
Active Families – Participant Experience

An independent qualitative evaluation

A report by Tiller Research Ltd on behalf of Stride Active

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Section 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background

Active Families is a programme that has been delivered by Stride Active (Herefordshire) CIC since October 2021. First developed as a short term project to support adults, children or the whole family to re-engage with or start physical activity following the Covid-19 pandemic, the programme has evolved to become an established package of tailored support to enable families to become more physically active.

Funded by Herefordshire Public Health, Active Families works through schools to reach families. An experienced co-ordinator provides 1:1 support to help families be more active, either at home or in the community. Typically provided over a 12-week period, this 1:1 support draws on evidence-based behaviour change mechanisms including motivational interviewing.

Participating families are gifted an activity bag that includes a range of equipment to use at home or in a local park, along with ideas to stimulate creative use of the resources, and charts to record activity. Further support is provided to identify physical activity opportunities within the local community that meet the interests and needs of individual family members and/or the family group, and to enable families to establish and maintain new physical activity habits.

1.2 Evaluation Overview

Stride Active commissioned Tiller Research Ltd to undertake an evaluation of the outcomes and impact of Active Families. This includes:

- Biannual reviews of data collected by the programme team in order to understand the outcomes for participants and impact of the programme;
- Quantitative analysis of impact measures relating to participation in physical activity;
- Quantitative analysis of adult and child wellbeing measures;
- Qualitative analysis of case note data;
- Semi-structured interviews with a sample of adult participants.

The evaluation provides evidence to inform and support the programme's ongoing cycle of learning and development, in addition to providing evidence to demonstrate the contribution that the programme has made to increasing the levels of physical activity and wellbeing of families in Herefordshire.

1.3 This Report

In addition to the ongoing evaluation activities, Tiller Research undertook a one-off round of interviews with a sample of Active Families participants. These were designed to explore the participant experience in greater depth, and to provide independent validation of qualitative themes identified from programme case notes. This report provides a standalone qualitative review of these interviews.

Section 2 – Methodology

2.1 Participants

A sample of adults who had participated in Active Families were invited to take part in a 1:1 interview. All had taken part in Active Families during 2025, and had completed their 12-week 'sign-off' appointment before the end of December 2025.

Prospective interviewees were given an information sheet and consent form that outlined the purpose of the research and intended use of the data, and provided information on the right to withdraw. Interviewees were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research before finalising their decision to participate.

Interviews were undertaken with seven individuals, all of whom were parents of one more children who had participated in Active Families, and six of whom had participated themselves.

2.2 Telephone Interviews

The external evaluator undertook 1:1 telephone interviews with participants between 20th January and 13th February 2026.

Interviews were semi-structured, covering topics including motivation to participate, the experience of participating in Active Families, changes that were experienced for individuals and/or the family unit as a result of taking part in Active Families, and suggestions for changes that would improve the programme.

Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed near verbatim before analysis.

2.3 Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed and coded to identify key themes. Codes were identified from the data, and were not pre-determined. Quirkos 3 qualitative analysis software was used to allocate, sort and group assigned codes.

Separate analysis was undertaken of the case notes of 193 adult participants who had completed their 12-week 'sign-off' appointment. Codes from interviews and case notes were compared to check for consistency, and combined to develop, refine and confirm the reported themes.

Section 3 – Impact of Active Families

Interviewees were asked to identify any changes that were experienced by individuals and/or the family unit as a result of taking part in Active Families. This section outlines the key themes that were identified by participants relating to the positive impact of the Active Families programme.

3.1 Increased Physical Activity

All interviewees identified that their children were more physically active since taking part in Active Families. In addition, most adults reported increasing their own levels of physical activity. This was the case for all adults who had wanted to increase their physical activity when signing up to the programme, and also for some of those whose initial reason for participating was focussed on increasing their children's level of physical activity. In most cases, interviewees reported that increased levels of physical activity had been maintained or even increased since sign-off from Active Families.

Informal physical activity

The Activity Bag was highlighted as the starting point for the reported increase in physical activity, helping both children and adults in the family to re-think their attitudes towards physical activity. In most cases, this initially involved engaging with fun, informal activities using the equipment and activity suggestions provided in the bag.

An initial focus on informal activity promoted the fun aspects of physically active games. This was identified as an effective means of avoiding previously experienced resistance to participating. Enjoying active games was viewed as creating a foundation on which to build ongoing increases in physical activity participation:

"They realise you don't necessarily have to run around to be active, you can be throwing things, you can be jumping up and down over things, you can still not have the screen to have fun."

"They were getting more active that wasn't forced upon them, they were choosing to be active and be a bit more social with it."

"Just bits in it like the cones, balls, it also had like some paperwork with it where you could go out for a walk and tick off the items off the paper, which was a really fun activity to do."

Progression to organised physical activity

Several interviewees noted how, following engagement with informal activities stimulated by the Activity Bag, their children had become motivated to participate in traditional sports activities. The bag was credited with having introduced new experiences and increasing motivation to explore other physical activity opportunities:

"She joined a football team, and maybe that was the start of something there... I mean she definitely didn't kick a ball before this bag. So it did make me think that's great, yeah, so I looked online and she joined [a girl's football team]. She does that every week, every Wednesday, and match days on a Sunday, so she's a super-active little girl now."

Changed habits incorporating increased utility exercise

Increased walking and cycling were noted, both as a family leisure activity, and as newly developed active travel choices:

"I think just walking a little bit more to and from school. So we wouldn't take the car at all now, it's always just walking, scooting, taking our bikes. And like my little girl she'll pick up leaves, she'll pick up sticks, and I think it's maybe because we did the sheet back in the autumn. So it's just lots more walking, keeping active and staying happy."

3.2 Children's Social Development

Interviewees noted how the Activity Bag had supported the development of their children's interpersonal skills. Improved relationships with siblings and peers were often noted, with the bag identified as providing important motivation to seek out positive relationships with other children. This was identified both as a positive impact of Active Families, and also as a mechanism for increasing and maintaining physical activity levels. Previously, disputes or disagreements would result in games ending and physical activity ceasing. In contrast, the resources and tools within the bag enabled children to work together to find solutions, resulting in both improved social skills and increased physical activity:

"My kids share a lot better now, since joining it."

"That bag has given him things where he'll seek out friends to join in with what he's doing, and that literally started with that bag, because I had it there and I was able to get little things out and work out a game, and he realised actually it's more fun when other people join in."

"We had some bean bags and cones, out of everything they were their favourite. They were throwing bean bags, and obviously my littlest is much shorter than the other two so she struggled quite a lot, so they worked out between them that if they had a different cone, put it in a different place, they could all stand at their own cone and still throw something. So it gave them a visual representation that, yes, my youngest is smaller but she can still play the game."

"My oldest is very much 'follow the rules, this what you do'; whereas my son is 'I'm not following the rules, don't tell me what to do'. So they're very, very different. I think to be fair they both learnt that actually if they follow the rules, they can then change them slightly to a way where they are both happy, they can play the game in a way that isn't quite following the rules but it is to a certain extent. We'll follow this rule, but this rule we don't need to do."

"I do think they've got a lot closer, it's not your game, my game- it's OUR game. And they'll play the game and if it doesn't quite work for them, they can together then actually say 'I didn't like playing it like this, shall we try it this way'... So I think it's taught them that yes following the rules is OK, but sometimes you need to change them depending on who is taking part."

3.3 Strengthened Family Relationships

Interviewees felt that playing games and getting active together had brought members of the family closer. In addition to the improved sibling relationships noted above, several parents noted that their own relationship with their children had improved. Examples included increased participation in family activities, more positive time spent together as a family, and parents reporting a better understanding of their children:

"To be fair I've realised they're a lot more creative than I ever thought they were. I think it's a case of I've realised they are a lot more capable than they let on that they are."

"I'm physically disabled... With the kids, I couldn't actually do stuff with them. It got me a bit more motivated to try and join in, so they would come up with something and if I couldn't do it they would go 'it's OK you can do it this way' and stuff like that. And it sort of brought us together a bit more. It was good."

"To just be able to do an activity with them, because me and my husband both found a lot of the time that they would play games but they didn't want us to play with them, or we didn't understand what they were trying to play and they would get frustrated coz we didn't understand what they were doing; but with this there were instructions, they could follow the instructions, we do it together, and then they would then change the rules and make up their own rules, and make up their own game, but we would understand what they were doing at that point. So more of a sort of get the whole family involved together."

"They actually enjoy doing little things now, so it's helped with some routines in the house. Some of the ideas were silly things like pairing up socks and throwing them into the cones. Well actually, they're now doing some jobs around the house, which is a win! So they're taking part in more things around the house because the bits in the bag made it fun, it wasn't a chore, it was game."

3.4 Improved Wellbeing

Interviewees reported a general improvement in wellbeing for them and their children. The improved family and peer relationships and increased levels of physical activity reported above were identified as having led to improvements in mood, improved sleep, and the adoption of healthier habits, such as reduced screen-time:

“My older daughter, she’s more ‘OK I don’t want to watch telly today actually’”

“They are more settled, more ready for bed, I’m more relaxed.”

“I sometimes think maybe they do need to sit down after school and just relax and watch telly because they’ve had a busy day at school. Whereas they’ve gone, no actually, they’re having more fun doing this. And I feel like they’re more settled in the evening as well if they are more active after school.”

3.5 Impact Summary

Interviewees reported a wide range of positive impacts as a result of participating in Active Families. The primary motivation of participants was to increase their and their children’s ideas for, and/or level of participation in, physical activity. This was achieved, with increased levels of informal physical activity reported by all interviewees, along with several reporting increased participation in organised physical activity as a direct result of taking part in the programme.

However, greater emphasis was placed by interviewees on the wider holistic impacts experienced by their family. The development of children’s social skills was widely reported, leading to improved family and peer relationships. These impacts, combined with the maintenance of a more active lifestyle and reduced screen time, were credited with improving the wellbeing of children and adults alike.

Section 4 – Enablers of Change

Interviewees were asked to reflect on their experience of participating in Active Families, and identify the aspects of the programme that enabled the changes identified in Section 3 to be achieved. This section outlines the key themes identified relating to participant views on these enablers of change.

4.1 The Active Families Activity Bag

Families participating in the programme are gifted an activity bag that includes a range of equipment to use at home or in a local park. The bag also contains activity ideas, and encouragement to make creative use of the resources. The novelty and portability of the bag were identified as key factors in gaining the interest of children.

The bag was perceived as something new and different, which generated interest and excitement. The items provided enough variety to remain fresh and exciting, but simple enough to be able to start an activity quickly before interest waned. Several interviewees also noted that the bag was easily to transport, which allowed it to be taken to different places, including on holiday. For younger children and neurodiverse children in particular, additional benefits were identified from the comfort and reassurance of being able to take a familiar resource to unfamiliar locations:

“From the get-go my kids were just like ‘it’s something new’, it’s in a bag, they loved the fact it was in a bag and they could carry it places. For about three, four, maybe longer, weeks, this bag came everywhere with us.”

“The kids were all like ‘what have you got, what have you got?’ As soon as I put it down, they were in it!”

“Some things, some games you have you can only use for one activity, but we were able to use all these things [in the Activity Bag] for so many different things.”

“It just worked on so many levels. You didn’t have to think too hard about it, it all came in the bag, it was just grab something out, quick idea, and it worked because it was simple enough for them to use their imagination to see past it.”

“They go to their dad’s for holidays and weekend, and she used the bag quite a bit over there and then brought it home.”

“We took the bag to Wales when we went on holiday and we had just so many different things, and it’s also a resource where it’s small enough that you can just put it in your suitcase, and take it away with you, which helped because I didn’t have to bring a thousand different things, I just brought this little bag and for a week it kept them happy!”

4.2 Creativity and Imagination

Interviewees identified an increase in their child’s creativity as a result of participation in Active Families, with particular reference made to creating imaginative games using the Activity Bag. The flexibility of the resources provided enabled items to be used in multiple ways, which encouraged creativity. This ensured children remained engaged, and also helped to promote positive social interaction and problem solving. Although physical activity was increased, this was often identified as a by-product of the fun and enjoyment that families were getting from participating together in games that they had created:

“They would come up with their own ideas. The bag gave me a list of ideas that would be helpful, and some days the kids would come up with their own ideas of what they would like to use the items for.”

"We found quite a few of the activities they were like multiple choice, and sort of gave her the chance to sort of use her imagination and turn things to how she likes to do things, but in a different way. She really enjoyed it."

"Quite often I just put the bag out in the middle of the floor, and go 'right we've got these things what can we do with them?'... because it's their idea, it's then fun."

"I showed them what they could play, and they were outside all the time. They were making up their own ideas of different games to play themselves. They weren't arguing! So yeah, it was really good, they enjoyed it."

4.3 Inclusivity

Interviewees identified a number of areas in which Active Families reduced common barriers to physical activity, including cost and accessibility. The bag provided a range of inexpensive activities, with additional support provided to identify low cost activities in the local community. The flexibility and adaptability of the bag contents were highlighted. This was identified as being particularly beneficial for participants who were neurodiverse, were physically disabled, or those with long-term health conditions, as activities could be easily adapted to enable everyone to participate:

"Just to get the family a bit more active, and just to give me a few ideas on how I could do that that's not going to cost me loads of money."

"It's very inclusive, you can change things to meet every situation you are in. Yes, they are kind of the rules but we can adapt it."

"My daughter has ADHD so it takes a lot to occupy her as she's constantly on the go. So having new activities... that really helped coz it was new things."

"My son is not the most motivated child; I don't know if it's the autism but he's not very active and trying to get him active can be quite a difficult thing. So I thought anything that could give me new ideas, coz nine times out of ten I get stuck on what to do. I've tried something once, they won't do it, and then I can't think of anything else... [My children are] now playing together. Being on the spectrum they don't like each other's company very much a lot of the time, but when it came to the things in the bag they would actually seek each other out to come and see what I've done or see what I'm using that for."

"My older two are asthmatic, so trying to get them to understand you can still run around and have fun."

4.4 On-going Contact

The support provided by the Active Families coordinator was critical to the engagement of some families. Initial engagement built trust with families, which supported people to take the first step to trialling activities. Celebration of personal success motivated participants to maintain activities. Contact throughout the 12-week programme enabled challenges to be explored and solutions to be identified, including 'activity top-ups' to freshen up the bag and renew excitement if this had started to wane. The interpersonal skills and experience of the Active Families coordinator were an important enabler of success:

"It was nice that [the coordinator] kept in contact and gave us a call every couple of months to see if there was anything else she could do. She dropped a few paper activity packs into school for [my daughter] at various times, that was nice that she kept checking how she was getting on with the bits she was given... I think the contact there was really good."

"[The coordinator] was always asking if I needed any more games, or asking if everything was OK, she would follow up with phone calls to see how everything was going and how the kids were getting on. So there was a lot of feedback going on."

"[The coordinator] would ring me every so often, just to check in that things were OK. We got bored of the activities we had to start with, so she did send us some more in the post which I think was quite good. That was a good idea as it got to the point where they would just go 'we've done this, I don't want to do this anymore'... So we got some more before Christmas, and I think actually that kept it ongoing."

"I thought [the coordinator] was really friendly, really bubbly, really nice, approachable."

"[The coordinator] was so approachable, she always made it a pleasure to be a part of it."

"A big thank you to [the coordinator] for being so kind and patient and really friendly."

4.5 Suggested Improvements

Interviewees had very few suggestions for how their Active Families experience could have been improved. Suggestions that were made centred on extending existing elements of the programme, for example by including additional activities in the bag or developing an app to track progress in addition to paper charts:

"It would have been nice to have had a few more little bits. But the fact that I had the bag it did give me ideas, so it was great and I'm grateful for that."

"I suppose the only thing I would say is like a few more regular games maybe like each month, maybe like a seasonal bag, like an autumn and winter active bag and a spring/summer active bag, something like that I say would be good."

"[Maybe] having an app attached to it so I can tick off what I've done with the kids, that would be a good thing to do, maybe different stages of activeness."

4.6 Enablers Summary

Interviewees identified the 12-week period of ongoing support and the flexibility and novelty of the Activity Bag to be key enablers of the positive impacts experienced as a result of participating in Active Families. The design of the resources provided in the bag promoted creativity and imagination, which was a key factor in the successful engagement of participants. The flexibility of the resources was particularly beneficial for those who experience additional barriers to physical activities as a result of disability, neurodiversity and/or long-term health conditions.

Section 5 – Concluding Remarks

5.1 Key Findings

Overall, Active Families is viewed positively by participants, and is identified as having led to significant and sustained changes. These include increased physical activity, children's social development, and an improvement in the perceived wellbeing of children and adults.

Although the primary motivation to participate was typically related to increased physical activity, participants placed more focus on the wider outcomes they had experienced. In part this was because outcomes related to social development, family relationships and wellbeing were not necessarily anticipated by participants, but also because these holistic outcomes are highly valued. Of particular note is the perceived inter-relation of improved social skills, wellbeing and participation in physical activity. All three elements were identified both as an enabler and a result of the other two: improved social skills and wellbeing led to increased participation in physical activity; increased physical activity provided the opportunity to improve social skills and wellbeing.

The support provided by Active Families, and in particular the highly valued resources of the Activity Bag, enabled children to successfully develop both social skills and physical activity. This provided an effective mechanism that enabled family members to become more active in a way they found enjoyable and wanted to continue, leading to new habits that delivered sustained improvements to wellbeing and sustained increases in levels of physical activity. The novelty and flexibility of the Activity Bag was identified as being a key enabler of success, in particular for those with additional needs who had previously experienced barriers to participating in physical activity. The provision of support over an extended period of time was also a key enabler of change, as it provided support to successfully overcome initial challenges that were experienced.

5.2 Recommendations

Explore opportunities to sustain the programme

Active Families has successfully delivered effective support to enable families to become more physically active, and has improved the wellbeing of children and adults. Moreover, the available evidence indicates that these outcomes are typically sustained beyond the period of engagement with the programme, demonstrating ongoing impact from the fixed-term support. This demonstrates that the programme is an efficient use of resources with potential to extend its overall impact. Therefore, it is recommended that priority is given to identifying funding to extend the programme beyond its current funding period.

Consider developing communications to promote social and wellbeing outcomes

Active Families has been marketed primarily as a physical activity programme. However, it has delivered significant holistic outcomes, which are highly valued by participants. This may present an opportunity to further develop messaging for partner schools and/or participants that highlights the full range of positive outcomes and motivations to participate.

Develop a Theory of Change

This evaluation has identified an inter-relation of improved social skills, wellbeing and levels of physical activity. This is central to the success of Active Families, and makes an important contribution to understanding the mechanisms of effective support. To formalise and disseminate an Active Families Theory of Change would enable this learning to be used to shape other support, and so extend the positive impact of the programme.