

# TACKLING THE CHALLENGE OF STAYING FIT IN THE NORTH: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

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The struggle to stay fit and maintain physical skills and strength is a challenge for everyone living with SCI. Initiatives such as the Aspire Leisure Centre and InstructAbility frameworks have led the way, but what do you do if you live in an area where such initiatives are not available?

Deborah Harrison, Specialist Neurological Physiotherapist at Neural Pathways told us: "I have worked with SCI people for more than ten years across the North of the England. And despite innovations in technology assisted rehabilitation, my clients still can't find a gym that knows how to meet their physical needs."

Part of Deborah's role at Neural Pathways is to assess and prescribe Functional Electronic Stimulation (FES), FES-assisted exercise kit and other tech robotics. "With more and more equipment available it often takes specialist knowledge to match the equipment with the client's needs," stated Deborah. She added: "It can also be heartbreaking to see how far out of my clients' financial reach some of this equipment is, even though I know how beneficial it will be."

In an attempt to address this unmet need, Deborah

and Neural Pathways have been working to support a Gateshead-based initiative. The Pop-Up Gym, a not-for-profit charity that relies on donations, is the brainchild of Drew Graham. Drew, a C4 tetraplegic, describes how before his accident in 2014: "All I knew was running and athletics. To go from that to being in a wheelchair 24 hours a day was quite a big shock."

Borne out of Drew's personal experience of life after his SCI, the charity aims to provide a rehabilitation and fitness maintenance service for SCI people across the North of England.

Drew and the charity's Trustees have worked tirelessly to secure funds and, by working across her wide network of contacts, Deborah has also helped to access specific equipment donations from around the UK.

The right venue was key. As well as the gym needing to be readily accessed by members in wheelchairs, Drew wanted to create a fun and pleasant environment, so members



would be comfortable when exercising, without feeling self-conscious. Once the right venue was found and enough funds were secured to employ a personal trainer to induct members to the equipment and follow physio programmes overseen by Deborah, the first Pop-Up Gym was officially opened in Gateshead, in January 2018.

Gym members can use a variety of specialist equipment including RehaMove 2 leg and arm FES bikes, EasyStand standing and glider frames, an Equalizer 6000 wheelchair-accessible multi-gym, as well as other more standard gym equipment such as free weights. There is also a private treatment room for one-to-one sessions and Neural Pathways continues to support the service by offering programme reviews, FES reviews and other specialist treatments such as neuro-acupuncture.

To date, more than 50 clients have used the gym and membership grows

each week. Drew is over the moon with member feedback and said: "A lot of our clients have never used any of this stuff before." He also describes how many people with paralysis have "been able to see their legs move for the first time since their accidents by using our FES bikes" and that there have been many tears shed.

As well as creating a safe and comfortable place for SCI people to exercise effectively, Drew has always wanted to create a community, where people facing similar issues can connect and provide one another with support, saying: "We believe the sense of community is just as important as good therapy."

So, what's next for the Pop-Up Gym? Drew has ambitious plans: "There are people we know who we can't yet reach. So, as well as increasing the number of Pop-Up Gyms across the North, we want to offer a mobile service to take specialist exercise kit into the wider community."

For more information about Pop-Up Gym visit [www.popupgym.org.uk](http://www.popupgym.org.uk)