

The logo for Ann Craft Trust, featuring the text "ann craft trust" in a green, lowercase, sans-serif font, enclosed within a green circular border. The background of the logo is a white circle with a green dotted pattern radiating outwards.

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June 2026

Voice of the Participant

Research Report





Key Findings

The researchers spoke to participants from 18 sport and activity organisations over a three-year period. The researchers were particularly interested in hearing the views of participants who belonged to a potentially marginalised group, by virtue of their age or of a disability.

1

It's the 'small things' that matter

Participants seem to value a sense of belonging more than they value 'typical' safeguarding concerns, such as physical safety. Participants seem to feel it's more important to get these 'small things' right than it is to design and implement formal safeguarding policies and procedures. Indeed, if nothing is going wrong, then participants seem to take it for granted that these safeguarding policies are operating effectively in the background, and are therefore beyond their concern.

2

We can enable and support activity leaders and volunteers to 'get it right'

If participants value the 'small things', then we must ensure that activity leaders and volunteers have all the support and resources they need to create environments in which participants can feel known, and valued. At the same time, participants seem to place a great deal of trust in activity leaders, which could lead to situations where they are afraid to challenge them if something does not feel right. To get around this, all clubs should appoint a dedicated welfare officer or safeguarding lead, who could handle concerns and disclosures independent of the activity leader.

3

We can support participants' agency, and encourage them to speak up

A lack of safeguarding concerns could mean that all is well. Or it could suggest that participants are not aware of certain safeguarding risks, or that they do not feel comfortable in speaking up. Safeguarding awareness campaigns could help here, but they would need to strike a balance: We need to empower participants and promote their agency without creating cultures of fear and mistrust.

**4**

We need to raise awareness of third party support

Many participants told us that, if they had a concern, they would report it to their club leader. This raises the obvious question of who they might turn to if they had a concern about their club leader. We should promote greater awareness of outside agencies, the sort of support they can offer, and of how participants might contact them.

5

There must be a balance between competition and inclusion

Some participants valued the social side of sport and activity. Others valued the competitive aspect. Activity leaders and volunteers need to find a way to cater for these differing priorities to ensure that nobody feels pressured, isolated, or unfulfilled.

6

A person-centred approach can help activity leaders meet diverse needs

Activity leaders need to accommodate varying levels of ability, along with varying levels of possible risk. A person-centred approach in line with participants' respective abilities can help ensure that nobody gets left behind, and that nobody feels rushed.

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Introduction

Maximising opportunities and tackling inequalities by listening to the voices of sports participants from potentially marginalised groups

In line with the Sport England's 10 year Uniting the Movement strategy, the Voice of the Participant project aimed to gather the views sport and activity participants from potentially marginalised groups.

Originally the project focused on marginalisation or inequality on the grounds of age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other protected characteristic that may result in potential differences in opportunity or treatment. Ultimately the research centred on activity groups for older people, alongside sport and activities provisions for people living with learning or physical disabilities.

The project sought perspectives from individuals and groups regarding their safety and wellbeing when engaging in their chosen sport or activity. Rather than sport and activity organisations, the project focused on those *participating* in sport and activities, along with those who support them to do so. The researchers acknowledged, though, that there would often be some crossover between these groups.

The approach

The research team of Anne Patterson and Tina Thordal gathered data through a variety of methods:

- Face-to-face focus groups and forums
- Individual interviews with likely respondents
- Online and offline surveys, using easy-read formats when necessary

Over a three-year period, the researchers gathered data and insights from 18 clubs and organisations.

All participating clubs and organisations received a written feedback report to enable them to take any actions necessary to improve the welfare and safeguarding provision in their clubs. The reports also served to reassure organisers of what was already working well.

After a certain amount of time, the researchers contacted a small number of organisations for an update on the feedback process, along with any actions they had made following their involvement in the project.



Participants

Our enquiries were made of various groups of sport/physical activity participants.

One of our initial project aims was to gain an appreciation of safeguarding from the perspective of participants who belonged to a potentially marginalised group, by virtue of age or of disability.

With the help of partner organisations in the Active Partnership and charity sectors we were able to reach people in both groupings. Some were taking part in exercise to build strength and balance to help prevent falls. Others were exercising just for the sheer enjoyment of getting outdoors and being part of a group.

We once more acknowledge that there are some overlaps between the two groupings of participants and so we report both the commonalities as well as those areas that are unique or different for each grouping.





Data Findings

Developing a shared understanding of what safeguarding means

We have highlighted in other areas of our write-up about this project that the vocabulary around safeguarding was often problematic, and it was necessary to ask about safeguarding in a variety of ways rather than simply asking participants what safeguarding meant to them. Our enquiries thus became about what made people feel safe and well (or otherwise) while taking part, and what was it that contributed to them feeling this way (or not!).

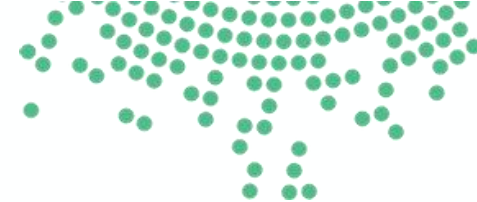
Consequently, the insights we report here are reflective of participants' 'lived experiences' of being/feeling safe and well when taking part in their respective physical activities. They encompass a whole gamut of things that for these participants help to build a feeling of safety and wellbeing – a safe place and activity that they return to regularly with confidence. We acknowledge that some of these might appear to be outside the 'normal' realm of safeguarding issues. This in itself was a key finding. What we might call 'safeguarding' means many different things to different people. It has been invaluable therefore to capture these 'voices' and gain some insight into what safeguarding is for participants themselves.



Safety and wellbeing (safeguarding) for participants is... (what really matters to participants)

Feeling safe physically in the environment and knowing that you could trust the coach

Participants oriented to physical safety and wellbeing. People said that they felt safe physically in the environment and felt they could trust the coach(es) – indeed, they spoke very highly of the coaches and the attention they gave to each person. Participants felt confident that leaders were able to anticipate what may happen and advised then accordingly during the session (for example, advising adjustments to posture and so on).



It mattered to participants that the physical environment was organised such that there were appropriate facilities for the activity being undertaken, with no obstacles and with health and safety in mind and that facilities (including changing) could cater for all of those participating. Some participants referred to the size of the group as relevant to their safety and wellbeing.

Some enjoyed the intimacy of a small group, particularly where an activity leader needed to attend quite closely to individuals' movements and posture. If there were too many people in the group, it could have detracted from the personalised help some required. Some people though found that they felt better in a large group that allowed for social interaction, but not so large that their voice was not heard or they were overlooked. Suffice to say that despite the variability of views, participants' sense of feeling safe and well during the activity depended upon the size of the group.

“ the activity area bring in view at all times allowed them to engaged autonomously ”

Many participants and their supporters referred to environmental and practical factors. People felt that a venue needed to be very safe for those needing a sheltered environment, where they could be seen and supported, but with little or no intervention if they wished to be independent.

Most venues allowed for the activity area to be in view at all times, which allowed for safety monitoring but allowed participants to get on with the activity as autonomously as possible. One volunteer mentioned some instances where participants had managed to tun off, but they mitigated this through using a circuit contained within a fenced area.

One participant referred to the fact that they took medication, signalling that they had an ongoing health condition requiring supervision. They said it was good that they could be supervised from a distance. Again, the activity area being in view at all times allowed them to engage autonomously in the activity but with unobtrusive 'monitoring' by their supporters.



Being known

In the context of what people can do within their sport or exercise

Participants reported that they felt safe in the knowledge that the group leader(s) knew what they were able to do and worked with them to manage any constraints related to their ability, capabilities, or otherwise to complete their activity.

Participants' confidence was supplemented by the variety of ways people could engage with the activity. At a cycling club, participants could cycle either independently or with someone on board a suitable bike. At some venues, supporters could cycle alongside them on another bike. People valued having their preferences known and having many differing options which resulted in very positive personalised experiences.



In terms of who they are and their wider social context

Participants valued being known by name and by leaders having a good sense of where they had travelled from, who supported them to take part, and so on. It was clear that many participants were repeat-attendees and so were well-known to leaders and volunteers. Participants liked that volunteers knew something about them and their preferences for engaging with the activity, and this helped their confidence to take part.



Participants told us how much it was appreciated that they were known fully and were able to tell leaders and volunteers if they were 'having a bad day' and were a little compromised in what they could do that day. They reported too that leaders were aware of their wider lives and so could appreciate if/when they may have other pressures coming to bear on their ability to engage with the activity. They liked too that leaders also knew their wider support circles; people who enabled them to attend.



Leaders' awareness of participants' varying health issues was also seen as a very important part of 'being known' as this helped participants to feel confident to take part, safe in the knowledge that someone else there knew something of them, in case a health problem manifested during a session.

'Belonging' and acceptance

Participants felt that being safe and well embodied things like a sense of feeling included; knowing that you were not going to be made to feel embarrassed; knowing that you were not being judged; a sense of 'belonging' to the group. Participants in many groups expressed a sense of belonging and they valued the social interaction as much as the physical exercise. For some (for example, someone who self-identified as gay), this had not always been their experience but the group to which they belonged was felt to be a very safe and positive space.

Safeguarding/safety/wellbeing was also described by some participants as belonging in a group where no abuse happens even when people are potentially vulnerable. Age was acknowledged by participants themselves as a potential vulnerability in this instance.



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**If I wasn't here I know I
would be missed**

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Many participants we spoke to suggested a sense of belonging at their club or activity, either because they already knew the leader, or they knew other people who attended, and they looked forward to seeing them.

There was a sense that this was about more than simply seeing people each week, and that they felt part of the club. As one person articulated, they would be missed if they didn't attend, saying *"We look after each other"; "If I wasn't here I know I would be missed"*



Socialising

Many participants made it clear that sport and activity provides an opportunity to socialise, which they said contributed to their sense of safety and wellbeing. This was expressed by carers/supporters too. The fact that some people had been 'socially prescribed' to some groups also evidenced the idea that the social element was equally as important as the physical gains that might be made from participating.

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the social part was an essential side of it

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Participants told us that feeling safe was about belonging to the group and the opportunity for social engagement. They said they attended the group for the company as much as anything else and the social part was an essential side of it. In many groups we observed a lot of 'back and forth' and much 'banter' and laughter among the groups which evidenced this very well.

Participants expressed a sense of camaraderie that made them feel safe too, and they said this also contributed to feelings of wellbeing; *"The class helps the brain too"* one participant remarked, *"and it can be a help with loneliness"*.

In particular the idea that it was a social as well as a physical activity was a key driver for many people to come along time and time again. When we arrived at one venue a group of people who arrived in a minibus was enjoying a picnic lunch before the session. Carers told us that this was just as much a social experience as one that enabled some valuable exercise.

For many participants it was also the 'event' of attending that was beneficial. Supporters also looked more widely at the activity as supporting participants wellbeing. They felt that participants enjoyed the outing itself, planning it and doing the outdoor activity, but also enjoyed the sharing of the activity within a larger group.

A parent-carer explained in great depth how good it was for their own wellbeing that they could enjoy a stride-out themselves for a walk within the perimeter of the track while also seeing the person they cared for enjoying their experience too. They felt it helped both of them with respect to their physical and emotional wellbeing.





Building Relationships

Participants really valued their activity leaders and looked to them as a source of constancy in the sense that participants knew what to expect from a session. The predictability helped them feel comfortable and confident to take part. In the case of people with learning disabilities the leaders and volunteers had built up a trust with many participants attending the session on a regular basis. Often activity leaders and volunteers could anticipate how everyone would engage with the activity and have the appropriate equipment ready. We were told how over time people's confidence to participate had increased bit by bit until they were able to participate autonomously, after having been very hesitant at the start of their engagement with the activity. Often these participants oriented towards those individuals with whom they had developed some sort of affinity, and it was this that enabled them to grow in confidence.

Due to varying disabilities, some participants were heavily reliant on others to aid their efforts in their chosen activity, though they were often able to communicate what did and did not suit them. Similarly, supporters and activity volunteers had a clear idea of what suited the person they supported and what did not. It became clear that for many participants their safety and wellbeing was a collaborative endeavour, and this largely rested upon relationships built on trust and confidence.

Having empathic activity leaders appeared to be paramount in building relationships and creating environments of trust.

As one participant remarked 'it's the people [leaders and volunteers] that make you feel safe'. Another participant referred to the positive attitude of activity leaders and volunteers suggesting that 'it gees people on'



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**it's the people
[leaders and volunteers]
that make you feel safe**

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Participants also described situations where they felt respected. Examples were given where coaches/leaders asked if it was okay to touch someone to re-adjust their physical position to help with their activity. 'Respect' was also used to describe where participants felt respected and valued for what they can and cannot do as part of the activity and were not made to do things they could not.



Communication

Communication was mentioned time and time again as being key to running a good activity/club. We consider this more in the next section, 'Preventing situations that place people at risk – exploring good practice/poor practice', as there was much good practice in this particular area.

We include it in this section too though, since it was reported by participants that effective communication contributed to their sense of safety and wellbeing. At an individual participant level, it was felt to be imperative that leaders and volunteers knew how each person typically communicated, particularly where this might not be 'mainstream' verbal communication. It was also said that leaders needed to understand individuals' modes of engagement in both communication and in their pursuit of the activity for them to feel safe and happy while participating.



Participants liked that leaders were reactive as well as proactive, in the sense that they were proactive in communicating well about how the session might proceed but were reactive too to anyone who might be struggling with understanding on any particular day. Some people acknowledged they sometimes had 'bad days' and these needed to be embraced too for participants to feel safe and supported in the session.

“ Participants said that what was required were ‘clear rules of play’ ”

Some participants also expressed the importance of having what they called “clear rules of play” for them to feel comfortable in taking part. This was particularly relevant for those who engaged in team activities and where competition was involved.

Participants expressed concern that it did not feel good when their personal challenges, such as physical or learning disabilities, behavioural challenges and so on, were highlighted or magnified in the pursuit of winning a game.



Participants said that 'clear rules of play' should reflect whoever was in their team at any one time so that no-one is made to feel uncomfortable about their contribution.

Examples of what people saw as 'rules of play' were included suspending play when someone falls over, minimising over-physicality, bullying, shouting, and aggression in play.

Participants told us that play should be about enjoyment, and that it should be inclusive. Participants also reported that there were various 'levels' of competition. We were told that play may take place in a relaxed session or more competitive setting, in which case differing "rules of engagement" may apply. There was a recognition that people's aspirations (for progression in leagues, for example) may be different and this can also affect matters of inclusivity, such as in terms of including people with a range of differing abilities. So 'clear rules of play' were reported to be important to all participants, whether very able and keen to win, or playing with recognised challenges and also keen to win!

Some participants also mentioned social media as a good means of communicating more widely about their activities but felt that for this to be safe it should be monitored and mediated effectively. We reflect on this again in the following main section around preventing risk.

Tailoring activities for each individual

Tailored generally to suit capabilities and capacities

Participants said that they felt that coaches were aware of their varying abilities/mobilities and knew each one of them and their exercise needs. In some cases, these were assessed by coaches when they enrolled for some classes. They felt they were in a safe space, where the trainer knew them and their abilities, and they were not pushed beyond their limits. Participants talked of having a sense of control over what they attempted and what they did not. The decision about what/how much to do rested with them as they knew best what they could and could not manage. Some people said that to be safe they had to concentrate and do as much as they could manage. Coaches also have a good sense of this for various individuals, and participants reported that sometimes they were reminded not to push themselves too far.





Many participants said they felt safe and happy while doing the activity, as they felt they had a choice around how much or how little they engaged. They felt they could maintain a sense of control for themselves and were empowered to work towards their own achievement goals by the leaders and volunteers.

There were several instances where people were encouraged to achieve their goals, and people moved from being unconfident to being fully confident. We observed one person who was rather reluctant to ride a bicycle, but who by the end of the activity session had completed several laps of a track and didn't want to get off!

For some participants joining the activity had been transformational. One person who had experienced a stroke had been initially transported round a circuit by others doing the pedalling, but they could now use an adapted cycle independently. They would not have been able to do this on the road, due to high risks, but they were able to incrementally increase their capabilities in a safe space. Their supporters said this had greatly impacted the building of independence for that person.



“ There were several examples of where people were encouraged to achieve their goals and people moved from being unconfident to being fully confident. ”

Similarly, a partner of a participant who had experienced a stroke also told us that they had been 'prescribed' the sessions to help with rehabilitation and that the activity had proved extremely beneficial in the pursuit of both rehabilitation and re-gaining some independence.

Tailored for those with very specific needs

Participants were made to feel safe, well, and confident when they had very specific needs, and when activity leaders and volunteers worked very hard to meet these needs. Examples given to us by participants included a couple who were blind (they self-identified using this term) and were enabled to take part in their activity with adjustments in equipment and communication. They reported they felt completely safe and confident and had worked collaboratively with those organising the activity to make it so. We detail this more in the 'Preventing situations that place people at risk – exploring good practice/poor practice' section of this write-up but include it here as a factor that was highly relevant to participants safety and wellbeing.

Similarly, we observed and were told of instances where those with challenging behaviours required sensitive solutions to enable their participation, and activity providers tailored this for them, such that the participants returned repeatedly in the knowledge they could participate safely and happily. Again, we say more about this in a following section as it reflects 'good practice'.

Thus, it is possible to see that there were a whole range of factors that contributed to participants' sense of safety and wellbeing when engaging with their activity. Some are things that it is possible to take for granted and/or may seem outside the realms of 'typical' safeguarding concerns. We consider this in our final reflection section.



Awareness of policies and procedures for safeguarding

Many participants assumed that there were policies and procedures related to safety and wellbeing in place, and held somewhere, but very few knew where these were or how they could be accessed. It was assumed by many that this particular area was the domain of leaders and organisers of the activity, and that safety and wellbeing was about their safe engagement in any one session, rather than the policies and procedures that might sit behind their safe engagement.

Some participants thought that there were probably safety policies in place, but that everything runs so smoothly in their club that policies never have to come into play. Suffice to say we were advised by all leaders/volunteers that there were policies and procedures in place should anyone wish to access them. One set of participants told us that they were in the process of developing these, and they acknowledged that they would need to be stored and 'advertised' in a way that made it easy for all to access, with consideration given to those who were less technical/media-aware. Thus, there was a varied range of participant awareness of policies and procedures ranging from some telling us they had "no idea" to those indicating a strong awareness.

Whose responsibility is 'safeguarding'?

For some, particularly those with learning disabilities, there appeared to be little awareness of their own agency in safety and wellbeing. We reflect further on this in other sections. In the main part, these participants appeared to trust their safety and wellbeing to those supporting them, whether this be support-workers or teachers, or those running the activity. Many other participants however reported that their safety and wellbeing was invested very much in their activity leaders, though they said that they looked out for each other, indicating that the responsibility was also a mutually shared one. Carers/staff-members of those who were supported to participate, echoed this tendency to look to the leaders in the first instance as responsible for safety and wellbeing, but they recognise too that it was a shared responsibility, and that for them it was part of their every care or work. Where there were designated 'welfare officers' in clubs, these were also named by participants as having responsibility for safety and wellbeing matters.



Knowing what to do if someone has a concern or worry

Very few grounds for concern

Most participants reported that they had very little cause for concern, suggesting that their leaders were approachable and friendly and had a keen willingness to help with anything that might occur. There was an overwhelming positivity that the leaders of their group could resolve anything.

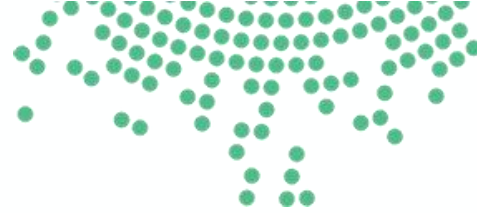
“ It appeared to be assumed by most participants, that ‘safeguarding’ was taken care of by the provider and leaders of the activity ”

With further discussion, some people did suggest ways in which concerns might arise, albeit on a speculative level. For example, some people described some of the feelings that can happen when participating in activities. People could feel ‘confused’, ‘unsure’, ‘overwhelmed’. This might mean that they or others might need staff support, whether from care staff or the activity leader, and it is their reassurance that can help them to feel confident. Their responses were consistent with some of the perspectives expressed above about what ‘safeguarding’ might look like. They were linked to their feeling safe and to their general wellbeing, rather than thinking about risks that safeguarding practitioners might consider risks, such as abuse, bullying, and so on.

It appeared to be assumed by most participants, that ‘safeguarding’ was taken care of by the provider and leaders of the activity session and they ‘assumed’ that policies and procedures were in place, particularly as for some of the older people they had been referred to the activity as a means of preventing falls and improving balance and the like, so it was considered a health intervention.

For participants with learning disabilities, particularly those attending from group care settings, there is possibly an assumption that safeguarding is implicit in whatever activity they attend with their supporters.





On the other hand, a number of participants with learning disabilities who attended activities independently or from shared care settings appeared very empowered to call out anything they did not like and said they would defend others ('we could gang up') if someone faced a risky situation or had a concern. Thus, again, there was a whole spectrum of responses, from walking away if you did not want to report a concern, to challenging something vehemently.

To tell or not to tell

Across all our visits, there was a great deal of variety in what a participant would do with a concern, should one be raised, either involving themselves or someone else. Some participants reported that they would have no qualms about reporting anything that concerned them whilst others said that they would not wish to 'rock the boat'.

Some even reported that they would rather 'walk away' if they felt they could not express and possibly resolve any concerns. Thus, there was a whole spectrum of responses ranging from saying that they may cry and get emotional about it, to telling someone they didn't feel safe and content in the context of their activity. At the other end of the spectrum, some people told us about whole pathways of people they may work through to raise a concern, including wider agencies like the police and social services.



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Some older participants said that at their age they would not wish to 'rock the boat' as they valued their participation in the group. Some said that at any age they would be reluctant to speak up about concerns. Some said they might simply leave the group rather than pursue an issue. Others said they 'wouldn't wish to make a fuss'.

Conversely, other older adult participants said they would have no hesitation in raising something either for themselves or for others.

Groups containing people with learning disabilities also gave a varied range of responses though with some elements in common. Some participants did not appear afraid to speak up and share their concerns with us which very much suggested they saw their club as a safe space to be honest and up front about anything bothering them. Certainly, the community feel of many clubs confirmed what was said by one participant – that they all look out for each other and would feel confident in raising any issues. We acknowledge that this may not be the same for all people with learning disabilities. Also, for those with greater communication challenges, the onus would rest on their supporters to raise any concerning matters.



Supporters also said that they would have no qualms in raising a matter on behalf of the person they supported, and in a lot of cases they were well positioned to do so as they were something of an 'expert' on the person they supported and knew what issues may and may not be concerns. Of course, this does mean that there is the possibility of 'filtering', by third parties, of whether and what to tell or not to tell, even if these parties feel they are acting in participants' best interests.

Who to tell

Overwhelmingly among all groups, it was reported that the first port of call with any problem would be the activity leader. There appeared to be a great deal of trust placed in the leader to be able to resolve any concerns.

“ there appeared to be a great deal of trust placed in the leader to be able to resolve any concerns ”

This was especially the case where a strong relationship had been built between participants and the activity leader as described in earlier sections.



Older participants who had no qualms about raising concerns named the activity leader as the person they would approach first. When asked what they would do if they had a concern about the activity leader, participants named several others they would approach with concerns. This included their family, friends, those who had 'prescribed' this activity (i.e. health and social prescribers), and the people running the leisure centre in which the activity was based. Someone even mentioned reporting to some sort of 'sporting ombudsman'.

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It was only when we asked what if the leader was the source of concern that people were more creative in their thinking

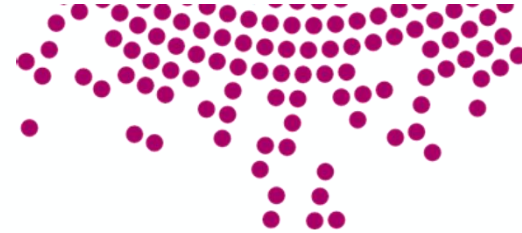
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For people with learning disabilities, since they were often supported by others to take part in their sport or activity, they invariably said they would speak to a carer or “staff” supporting them in the first instance. They also said that they would tell the activity leader in whom much trust was placed.

Activity leaders appeared to be pivotal figures for participants. This makes us wonder what would happen if it was the leader with whom they experienced a concern.

For both older participants and those with learning disabilities, there was a general sense that activity leaders should be the first port of call. It was only when we asked what if the leader was the source of concern that people were more creative in their thinking and named other pathways, including wider agencies that may be of help. There generally appeared to be limitations about who could be approached. Participants with learning disabilities appeared to find it more challenging to think beyond their immediate carers/supporters and the leader of the activity group, although they sometimes referred to others in their care setting, such as “people in the duty office”.





Agency

While older participants demonstrated some agency in whether and where they might report a concern, there were still instances where they said they might walk away rather than 'rock the boat'. This potential vulnerability was magnified somewhat when it was accompanied by a possible fear that they might not be able to attend if they 'rocked the boat', since they valued the social engagement greatly too. Thus, older people did appear to act as their own agents in matters of concern but weighed this against what they might lose as a result of raising a concern. Some participants told us that they felt comfortable in raising issues, had raised issues as they went along, and had had their concerns considered and resolved.

On the other hand, participants with learning disabilities did not show a great deal of agency for their own safety and wellbeing. It appeared to be entrusted to their familiar others, whether this was their carers/supporters or the activity leader.

“ **...might walk
away rather than
'rock the boat'** ”

Those participants with learning disabilities who did demonstrate some agency in raising concerns told us that they would speak up and say when they were not happy, that they could walk away if they wished to and did not like what was going on. One participant suggested that they were a close-knit group and would 'gang up' on whoever was causing them to be concerned!

Preventing situations that place people at risk (exploring good practice/poor practice)

Our own observations at the various clubs made us aware of much good practice. Leaders and volunteers reported that there were policies and procedures in place, with some clubs having designated welfare officers. Yet the emphasis in this section is on what participants themselves said they thought was good (or poor) about their club/activity. Participants' perspectives are thus foregrounded here, though having attended many sessions ourselves, we supplement these with our own observations of what we saw 'on the ground', as it were.



Exploring good practice

Effective leadership

Overwhelmingly participants sang the praises of their activity leaders and their teams of volunteers. The activity leader and supporting volunteers who delivered the session appeared to be important figures in making participants feel safe and confident to take part. For some participants confidence was a key issue, and we observed all supporters enabling their involvement in a way and to a level that individual participants were comfortable. We were told by participants that 'the staff are great' and that they enjoy the session 'because it's relaxed, friendly and without too many rules and regulations'. It is good that that is how people feel who take part, and we could see that staff worked very hard to make it safe, seamless, and enjoyable.

Effective leadership also involved effective planning. It was clear that some of this had been done in advance, and we were told that participants liked that their activity organisers checked out premises and ensured that everything was present that was needed/desired, including adequate changing areas for differing genders. In relevant cases that there was a referee for competitive sessions.

We were also made aware that there was a great deal of collaboration with participants' supporters and with other agencies, for example the leisure centres providing the activity venue.

Participants' supporters told us that they also collaborated with wider agencies such as the council and local charities, who activity leaders worked with to maximise inclusion and provide the potential for safe and beneficial engagement with physical and social activity.





Good practice embodied in activity leaders and volunteers

Participants spoke very well of support workers and coaches, using expressions of how it made them feel to tell us about this. Among these were feelings of 'happiness' and 'being loved'.

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One volunteer commented that they genuinely believed that they have the best job in the world

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Participants reported that it was down to the attitude of activity leaders that they felt that participants could do their activity. It was they who gave them the confidence and made them feel comfortable to be there and to participate to whatever extent they could.

Participants reported feeling encouraged by the activity organising team. We were told by activity organisers that 'we always find a way'. Such was the commitment of activity leaders and volunteers to enabling optimum levels of engagement.

One volunteer commented that they genuinely believed that they have the best job in the world. Such was the commitment of organising staff to making the activity enjoyable and beneficial for those taking part.

Participants told us resoundingly that leaders and volunteers were approachable and that they felt listened to. They particularly valued that the leaders knew who they were as individuals, leading to a sense of belonging and 'being known'.

We observed that people were known individually by leaders and volunteers and there were flexible ways to engage everyone on both a practical and social level.



We observed how the coaches knew their participants' personal circumstances and how they were feeling on the day. Generally, each participant was known individually, even when they were part of a large group. This was clearly very important to participants since it was mentioned by so many of them and this clearly contributed greatly to their feeling safe and comfortable in participating in the activity.

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Participants told us resoundingly that leaders and volunteers were approachable and that they felt listened to.

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Participants liked too that coaches knew what they could and could not manage within the activity. One participant said that they established that it was a safe environment for them early on. They had sensed that very quickly from the attitude of activity leader and volunteers.

Others said they felt comfortable that they could approach someone with any concern, in particular describing one of the team as very compassionate and caring about them in a non-intrusive way.

They added that they valued being put at ease and being part of the group.

Supporters of those taking part were also extremely complimentary about the leaders and volunteers and of the activity which they provided. They said they saw the many benefits for those they support and often it was a highlight of participants' weeks. Participants confirmed this latter point too, quite emphatically, telling us: 'It's wonderful here'; 'It's only my second week here but I really enjoy it'; 'There's a sense of community' and 'I love being here', to give but a few examples.





Person-centred 'solutions' – promoting choice, independence and confidence

During our visits we were able to speak with a wide variety of participants taking part in a varied range of physical activities. There were people from an older-adult population, some individuals with extra communication needs, some with visual impairments, varying levels of physical and/or intellectual disability, people with mental health concerns, and individuals whose behaviour could present as challenging. Every effort was made to work in a person-centred way to accommodate such a diverse range of participants and to enable them to take part safely and confidently. One participant's parent-carer summed it up in the following way: 'The sessions are inclusive, helpful and amazing'.

As mentioned previously, leaders and volunteers were instrumental in the encouragement and motivation of individual participants to engage with the activity however they wished and felt able. Participants told us that they felt that activity leaders and volunteers motivated them really well and said that they seemed to proceed with a 'no such thing as you can't' attitude. Although some participants also added that motivation comes from within oneself, they acknowledged that their self-motivation was enhanced by the coaches constantly encouraging them.

Both participants and their supporters spoke about having choice around how much people engaged with the activity. Often activity sessions began with a warmup or game, which included everyone regardless of ability/capability.

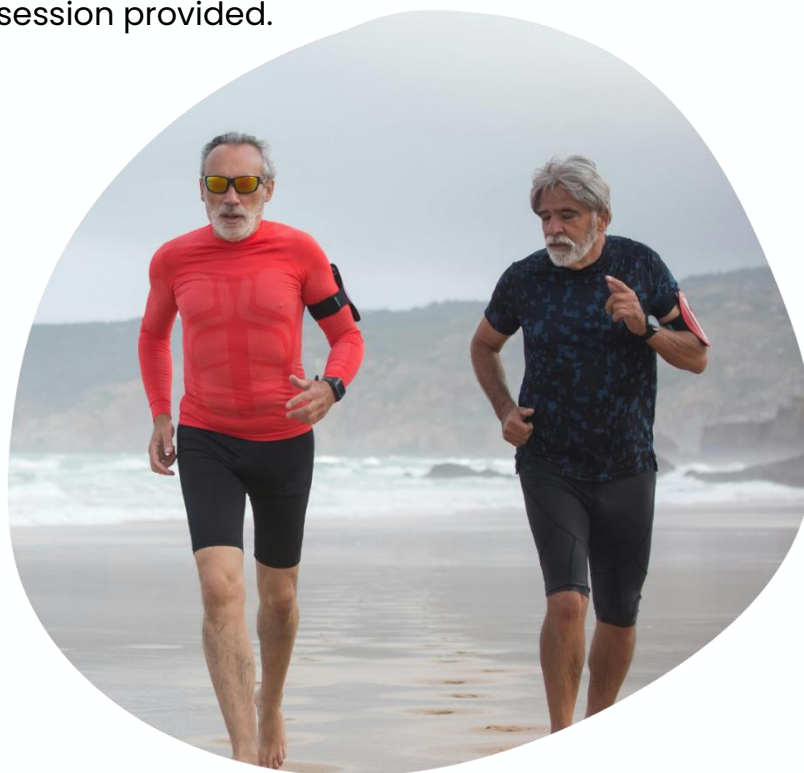
It was very inclusive, though we observed that participants did indeed exercise choice around how much or how little they engaged. Some were 'in the thick of it', while others were reticent and so were encouraged to do what they could or wished to, in a non-pressurised manner.





One participant said 'Sometimes I decide I don't want to take part and no-one forces me to. I like to just watch'. This also indicated that there was value too in the social opportunity that attending the session provided.

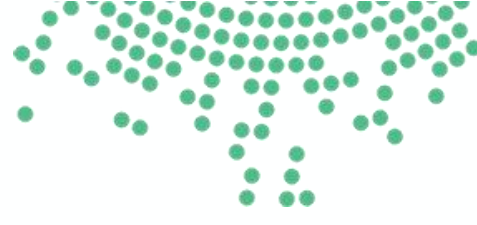
Where the exercises seemed too energetic for some, participants suggested that they felt this was more about a poor fit, presumably between the person and the exercise content, rather than it being about not having a choice. This was mentioned in the context of them explaining that it was imprinted on them by the activity leader that they should go at their own pace. For example, during a cycling activity, if someone said they didn't want to ride or they dismounted their cycle at any point, then that was completely fine and encouragement was given to proceed at their own pace, or not at all if that is what they chose.



As we mentioned earlier, we observed that people were known individually by leaders and volunteers and that there were flexible ways to engage them. There appeared to be a loose/informal 'plan' for how each participant might progress and grow in confidence.

One example was a young female participant who was very slowly building confidence to participate. She was encouraged to hold the handle bars on a small bike that had been decorated with stickers (which were important to her personally) for increasing amounts of time, with an intention to increase time doing this and so build greater confidence around the cycling activity.

Participants were supported to think for themselves rather than for others to take over. For example, it was suggested they 'think about your position' or 'think about where your chair is', which gave participants time to think through their actions and then to act independently to achieve what they were trying to achieve.



Participants and their supporters at a cycling activity contributed to decisions about which cycles they felt comfortable with at that particular time. Staff were extremely good at enabling people to achieve their best experience and one volunteer told us that 'it always starts with what people can do and not what they can't'.

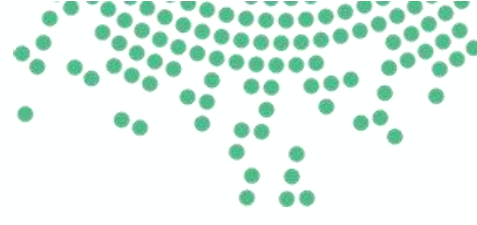
One example of the promotion of independence was of a man who had experienced a stroke that had left him with some physical challenges. He had, over several sessions, been supported to progress from using a tandem supported by another person, to using a three-wheeled bike that he was then able to use alone.

As well as being impactful on people's wellbeing and empowerment in the ways described above, supporters also recognised some wider benefits in taking part. For example, one supporter told us: "We like the person we support to independently pay for their session as it helps to develop money skills". Supporters felt that this activity provided a safe environment in which these other skills could be practised.



They felt participation in the activity and the way the activity was run had other added benefits for people's development, autonomy, and wellbeing.

In terms of building individuals' confidence, we were told by participants and supporters, and we actually observed this ourselves, that participants' confidence seemed to be invested in those people who had helped them before, and so they sought those people out to help them. This contributed to their feeling of safety and wellbeing and supports an earlier observation that good practice is often embodied in leaders and volunteers, and their attitudes. Similarly, the idea of 'being known' by leaders and volunteers was again seen to be an important factor in building and maintaining participants' confidence.



Two participant-cyclists in particular told us how their confidence had grown increasingly in a fairly short time. This was affirmed by their care staff. Varying arrangements were made possible for individuals to build or maintain confidence.

For example, parent-carers took it in turns to cycle with a participant who struggled to do so alone. We witnessed individuals' confidence growing over the course of a session and even lap upon lap, all enabled by those delivering the activity who tailored support for each individual.

We were also told that confidence was aided by preparation and participants knowing what to expect.

For example, some participants responded well to having storyboards for the activity, mostly done by supporting care-workers in conjunction with leaders and volunteers.

Participants also said they appreciated the clear instructions and the patience and encouragement they were given, especially when sometimes confidence was a little low and it might feel more challenging. Participants and supporters alike told us that they had seen their and other individuals' confidence being boosted and growing as a result of regular attendance and the person-centred approach.





Effective 'history-taking' and paperwork

Having spoken about good practice associated with the personalisation of activities for each individual and being told how much participants valued the idea of being known by activity leaders and volunteers, participants explained how this came about. Apart from knowing everyone on a social level we were told by participants that 'We are asked information about ourselves when we first join'.

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We were told at several venues/clubs that a form was used to capture important information about participants.

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We were made aware that as part of what might be termed their registration, data was collected on people's specific needs to enable them to take part as fully as possible. We certainly saw this in action as specialist equipment was brought into play as and when needed.

One parent explained the lengths that the club had gone to, to enable her offspring to be part of the club. As a young person with challenging physical disabilities, a number of differing approaches were tried to bring about optimal engagement, and enjoyment!

We were told at several venues/clubs that a form was used to capture important information about participants. This form also acted as something of a 'risk-assessment' of what people may need to be able to take part. It contained important information that organisers needed to know about a particular participant and their preferences, and so on. We saw these forms being issued to new participants and collected from existing ones at our visits.

We were told by one supporter that this being known was really important to many participants when it came to leaders and volunteers knowing of medical conditions. For example, if someone had epilepsy this would need to be known. Activity leaders confirmed that when new people attended, they were asked about any such existing conditions and also about abilities and capabilities in order that any aids could be provided to enable their inclusion and keep them safe and well.





Personalisation – having appropriate ‘aids’

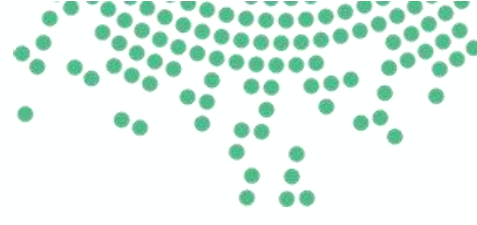
At almost all sites we visited we observed different aids being used to support people with varying mobility and/or capacity to take part.

At cycling events we observed that the leader and his supporting volunteers knew the individuals attending and which cycles they preferred and enabled this as far as possible. We observed that the leader and volunteers worked alongside those who were directly supporting individuals and jointly they tailored a way for an individual to engage with the activity.

There was a sense of ‘personalisation’ of the activity for everyone. We were told by participants and their supporters that the activity leader and supporting volunteers knew how confident people were about the activity and what their preferences were in terms of using particular cycles. We observed a wide range of participants with very diverse needs, some quite complex, all being very well catered for. Examples were provided where activity organisers had gone above and beyond to enable people with varying needs to attend.

An example of this person-centred approach was of a young participant who liked to travel with their toy dog, which was strapped to the cycle or her helmet to enable this, which contributed greatly to her confidence and wellbeing in taking part.

Another example was of two male cyclists who remained together throughout most of the session, often riding one or two laps and then changing their cycle. This was supported by volunteers who seemed very familiar with this trend. We observed these participants bordering on being a little disruptive, but this was handled extremely well by diversion towards different cycles. They were very well supported by volunteers who seemed to be familiar with their behaviours and tendencies. This approach also contributed greatly to the idea of this being an activity that supported shared experiences, again signifying that the social as well as the physical benefits are important to participants.



Furthermore, a 'cyclist' who had never before been on a bike, attended with supporters and was encouraged to try one of the three-wheeler bikes. They were so thrilled with the activity that their supporters thought that they would have trouble getting them off the bike when they needed to leave. Their joy at being able to ride was palpable!

A final example was of a participant who wished to attend and cycle but who spent a lot of time underneath a rug/blanket as that was their 'safe space'. The person was agitated and could present with challenging behaviour when out of this 'safe space'. In order to enable this person to participate, activity organisers and volunteers arranged for them to attend towards the end of the activity session when there were very few people remaining. In that way they could concentrate on them, and they felt able to come out from the 'safety' of their rug/blanket and went on a cycle and cycled around freely and confidently with a supporter alongside.

Personalisation also came in the form of adjustments to cycles for each participant. At the cycling sessions there was provision for the adjustment of cycles and of protective wear such as helmets. There was much consideration given to which bicycle would be appropriate for each individual. Adherence to Health and Safety matters was also confirmed by activity leaders. We observed this on the day. There was ongoing maintenance of tyre pressures and seat heights and so on throughout the session. We saw basic cycle checks taking place and were told that any major adjustments or checks were completed by qualified, certified technicians.





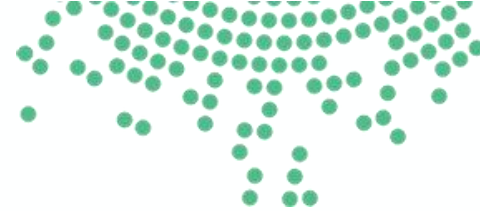
At some exercise sessions for older adult participants, we saw a ready supply of aids to assist with variable levels of mobility/capability. Similarly, exercises were made relevant to and for individuals who varied greatly in their capabilities and mobility. We were told by participants that even when participants sensed that organisers and/or leader(s) were a little nervous about being able to include them, they had persevered and had managed to include them safely.

One key example of this was of two blind¹ participants who told us they felt they were very well supported to participate safely. This had been through working together, and through leader(s) taking advice from those participants about what enabled them and what hampered them in being included and taking part safely in the session. They felt that they had been heard and that potential difficulties were worked around. They gave several examples of how descriptions of the desired exercises were modified to enable them to complete the activity safely. Participants spoke highly of the leader(s) willingness to receive feedback from them on an ongoing basis. They also told us that they had been helped to become oriented to the environment/building over a short period prior to them attending classes.

Participants told us at these sessions that they really valued that the instructions given were closely tailored to them individually, in response to their individual capabilities. Participants expressed confidence in taking part in the exercises, since they felt exercise leader(s) were in tune with each person and their specific capabilities. We observed this practically when a participant appeared 'weaker' on one side of the body whilst exercising. The exercise leader, having spotted this, responded by issuing a reminder to the participant, not to bend too low and to correct their balance during the exercise.

¹ This term is how the participants themselves self-identified





Building social capital and wellbeing

Participants at all activity sessions said how much they valued the opportunity for social as well as physical engagement in the sessions they attended. They added that this promoted their wellbeing as much as they enjoyed the physical activity.

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**They told us that they all
look out for each other.**

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At one of the cycling activities, we were told that it was possible for whole families, three generations, to cycle together using varying cycles, which they really valued as it was one of the few things that they could all take part in together.

We also observed a group activity including all participants from a particular organisation taking part during our visit. We also understand that such groups could enjoy the activity along with all other users on a particular day, or it was possible for there to be a bespoke session planned at the end of the more ‘public’ session. Flexibility of access and participation was very evident, with a view to enhancing social ‘networking’.

Many activities/clubs appeared to operate very much as a little community of their own, with most people knowing almost everyone else. We heard much friendly banter and there was a strong ‘team spirit’ among those attending, with encouragement and sometimes friendly teasing.

Participants enjoyed the social space at the end of the session and felt it helped their mental wellbeing, being part of the group. They told us that they all look out for each other. The encouragement, friendliness and social side was perceived to be as important as the training itself.



“ All agreed that social engagement was as important as the opportunity to get some physical exercise. ”

Our own observations were that people appeared very content while doing their activity. Participants were very engaged with the activity and with the social opportunity it afforded them.

Supporters of those participating told us that they too benefited from the opportunity to meet others and to socialise whilst attending. These all appeared to contribute to a general sense of wellbeing and engagement on the part of participants and supporters alike. All agreed that social engagement was as important as the opportunity to get some physical exercise. Most activities supported these important aspects by having a time for socialising either before or after a session.

Effective Communication

Participants referred to various aspects of their experience that required effective communication. They referred to the fact that it was easy to book to attend the activity, where this was required. They appreciated that during the activity communication was very much a two-way process. They appreciated that leaders knew more than just their names and that they knew their preferences for engaging with the activity and how to enable them to take part. Participants said they appreciated being asked 'how are you?' and being able to give an honest answer, since activity leaders and volunteers showed a genuine interest in each participant's wellbeing. They also liked the idea that activity leaders kept in touch with people who had not been attending for one reason or another and enquiring if they are okay.



Volunteers and supporters of those participating talked of the partnership between care staff and activity leaders and volunteers, to enable an optimal experience for each individual, and the importance of good two-way communication. To paraphrase what one volunteer said: You have to know the parents or carers and the people participating, to know their situation and what will work best for them.



We saw various forms of communication being used including signing, mostly Makaton, although activity leaders and volunteers mostly used clear and straightforward verbal instructions. We were told by participants that the two-way communication that existed between leader(s) and participants alleviated any concerns and provided for an open 'debate' about what benefits the group and the individuals therein.

“ One supporter told us that competition can get very intense and that emotion can become an issue for some players. ”

Some participants remarked that it was important that activity groups communicated club 'values', because if people knew of these, they could sign up to them and observe good principles and fair play.

Effective communication was also evident when it came to managing emotions around competition and who plays. One supporter told us that competition can get very intense and that emotions can become an issue for some players. We noted that some participants were very competitive, working collaboratively within their teams with the sole aim of winning. One parent/supporter pointed out to us that there was some good unspoken communication during the game, something we would not have noticed as it was very subtle. The parent/supporter said that they felt that this contributed positively to participants' social wellbeing and general sense of 'looking out for each other'.

It was further explained to us that players knew each other's abilities and capabilities well in the game, and they adjusted their body positions and positions for play within their teams.

This was again seen as a positive contribution to building effective communication and social skills.

This sense of collaboration contributes to wellbeing, and other team-members could potentially provide an alert if something did not feel quite 'right' with someone.



“ The fact that when someone did not attend, they were asked after, was important to many participants. ”

The use of social media, particularly WhatsApp, as a means of supporting communication to and within activity/club members was recognised by participants as both a good thing and a potential risk.

If someone did not attend a session, they were asked why afterwards. This was important to many participants. Social media was used to support this and to support club communication in general. For example, “We already communicate through WhatsApp, and we let others know if we won’t be attending”.

However, participants drew attention to the fact that social media use needs to be monitored by someone to prevent some pitfalls, such as online abuse and disagreements.

Supporters also confirmed that communication through the club was very effective. As mentioned above, supporters are an important part of the club’s social fabric. Many remained to observe and support those they cared for, while others were just as at ease in dropping off someone, presumably in the knowledge they would be ‘safe’.



Participants said that the most effective form of communication was the sort that allowed activity leaders to ‘meet them where they are’. For some this was about clear spoken instruction or about using signing or additional body language to demonstrate something, a movement for example. And, as in the case of the example above of two blind participants, using a variety of means to communicate appropriately to enable their optimum participation.



Training of activity leaders

The activity leader and volunteers told us that between them they had a wide range of training experience, from first aid to autism awareness, as well as more standardised safeguarding training. We were made aware too that Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks were completed by all.

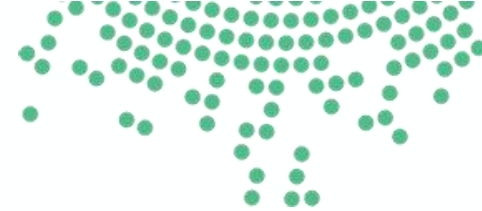
Most participants assumed that all leaders and volunteers had gone through all necessary checks and received training appropriate to their role. So, there was a great deal of trust on the part of participants that all was well in these areas.

We saw small examples of good practice in safeguarding at the sessions. For example, we observed participants being asked if photos could be taken for publicity. In fact, we were asked too. This is a small but important example of how matters of safeguarding were taken seriously in the day-to-day running of a session.

In terms of more specialised training, those leading older adult exercise classes were qualified in various fields of occupational- and physiotherapy. Similarly, those leading cycling activities had knowledge and experience of cycling and of cycles. Those delivering other types of activity were experienced in their sport. This seems to have been what drew them to leadership or volunteering.

Again though, this was largely assumed by participants who entrusted their safety and wellbeing to those leaders and volunteers. So, while we became aware that these matters were taken care of rather well, participants' knowledge of appropriate training and other relevant checks were somewhat assumed. This is something we pick up on further in the reflections later in this report.





Some activities required more specialist equipment knowledge. For example, in cycling activity groups, leaders and volunteers may need to know how to work with certain specialist cycles, such as those that can accommodate wheelchairs. Usually those running the sessions knew how to use this equipment, and so did some of the participants' supporters. We highlight this to illustrate that safety and wellbeing for some participants may be entirely in the hands of others, which means that the 'others' in turn need to be furnished with appropriate skills to get these things right. We were also advised that organisers knew their limits about what they could 'fix' and what they could not. Their maintenance efforts were supplemented by 'professional' checking/repairing of cycles periodically.

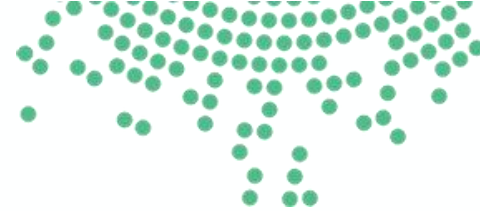
Choice of venue/environment

In order to prevent risk and promote safety and wellbeing for those participating, it was important that good choices were made as to where to hold activities. Overall, participants said that they had a sense of what were safe physical spaces. We have considered above the good practice demonstrated in orienting two blind participants in the building they were to use for their exercise session. Similar practice was evidenced in creating safe spaces, rather larger ones, for cycling activities.

The general accessibility of where the group was held and the facilities it included, for example, a leisure centre with a café and toilets, was generally seen as a big benefit by many participants.

We were told by supporters that venues really should be easily accessible by road and needed to have good parking facilities for larger vehicles and so on. Each venue we visited met with these fundamental requirements. Additionally, they were pleasant and peaceful places to be. We observed that often the grounds themselves had a countryside feel, but were contained, by fencing for example. This was something that participants and their supporters told us was an important safety consideration for anyone who tended to run off.





Since the whole circuit could always be seen, it was possible for cyclists to independently go round the circuit, with minimum intervention from supporters. Activity leaders, volunteers, and personal supporters could remain vigilant from a distance, which enabled a really good level of autonomy for those taking part. Supporters very much liked the idea they could see the people they were supporting were in a 'safe space'; cycling within necessary bounds, but with enough space to experience a level of independence.

Supporters remarked:

'He enjoys the freedom. It's the only place he can be on his own without support'

'We can see them... knowing they are safe is important'

We were also told that the flat terrain was helpful, enabling more people to engage, since they were not put off by hills, bumps, and so on.

It was possible in these 'bounded' environments for participants to set goals for themselves, for example, in terms of number of laps. Again, the venue being a defined area contributed to this as it was clear and structured for a diverse set of users to pursue their own goals at their own pace. One feature of most of the cycling venues was that all parts of the cycle track could be seen from the activity leaders' 'station'. It was therefore possible to see people most of the way round and to see if there were any problems. We also observed that when someone seemed to have been a long time getting round the circuit, organisers were asking about that participant and checking that they were still on track and were safe and well. The environment/site itself thus contributed to the sense of being safe and enabled people to be more independent than might otherwise be possible. Indeed, one person expressed their feeling of independence as: 'This is freedom!'





The size of group mattered to participants, though they voiced different preferences. Some liked the intimacy of a smaller group while others liked the social networking that came with a larger group. Since activity leaders were extremely good at getting to know people, even when there was a large group, all felt they were known by leaders and volunteers such that the large numbers did not detract from their enjoyment. Participants who took part in cycling sessions did tell us that occasionally they could not get the cycle they wished to have as it was in high demand, which potentially meant waiting their turn. However, one way that this was mitigated by the activity leader was to plan ahead and give thought to who was likely to attend on certain days, organising timings accordingly. This worked well and we saw little or no waiting for cycles at all cycling sites.

Thus, it seems that good practice can be found in the selection of appropriate venues, according to the type of activity, and planning and thinking in a person-centred way about these things contributes to keeping people safe and well so they can enjoy their chosen activity.

Exploring 'poor' practice

We acknowledge that though the following matters were raised as potentially negative issues by participants, they were not called 'poor practice' by participants. Rather, they were raised in response to our questions about what participants might not like about aspects of the activity, and what potentially could disrupt their engagement and enjoyment of the activity. In other words, what factors might cause them to feel less safe and well when participating.

Among those matters mentioned by participants as actually or potentially putting safety and/or well-being at risk were the following. We acknowledge once more that some of these are outside the control of activity leaders and volunteers.





Not knowing who's who at the club and/or not being 'known' themselves

Participants told us that they would not like it if they did not know who does what, presumably in the operation of the classes. They said if they did not know who's who, who they could ask about something of concern, and who could help with a safety or wellbeing matter, then that would make them feel less secure and confident in participating. They said it would not be good if no-one was checking or monitoring safeguarding matters.

Some participants also felt that some volunteer helpers might not always know their capabilities. Though they said they would be prepared to speak up about that at the time, it was still a concern that they and their usual engagement with the activity might not be known by all volunteer helpers, and this would make them feel less safe and confident.

Some concern related to the size of the activity groups themselves. For example: 'Sometimes there's too many people – it's been a victim of its own success'. Though there was some variance in what people preferred, some favouring a small intimate group and some finding a larger group socially stimulating, it was important to participants that the size of the group was optimised around the type of activity being undertaken and around participants' preferred modes of engagement. Knowing participants well was key to the level of engagement they preferred.



“ ...it was important to participants that the size of the group was optimised around the type of activity being undertaken... ”



Limited number of aids, or time

Participants said that sometimes people were limited as to how much or little they can engage with the activity when there were not enough helpers in the group or enough equipment and mobility aids. The varied nature of some groups in terms of mobility/capabilities means that when there are not enough helpers, the exercises that are possible may be somewhat limited.

For example, floor exercises were not possible when there was only one instructor as aid was needed to help those who were less mobile get up and down. Some participants explained that at one time there had been help from trainees, but once they qualified, the extra help dried up and with it some of the varied exercise opportunities.

Participants also reported that they were at a bit of a loss when there was no one to stand in if a leader was unwell, though they fully acknowledged that people cannot help being unwell. This could range from an odd week up to several weeks without a class, in which time physical capability could again fall back, and ground could be lost towards their mobility goals. Another matter mentioned was that there was not always time for a cool down, and it would always be desirable to have one.

Fear if group stops and not knowing about opportunities in the first place

For all participants in groups of limited duration, the group coming to an end was a source of great concern. Some people expressed this as “sadness” that it would end and reported that they would particularly miss the social inclusion of taking part. Some expressed the desire to be able to join the more ‘advanced’ group, but this was dependent upon them being able to. In a physical sense they needed to progress enough to be ‘promoted’ to the advanced group.





They also told us that attendance may be dependent upon people's ability to pay for the classes. For many people, the worry of the group coming to an end was also linked to the fact that they had an effective and well-liked coach who they hoped to retain for any ongoing group.

Furthermore, some participants said that knowing about such classes in the first place relied on being referred/socially prescribed and it was not the same experience for all. Some felt that they had had to research things for themselves and then request services, rather than them being offered more widely. Participants referred generally to a lack publicity that suitable activity groups existed.

Team selection for competition

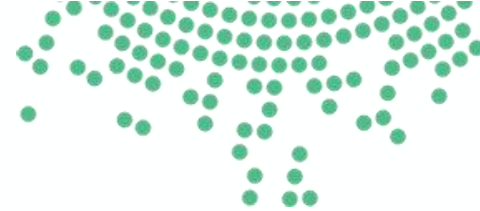
Participants and their supporters, such as carers, activity leaders, and volunteers, raised the matter of when it was not possible to take everyone to competitions. This had the potential to leave some participants disappointed and emotional. However, we were also told that there were a variety of leagues, large and small, more and less competitive; and leaders and volunteers engaged in as many as possible to ensure that all participants got a chance to play competitively where possible. This mitigates the potential for disappointment, to some extent. Certainly, at the sessions we observed, each attendee was valued as a player, whatever their playing 'level'.

Some participants in groups that did not include an element of competition said that they would not like it if the environment became competitive.

Communication as both a help and a hindrance

Those participants who used social media to communicate with their activity group raised the issue that as well as being helpful, it could be used unhelpfully. They said that it would be a bad thing if people were allowed to misuse it to upset other participants, so there should be monitoring to make sure that this does not happen.





Money/Cost

As mentioned briefly above a further concern for some participants was whether the cost of attending their activity might make it difficult to carry on attending.

For example,

'What wouldn't be so good is if the payments go up'

'People might leave if the money goes up'

Environmental/venue issues

Some participants commented on how difficult parking was at the venue they attended, particularly where large or adapted vehicles were necessary to bring someone to the activity group. Parking capacity in general at some venues was also raised.

For those attending activities in public open spaces such as parks, there was concern about dogs. This is outside the control of the group organisers, but nevertheless made people feel less secure and confident in participating. Similarly, something else outside the control of organisers was how weather played a part in how much people enjoyed their experience. Organisers proceeded in all weathers so as not to disappoint participants, except when weather warnings indicated they should not go ahead.

We have included in this sub-section a number of matters that could be outside the control of activity organisers, but we include them for completeness in detailing those things that detract from participants' enjoyment, and so their sense of safety and wellbeing while participating. We acknowledge they are not poor practice per se. But they are matters that might require mitigation to optimise participants safety and wellbeing.



Making improvements to keep people safe and well in training/activities/clubs

We acknowledge here that there is some overlap and repetition with the following section, where we asked for any additional comments. To remain true to participant replies we have included the various responses in the order in which they were asked and answered, though we appreciate these two sections are intertwined, and they are ultimately all suggestions for how things might be improved for participants.

There were some things mentioned in terms of making improvements even though there was a great deal of acquiescence and appreciation with how the activities were currently run. Some of the issues mentioned were largely outside the control of the activity organisers, though we include them here for completeness, and also to acknowledge them as important matters of accessibility for some.

As already mentioned, most participants and supporters who expressed their thoughts said that nothing needed to change. They were very content with how they were able to take part in the activity. Indeed, participants were very enthusiastic in expressing this, for example, saying: 'I am happy how everything is'; 'There isn't anything I don't like'; 'I don't want to see anything changed' and 'There isn't anything I want to change – I am happy how everything is'.

Carers and supporters echoed this enthusiasm, saying: 'There isn't anything I feel needs changing. The [activity] staff are helpful. Everyone enjoys the session. It's a social day out as we stop off at a café on the way back'; and 'We are all happy with the way things are. The service users enjoy coming here'.

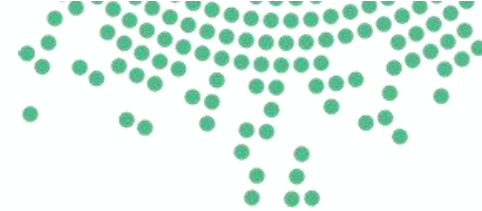
Some participants and carers then went on to make a number of suggestions for possible improvements to potentially enhance participants' experiences:



Suggestions about physical environment and equipment

- In a class where chairs were used to support people while standing for some exercises, participants mentioned the possibility of having a bar to hold on to instead of chairs. The chairs did not work for everyone, as people were of varying heights and builds.
- It was also suggested that stretchy bands would be good aids for certain exercises.
- A priority should be ensuring/maintaining an adequate first aid kit and first aid training.
- Suggestions were made by supporters and volunteers that more cycles would be desirable, and we witnessed one or two individuals needing to wait, especially for very specialised cycles or their 'best-fit' cycle, which could cause challenges for that person and their supporter. We were told: "It's sometimes difficult when a person must wait for a particular cycle. We can have behaviour issues, or the person gets bored and wants to leave". We were made aware that the leader tried to mitigate this through planning who was likely to attend on certain days/times and organising timings accordingly. This is also mentioned above as a good practice.





Suggestions about communication

- Prompted by our questions about what to do with a concern, participants said they would welcome having it spelled out what to do with a concern, such as with a leaflet or poster, including the range of people they might talk to.
- Small packs of safety and wellbeing information and contacts for reporting concerns could be made available. This suggestion was prompted by us exploring if they were aware of policies and procedures about safety and wellbeing for their group, so it was not volunteered without us first raising it!
- Any resources should be printed in appropriate formats, to ensure that all participants can understand them. This could include easy-read guides, and materials in braille for those with sight issues.
- Participants said they favoured the idea of increased promotion of safeguarding policies and encouraging people to engage, via apps or other means. Also required might be clear summaries of important points alongside full policy documents, as it was recognised that these can be difficult to navigate.



Suggestions about how activities were advertised and organised

- People would ideally like to progress together into another class or for the duration of the group to be longer. This referred to the time-limited nature of some activities. That is, a set number of weeks/months.
- Promoting wellbeing through social interactions after practice over a cup of tea. The group could also consider other social activities to engage in. Examples suggested were of an elders and children session, health talks, quizzes, and additional sporting activities. Also, the possibility for opportunities for bringing family members and friends along for socials was suggested.
- More active involvement in varied aspects of the club. This was a suggestion arising from those interested in helping administer the club/activity.



Miscellaneous suggestions

- Weather plays a part in how much people enjoyed outdoor activities. We were told by supporters: 'It's difficult if the session is rained off as any changes in routine can be difficult for some of our service users to adapt to'. Organisers tried to proceed in most weathers so as not to disappoint users. It was helpful that for some groups there were leisure centre facilities nearby in case the weather should suddenly change. With further regard to weather conditions, a small suggestion was made that rain ponchos might be helpful. If they were readily available, then people may not need to abandon their laps if weather conditions changed.
- At one venue two-wheeled cycles were not allowed on the track, as they may damage the surface. So, anyone who needed someone alongside to encourage them were either supported from the start point, or someone had to run alongside them. This was of concern to supporters as they recognised that some participants had little awareness of other cyclists, and they sometimes wandered across lanes during cycling.

We fully appreciate that resources are limited, that there are constraints at venues, and the weather is sometimes unpredictable. We mention these issues for completeness in reporting participants' views and suggestions for improvement.



Additional Comments

When we asked participants and their supporters if they wanted to make any additional comments, they generally sang the praises of those leading and supporting the activity. They also expressed how happy they were to attend and meet with others.

When we specifically asked if there was anything else participants wished to add that we had not asked about, most participants said they had nothing to add. Subsequently, and as often happens, participants then went on to raise some matters right at the very end of our chat. The sorts of matters were as follows:

- It would be good to have leaflets promoting the group. But there was also a suggestion that a pamphlet against which you could measure how well you were progressing would be good too, especially if one aspired to moving on to an advanced group.
- It would be good if there were enough classes to cater for demand. It was not currently perceived to be the case. Indeed, participants suggested there was a long waiting list.
- People said that they felt the benefits to their health and wellbeing straight away upon joining the activity.
- Finance and transport were raised as issues that may preclude some people from attending, who might otherwise benefit from the classes. Parking at particular venues was also raised as a potential concern. This was particularly important for people who needed disabled spaces/access, or if people came as a group in a larger vehicle/people carrier.
- Finding information about such activities/classes could often be a bit haphazard and possibly they should be more widely advertised through a wide range of media.
- Social prescribing of classes could be improved. Some GPs do this, and some do not. If more GPs did this, then more people could benefit from better mobility and wellbeing. People also felt that classes were not advertised as well as they could be, and that they were not as well 'prescribed' and signposted by relevant parties as they might be.

- The room used by one group could be a little echoey and as a result it was possible to miss instructions sometimes.
- It would be good to have foreign trips. The club played international matches sometimes, and they could include families in this too.

As mentioned previously, some of these matters are outside the control of those running the classes, but the impact of these matters and the concern they cause, is felt keenly by some participants.





Reflections and Observations

Challenges and Opportunities

It's the 'small' things that matter!

We have seen from participant responses that there were a whole host of factors that contributed to participants' sense of safety and wellbeing when engaging with their activity. Some are things that could easily be taken for granted, and some may possibly seem outside the realms of 'typical' safeguarding concerns. So, for example, feeling 'known' among the group, and by leaders, and having a sense of belonging to the activity group were considered as important as feeling safe physically in the activity environment, and having activities tailored and personalised for their specific needs and preferences. Being 'known' of course relies upon the sharing of relevant information with a view to keeping people safe, and this must be balanced with participants' rights of privacy such that they may not wish to disclose aspects of their lives.

Participants in the main felt this was being done well through effective history taking to assist in their full engagement in the club or activity.

In many ways therefore, participants valued the 'small things', as they might be termed, and indicated that it was a case of getting these simpler matters 'right' rather than safeguarding being about unwieldy policies and procedures. It was often taken for granted by participants that policies and procedures existed, but they were not seen as their domain and were not at the forefront of their concerns when we broached the subject of safeguarding.



Enabling and supporting activity leaders and volunteers to 'get it right'

Having highlighted those matters that are very important to participants in terms of their feeling a sense of safety and wellbeing, we next acknowledge that leaders and volunteers must commit a lot of time and effort to get these things 'right'. Activity leaders and volunteers need to be supported to do so, and this demands both adequate resources, that is, enough volunteers and equipment, and also a great deal of personal dedication. This sometimes goes unacknowledged, though not by participants!

Participants made it very clear that a lot of trust is placed in leaders and volunteers. That participants place such high levels of trust in leaders and volunteers suggests that they simply expect them to 'get it right'. They will always be looked at as the 'go to' person. Hence the need from wider sporting bodies to value their contribution and to support them. We acknowledge too that this places them in positions where participants may not wish to challenge them if they are not happy with something. Thought should be given to how this can be managed. One idea mentioned was that all clubs should have a welfare officer/safeguarding lead as well as an activity leader. Though this would be a good solution, it would present some resourcing implications.

Our observations were that the more typical matters of risk and safety seem to be managed well. Participants mentioned, and we witnessed, the use of participation forms to capture relevant information to enable individuals to fully engage in their activity. We were told that everyone had DBS checks, ongoing safeguarding training, and so on. So, the 'bread and butter' of safeguarding was being very well taken care of. For more specialised groups, leaders and volunteers had engaged in more specialised training, such as autism awareness..



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There needs to be an upward filtering of what is important to participants to the highest levels of sporting governance.

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We now have some evidence from participants at grass roots level and a resounding message from them that they value quite different things to what might be considered more typical safeguarding matters, such as DBS checks, training, and so on.

It is possible that these things may not yet be recognised as so important by sport governing bodies and other authorities who feel they may get the ‘bread and butter’ of safeguarding right, and many do. But in the light of what participants have told us, the ‘softer’ safeguarding issues revealed in our findings may require attention too in whatever discussions take place at other levels in sporting bodies. There could be discussions about how they could support sport and activity leaders to embrace some of the matters that were highlighted by participants as key to their sense of safety and wellbeing. The highest levels of sporting governance should be made aware of what is important for participants. Furthermore, it would be desirable to have a means of capturing participant voices about what they value to inform ongoing development of safeguarding policies and procedures.

The key elements that provide participants with a sense of safety and wellbeing may at first view seem on the periphery of safeguarding. But these are the things that matter to participants.

Some participants may not find it so easy to take agency for their own safety and wellbeing, or to make their feelings and preferences known. This is why it is vital that leaders, volunteers, and the wider sporting organisation work together to ensure that every participant has a voice.





Supporting agency and encouraging participants to speak up

One key observation was that there were very few concerns raised. On the one hand, this could indicate that participants felt that all their safety and wellbeing needs were being adequately met. Indeed, much good practice was evident, as we mentioned in previous sections. On the other hand, however, it could be suggested that the lack of concerns raised was due to a naivety among some participant groups about what 'risk' may exist.

“...the prevalent feeling of trust for those supporting them to do activities is both positive and a concern.”



The lack of engagement with the topic of safeguarding itself among some participant groups, for example, people with learning disabilities, throws up a whole challenge of getting this client group to engage with matters of their own and others' safety. The prevalent feeling of trust for those supporting them to do activities is both positive and a concern.

It is positive, as participants already have a sense that they have someone to report their concerns to, which is reassuring. But it also suggests a lack of agency in raising matters for themselves, if for example it was their immediate supporters or activity leaders/volunteers who were a cause of concern.

It would be desirable to consider how and how much these matters might need to be further 'promoted' with participants, such that it might empower and enable agency, but not scare people. This might involve having a range of accessible materials to hand for each person taking part and/or every so often running an in-house session on keeping safe. Thought would need to be given to whose responsibility it is to deliver this, as in some groups, when we enquired about safety and wellbeing, we were perceived as 'strangers' and people felt less inclined to engage with us.



In activity groups which included participants with physical or learning disabilities, participants looked to others when it came to safeguarding. Most were reliant upon parents, carers, or other supporters to participate, and so naturally they oriented to them for immediate safety and wellbeing needs.

Overall, for many participants the sport or activity comes first, and so safeguarding is not on the radar. There is a responsibility to put it on participants' radars, however, without inciting alarm or fear, and there are several ways this could be addressed. For example, simply making people aware that policies exist when they first join a group, and signposting where to find them. Or perhaps there could be a user-friendly summary in hard copy and online in various accessible formats.

The assumption that there are safeguarding policies in place, but they are not overtly consulted as everything seems to go smoothly, is both a positive and a possible negative. It is undeniably positive that participants feel things are going so smoothly that safeguarding policies never need to come into play, but we also wonder whether policies should be more visible, and whether awareness should be raised of the complaints procedure, should that become necessary at any point.

As well as policies, participants would benefit from being made overtly aware of how to raise a concern for themselves and having it registered and investigated. Simultaneously, attention needs to be given to the fact that care-workers/supporters should not become 'gatekeepers' of the concerns of individuals. Leaders and volunteers should be mindful of this and ensure that if participants wish to be vocal about any concerns, they have the space and opportunity to voice or sign these concerns.

Occasional surveys or informal 'check-ins' directly with participants would help reduce the chances of carers/supporters stifling any opinions they may have.





It is a little concerning that some participants said that they would not speak up, and that they would not wish to rock the boat because they were so grateful for the opportunity to be in their activity group. It is great they feel that way about the group, but it is worrying that someone may simply walk away, potentially into isolation, if they felt they could not or should not voice a concern. Furthermore, if people walk away rather than speak up, it might mean that nothing would be done about whatever concerned them. Any issues may continue, resulting in harm to someone else. This is why it is important to constantly raise awareness of the need to speak up if there is a concern, and why it is important to provide an easy and confidential way for people to do this. A simple 'How to voice a concern' leaflet may suffice, which could be distributed when someone joins. Periodic reminders could be distributed after that.



Additionally, thought would need to be given to how to manage situations where people disclose something but ask for it to be completely confidential. How could they then be encouraged to seek appropriate help?

Finally, it is worth emphasising that not only do activity leaders/group organisers need to raise awareness and so empower people to speak up, but they also need to develop and communicate a fair and just means of investigating and mitigating matters when a concern is raised.

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**...some participants
said that they would
not speak up...**

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Raising awareness of wider agencies where people could voice concerns

If participants wished to raise a concern about their participation in their club, they overwhelmingly said they would turn to the club leaders in the first instance. There was little orientation towards any outside agencies that they could reach out to with any concerns. This suggests there may need to be more awareness raising about other agencies that can help if a participant has a concern. This could be done in a number of ways, such as through periodic 'safety and wellbeing' discussions and surveys. These could capture the participant's voice while also raising awareness of safety and wellbeing issues and where to report them.

Similarly, this could also prevent any gatekeeping, no matter how well intentioned, by people close to the person sharing a concern. Though it is natural to wish to talk to someone close in the first instance, this clearly would not work if that confidant is themselves part of the problem for the participant.

Balancing competition and inclusion

The social side of taking part was very important to participants, though for some the sport itself and particularly the competitive side of the sport was a strong driving force in their participation. This points to a need to manage expectations as well as to encourage people to achieve their full potential.

Thought needs to be given to how varying levels of competitive aspiration can be managed and promoted. Activity groups and clubs will need to find a balanced approach to competition without putting undue pressure on individuals or compromising inclusivity.

Participants suggested that 'rules of engagement' should be spelled out for varying 'competitive' situations. Accessible ways of communicating this will need to be thought through. This is part and parcel of managing a diverse set of needs among a varied participant population.





Furthermore, it should be well communicated when it would be considered that a line had been crossed, for example regarding use of bad language, 'banter', or displaying poor or inappropriate behaviour. It should be communicated clearly to participants where 'the line' is in the first place, and what is and is not acceptable during the activity, particularly if competitive situations lead to heightened intensity.

Meeting diverse needs

Having touched upon the challenges of how it might be possible to manage the ongoing tension between competitive aspiration, inclusion, and personalisation, leaders will need to consider how best to accommodate varying levels of ability and possible 'vulnerability' within varying levels of competition. We observed this being done very effectively in activity groups/clubs, through their engagement in a variety of 'leagues' that enabled participants to take part at a level of competition that was commensurate with their abilities and capabilities.

This requires leaders to develop a good grasp of what might be needed for everyone, which speaks directly to all that has been said already about participants being 'known' and appreciated for what they can do rather than what they cannot.

Participants felt they indeed experienced a person-centred approach in line with their capabilities. We observed that people's needs were quite varied, and that this could potentially mean that some needs may be overlooked if people were slightly slower in doing exercises or in processing instructions. This has implications for the size and make up of each group to ensure people are not left behind or rushed.





We also observed that some personalities in some groups could prove quite challenging to leaders but viewed this as something that needs to be accommodated, especially when it relates to individuals' medical conditions/needs. Again, this has implications for the size and make up of groups that allow for all types of needs to be met tolerantly.

We observed that the diverse range of mobilities/capabilities meant that a lot of needs required addressing in one session. We can only imagine how challenging this would be if there was just one leader in place. Thought as to the make-up of any one group is obviously highly desirable so that safety and wellbeing can be maintained for a highly varied group. We acknowledge completely that this has resourcing implications and that care might be needed too in terms of staffing ratios when there are a lot of extra needs within one group.



Participants particularly wished to avoid missing out on their potential to progress in their sport/activity as a result of activities being curtailed when there was not enough support or equipment available.

The tailoring of experiences for participants was very important and was done so well in many environments. The pre-planning by leaders was key to this and enabled sometimes limited resources to be allocated fairly and with minimum waiting for equipment or assistance.

Optimising the size and mix of groups is therefore a key consideration, and something that must be managed effectively.



Appropriate venues

Participants cited the many benefits arising from the good choice of venues for the varying activities. For example, using multi-purpose tracks for outdoor activities, specifically cycling. The flat terrain makes it easy for individuals of all abilities to take part. The structured nature of the track meant that people could set their own goals and pace. The facilities available in the nearby leisure centre meaning that toilets, seating, and refreshments were readily available. As a result of these factors, participants liked the idea that this was a whole 'outing' for individuals. At the same time, many outdoor venues were 'bounded' in the sense that people could freely take part with some autonomy and independence, but within a physically bounded safe space.

Though we appreciate that finance and transport may be out of the remit of providers, we have included participants' observations about these to prompt and inform wider network/environment considerations.

Managing the use of social media

Social media was acknowledged by many participants as a good means of communicating more widely about their activities, such as advising of changes in activity arrangements, and for enabling members to stay connected if they are unable to attend. However, participants said that social media must be effectively monitored and mediated to keep everyone safe.

In the same way we mentioned above in the context of managing competition and defining 'lines' that should not be crossed, such 'lines' should also be specified when it comes to being part of social media groups to support involvement in an activity group. Participants noted that there needed to be clear and ongoing reminders about what those 'lines' might be, and what was and was not acceptable in the ongoing use of social media to support participation.



Working in Partnership

With participants

It is commendable good practice that organisers and exercise leaders took on board advice from those taking part to formulate ways of including them safely in the group. It was pointed out to us that blind participants were helping to train other leaders in how to include participants in exercise, using appropriate descriptions for the exercises and not including terms that might be meaningless. For example, using an instruction that is dependent upon having pictorial awareness, such as “sit up straight like a peacock”, would only work if one knows what a peacock looks like. This ongoing learning from participants, taken on board by leaders, would be something for other groups to emulate.

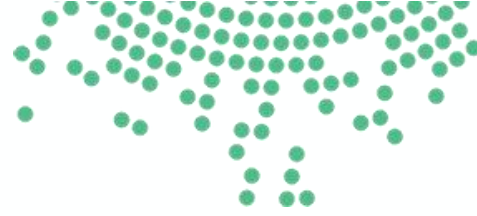
With wider agencies

It was also mentioned by organisers that relationships with key people at the site were paramount, for example, with those who run the leisure centre. All groups should look to make such connections, as the collaboration can play an important role in making the activity accessible for everyone.

Within local networks

We also became aware from some conversations that many groups who supported activities for those with physical and learning disabilities were known locally by certain other agencies, and that they were recognised as a good resource in the disabled/learning-disabled community. Organisers/leaders had very good links with all the group homes whose residents accessed the activity. They also had good links with the local council and other council schemes. Fostering these relationships with other groups/charities/agencies appears very good practice and could provide a means of sharing safeguarding and wellbeing ‘know-how’, experience, and perhaps even training.





Concluding remarks and acknowledgements

We have heard the voices of participants and what it is they value. While these might not traditionally be viewed as 'typical' safeguarding issues, their voices have spelled out what gives them a sense of safety and wellbeing when taking part in sports or activities. As such, there are opportunities for those leading activities and their wider governing bodies to embrace a different set of priorities, which may help to minimise safeguarding risks and contribute to the prevention of negative situations. But at the same time, they should of course still pay attention to the 'bread and butter' safeguarding issues associated with vetting and training. These participant voices offer a candid insight into how it is for a variety of people of all abilities, capabilities, and possible vulnerabilities to be active.

We are so very grateful to those individual participants who have spoken to us, to their group leaders and volunteers, to activity groups and clubs who have hosted us at their sessions, and to the charities, Active Partnerships, and sport governing bodies who have provided introductions and signposts for us to hear these most valuable participant voices.



Appendix 1: How to effectively gather 'participant voices'

Key learning points

Introduction

We detail below some of the experiences and learning that have arisen as a result of the 'Voices of Participants' project completed over the last few years. Though some ideas are not new or startling, they hopefully might act as reminders to enable the gathering of sports participants' voices for others wishing to do the same.

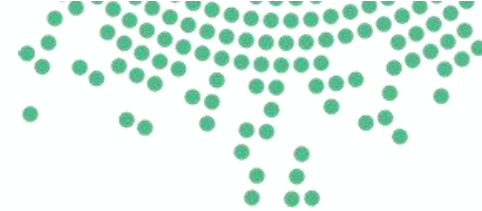
Experiences and Learning

Engaging participants

After having tried a number of ways to hear the voices of those taking part in sporting activities at grass roots level, we began to appreciate that to do this, it was no good going to the top of organisations and seeing if we could cascade down our enquiries, because we experienced some gatekeeping and blockages, especially where we had been unsuccessful in finding someone in the organisation to champion our request for participants' insights. Alternatively, when we did receive some helpful insights, these were from those staff or volunteers who already knew an awful lot about safeguarding. We realised we were receiving 'model' answers about what safeguarding should look like, when in fact we were trying to get a feel for what people actually taking part in sport knew about safeguarding.

We tried inviting participants to face-to-face 'forums' and/or asked them to complete surveys. We achieved some limited success with these two approaches, but we were not really getting a sense of what it was that made participants happy and comfortable to keep turning up to participate in their respective activities. We felt we had the right sort of questions, but it seemed to be the approach that was not working. In the last couple of years, however, we had a breakthrough when we approached partner organisations who were closer to the delivery or running of various clubs and activities. Active Partnerships were instrumental when it came to arranging access to people taking part in physical activities, and similarly, charities providing sporting activities for people with physical or learning disabilities invited their attendees to talk to us if they so wished.

Key learning point: Approach those close to the delivery/provision of activities and seek their help in inviting sports participants to give their insights.



Explaining why we were there

Once you have been successful in gaining an invitation to attend a group and speak with people, make sure you explain to the group what you are there to do, your roles, who you are, and so on. We experienced some misunderstanding about why we were there asking questions, with some people assuming we were evaluating or inspecting the participants themselves! Once this was cleared up, people were much more forthcoming with their insights. Similarly, we made sure to assure them of our confidentiality and their anonymity and confirmed that nothing that was said would be attributed to any particular individual.²

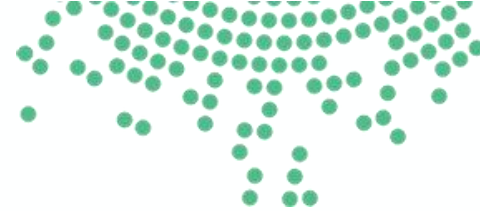
Key learning point: Ensure at the outset what it is you are there to do, making clear that it is not to 'inspect' their group or them. Explain confidentiality and anonymity.

Tailoring the approach

As we've approached a wide range of people with varying capabilities and capacities, we have found it necessary to tailor our set of questions for differing groups of participants. For example, we have talked to groups of older people about their experiences of exercise to prevent falls, and also to people with learning disabilities taking part in outdoor sports for exercise and fun. For each group we did a little groundwork to understand the context of their (usually) weekly meetings and tried to gain some idea of the group we would be talking to. We then tailored our various questions to enable various groups' engagement with the topics at hand. We largely abandoned the word 'safeguarding', opting instead to ask how safe and well people felt when doing their activities, and what it was that made people feel safe and well. What made people feel comfortable? What made them enjoy their activity? For some groups, we simply asked what they like about doing this activity, and what do they not like about it. Thus, we tailored our questions to the group that we were approaching for their insights. The variety of answers that we received enabled us to paint a picture of what safeguarding looks like for those people taking part, expressed in the way in which they experienced it.

Key learning point: Do a little groundwork in advance and tailor questions and choose vocabulary that is most appropriate for differing groups.

² The only exception to this would of course be if anyone disclosed something that would need to be passed on to relevant authorities, which we would expect to first discuss separately with the person disclosing, if this had occurred. We did not foreground this in our introductions, but our team agreed in advance how we would proceed should there be a disclosure of a serious type.



Meeting people 'where they are'

We have found that the best way of gaining these experiences and insights has been to go along to clubs and activities in whatever form they take, and speak to people at their actual club or meeting. We appreciated that people were first and foremost there to take part in their activity, so often we observed for a while, as unobtrusively as possible, until we had the chance to speak with them after their activity. There was a lot to be gained from observing participants' reactions and demeanours whilst taking part, so this too was a valuable way to gain a picture of how safe, well, and confident people appeared to be while attending the club or activity. This provided a good introduction to our questions, as we were able to say, 'you looked very confident or happy' and so on.

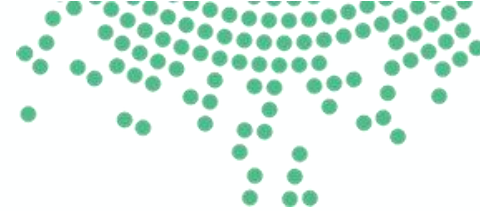
We were also not fazed if the sport was the main goal for them at their meet, and that answering our questions was not! We remained genuinely grateful for all levels of participation, be it long or short and in varying forms, including observation.

Key learning point: Meet participants 'where they are' in terms of both venue and whether they wish to respond or not . Observation can be helpful too.

Providing Feedback

We provided immediate verbal feedback to leaders of the activities at the ends of the session we had attended. We also followed this up with a short write-up detailing what participants had shared anonymously. We provided some reflections and observations at the end of the write-up, which detailed some challenges and opportunities that the participant voice had prompted. This was very well received, and we were told that this had helped deliverers/leaders of the activity to consolidate their good practice and to look for ways of tweaking a few matters suggested by participants and ourselves.

Key learning point: Provide feedback from each visit both verbally at the end of the session and in the form of a write-up to summarise the participant voice for each individual club/activity group.



Keeping consistency

Although we tried to embrace varied ways of gathering insights, we had five topic areas that we used consistently across surveys, discussions, focus groups, chats, and our own observations. This means that insights could be drawn together under various headings in a meaningful way to highlight good practice and identify challenges and opportunities for clubs/activities.

Key learning point: Though approaches and vocabulary may need to vary, keep the key areas of enquiry in mind, and try to stay consistent.

Further information on topics for enquiry

(Also included in Appendix 2)

The five areas upon which we sought insights were:

Section A: Developing a shared understanding of what safeguarding means in the context of participating in sporting activities

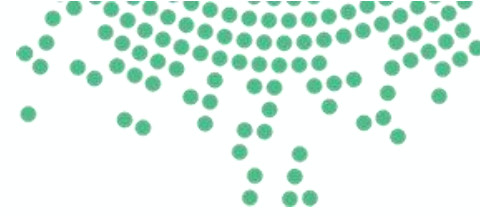
[Prompts might include – What does safeguarding mean to you? Who might need safeguarding? In what situations might people not feel safe? What are the main ways that people could be kept safe? Are there policies and procedures at your club?]

Section B: Knowing what to do if someone has a concern or worry

[Prompts might include – If you or someone you knew were worried about something that was happening to them when they were taking part, what would you do? Who could you tell? Who do you think could help? If the person you might normally tell your worries to is the same person who is causing you to worry, who could you tell then? What sort of help or support would you expect to get if you or someone you knew had a worrying situation going on?]

Section C: Preventing situations that place people at risk

[Prompts might include – What sorts of things could be done to stop people finding themselves in tricky (vulnerable) situations? Give some examples of GOOD practices in sporting groups/clubs that stop people getting into tricky (vulnerable) situations. What are examples of POOR practices in sporting groups/clubs that mean that some people could get into tricky (vulnerable) situations? How could any POOR practices be put right and made better?]



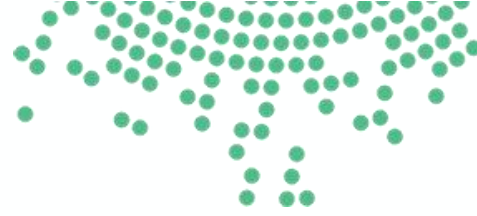
Section D: Making improvements to safeguard people taking part in training/activities/clubs

[Prompts might include – Whose responsibility is it to keep people safe? How can coaches/club leaders keep people safe? What are ‘good’, practical things they can do? How can club members/competitors/people engaging in sporting activities help keep themselves and other people safe? What are ‘good’, practical things they can do?]

Section E: Opportunity to explore anything our questions have not covered

[Potentially this might be matters specific to particular sports/activities, that raise issues we have not considered in other questions]

Key learning point: This is a set of possible questions. There are other ways of asking these things according to varying audiences.



Appendix 2: Topic Guide

(Questions for a short focus group before/after a session or for an individual chat/interview)

Developing shared understandings of what it takes to keep people safe and well in sport

- What does it mean to you to keep you and others safe and well while participating in sports/activities?
- Whose responsibility is it?
- What sorts of things might be involved in keeping people safe and well?
- Are you aware of any policies or guidance your group/club has to keep people safe and well?

Knowing what to do if someone has a concern or worry

- Would you know what to do if you, or other people taking part, felt unsafe or in some way 'at risk'?
- What would you do if you or someone told you that they felt unsafe?
- Who might you talk to about it?

Preventing situations that place people at risk

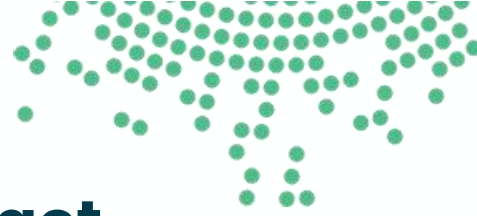
- Do you have examples of good practice in keeping people safe and well whilst taking part in sports and activities?
- Do you know of examples of poor practice?

Making improvements to keep people safe and well in training/activities/clubs

- What could be done to improve safety and wellbeing, either generally or specifically for your particular sport or activity?

Opportunity to explore anything else our questions have not covered

- Do you have anything to say that we have not asked about?



Appendix 3: Responses to Impact Survey

As part of the 'Voices of Participants' project, we visited a number of sporting clubs/sessions ranging from exercise sessions for people with compromised mobility to cycling clubs for people with a range of physical and learning disabilities. After each visit the organisation was provided with some feedback. Of 11 surveys sent to group leaders, we received 3 responses, though we believe that where organisations had several site visits, they have responded as an organisation, rather than per site.

Due to the small number of responses from clubs/groups, we are able to provide verbatim answers rather than summarising or paraphrasing what was actually said. The following section details their responses in full:

Has the feedback from us contributed to a better understanding of how your sports participants (and/or their carers) view safeguarding within your sessions?

'Yes'

'Yes, the feedback has helped us understand how our participants and their carers view safeguarding, especially by focusing on what makes participants feel safe and well during sessions. The positive environment, where participants feel known and supported, plays a significant role in their sense of security. All visits emphasised the trust participants place in activity leaders and volunteers, noting that participants tend to rely on their supporters for any concerns, even if they are not fully aware of formal safeguarding procedures.'

'It certainly helped both groups, all participants are aware of safeguarding issues and who to follow them up with if they have any concerns.'

Has the feedback helped you to recognise good practice to minimise risks within your sessions? If so, please provide a few examples of where you have continued good practice and/or whether you have changed practice with a view to improvement.

'Yes'



'Yes, the feedback has helped reinforce the importance of good practices, such as ensuring participants can engage at their own pace and creating a personalised approach for each individual. At all sites, we have continued practices like maintaining an unobstructed, visible space for participants to cycle safely and ensuring the accessibility of bicycles tailored to individual needs. Moreover, the feedback highlighted that regular maintenance of equipment, such as checking tyre pressures and seat adjustments, is a good safety practice that we continue to uphold. Additionally, we are exploring ways to ensure participants have more accessible information on safeguarding concerns, such as producing easy-read flyers on who to approach if they have a worry.'

'I have always recognised good practice and continue to do so. The visits did not change my approach, however it did help as a reminder.'

Did the feedback help you to recognise any areas of concern and if so, how might you look to address those concerns? Please give examples.

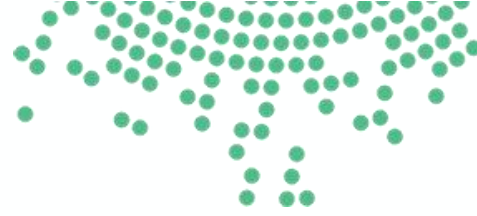
'To assist the carers that bring the participants to have a clear understanding of their and our roles in harmony with each other.'

'Yes, the feedback has pointed out a few areas where we could improve. For example, that participants generally don't engage with safeguarding terminology or policies directly. This indicates a need to raise awareness among participants about their ability to voice concerns. To address this, we plan to introduce easy-read materials that clearly outline who to approach if they have concerns, ensuring it's accessible for those who might not be aware of formal safeguarding channels. Additionally, we are mindful of the potential for carers to act as gatekeepers to participants' concerns, and we aim to provide more opportunities for participants to independently express any worries, possibly through informal check-ins or surveys.'

'No due to the nature of my program i.e. Falls Prevention for Elderly Adults I have always been alerted to issues that could arise i.e. safe areas, room layout, clear floors etc...'

Has it been useful to have contributed to the 'Voices of Participants' project and if 'yes', please say how.

'Yes - the feedback has been useful, in addition to being able to see that the impact on our sessions was positive and clear'



'Yes, contributing to the 'Voices of Participants' project has been invaluable. It has provided us with clear insights into how participants experience safeguarding, safety, and well-being during their sessions. The project has also prompted us to evaluate and adapt our approach to better empower participants, ensuring they feel confident in raising any concerns. We've found that through this feedback, we can improve not only the physical safety measures but also the emotional and social elements that contribute to a participant's overall wellbeing.'

'It was very useful, the participants were able to have a "free" voice and this proved very positive for them and for myself and the instructor.'

Respondents reported that receiving feedback from our visit has been useful. For some the feedback has acted as a reminder and consolidation of good practice, and in some cases, it has highlighted areas for ongoing improvement.

In particular, there seems to be an appreciation of the importance of building and maintaining a shared understanding and approach to safeguarding, and of safe spaces where concerns can be raised, using language which is accessible to all.



Further Information

For further information about the Ann Craft Trust, or if you have any questions, please contact:

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**ann
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Don't forget to sign up to our quarterly bulletin to keep up to date with the latest news and guidance in safeguarding adults.
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