Active Community as a platform that enables partnership working.

At the same time, it suggests collaboration might be achievable where relationships are supported but may still depend on local capacity and continuity.

Examples of joint activity

In some cases, connections facilitated through Our Active Community appear to have enabled opportunities that may not otherwise have emerged.

This includes inclusive dance sessions and guided walks in Nottingham, which build on existing provision while widening access.

Joint working has also supported the creation of Easy Read resources, helping to strengthen communication and accessibility across organisations.

Cross-borough sharing of approaches is also emerging, with learning from a buddy scheme in Greenwich being shared with stakeholders in Ealing.

In several communities, partnership activity has extended to links such as training providers offering qualifications.

In Worthing, collaboration between local partners and Mencap has also supported the delivery of an inclusive British Triathlon event.

Co-production in practice

People with a learning disability are becoming more visible within partnerships through Community Connector roles and forum involvement.

Their participation is seen to bring lived experience into planning and delivery discussions, suggesting movement toward co-production in practice.

Further examples include a co-produced dance session in St Austell and the Clay Country, as well as a youth voice co-produced video showcasing football sessions in Derby.

Variation across communities

The depth and sustainability of partnerships appear influenced by local infrastructure, organisational readiness and available capacity.

Overall, partnerships are developing progressively rather than uniformly, shaped by local context and the strength of relationships formed.



About 3 in 5 say they have collaborated with other organisations or community members

“The disability network was born out of the community forum, as people who are passionate about what we are doing and how that can be improved and so they meet up, and discuss what is happening in the community and what can be done It is a space where groups can collaborate and contribute their knowledge to help build the community”

Seed Funding

How it works

Seed funding model

Our Active Community provides seed funding to support inclusive physical activity within each community, with up to £60,000 available over the project period, averaging £20,000 per year per community.

Funding is intended to enable new or expanded opportunities that increase access and inclusion for people with a learning disability.

Use of funding

Seed funding is often used to pilot activities, create new provision or reduce participation barriers.

This includes supporting inclusive dance and fitness sessions, enabling access to community venues, contributing to equipment or facility improvements, and funding taster events that introduce people to new activities.

This suggests funding is frequently acting as a catalyst to test ideas and build local confidence in inclusive delivery.



Access and application support

Funding information is shared through community forums, networks and direct support from Community Partners.

Easy Read materials and one-to-one guidance are used to make the process more accessible. Support from Community Partners appears to play a key role in helping organisations develop proposals that reflect local needs.

Application experience

Applying for funding can take time, particularly for smaller organisations, but tailored support and guidance seem to help groups navigate the process, with some communities expressing a preference for more in-person support to reduce repeated follow-up and clarification.

This indicates that the project focuses not only on giving funding but also on helping organisations access and use it effectively, but further support could be provided.

Funding is generally directed toward activities that support inclusion and reflect local needs.

This can encourage organisations to plan carefully and work with Community Partners, Community Connectors, stakeholders and community members with a learning disability.

Not all organisations however are equally prepared to apply, and those with more experience or capacity tend to access funding more easily.

Role of funding in engagement

Stakeholder survey data suggests funding is a motivator for some organisations, with 31 citing access to funding as a reason for involvement. A similar proportion (33%) report successfully accessing funding.

This pattern may reflect the different roles organisations play locally, as not all organisations are in a position to apply for or use the funding.

It also suggests that while funding is valued, it may not be the primary driver for all engagement.

Continued support and clear communication around funding processes remain important so that organisations that are eligible feel confident to apply.

This aligns with the project's role in providing tailored support and signposting, particularly for smaller or less experienced community organisations.

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

Panel structure and membership

Funding panels are now established within most communities to review seed funding applications and guide decision-making.

Panels typically include a mix of stakeholders and people with a learning disability, with lived experience forming a central part of the process.

In several areas where formal panels are not yet in place, key day service users are involved in funding discussions, with some expressing enjoyment in contributing to conversations and considering how funding should be used.

Cross-community support

In Ealing, where a local panel has not yet been established, the Derby funding panel has provided support, reflecting some cross-community collaboration in decision-making processes.

Influence of lived-experience

In practice, the inclusion of people with a learning disability on panels appears to shift decision-making toward what is meaningful and accessible in real community contexts.

Their involvement is viewed as bringing first-hand insight into what supports participation and what may create barriers, helping ensure proposals are considered through an inclusion lens rather than solely on delivery feasibility.

Stakeholders frequently value the relevance and inclusivity this brings, and the opportunity for people with a learning disability to have their say.

Accessible approaches

Easy Read materials and supported discussions are used to enable participation in panels.

This reflects an effort to make decision-making itself inclusive, not only the activities being funded.

Participation in panels also appears to support skill-building and confidence for those involved, contributing to leadership development as well as representation.

Shared decision-making

Stakeholders often view panels as a fair and transparent way to allocate funding.

Bringing together different perspectives can support balanced decisions and a sense of shared ownership, which may encourage wider buy-in from local organisations.

Challenges in establishing panels

At the same time, establishing panels with strong lived-experience representation has been more challenging in some communities.

Capacity constraints, varying levels of interest and travel logistics are suggested to influence recruitment and participation.

The process can also require time and facilitation to ensure all voices are heard, particularly where panel members are new to decision-making roles.

Sustainability considerations

Alongside decisions about allocation, discussions frequently highlight the importance of sustainability.

There is recognition that while seed funding can successfully kick-start activities, further resources may be needed for longer-term development, training and continuation beyond initial funding periods.

A community stakeholder also expressed a desire to see more joint collaborations on funding bids, suggesting that partnership approaches could help increase engagement numbers, widen reach and improve longer-term sustainability.

There were also reflections on the importance of impact monitoring. While funding may not be tied to strict KPIs, a strategic stakeholder suggested that funded organisations could be expected to share evidence of impact.

This focus on capturing outcomes could help strengthen accountability, demonstrate value, and support sustainability planning beyond the initial funding period.

Overall, funding panels appear to operate as both a governance mechanism and a form of co-production.

Involvement in panels suggests lived experience is increasingly viewed as influencing funding decisions and local inclusion practice.

“How do we make physical activity more accessible and inclusive for people with a learning disability, not just another standalone session, that when funding runs out, it stops?”

Community	Approved		Other applications <i>(awaiting approval)</i>
	2024–2025	2025–2026	
Bradford and District	✓ Learning disability gym sessions ✓ Boccia ✓ Boxercise classes ✓ Mixed ability cricket	✓ Multi-sports sessions ✓ Refunding of Boccia and boxercise	
St Helens	✓ Football sessions, holiday camps & upskilling of coaches	✓ Inclusive football sessions ✓ Silent disco walking group ✓ Dance group for children with special educational needs ✓ Therapy and sport sessions for children with special educational needs	✓ Multi-sports sessions awaiting approval ✓ Multi-sports sessions and activity hub awaiting approval
Nottingham	✓ Rebound therapy & multi-sport sessions ✓ Dancing sessions ✓ Guided walks	✓ Taster sessions of Boccia, yoga and swimming	✓ Equipment and taster activities ✓ Boccia and Basketball sessions ✓ Basketball sessions
Derby	✓ Non-contact boxing sessions	✓ Refunding of non-contact boxing ✓ Development of a community garden to support people with a learning disability to get active through gardening ✓ Creative dance and movement sessions ✓ Silent disco equipment ✓ Creation of a learning disability dedicated garden area ✓ Inclusive football participation video project ✓ Refunding of non-contact boxing	✓ Multi-Sport Sessions ✓ Walking group
Ealing	✓ Multi-sport sessions	✓ Gaming and sports event ✓ Inclusive sports week ✓ Inclusive hockey sessions ✓ Dance classes	

Continued on next page...

Community	Approved		Other applications (awaiting approval)
	2024–2025	2025–2026	
Greenwich	✓ Yoga sessions ✓ Creative dance sessions and performance ✓ Zumba sessions ✓ 12-week sports leaders course	✓ Seated Boccia and Sosa dancing ✓ 'Hoops' basketball sessions ✓ Inclusive sports days ✓ Free and discounted gym membership ✓ Winter inclusive sports day	✓ Dance leaders course
Thanet	✓ Supporting people to access community gym facilities	✓ Multi-sports taster session ✓ Inclusive supported gym access programme ✓ Weekly activities including martial arts, boxing, yoga and belly dancing	✓ Self-guided walking project
Worthing		✓ Seated exercise sessions ✓ Group fitness sessions ✓ Inclusive dance sessions ✓ Sport buddies service	
St Austell and Clay Country	✓ New adapted bike ✓ Table Tennis sessions and community outreach	✓ Football sessions ✓ Community dance club ✓ Youth dance club ✓ Water sports sessions ✓ Refunding of the community dance club	✓ Purchase of a frame runner ✓ Forest school provision ✓ Qiqong sessions ✓ Training for multi-sports and Table Tennis delivery

mencap

**ACTIVE
COMMUNITY**



Mencap Active Community

What the Network Provides

About 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.

The network brings together organisations, groups, and individuals who are committed to creating more opportunities for people with a learning disability to be active, happy, and healthy.

By expanding beyond the nine communities, Mencap Active Community networks and connects partners nationally, enabling them to share best practice, learnings, and successes.

It also aims to strengthen links between the care services and sport sectors, providing shared resources and promoting initiatives that improve participation among people with a learning disability.

Web portal

Purpose and function

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.

Supporting national connections

The portal supports networking between partners across the country.

On registration, partners have the option to create their own profile page, including links to their organisation's website, helping to increase visibility and encourage connections.

The portal also promotes resources and events, supporting partners to stay informed and engaged with Mencap Active Community activity.

Link to activity data

To further support access to opportunities, the portal links to 'Everybody Moves', using open data to signpost partners and communities to available physical activity opportunities.

Implementation and launch

The launch of the portal has been slower than anticipated due to technical issues with the sign-up system, alongside capacity pressures across both the web and sport teams, particularly around the nine Our Active Community conferences.

To support delivery, a new Programme Support Coordinator has been recruited to help manage the portal. Despite this, around 67 people have registered for access before the end of January 2026, demonstrating early interest and demand.

Registered partners will soon be given access to the portal once it has been populated with content and information.

Initial feedback suggests the portal is viewed positively, with one partner commenting, "I will check it out, I think anything like that is always useful, to hear about good practice and share examples."

Webinars

Purpose and format

The Mencap Active Community webinars provide a space for partners to connect, share best practice and explore key themes relevant to supporting people with a learning disability to be active.

Open to all Mencap Active Community members, the webinars bring together people from across the country, offering an accessible way for partners to stay connected and informed.

Since February 2025, two webinars have been delivered, with attendance from 67 partners across a range of regions and sectors.

A partner reflected positively on a session, noting, “it felt like it was well structured...there was a good introduction, clearly articulating what the purpose was.”

The format includes opportunities for interactive discussions, with one participant recalling that “there was an opportunity for everybody to...go into smaller breakout groups.”

This approach may support meaningful engagement and participation in the webinars.

Shared learning and networking

Shaped by partner needs, the sessions highlight regional projects and initiatives, while bringing together organisations, practitioners, and community partners.

The webinars create opportunities for open discussion, shared learning, and networking, which help to build a connected national community focused on improving opportunities for people with a learning disability to be active and healthy.

The informal format supports conversation and reflection, enabling partners to chat, ask questions, and exchange practical tools, resources, and insights, such as fundraising guidance, campaign insights, and Easy Read communication techniques, that can strengthen local work.

An attendee describes the sessions as collaborative and engaging, sharing, “I definitely feel like we had the opportunity to discuss and to think and feedback ideas in and share best practice and experience and knowledge as well.”

They further highlight the inspirational nature of hearing from passionate practitioners across the network. The webinars are seen as motivating, providing a space not only to learn from others but also to contribute.

A particularly strong theme was the visible involvement of people with a learning disability within the sessions, as one attendee reflects, “the thing that really sticks in my memory is how much people with a learning disability

were really involved in the webinar and in running it.”

This co-production element may strengthen the authenticity and impact of the sessions.

While highly valued, some partners note that continuing connections beyond the webinar itself is an area for further development, reflecting a desire to sustain relationships and collaboration between sessions.

Mencap Active Community aims to continue delivering the webinars quarterly, ensuring regular opportunities for connection, learning and exchange across the network.

The Learning Disability and Sport Workshops

Purpose and approach

The workshops, delivered by Mencap in partnership with Special Olympics, are offered through Mencap Active Community and equip 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.

Delivery and reach

Since the last report in February 2025, 18 more workshops have trained a further 232 people, bringing the total to 42 workshops and 588 people.

Plans are in place to increase the number of workshops delivered each year and continue expanding the co-tutor workforce.

Since last year, one new co-tutor has been trained, with plans to bring another co-tutor into post soon.

Delivery settings

The workshops have been delivered across a range of sectors and settings.

This includes delivery in partnership with Special Olympics at the University of Derby, sessions for NHS social prescribers to improve knowledge, awareness and signposting, and targeted workshops for sports organisations and community clubs.

For example, a community tennis club in North London opened a session to other local sports clubs, supporting wider learning across the area.

A strong partnership has developed with Active Norfolk, who have commissioned multiple workshops to target specific geographic areas and partners seeking to improve accessibility and inclusion.

Active Norfolk has expressed plans to continue delivery across the county, with a focus on reaching a wide range of groups, including an upcoming workshop booked for 20 football coaches.

Workshop content and experience

Workshop content includes information-sharing, group discussion, creative activities, and practical exercises that encourage participants to reflect on language, barriers, and inclusive practice.

Attendees report increased confidence in recognising disability, allowing more time, using clearer communication and visuals, and adapting activities to be more inclusive.

Feedback highlights that small changes in delivery can have a meaningful impact on participants with a learning disability.

All attendees receive a certificate of participation, including recognised hours towards CPD points.

Learning and impact

There is emerging evidence of impact beyond the sessions themselves, with coaches and clubs reporting that they are beginning to implement strategies discussed in the workshops and share learning with colleagues who did not attend.

One participant reflects, “it encouraged reflection on our learning and thinking around how small changes could make a real difference for participants at the leisure centre or within sessions”.

While another attendee notes the workshops offered a strong balance between knowledge and practical application.

One attendee shares, “he definitely adds value just by engaging with the groups and individuals there, and that becomes part of the learning for some of them.”

There are plans to further develop the Learning Disability and Sport Workshops, as Active Derby has expressed interest in working with Mencap to develop bespoke versions of the workshop to meet specific groups, community or local needs, such as for delivery of the holiday activities and food (HAF) programme or particular sports.

Special Olympics also plans to work with Mencap to explore how the workshops can evolve further, including their potential inclusion as part of coach development programmes through existing relationships with National Governing Bodies.

There is also interest in adapting the workshops for different sports, and expanding delivery within higher education settings, such as university and college coach development courses.

"We learned a lot, and all the coaches said they want to better embed inclusive practice within their sport"



Our Active Community Conferences

Attendance and Participation

Across all nine conferences

Total attendees: **336**

People with a Learning Disability attendees: **105, nearly 1/3 of total attendees**

People with a Learning Disability staff involved in delivery: **30**

New individuals connected: **286**

New organisations connected: **95**

Overview

Within Mencap Active Community, the Our Active Community conferences form part of the wider network activity and are led by people with a learning disability, supported by Mencap staff.

They celebrate inclusion, collaboration, and the sharing of best practice to support more inclusive active communities.

Held from September to November last year across the nine communities of Our Active Community, the conferences provided opportunities for people with a learning disability and community stakeholders, whether already engaged with Our Active Community or not, to share inspiring stories, access research insights, take home practical tools, and network with peers and professionals.

Highlights include hearing real stories featuring experiences of people with a learning disability, including Paralympic gold medallist Jessica-Jane Applegate.

Attendees further praise the events, with one noting: “it was really good seeing people with a learning disability at their conference, and for our young people to meet other young people who are active.”

Conferences also provided access to research shaping future inclusive activity programming, networking opportunities, practical tools to implement locally, and recognition of the achievements of Our Active Community Community Connectors.

Conference activities

The conferences included a range of activities designed to engage attendees and promote learning.

The keynote address by Jessica-Jane Applegate MBE, a triple Paralympian and Mencap ambassador, focused on her journey to a gold medal and the importance of activity for people with a learning disability.

This session was widely regarded as impactful, with one attendee commenting, “Jessica was really

inspiring”, and how hearing from Jessica “changed a few people’s perspectives on what a learning disability is”.

Workshops were another core element of the conferences. SPEAR, the research centre commissioned by Mencap to evaluate Our Active Community, delivered a session exploring both challenges and opportunities in developing accessible physical activity provision for people with a learning disability.

Another thought-provoking session, ‘Getting Started with AI for Activity’, examined how artificial intelligence could be used to support people with a learning disability in leading healthier, happier lives.

Feedback highlights the relevance and usefulness of this workshop, with attendees noting plans to explore AI and accessibility in their own settings, as one attendee shares, “the workshops were very useful, especially the one about AI. I thought it was very relevant.”

Community organisations and people with a learning disability were also given the opportunity to present.

These sessions allowed them to showcase their work, share experiences, and inspire others.

Presenters, including those with a learning disability, were commended for their confidence and engagement, and attendees appreciated seeing people with a learning disability taking a central role, as one community organisation shares, “our young people loved doing it, they were brilliant.”

The conferences also promoted the Learning Disability and Sport Workshops, generating interest in follow-up training. For example, conversations following the conference led to plans for delivering a workshop in Southall, Ealing, and training entire teams within local organisations.

Community Connectors

Community Connectors played a central role throughout the conferences, delivering opening addresses, assisting with presentations, and supporting event logistics.

Their involvement was widely valued, with attendees noting the benefits of seeing Community Connectors actively contribute and lead sessions.

A staff member from Mencap highlights, “the way Community Connectors faced their challenges and delivered in front of everyone”.

Feedback shows the confidence, professionalism, and problem-solving skills demonstrated by Community Connectors, and their contributions were seen as enhancing the overall impact of the conferences.

Feedback

Feedback from around 25 attendees, collected through interviews and post-conference surveys, was largely positive.

Many highlight the value of the conferences in showcasing inclusive activity and supporting people with a learning disability to be more active.

Participants appreciate the opportunities for networking, hearing from people with a learning disability and peers, and engaging in well-structured discussions and workshops.

The mix of presentations, group discussions, and workshops is noted as effective and well-selected.

One attendee summarises: “I thought it was really well delivered and it provided a lot of opportunity for us.”

While the feedback was positive, there was some disappointment regarding overall attendance numbers, particularly the gap between those who registered and those who attended on the day.

Attendance, especially from key services, such as day centres and day services, within some communities, could have been higher.

Some stakeholders also express a desire to see more stakeholders and people with a learning disability from other communities, and suggested regional conferences to facilitate cross-community engagement as part of Our Active Community.

Some feedback also highlights potential overlap with other established conferences or events, such as those led by Active Partnerships, and that differentiation could add greater value.

Outcomes

It is suggested that the conferences have generated opportunities for networking, increased awareness, and ongoing engagement.

Many attendees requested follow-up workshops, established new contacts, and strengthened existing networks, with Community Partners also gaining new contacts from other community organisations.

Connections made during the conferences led to collaboration between organisations, including joint initiatives between a sport provider, a community organisation and a charity in Ealing.

Conferences may have also fostered community engagement, with local projects such as bike rides extending into new locations, exemplified by visits to a community café run by people with a learning disability, which became a new stop for riders.

Attendees report increased awareness of other organisations and initiatives, and there is an appetite for continued engagement and sharing of ideas across all nine communities.

One participant reflects, “because of the conference, we have made loads of different connections.”

While networking was widely valued, a small number of stakeholders across the communities noted the challenge of maintaining momentum beyond the conference itself.

Although intentions to collaborate and engage further were strong, some reflected that finding the time and capacity to sustain involvement can be difficult, with ongoing engagement sometimes perceived as a “nice to have” alongside competing priorities.

Stakeholders also express a need for case studies, reports, and key learnings from the conferences to be shared, ensuring the wider network benefits from the work undertaken across each community.

“I found that the mix of discussions in groups, but also talks from different people, was really good and well selected”

Progress and Next Steps

Progress to date

Mencap Active Community demonstrates growing engagement and strengthening relationships within and beyond the nine communities.

The development of the wider network appears to be supporting increased connections between organisations, individuals, and sectors committed to inclusive physical activity for people with a learning disability.

This is reflected in growing interest in conferences, workshops, webinars, and the web portal, training, and shared learning opportunities.

Stakeholders highlight the value of building on these connections, with one noting: “I’ve been keen to learn a bit more about some of the conferences and some of the other work that Mencap do. I definitely want to build on that relationship.”

This feedback reflects wider interest in deeper collaboration and sustained engagement across the network.

The delivery of webinars and Learning Disability and Sport Workshops has continued to support knowledge-sharing and confidence-building across a range of sectors, including health, education, local authorities, the voluntary and community sector, and sport and physical activity organisations.

Feedback consistently highlights the quality and practical value of this activity within the wider network, with attendees reporting increased confidence in embedding inclusive practice and applying learning within their own settings.

While engagement with the workshops is evident among some of the nine funded communities, awareness of Mencap Active Community as a wider network appears more limited.

Knowledge of the web portal, shared resources, webinars and national networking opportunities does not yet seem fully embedded within all communities.

Greater engagement and awareness of Mencap Active Community could strengthen sustainability beyond the funding period and provide additional infrastructure to support continued local development.

Plans and next steps

A key priority for the next phase is increasing engagement with the Mencap Active Community web portal, ensuring partners are signed up and actively using the platform.

The portal will be further populated with resources, information, training opportunities, and updates to support ongoing learning and collaboration.

Webinars will continue to be delivered regularly, responding to partner needs and highlighting practice from across the nine communities and wider network.

The Learning Disability and Sport Workshop content will be refreshed to ensure it remains current and relevant, including updates aligned with Learning Disability Rights UK guidance.

Looking ahead, there is an interest in developing a short workshop to support people with a learning disability to explore leadership roles and progression into further qualifications.

This session is anticipated to be two to three hours in length and would be developed in partnership with Special Olympics, providing an accessible introduction to leadership pathways.



Challenges

Key Challenges

Project-Level Challenges (Our Active Community)

Capacity and consistency of engagement

Ongoing capacity pressures continue to shape how organisations engage with Our Active Community.

Limited staffing, competing demands and reliance on small teams reduce consistency of involvement, resulting in variation between sectors and communities.

Education settings and some mainstream providers remain the least consistently engaged. While this may reflect structural constraints rather than a lack of interest, it may affect the programme's reach, influence and overall impact.

Workforce confidence in inclusive delivery

Across communities, willingness to be inclusive is strong; however, provider confidence in adapting sessions and communicating accessibly continues to develop.

Training and practical guidance are valued, yet consistent, inclusive practice is still emerging.

This indicates that workforce capability remains a key enabler for scaling inclusive provision.

Community Connector consistency and sustainability

The Community Connector role is now present across all nine communities, but variation in host capacity, onboarding processes and organisational readiness has led to uneven implementation.

While early progress is visible, embedding the role sustainably will require consistent support structures, clearer long-term pathways and shared ownership beyond individual hosts.

Transitioning from facilitation to local ownership

Networks and partnerships are strengthening, yet progress remains closely linked to the relational work of Community Partners.

Sustained impact will depend on gradually shifting toward broader shared leadership and reducing reliance on individual roles to maintain momentum.

Place-based variation

Differences in local infrastructure, partnership maturity and community readiness mean progress is not uniform.

A flexible, place-based approach remains necessary, but it also presents challenges in ensuring equitable development across all areas.

Not all areas defined within Our Active Community perceive themselves as a single cohesive community. In some cases, geography or differing local identities influence this.

This is an important consideration for future scaling and development of the project, as approaches may need to reflect varied identities and levels of connectedness within each area.

Embedding understanding of the full offer

While workshop engagement is visible in several communities, awareness of the wider Mencap Active Community network, including the web portal, webinars and national opportunities, appears uneven.

This suggests that the broader infrastructure designed to support sustainability is not yet fully embedded locally, potentially limiting longer-term impact.

Community-Specific Challenges

Rurality and transport (e.g. St Austell and Clay Country, Thanet)

In more rural or geographically dispersed areas, transport and travel distances continue to limit access and attendance.

Even where new provision has emerged, participation can depend heavily on local travel options and support availability.

Mainstream integration (e.g. Ealing, Greenwich, Nottingham)

While connections with leisure centres and mainstream providers are increasing, integration remains gradual.

Some providers are still developing confidence and understanding of inclusive practice, and engagement from Special Educational Needs schools continues to be inconsistent due to staffing pressures and competing priorities.

Capacity within voluntary and community organisations (e.g. Bradford, Derby, Worthing)

In several areas, delivery relies on small organisations managing multiple responsibilities.

Although seed funding has enabled new activity, sustaining sessions beyond initial funding and managing the higher staffing ratios required for inclusive delivery remains a concern.

Awareness and visibility of opportunities

Across multiple communities, opportunities are reported as existing but not always widely known or clearly promoted as inclusive.

Reliance on word-of-mouth or informal networks can create uneven awareness, particularly for families and individuals not already connected to services.

Balancing specialist and mainstream provision

Some communities continue to rely heavily on specialist or day-service-based activity.

While these environments are valued and trusted, expanding into mainstream community settings is still in progress, requiring confidence-building for both providers and participants.

A purple-tinted photograph of an elderly woman with short, light-colored hair, wearing a striped long-sleeved shirt. She is holding a cricket bat across her chest and giving a thumbs-up with both hands. In the background, other people are visible on a grassy field, some holding cricket bats, suggesting a community cricket match. The overall scene is bright and active.

Headline Findings

Community Engagement

Stakeholder engagement across the nine communities continues to strengthen, with forums and relationship-based approaches supporting collaboration and shared learning.

While awareness and participation are growing, engagement remains uneven across some sectors, particularly mainstream providers and education settings, and understanding of the project's full scope and aims is still mixed in some areas.

Community Partners

Community Partners remain central to connecting organisations, coordinating activity and maintaining local momentum around inclusive physical activity.

Their relational and place-based approach is widely valued, although continued progress will require greater shared ownership across community stakeholders, alongside a sustained drive and tailored approaches to initiate and maintain engagement.

Community Connectors

Community Connectors are increasing the visibility of lived experience within communities and contributing to co-production, engagement and local decision-making.

While early impacts are emerging, consistency of role development and support varies depending on host capacity and stage of onboarding.

The Communities

Communities are seeing a wider range of inclusive activities and increased awareness of opportunities, supporting participation and social connection for people with a learning disability.

Despite this growth, access remains influenced by structural barriers such as transport, support availability and uneven visibility of provision.

Developments

Networks and partnerships are continuing to grow, with community forums helping to strengthen collaboration and generate new opportunities, including for capacity building.

Progress is evident, though sustaining momentum and ensuring long-term continuation beyond short-term funding remains an ongoing priority.

Mencap Active Community

Mencap Active Community is supporting shared learning and wider connectivity beyond the funded communities, helping to extend inclusive practice and collaboration.

There is further opportunity to strengthen how national learning is translated into consistent local application, and within the current nine communities part of Our Active Community.

Routes to Impact, Recommendations and Next Steps

Routes to impact

The emerging picture across the nine communities shows several interconnected routes through which the project is generating impact.

Strengthening community engagement, supported by forums and relationship-based approaches, is helping build collaboration, trust and shared learning, creating the foundations for more coherent local ecosystems.

Community Partners continue to play a pivotal role in coordinating these relationships and maintaining momentum, with their place-based approach enabling practical problem-solving and alignment across diverse stakeholders.

At the same time, Community Connectors are amplifying lived experience within decision-making spaces, helping organisations better understand what truly inclusive participation requires.

As a result, communities are beginning to offer a wider range of inclusive activities, increasing awareness and supporting meaningful social connection for people with a learning disability, even as structural barriers such as transport and visibility of provision continue to shape access.

Growing networks and partnerships, both locally and through Mencap Active Community, are expanding opportunities for capacity building and shared practice, while also highlighting the importance of long-term planning to sustain progress beyond short-term funding.

Together, these developments illustrate how relational work, lived-experience leadership, strengthened local networks and increased visibility of opportunities combine to shift systems incrementally toward more inclusive, community-owned and sustainable models of physical activity.

Next steps for the project

Despite clear progress in increasing awareness of inclusive opportunities and strengthening networks, practical and systemic barriers continue to shape participation.

Structural issues such as transport and travel limitations, reliance on social care structures and staffing models, inconsistent dissemination of information, and limited access to fully accessible community venues sit beyond the immediate control of the project.

The community-led approach has required time to build trust and relationships; while there have been gradual developments, there has not been a complete shift.

Addressing these wider system and infrastructure constraints may require sustained focus and longer-term strategic alignment to achieve deeper and more equitable impact.



Recommendations



Develop a clear sustainability strategy post Our Active Community (2026–2027)

Developing a clear sustainability and transition plan will support long-term ownership beyond project funding, including mapping responsibility for networks and forums, supporting employment transition planning for Community Connectors, identifying local champions, including and beyond Community Connectors, and establishing longer-term funding development approaches.

Consideration should also be given to how cross-community learning and national network connections, including Mencap Active Community, can be developed and maintained beyond the project.



Strengthen cross-community and national knowledge exchange

Translating learning across the nine communities and connecting more consistently with the wider Mencap Active Community network could enhance impact.

Regional networking events, cross-community conferences or thematic knowledge-sharing sessions may help scale effective practice, reduce duplication and accelerate learning between areas.



Shift from relationship-building to shared ownership

As the project matures, focus should continue moving toward shared leadership and locally embedded ownership.

This may include supporting stakeholders to facilitate forums, coordinate activity, co-design inclusion plans and sustain networks beyond reliance on Community Partners.



Improve communication and project engagement

Strengthening communication approaches may help address uneven engagement across sectors and communities.

In addition to one-way updates, adopting further personalised engagement methods, including targeted 1:1 relationship-building with less engaged or capacity-constrained stakeholders, could help build sustained momentum.



Strengthen workforce development

Strengthening workforce capability, through practical, inclusive delivery training, peer-learning opportunities across communities, and the development of accessible toolkits and guidance, including Easy Ready materials, will help to support mainstream providers to confidently adapt activities for people with a learning disability.



Embed Community Connector influence Structurally

Embedding Community Connector involvement, beyond Our Active Community, such as within local decision-making, strategic forums and funding processes, alongside opportunities for peer mentoring and clearer progression pathways, may ensure the role has lasting influence beyond the project period.



Address barriers, access and inclusion

Prioritise longer-term action on structural barriers that sit beyond individual activity delivery. This may include developing transport partnerships, strengthening links with social care providers and support networks, improving access to accessible community venues, and aligning with wider local infrastructure planning.



Expand interest-led and inclusive participation models

Supporting providers to design activities around interests, familiarity and social connection, including taster sessions, trusted venues, buddy approaches and dual-activity models that benefit support workers or carers, may help reduce participation barriers.

Shifting emphasis from the specific sport to the social and experiential value of activity may further strengthen engagement and sustainability.



Expand out-of-hours and mainstream integration

If local need demands, expanding evening and weekend opportunities and supporting mainstream providers to adapt existing sessions could help to increase access and participation, and normalise inclusive participation through mixed and community-based models where appropriate.



Improve information-sharing and awareness

Develop a sustainable, accessible information-sharing infrastructure that extends beyond the lifespan of Our Active Community.

This could include strengthening the use of Easy Read and visual communication, establishing visible and centralised directories of inclusive opportunities, and reducing reliance on informal word-of-mouth networks.

Next steps for the evaluation

The next phase of the evaluation will develop a second suite of nine place-based case studies, moving beyond descriptive reporting to examine the cultural, structural and systemic conditions shaping delivery and impact.

This will include exploring how trust is built within communities and the time required to establish credibility; how the place-based approach operates in practice; and how local ecosystems, stakeholder networks and navigational complexity influence participation.

Greater attention will be given to the addressing of barriers and inequalities, as well as whether participation is translating into longer-term habits and sustained engagement.

The evaluation will also focus more explicitly on sustainability and scalability.

This will involve examining community readiness as funding phases evolve, lessons learned across different local contexts, and the extent to which networks, partnerships and leadership structures are embedded beyond reliance on Community Partners.

Particular attention will be paid to the Community Connector role, its influence, distinctiveness and sustainability, including what elements are essential to maintain and what support structures would be required for continuation.

The next phase will also consider alignment with Mencap's emerging 2030 strategy and Sport England priorities, assessing whether the model demonstrates potential for longer-term, systemic change rather than short-term activity growth.

Report produced by SPEAR

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