

CASE STUDY

Helping people living with chronic pain to become active

HELPING PEOPLE LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN TO BECOME ACTIVE

Flippin' Pain™ is a public health initiative that brings the science of pain to people who need it in the places they live and work, in the heart of their communities. Championed by community healthcare services provider Connect Health, it aims to change (or flip) how people think about, talk about and treat persistent pain while raising awareness of the problem of pain. Flippin' Pain believes that empowering individuals and communities affected by persistent pain through education and understanding is key to transforming the approach to pain on a systemic level.

Persistent pain affects 30-50% of people in the UK. Its impact is significant, negatively affecting physical and mental health, social and home lives and people's ability to stay in work. Chronic pain is more prevalent in the North East than in any other part of England; it is thought to affect around 43% of people, and opioid prescription rates in the area are 300% higher than in London.

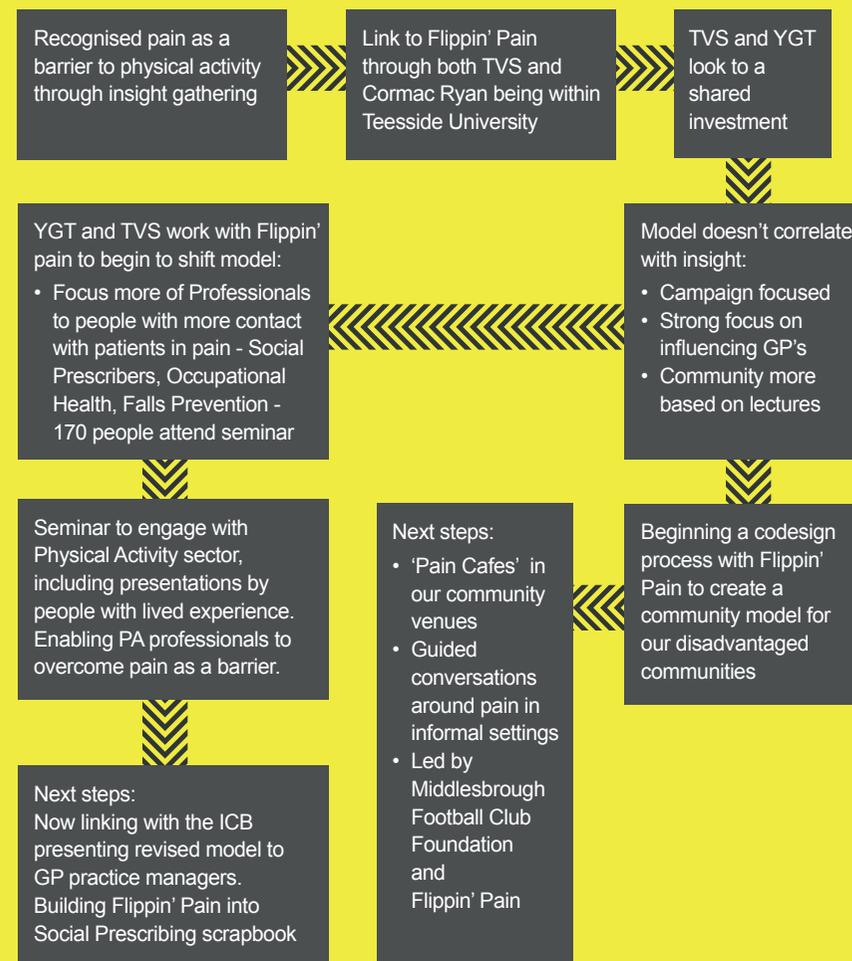
Through insight from health professionals and patients, YGT and Tees Valley Sport (TVS) identified pain as a significant barrier to physical activity but had not yet found a way to tackle this issue. After attending a local seminar where Cormac Ryan, Professor of Clinical Rehabilitation at Teesside University and a community pain champion for Flippin' Pain™, spoke, they realised that forming a partnership could be an effective solution.

This has led to a two year journey to reimagine pain and physical activity, which is summarised in the graphic to the right.

Together, they collaborated with Flippin' Pain™ to share insight and address pain-related health inequalities. At this time, Flippin' Pain™ was delivering events within Teesside University, and health professional sessions focused specifically on GPs. From our insight, we argued that offering public sessions in local communities and expanding outreach to nurses, social prescribers, and other health practitioners would create a more significant impact.

This initial coming together led to YGT and TVS joining a steering group. Throughout these sessions, they were able to share valuable insight and learning to nudge the Flippin' Pain™ team to do things differently.

OUR JOURNEY UNDERSTANDING PAIN



As a result of this initial groundwork, a first-of-its-kind public and private sector collaboration was forged to tackle the issue of pain head-on. It aimed to directly reach those living with chronic pain, overcome barriers to physical exercise, and challenge outdated perceptions and beliefs relating to pain management and treatment.

Carol Appleton, Programme Support Officer for You've Got This, said: "Through our work in the local community, we know that many people live in pain, which prevents them from being active. They often believe they can't do anything about it because they have never been told or shown they can."

Together, Connect Health, NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (Including North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust and South Tees NHS Foundation Trust), YGT, TVS and Teesside University, pooled resources and expertise, to co-create and deliver a series of targeted events and activities for the public and health professionals.

These included the Flippin' Pain™ Tees Valley Outreach Tour. It comprised 19 events held over six days, featuring educational workshops, public seminars and experiential pop-ups. 2,400 people engaged, and more than 725 people joined the sessions, which were led by a team of pain professionals, educators and community champions. This was backed up with a suite of interactive multimedia learning resources that brought the six key messages to life through podcasts, infographics, and animations. These resources were co-created by a team of pain experts, including people with lived experience of persistent pain.

A key insight from YGT's work was that many professionals were supporting people living with chronic pain, as well as GPs. The thinking behind targeting this wider audience was that these health professionals have more time and contact to try and change their clients' behaviours to be more active while still living in pain; whereas a GP only has an 8-minute window. 'When PAIN gets in the way' educational sessions were codesigned for those professionals supporting people with pain or promoting active lifestyles. As a result, 170 social prescribers, nurses, occupational health, and falls prevention nurses attended the events.

Through working with YGT and TVS, Flippin' Pain has also built a relationship with the North East and North Cumbria ICB. Together, they have connected Waiting Well and

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By helping health professionals
and those living in pain change
their perspectives and flip how they
deal with pain, we can help people
to live more active lives.

Carol Appleton, YGT

work independently to explore how pain pathways, physical activity, and movement can permeate all areas of the hospital.

YGT's approach to the Flippin' Pain initiative is a significant example of fostering a trusted collaboration through distributed leadership. While they continue to play a role in the project, they are no longer the primary drivers for changing their ways of working. Instead, they are becoming deeply embedded in the processes, ensuring sustainability and long-term success.

Having adapted the original communication approach from events at Teesside University, flipping it, and taking the initiative out into the community, it has been easier for people to access the information. Often overlooked, the location of a venue can be a significant barrier for individuals in hard-to-reach communities. The team recognised that when working in areas of deprivation and people living with high levels of pain, they are going to have to adapt the communication to be able to reach them. Building on this insight, we are now exploring the introduction of HOPE (Helping One-another with Pain Education), facilitated community support sessions in accessible and familiar spaces in deprived communities to connect with people where there are high levels of long-term conditions and inactivity.

We are especially proud of the fact that they have been able to amplify the synergy between pain and physical activity. Previously, it felt disjointed and only rooted in pain and psychology. Because YGT commissioned the work, we were able to shift the narrative onto getting people to move and re-educating them to recognise that it's not just about living better with pain; it's about living better and being active with pain. This shift is especially crucial given that 44% of people who report being inactive cite pain as the primary barrier. It has also enabled the team to reposition their campaign to focus on both pain and movement rather than pain alone.

The project's initial phase evolved into a series of events tailored for physical activity professionals. A two-day event focused on education, helping attendees reframe their understanding of pain and providing practical tools to integrate this knowledge into their work. This has fostered a seamless collaboration between healthcare and physical activity professionals, ensuring that both groups recognise that pain doesn't have to be a barrier to activity and that hurt doesn't always mean harm.

The collaboration has been an award-winning success. At the HSJ Partnership Awards 2024, the Flippin' Pain™ partnership was officially named the "Gold" winner of the Most Impactful Partnership in Preventative Healthcare.

Flippin' Pain™ also won a Bright Ideas in Health Award in the Innovation in Clinical Education category. The regional awards celebrate the achievements of individuals and teams in the North East working within the NHS, industry, and academia who have improved patient services through technical innovation or better service delivery.

Insights and learning:

Changing Flippin Pain's perspective about who they should communicate with, from GPs and GP consultants to a much wider group of health professionals, has significantly impacted the work's effectiveness.

YGT is also including information about Flippin Pain in a new social prescriber scrapbook that they are developing in collaboration with social prescribers across Redcar & Cleveland.

A recent large-scale study conducted by the Richmond Group of Charities explored the barriers to physical activity for individuals with long-term conditions. The research found that health professionals often attributed these barriers to factors like a lack of motivation, money, time, capacity, or skills. In contrast, patients identified chronic pain as the primary obstacle, with many stating that pain itself was the biggest barrier to activity. This contrast underscores a significant empathy gap between those living with long-term conditions and the professionals supporting them. Over the past two years, this initiative has substantially addressed that gap. By sharing insights, fostering mutual learning, and upskilling professionals and patients, the programme is better equipped to support individuals in managing their conditions. Additionally, it provides high-quality, practical resources and training to enhance care and promote more effective, empathetic support.

The key impacts of the work to date can be found here ([link](#)).