

## Head 4 Health Female Cohort



June 2022

The Centre for Sport, Physical Education & Activity Research  
(*spear*)



## Context

The Wolves Foundation runs the Head 4 Health project in collaboration with the Premier League, the Professional Footballers Association and the City of Wolverhampton Council's Public Health Department. Head 4 Health aims to improve the physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing of adults within the local community.

This case study explores the experiences of the first female cohort in the Head 4 Health project. Data for this case study were obtained through observation of an alcohol awareness workshop attended by five female participants from the female cohort. The workshop was facilitated by the Service User Involvement Team (SUIT), based within Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council, and supported by Head 4 Health staff members Megan Walters and Georgina Slawinski.



## Delivery

The workshops for the female cohort are delivered at the Molineux Stadium. The stadium is a popular venue for the local community and is seen to offer a safe and relaxing environment for participants. Female participants who are football fans, or Wolves supporters, state that the stadium evokes positive associations and is seen as an inviting place to go to.

During the alcohol awareness workshops, female staff members from SUIT share personal stories of mental health issues and alcohol dependency. They explore triggers in their lives that impacted their mental wellbeing and led to them using alcohol as a coping mechanism and becoming addicted. They also describe the support mechanisms they have accessed to break their addiction. The discussion is then opened up to other participants who are encouraged to share their own experiences of alcohol or drug misuse.

The day's schedule also includes a physical activity, for example, table tennis after the SUIT session.

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*I like this group as people have different problems to me.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*For me, it's the opportunity to meet other women, because I don't get out as much anymore with my MS [Multiple Sclerosis]; this has been a good way for me to socialise.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*It's good that there are different topics each week, and you get to hear other people's stories that are different to your own.*

Head 4 Health Participant

## Insight

Participants praise the friendliness and the caring attitudes of Head 4 Health staff. They say staff make them feel welcome and valued. In support of this, they cite the example of being phoned by staff immediately after the referral to Head 4 Health. This early phone call is said to be an important driver of attendance at the first session. In contrast, a participant noted they had been contacted by a different organisation via Zoom; however, this method of being contacted was not perceived to be helpful. The more familiar method of a phone call or text was unanimously preferred.

All participants report feeling anxious before their first or taster session and subsequent sessions. Their anxiety has led them to occasionally miss sessions. The high levels of anxiety may be inferred from the admission that participants sometimes go all the way to the stadium and then go home instead of going into the session. Bad weather is also described as being a potential barrier in attending sessions.

Explaining the reasons for their attendance, participants say they are keen to meet other women and share experiences in a supportive environment. Head 4 Health is seen to give participants the chance to meet women with different struggles to their own and to hear alternative perspectives.

Some female participants describe themselves as Wolves fans, while others admit to having no interest in football. For the Wolves fans, the setting for the project, the Molineux stadium, is a strong attraction. Participants also appreciate the provision of refreshments and the comfort of the venue, which are seen to support creation of a conducive atmosphere for discussion.

Participants value the flexibility shown by Head 4 Health staff. For example, the planned table tennis activity following the alcohol awareness session was deferred as the group preferred to sit and chat instead of engaging in the activity. Female participants commented that the scheduling of physical activities within the sessions could be improved. They welcomed the idea of doing the activities but felt transitioning to doing something active when they were feeling relaxed wasn't easy.

Participants appreciate the prompt and easy access to the counselling service through Serenity. Through Head 4 Health, participants are able to receive counselling within a week of requesting it whereas previously they had to wait for six months or more. The ease of access to counselling is reported by participants to be one of the most beneficial aspects of Head 4 Health.

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*My ex-husband and I used to come here [the Molineux Stadium] with my son but we're split up now, so he just goes with him. So, for me, it was really nice coming back here as it brings back nice memories of when we used to come here all together.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*[The Counsellor from Serenity] she's really good. She totally understands everything I'm talking about and she's really helping me deal with things... She's by far the best counsellor I've had.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*When you've been talking in this environment, you get quite relaxed and it's hard then to do a physical activity...maybe the physical activity should be done separately.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*I've got no interest in football so it [the programme being set at the Molineux] means nothing to me.*

Head 4 Health Participant

## Impact

Attendees report a number of positive impacts from Head 4 Health.

Two participants with Multiple Sclerosis stated that Head 4 Health provided much-needed structure to their week. They explained how their condition impacted their ability to work and that they lacked routine. They felt the regularity and consistency of Head 4 Health sessions gave them both structure and a sense of purpose.

They also believed Head 4 Health sessions reduced their feelings of social isolation. They explained that, because they didn't work, their regular social circle didn't extend much further than their immediate family. One participant stated that she attends Head 4 Health specifically for the social interaction with other females, and she felt happy that the project helps her connect with others.

One of the participants reported an increase in her motivation to look after herself and described this as a key impact. She saw simple tasks like walking the dog and putting the dinner on as being small wins in terms of looking after herself which, prior to the project, she lacked the motivation to do. She now finds walking the dog beneficial for her mental health and pushes herself to do the things she needs to do daily. Head 4 Health, she says, has helped her understand that she needs to engage in daily life activities for good mental health.

A participant noted that one of the biggest benefits for her has been the counselling support through Serenity. She said she is improving in terms of opening up and expressing herself in a group environment. She reports significant benefit from the one-to-one discussions and describes the counselling support as a "lifeline at the end of the week".

*Having struggled with her mental health for several years since her Multiple Sclerosis diagnosis, Jo was referred to the Head 4 Health project by West Park Hospital (WPH). She said the social isolation and lack of routine through not being able to work impacted her mental wellbeing.*

*She was on a waiting list to receive counselling support at WPH but the wait time stretched for months. She had sought support from Healthy Minds but found the counselling insufficient. She also attended MS Mondays to seek support alongside other sufferers of MS but found the run-down church location it was delivered in depressing.*

*Jo said the Head 4 Health sessions help create a routine for her week and that she enjoys the comfortable environment it is delivered in. "Here it's absolutely lovely."*

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*This group is really good as it gives me a structure to my week. I've got somewhere to go, like-minded people I can talk to, and I've found it really good. Even talking just now, I'm coming out of my shell. It's good to know that today that's what I'll be doing.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*I'm definitely more motivated to start looking after myself better.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*I had to push myself to come today as I've been in a bad place this week...but to get up and go to a group, it's been wonderful...[I feel] a lot better than I did before I came. I was going to turn back and go home.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*[The counselling support through Serenity has] been a lifeline at the end of the week.*

Head 4 Health Participant

## Recommendations

### 1) Ease access to sessions

Consider how participants can be supported to overcome barriers to engagement by assisting with travel to the venue. Getting to sessions can be a major barrier for some participants. The journey to the venue, be it a walk, drive or public transport, is a time when anxiety can develop. If finance and logistics allow, consider using a minibus to pick up participants directly from their homes. This may help reduce anxiety and counter other barriers hindering attendance.



### 2) Separate physical and educational activities



Consider scheduling physical activities at different times of the week and as stand-alone sessions. Participants say they are more likely to engage in activities if they are the only things they are attending on the day. They would also welcome the opportunity for another session in the week. A separate physical activity session could provide additional focus and structure for participants needing this support.

### 3) Use familiar communication methods

While the pandemic and associated restrictions necessitated virtual contact, participants unanimously prefer face-to-face engagement. They also say they prefer phone calls or texts to video calls. Instigate in-person contact or opt for familiar methods of communication to ensure every interaction is as accessible and effective as possible.



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*I had to really push myself to come today as I've had a bad week.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*I've been [intending to go] to the art class and I've been outside, and I've gone home as I just couldn't cope with it.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*When you've been talking and you've had quite a mental session, I think to get motivated for the sports is a bit difficult.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*I'd like there to be another session during the week, so if this was for the activities it might work quite well.*

Head 4 Health Participant

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*Talking to someone on the phone is something we've always done. It's what we're used to. It feels more natural than speaking to a screen.*

Head 4 Health Participant

## About *spear*

The Centre for Sport, Physical Education & Activity Research (*spear*) is located within the Faculty of Science, Engineering & Social Sciences at Canterbury Christ Church University. *spear* undertakes a range of evidence-led analyses, from critical commentaries and reflections on current policy and practice, to commissioned research, evaluation and consultancy.

The Centre's research is funded by a range of national and international funders such as the International Olympic Committee, World Health Organisation, Terre des Hommes, Department of Health, Department for Education, Youth Sport Trust, Chance to Shine, Premiership Rugby, Sport Birmingham, parkrun UK and Sport England. Recent work has focused on sport, physical activity, health and wellbeing in schools and communities.

Research conducted by *spear* helps guide and inform public policy by contributing to the wider evidence base used by policy makers, providing a rationale for government and commercial investment, and steering programme improvements that enhance the experience of practitioners and participants.

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