

## **ukactive Awards 2021**

### **Developing & Supporting Communities During Covid-19**

#### **PROFILE (150 WORDS)**

Award-winning charity Sport Aberdeen is committed to creating opportunities, inspiring people and changing lives through sport and physical activity in the north-east of Scotland. We aim to get the most inactive members of society active, regardless of age, gender or ability.

We deliver targeted programmes designed to reach those less likely to be given the opportunity to be physically active.

SPACE (Supported Physical Activity for Care Experienced) is an innovative project utilising the positive benefits of sport and physical activity to help care experienced children and young people reach their full potential through bespoke interventions.

The project aims to remove barriers and support participants to improve their physical health, emotional wellbeing and enhance key life skills, using the power of sport as a catalyst for positive change. As a corporate parent, Sport Aberdeen has a commitment to over 450 care experienced young people within the care of Aberdeen City Council.

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#### **ELEVATOR PITCH (250 WORDS)**

##### **Why do you think you deserve to win this award?**

Physical activity can positively impact mental and physical health however there are often fewer opportunities for those in the care system, who are disproportionately affected by poorer mental and physical health than their non-looked after peers<sup>1</sup>.

The project was the first of its kind in Scotland and, in partnership with Aberdeen City Council, supports and mentors the city's most vulnerable children and young people who would otherwise have little/ no access to many opportunities.

Opportunities include boxing, cycling, horse-riding and accessing local greenspaces alongside free-of-charge membership to Sport Aberdeen's citywide gyms.

A child-centred approach results in intuitive methods of intervention based on the needs and views of the participants with tailored approaches adopted when possible, utilising bespoke 1-2-1 support and small group sessions; building long-term positive relationships with a high level of resource and time going into working with the participants who really need the support; focusing on achieving life changing positive outcomes over high numbers.

One young participant had severe anxiety and poor body image, resulting in disengagement from school. Their target was 'to become more confident about body image and live a happier life', which has been evident throughout sessions; the participant now continuously smiling and giving positive

verbal feedback. They now talk openly about previous negative experiences of school PE and badminton. With encouragement, they tried the sport with the free Sport Aberdeen membership and excelled, expressing increased confidence to try PE again. They have since returned to school, following 0% attendance for most of the year.

### **ENGAGEMENT AND RATIONALE (300 WORDS)**

Throughout the pandemic, care experienced children and young people faced unprecedented challenges, largely in accessing activities and engaging with project activators. Guidance required new ways of working.

Discussions with the Virtual School, responsible for care experienced young people in education in Aberdeen, resulted in the project providing both community outreach support and working with partners to increase reach. The project joined Sport Aberdeen's Active Schools team, ensuring maximum impact could be achieved through integrated working.

13 participants were supported throughout lockdown one, with eight new referrals, in addition to the estimated 90 children who attended the vulnerable hub provision delivered by SPACE.

When restrictions resulted in the closure of lessons and coaching programmes and gyms, SPACE engaged with its target audience through community walks and multi-sport activities, with high engagement (80%).

Increased pressure on families saw the project respond by delivering weekly 1-2-1 summer holiday activities. Participants were referred by Children's Social Work and engaged in games and multi-sport activities, emphasising outdoor play and the importance of family; sibling groups were encouraged where possible. Local greenspaces were explored, dens built, and many miles walked; over 115 hours of outdoor play were experienced over five weeks and engagement led to increased physical activity and reduced screen time.

One young person enjoyed a walking group, set up in response to the pandemic, so much that he is starting to lead sessions, plan routes and has expressed interest in 'helping the local community access this activity to combat loneliness'. This same young person was referred to the project to build relationships and social skills, which he now talks positively about. *"[He is] excited to return to school for the social aspect. He walks with confidence and is now wearing designer clothes. His PE teacher has also commented on his improved fitness."* – Foster Parent

### **IMPLEMENTATION (300 WORDS)**

SPACE engages with participants by offering activities which are fun, appealing and often not otherwise available.

Opportunities for participation are offered in several ways, with the impact of Covid-19 changing the approach ensuring that this group was still receiving the support they needed.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown, Project Activators were deployed into educational hubs, established to support children living in vulnerable situations. This supported wider learning and increased attainment and opportunities. In total, 1,095 hours were spent directly impacting three hubs, with another 5,000 hours of Active Schools time supporting children and young people across six hubs for children of keyworkers, and Orchard Brae School.

To date Sport Aberdeen has provided over 250 free memberships to care experienced young people and their families, carers or other relevant person(s) through SPACE, alongside swimming lessons for over 50 participants each week (pre Covid-19). Providing these opportunities free of charge has engaged with this group, offering something new and exciting. Memberships have also been provided to all children's homes and staff within other support services, increasing the support available and allowing more participants to improve mental and physical wellbeing.

In April, SPACE teamed up with Children 1<sup>st</sup> to introduce physical activity to an initiative delivering 'wellbeing packs' to young people. The sports packs, funded by Sport Aberdeen, were specifically tailored, where possible, for individuals and almost 250 were delivered.

Engagement is maintained as participants transition from education into work. One participant was supported to assist in a lunchtime tennis club at school. His passion for supporting sports sessions lead to him achieving the Saltire Award for volunteering and ultimately becoming a leisure attendant where he is thriving.

Progress is monitored through:

- attendance (school / activity sessions)
- qualifications gained
- feedback (young people/ carers/ teachers /professionals)
- ongoing observations from Project Activators and other professionals

### **IMPACT REVIEWS (300 WORDS)**

85% of children and young people increase their school attendance after participating in the SPACE project for a minimum of 12 weeks.

Adapting to guidelines during Covid-19 meant the project created support for young people and their families entirely based on their needs. One child was offered a place in an educational hub, however this caused anxiety for the parent, resulting in the continuation of project activator support. This progressed from weekly phone calls to the child being allowed to undertake face to face activities. The child learnt to speak on a phone and weekly outdoor activities had an impact on the whole family, as the child would show the parent the places they visited. Similarly, the parent felt confident to let the child play outside independently as they had developed increased road safety awareness, thanks to the walks with the project activator.

Impact is evaluated based on varying information and data. Initially the referral information shapes the progress outcomes which are tailored to each participant. The project engages directly with the young person to give them a voice in their journey, allowing them to choose their own path. The project consistently works with other professionals, carers and educational staff to ensure there is a cohesive flow of information relevant to the young person, overall evaluation is then gathered through feedback surveys, monitoring reports and observations.

*Sport Aberdeen is a great example of a Corporate Parent and constantly look to do more to support our care experienced young people. During the pandemic they have adapted to ensure that they continue to offer support. This has had a huge impact and the SPACE programme has been vital in supporting the mental and physical health of some of our most at-risk young people during this period. Larissa Gordon, Virtual School Head Teacher*

## LOOKING AHEAD (300 WORDS)

The SPACE project is constantly evolving, and systemic change is at the forefront of its work, learning from key policies such as the Care Review and Education Scotland's 'How to build back better'.

Active Schools Aberdeen is one of only five teams represented on **sportscotland's** 'Changing Lives Champions' programme which aims to inspire and enable professional staff in the sporting system to adopt and apply a 'Changing Lives' approach. This method will continue to be adopted by the project to further engage with the targeted audience.

This approach will continue to shape job roles within the charity, with the creation of a project activator post, split between the SPACE project and community sport. This will enable increased accessibility and inclusion across sports clubs, whilst providing opportunities for wider achievement.

Refurbishment of a facility within an area of deprivation has considered the target audience throughout the planning process. The improvement of this facility, in the specific area, will increase the range of local opportunities, further supporting accessibility and inclusion for the whole family whilst removing travel barriers to support continued life-long participation.

A further consideration includes developing the programme to include 1-2-1 activities for the primary caregivers, and to include more family-based activity. £10,000 has been invested to create a bespoke adventurous activity programme in addition to the implementation of a skills development and employability programme. Sport Aberdeen will be delivering the 'Active Families' programme throughout the summer holidays, where several families will be invited to experience the benefits of Adventure Aberdeen's offering.

Further developments include the purchase of water bottles, to ensure hydration is not a limiting factor for activities. Methods of sustaining the provision of healthy snacks is also being considered as there is awareness that food poverty is a challenge for many of the families supported.