



September 2025

# Improving our exercise referral pathway.

A report on activities and learning

Prepared by:

**NIHR** | Health Determinants  
Research Collaboration  
Blackpool

**Blackpool Council**  
ACTIVE BLACKPOOL

# Contents.

- 03:** Summary
- 04:** Background on the Blackpool Health Determinants Research Collaboration
- 05:** Background on Active Blackpool
- 06:** About the Workshops
- 07:** About the Service Evaluation
- 08:** Main Findings of Workshops and NHS Service Evaluation
- 09:** Recommendations
- 10:** Contacts and Authors

**Funding:** This is independent research funded and carried out by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) Blackpool. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) Blackpool, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

**Acknowledgement:** The authors would like to thank all individuals who participated in this study. Without your contribution, this work would not have been possible.



# Summary.

This report outlines the insights and findings drawn from a series of research workshops and service evaluation delivered by the Blackpool Health Determinants Research Collaboration and Active Blackpool. This work took place between October 2024 and July 2025.



## Background on the Blackpool Health Determinants Research Collaboration

The NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) Blackpool is part of the NIHR and hosted by Blackpool Council. Known locally as Blackpool Researching Together, HDRC Blackpool is a partnership between Blackpool Council, Lancaster University, Blackpool Teaching Hospitals, the voluntary sector and the local community.

## Background on Active Blackpool

Active Blackpool is the Leisure Services arm of Blackpool Council, dedicated to promoting healthier lifestyles and improving wellbeing across the community. The department delivers a wide range of inclusive physical activity programmes, manages leisure facilities and supports targeted health initiatives for residents of all ages and abilities. Through strategic partnerships and evidence-based interventions, Active Blackpool plays a key role in reducing health inequalities and encouraging long-term behaviour change, while ensuring accessible and welcoming environments for everyone.



# About The Workshops.

For this project we organised three workshops specifically focusing on developing exercise referral schemes.

Participants included were users of the current exercise referral scheme, users who had started the scheme but had left, and staff who worked on the exercise referral scheme including gym instructors, leisure managers, and public health consultants who had experience in commissioning and working on the scheme.

During the workshops, we explored ways we could improve the exercise referral scheme with emphasis on developing a user-friendly scheme that better suits the needs of people and encourages participation. We aimed to explore the barriers and facilitators of the current scheme offer and explore other schemes around the country, additionally we explored what an exercise referral scheme might look like in an ideal world.

## Format of the Workshops

We conducted three in-person workshops. The workshops had different content but all used creative methods. Participants were divided into tables of 4-6 people and 4 facilitators helped support and guide discussions.



### Workshop 1



#### Activity 1

Mapping barriers to the current exercise referral scheme



#### Activity 2

Mapping facilitators to the current exercise referral scheme



#### Activity 3

Priority mapping a new aim of the scheme

### Workshop 2



#### Activity 1

What do you like about other schemes across the country



#### Activity 2

What does the perfect exercise referral scheme offer

### Workshop 3 Feedback of findings to participants



A total of **20 people** attended the workshops.

**9**

Users of the exercise referral scheme

**11**

Staff of the exercise referral scheme

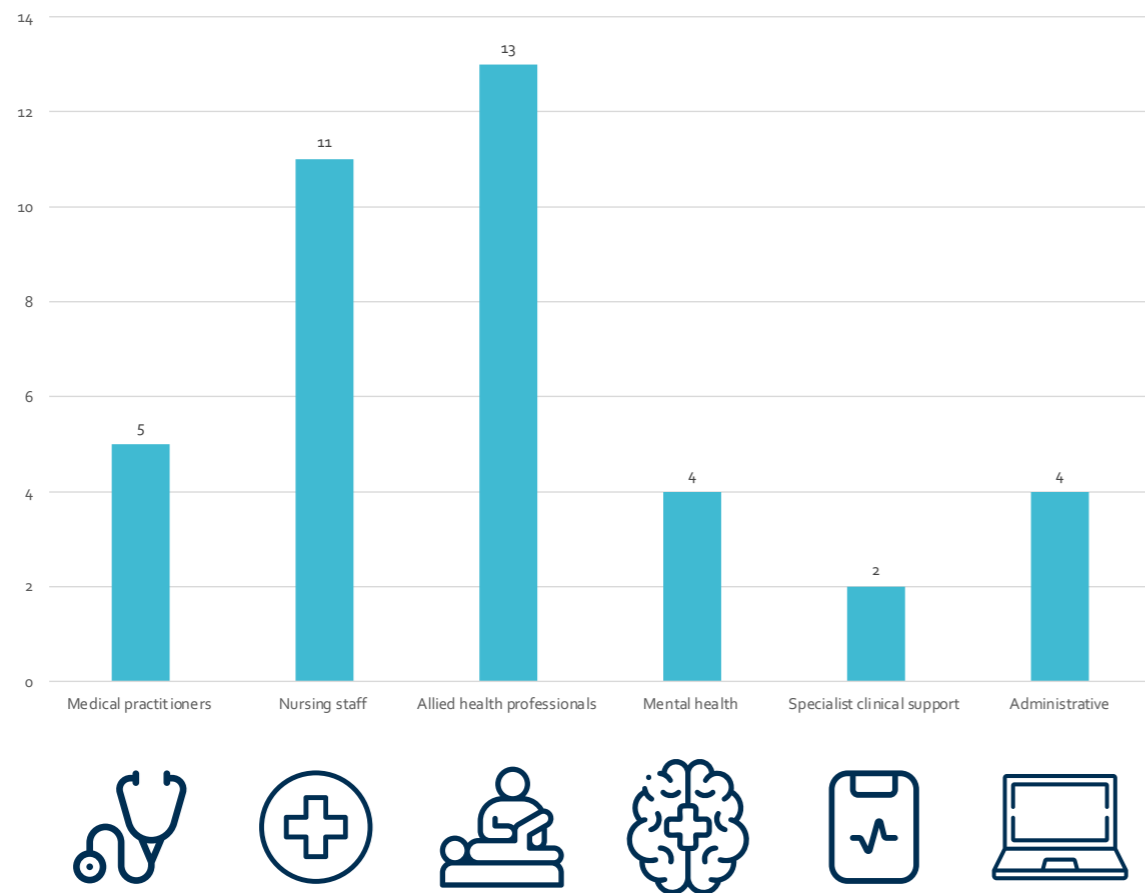
A thematic analysis of the workshop materials was completed. Five themes were developed from the analysis, which depict the exercise referral journey including navigating the system, communication, personalisation, delivery and what comes next.

# About the service evaluation.

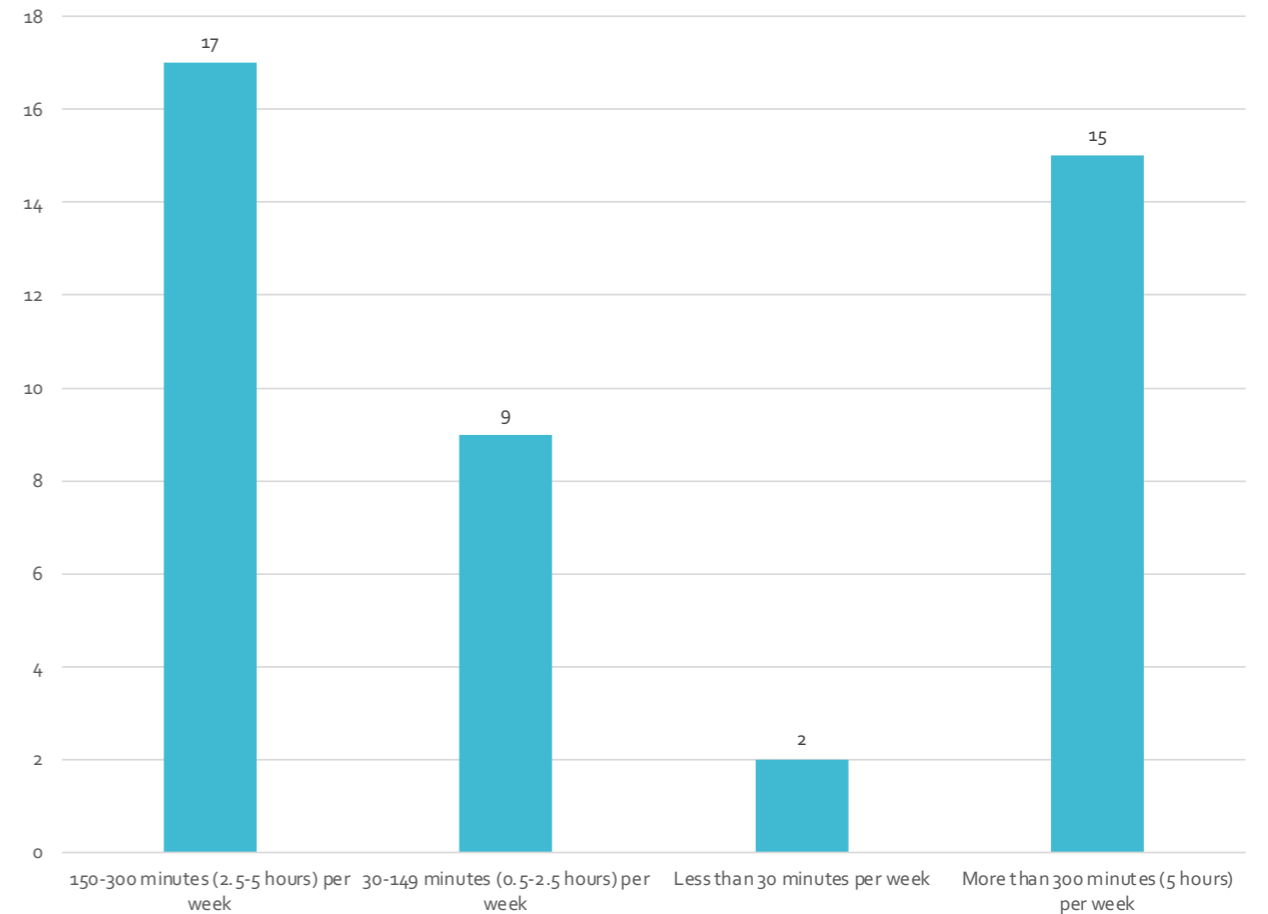
A questionnaire was purposively designed and was sent out to NHS staff whose roles involved referring patients to the program, including general practitioners (GPs), practice nurses, physiotherapists, clinical nurse specialists (e.g., for diabetes, respiratory conditions or cardiac rehab), health and wellbeing coaches, social prescribing workers, community mental health nurses and dietitians. The questionnaire included 21 questions and the purpose was to gather feedback about the current exercise referral scheme. The questions included collecting views about the general overview of the scheme, the referral process, what the scheme offered, and collaboration between NHS and Active Blackpool.



## Breakdown of roles



## PA of staff





# Main Findings of Workshops.



## Navigating the system

This theme describes some of the practical challenges that both users and staff faced in accessing and progressing through the exercise referral scheme. This included structural inequalities such as time, cost, and transport. The exercise referral process was also described as not straightforward, with users of the scheme being directed to multiple different contacts, a process described as “tennis”.



***“Us old folk can’t use public transport until 9:30, unless we pay for it”***

***“I struggled getting on the referral team, it was a bit of back and forth, so I contacted the council, then I need to contact the doctor, then I needed to contact the council”***



## Communication

This theme describes some of the challenges around communication and the solutions for preferred methods of communication. This included technology being seen as a barrier for older users, with some afraid of receiving messages off unknown numbers in fear of them being a scam. There was a preference to receive communication off a health professional and to receive information about the benefits of completing the scheme and what comes next.



***“People of your age have been brought up with this, but when you get to your twilight years, its not easy to find your way around”***

***“I’d want communication of a health professional”***



## Personalisation

This theme captures how participants wanted tailored experiences. Participants suggested they would like to have a questionnaire to evaluate their progress as well as an adapted training plan that reflected their needs. Service users valued that people in the classes were a likeminded group with a shared ability. For staff, it was essential that users had the ability to choose their own exercises and goals.



***“I actually really like the exercises, its not too difficult, but its not too easy. Its just right”***

***“Its your party, because you’re paying, you’re the one participating and its for your enjoyment”***



## Delivery

This theme captures how a sense of community was an important factor for participants. Having the opportunity to socialise and participate in non-exercise related activities was seen as just as important as the physical activities. Participants also wanted flexibility in the scheme; suggesting home-based exercise activities or outdoor exercise classes. Participants also felt that regular check-ins were important to maintain engagement.



***"I'm actually more inclined to attend knowing that certain staff are actually working, because you build rapport with them"***

***"I think it would be good to have home-based and online options aswell"***



# Main Findings NHS service evaluation.



## What comes next?

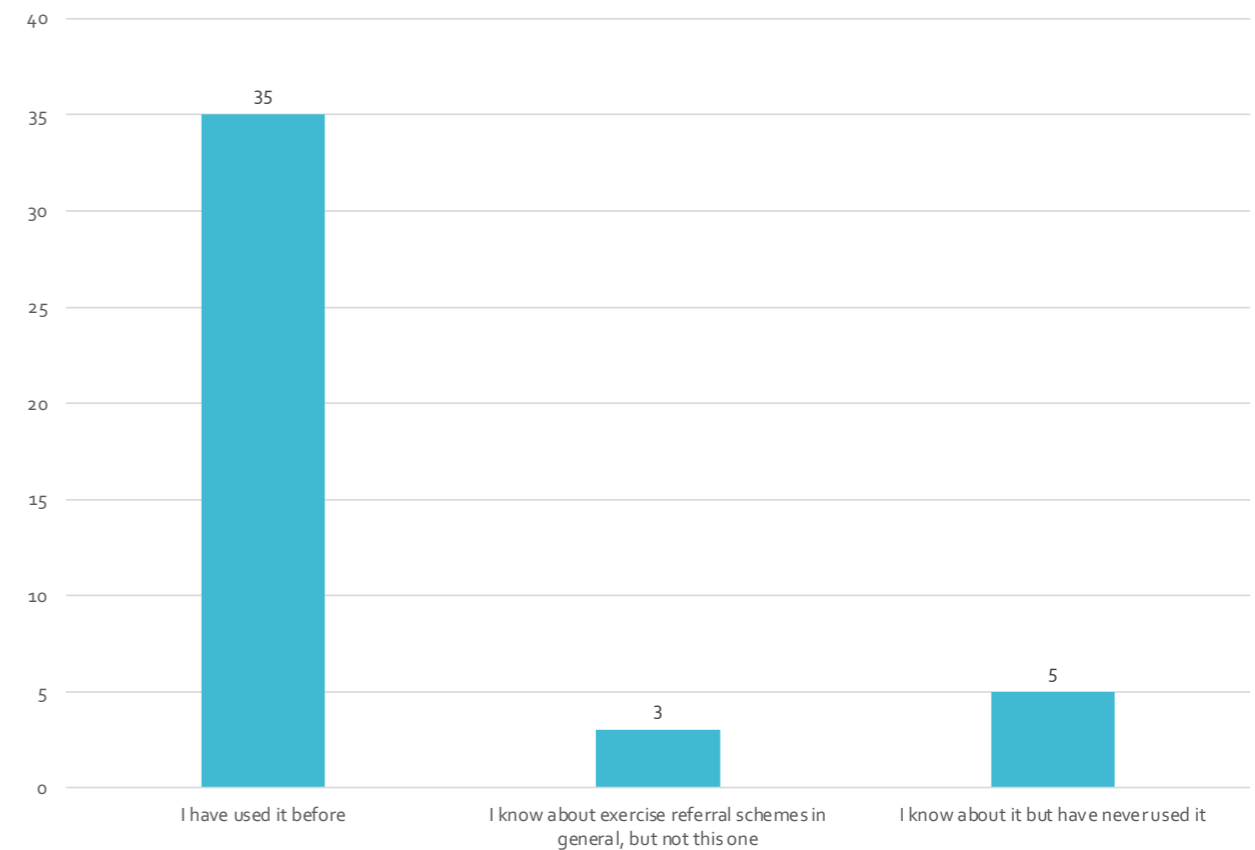
There was mixed discussion about how to celebrate participants achievements at the end of the scheme, but participants agreed there should be some form of recognition. It was suggested to provide feedback back to the original referrer or having a check-in to reflect on what their "future self" might look like. Participants even suggested that after reaching the end of the scheme they would like ongoing support in the form of social activities.



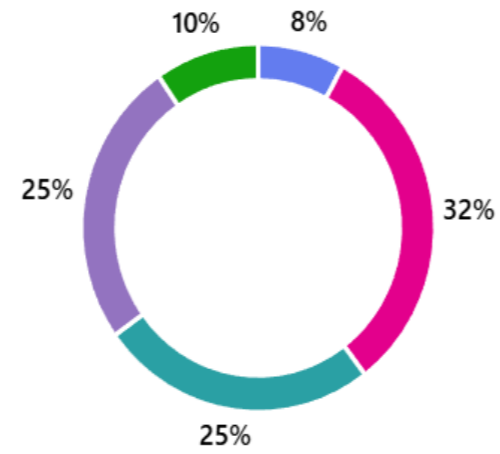
***"It doesn't mean the end of the programme, it just means they've reached a milestone"***

***"We'd like support to continue, continued social activities, and continue check-ins"***

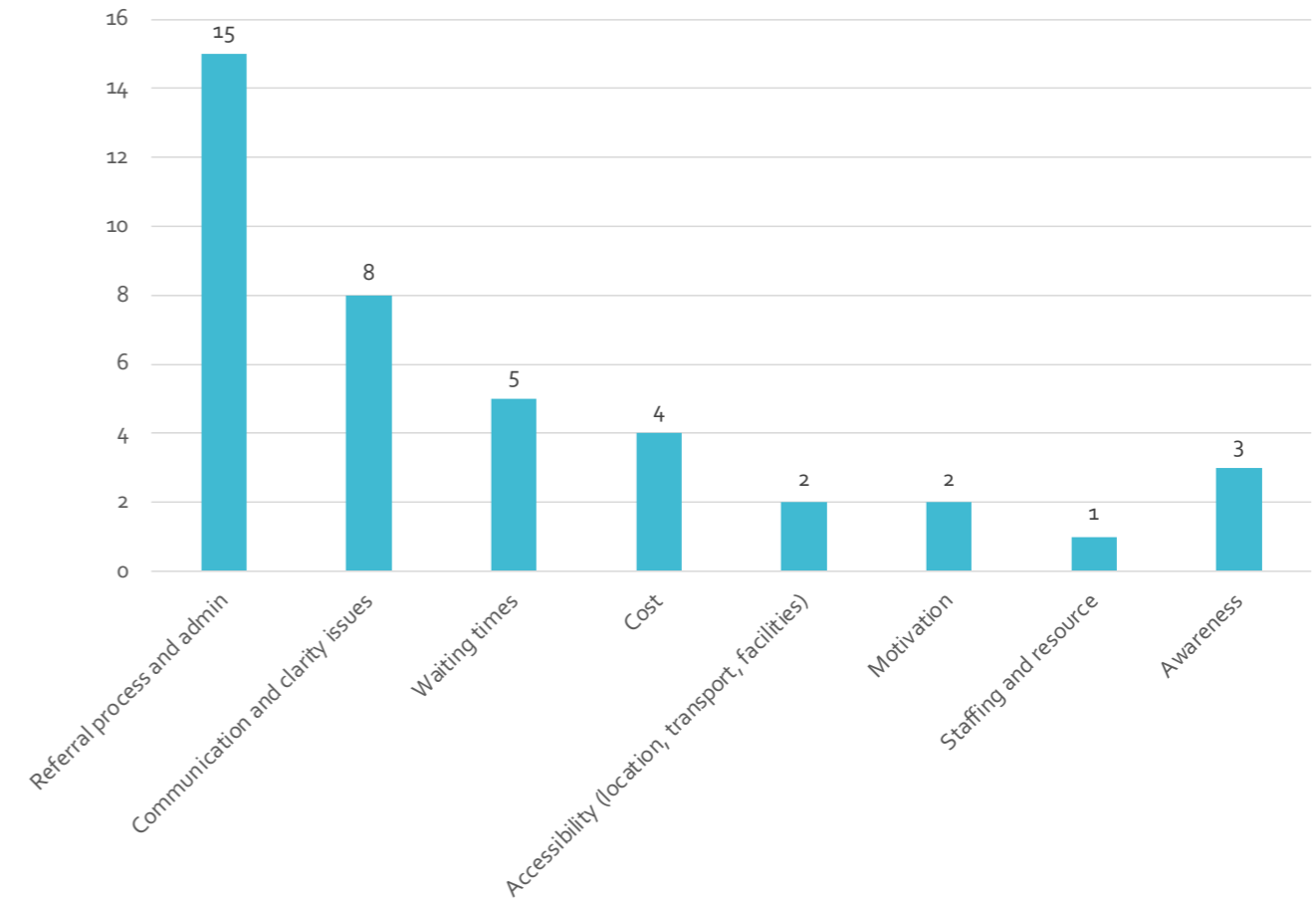
### How familiar are you with the current scheme?



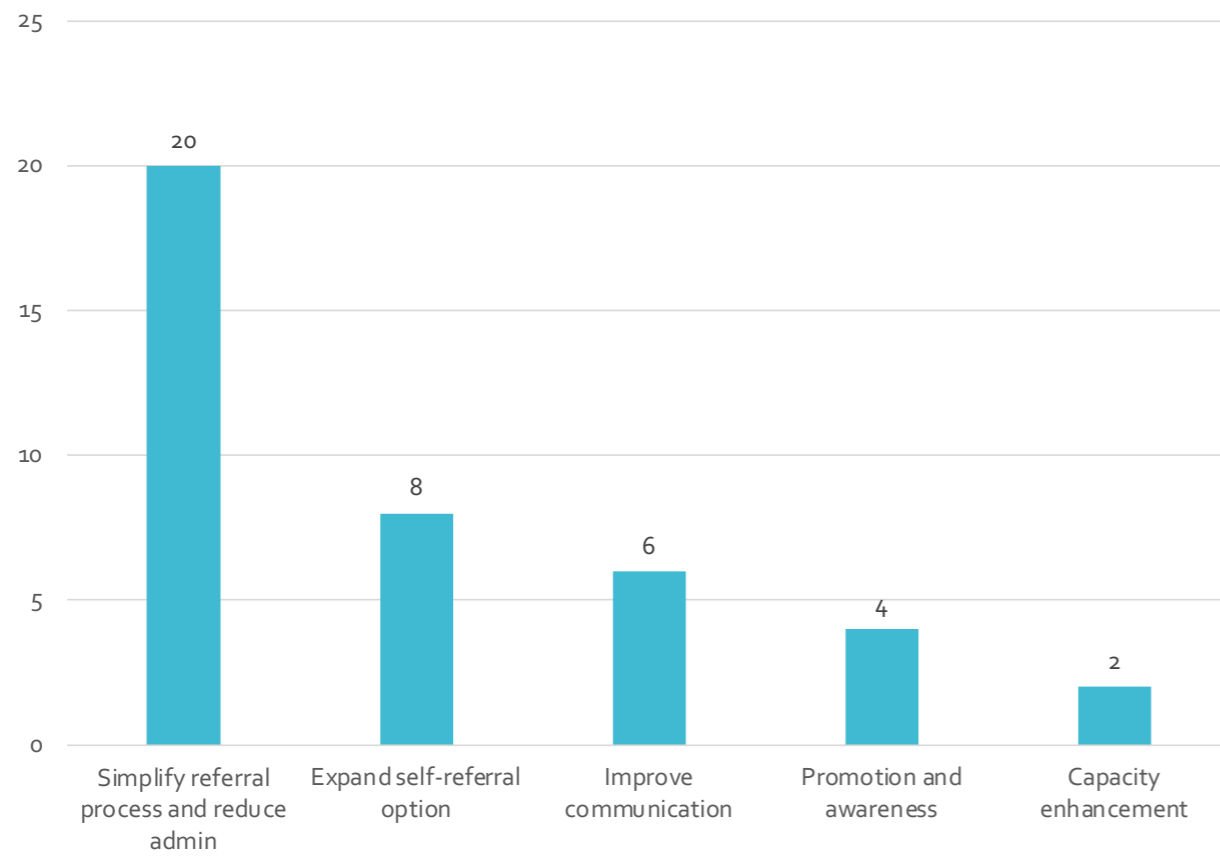
- Lack of awareness of the scheme 5
- Time constraints 20
- Complexity of referral paperwork/process 16
- Lack of feedback of patient progress 16
- Other 6



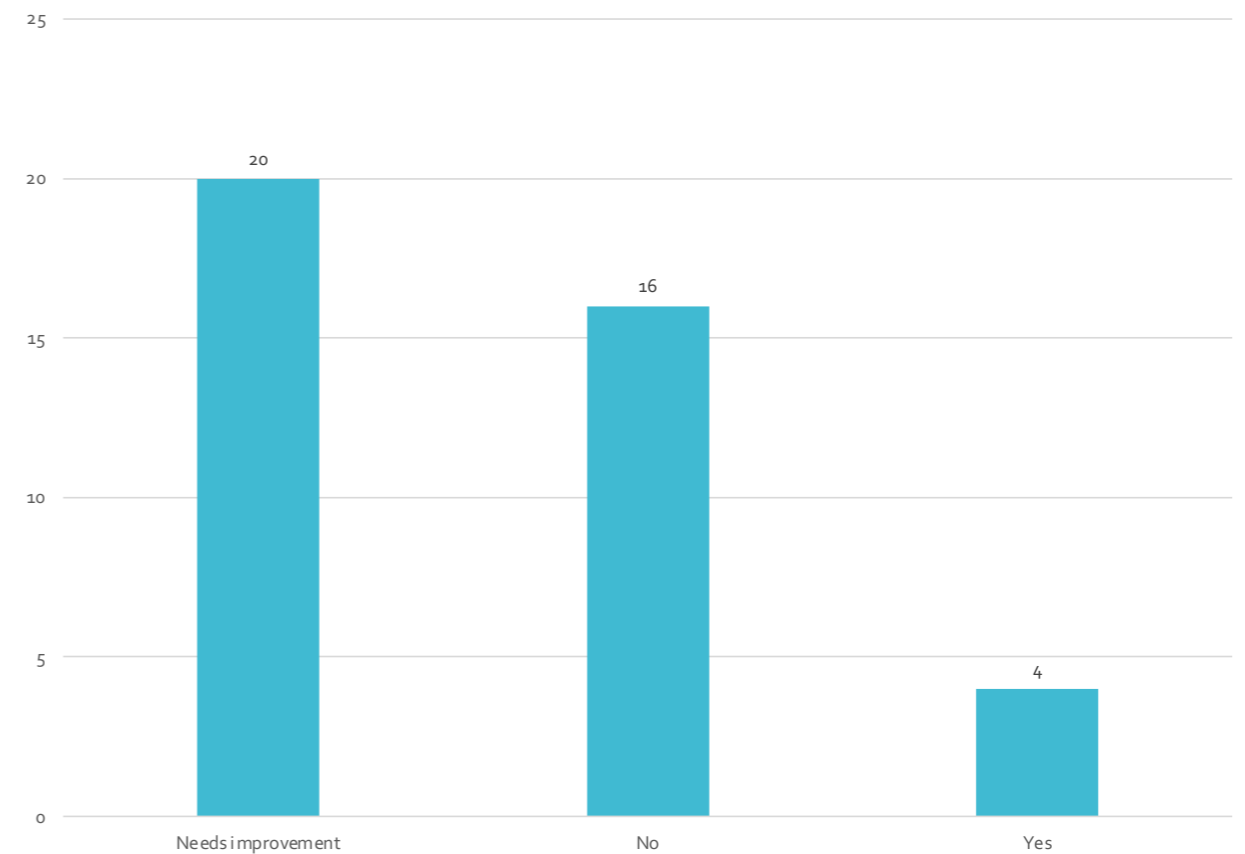
### What are the main challenges or barriers to the scheme?



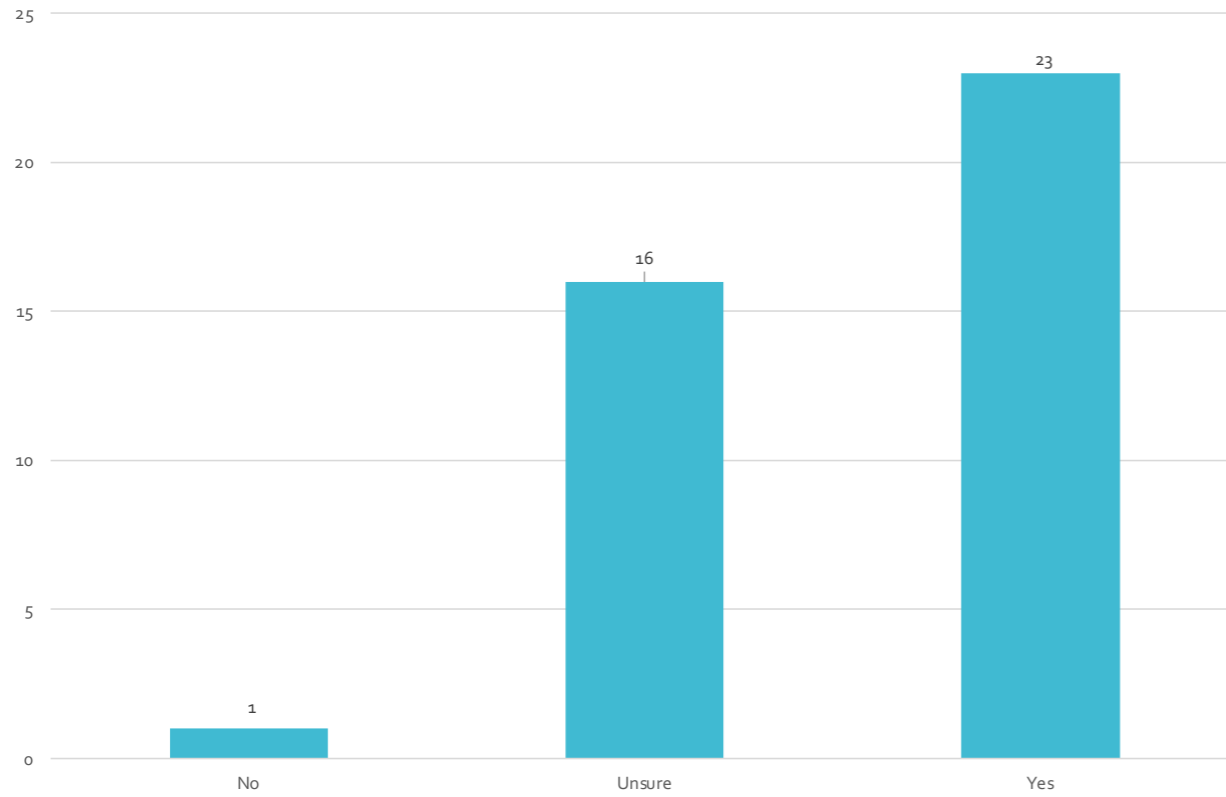
### What improvements would make it easier for you to refer patients?



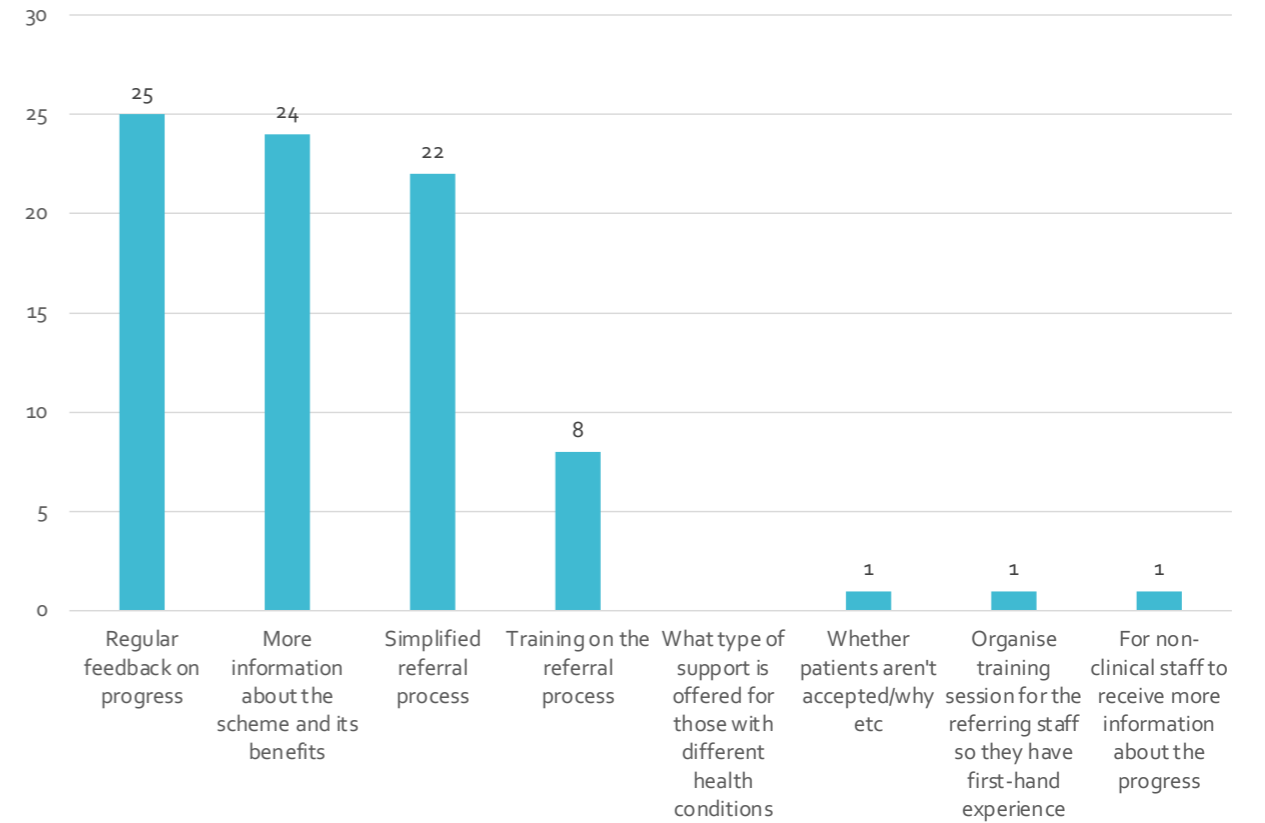
### Do you think there is adequate communication between NHS and Active Blackpool?



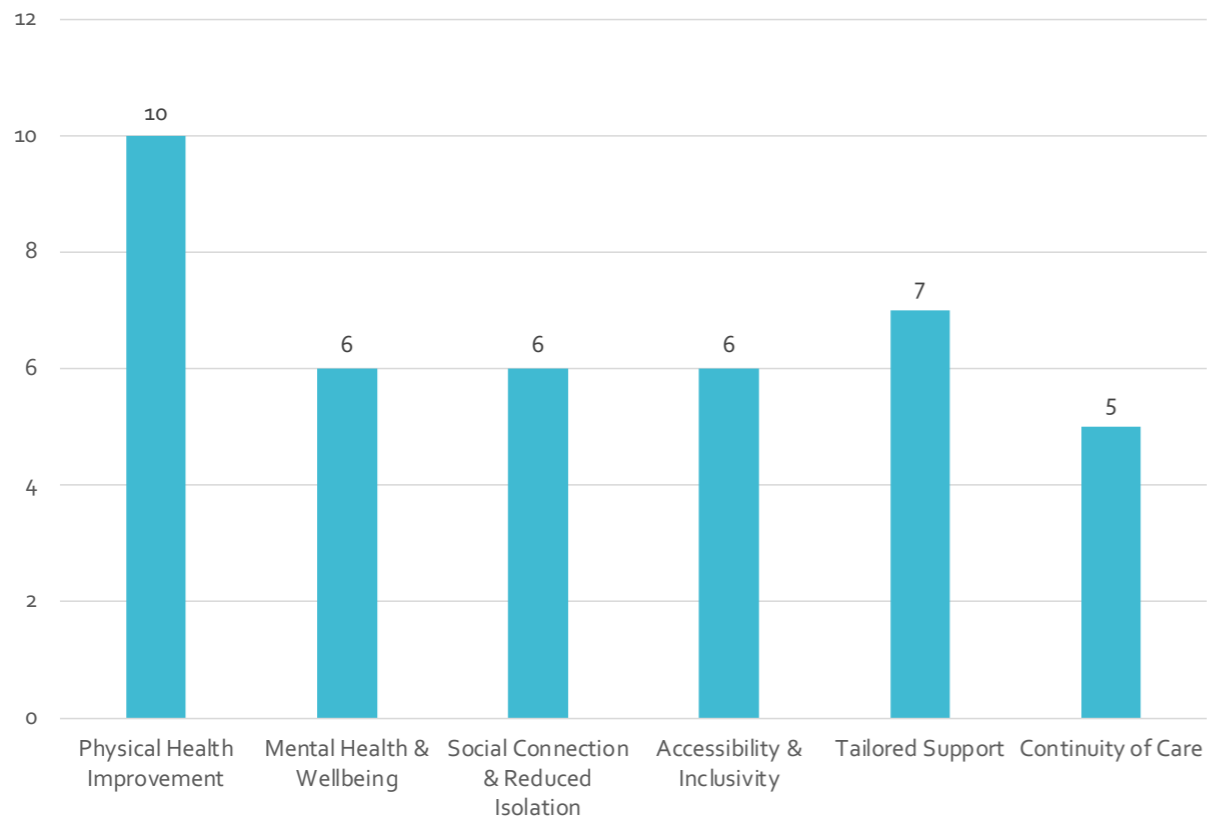
## Do you think the scheme meets the needs of the referred patients?



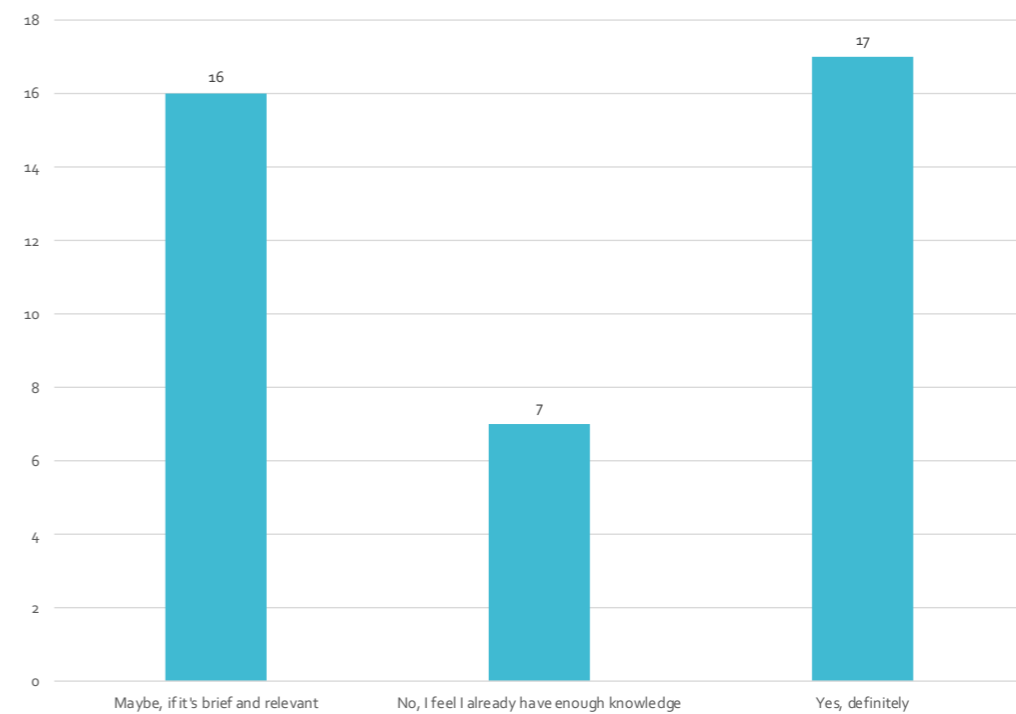
## What support do you need from Active Blackpool to increase referrals?



## What key benefits do you see of the Active Blackpool scheme?



## Would you find it beneficial to receive training or info sessions on the exercise referral scheme?



# Recommendations.

## Short-term:

### 1) Technology sessions

Active Blackpool could offer users a series of interactive sessions to familiarise them with the new app and website. These sessions could cover the key features, navigation tips or highlight any changes from the old version.

### 2) Exercise referral ambassadors

Active Blackpool could support the creation of an exercise referral ambassador group. The group's aims would focus on arranging social activities, celebrating achievements and providing feedback to the Active Blackpool team. This group would result in keeping people involved long-term.

### 3) Improving transport links

Active Blackpool could start conversations with Blackpool Transport to explore opportunities to improve access to the centres through public transport.

## Long-term:

### 1) Simplify access

Offer one point of contact for questions, provide a clear summary covering costs, locations, schedules and transport options. Offer flexible participation options encouraging home-based exercises.

### 2) Promote motivation

Provide training to staff involved in the delivery and promotion of the scheme in basic motivational techniques. Embed a motivation section within the app which provides users with idea on how to get/keep motivated at different stages of the scheme.

### 3) Support sustainable transition

Active Blackpool could provide clear post-programme guidance through a one-page "next steps" guide which links participants to local community activities (free and paid for), other classes offered through Active Blackpool, an introduction to gym staff and what they can offer.



## Contacts and Authors

### Amelia Simpson

Lancaster University  
Research Associate

### Jennifer Fairfield

Blackpool Council  
Active Communities  
Manager

### Neil Pimlott

Blackpool Council  
Active Lives Development  
Officer

### Sandra Bee

Healthwatch Blackpool  
Co-researcher

### Karen Gratrix

Blackpool Council  
Research and  
Development Manager

### Dr Laura Thomas

Liverpool John Moore's  
University  
Senior Lecturer Exercise  
and Health Psychology

### Dr Nikita Rowley

Coventry University  
Researcher in the Centre  
for Physical Activity, Sport  
and Exercise Sciences