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Everyone Active use EXI for GP Referral Scheme

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Case Study

Everyone Active use EXI for GP Referral Scheme

Summary

Everyone Active and EXI worked together to develop and deploy a hybrid exercise referral scheme (ERS) combining Everyone Active's specialist exercise referral qualified instructors with EXI's digital physical activity prescription, and access to their national network of leisure centres. The service was used by over 2350 people with an inactive lifestyle and, often multiple, long term health conditions.

Data collected from users indicates positive results including increased weekly activity minutes and steps, and improvements in key health measures including weight, resting heart rate and blood pressure.

This case study demonstrates the feasibility of integrating a digital therapeutic into ERS, and delivering the service on a national scale. The partnership between Everyone Active and EXI garnered significant learning and has resulted in a template for future successful deployment of EXI into ERS or similar schemes. Fitness and leisure providers now have a new opportunity to deliver safe, personalised and cost-effective physical activity services to individuals living with long term health conditions. The use of digital therapeutics has the potential to extend the reach and scope of ERS, and thereby reduce both health inequalities and overall disease burden.

Background

Exercise referral schemes (ERS) are recommended by the National Institute for Health & Care Excellence (NICE) for sedentary or inactive people with chronic health conditions, as a means to increase their physical activity, due to the many health benefits physical activity can bring. Schemes typically involve the identification of an individual as not meeting UK recommendations for physical activity, and referral to a physical activity specialist or service. Following referral, the individual will receive a personal assessment from that specialist or service, with tailored recommendations for physical activity to suit their needs, and opportunities to participate in physical activities. While reviews of the evidence for the effectiveness of ERS have consistently concluded that schemes are effective at increasing physical activity, the estimated effect is usually very small, and the cost-effectiveness of such schemes has been called into question as a result[1]. Additionally, where ERS is shown to be effective, some groups have been shown to benefit less from these schemes, for example those from more deprived areas and those with mental health conditions[2]. As such, there is significant scope to improve ERS with innovative and scalable solutions which may engage a wider range of individuals, such as digital therapeutics. For example, digital solutions are able to go beyond the gym and class timetable, and offer a wider range of activities. For many individuals stepping into a traditional fitness or leisure environment can seem unachievable, and increasing activity in places they feel more comfortable can build confidence and fitness to facilitate that transition into more structured physical activity settings. Additionally, people with long term health conditions are more likely to be experiencing unemployment or be on a low income, and digital solutions can help overcome the financial and practical barriers that many face to starting their physical activity journey.

Everyone Active operates 207 leisure centres and is one of the largest providers of exercise referral schemes in the UK. To maximise access to their ERS schemes, Everyone Active enables anyone with a long-term health condition who is not meeting the physical activity recommendations to self-refer, or be referred by their healthcare professional, to the service.

In 2021 Everyone Active implemented a 'one group' approach for their ERS offering, seeking to provide a seamless and consistent experience for scheme users regardless of where they lived. Concurrently, Everyone Active were cognisant of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the vulnerability of individuals with certain long-term health conditions, and wanted to offer support for individuals who would benefit from increased physical activity but preferred not to attend the leisure centre. EXI was therefore chosen to compliment the existing ERS. As a digital tool, EXI can be used by anyone with a smartphone anywhere in the country, and users can engage in any type of physical activity, whether at the leisure centre or at home. EXI provided that consistent experience for all users, with everyone receiving a personalised physical activity prescription and behaviour change support within an easy-to-use app. Importantly, the remote monitoring of users' progress enabled Everyone Active to monitor the success of the scheme at both group and centre level.

About EXI

EXI is a digital therapeutic – a medically validated health intervention platform – that combines behaviour change science with the latest clinical evidence and physical activity guidelines to deliver safe, personalised physical activity prescriptions. Set at exactly the right intensity for each person, and tailored for 23 physical and mental health conditions, the app helps users to safely and gently increase their activity levels, and improve their health. EXI is created by health experts, and carefully applies the latest medical guidelines for exercise prescription, including NICE guidance and Exercise Is Medicine® protocols. Each user is given an individualised goal for each week and is given the option of meeting this goal via either intensity-based minutes of exercise (e.g. 4 days of 15 minutes at low intensity) or step count which is tracked in the background via their smartphone (e.g. 4 days of 6,000 steps).

Activity and health outcome data is delivered directly back to health and fitness professionals in real-time, via the secure, penetration tested and GDPR compliant web-based data portal. The information provided includes weekly exercise time, steps, and percentage of goals completed, allowing the clinician or instructor to have an informed conversation with users about their physical activity. This data has never been available to instructors, so the conversations and support given by the instructor is more personalised than ever before.

EXI can help fitness and leisure providers to welcome the substantial number of individuals living with long term health conditions into their facilities and services, with the reassurance that these individuals have a medically approved plan to follow. This enables those individuals to safely increase their activity levels, while enjoying the support of the providers' instructors, and becoming part of the member community. Efficiency is maximised with the ability of instructors to easily identify those individuals who are making positive progress, and those struggling to meet their goals, via the secure data portal, and to target resources accordingly. Additionally, as EXI's intelligent platform carefully analyses users' health and applies all the essential medical guidance when formulating the physical activity plan, it is not essential for instructors working with these users to hold specialist qualifications, potentially increasing capacity for services such as ERS.

Implementation

In readiness for the centralised service going live, EXI provided a number of resources to prepare Everyone Active staff for the launch. This included a range of training sessions for centre managers and instructors. As many members of staff were returning to work from furlough, sessions took place until all necessary staff were trained. The training included how to onboard ERS users onto the EXI platform, as well as up to date information about physical activity and a range of long-term health conditions, including long Covid. Additional resources included demonstration videos to fully explain all of the EXI app and data portal functions, and a 'Getting Started' pack, to support staff to explain EXI to users. Prior to launch, access to the data portal was provided to all ERS qualified instructors and centre managers, and staff were encouraged to use the app themselves for familiarisation. Co branded posters were also created to be used across all 207 sites, both in print and digital form.

For a seamless experience, and to eliminate the need for any additional resources or time from Everyone Active staff, API was used to link EXI with Everyone Active's systems. As such, the entry process into the ERS was as follows:

- Individual completes an online referral and health questionnaire on the Everyone Active website.
- An email direct to the individual is triggered automatically to invite them to download and onboard with EXI.
- Individual receives their tailored physical activity plan via the EXI app.
- Individual attends an initial assessment with a specialist instructor, qualified in exercise referral, to discuss their needs and preferences. The instructor checks the individual has onboarded with EXI, supporting them to do this if they have not.
- The instructor gets to know the individual during the assessment, and based on this provides recommendations on what types of activities are available and suitable to achieve the frequency, intensity and duration of physical activity specified by EXI.
- Participants can begin to get active and self-manage their condition more effectively and with more confidence, knowing they have the support of their instructor and EXI.

Implementation
Continued

EXI automatically increased each participant's prescription each week, to encourage a safe progression in their physical activity over 12 weeks. Participants also attended meetings with their instructor at 6 and 12 weeks into the programme, to review progress and receive further advice and encouragement. In between the reviews, the instructors were able to review participants' progress against their activity prescription via the EXI secure data portal. After 12 weeks participants were referred on to other services.

EXI's partnership and customer support teams were available to both Everyone Active staff and EXI users to answer questions, resolve any technical issues and to respond to feedback. All the information gathered by these teams was then applied to the ongoing development of the EXI platform.

Key Learning

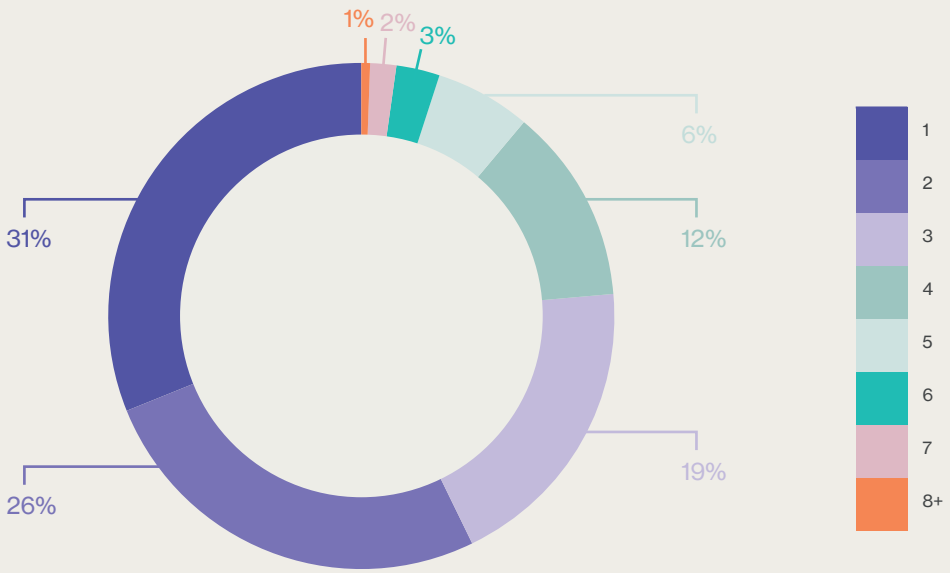
As Everyone Active were innovators in this hybrid approach to ERS, using a combination of digital and in person delivery, Everyone Active and EXI worked collaboratively to identify learning and to iteratively refine processes. Additionally, a number of changes were made to the EXI platform as a result of this learning process, to improve both the provider and end user experiences. A summary of key learning points and recommendations for implementation is outlined below:

- A joint workshop to work through the onboarding experience flow is essential to creating a smooth, seamless and positive user experience from day one.
- The email invitation to EXI needed to be co-branded with Everyone Active, and to clearly explain how EXI works as part of the ERS service the user had signed up to.
- Users needed clear 'Getting Started' information to enable them to feel confident with the technology and to get them going on their EXI journey prior to the initial assessment visit.
- The ERS provider needed to be able to view users on the data portal according to specific internal criteria, for example by site or by instructor. Custom fields were built within the data portal to enable this.
- While instructors welcomed the training and resources provided, few made use of the data portal to review their users' progress between assessments. Ongoing webinars/training sessions may encourage instructors to leverage the information available to further tailor their support for users, and to use their time most efficiently.

Outcomes

In total, 2358 ERS participants took up the invitation to use EXI. Users' ages ranged from 18 to 88, with an average age of 47. 68% of users were female, 32% were male and less than 1% identified as another gender. The most common health conditions among users were Obesity (923), Depression & Anxiety (814), Muscle & Joint Pain (638), Asthma (407), Hypertension (397), Osteoarthritis (365), Fibromyalgia (305) and Type 2 Diabetes (266). As would be expected in this population, the majority of users had multiple long term health conditions.

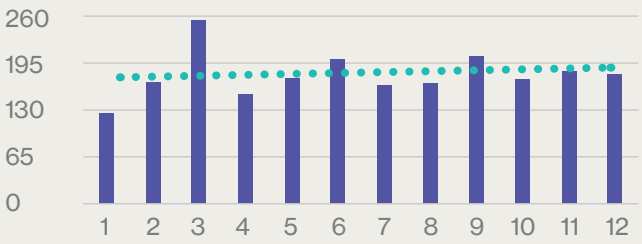
Number of health conditions reported:



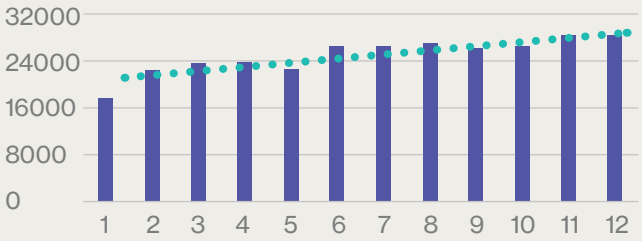
Outcomes
Continued

Recorded activity minutes showed a positive upward trend throughout the 12-week programme. There were statistically significant increases in mean weekly activity minutes among users who consistently recorded activity minutes. An increase of 50% (58 minutes) was observed when comparing Week 1 to Week 8. Users who continued with EXI for the full twelve weeks had an overall increase of 36% (51 minutes). Average weekly steps for all users in Week 1 was 18,395 compared to an average of 29,513 for users of EXI in Week 12. Although not all users continued recording their steps until week 12, the data shows a consistent upward trend in weekly steps.

Activity minutes/week

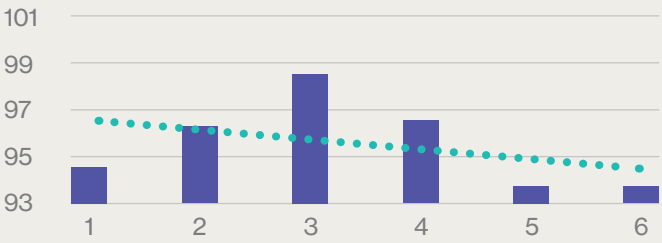


Steps/week



Analysis of data from users who recorded their weight shows a trend for decreasing weight across the 12-week programme (note: not all users recorded their weight every week, hence we see fluctuations in the graph week by week). Between week 1 and week 6 there was a statistically significant decrease in weight of 2.3% (2.2kg). This indicates that after 6 weeks of the programme, on average users are almost halfway towards a clinically significant weight loss of 5% of body weight.

Weight



Finally, although a relatively small number of users regularly logged their cardiovascular health metrics, for those who did, the measures of cardiovascular health, i.e. resting heart rate, systolic and diastolic blood pressure, all showed a clear downward trend among users across 12 weeks.

Participants:

Avg increase of

1 hour

moderate or vigorous activity per week

2.3kg

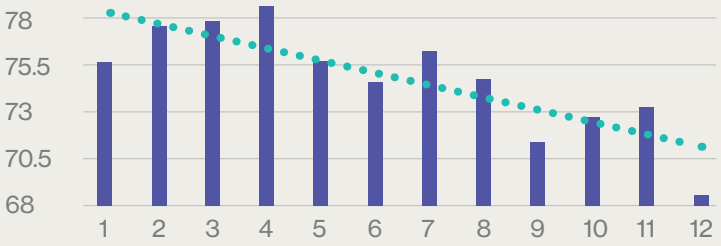
Avg weight loss after 6 weeks

Blood Pressure + Resting Heart Rate

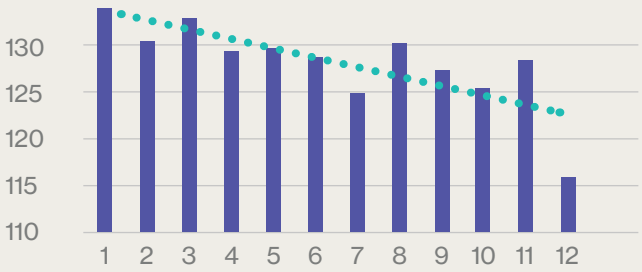
decreased

Outcomes
Continued

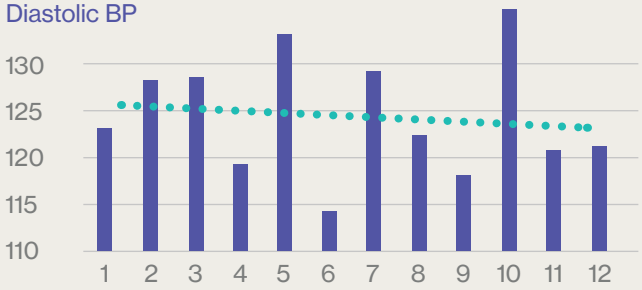
Resting HR



Systolic BP



Diastolic BP



Conclusions & Implications

Everyone Active's hybrid approach to delivering ERS, combining EXI's personalised and progressive physical activity plans and remote monitoring with support from a qualified instructor, enabled a significant number of inactive individuals with long term health conditions to increase their physical activity. As a digital solution, EXI can be used effectively by ERS participants who may not wish to attend an exercise facility, or for whom traveling to the facility is prohibitive, thereby extending the reach of Everyone Active's ERS offering. This was particularly important during the Covid-19 pandemic, when individuals with health issues had increased vulnerability, but also increases access to ERS for individuals living in rural areas and/or with limited access to transport.

Although weight loss may not be a specific goal for all ERS participants, given that two thirds of adults in the UK have excess weight or obesity, and that obesity is a common co-morbidity of many other health conditions, the statistically significant weight loss among users suggests that the ERS with EXI can have a positive impact on this important health metric. Weight management and lifestyle change are the recommended strategy for prevention of Type 2 diabetes, and ERS with EXI could be targeted at the increasing pre-diabetic population, as an accessible pathway into establishing a long term physical activity habit and healthy weight.

For a sedentary population with, often multiple, chronic health conditions, the improvements in resting heart rate and blood pressure seen in some EXI users are also encouraging, as these indicate the potential for significantly reducing the risks of inactivity to health. The ability to demonstrate positive impact on the key public health priorities of weight and cardiovascular health can be a differentiator for fitness and leisure providers, with the potential to attract significant funding.

Conclusions & Implications
Continued

The partnership between Everyone Active and EXI to deliver this innovative ERS resulted in significant learning. Recommendations for future deployment of EXI within ERS are summarised below:

- Co-designing the end to end service is vital to an effective deployment. Workshops should be held to ensure everyone understands what they want to achieve, and can plan for mutual success.
- ERS participants should be encouraged to make full use of EXI, including monitoring and recording all their activities and important health measures such as weight and blood pressure. This would provide vital encouragement and motivation for users through seeing their progress, and would also increase the data available to the ERS provider, for use in real time and to assess the impact of the scheme. The encouragement of the use of wearable devices, e.g. Apple watch, Fitbit, etc. is also advantageous as this improves the amount and quality of feedback the user and instructor receives.
- The use of incentives should be considered to support engagement and adherence. These have been shown to work in contexts such as health insurance, and could be applied to reducing gym memberships, or to fund wearables.
- EXI will be adding additional functionality to increase long term engagement, such as goal setting and planning functions, as well as improved prompts and nudges and further personalisation of the user experience.
- Instructors working in the ERS should use the remote monitoring facility of the data portal to identify participants not meeting their physical activity goals and offer them additional support in between routine assessments. Conversely, participants who are achieving their goals could be offered the option of less intensive and/or remote support, thereby allowing the instructor to allocate their time to those who would benefit most.
- To facilitate more tailored and targeted interactions with face to face support, EXI will be adding a function for those with access to the data portal to message users with automated and bespoke messages.
- Fitness and leisure providers can have confidence in safety, acceptability and efficacy of the EXI prescription, and as such should consider using EXI in contexts outside of ERS, and therefore without the need for specialist instructors. This would offer an affordable option to increase access to physical activity opportunities for people living with long term health conditions.

Conclusions & Implications

In conclusion, the Everyone Active ERS with EXI is an innovative service that has provided a template for how digital therapeutics can compliment traditional ERS offerings.

The feasibility of digital interventions within fitness and leisure settings has now been demonstrated, and opens up significant opportunities to extend the reach and scope of ERS, to contribute to the reduction of health inequalities and disease burden.

References

1. Werbrouck, A., et al., Cost-effectiveness of exercise referral schemes: a systematic review of health economic studies. European Journal of Public Health, 2022. 32(1): p. 87-94.
2. Morgan, K., M. Rahman, and G. Moore Patterning in Patient Referral to and Uptake of a National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) in Wales from 2008 to 2017: A Data Linkage Study. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2020. 17, DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17113942.

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About EXI

EXI is an evidence-based, NHS approved and award-winning app which analyses user health and fitness and prescribes a personalised physical activity programme. EXI can help health and exercise professionals to provide a physical activity solution in an efficient way that fits in to the users life.

EXI empowers exercise professionals and certified trainers to confidently work with and add value to those with long-term health conditions, knowing the activity prescription is safe.

The EXI web portal improves accountability from the user to the health or exercise professional, and allows the user to demonstrate that they are compliant with the physical activity programme provided to them.

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