



# EVALUATION REPORT

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Edge Hill University

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# *CONTENTS*

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>MALE MENTAL HEALTH, ILLNESS AND SUICIDE</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>MENTAL HEALTH CHARTER AND OTHER PROGRAMMES</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>THE OFFLOAD PROGRAMME</b>	<b>9</b>
THE OFFLOAD PROGRAMME	9
PARTNERSHIPS	10
DELIVERY	10
ESCALATION PROCESS	11
<b>THE EVALUATION</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>EVALUATION FINDINGS</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION</b>	<b>13</b>
TOTAL NUMBER OF MEN ENGAGED	13
GROUP TYPES	13
DEPRIVATION	14
ETHNICITY	15
EMPLOYMENT STATUS	15
SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS	16
<b>SERVICE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>REFERRAL PROCESSES</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>BIG LOTTERY OUTCOMES</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>ALL CLUBS</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>INDIVIDUAL CLUB SUMMARY</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>FOCUS GROUPS WITH THE PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>23</b>
SUMMARY	23
<b>SALFORD RED DEVILS FOUNDATION</b>	<b>24</b>
ATTENDING OFFLOAD	24
THE RUGBY LEAGUE BRAND	24
FIXTURES IN THE STADIUM	24
GROUP DYNAMICS	25
HEAD COACHES	26
IMPACTS	26
CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT	27

<b>WARRINGTON WOLVES FOUNDATION</b>	<b>29</b>
ATTENDING OFFLOAD	29
THE RUGBY LEAGUE BRAND	29
FIXTURES IN THE STADIUM	30
GROUP DYNAMICS	30
HEAD COACHES	32
IMPACTS	33
CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT	34
<b>VIKINGS SPORTS FOUNDATION</b>	<b>36</b>
ATTENDING OFFLOAD	36
THE RUGBY LEAGUE BRAND	36
FIXTURES IN THE STADIUM	37
GROUP DYNAMICS	37
HEAD COACHES	38
IMPACTS	39
CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT	40
<b>CASE STORIES</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>IAN'S OFFLOAD STORY</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>ANDY'S OFFLOAD STORY</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>MARK'S OFFLOAD STORY</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>DAVES' OFFLOAD STORY</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>LEARNING FROM THE PILOT PHASE</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>LANGUAGE USED</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>DELIVERING OFFLOAD TO DIFFERENT GROUP TYPES</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>MEN WITH MORE COMPLEX NEEDS AND THE ESCALATION PROCESS</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>MANAGING BOUNDARIES</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>VOLUNTEERING PROTOCOL</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>56</b>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

It was estimated in 2015 that 322 million people globally were living with depression (excluding bipolar affective disorder), and suicide was accountable for 788,000 global deaths (1.5 percent) (WHO, 2017). Three-quarters of the 5,821 suicides in the United Kingdom in 2017 were by males (15.5 deaths per 100,000), and the highest age-specific suicide rates since 2013 has been among males aged 45-59 (21.8 deaths per 100,000) (ONS, 2018). Rugby League's core areas range across Northern England, with many individuals engaging with the sport living in England's most 20% deprived areas (Indices of Multiple Deprivation [IMD], 2015). These areas are often characterized by low income, educational underachievement, weak labour markets and high rates of unemployment, which can increase vulnerability to mental illness.

Rugby League Cares (RLC) were funded by the Big Lottery for a two-year pilot of the Offload programme which began in April 2017. Offload is a ten-week-two which uses the brand of rugby league to address low level mental health conditions among men, including low self-esteem, social isolation, work-related stress, depression and anxiety through

education-based sessions. The programme aims to raise men's awareness of mental health and develop coping strategies to deal with challenging situations.

Offload is delivered by former rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness specialist, provided to the programme by State of Mind Sport, a partner of RLC. It is intended that the brand of rugby league enables men to understand how players, coaches and referees look after their mental health by using appropriate rugby league language, where the delivery staff are known as 'head coaches' and the sessions are called 'fixtures'. These fixtures were delivered at three Rugby League Club's Charitable Foundations: Salford Red Devils Foundation, Warrington Wolves Foundation and Vikings Sports Foundation.

This report presents the key findings from the evaluation of Offload, conducted by researchers at Edge Hill University. Data are presented from the first eighteen months of the pilot phase (1 April 2017 to 30 September 2018), and includes quantitative and qualitative findings alongside other data provided by the clubs involved in Offload.

## KEY FINDINGS

### DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

A total of 972 men engaged with Offload, and 46.7% of the men were aged 35-64. Over half lived in the most 50% deprived areas in England. Consistent with the ethnic profile of the regions in which the three clubs were located, the majority of the men self-identified as White British (83.3%) or White English (9.5%).

Approximately three-quarters had accessed their GP in the last twelve months, with 32.2%

of participants identifying that they have seen their GP about their mental health. Of these, 24.3% reported that they have been diagnosed by their GP with a mental illness.

The men typically heard about and accessed Offload through their place of employment or training (39.0%), word of mouth from previous participants (26.4%), or by contact with the relevant club (11.9%).

## BIG LOTTERY OUTCOMES

The nine outcomes and their respective target that Offload sought to achieve were developed by representatives from RLC and State of Mind Sport, the relevant Rugby League Club's Foundation Managers, and health professionals. Following the allocation of funding, the outcomes were then informed by the Big Lottery. A total of 699 men completed both pre- and post-questionnaires exploring their perspectives on health and wellbeing, ability to cope with everyday life and manage setbacks, relationships with family members, participation in local activities, volunteering, and the support around them.

**Table 1: Big Lottery outcomes (all clubs)**

Positive improvement	
1. How aware are you of how to look after your health and wellbeing?	78%
2. Are you keen to make a change to improve your education, training or employment situation?	63%
3. How would you rate your ability to cope with everyday life?	74%
4. How able do you feel to manage setbacks and challenging situations?	73%
5. How often do you experience challenging situations with your family?	49%
6. How would you rate the strength of your relationship with your family?	66%
7. How regularly do you take part in local activities (e.g. swimming, walking, going to the Rugby, accessing local services such as libraries etc.)	53%
8. In the past 2 weeks, how many days have you spent volunteering or supporting your local area?	22%
9. How would you rate the support around you?	65%

Based on responses given to the questionnaires delivered in the first and final week of each round of fixtures, approximately three-quarters of participants were more aware of how to look after their health and wellbeing, better able to cope with everyday life, and manage setback and challenging situations. Over half were keen to change or improve their education, training or employment, had a better relationship with their family, and had more support around them. 53% took part in more local activities, and some engaged in voluntary roles in their local area.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Participants attended Offload as a means of self-help, most often to develop coping strategies for low level mental health conditions including social isolation, depression and anxiety, and for some men as a means of helping to manage suicidal ideation.

According to the men, the success of the programme could be attributed to:

- The brand of rugby league which was initially effective in recruiting men to Offload. Men who did not identify themselves as rugby league fans were not deterred by this.
- Holding the fixtures in the relevant rugby league stadiums and using non-clinical, rugby league style language which encouraged me to seek help for their mental health.
- The fixtures were delivered by former rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness specialist with lived experience of low level mental health conditions. This made the programme content more relatable to men.
- Many of the participants had previously engaged with other mental health services, and Offload was able to provide immediate support to those currently on a waiting list and complement the experiences the men had with those services.
- The informal and non-judgmental environment removed the stigma surrounding mental health and created a welcoming atmosphere.

Other self-reported benefits of attending Offload included:

- Increased confidence and self-esteem and men's willingness to talk about their mental health.
- Developed coping mechanisms for mental health and symptoms of mental illness.
- Increased social and emotional connections with others.
- Increased support networks and social relationships.
- Feeling able to leave the house and being able to sleep, and stay asleep, at night.
- Reduced substance abuse, including alcohol
- Increased physical activity.
- Engagement with voluntary work opportunities.

*"It teaches you how to cope, it gives you really good coping strategies, with different sessions with people who have been through it."*

*"I've stopped drinking and done more exercise since I've come here, so my lifestyle has changed completely now... I just feel brilliant now."*

*"I've had a belly full of being depressed and trying to make me feel good, and trying to please other people before I please myself, and like other people before I like myself, and now I'm starting to like myself for what I am as a person."*

# INTRODUCTION

## MALE MENTAL HEALTH, ILLNESS AND SUICIDE

In 2015 it was estimated that 322 million people globally were living with depression (excluding bipolar affective disorder). This is equivalent to 4.4 percent (5.1% of females; 3.6% of males) of the world's population (WHO, 2017). Suicide was accountable for 1.5 percent of global deaths, with 788,000 suicides in 2015 (WHO, 2017).

Of the 5,821 suicides registered in 2017 in the United Kingdom (a decrease from 5,965 deaths in 2016), three-quarters of these were by men (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2018). The age-standardized suicide rate for males was 15.5 per 100,000 compared to 4.9 per 100,000 for females, with males aged 45 to 49 (24.8 per 100,000) being more likely to die by suicide than other age groups (ONS, 2018). Suicide was also consistently more common among young males than females aged 15 to 19 (7.6 compared to 3.5 per 100,000), 20 to 24 (12.9 compared to 4.3 per 100,000) and 25 to 29 (17.0 compared to 4.2 per 100,000) (ONS, 2018). Depression and anxiety are consistently among the most commonly reported mental illnesses globally; other mood disorders, as well as substance-use disorders (particularly alcohol), eating disorders, and related body-image-oriented conditions are also becoming more prevalent (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, 2018; WHO, 2017).

Rugby League's core areas stretch across Northern England's major cities and towns, covering many highly deprived areas, and many people who engage with the sport live within England's top 20% most deprived areas (IMD, 2015). Those living in areas of high deprivation are more likely to experience low income, insecure employment, unemployment and low educational achievement, status anxiety, and poor (mental) health service use, all of which increase vulnerability to mental illness (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, 2018).

**Table 2: Super League Rugby League areas male suicide rates 2014-2016 (ONS, 2017).**

Position	Club	England Average	Suicides per 100,000 Population
1	St. Helens	15.3	27.1
2	Catalan Dragons	16.9 (France Average)	23.1
3	Hull FC	15.3	20.5
4	Hull KR	15.3	20.5
5	Castleford	15.3	18.5
6	Wakefield	15.3	18.5
7	Leeds	15.3	18.3
8	Wigan	15.3	18.1
9	Salford	15.3	17.2
10	Huddersfield	15.3	15.2
11	Warrington	15.3	14.5
12	Widnes	15.3	10.7

## MENTAL HEALTH CHARTER AND OTHER PROGRAMMES

In March 2015 the Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation was launched by Sport and Recreation Alliance, with the Professional Players Federation (PPF) and support from Mind the mental health charity. The Charter set out how sport and recreation organisations should implement good mental health practice that is inclusive and open to everyone, to remove the stigma associated with mental health (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2015). Over 370 organisations have now signed up to the Charter and are committed to using sport and recreation to promote wellbeing, adopt good mental health policies with their sport and recreational activities, use role models, treat all with respect and dignity, work closely with the mental health sector and regularly monitor their performance (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2019).

After signing up to the Charter, RLC, State of Mind Sport and three Rugby League Club's charitable Foundations developed Offload as a multi-dimensional programme to promote good mental health within rugby league communities, an objective which is also addressed by similar programmes.

Football and Rugby League clubs have previously used their brand to engage members of their communities and deliver health promotion interventions or programmes. Sharing similarities with programmes such as 'It's a Goal!' (IAG!), 'Boot room' (BR), 'Imagine Your Goals' (IYG), 'Active Blues' (AB), 'Premier League Health' (PLH) and 'Coping through Football' (CTF), Offload participants explained that the brand of rugby league and its stadia helped successfully to overcome self and social stigma associated with mental health (Dixon et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2014; Pringle et al., 2013; Spandler et al., 2013), developed supportive and empathetic relationships with delivery staff (Spandler et al., 2013) and other participants (Dixon et al., 2018; Spandler et al., 2013), provided structure to their week (Henderson et al., 2014), increased social inclusion and social capital (Dixon et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2014; Pringle et al., 2013; Spandler et al., 2013), and provided an informal and flexible approach to delivery (Dixon et al., 2018; Pringle et al., 2013) through male only sessions (Pringle et al., 2013; Spandler et al., 2013).

Although each of these programmes vary in their aims and delivery style, many of the reported benefits are similar. These included the development of: confidence and self-esteem (Bingham et al., 2014; Dixon and Flynn, 2016; Henderson et al., 2014; Spandler et al., 2013), positive coping strategies (Spandler et al., 2013), increased levels of support and social connections (Dixon et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2014; Pringle et al., 2013; Spandler et al., 2013), positive lifestyle choices including increased physical activity (Bingham et al., 2014; Dixon and Flynn, 2016; Henderson et al., 2014; Pringle et al., 2013), better dietary choices (Bingham et al., 2014) and decreased substance abuse (Spandler et al., 2032), and some community engagement, whether in a voluntary or participatory capacity (Dixon and Flynn, 2016; Dixon et al., 2018; Spandler et al., 2013).

## **THE OFFLOAD PROGRAMME**

### **THE OFFLOAD PROGRAMME**

The Offload programme was a pilot designed by RLC in partnership with State of Mind Sport and three Rugby League Club's Charitable Foundations: Salford Red Devils Foundation, Warrington Wolves Foundation and Vikings Sports Foundation. Targeted at men aged 16 and above, Offload uses the rugby league brand to address low level mental health problems including social isolation, low self-esteem, and conditions such as depression and anxiety, whilst also helping to prevent the development of complex mental illness and suicide among men.

Offload consisted of ten sessions (referred to as 'fixtures') to raise awareness of mental health among men, tackle the stigma associated with mental health, and to encourage men to develop coping strategies to manage challenging situations. The fixtures focus on building and maintaining mental fitness, coping and managing setbacks, stress, anger and emotion management, mindfulness, building resilience, and maintaining a good work/life balance. The fixtures are delivered by former rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness specialist each with lived experience of mental illness including depression and anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The delivery staff use their experiences of living with, and managing, poor mental health to inform the delivery of the fixtures to encourage participants to consider adopting similar coping mechanisms in their lives.

Language is crucial to therapeutic engagement and using language that is not immediately recognised by men may be a reason why they feel unable to access traditional services (Spandler et al., 2013). Hence, in Offload, rugby league language is used to firstly normalise and familiarise mental health in various recruitment methods to engage men, and, secondly, used throughout the fixtures by the delivery staff to maintain the men's engagement and reduce drop out. The types of non-clinical, rugby league style, language which is used include:

- Mental health is replaced by 'mental fitness'
- Participants are referred to as 'players'
- The group is a 'squad'

- Delivery staff are the 'head coaches'
- Foundation leads are the 'Player Welfare Manager'
- The Programme manager is the 'Chief Executive Officer'
- Independent evaluators are 'Head of Performance'
- Each session is a 'fixture'
- Each 10-week block is a 'season of fixtures'

Responding to the lack of men's engagement with (mental) health services – often for reasons such as regarding help-seeking as unmanly or embarrassing, feelings of incompetence, a loss of autonomy and identity, and self-medicating with alcohol (Lynch et al., 2018; Moller-Leimkuhler, 2002) - Offload was taken into settings where men typically present themselves and which they associate with being a safe, positive and non-clinical environment (Spandler et al., 2013). Specifically, the fixtures are mainly hosted at the stadia of each club one evening per week, and where possible, each Foundation delivered Offload in local male dominated workplaces and community settings.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

RLC partnered with a variety of organisations to ensure the delivery and overall management of Offload was successful. Firstly, RLC partnered with State of Mind Sport. State of Mind Sport is a charity that aims to promote awareness, tackle stigma, promote resilience in both individuals and communities and encourage timely help seeking to prevent suicide. State of Mind Sport provided a mental health clinician as a referral contact if a participant needed specialist support, provided the head coaches to deliver the sessions, and supported the development of the fixture topics. State of Mind Sport also took over a round of fixtures during the rugby league season, where Offload was promoted, and the professional players warmed up in Offload t-shirts. As noted above, the Charitable Foundations of Salford Red Devils, Warrington Wolves and Widnes Vikings used the head coaches provided by the State of Mind Sport to deliver the season of fixtures in their stadia.

One representative from Public Health England (PHE) and one from Warrington's Clinical Commissioning Group sat on the Steering Group. These partnerships enabled the Steering Group to access support and advice from both organisations, including current mental health practice and intervention programmes elsewhere in each of Offload's delivery areas, and relevant contacts for specific target groups such as older men and veterans.

Edge Hill University were commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the Offload programme. Members of the research team sat on the Steering Group and Operational Project Group and attended a variety of the fixtures while completing the evaluation.

## **DELIVERY**

Many football clubs engage large numbers of supporters from their local communities and have a captive audience to attract hard-to-reach groups to health promotion interventions or programmes (Pringle and Sayers, 2004). Similarly, rugby league clubs are often situated in town centres, central to local communities, and this is thought to be an important mechanism by which to engage men in Offload. Although the three clubs did not have the highest rates of suicide in their areas compared to other Super League clubs, at the time Offload was being developed and delivered these clubs had the relevant resources to manage and deliver the programme, and chose to engage in Offload to enhance the health promotion work they already do and improve the mental fitness of men in their local communities.

The Foundations delivered the season of fixtures to three different group types: open opt in, relatively opt in, and non-opt in. The varying group types were identified and labelled during the second year of the pilot by the evaluation team to distinguish how men are engaging with Offload (e.g. whether their participation was voluntary or compulsory) and to better understand help how Offload works for the participants across the different delivery sites.

The open opt in groups are held at the relevant rugby stadia one evening each week, and participants turn up and attend without prior booking. Relatively opt in groups are delivered in organisations or institutions including workplaces, prisons and sheltered accommodation. Attendance at fixtures delivered to this group type is voluntary and only available to those who are part of that organisation or

institution. Like relatively opt in groups, non-opt in groups are where Offload is delivered in an organisation or institution. These group types are less common and tend to occur only where Offload is delivered as part of curriculum time in Sixth Form colleges. Attendance at these groups is compulsory and participants are selected by the organisation or institution.

<p><b>Open opt in groups</b> Held at the relevant club's stadium where participants can turn up without prior booking.</p>	<p><b>Relatively opt in groups</b> Delivered in organisations, institutions, prisons and sheltered accommodation. Attendance is voluntary and only available to those who are part of that organisation.</p>	<p><b>Non-opt in groups</b> Delivered in organisations or institutions, however attendance is compulsory and pre-determined by managerial staff (e.g. college tutors ).</p>
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**Figure 1: Description of group type**

As previously explained, Offload offers a ten-week season of fixtures, with the first fixture welcoming the group and the tenth concluding and celebrating their progress. However, when taken into an organisation or workplace, a season of six-week fixtures was deemed more appropriate. In an organisation or institution, the participants engaged with Offload as part of a pre-existing group, so providing time for the group to gel was not necessary. In this case, the organisation or workplace would select the six fixture topics that they thought would be most beneficial to the participating group.

In addition to the ten-week season of fixtures, the Warrington Wolves Foundation also offered 'Extra Time' to men who had completed the ten-week fixtures. Extra Time was developed following feedback from the men who explained that they wanted to continue to meet each week to carry on the conversations about their mental health and learn more about how to positively develop their mental health. The Extra Time sessions are also held at the stadium at the same time and evening as the open opt in group and offers a space for the men to talk and engage in a voluntarily paid-for mindfulness session. Since the Extra Timers are still at the stadium when the main Offload fixtures are delivered, they make new participants feel welcome and answer any questions they may have. This appears to have offered a valued peer support for many of the men who attended the Offload fixtures at Warrington and has potential to be replicated at the other Offload clubs.

## **ESCALATION PROCESS**

Despite the formal aims of Offload, RLC acknowledged that at times participants may disclose experiencing a mental illness that is more complex and requires further specialist support. Anticipating this, RLC joined State of Mind Sport to access their clinical background and expertise to support men. A policy was devised to provide a robust framework to detail how Foundation staff and head coaches would manage men who present with more complex conditions.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that a stepped-care model should be used to help people with common mental health disorders, including their family, carers and healthcare professionals, to organise the provision of the most effective intervention for the individual (NICE, 2011).

**Table 3: Stepped care model (NICE, 2011, p.15-16)**

Step 1	All disorders – known and suspected presentations of common mental health disorders.
Step 2	Persistent subthreshold depressive symptoms or mild to moderate depression; GAD; mild to moderate panic disorder; mild to moderate OCD; PTSD (including people with mild to moderate PTSD).
Step 3	Persistent subthreshold depressive symptoms or mild to moderate depression that has not responded to a low-intensity intervention; initial presentation of moderate or severe depression; GAD with marked functional impairment or that has not responded to a low-intensity intervention; moderate to severe panic disorder; OCD with moderate or severe functional impairment; PTSD.

The Offload programme expected to engage men that present Step 1 and 2 type mental health conditions and provide educational mental fitness sessions that can complement any help that individuals may have received from another service. Individuals who presented moderate to severe mental health conditions, or severe functional impairment, would be escalated to Step 3 of the Stepped Care Model.

In the policy and through staff training, Foundation Staff and delivery staff were provided time points where participants who required further support may have been more identifiable (e.g. upon referral, completion of Offload, at focus groups, Fixture 2 and throughout the programme), and indicators for the need of specialist support (e.g. unexpected mood changes, withdrawal, and increased drug and/or alcohol abuse). All Foundation staff were trained to use the Patient Health Questionnaire – 9 (PHQ-9) and the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Scale – 7 (GAD-7) where they felt appropriate, or if a participant caused a level of concern for the staff, to identify the severity of the participant's mental health symptoms.

All Foundation and delivery staff had ongoing access to an experienced mental health clinician (provided by State of Mind Sport) and were able to contact them for support and advice. During the incident of an escalation, all Foundation staff and/or delivery staff must have contacted the emergency clinical staff to report the escalation, and where necessary, have completed versions of the PHQ-9 and/or GAD-7 from the individual. The emergency clinical staff then contacted the participant to arrange access to further specialist support relevant to the need presented.

## **THE EVALUATION**

The evaluation was funded by the Big Lottery, commissioned by RLC and conducted by the Department of Sport and Physical Activity at Edge Hill University. Ethical approval was granted by Edge Hill University's Department of Sport and Physical Activity Research Ethics committee. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to data collection and this report will outline the main findings from:

- Demographic information collected by the Club Foundations
- Questionnaire responses by 699 men completed at the first session and tenth fixture
- Focus groups held with 69 participants who had completed the season of fixtures
- Learning by RLC and the Club Foundations

# EVALUATION FINDINGS

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The demographic information and pre- and post-questionnaire data presented below were collected by Salford Red Devils Foundation, Warrington Wolves Foundation and Vikings Sports Foundation as a requirement of the funders and was provided to Edge Hill University to complement their evaluation. The figures presented are for the first eighteen months of the Offload pilot (1 April 2017 to 30 September 2018).

### TOTAL NUMBER OF MEN ENGAGED

**Table 4: Total number of men who engaged in Offload**

All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
972	315	212	445

A total of 972 men engaged with the programme (attended at least one session).

**Table 5: Number of men who attended half or seven fixtures (n and %)**

All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
624 (68.0%)	263 (84.0%)	96 (43.0%)	265 (67.0%)

Participants who attended Offload in their workplace were offered a 6-week block of fixtures and participants who attended Offload through the open opt in groups were offered a 10-week block of fixtures. These figures represent participants who attended at least 3 out of 6 fixtures or 7 out of 10 fixtures, depending on where they engaged with Offload. Overall, over half attended at least 3 (in workplaces) or 7 (in open opt in groups) fixtures.

### GROUP TYPES

**Table 6: Group type each club delivered to (n and %)**

Group type	Salford Red Devils (no. of men)	Salford Red Devils (no. of groups)	Warrington Wolves (no. of men)	Warrington Wolves (no. of groups)	Vikings Sports (no. of people)	Vikings Sports (no. of groups)
Open opt in	31 (9.9%)	3 (10.0%)	133 (64.3%)	7 (63.6%)	47 (11.8%)	5 (38.4%)
Relatively opt in	166 (53.0%)	10 (33.3%)	74 (35.8%)	4 (36.4%)	166 (41.9%)	2 (15.4%)
Non-opt in	116 (37.0%)	17 (56.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	183 (46.2%)	6 (46.2%)

Salford and Widnes delivered to all three groups, while Warrington delivered to open opt in and relatively opt in groups only. Over half of Warrington's participants engaged through the open opt in sessions which took place at the stadium on a Tuesday evening each week, whereas over three-quarters of Salford and Widnes' participants accessed Offload through an organisation or workplace they were involved with.

Salford's relatively and non-opt in groups had fewer participants, but the club delivered fixtures to more groups. In comparison, Widnes delivered to a smaller number of groups but recruited more participants. Warrington, conversely, had delivered seven open opt in groups.

## AGE

**Table 7: Age of the participants (n and %)**

Age	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
<b>0-24</b>	350 (36.0%)	105 (33.3%)	18 (8.5%)	227 (51.0%)
<b>25-34</b>	122 (12.6%)	41 (13.0%)	49 (23.1%)	32 (7.2%)
<b>35-64</b>	464 (46.7%)	160 (50.8%)	139 (65.6%)	165 (37.1%)
<b>65+</b>	17 (1.8%)	5 (14.3%)	5 (2.4%)	7 (1.6%)

Given the concern about mental illness and suicide among men, Offload sought to engage a high proportion of its participants from some of the most high-risk age groups for suicide: men aged 35-59. Just under half of all participants were in this age range. Over half of participants at Warrington (65.6%) and half of participants at Salford (50.8%) fell into this age category, while just over half of Widnes' participants were younger men up to the age of 24. Just over 1 in 10 participants were aged 25 to 34 and although the programme did not target directly men aged 65 and over, 17 men of this age engaged in Offload. The high number of men in at-risk ages groups (aged 35-64) were expected at the outset.

## DEPRIVATION

**Table 8: Deprivation (n and %)**

Deprivation	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
<b>Most deprived 10%</b>	212 (21.8%)	57 (18.0%)	54 (25.5%)	101 (22.6%)
<b>Most deprived 25%</b>	372 (38.3%)	128 (40.6%)	77 (36.3%)	167 (37.5%)
<b>Most deprived 50%</b>	603 (62.0%)	243 (77.1%)	119 (56.1%)	241 (54.2%)

To help establish the significance of socio-economic deprivation in local communities for mental health, participants were asked to provide their residential postcode. However, in some instances participants who were in prison provided the prison postcode, while others provided postcode information for their place of work and college. For these participants the deprivation scores did not necessarily reflect the location of their residential address. The programme engaged just over a third from most 25% deprived areas and over half from the most deprived 50%. This was expected at the outset.

## ETHNICITY

Table 9: Ethnicity of participants (n and %)

Ethnicity	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Arab	1 (0.1%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Black African	5 (0.5%)	4 (1.2%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
Black Caribbean	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Chinese	2 (0.2%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
Indian	3 (0.3%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
Other black	2 (0.2%)	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
Other ethnic groups	1 (0.1%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other mixed	8 (0.8%)	2 (0.6%)	3 (1.4%)	3 (0.7%)
Other white	10 (1.0%)	5 (1.6%)	2 (0.9%)	3 (0.7%)
Pakistani	5 (0.5%)	5 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
White & Asian	2 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.2%)
White & Black African	4 (0.4%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	3 (0.7%)
White & Black Caribbean	7 (0.7%)	5 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.4%)
White British	810 (83.3%)	255 (80.9%)	147 (69.3%)	408 (91.7%)
White English	92 (9.5%)	23 (7.3%)	56 (26.4%)	13 (2.9%)
White Irish	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
White Scottish	1 (0.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
White Welsh	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Not provided	11 (1.1%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	9 (2.0%)
Prefer not to say	2 (0.2%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)

The majority of participants self-defined as White British or White English which was generally consistent with the ethnic profile of the regions in which the three clubs were located (ONS, 2011) and the rugby league fan base.

## EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Table 10: Employment status of participants (n and %)

Employment status	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Employed	559 (57.1%)	175 (55.6%)	124 (58.5%)	260 (58.4%)
Unemployed, not in training	160 (16.5%)	60 (19.0%)	47 (22.2%)	53 (11.9%)
Unemployed, but in training	155 (16.0%)	73 (23.2%)	9 (4.2%)	73 (16.4%)
Self-employed	21 (2.2%)	1 (0.3%)	12 (5.7%)	8 (1.8%)
Retired	20 (2.0%)	2 (0.6%)	13 (6.1%)	5 (1.1%)
Prefer not to say	58 (6.0%)	4 (1.3%)	7 (3.3%)	47 (10.6%)

Given the variety of environments in which Offload was delivered, most men (just under 6 in 10) were currently employed. A further 16% were either unemployed and not in training, or unemployed and in training, and this pattern was generally consistent across all three clubs.

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS

**Table 11: Sexual orientation of participants (n and %)**

Sexual orientation	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Heterosexual/straight	785 (80.8%)	230 (73.0%)	201 (94.8%)	354 (79.6%)
Bisexual	7 (0.7%)	3 (1.0%)	1 (0.5%)	3 (0.7%)
Gay	6 (0.6%)	4 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.4%)
Not known	112 (11.5%)	61 (19.4%)	7 (3.3%)	44 (9.9%)
Prefer not to say	29 (3.0%)	3 (1.0%)	3 (1.4%)	23 (5.2%)
No answer	30 (3.0%)	12 (3.8%)	0 (0%)	18 (4.0%)
Other	3 (0.3%)	2 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)

The majority of participants self-defined as heterosexual/single and this was consistent across the three clubs. Nearly one-fifth of participants did not provide this information, and this was highest in Salford and Widnes where more workplaces and colleges were engaged.

**Table 12: Relationship status of participants (n and %)**

Relationship status	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Single	505 (52.0%)	199 (63.2%)	85 (40.1%)	221 (49.7%)
Married	287 (29.5%)	86 (27.3%)	81 (38.2%)	120 (27.0%)
Divorced	39 (4.0%)	11 (3.5%)	15 (7.1%)	13 (2.9%)
Cohabiting	135 (13.9%)	17 (5.4%)	29 (13.7%)	89 (20.0%)
Widowed	6 (0.6%)	2 (0.6%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.4%)

In terms of relationship status, higher proportions of single men engaged at Salford and Widnes, while Warrington's cohort engaged a similar number of both single and married men. One-fifth of men at Widnes were cohabiting.

## SERVICE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

Offload was accessed by men with varying mental health conditions. Upon arrival, the participants were asked to provide information about GP access, whether they had been diagnosed with a mental illness, and to identify any specific medical conditions they had. The most common conditions reported by men were depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and social isolation, though some participants did present more complex conditions including bipolar affective disorder, borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation and attempts.

**Table 13: When participants last saw their GP (n and %)**

Last saw GP	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Last month	302 (31.1%)	90 (28.6%)	111 (52.3%)	101 (22.7%)
Last 12 months	417 (42.9%)	147 (46.7%)	64 (30.2%)	206 (46.3%)
Last 2 years	36 (3.7%)	25 (7.9%)	2 (0.9%)	9 (2.0%)
Last 5 years	116 (11.9%)	40 (12.7%)	21 (9.9%)	55 (12.4%)
Longer ago than 5 years	63 (6.5%)	8 (2.5%)	32 (15.1%)	23 (5.2%)
Not registered	58 (6.0%)	5 (1.6%)	2 (0.9%)	51 (11.5%)

Three in 10 of the participants had visited their GP in the last month, with two-fifths doing so in the last year. Just over half of Warrington's participants visited their GP in the last month, whereas a higher proportion of participants from Salford and Widnes visited their GP in the last year.

**Table 14: Participants who had seen their GP about their mental health (n and %)**

Seen GP about mental health	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Yes	313 (32.2%)	109 (34.6%)	129 (60.8%)	75 (16.9%)
No	588 (60.5%)	189 (60.0%)	80 (37.7%)	319 (71.7%)
Prefer not to say	71 (7.3%)	17 (5.4%)	3 (1.4%)	51 (11.5%)

Of those who reported visiting their GP, approximately one-third had done so about their mental health, however this was not consistent across the three clubs. A higher proportion of participants in Warrington (60.8%) reported that they have previously seen their GP about their mental health, compared to Salford (34.6%) and Widnes (16.9%). This perhaps reflects Warrington's main method of recruiting and engaging men, namely, through their open opt in sessions, which typically attracted participants with more complex mental health needs.

Between 2005 and 2015, just 27% of people who died by suicide had been in contact with a mental health service in the year before they died (Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership, 2017). Offload was successful at engaging men who had not accessed support for their mental health and the programme appeared more attractive and effective in engaging men than more traditional services.

**Table 15: Participants diagnosed with a mental illness by a GP (n and %)**

Diagnosed with a mental illness	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Yes	76 (7.8%)	15 (4.8%)	47 (22.2%)	14 (3.1%)
No	163 (16.8%)	26 (8.3%)	40 (18.9%)	97 (21.8%)
Prefer not to say	7 (0.7%)	2 (0.6%)	3 (1.4%)	2 (0.4%)

Participants were not asked about whether they had been diagnosed as having a mental illness by a GP until the second year of the programme, which may partly account for the relatively few men who reported this. Overall, few participants reported they have been diagnosed with a mental illness by a GP at Salford and Widnes, but one-fifth (22.2%) of participants at Warrington had received a diagnosis. Of those who had visited their GP about their mental health, 24.3% were diagnosed with a mental illness. However, this varied by club, ranging from 13.8% at Salford and 18.7% at Widnes to 36.4% at Warrington.

**Table 16: Participants reporting a specific medical condition (n and %)**

	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Number with specific medical condition	208 (21.4%)	63 (20.0%)	118 (55.7%)	27 (6.1%)

One-fifth of participants reported that they have a specific medical condition. Whether this medical condition was a physical health condition, or a mental health condition, was not recorded and this information was unavailable to the evaluation team. However, just over half of Warrington's participants identified having a specific medical condition, while Widnes has a significantly lower number of reported medical conditions.

## REFERRAL PROCESSES

Table 17: Referral to Offload (n and %)

Referral to Offload	All clubs	Salford Red Devils	Warrington Wolves	Vikings Sports
Word of mouth	257 (26.4%)	7 (2.2%)	51 (24.1%)	199 (43.7%)
Employment or training	379 (39.0%)	205 (65.1%)	44 (20.8%)	130 (29.2%)
Club contact	116 (11.9%)	36 (11.4%)	16 (7.5%)	64 (14.4%)
Health Care Professional	72 (7.4%)	28 (8.9%)	36 (17.0%)	8 (1.8%)
Probation/prison	54 (5.6%)	32 (10.2%)	22 (10.4%)	0 (0%)
Social media	42 (4.3%)	2 (0.6%)	21 (9.9%)	19 (4.3%)
Leaflet/poster	29 (3.0%)	0 (0%)	15 (7.1%)	14 (3.1%)
Match day	14 (1.4%)	2 (0.6%)	5 (2.4%)	7 (1.8%)
Community club	5 (0.5%)	3 (1.0%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.2%)

Two-fifths of participants heard about Offload through their place of employment or training and just over a quarter by word of mouth. The figures typically reflect the settings in which the clubs delivered Offload. Most notably, Salford delivered the majority of their fixtures in workplaces and prisons, while Warrington focused their delivery on open drop in sessions each. Offload was also successful at engaging a number of men from the armed forces (3.8% of participants) or prison (7.5%) populations which are at increased risk of poor mental health, mental illness and suicide.

## BIG LOTTERY OUTCOMES

The nine Big Lottery outcomes and their respective targets were developed by the Steering Group which comprised of representatives from RLC and State of Mind Sport, the relevant Rugby League Club's Foundation Managers and health professionals. Following the allocation of funding, the outcomes – which were guided by the Big Lottery – were determined and are outlined below:

1. Participant will report having a better understanding of their health and wellbeing needs.
2. Participants will express a desire for change and increase their interest in education, training and employment.
3. Participants will report having better coping strategies.
4. Participants report having a better understanding of their own behavior and are more able to manage crisis.
5. Participants report fewer distressing incidents with family members.
6. Participants report improved relationships with family members.
7. Participants report an increase in their volunteering time.
8. Participants report accessing additional community activities.
9. People using the service will feel less lonely and isolated.

Data for each outcome were collected through a questionnaire in the first and tenth week (or the first and sixth week for organisations or workplaces) of the season of fixtures. The participants were asked nine questions and provided their response on a scale of one to ten, and number of days for the time spent volunteering. Of the 972 men who engaged, 699 provided complete pre- and post- data for analysis.

## ALL CLUBS

Table 18: Big Lottery outcomes (all clubs)

	Total Response			
	Total Respondents (of 972)	Positive Improvement	% Positive Improvement	Target %
1. How aware are you of how to look after your health and wellbeing?	699	542	78%	60%
2. Are you keen to make a change to improve your education, training or employment situation?	699	439	63%	50%
3. How would you rate your ability to cope with everyday life?	699	517	74%	90%
4. How able do you feel to manage setbacks and challenging situations?	699	507	73%	60%
5. How often do you experience challenging situations with your family?	699	341	49%	30%
6. How would you rate the strength of your relationship with your family?	699	460	66%	80%
7. How regularly do you take part in local activities (e.g. swimming, walking, going to the Rugby, accessing local services such as libraries etc.)	699	370	53%	50%
8. In the past 2 weeks, how many days have you spent volunteering or supporting your local area?	699	156	22%	40%
9. How would you rate the support around you?	699	457	65%	90%

The red and green coding represents whether that Big Lottery outcome met the target set at the onset of the programme. Overall, just over three quarters of men felt they were more aware of how to look after their health and wellbeing having attended Offload, and just under three quarters felt better able

to cope with everyday life and manage setbacks and challenging situations. Over one-half of participants felt they had a stronger relationship with their family, while just under one-half experienced fewer challenging situations with their family. All of the outcomes indicated that Offload was able to increase awareness of mental health and illness, help men to deal with challenging situations and setbacks, make positive changes to their education or employment, and begin to increase time spent taking part in local activities. Although some outcomes did not meet the initial targets set by both the Offload Steering Group and the Big Lottery (discussed below), each of the nine outcomes did improve between the completion of the pre- and post-questionnaire. Seventy four percent of men felt more able cope with everyday life, 66% said that they now have a stronger relationship with their family and 65% felt they have more support around them.

Although the questionnaire responses were self-reported, they nevertheless reflected the individual's awareness of their health and wellbeing and their ability to cope with everyday life and manage challenging situations. Self-perception of health and wellbeing should consider the broader social context in which data are being collected, including education, available information about illness and treatment, and access to health facilities (Sen, 2002). In the case of Offload, men often made reference to self and social stigma when completing the questionnaire which may have encouraged them to over-score their responses when completing the pre-questionnaire. Some of the men explained this to the evaluation team:

*"I think when you walk in and you sit down, you kind of feel that you might be in a better place than you actually are, even though you need to be here... even when you know things are still wrong, you still really don't want to admit it."*

*"You don't know yourself where you're at. You know you're not in a good place, but it's hard to answer questions about it."*

*"I thought I'd answered the questions honestly when I first started, but then when I had to do it again after the review, then I did it honestly. I thought: 'I've not moved in many things, is that because I wasn't honest in the first place?'"*

Twenty-two percent of participants increased the number of days they spent volunteering or supporting their local community. This outcome was perhaps less successful since none of the clubs had formally developed pathways for men to take-up volunteering opportunities both in their Foundations and their respective local communities. Some of the participants volunteered during Offload sessions by helping other men feel welcome to the group and ensuring new men were provided with the data collection documents and briefed about their purpose. Actions like these were perhaps not viewed as formal voluntary acts by the men and were not reflected in the responses recorded for time spent volunteering. Since Offload attracted many men who were employed, this may also have limited the time available for them to undertake volunteering. Learning from this and the volunteering protocol going forward can be found on Page 48.

Outcome Five (assessing how often men experiencing challenging situations with their family members, and Outcome Six (how the men rate the strength of their relationship with family members) were lower than expected at the outset. In its design phase, discussions took place about how Offload might be able to engage and support family members of the men to improve those relationships. Those thoughts were not developed as the programme progressed into its pilot phase, however it may be worthy of exploration in the future.

## INDIVIDUAL CLUB SUMMARY

Table 19: Big Lottery outcomes for responses to pre- and post-questionnaires

	Salford Red Devils (total respondents 195/315)	Warrington Wolves (total respondents 203/212)	Vikings Sports (total respondents 301/445)
	% Positive Improvement	% Positive Improvement	% Positive Improvement
1. How aware are you of how to look after your health and wellbeing?	73%	84%	76%
2. Are you keen to make a change to improve your education, training or employment situation?	52%	62%	70%
3. How would you rate your ability to cope with everyday life?	72%	73%	76%
4. How able do you feel to manage setbacks and challenging situations?	71%	71%	74%
5. How often do you experience challenging situations with your family?	43%	67%	41%
6. How would you rate the strength of your relationship with your family?	49%	76%	70%
7. How regularly do you take part in local activities (e.g. swimming, walking, going to the Rugby, accessing local services such as libraries etc.)	30%	62%	61%
8. In the past 2 weeks, how many days have you spent volunteering or supporting your local area?	19%	29%	20%
9. How would you rate the support around you?	49%	70%	73%

Of Salford's 315 men who engaged with Offload, 195 (61.9%) completed both pre- and post-questionnaires, 203 of Warrington's 212 men completed both (95.8%), and 301 of Widnes' 445 men (67.6%) did. Due to a larger proportion of Widnes and Salford's sessions being delivered in closed settings, it was more difficult to gain responses for both the pre- and post- questionnaires given the nature of some of the organisations in which Offload was being delivered. Some organisations were restricted to a one-hour slot which covered the time needed for the fixture delivery with little time to complete the questionnaires. Hence, some forms were delayed on return, or did not have complete data.

For Salford's participants, around three-quarters feel better able to look after their health and wellbeing, and cope with everyday life and challenging situations. Few participated in more local activities and just under 2 in 10 spend more days volunteering.

For Warrington's participants, just over 8 in 10 felt more aware about how to look after their health and wellbeing. Around three-quarters of the men feel better able to cope with everyday life and manage challenging situations and rated the support around them as better. Over one-half of participants participated in more local activities, and nearly 30% engaged in more days volunteering.

For Vikings Sports' participants, approximately three-quarters felt more aware of how to look after their health and wellbeing, cope with everyday life, manage challenging setbacks, had a better relationship with their family and had better support around them. Just under three-quarters were keen to make a change or improve their education, training or employment status.

In line with the Big Lottery outcomes, the focus groups elicited that some men showed low-level increase and understanding of mental fitness and techniques to deal with challenging situations, and reduce possible development of more complex mental health conditions:

*"One of the relaxation therapy sessions was assessing where you control your breathing and you step back from a situation and wait and stop, because people jump into things without thinking... That was a good session for me."*

*"It's helping me to deal with everyday life and basically get on with life."*

*"I sometimes have trouble sleeping but we've learned about controlling your breathing and that's helped me learn to relax my body more and help me get better sleep."*

As well as helping to deal with low-level mental health conditions, it also became apparent that Offload increased the ability of men to cope with more severe mental illness, and, in some cases, stopped suicidal ideation and/or attempts:

*"It's helped me understand where your mental health baseline is, and I know I'm going to have bad day but it's a case of ok, today is a bad day and I know I can do a few things and get myself back and I have a good day."*

*"I can honestly say Offload saved my life. Because that night that I went to Offload for the very first time, I was planning to do it again and so, I can't sing its praises enough to be honest, I wouldn't be here without it."*

*"I wouldn't be here today without any hesitation, without Offload. I can't say enough, without Offload, it literally saved my life."*

## *FOCUS GROUPS WITH THE PARTICIPANTS*

This section outlines the key findings of the focus groups held with the participants to whom the evaluation team had access at each of the clubs. An overall summary is presented first followed by a summary of the findings for each club. To facilitate comparison between clubs, the data are presented according to the following key topics: attending Offload, the fixtures and rugby league brand, group dynamics, head coaches, key impacts, and continued engagement.

### **SUMMARY**

In each of the three clubs, men joined Offload for various reasons including as a form of self-help, to raise their awareness of mental health, to meet similar men, to support a friend or following suicidal ideation or behaviour, or because they were recommended by family members.

There were several key features to which the claimed success of the programme was attributed. Firstly, the brand of rugby league and using rugby league language and terminology throughout the fixtures was, in many cases, an initial hook to engage men in Offload and maintain their attendance. The language, in particular, differed to the language typically used in other mental health services and this made the fixtures more accessible as the men felt better able to relate to terms such as a 'building mental fitness' and 'head coaches', rather than 'mental health' and 'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy'. Further, the fixtures were held in the club stadium and this reduced the stigma associated with being a male and seeking help for their mental health. In particular, the men appreciated that Offload was not delivered in a clinical environment, with many identifying the stadium as a positive place and somewhere their rugby league idols build their own mental fitness.

Extending the Rugby League theme, many of the positive experiences, men discussed were related to the fact Offload was a group-based programme which involved them being around other men who had experienced similar mental illness. This provided a sense of relief and feeling that they were 'not the only one' experiencing mental health problems which, alongside conversations about rugby league, aided the groups to gel. The men also liked the non-judgemental and informal nature that the fixtures adopted since it contrasted stigmatised attitudes of mental health seen elsewhere. Here, the men felt that they could speak openly and honestly about their mental health without being judged or becoming isolated.

As previously mentioned, Offload is delivered by former rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness expert and they were a key success of the programme. The head coaches made the programme content more accessible to the men while adding value to the fixtures and offering alternative methods to cope with challenging situations through their own experiences with mental health problems, illness and suicidal ideation. The men explained many positive benefits from engaging with Offload including increased confidence and self-esteem (both in themselves and to be able to talk about their mental health), development of coping mechanisms, improved sleep, reduced substance abuse, better dietary choices and increased physical activity.

## SALFORD RED DEVILS FOUNDATION

### ATTENDING OFFLOAD

The Salford Red Devils Foundation delivered the Offload fixtures in workplaces, prisons, probation centres, mental health units and Princes Trust groups. Of the organisations the research team had access to, 13 men took part in two focus groups.

Many of the participants who attended Offload had experienced common mental health related problems, including low self-esteem, poor sleep patterns, and stress, and some had experiences with low level depression and anxiety.

The participants, who attended through their workplace, acknowledged that male mental health is a current issue across the population, and chose to engage to learn more about mental fitness:

*"Because it was on offer, and that fact that it wasn't going to hurt either way, either you did or you didn't, that's pretty much why I took it up anyway."*

Few participants spoke about their experiences with depression, anxiety, and difficult situations. These participants chose to attend Offload as a method of self-help and learning how to manage challenging situations:

*"I started, I asked my boss because my wife passed away seven years ago and I never ever got any counselling, and no one ever put me in the direction of counselling, so I thought I'd go in and do it."*

*"For me, I've had some mental problems in my own family and I suffered a bit myself, so any kind of knowledge or anything I can gain from it I was interested in."*

Some men found that Offload was being delivered by their employer through posters on notice boards and online bulletins. Others became aware through a Workplace Mental Health Day where the potential delivery of Offload was mentioned and sounded attractive to the men, as one participant explained: *"They said they were surprised with the uptake"*. One participant was particularly appreciative of his workplace offering a mental health programme during their working hours, rather than just mentioning the importance of looking after your mental health and wellbeing. He said: *"I'm glad it existed and was put forward to us. It's been a good thing, and people felt there was something in it, there was actually substance behind it."*

### THE RUGBY LEAGUE BRAND

For some men, Offload's affiliation with the brand of rugby league enhanced the initial attraction of the programme. As one participant explained, for those who had an interest in rugby league: *"It sort of did with some people in our group who had a strong interest with rugby as well, it was a bit of a draw"*. For others, they had previously read published stories about rugby league players and mental health, and these stories helped some participants engage:

*"A lot of the rugby stories had been in the press as well with the young lads who'd suffered when they left and things like that, so we knew of some of those."*

Generally, the brand of rugby league was not discussed extensively, and was not referred to as a reason for engaging or making the programme more accessible.

### FIXTURES IN THE STADIUM

Although the fixtures were delivered to staff employed by the host organisation, the fixtures were held at Salford Red Devil's stadium and the participants were provided with transport to access the venue.

For one participant, the stadium was a convenient place given the link the programme has to rugby league: *"it made sense really because it's rugby players doing the talks".*

Most of the conversations about the location of the fixtures being held in the stadium referred to it being *"a good environment"* because it was *"somewhere different"*. The participants explained that their employees are supportive about mental health, however going to Offload at a different location encouraged them to talk more openly among like-minded people, and not feel judged in doing so:

*"It was away from our workplace here. You would feel very anxious about saying things because, management and things like that people don't like that sort of thing, and there's other people who aren't interested in the mental health and might look at it in a different way, so it was nice detached away to somewhere else, where a group of people who are like-minded or more open to it."*

## **GROUP DYNAMICS**

The men who attended Offload were already part of pre-established groups, and they took part in the focus groups in those groups. One participant explained that some staff were willing to engage, and some were not:

*"Most people were understandable about it, not everyone on the team was going so it was a bit disruptive, but everyone could understand why we were doing what we were doing. Some people were on board and some people weren't, but everyone gave us the opportunity to go. There was no issues with that."*

It became apparent, however, that some of the men already knew about other colleagues' experiences with mental illness. For others, they were unaware that some of their colleagues had experienced similar situations and problems as themselves, and Offload offered an environment to talk:

*"It fitted in very well because the people we work with every day, you don't realise they suffer the same problems you do or have some understanding, and it was a good thing to actually do and talk to, even though we're with each other every day, there's issues we've never touched and because you can be a little bruised or a little bit stand back a bit. People did talk they were good, and you understand them a bit more as well as yourself",*

This often involved the *"use humour to deal with it"*. Some participants found it difficult to find time to look after their mental fitness and appreciated their employers providing them with time during their working hours as a group to attend the fixtures. One participant explained: *"to be given that in work for an hour just to go and not be sat about or be in the office, that was really powerful and useful"*.

The group setting also strengthened the support that men provided to each other when needed. Some participants explained that they spend a lot of time with their work colleagues and that they do become a group of people the men can talk to or turn to for support:

*"I think because we work together every day, we talk about issues every day any way, so everybody knows what everybody gets up to."*

*"It's one of them, it's opened doors, you're not on your own."*

For some participants, Offload increased their understanding of mental health and improved their confidence to talk about mental health related topics with their colleagues:

*"Even the lads we're very close and tell a lot of personal things to, we probably wouldn't have touched mental health, but now we will. Now we will say, and I have "I'm struggling today with my anxiety", and it's always "Ok, no problem"."*

## HEAD COACHES

Part of the success attributed to Offload was linked to the use of former rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness specialist who delivered the fixtures. In particular, the participants enjoyed the head coaches' stories about their personal difficulties, even though they were former sportsmen. Many of the experiences the head coaches spoke about resonated with the men:

*"Listening to the other fellas' experiences, I mean these are professional sportsmen. They've kind of had the world at their feet and a lot of them have lost everything and coming through that shows that it doesn't matter what you've got the problem will always seem to boil down to any personal issues, these fellas were losing millions and they still come through it."*

Some of the men also appreciated that the head coaches had been through similar experiences to themselves, which meant they related to the fixture content better:

*"I think someone who has had an issue in the family or themselves, really can be understanding, and I think that's when you've got a counsellor, they might have the best education but they've not gone through it themselves, or you might have somebody who's gone through it with no education who understands brilliantly, and there's a lot to that."*

The participants explained that the head coaches created a non-judgmental environment for them. This was important since the men said they were often reluctant to talk about their mental health because it implied weakness and generated feelings of embarrassment:

*"More jack the lad sort of thing. It's easier to open up to someone that's not a professional because you don't feel like you're getting judged or that."*

Rather than the head coaches positioning themselves as the authoritative person, the men liked that the head coaches told them to *"just jump in if you want to say something"*. This kept the fixtures interactive, so the men always had the opportunity to speak when they wanted and felt comfortable doing so. Some of the men spoke about the similarities between working in rugby league and the type of work they are involved in, and how this link made the programme more relatable:

*"I think they understood where we came from as well, more the manual side the physical, and the pressures of today you've got a job and tomorrow you've not, very relatable to rugby, but rugby is more condensed and in a quicker period. But for us, physical, you don't know if you've got a job today or tomorrow, and that sort of it is understandable."*

With this, the participants liked that the head coaches spoke in their type of language, making the fixtures more accessible, as one participant said: *"they was talking in our type of language, so that made it a lot easier"*.

## IMPACTS

At the time of joining Offload, this group experienced common low-level mental health conditions including low self-esteem, work related stress, depression and anxiety. In particular, the men enjoyed the mindfulness fixture with many suggest *"that was the best session that for me"*. One participant spoke about how the mindfulness helped him *"step back from a situation and wait and stop, because people jump into things without thinking"*, while others explained that they *"felt very relaxed afterwards, you felt lighter didn't you?"*. This session also helped one participant change his driving style:

*"One of the things I used to mention all the time was about driving, because I've got quite a long commute and I used to get really irate driving behind the wheel just when someone cuts you up, and I've actually changed, completely changed my driving style and just doing seventy and taking it easy."*

For some participants, Offload helped them to identify traits in themselves, similar to those of the head coaches. Raising the participants' awareness of mental health and factors that could later develop into a more complex mental illness encouraged men to practice coping strategies earlier:

*"It's helped self-recognition, so hearing other people's stories and methods could be more, you can notice some similar things in yourself, obviously not as extreme, but you can start. It's helpful to start recognising behaviours earlier".*

After the fixtures, conversations carried on during the journey back where the men discussed the fixture topic and how they relate to it. These conversations encouraged the men to listen and understand any situations or problems that may be happening in their colleagues' personal life:

*"I think more understanding of people's problems where sometimes you can be a bit short tempered and you think 'Come on, give it a second there might be more to it'."*

As the men spent a lot of time together in work, attending the fixtures in their employment group encouraged them to reduce the stigma of mental health in their workplace and support any member of staff who may be experiencing a period of poor mental health. Other positive impacts mentioned during the group discussions included men feeling able to open up about their mental health to family members and employers. One participant explained his reluctance to open up about his experiences with anxiety, however since completing Offload he felt better able to have conversations about his anxiety without self-stigmatising:

*"I've been able to get to a point where I can actually tell my wife and my kids, even my employer that I'm struggling a little bit. But I have got to a point where I could, before I would just keep it in, now I'm a lot more open about it to anybody really, I'll say "Yes I have got some anxiety problems", it's nicer to say "sod it, I've got it"."*

Many of the participants who engaged with Offload within workplaces or organisations were employees of a manual or labour workforce who are at an increased risk of suicide, and many were often physically inactive outside of work. Another participant has since started to increase his physical activity levels and improve his mental health through running:

*"I'm trying to run a bit more again, just trying to do a bit more exercise. Yes, so used it as an inspiration to get out after work you know, get the head clear and go for a run."*

## **CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT**

The men were offered Offload as a six-week programme to raise awareness about mental health and build their mental fitness. Their desire to attend the fixtures each week was due to a different head coach delivering each fixture. This was particularly enjoyable as it kept the men engaged for the season of fixtures, and they got to hear the head coaches' stories and perspectives about mental health conditions, how to manage them, and challenge negative thinking:

*"It was a different speaker each time and I think that helps, because it's a different perspective each time you go so not everyone's story is the same, and it is someone taking a small piece of each chunk and gives you a little bit of a different outlook on what you're doing and I think that helps, because I think if you've got the same person delivering all the time, and you take a dislike to a certain person you don't pay attention, it's different people doing different sessions and I think that helps. That's a good way of doing it."*

During their time on the programme, some men did not know the fixture topics in advance. This stimulated them to attend each week and go through the programme without any preconceptions or judgments about the areas they were going to discuss. Some participants were aware of the following week's topic, and this encouraged them to attend to explore the fixture topic in more detail:

*"A couple did know who was going to come the following week and it did give you a bit of a lead on and did make you, you'd get a little snippet of the story and it would make you want to go back and find out what the rest of the story was".*

Participants tended to only miss a fixture due to a work commitment or pre-arranged annual leave, and some participants expressed disappointment if they had to miss one:

*"Yes, just disappointed really. It would have been good to get to all of them I think definitely. But I did find as well that although you didn't get there, the next week you could pick up quite easily".*

For this group type, the men explained that they took away a variety of coping strategies and that there was no need to repeat the season of fixtures. However, the men were interested in any sessions that Salford could offer that would further their learning from Offload.

# WARRINGTON WOLVES FOUNDATION

## ATTENDING OFFLOAD

The Warrington Wolves Foundation delivered the majority of their Offload fixtures at the weekly drop in session based at the stadium, and 35 of these participants took part in the focus groups. Most participants reported they attended because they needed to engage with a service. Many participants said that they had experienced depression and anxiety, with some participants experiencing more complex mental health conditions including bipolar affective disorder, borderline personality disorder, PTSD, and suicidal ideation or attempts:

*"I came because I was at a crossroads, the crossroads being I can either sort myself out for the sake of my family, or for the sake of my own mental wellbeing, or I can carry on in a deep depression, feeling sorry for myself... just waiting for a better time to come around again."*

*"I was in quite a bad place and I tried taking my own life... I literally walked in and went and sat down and it was the best move I've ever done."*

For others, Offload was an immediate service that they could attend while waiting to access a service provided by the National Health Service:

*"Because there's nothing else out there, to be fair, there's nothing else out there. We're all down, well I am anyway, but we're all feeling down and when you try and get the help off the NHS or whoever, they just, five week waiting list six week waiting list."*

While the majority of participants explained engaging with Offload as a method of seeking-help, how they found out about Offload varied. The dominant method of engagement was through "word of mouth from a friend", and in particular from previous participants:

*"One of the lads who comes here told me about it and said you can just turn up, so that's what I did, and I'm thankful to him really because it's helped me a hell of a lot."*

*"There's a couple of lads there who I sort of had an awareness were coming, so I spoke to them, and they sort of reassured me that the atmosphere's good, and it's welcoming, and it was all those things, because it is a big deal walking through the door."*

Some spoke about becoming aware of Offload through their connection with the club as a season ticket holder, while a few "volunteer anyway at the Warrington Wolves Foundation". Conversely, others were provided information about Offload from another service, one participant said: "I'd seen the Offload thing in the doctors when I was taking my daughter to the doctors", and another explained:

*"I got recommended to Offload through Warrington Primary Care, I went to my GP, I was feeling really depressed, I didn't want to be here basically. I then rang Primary Care... the lady I spoke to at Primary Care had just heard of Offload, and she said "Try that, it's not like that you can go when you want. It's done at the rugby ground"."*

## THE RUGBY LEAGUE BRAND

Many participants explained that the rugby league theme was a valuable concept to base a mental fitness programme on. Initially, the brand of rugby league acted as a 'hook' to gain the interest of men who may be unknown to mental health services, or who have previously accessed services but wanted to try a non-clinical intervention to complement those services:

*"I wouldn't of started it, it wouldn't of got my interest, but it did because of the [rugby] theme it had. I've come across loads of, you know, nothing like this but similar in groups sessions and things like that, but this is completely different, it's a lot more interesting."*

Conversations around the Warrington Wolves first team dominated most of the initial conversations that took place at the beginning of each fixture. As many of the participants were season tickets holders

or “a big rugby league fan”, these conversations made the men feel at ease after arrival to their first fixture and integrate into the programme. Few participants explained that they followed a different rugby league team but attended the Warrington Offload squad because their team did not offer the programme. This did not act as a barrier; instead the variety of club fans, in particular other local rugby league clubs, encouraged rugby league ‘banter’ to facilitate more conversations, encourage the men to gel as a squad, and created an environment of “rugby club humour”, a situation familiar to the men.

In contrast, a couple of participants did not realise the programme was derived from concepts of rugby league, as one explained:

*“I didn’t realise it was what it was when I got here, I didn’t realise it was in the changing room and the purpose was round the rugby fixtures... I didn’t realise it was going to be so sport based. I actually like it because it buys in to us.”*

Another participant who moved into the area explained that:

*“Most people here are from Warrington, I moved here for work purposes. I knew a bit about rugby league but I would never like, I wasn’t a massive fan of it, wasn’t a massive fan of Warrington, for me I came here because I’d accepted I needed some help and I knew that State of Mind done a workplace presentation in my work and Offload has kind of been a small part of it, yes. I think it’s the bit, you know sports related, it kind of helps me as a guy.”*

Although these participants were not aware that the theme of the fixtures was related to rugby league or did not themselves follow rugby league, Offload’s connection to sport more broadly facilitated the programme to be accessible to those who did not have a primary interest in rugby. Further, the analogy that “you get fit to go and play rugby” so go to Offload “to be mentally fit”, and learn how players, referees and coaches from Super League cope with challenging situations, reduced the stigma associated with being a male with mental illness.

## **FIXTURES IN THE STADIUM**

The participants liked the fact that the fixtures were held in the rugby stadium, in particular the first team dressing room because “It’s not in a clinical environment”. As the stadium is also a setting where a variety of community activities and health programmes are held, attending the fixtures there reduced the stigma of seeking help for mental illness because no one knew why the men were there when they walked in:

*“Here, you could be walking in to do weight training or a different class, you could be doing anything. There’s no embarrassment of walking into this place.”*

The participants also agreed that they felt empowered and important walking into the stadium, as it is the side of the stadium that they would not typically be able to access, as one participant explained: “I feel good walking through here, it’s just bizarre isn’t it. Sometimes you feel you have this hero status”. Continuing this, some participants discussed the nature of the stadium being “bit of a matcho place and people come here and literally have a battle on a field over a rugby ball”. The stadium’s association with male stereotypical characteristics such as being ‘tough’ and ‘in control’ juxtaposes the participants actual behaviour and willingness to speak about their experiences and show emotion throughout the fixtures with other men.

## **GROUP DYNAMICS**

Many of the positive experiences that the participants expressed were related to being around other men who had similar experiences as themselves:

*“From what I’ve been told we’ve all had suicidal thoughts or tried to do it, just feel comfortable in this group knowing you’re not the only one, there is others, it does help.”*

*“I think when I first came through the door, I had this mixed feeling, “goodness me, it’s not only me”. I had this mixed feeling, I felt sad that everyone else was going through the same issues, but at the same time relieved.”*

This was notably important as many of the participants have previously engaged with services that provide talking therapies, but on an individual basis. Although most participants mentioned that they took skills and some positive experiences away from counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy, they still felt isolated in their symptoms. Hence, the opportunity to get to know men who had similar experiences and listen to each other was well received as it offered a sense of relief that the participants were not the only one experiencing mental illness, substance use disorders, and suicidal ideation. Through the conversations, it became evident that it was the lived experiences that each participant had been through that enabled the groups to gel so positively. A couple of younger participants explained that *"age is not a thing"*, and although they were younger than the average age of attendees, there was no exclusion caused by this. Rather, it was a helpful group feature, as one participant said: *"Sometimes that age gap can help as well, because we've experienced different things in life"*.

Many of the participants enjoyed the informal and non-judgmental nature of the fixtures. As many of the participants experienced anxiety or perceived barriers to help-seeking, attending a new session was a difficult experience. The Foundation staff and other Offload participants made each other feel welcome and at ease when they entered the stadium:

*"I get nervous in new situations whether I start a new job or a new shop or whatever, and coming here it's hard enough for me to go somewhere new, but you walk in, hand shake, you just get made to feel welcome. It's like a huge relief lifted off your shoulders."*

*"The lads when you come in, they all shake your hand and ask 'You alright? How're you doing?', and it's just that nice, nobody is judging you, and I think that's what you want."*

In addition, the men spoke favourably about not having to introduce themselves at the beginning of each fixture:

*"Like when you turn up, there's no pressure, it's not, 'Hi, what's your name? Where do you come from?' You just sit down and just get to chat to whoever you want, about whatever you want."*

During the fixtures, there is not a requirement for the men to explain why they had attended and this created a non-judgmental and non-stigmatised atmosphere for when the participants did choose to speak about their experiences:

*"Nobody's judging you... but we've all got our issues were we're trying to help each other out. He listens to me, he listens to me, I listen to him... then he goes 'I'm a bit like that in my head, he's a bit like that in his head' and it's like, it's just a good release."*

Elaborating this and the way that the group has gelled, the participants discussed how they are now *"like a rugby team"*. The feeling of becoming a team further highlighted how the men were not the only ones experiencing mental illness, and that there was genuine concern for each member of the 'team' and their wellbeing:

*"The camaraderie, the way that lads, for me anyway, seeing the way lads interact, they're all at different levels but it doesn't really matter what level you're at, it just seems that everybody is genuinely concerned about everybody else as well, and you are a team."*

Although Offload explores sensitive matters and the men had been through some difficult experiences, this also gave them an *"opportunity to have a laugh"* and enjoy the fixtures.

The group nature of the fixtures encouraged the men to form a social network and provide support to those when they need it. Some of the men discussed how they now have friends and a social circle outside of family life, as one participant explained that: *"At forty-eight, I've finally got friends, where in the past, I told people to get stuffed, get away, leave me alone"*. Other participants now saw their Offload squad as a second family:

*"Warrington Wolves and Offload has become my second family. It's been a lifeline, and without these lads, and without Warrington Wolves, I wouldn't be here. They've saved my life, in more ways than one."*

All participants explained that the squad is now their support network and they have *"always got someone to talk to and someone that can help you through, so it's always a good thing"*. The men found this to be extremely valuable as this form of support came from other men who were like themselves and experiencing similar issues or thoughts. The participants in this squad set up a private Facebook group to provide support to their fellow participants when they needed it outside of the Offload fixtures, and all of the men found this to be an immediate source of support at a time when they were *"feeling down"* or *"having a rubbish day"*:

*"These lads are here 24/7 for anybody, and I've seen it on the Offload Facebook page, how they support and help people, and it's not just mental. If you've had a bad day, you can put on there, 'I need help', and somebody will be there to help you. 'Come for a cup of coffee. Do you want me to pick you up, do this, do that?' And just that thing by being able to do that and have the support, it's just brilliant."*

Interestingly, some of the participants mentioned that the support of the other participants, both at the fixture sessions and through the Facebook group, enabled them to stay feeling good when they were in a 'good place', as one participant explained:

*"There's somebody to support me, and because usually when I'm in a good place, there's no support around, and I end up going back down again, and if I'm good, I can keep going good, because I've got this supporting me, and I think it's unique. It's just fantastic, really."*

In these supportive contexts, the men felt comfortable showing emotions and expressing their feelings at difficult times with other Offload participants, something that they felt they could not do with any existing male friendships outside of Offload:

*"I find myself more nervous in a group of what I supposedly call mates at my rugby club than I do in this room. I can't walk in, you know what rugby clubs are like, I can't walk into a room with my team mates and be like this, you can't do it."*

## **HEAD COACHES**

All participants agreed that the Offload delivery staff were critical to the success of the programme. For the participants, learning how to cope with challenging situations from the head coaches appeared to be meaningful and accessible given their experience of mental illness and suicidal ideation which they brought to the delivery:

*"it's like rugby/football I say, the best coaches are always the one that's played the game, the ones who haven't played the game, yes, they make loads of tactics, but they don't actually know how to implement it, and I think that's what these guys do. They actually know the tactics and they actually have played the game and been depressed or suicidal."*

In addition, the head coaches were described as being 'on the same level' as the men, and were empathetic and concerned. The men felt comfortable asking the head coaches questions about their story or similar situations they had experienced because *"the answer actually comes from them [head coaches]"*, and appreciated the time that the head coaches would take time to express their concern:

*"I was in a really dark place, and he rang me and talked me out of it... Danny is this big sports guy that you think wouldn't have time for someone like me, so that was fantastic."*

Further, the participants enjoyed how the head coaches would deliver the fixture to suit the needs of the group, and this was attributed to the way head coaches would address the theme of the fixture, but *"step off script"*. Participants explained that the head coaches 'stepping off script' encouraged conversations about matters personal to the group and *"people who don't usually speak start getting a bit of confidence to speak up"*. The men are able to attend the season of fixtures more than once, and

those that have explained the delivery of all fixtures is different each time. Although the fixture topics remain the same each season, the varying topics discussed throughout enables learning to happen each week, irrespective of how many seasons the men have attended:

*"because they go off script. I've watched Jimmy, I think I've sat in his three times, and it's always different so, you can always pick up something different each time."*

## IMPACTS

At the time of joining Offload, many of the participants *"used to hide it [mental health]"* and would *"smile and laugh and act fine"*. Some of the men *"lost a job due to a condition through the mental health"*, while others *"just kept going back to the doctors saying the same old thing getting the same old medication and living in a loop"*, were socially isolated, unmotivated, and obtained a personal negative attitude. Since engaging with Offload some participants now felt more confident, and this confidence was in two parts. First, many of the men had difficulty with low self-esteem, but reported they now felt more confident in themselves generally and when dealing with challenging situations:

*"I've had a belly full of being depressed and trying to make me feel good, and trying to please other people before I please myself, and like other people before I like myself, and now I'm starting to like myself for what I am as a person."*

*"when I first started coming to Offload I was extremely down about myself, I could never do anything right if you ask me, you know I'd always be extremely negative about myself. And now when or if I do make a mistake, I don't beat myself up so much about it anymore, it's just like oh I've made a mistake, and I can kind of brush it off and build myself back up."*

Second, many of the men now felt able to *"talk with confidence"* about their mental health problems away from the Offload setting, as one participant said: *"I've now got the confidence to actually talk about what I suffer outside of Offload"*. This man talked about how Offload has enabled him to identify possible symptoms of poor mental health among other men and offer support: *"I've got the confidence to have a conversation with them, to bring them down to Offload now"*.

It was apparent that many of the participants were extremely socially isolated due to their mental health condition and/or a life changing event. Offload encouraged these men to leave their houses:

*"I had health issues and anxiety, because of losing my father in law and that, I think I'd constantly be sat at home doing nothing, constantly thinking there'd be something wrong with me, without having this I'd still be there now sat on the couch doing nothing."*

For other men, enhanced social contact and discouraged suicidal ideation or attempts:

*"Without this, this programme being here, I'd be gone, because I was extremely serious about taking my own life. I planned it all out, Offload stopped me doing that."*

*"I can honestly say Offload saved my life. Because that night that I went to Offload for the very first time, I was planning to do it again and so, I can't sing its praises enough to be honest, I wouldn't be here without it."*

Many men also explained how they found it difficult to sleep and, for them, the mindfulness session in particular was positively received by those who were frustrated at being unable to get to sleep or remain asleep. Hence, this session was reported as helping men to regain a sleeping pattern:

*"Before I came to Offload, I never slept, I never slept at all, and if I woke up in the night, I would never get back to sleep. Now, I go to sleep every night, and if I wake up, I'm back to sleep within five minutes, just by following what Russell's taught me. And it sounds simple, but it's absolutely, it is life-changing."*

All participants agreed that Offload helped them develop new coping strategies for stressful or difficult situations. As the men are around other men who have had similar experiences with their mental health, they would discuss and trial the coping mechanisms that the head coaches and others in squad use:

*"It teaches you how to cope, it gives you really good coping strategies, with different sessions with people who have been through it."*

From the focus group discussions it was evident that this squad took a group approach to developing and using coping mechanisms, which mirrored the 'team' atmosphere and the desire to help each other as well as themselves that was established:

*"The thing I like about it is obviously we're all in the same boat and what other people, other people have got their coping techniques that they use, and we can all try and use other people's and vice versa."*

Substance abuse was commonly referred to as a method of coping prior to Offload. One player talked about how Offload has offered alternative methods of dealing with emotions and challenging situations:

*"I used to just turn to drugs and alcohol, and that's what I used to do every weekend, most nights, but now I don't. Every time I feel down, I don't bother, I do something else that keeps me going, and loads of things I do now like exercise that keeps me occupied instead of going out drinking and wishing my life away just because I have one bad day."*

Among the participants, there was an acknowledgement of the benefits that physical activity can have on the men's mental health. Some spoke about how they now engage in physical activity, including walking and running, to positively impact their mental health:

*"It's that positive to just go forward and get, not just your mental fitness, but your normal fitness, and getting you doing things like, instead of just sitting at home watching the telly, going out for a walk or instead of jumping in the car, walking back and to places."*

For some, a small focus on physical activity appears to have had a positive benefit with associated engagement in challenging bike rides and half marathons to raise awareness of Offload and fundraise for various mental health charities. Regardless of their level of physical activity, the men discussed a sense of achievement from increasing their physical and mental fitness, and positive impacts their self-esteem due to further benefits including weight loss and regaining their enjoyment of being physically active:

*"I've gone back playing rugby and I've dropped two stone... I go out more now I started playing again albeit for the masters team."*

## **CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT**

Although Offload was only intended to be a 10-week programme, some men continued to engage with Offload following the completion of their first season of fixtures. Participants explained that Offload gave them *"that Tuesday night where you can get away from family and other people and just have that time to yourself"*, and *"no matter what comes along Tuesday is the night I've committed to Offload and that has to stay"*.

Offload was described by this group as a *"secure"* place that they can access at a time of need. The opportunity to continue attending the fixtures was very positively valued and compared to other services – where sessions were limited with inadequate follow-up – support was available if they felt vulnerable or in need of active support. For most, Offload became a routine part of their week which they would only miss if they could not attend:

*"The only time I've missed is when I've been on holiday"*.

*"I'm not going to be here next week, and I know it's going to be playing on my mind"*.

Although the men felt that they needed to attend the fixtures again or the Extra Time sessions, this squad's Offload Facebook group meant that the men felt they were always near Offload throughout the week or if they were unable to attend:

*"I've also realised as well is that I wasn't away from it, because I'm on the Offload group every day, because the lads post things. Even somebody posting some horrendous joke that's not funny, it makes you go and look at it... So although I was away for two weeks, I wasn't."*

This desire to attend the fixtures each week was often attributed to their experiences with other services, which often had a set number of weeks attached to it, as explained by one participant:

*"So what I've struggled with in the past is, I've seen a counsellor for six weeks, and then after that six weeks I'm just left, and I go up and down".*

Although the participants gained useful skills and knowledge from other services, the set number of sessions elevated concern about where the men could go if they needed further help. Offload complemented these services as a place the men could go each week and seek this support, *"as I know that every Tuesday, I can come down here, I can just sit and listen, I can talk"*.

# VIKINGS SPORTS FOUNDATION

## ATTENDING OFFLOAD

The Vikings Sport Foundation delivered many of their Offload fixtures at the weekly evening drop in session based at the stadium. Much of their delivery occurred in local male-dominated workplaces and community settings. The data presented for Vikings Sports Foundation are derived from a combination of the two delivery settings (open opt in and relatively opt in groups) and 19 men took part in the focus groups.

Many of the participants have experienced low-level mental health conditions including depression and anxiety, while a few explained their experience with PTSD, suicidal ideation and/or attempts. The men chose to attend Offload as they recognised they needed to seek help for a mental health condition or symptoms:

*"I started myself trying to keep physically fit, but I realised I mentally wasn't"*

*"To see if it could help me get out of a pit I was in... What it was at the time, I'd just lost my mum and then five days later I lost my brother and then when I went back to work, my boss started picking on me every day, and I couldn't put up with it."*

Another said: *"Because I was struggling... When I mean struggling, I mean going to [location] bridge [to take my own life]"*.

Some participants also joined Offload to *"learn more about mental health"*, and this included their own and others' mental health:

*"even though my problems are obviously personal to me, everybody else has still got issues that could lead to where I ended up, and that's just not going to happen so for me it's more of a learning curve coming here, just trying to understand other people's issues and what makes them tick and what help they needed."*

The participants generally became aware of the programme through *"the Widnes Vikings club, the booklets and websites"*. Some participants were made aware of the programme through the club's social media platforms, while a couple found out through RLC's social media platforms and the work of State of Mind Sport.

## THE RUGBY LEAGUE BRAND

The majority of participants from both the open opt in groups and the relatively opt in group said that the link with the club and brand of rugby league was an initial attraction. One participant said: *"The draw for me was because it was linked with the rugby"*. This association with rugby league was often referred to as *"a common interest"* and *"helps get you through the door"*. Those participants who did not identify themselves as a rugby league fan explained that this did not hinder or affect their engagement with the programme in anyway, as one participant said: *"I'm not a big rugby fan myself, but I thought a chance to improve my mental health, regardless of whether your rugby background is good or not"*. Many participants suggested that the alternative environment provided by a professional sports club was an attractive setting in which to engage in help-seeking behaviours:

*"Even though I'm not a massive rugby fan, still the fact that a club that are playing the top level of their sport are still doing this and putting things on, and that was something that attracted me to it. It wasn't being Widnes fan, it was still something that I thought I want to get involved in."*

These participants elaborated further about how the rugby league theme made learning about their mental fitness more accessible and relatable:

*"As all male and the link to rugby, I guess does help me get through that door a bit better, but if it was a general counselling group, you would just think maybe that's not right you know."*

In particular, the rugby league language that structured the fixtures reframed clinical terminology and skills so these were easier to understand, and made the content more relevant to needs of the participant. Some participants mentioned a comparison to a skill provided by a different service, that they *"think the rugby thing allows us to relate. Like about that beach ball that sounds ridiculous I couldn't relate to that [from a different service]"*. Although the fixture content was derived from evidence-based ideas used in clinical practice, using the brand of rugby league and its language to adapt such practices reduced any *"barriers to come through the door"* that men typically cite as reasons for not seeking help from a medical professional.

## FIXTURES IN THE STADIUM

The participants liked the fixtures being held in the stadium and explained that it was a convenient and accessible setting as *"the stadium is more or less known by everybody"*. From the discussions, it appeared to be important that the stadium was seen as a *"neutral place"* for the fixtures to be held, in a setting that was away from clinical environments, and *"doesn't feel too overly professional"*. This complemented well the experiences the participants had of other forms of help including cognitive behavioural therapy and counselling.

All participants also explained that the stadium was *"a safe environment"*. When asked if they would have attended Offload in its same format, but in a different community location such as a college or library, the participants expressed an unwillingness and a sense of fear about this. One participant who experienced severe PTSD said: *"As I say, this is a safe space [the stadium], the college wouldn't be a safe space"*, while another participant suggested that other locations that are more formal or professional might *"set off triggers"*. Although many of the participants have engaged with health services previously, they suggested they would feel uncomfortable participating in a programme that was led by Widnes Vikings but delivered in a more professional setting. Hence, for the groups who attended the drop in sessions, the fixtures being held in the stadium was vital to its positive outcomes for the men.

Widnes Vikings also delivered some seasons in venues away from the stadium, and one group who engaged in the evaluation attended Offload at the housing setting in which they live. This group, where it was targeted at men aged fifty-five and above, appreciated Widnes Vikings bringing Offload to them, and from the discussions, this location did not appear to cause negative experiences with Offload. This may be due to the room used being familiar as it is where the men took part in other activities such as yoga as part of a pre-established group.

## GROUP DYNAMICS

The group setting in which Offload was delivered was particularly important for the participants. As men experiencing mental illness are often socially isolated, the participants in this cohort liked that they were all *"in the same boat"*. This created the feeling that the participants were not the only ones experiencing mental health problems or illness:

*"Once you get here, I find you realise you're in a room full of people who've all had similar experiences and suffering with similar things, and you realise it's not just you, it normalises it."*

Many of the participants had sought help from a different service or intervention prior to Offload. Most of the participants had some positive experiences of other services but did not always like the one-to-one nature of them since they perceived this as daunting and somewhat pressurised. The group setting meant the focus of each session was not directly on any individual, and the opportunity to listen and speak up in the presence of others with similar experiences was preferred:

*"If you go and see a counsellor, it's one on one, it's very intrusive isn't it, sometimes you're reluctant to open up to them."*

*"You can come here and not want to engage and you, you can come here and be having a bad day, come and just listen to everybody and that will help you... you just think I'm not crazy I'm not, I'm just doing exactly the same thing, so yes, I think the group dynamic of it works massively, it's certainly helping me so far yes."*

It seemed that the male group setting was important as it contrasted to the stigmatised attitudes they experienced elsewhere. Here, the men felt that they could speak about their experiences, feelings and emotions in a non-judgmental environment:

*"You can say what you want to say, the way that you want to say it, and we don't hold it against you."*

*"We've all got our own problems, we all never judge each other."*

Moreover, the participants arrived at Offload with the preconception that they would be expected to stand up and explain who they are and why they were there. The participants were often relieved when they realised this was not a requirement. This, in turn, created an informal and relaxed atmosphere to the fixtures:

*"It's a very informal session when you come in, a lot of people expect you to be basically be asked to stand up and tell your name and give your story there and then, I think that's what probably puts a lot of people off but, actually coming through the door was the hardest bit and realising that it's informal, you can divulge as much as you want."*

The participants explained that Tuesday evenings were a time to catch up with the other participants and talk about the previous week. Many of the men found that Offload encouraged a supportive social network to form among the men so *"when you're having a dip you can call on someone"*. This is what the participants explained they lacked away from Offload. Using the rugby league metaphor themselves, the participants explained how they were now a 'team' and saw each other as 'family', as one participant said that *"you feel part of a team don't you, you feel like you're in it together... these people are like family to me"*.

The groups at Widnes' delivery of Offload were often smaller which enhanced the social relationships that developed between the men, and the participants often spoke about the levels of care and concern they had for each other. With the men's increased knowledge of mental health, they now also attended Offload to *"make sure everyone else is alright as well as yourself"*. This support and will to help each other was valuable as it was from other men who were experiencing similar thoughts, feelings, emotions and events as themselves.

## HEAD COACHES

Part of the attraction of attending Offload was the knowledge that former rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness specialist were delivering the fixtures. As many of the participants have previously accessed other mental health services, there was a general consensus amongst the men that they preferred the fixtures being delivered by people who are not clinical experts in the field:

*"In a way they are the ones that have conquered their own problems and have become more experts in their own way, but they're not an academic expert."*

*"It's the things they say that they aren't professionals, they don't know it all, they're just telling you their experience, I think that's key, the delivery of it is very well done in that respect."*

The participants described the head coaches as inspiring, honest and relatable. Some participants *"didn't expect the presenters to have been through what you've been through"*, and others felt *"they get us they've been through it"*, and *"it puts things into perspective"*. The men valued the head coaches' willingness to share their own personal struggles, which in most cases, resonated with the men's:

*"Jimmy, I thought was really quite inspiring, it puts things into perspective what he's gone through and what you're dealing with, and you know if he can deal with what he's had to then I can get over this"*.

*"Listening to people like that, and some of them are people I've admired because I am a Rugby League fan, when I've seen what they've been through, it made it easier for me to Offload my problems in front of a few people which I wouldn't have done before."*

Further, the head coaches' readiness to show emotion during the fixtures contrasted with traditional male stereotypes and normalised expressing all emotions:

*"He always looks as if he's about to burst into tears you know and he is, they do get, they're really into it, they're really emotional, and I think that's something we've not really talked about. The fact is, we've touched on it, but it's getting away from that stiff upper lip, there's folks there, big tough guys, not being ashamed or embarrassed to be virtually in tears."*

The men portrayed the head coaches as genuine, real, and *"a bit crazy as well but I think that's why we all relate to them"* and felt that these characteristics allowed the head coaches to be flexible in their delivery, and adapt the fixture topic to suit the needs of the present group:

*"It was based around the slides, but it was just an open forum. It's like they give a s\*\*\* about what you're saying, and they want to listen."*

Perhaps due to the fact some participants had completed the fixtures at least twice at were aware which head coaches delivered each fixture topic, there was an appreciation for how the head coaches would stand in for each other if they became unable to deliver the session. As one participant explained: *"if one of the speakers can't turn up, there's somebody who will always, if Jimmy couldn't turn up, Ian would be here like a bullet"*.

## IMPACTS

Many of the participants had a diagnosis of low level common mental illness including depression and anxiety. Some of the participants also experienced low self-esteem, social isolation and work-related stress for example, and a couple had a diagnosis of PTSD.

Since the completion of the fixtures, the participants at both the open opt in session held at the stadium and those from the community setting explained that Offload helped them to accept their mental health condition and develop themselves:

*"It just helped me feel more relaxed and I felt happier for coming and ever since then I've always looked forward to coming to these sessions, so it's helped me develop myself more as a person. I mean obviously I still have a couple of things that I need to deal with but I'm getting better"*.

One participant spoke about reducing negative thoughts when he said:

*"I'm still figuring stuff out, obviously everyone still has bad days and I'm no exception, but ever since I started, I have had a more positive outlook than I had when I started."*

Many others reported that they did not know how to deal with their issues or symptoms and Offload has helped them develop *"a collection of tools from coming here"* to deal and cope with any challenging situations that may arise. They explained that they have learned men do not talk enough, and this has helped them understand that *"you don't have to be strong, we have to get things out in the open"*. Hence many of the men appeared more willing to have conversations about their own and others mental health both during the Offload fixtures and elsewhere.

Going to the Offload fixtures encouraged many of the participants to identify any unhealthy lifestyle choices they engage in and how these might be replaced by healthier alternative choices. For some, this was reducing things like sedentary behaviour and alcohol intake, and incorporating more physical activity into their lifestyles:

*"I don't just go home and sit on the couch, I go and walk, even though I've got two bad knees at the moment, I go out and walk for an hour or two, and I'll sit down every ten minutes or so when my knees start hurting, but I'll go out and do my garden more and more now and try and get that more tidy."*

*"I've stopped drinking and done more exercise since I've come here, so my lifestyle has changed completely now... I just feel brilliant now to be honest."*

In addition to increasing physical activity, some participants mentioned adopting a healthier diet. One participant spoke about his poor relationship with food which he attributed to his long unsociable working times which, for him, often led him to go without food. In this instance, Offload added structure to his daily routine and diet:

*"I've started eating, which might sound daft when you look at me, but I was skipping meals with work and family commitments. I can get up in a morning at quarter past six and not eat until five o'clock at night and then I'll finish work at twelve and have something to eat at two o'clock in the morning, and it's like trying to be more structured health wise, forcing myself to eat even when I'm not particularly hungry. I think it's structure, you need structure in your life, you need that routine to get you through the day, I know for me structures massive otherwise I'm a nightmare."*

Other participants struggled with getting to sleep and remaining asleep through the night. In some cases, this was due to their employment, and for others it was due to their mental illness. The mindfulness sessions helped the men to learn how to control their breathing and sleep:

*"I sometimes have trouble sleeping but we've learned out controlling your breathing and that's helped me learn to relax my body more and help me get better sleep."*

## CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT

During the focus groups with the men from the open opt in group where the fixtures are delivered at the stadium, it became apparent that a number of the participants had attended the season of fixtures two or three times. Participants explained that this was because Offload gives them a 'lift' each week:

*"I find it a bit of a weekly rest bite, all through the week you might be ok but, occasionally something in a day or a couple of days, it might be insignificant to everyone else but to you, you just feel a bit down, coming here is the light at the end of the tunnel, it just gives you a lift."*

Many of the participants agreed that Offload was a "weekly escape" from everyday life, and provided the men with time for themselves. The notion of 'weekly' for participants did not just refer to attending the fixtures for ten weeks, rather it has evolved into a place the men can go to each week to look after their mental fitness. They described Offload as "cyclical", a "safety net" and a "reset" and a place they want to go to each week:

*"Didn't start that way, like you say you think ok I'll jump through the 10 weeks and pick up a few tools and tips and then I'll just have to survive and go out and do and hope it helps, but I think it's morphed or changed into well no I want to go every week, not just to help yourself and keep yourself and head above water, but can hopefully help someone else."*

Some of the men explained that if they could not attend, they felt like "I'm carrying two weeks' worth of weight instead of one week", and it was important to a few participants to make sure they still attend even if they have had a good week:

*"I think I like this because I've actually had quite a good week this week, this week there's been a lot of things that weren't working that I've had to fight through to fix, and it's a case of, even if I've had a good week I think I don't necessarily need to go, but it's good because if you've had a good week, you feel as though then, I'm here to help others, then when you're not having a good week everyone's helping you out and stuff, so I think it's having the opportunity just for that connection".*

Although their main motive to attend Offload was for self-help purposes, it was evident from the focus groups from both group types that the participants were concerned with looking after others. One participant explained that: "I see it as me letting people down in one respect, because I see here as more of a group mentality".

The participants that attended Offload through their living accommodation returned to fixtures each week as they "wanted to see it through to conclude it". Compared to the participants who attended the

open opt in group, these men did not feel a need to continue to attend the fixtures each week after completion of the season, and if the opportunity for Offload to be delivered again was provided, they would *“definitely recommend it to anyone”* rather than attend again themselves.

# CASE STORIES

## IAN'S OFFLOAD STORY

Ian Houghton is a 26-year-old project manager from Newton-le-Willows.

"I went off work with depression in October 2017 and my manager at the time mentioned Offload as a programme that might help me.

He'd heard about it through State of Mind, who had done a workplace presentation. I love sport and though I'm not a massive Rugby League fan I thought I'd give it a go. It's the best decision I've ever made!

I'm back at work now and I wouldn't be here were it not for Offload.

Offload has given me a way to accept that it's not just me going through this. Meeting other men at the Offload fixtures who've had similar, and in many cases, worse issues than me is incredibly helpful.

I can speak to anyone in the squad about my issues: none of them are experts in the field, so to speak, but they are human beings who gone through dark times and lived to tell the tale.

It's great to know you can walk into a changing room and bring up any sort of feeling or emotion that's affecting you, whether that be just being a bit low or having an urge to take your own life.

People will stop and listen and genuinely want to help you. Every single one of us has their own story about mental health and how it affects our lives: everyone is ready to listen and offer their take on things if they think it can help you.

I have been given some great advice while I've been attending the fixtures. Offload has also helped me open up about my depression in other aspects of my life. For example, pretty much everyone at work knows I have got depression.

I have spoken to my GP about Offload and he was aware of it, which is good. I've become a real advocate for Offload and I have suggested to four or five colleagues that they ought to give it a try.

I am doing a course on meditation at Warrington College and I've recommended it to a couple of people there. Offload is well known around the college.

I know that every Tuesday I can come to the stadium and literally offload about whatever is stressing me out or burning me up, and I can listen to other people offload.

For some men, the hardest thing is coming in for their first fixture, and it's not uncommon for people to sit in their car outside the stadium deliberating.

If you're in the car, I can say without any doubts that this course will help fix you. Just by being there you've already accepted you have a problem in your life and you want to fix it.

If you're wondering whether Offload is the answer, or if it can help, all I can say is that it's definitely not going to make things worse.

Offload is not for everyone: however, "99.99 percent of men could benefit from this in my experience. Particularly those wanting to build their mental fitness or who have issues with their mental health"

There's no-one in the dressing room who will say anything different. They won't laugh, they won't sneer and they won't think 'what a weirdo' because we've all got our own issues and problems and we've all been where you are now.

Thanks to Offload, we're all in a better place. I can't recommend it highly enough."

## ANDY'S OFFLOAD STORY

Widnes Vikings' Offload programme continues to grow from strength to strength, and has been praised by one participant this week as "a big step forward for men."

Offload is a free weekly programme that uses the power of Rugby league to help men build their mental fitness. Participants have the opportunity to learn from members of the Rugby League community, including former players, coaches and referees, on how to manage stress and stay mentally resilient.

Andy McLain, a regular attendee of Offload, has praised its impact in engaging men and breaking stigma.

"Men, being men, don't like to talk about their problems and keep things bottled up", he explains.

"But you come to programmes like this, you are able to talk to other people who have suffered mental health challenges. It's great to have heard from rugby players, who pass their experience on to help others deal with stressful situations in everyday life."

At Offload, guest speakers from the world of Rugby League openly tell their story to connect with participants. For Andy, this has been powerful.

"You get to meet some of the past and present stars of rugby league, and to understand that they also experience the stresses of everyday life too.

"Danny Sculthorpe's was a really good and informative session. He speaks from the heart. It was inspirational to hear how he overcame the challenges he experienced through having to retire early through injuries."

Offload is free, inclusive and open to all. As someone who has benefitted from it, Andy hopes that others will join in.

"I would recommend it to anybody," he said.

"Even if you think you're okay, and just want to come down and listen to the stories, it will make you feel better and give you a boost.

"There are lots of people here and a good mix characters. You find as the weeks go on, you get to know everyone and have a bit of banter. It's something I look forward to every week."



## MARK'S OFFLOAD STORY

I have struggled with mental health since I was 17. I had a really difficult relationship with my step-mum and things seemed to spiral.

The low point for me came a couple of years ago when my dad died. We were very close and had a strong common bond through Rugby League.

When he died I went off the rails. I tried to take my own life by drinking the best part of a bottle of morphine. It was a dark, scary time and I wasn't in a good place for the but sake of my wife and four children I decided I was going to sort myself out.

I saw a post on Facebook about Offload taking place at Warrington Wolves and thought I'd give it a try. It's the best decision I have ever made.

Although I live in Warrington I'm a St Helens lad born and bred - my dad coached at Blackbrook - and it felt strange walking through the door at The Halliwell Jones Stadium for the first Offload fixture. Once the session began, though, I knew it was for me.

It's not easy talking about mental illness but when you're with a group of blokes who have so much in common with you it's like a weight being lifted.

I have made some great friends through Offload, friends who will stay with me for life. They've told me that when I first came along I was a very angry man and seemed unapproachable. Hopefully that's not the case anymore.

Our squad has set up its own Facebook group and are always in touch on Twitter. My involvement has inspired me to move forward with my life. Things are now easier at home because I don't get wound up as easily.

There's so much variety within the fixtures and I've been able to take something from everyone. Ian Smith, the former Super League referee, has been incredibly supportive.

I was going through hell and speaking to Ian really did turn my life around.

He talked through the situation I was in at the time and together we found a way through it. We've become good friends, although that doesn't stop me giving him some stick from time to time about his refereeing!

It's also been great listening to people like Phil Veivers. I've looked up to Phil since I used to watch him from the terrace at Knowsley Road and it's great enjoying banter with him at Offload fixtures.

I spoke to my doctor and told him about Offload. He questioned it on the grounds of equality because it's a male-only thing but he's impressed by the difference it's made to me.

Offload provides something men like me can't get within the NHS.

At the start it was hard to break down my own barriers. I am old school, I kept things to myself and wasn't a nice person to be around.

Offload has smashed down those barriers and not only have I helped myself I am now helping others.

I've just started something called The Shoe Project which involves collecting unwanted shoes from people in the UK and sending them overseas for children in Afghanistan and Syria to wear.

I feel like a better person because of Offload and I can't thank Rugby League Cares and Warrington Wolves enough for the difference they've made to my life.

## DAVES' OFFLOAD STORY

Dave Bird admits he felt sceptical on first hearing about Offload, the hugely successful men's mental fitness and wellbeing programme run by Rugby League Cares and delivered by the charitable foundations at three Super League clubs.

Previous experience had taught Dave not to have too high an expectation of workplace-led health schemes, some of which often seem to be little more than box-ticking exercises by well-meaning employers.

But after just one Offload 'fixture', the 36-year-old Communications Officer with Salford City Council found himself won over by an initiative that has since gone on to change his outlook on life forever.

"Offload has made a big difference to my life and I'm a much better person because of it," said Dave.

"Salford Red Devils approached the Council and asked if they could put on an Offload session for staff to see what impact it would have.

"Few of us were rugby fans and we didn't know what to expect: my scepticism proved unfounded as very quickly I came to realise how amazing Offload is."

Dave had been diagnosed with depression in his late teens and was prescribed a course of anti-depressants which did little to improve his life, leaving him feeling 'neither happy or sad, just numb.'

He came off his medication after six months and managed his depression as best he could until relationship issues prompted him to seek counselling.

"That worked for a while but pretty soon I slipped back into being a miserable sod," said Dave. "In 2017, my daughter was born and that was the best thing that's ever happened to me.

"However, I had a difficult time adjusting to life as a parent and the stress that comes with a baby, which left me struggling to handle the ordinary pressures you face at work and elsewhere. And then Offload came along."

Dave attended nine of the 10 Offload fixtures delivered by Salford's Paul Highton, former referee Ian Smith and Danny Sculthorpe, the ex-Wigan, Castleford and Huddersfield prop, and was surprised by how quickly his self-awareness changed.

"I may not be a rugby fan but I found myself relating to so much of what I heard from people like Paul and Ian," he said.

"It wasn't prescriptive at all, and at no time did I feel I was being lectured or preached to: instead, it was just like being down the pub with a mate.

"I've picked up so many good techniques to manage my mental health, techniques that will last me a lifetime.

"The fact that Offload is aimed at a male audience made it more relatable. The information was delivered in a very blokey manner, which went down very well.

"Offload has made a lasting impression on me: you don't come out of it thinking you're changed for the better and forever, rather it's a case of being armed with the tools you need to manage your own health.

"I can now spot behaviour triggers and react accordingly: I also find I don't dwell on minor problems and stresses which previously would have escalated in my own mind.

"Through my involvement with Offload it feels like a cloud has lifted. I'm now more confident and learning more about myself on a daily basis."

# LEARNING FROM THE PILOT PHASE

## LANGUAGE USED

During the design phase of Offload, RLC, State of Mind Sport and the Salford, Warrington and Widnes Foundation staff engaged in co-production work. Over 200 men were engaged in this process through focus groups, one-to-one interviews and questionnaires about what they would want from a mental health intervention. This was imperative to enable RLC to centre the programme around the needs of men. The findings from this informed the programme name, self-care tools and fixture topics relevant to their needs, where and when the programme would best be delivered, language that retains masculinity around mental health, and what evaluation tools were best suited to this group.

During the co-production exercise, the men explained that current language associated with mental health was not appealing, or they felt that it did not relate to them. Some men did not associate themselves with being 'mentally unwell', and others did not want to associate themselves with needing to seek specialist professional support for their mental health. Language can be fundamental to successfully engage men with mental health interventions, and State of Mind Sport recognised this and uses terms including 'mental fitness' and 'help a mate' (Cooper et al., 2017). Including State of Mind Sport's work elsewhere and the feedback from men, terms such as 'strong mindset', 'making ground', 'retaining control', 'season of fixtures', 'head coaches', and 'squad' have been used to create a non-judgemental and empathetic programme (Cooper et al., 2017).

## DELIVERING OFFLOAD TO DIFFERENT GROUP TYPES

Offload's initial design was to deliver 10-week blocks of fixtures at each club stadium one evening per week. As the programme developed, the RLC and the Foundations identified a need to take Offload into male dominated workplaces and local community settings to raise awareness about the programme and mental health and deliver the fixtures. Together, RLC and the research team at Edge Hill University labelled the three group types that emerged: open opt in, relatively opt in, and non-opt in (as explained earlier). The challenges, learning and actions are presented below for each group.

### OPEN OPT IN GROUPS

The open opt in groups were the closest model to the initial programme design. Holding this group type in the stadiums encouraged men of varying ages, employment status and experiences with mental health and illness to attend. Based on voluntary engagement meant the men who attended these groups took the decision to attend and, with the rugby league theme, this appeared to contribute to the engagement of men who had not been in contact with a mental health service prior to Offload.

Although uptake numbers were slower, the men who did attend often presented with more complex mental health conditions (explained in more detail later). This group type was delivered by Warrington Wolves and Widnes Vikings at their stadium on Tuesday evenings. Both Foundations delivered the fixture topics in the same order but varied the format of the fixtures. Warrington divided each fixture into two 40-minute 'halves' and had a rugby ball in the centre which the men would pick up to speak. The men who attended here were very positive about this concept since it enabled them to speak about their experiences when they felt ready or felt it best related to a particular fixture topic. Widnes, in comparison, did not divide the session into two 'halves' and adopted more of an open forum approach between the presenters and the participants. The men at the Widnes Offload group liked this format as it kept the atmosphere during the fixtures quite relaxed and allowed conversations to flow throughout the evenings. Each approach followed the initial intended design in parts, but RLC and the Foundations saw the importance of ensuring the needs of the men were met and agreed that varying approaches to delivery should be allowed to enable this.

Throughout discussions with staff at the Salford Red Devils Foundation, RLC and State of Mind Sport, it became evident that attendance at the open opt in sessions held at the AJ Bell stadium (Salford Red Devils' stadium) was low, with the main reason often cited for this being the location of the stadium. As the Warrington and Widnes Rugby stadia are in the town centre, going forward it would perhaps be suitable for Salford to deliver an open opt in session in a local rugby club or community setting instead.

## **RELATIVELY OPT IN GROUPS**

The relatively opt in groups were delivered by all Foundations in male dominated workplaces, community settings, prisons, and the Princes Trust, for example. Participation was voluntary, however the men had to be a part of the relevant organisation to be able to attend. For these organisations, a six-week season of fixtures was preferred, and, in most cases, the organisations picked the six topics that were delivered. The fixtures were delivered once per week or month, at a time pre-arranged with the organisation and the Foundations and hosted at either the organisation's venue, or at the relevant club stadium. The organisations were allowed to select the number of weeks and topics to be delivered to ensure relevant topics or experiences were explored (for example being on a low-income wage, short contracts and insecure work).

Delivering to this group type, and hosting the sessions in the organisations' venues, did mean Offload was being delivered in settings which were not otherwise intended. However, in doing so, it enabled the clubs to reach a wider audience, increased mental health awareness in the workplace and provided an opportunity for employees to speak about their mental health at work. Attendance at these types of groups was initially low and this may be attributed to a lack of awareness about Offload or stigmatising attitudes about attending a mental health related programme in the workplace. During the second season of fixtures, however, the engagement increased significantly. Unlike the open opt in groups where men were keen to remain involved with Offload, the men who complete the programme in their organisation did not remain involved in any way.

## **NON-OPT IN GROUPS**

The non-opt in groups were delivered in colleges, probation services and to Princes Trust groups. Those who attended fixtures here did so on a compulsory basis, though for some college groups this was optional. This group type enabled other groups of men to participate who may not otherwise have done so. Analysis of the pre- and post- questionnaire data for this group type suggested that an increase in mental fitness was either reported by only a few, or not reported at all. Although the programme was for men aged sixteen and above, its delivery largely targeted men aged twenty-four and above. This perhaps reduced the perceived relevance of the fixture topics to the students aged sixteen to eighteen and resulting in little or no change to perceived mental fitness. The Programme Manager, State of Mind Sport staff, the Head Coaches and the research team attended a workshop to understand the best approaches to delivering a mental health awareness programme to young people. Following this, the programme is currently being reviewed to tailor the fixtures to suit this age group before groups of this nature and age are again engaged.

Having three different groups types enabled Offload to access more and a greater diversity of men, and enabled men to engage who were at increased risk of suicide (e.g. men aged 35-50, men who are employees of a manual or labour workforce and men who have not accessed their GP or mental health service). This was a positive outcome, since one-quarter of people who die by suicide have not been in touch with a mental health service (Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership, 2017).

## **MEN WITH MORE COMPLEX NEEDS AND THE ESCALATION PROCESS**

Offload was initially intended to be an education-based mental fitness programme for men with low-level mental health conditions which helped raise awareness of mental health and helped men to develop positive coping mechanisms. However, as the programme has expanded over the first eighteen months, men with more complex mental health conditions and illness including PTSD, bipolar affective disorder and suicidal ideation and/or attempts have attended Offload. Throughout the focus groups, the men expressed how they felt safe reaching out to Offload compared to other NHS services. This was often attributed to the programme being situated away from clinical environments, instead taking place in rugby league stadia and using rugby league language such as 'building mental fitness'. Thus, although the programme did not intend to engage men with more complex needs, it has been successful in engaging men who were out of contact with other services and who were more vulnerable to suicidal ideation and attempts.

Notably, men with more complex mental health conditions tended to be a participant in one of the open opt in groups at Warrington or Widnes. In some cases, the men with more complex conditions were at a point of crisis (reoccurring suicidal ideation and/or attempts), had previously accessed other services,

or were on a waiting list for a different service and accessed Offload as a form of immediate support. It is therefore possible that Offload was viewed as a potential treatment pathway, rather than just the education-based and awareness raising programme that was originally intended. Men who presented with more complex mental health conditions, and therefore required further specialist support, were engaged in the escalation process and contacted by a mental health clinician provided by State of Mind Sport. Offload, for this group of men, became the education-based mental fitness programme it was intended to be and which complemented the treatment they would then receive from the appropriate service the State of Mind Sport mental health clinician referred them to.

The escalation process (as described earlier) had been used by all the three clubs. A total of six escalations were made during the evaluation time period. The nature of the escalations included the participants feeling isolated and demotivated, a lack of self-esteem in their ability at work, substance abuse, and having suicidal thoughts and feeling like family and friends would be better off without them. All of the men who were escalated were contacted by the clinician provided by State of Mind Sport and accessed other services appropriate to their needs. Having an escalation process in place for men who do present with more complex needs has enabled Offload to refer to, and support other, existing mental health services while providing them with additional support.

## **MANAGING BOUNDARIES**

Managing the boundaries between the male participants and the head coaches and Foundation staff became a priority at the end of the first year of the pilot. Offload uses former rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness specialist to deliver the fixtures as they can bring their own personal lived experience with mental health problems. However, the status of the former rugby league players, coaches, officials and the mindfulness specialist were removed when they delivered Offload, so they could put themselves on the same level as the men. Some participants saw these individuals as an immediate form of support when they were in a difficult place or situation. To ensure the head coaches and Foundation staff were not contacted at unsociable hours, the men were reminded that Offload is an education-based mental fitness programme, and should they require further support, they must access other services. At the end of each session, participants are provided with contacts details for Samaritans and the CALM helpline, and instructions to access the Hub of Hope to locate other nearby services. The escalation process was used in any instance where a man needed further specialist support outside the capabilities of Offload.

As the men who attended Offload respected the head coaches greatly, it also became a requirement that boundaries were made clear. All staff attended a training day delivered by State of Mind Sport about how to manage boundaries between themselves and participants. In addition, staff were provided with a clinical mentor to support their role within Offload, advise how to deal with difficult situations, and talk through any concerns staff may have. This was implemented to ensure the wellbeing of the staff was addressed, as well as the men who are attending the programme.

## **VOLUNTEERING PROTOCOL**

A secondary aim of Offload included the men beginning to undertake voluntary roles within their community, often due to increased self-confidence and self-esteem which had developed since joining Offload. A couple of participants have since set up their own charities and projects to help members of their local community to work together to provide resources to both disadvantaged areas in the UK and overseas. Some of the men have taken part in local running events or bike rides to rugby league cup finals to raise awareness of Offload and funds for their respective clubs' charitable Foundation, while others have taken up voluntary roles at their local parkrun event. Although many men have engaged in volunteering of some capacity, the majority have not. As noted earlier, this is perhaps due to no volunteer pathway being in place at the time of Offload's implementation until now.

Recently, the Steering Group changed the name of the act of volunteering to 'giving back'. As Offload has developed over the past eighteen months, some participants want to support Offload and help the programme expand and succeed by expressing their desire to 'give back' their time. Hence, a protocol has been devised to structure the variety of opportunities available for participants to 'give back', and also increase the number of men engaging in voluntary activities in relation to the Big Lottery outcome.



**Figure 1: Offload volunteering structure**

The volunteering structure outlines four levels at which participants can 'give back' to Offload. The Steering Group recognises that participants currently are eligible for the 'buddy' and 'scout' level.

Summarised below are the requirements for each level:

- **Buddy:** Must have gone through the 10 fixtures of Offload and have attended an offload volunteer training session
- **Scout:** Must have gone through the 10 fixtures of Offload and have attended an offload volunteer training session. Must have also had a 1:1 meeting with the foundation lead to discuss the engagement plans in the community.
- **Peer Mentor:** Ensure a full understanding of the Offload project and the support groups in the foundations area. Ensure they have completed Mental Health First Aid training. Must have also attended an offload volunteer training session.
- **Trainee Session Lead:** Ensure a full understanding of the Offload project and the support groups in the foundations area. Ensure they have completed Mental Health First Aid training. Ensure they have completed the full State of Mind Sport training programme and are signed-off by a State of Mind Sport representative to deliver sessions. Must have also attended an Offload volunteer training session.

The volunteering protocol provides a pathway for the Offload participants to become involved in 'giving back', and includes the code of conduct, the training session structure that will be provided every six months by RLC and supported by the Foundations, how participants should log and record any volunteering, and incentives and rewards for the volunteers.

## ***BENEFITS FOR THE FOUNDATIONS***

Offload was delivered by the Salford Red Devils Foundation, Warrington Wolves Foundation and Vikings Sports Foundation. As mentioned, the Foundations got involved with Offload to improve male mental health in their respective areas, and their involvement has encouraged further partnerships to be made, funding opportunities, and increased staffs' awareness and training in mental health.

Below are narratives from the Offload leads at each Foundation, explaining their involvement and working with existing and new partnerships.

***"Offload has been a great addition to the Foundation as a whole. Not only has it opened doors to new partnerships, but it has also provided staff with opportunities to be educated in such an important and prevalent field that affects all walks of life. Whether it be personal or professional matters, staff have become more aware and empathetic to others when taking mental health into consideration where previously it wouldn't have been a factor.***

***Our club and first team players have been very supportive of the programme with Josh Jones in particular putting himself forward to be part of our mental health campaigns over the past two years sharing his own experiences.***

***The community as a whole has been very open to the programme in understanding the importance of getting the messages around mental health and the reducing the stigma attached to males opening up and speaking about what they are feeling.***

***Rugby League Cares, Emma in particular, has been very supportive throughout this project providing regular contact through one to ones and project groups. This has allowed constant feedback, whether it be positive or negative, and involvement in the development of the programme.***

***There has been very little delay in all controllable factors of the programme which has to be down to Emma ensuring all the correct policies and procedures have been put in place for us to deliver successfully.***

***State of Mind speakers throughout the programme have always been engaging in their sessions and provided feedback as to what works and what doesn't in order to improve delivery and make them more relevant to 'real life' situations.***

***Edge Hill University; Rachel has been very approachable in the evaluation process and has ensured the evaluation didn't feel over bearing for participants.***

Joanne Shepherd, Business Development and Health Manager  
Salford Red Devils Foundation

*"Offload has had a very positive effect on the Vikings Foundation, providing an overwhelming feeling that the programme has made a real difference to many peoples' lives. The programme has allowed the Foundation to reach, understand and support a group of people who, previously, might never have come into contact with the Vikings or the Vikings' Foundation. Throughout the entire club there has been a "buy-in" to the programme and its impact. Only last week the current club captain, Hep Cahill, accompanied a family friend to his first Offload session.*

*In order to ensure the smooth management of the Offload programme, Widnes Vikings' has worked in close partnership with other organisations with responsibilities extending to the following areas:*

*Rugby League Cares have been responsible for the organisation and progression of the programme, the scheduling of regular meetings and the collation of all relevant data. RLC have also liaised with State of Mind on behalf of the Foundation in terms of the provision of the State of Mind speakers.*

*State of Mind ensure programme-appropriate Mental Health input through the design of the presentations and the training of the presenters and the relevant Foundation staff. SoM are responsible for the provision of SoM speakers when requested.*

*Edge Hill University have conducted extensive and thorough research into the Offload programme, which has involved the observation of sessions and interviews with deliverers and participants. "Critical Friend" feedback received from the EHU research has been utilised to amend and improve the programme."*

Sean Mellor, Community Rugby League Co-ordinator  
Widnes Vikings Foundation

*"The Warrington Wolves Foundation recognise the deep-rooted social problems which exist in people who have or are at risk of developing mental health problems. As a consequence, the Offload programme has enabled us to engage men in deprived communities using a creative and innovative approach. Offload has given local men the opportunity to increase their awareness and develop self-management techniques designed to improve their lives using the profile of the professional Rugby League team. The collaborative approach between experts in men's health, clinicians and professional Rugby League players & officials with lived experiences has been tailored to meet the needs of the male population and provided us with detailed insights for new initiatives moving forward. Rugby League is leading the way in tackling the stigma of mental health through the work of State of Mind and the opportunity to collaborate alongside the sport's charity, RL Cares has ensured that the key values of the sport have been upheld by attracting and supporting men who are struggling to make ground in their lives by creating a band of brothers. The academic credibility provided by Edge Hill University has initiated new and strengthened partnerships with key strategic stakeholders including Public Health, Clinical Commissioning Groups and corporate sponsors who have recognised the value of Offload in initiating conversations, building resilience and equipping men with the self-care strategies required to survive and thrive in today's society."*

James Howes, Sport and Lifestyles Manager  
Warrington Wolves Foundation

As mentioned earlier, a representative from Warrington Clinical Commissioning Group sits on the Offload Steering Group. Below is a narrative from that representative, Margi Butler.

*"It has been a pleasure, sitting on the Offload steering group and working with the very dedicated & enthusiastic colleagues from Rugby League Cares. As a commissioner of mental health services, I see great merit in the Offload programme and how it complements existing mental health pathways, whilst adding great value to the wider system. I can see the potential for it being commissioned widely, if it continues to deliver such good outcomes in a measurable and consistent way."*

Margi Butler, Head of Commissioning - Mental Health, Dementia & Learning Disabilities  
Armed Forces Health Lead - Cheshire, Warrington & Wirral CCGs  
NHS Warrington Clinical Commissioning Group

## **BENEFITS FOR ORGANISATIONS**

Offload has engaged many organisations, workplaces and institutions to provide the programme as part of wellbeing strategies and to raise awareness about mental health. The programme can be delivered to staff at all levels of a workplace or organisation, including all types of employees, students or members, and includes evidence-based fixture topics to raise awareness of mental health and how to look after the mental health of themselves and their colleagues.

Workplaces and organisations are able to access a 6-week season fixtures and select the fixture topics they see to best suit. Fixture topics available are: basic mental fitness, coping and managing, stress management, resilience, mindfulness, work/life balance, anger management, and problem solving and emotional intelligence. The fixtures are delivered by for rugby league players, coaches, officials and a mindfulness specialist.

Below are case studies from three different organisations that Offload has been delivered.

*"I'm a Probation Case Manager based in Salford and Manchester. I saw a poster for Offload at a council building where I was attending a meeting and thought it would be a great idea for some of my service users. My caseload is made up of men who have been involved in the criminal justice system, some have been in prison and others sentenced to Community Orders by the courts. A high percentage of my cases have struggled in one way or another with mental health issues so I felt Offload could be beneficial. After contacting Offload, they helpfully agreed to carry out a programme in Probation offices in Salford and Manchester.*

*Both programmes have been very well received by both staff and in particular service users. The guest speakers are inspiring and offer a personal insight of how they have faced struggles and managed to overcome mental health setbacks. I believe that the sessions have helped to promote a positive message that speaking about mental health and asking for help is a show of strength rather than weakness. Having seen first-hand the positive impact of Offload, I hope that we can continue to offer this valuable initiative in probation offices again in the near future."*

Daniel Callaghan  
Probation Intelligence Officer  
Cheshire and Greater Manchester Community Rehabilitation Company

*"Over the past six months we have welcomed the team from Offload onto site to raise awareness and build coping mechanisms around our mental health and wellbeing. We were lucky enough to have on site some inspirational sportsmen from across the Rugby League spectrum sharing very personal, insightful and hard-hitting stories with us. During the sessions they gave us some simple strategies we can all take into our everyday life to help improve our mental fitness. Things such as getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising and the biggest theme throughout talking, finding someone we can open up to and telling them how we are feeling. We now know that 'it's ok not to be ok' and there is always someone willing to listen.*

*Over the course of the six months 198 personnel from all areas of site attended at least one Offload session. We are keen to continue our relationship with Offload and are planning for them to come back to site to deliver some sessions to shift workers who may not have been able to attend. We are also looking at ways to get the team back to Fiddler's to develop on the sessions they have already delivered."*

Engineering Manager  
Fiddler's Ferry Power Station

*"With a strong rugby presence within the town Warrington Borough Council (WBC) embraced the opportunity to support the Offload project and bring the initiative in-house.*

*Men's mental health is a key part of WBC wellbeing programme. Offload was fully endorsed by the senior management team and employees were given the time to attend at a number of locations throughout each week. Participants learnt about breaking down barriers, taking those initial steps to start a conversation and a variety of techniques, support and information to support their own mental fitness and also that of their colleagues, friends and family.*

*There have been many benefits to the organisation. We now have male employees who are happy to talk about their own experiences, what they have learnt and how they would like us to develop and increase the support available. Offload supports our employee Time To Talk Sessions, our own mental health programme, the recently re-accredited Workplace Wellbeing Accreditation, Mindful Employer to name a few.*

*It has been a great opportunity for the council and one that has been well received."*

Caron Jones  
Warrington Borough Council

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the learning, successes and new knowledge developed from the first 18 months of the Offload pilot, it is recommended that the various groups involved consider the following:

1. Continue to capitalize on the success of the open groups in recruiting men and maximising project outcomes by expanding the number and frequency of these groups, rather than closed ones. The open groups might also be delivered in local community venues too.
2. Engaging with a wider variety and number of community groups to broaden the reach of the programme, with the Armed Forces, those under 25 and those aged 65 and above being among the groups who might initially be prioritised.
3. Continue to leverage the initial hook and appeal of the rugby league brand generally, and those of individual clubs in particular, to further strengthen and identify new ways of recruiting and supporting new participants. This might be complemented by even more targeted and bespoke forms of marketing and recruitment approaches, including in clinical and non-clinical contexts.
4. To reduce the demand of local CCGs and other clinical services, Offload could be developed as an interim support service for those who are seeking support from other mental health services. For some men, this may help reduce the need to engage in those services at all, or to engage less frequently and shorter periods, which has a wide range of benefits for service users, providers and commissioners.
5. To build upon men's preference for listening to other men who have experienced similar challenges, expanding the number and variety of speakers who deliver the fixtures would appear a strategy worth considering.
6. During their time on the programme and as part of a planned set of sustainable exit routes, consider signposting participants into other areas of the Foundation's activity (e.g. volunteering roles to provide necessary skills for paid employment), and to other activities which are available in local communities.
7. Identify opportunities to develop new, relevant local partnerships who wish to engage men at risk of developing, or experiencing, low to moderate mental health problems as part of community centered approaches to health and wellbeing. These should complement preferred existing partnerships and have the required commitment, philosophy and values consistent with Offload.
8. To continue to enable evidence and the effectiveness of Offload in meeting its objectives, continued independent monitoring and evaluation should be undertaken. This should focus particularly on what works, for whom and in what circumstances.
9. Consider drawing upon the insight, knowledge and experience of significant others (e.g. the men's partners and family members) as part of ongoing evaluation processes.
10. Consider developing a set of return on investment processes and principles, supported by evaluation of participants' experiences, to demonstrate the effectiveness of Offload in contributing to the production of clinical and non-clinical outcomes.

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