



# Being Our Best Selves (BOBS)

## A Culture Shift Pilot Project

### Summary evaluation report



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# About BOBS

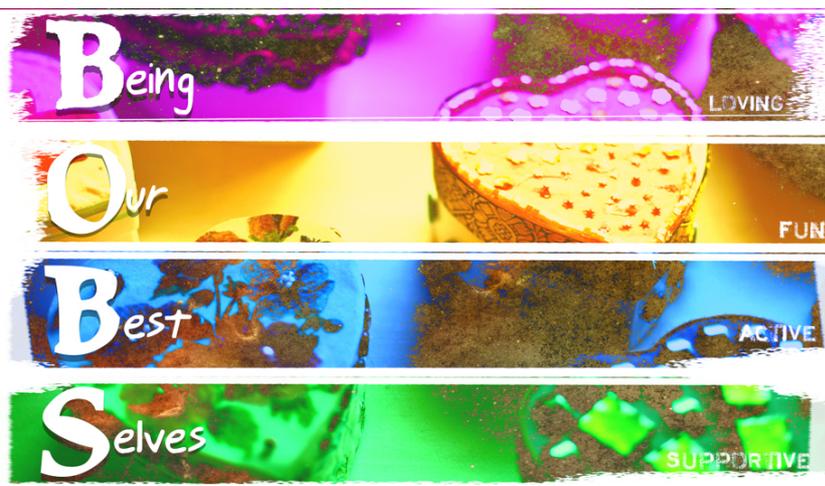
BOBS began as a pilot project aiming to support the physical and emotional wellbeing of the members of the band Delta 7, a Culture Shift project involving a group of 7 learning disabled adults, based in Eastbourne. Members included people with learning and physical disabilities and people with mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety.

The BOBS pilot started in September 2019 and ran for 10 sessions over a period of nearly 4 months, ending in December 2019.

During this period, attendance at group sessions grew from 12 to 30 participants in total, some attending all sessions, others occasionally. The initial 12 comprised of the core members of Delta 7, support staff and carers. Additional participants were carers (both paid and unpaid) and friends, invited by members of Delta 7.

This project was delivered on the basis of an entirely volunteer workforce and in kind support (free venue hire from St Elisabeth's Community Church, Eastbourne) with incidental administrative expenses subsidised by Culture Shift.

This brief evaluation report is based on a focus group (a core group of 19 regular BOBS participants) and brief one-to-one interviews undertaken with 6 BOBS participants which took place at the end of the pilot.



**With thanks to everyone who took part in the pilot project and in particular members of the core group:**

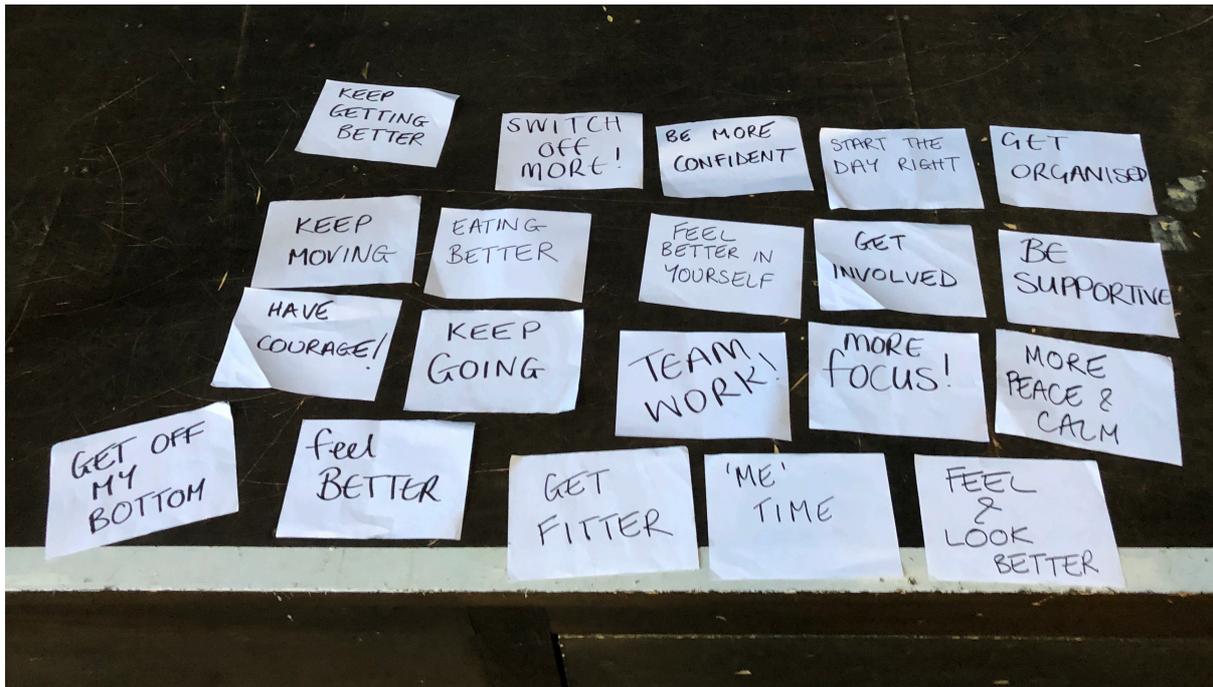
Sam Baldwin, Darrell Barrett, David, Pauline and Alf Campin, Fraser, Elliot, Jane and Richard Caygill, Tom Cook, Harry Fairchild and Linsey Fairchild, Ruth Mowbray, Perry Orr, Craig, Jenny and Ian Post, Mikey Reynolds, Lucy Walker

# Project delivery

## The Objectives

The objectives were set by members at the beginning of the pilot. These were:

- To look and feel better
- To be more active
- To be healthier in terms of diet and physical activity



## The Team

- Julia Roberts, Director of Culture Shift - Project Manager with responsibility for organising logistics, communication etc
- Jack Roberts, professional sports coach and personal trainer - Project Facilitator, with responsibility for planning and delivery of the activity sessions with a specific focus on physical health
- Jessica Towner, recent Psychology Graduate - Project Facilitator, with responsibility for planning and delivery of the activity sessions with a focus on mental health and wellbeing

## The Approach

Each of the project sessions was structured to include elements of physical activity, social interaction and personal development.

- Physical activity - this included simple, differentiated circuits exercises (time-based, in pairs), dancing, games such as musical chairs and walking (in one session, to deliver leaflets promoting a community event) . The emphasis was on

promoting and inspiring participants to take everyday activity, requiring no money or specific equipment.

- Social interaction - usually in a circle, group discussion was a central part of the activity sessions and participants were encouraged to share their feelings, discuss issues and challenges and celebrate success freely and openly. "How are you?" was the general starting point. More formal group discussion/brainstorming was facilitated around specific themes such as defining personal strengths and weaknesses and goal-setting. This element of the sessions focussed on mental health and introduced strategies such as 'mirror talking' to raise self esteem, with participants encouraged to repeat positive affirmations to themselves every morning. One of the group participants decided to greet himself with the greeting "morning gorgeous" every day!
- Personal development - through simple tasks which were agreed each week, participants would try explore new ways to develop their self confidence, awareness and physical and mental health. After every session, mental and physical health exercises were set for the members to maintain throughout the week. These included such things as "Starting the Day Right" (drinking a glass of water, moving on the spot for a minute, making the bed)

Another key element of the project was the online communication which was established and maintained through regular (almost daily) contact a What's App group and a Secret Facebook group through which participants shared messages, photos and videos, sharing the highs and lows of daily life and supporting each other emotionally and with practical ideas and encouragement.

### **The Values**

The following were identified through the focus group and interviews;

- Everyone is different but equal
- Everyone makes a valuable contribution to each other
- Being the best we can be is what is important, not comparing ourselves to others

These underlying values were evidenced in the process underpinning the group which built from a sense of mutual inspiration and friendship regardless of who came in as a supporter and who came in as a member. This results in a strong feeling of community (or as reported above, family) rather than a service. As one supporter commented "***what makes it different is that there isn't a gap between the helper and the helped. Feels very equal. Everyone is just a person. Everyone has said personal things about themselves....actually, everyone is inspired by everyone else***".

This sense of 'different but equal' was a consistent theme running through feedback from the focus group and the interviews, for example BOBS was described as a "***mutually inspirational space – inspired by the person next to them. Everyone gets so much from each other and that's what's really special about it***".

Another important and innovative aspect of BOBS was the bringing together of professionals from the disciplines of sports coaching, arts and mental health. This not only ensured that there was a balance of activity opportunities but also something for everyone. As one Culture Shift staff member commented ***"there's a lot to learn from sports and coaching about working as a team and the mental health benefits of this. It's brought so many different kinds of learning together"***.

## **The impact of BOBS**

All members of the BOBS pilot group reported tangible benefits stemming from their involvement. The impact is highly significant, given the pilot was only for 10 sessions. The benefits reported by members have been categorised below as social benefits, physical health benefits and mental health benefits. It is important to note, however, that all of these are inextricably linked in the feedback from members and supporters. Each had positive impact on the others.

### **3.1 Social benefits**

A social benefit that came out very strongly from the focus group and the interviews was the sense of mutual support and understanding. This was consistently referred to as a sense of family:

***"I am thrilled to be involved in this family"***

***"I feel protected like I am not on my own 'cos I'm part of a family"***



Members reported that it provided an important sense of inclusion and belonging:

**"You feel you have friends around you"**

This was important in promoting engagement in the physical activity aspect of the group:

**"everyone tries and it doesn't really matter if you're not very good – nobody judges you for that"**

It was also a fundamental contributor to the mental health benefits that were identified (see below **Mental health and resilience benefits**).

The involvement of carers - both paid and unpaid - was key to the successful engagement of the participants but it was not expected that the carers would contribute so actively and enthusiastically, often sharing personal information about their own physical and mental health within the group.

Another social benefit of the project was that 2 members of the core group were "matched" with a Gig Buddy as a result of their involvement in the project (Gig Buddies is a project managed by the Stay Up Late charity).

### **3.2 Physical health benefits**

All members agreed that they had enjoyed and benefited from the physical activity that was generated in BOBS and this had encouraged them to be more physically active in day to day life. As one member commented: **"it makes you feel like you want to do it"** (do more physical activity). This resulted in tangible outcomes for several members in relation to their physical health (**"I've lost a lot of weight"**, **"I've started going swimming again for the first time in ages"**)



Physical activity was promoted through a team approach and undertaken in a non-threatening way that was mutually accepting of different needs and abilities. Members reported that the physical activity itself promoted positive mental health and emotional wellbeing through:

- increased confidence (***"I feel like I can do this stuff now (physical activity) but I didn't want to do it before"***)
- enhanced self-esteem (***"I can show off doing press ups – I enjoy it a lot!"***)

### **3.3 Mental health benefits**

All members of BOBS who took part in the focus group, including those who had joined as volunteer supporters, reported that it had impacted positively on their mental health. This view was supported in the 6 one to one interviews."

***"Yes, it has helped me and it's helped me be more resilient"***

***"It hasn't made my problems go away but I feel a bit stronger to deal with them"***

***"It has brightened up my life every day and not just when I'm here"***

In interviews, members were consistent in linking these mental health benefits to the fact that the group provided an opportunity for mutual peer support:

***"I have felt I always have someone to talk to about things if they are difficult for me"***

***"It's about building each other up"***



There was also a strong emphasis on sense of safety within the group, and the importance of this in relation to mental health:

***"Such an open environment where everyone feels safe"***

***"Yes, its important to feel safety because you just feel stronger to be completely honest and that's better for mental health"***

***"Being safe like this here, it means you can be honest about your feelings"***

Members made links between the value of BOBS and prevention of escalation of mental health issues. There was a recognition that expressing feelings was important and healthy:

***"There has never been a time when it hasn't been okay to cry (in the group)- and healthy! "***

***"The best thing for you to do is not bottle it up but to let it out and people need a place and other people to do that with"***

With regard to a well-loved person who had been associated with Delta 7 who had died by suicide before the pilot, one person wondered out loud whether ***"if we had had this group then, whether that would have made any difference? If it could have helped? Because he might have been able to open then and talk about his feelings more"***.



# Reflections

Members were asked in both the focus group and the interviews whether they had any suggestions for how BOBS could be improved or developed. Members did not have any specific suggestions for improvement. The level of shared ownership and decision making was almost certainly a factor in this, as members clearly recognised that if they wanted something in the group to change they could suggest this and it would be addressed.

The main suggestions were:

- for the existing group established through the pilot to continue and for funding to be sought to enable this to happen.
- for there to be more BOBS groups in other locations so that it could benefit more people.
- the idea of BOBS being packaged as a workshop or awareness-raising activity that could be delivered in various places, including the idea of BOBS 'pop-ups' in community venues and public places.

**Jack Roberts;** *"For me, the BOBS project was a place of safety, honesty, trust and caring where everyone - staff (the project leaders), participants (the core group) and their supporters (paid and unpaid carers) had a platform to express how they were feeling emotionally whilst also being given an opportunity to engage and challenge themselves to improve their physical health. I believe this project illustrates how vital it is to tackle mental health alongside physical health and not see them as different challenges and I would like to see this approach being taken more widely. The impact could potentially be huge for people who otherwise lack opportunities to be the best version of themselves"*

**Jessica Towner;** *"The feeling at the end of every BOBs group was complete and utter joy and excitement which is (in my experience) entirely unique amongst mental health improvement projects. I believe this was due to the combination of a completely trusting environment, a chance for people to discuss their successes in the exercises (mental and physical) set the week before, and a brilliantly fun workout section! Clearly, this project made a vast difference to the lives of everyone involved which they have since carried with them, months into the future, showing that it was successful in developing longstanding skills and strategies. The uniqueness of this project is highlighted in the frequent comments regarding the feeling of family, which I wholeheartedly agree with."*

**Julia Roberts; Culture Shift;** *"This project evolved as an example of asset-based community development, recognising need and building on collective energy, skills and desire to make a difference. This relatively short intervention with a very specific yet diverse participant group was an attempt to 'test and learn' from a new approach to the long-standing and ongoing challenge to reduce health inequalities for vulnerable people. The learning outcomes of this project were outstanding and has increased our understanding of this area of work and will continue to inform our future planning."*

## Summary findings

1. An inclusive group setting which focuses on common ground and NOT the idea that some people are "better"/ "healthier"/ "unhealthier" than others is a positive starting point - taking part alongside others is very empowering.
2. There is much to be gained from a cross-sector approach - sports, arts and care professionals working in collaboration to support diverse individuals.
3. A primary focus on mental health is a helpful first step towards improved physical health for those who are most vulnerable.
4. Creating space to talk and relax alongside physical activity makes it more accessible to those for whom physical exercise can be challenging.
5. Consistent, supportive contact between group sessions is key to maintaining momentum and confidence and contributes to a sense of collective effort and belonging.
6. For those for whom physical exercise is most challenging, it needs to be facilitated in a way that is differentiated, light touch and achievable to ensure that participants focus on what they can do, rather than what they can't. The philosophy of "any movement is better than none" is fundamental.
7. Allow for lots of celebration of success, on a small basis if necessary, to build confidence and avoid de-motivation.
8. Goal setting is key but this needs to be driven by the individual in a context of acknowledging strengths as well as "work-ons".
9. The involvement of carers was of great benefit to this project but there may also be value in facilitating separate sessions for carers to address their needs specifically.



For further information, please see [www.cultureshift.org.uk](http://www.cultureshift.org.uk) or contact Julia Roberts at [julia@cultureshift.org.uk](mailto:julia@cultureshift.org.uk)