

City to Sea

Summary of learning from Spirit of 2012
grant to Laureus / the Wave Project



Background

In 2018, Spirit of 2012 awarded a grant of £199,920 to the Laureus Foundation to fund the Wave Project's (TWP) *City to Sea* initiative. *City to Sea* takes young people from inner-city London and urban areas of Cornwall to the beach to experience the benefit of surf therapy. By creating inclusive surfing communities and using a combination of creative surfing and person-centred mentoring, the project aimed to transform participants' physical and mental wellbeing.

The project aimed to work with at least 540 disadvantaged young people aged 8-21 identified through TWP's referral partnerships with CAMHS and other statutory services. TWP intentionally targeted referrals of young people who are isolated and vulnerable because of complex needs such as mental health problems, disability and illness, with a target of 40% of participants self-identifying as disabled. Some may have experienced trauma and crisis, or face problems exacerbated by self-harm, challenging behaviour, eating disorders and/or other difficulties.

Participants took part in a six-week Surf Therapy course, combining outdoor physical exercise at sea with 1-to-1 mentoring. The sea and sport provide a restorative and sensory experience that motivates young people to learn new skills, overcome challenges and socialise. Course graduates could then elect to join a regular surf club coordinated by other young people, focused on social connectedness, communication and developing teamwork skills. Members of the surf club might then be invited to volunteer as peer mentors on future Surf Therapy courses, developing their leadership skills whilst sharing their experiences with current participants.

City to Sea aimed to achieve the following outcomes for participants:

- Improved wellbeing, self-esteem and resilience.
- Reduced social isolation and better, stronger relationships
- Improved emotional development, soft skills and improved life skills through volunteering
- Disabled people feel more able to participate in physical activity / sport
- Improved perceptions of disability

Outcomes

At a Glance

- 726 young people completed a 6-week surf therapy course, with 186 of these going on to join a surf therapy club.
- Just under 30% of participants were from BAME backgrounds, and approximately 40% were disabled young people.
- Average wellbeing improved by approximately 13%, 77% of respondents agreed that they 'feel better' and 81% 'had fun' after attending sessions.
- There were also improvements to self-esteem, with a higher proportion of participants reporting feeling good about themselves, and that there were things they can be proud of.
- Responses to surveys suggest an improvement to participants' resilience and willingness to try new things.
- Social connections also improved, with 87% of participants saying they'd made new friends as a result of the project.
- 45% of parents of participants felt their child demonstrated a more positive attitude, and 48% felt their child demonstrated better communication skills.

Participation

In total, 726 young people completed a 6-week surf therapy course against an original target of 540. 186 of these going on to join a surf therapy club, against an initial target of 200. Of these 726 young people, just under 30% were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, and approximately 40% were disabled young people.

Wellbeing

Across the three ONS4 wellbeing measurements used, average wellbeing improved by approximately 13%¹, which is an impressive change. 77% of respondents agreed that they 'feel

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<i>ONS measure</i>	Baseline average	Endline average	%age change
<i>Satisfaction</i>	6.27 (n=407)	7.05 (n=329)	↑12.4%
<i>Worthwhile</i>	6.22 (n=407)	6.91 (n=329)	↑11.1%
<i>Happiness</i>	6.15 (n=407)	7.05 (n=330)	↑14.6%

better' and 81% 'had fun' after attending sessions. Qualitative evidence supports this data, with staff and volunteers observing young people are more communicative, will take risks, cope with challenging situations better and seem visibly more positive/happy.

"I did not expect to see this – One happy proud boy walking back from an hour of surfing and wave bouncing! An hour previous I was sure he wouldn't make it – in a changing room on our fourth wetsuit change with extreme sensory overload, intense feelings, along with silent frustrated tears, we thought we might go home. Fast forward an hour and our son is smiling, laughing and going back for more."

- *Parent/carer of a participant*

"I feel that all my worries disappear when I'm on my bodyboard. It is the place I feel most relaxed."

- *Participant*

Self-esteem

There were also improvements to self-esteem, with a higher proportion of participants reporting feeling good about themselves², and that there were things they can be proud of³. Many young people comment on the instructors and volunteers who help them at the sessions, and it seems that the relationships that are built and the investment the volunteers make in the young people are key in helping them to develop their confidence and feel better about themselves through positive encouragement and support and non-judgement.

"E has benefitted so hugely; her confidence and self esteem have been so positively and noticeably impacted by her attendance at the sessions, and it has been the highlight of her week for the past month. It has also greatly supported her transition and reintegration into school."

- *Parent/carer of a participant*

² 71% (n=495) of participants responded 'quite a lot' or 'all of the time' to the statement "I've been feeling good about myself", compared with 65% before the project (n=543).

³ 61% (n=435) responded positively to the statement "I think there are things I can be proud of" after taking part in the project (n=435), compared to 49% (n=529) before the project.

"P looked the happiest I've seen him in years. It's boosted his confidence and self esteem. At school the teachers reported a noticeable rise in confidence, he's putting his hand up in class and he stood up for himself against a bully. It's helped him grow and show him that he can achieve things he never thought possible."

- *Parent/carer of a participant*

Resilience and willingness to try new things

Responses to surveys suggest an improvement to participants' resilience⁴ and willingness to try new things⁵. It was observed that young people benefited from the encouragement and feelings of success, which helped them feel able to keep trying. When asked what they liked best about the Wave Project one young person responded, *"The volunteers and instructors because they help and challenge me and help me laugh it off when it goes wrong."*

Social connection

Social connections also improved, with 87% of participants saying they'd made new friends as a result of the project. Key to this was the welcoming, supportive community provided by TWP, trust in the trained adults present, and relationships built with peers whilst participating together in adrenaline-inducing activities. The grouping of young people also allowed bonding for those experiencing similar issues in life. Anecdotally, TWP received frequent positive feedback in relation to the relationships built during participants' time with peers and volunteers.

"Darcie has been sleeping better and left us for a sleep over at her friends last night which she would of never done before so a massive step for her."

- *Parent/carer of a participant*

"The big thing is she has made friends out there in the world."

- *Parent/carer of a participant*

"I realised I've got social skills and that I can make friends easier than I thought!"

- *Participant*

⁴ A series of survey questions intended to measure participants' resilience were asked at the beginning and end of the project, including the question 'I tend to bounce back quickly when things go wrong in my life', and 'I've been feeling calm'.

⁵ Responses to the question 'I like trying new things' showed a 13.9% increase from pre- to post-course

Parent/carer observations on positive attitude and communication

As well as surveying young people participating in the project, TWP also asked parents/carers to answer some questions after the course designed to discover whether they had noticed change in their children. In their responses, 45% felt their child demonstrated a more positive attitude, and 48% felt their child demonstrated better communication skills. One referral partner said, *"G was smiling when he arrived and his Mum expressed how G was a "different boy" following his first session. She said she couldn't remember the last time that he had smiled and been as happy as he was after his initial session."*

Disabled participation

Many parents of disabled participants reported that their child felt more able to participate in physical activity and sport, and felt included within their Wave Project peer group. One said, *"[Young person] has chosen to be more active and has bought herself a skateboard. She was uncertain and fearful on being in the sea and is now much more positive about the sea, surfing and playing in the sea."*

Learning

Evaluators of *City to Sea* conducted interviews with participants, their parents/carers, TWP staff, and referral partners, and identified learning from these. Some of these are outlined below.

Inclusive sessions benefit all

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the inclusivity of sessions had a positive impact on all involved. Evaluators found this enabled young people to learn everyone is not the same and they each face different challenges - physical, mental and emotional - and these can sit alongside one another in the group. The evaluators noted that successful development looked different for different people and recommended it should be celebrated equally. *"A young person might not engage in conversation at all at the beginning of a course, but by the end be willing to answer questions when asked. This is just as important as a young person who by the end of the six weeks actively seeks to make conversation and interact off their own initiative with their peers and volunteers."*

Key to success was equipping staff and volunteers with the skills to work with people with a variety of needs, enabling them to feel confident working with any young person.

Developing trust with referral partners

Referral partners were very positive about their involvement with *City to Sea*, and one said, “there’s nothing like the Wave Project.” Trust in the Wave Project was key, both in their ability to deliver outcomes and to develop positive relationships with clients. Working in a sensitive way and giving one-to-one support were important, and referral partners had confidence that TWP would follow up and develop trust with the clients to help them take part and get to sessions.

“The culture of confidence and communication gives voice to young people. I think we will get our young people to talk about the barriers they had and show how that changed, like...I was really scared at first etc.’ so that the other young people can identify with them and relate to them.”

- *Referral partner*

“Travelling from City to Sea is not a barrier, it is an asset”: Connection to new places and the environment, and a sense of novelty and adventure

City to Sea involved transporting clients from inner-city London to a beach on the south coast to participate in sea and shoreline activities. It took effort to organise travel, but the idea of visiting a new place and the excitement of going to the sea was a huge draw for both young people and for volunteers.

“It is a 2-hour drive, but it is not a chore for the kids. Everyone loves it... They forge friendships on the bus. The bus provides a space for the children to chill.”

- *Volunteer*

Courses often combined both city and sea experiences, as sometimes bad weather necessitated a session in London. In both cases, there was a sense of ‘connection to other places’, either through travelling to the sea or visiting new places within the city, such as the lakeside surf club.

Many participants had never visited the beach, and some were fascinated by the new sensory elements of sea, waves, seaweed and sand. As one referral partner noted, “*Getting their faces under the water is amazing for their confidence.*”

Evaluators noted that the sense of novelty and adventure associated with these new locations – described as “a sanctuary, and special place, away from the norm” – was very valuable to the project, and that referral partners saw this as one of the main draws for the young people. The travel experience itself was seen as a transformative achievement: *“Travelling to the sea led to a sense of ‘transformation’ in young people, and a journey, in their imagination and expression. On the journey home in the bus, young people talked about and drew sea creatures, both real and imaginary.”*