

# **Research Evaluation: Sporting Activity for Older People**

## **Executive Summary**

May 2023



**Ryan Brown**

*(Lead Researcher & OSS Research Manager)*

Additional research by:

**Dawn Skelton**

*(OSS Research Associate, and Professor of Ageing and Health at Glasgow Caledonian University)*

**Gregor Heath & Matthew Bedwell**

*(OSS Research Assistants)*



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This research was commissioned by Sporting Memories to study the impact of adding a variety of sporting activity to existing reminiscence clubs, and to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of club participants and their views on sport activity for older people.

Sporting Memories are dedicated to the development and use of sports reminiscence to support isolated, older people across Scotland. Sporting Memories operate 30 weekly community clubs bringing together older people living with long-term conditions, such as dementia, and 25 other Sporting Memories closed-setting groups. The aim is to improve the mental and physical wellbeing of members, whilst reducing loneliness and isolation, and connecting people with social and health networks across their wider community.

You can contact Donna Mackey at [donna.mackey@sportingmemories.uk](mailto:donna.mackey@sportingmemories.uk) for more information on their, or visit [www.sportingmemories.uk](http://www.sportingmemories.uk).

## **Executive Summary**

Sporting Memories developed the idea of 'Replay Sports & Social Clubs' where they would add to reminiscence and games by introducing a weekly schedule of planned exercise, sport and physical activity geared towards older people, alongside discussion groups and opportunities to attend local sport events.

The Replay club in Kirkcaldy involves 15-18 members who meet at Kirkcaldy Rugby Club once each week. The club members are all older adults, including some who are frail and suffer long-term health conditions. Four members are living with dementia and one recovering from a stroke, and others reported various health issues affecting their daily lives.

The aim of this research was to investigate whether adding regular sporting activities, alongside home exercise kits and links to other local sport, impacted on functional fitness, physical activity and sedentary behaviour, loneliness, quality of life, balance and wellbeing.

OSS researchers carried out physical tests and questionnaires at the start of the Replay club in September, 2022, and at three- and six-month intervals, concluding in March, 2023. The same physical tests and questionnaires were conducted with 15 club members and, following the six-month session, qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 members to gather further lived experience.

## **Key Findings**

A key finding in this research was that while additional sport activity was welcomed by older people as a valuable addition to their weekly diary, with greater benefits for mental health potentially than physical health, participants felt that the Replay club environment and social chat was crucial to engagement in activity and its success.

Throughout the six-month project, the number of participants meeting the UK Chief Medical Officers' weekly guidelines of 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity physical activity increased by 44%, whilst the average sedentary time decreased by 36%, from 6.3 hours to 4.6 hours per day – a fall of 1.7 hours across the cohort. Additionally, after six months, 73% of the participants rated themselves as having either good, very good or excellent aerobic fitness, compared to just 53% at the start of the research study.

There was no 'statistically significant' level of change observed across the whole participant group from the aggregated physical and mental health measures used in this six-month period of evaluation. A longer period of study, and comparison between new members and the cohort in this study, who have been active in the club for varying numbers of years, may provide greater evidence of cause and effect. However, all participants did individually show improvements across different areas of fitness, health and wellbeing. When looking at the functional fitness test, over 50% of the participants improved in each individual test, with more than 80% improving in the chair rise and standing march - the test recording the one 'statistically significant' change.

Participants' quality of life scores showed slight improvements in mobility, usual activities and levels of anxiety and depression, whilst self-care and pain and discomfort scores remained constant over the six months. The majority of participants' loneliness scores remained constant through the research, with four improving and two worsening - 53% felt that their loneliness was either a lot or somewhat better, after six months. The average balance confidence score showed a 3.2% decrease, signifying a slight fall in participants' confidence in their balance. Further investigation is underway to understand why this was the case. Participants' overall wellbeing showed a minor average decrease across the six-month period, but the confidence and wellness aspects improved.

Qualitative interviews with participants identified that members view the ‘Replay Sports & Social Club’ as a good route to reintroduce older adults to more sport and physical activity. They insisted that the combination of the opportunity to chat and reminisce in a safe and social environment, and the activity was key, most participants in the study stating that they would be unlikely to participate in a sport and physical activity club without the social reminiscence focus.

It was felt that the club provides a social community for older adults in the local area to meet others like themselves, with numerous members stating that they joined following illness or health issues in order to find ways to improve health and keep physically and mentally active. Study participants spoke at length about feeling improvement in their mental health since joining the club, with ‘improved confidence’ being the most common feeling.

A limitation in the study was the inability to compare a group of completely new Sporting Memories members with this group of existing club members. What was clear was that many participants felt their physical and mental health had improved since joining the Sporting Memories club, with some having been members for three-plus years. Some of this was due to the club itself but also to increasing confidence derived from the club, which enabled them to leave the home more often during the week and take part in other local activities. As a result, they suggested that their baseline figure for this research would be significantly lower if tested when they had first joined the group. Having a ‘control group’ of people completely new to the club would offer greater depth of insight to the physical and mental health differences experienced by participating in the weekly club.

It is possible, therefore, that more statistically significant changes may be reported when evaluating completely new members, particularly across the measures of loneliness, quality of life, wellbeing, balance and functional fitness. Additionally, records of participant involvement in each of the weekly activities were not gathered – and some weeks the activity did not take place – therefore, it was not possible to analyse volume of activity and compare impact of frequency across the study group.

Further research is required over a long period of time to establish patterns and trends, and understand if improvements shown in this study, are sustainable. It would also be beneficial to introduce this type of study to new members on joining the club, to better understand the impact values of both the reminiscence and sport activity aspects of the clubs.

## **Recommendations**

- Conduct assessments of new members prior to starting activities, and evaluations of members at regular intervals, ie quarterly/annually, following protocols established in this research. Longitudinal research, along similar lines to this project over a longer period of time, would develop a deeper understanding of challenges and potential evidence of cause and effect.
- Record attendance and gather reasons for non-participation, where possible, to inform programme. This could also include monitoring of external daily activity.
- It was clear that ensuring fun and variety of sport activity resulted in greater engagement, so this should be at the heart of planning and delivery of the club activity programme. Involve members and volunteers in planning of activity form and time, understanding different requirements and capacities, and enabling members to be challenged and stretched.
- Increase excursions, guest speakers and interaction with other Sporting Memories clubs.
- Build on local organisation partnerships and interaction to strengthen network and attraction of suitable groups and clubs in local community. This could also attract members of other clubs to the Replay club, and help to develop its sustainability.