The purposeful linking of the worlds of football and mental healthcare has resulted in the development of a number of projects across the UK which have involved both playing football and using football facilities to promote mental health. The Notts County FC Football in the Community programme embraces fully the idea of using football, supported by a Club based in the heart of communities, to facilitate mental health work.

Situated in the centre of the city of Nottingham, Notts County is the oldest football league club in the world still to be playing with football league status. The club was formed in 1862 and was one of the 12 founder member clubs of the football league when it came into being in 1888. Notts County was also one of the first clubs to develop a comprehensive football in the community (FITC) strategy and since its inception in 1989, the FITC team has delivered a range of innovative programmes in the four key areas of health, education, social inclusion and sports participation.

Based at Portland Centre in the heart of the Meadows area of Nottingham, FITC is a familiar service to people in the City of Nottingham. The Portland Centre has been managed by FITC since March 2014 and has all the facilities normally associated with a leisure centre, including a swimming pool, sports hall, squash courts and a fully equipped gym and dance studio. In addition, there are conference facilities, meeting rooms, classrooms and a creative suite with IT facilities. Recent projects have included groups to work with adolescents, an innovative multi-sport and dementia project, and programmes aimed at specific target groups such as the refugee football project.

The mental health and wellbeing-oriented groups run by the FITC team covers a range of ages and includes ‘On the Ball’, a men’s group that involves playing football, followed by workshops covering issues that impact on the lives of the participants, and ‘Right Mind’, a women’s group that uses a range of sports selected by the participants and also uses a social gathering after the sessions to offer support. The Goals4Life project works closely with the local child and adolescent mental health services to offer a programme to young people aged 10–18 years, and Primary Goals is a project that involves Notts County FITC staff going into schools to work with primary school age children to deliver sessions based on developing resilience and wellbeing.

In 2013, the FITC team approached the University of Nottingham for some help in evaluating projects and over the following years the relationship between the University and Notts County FITC has developed, with three distinct threads becoming prominent. This has resulted in the design of evaluation tools for various projects and in overseeing the evaluation process. Student nurses have evaluated placements as part of their BSc in Nursing programme in very positive terms. Furthermore, two students have recently based their dissertations on the work being done at Notts County by the FITC team.

A recurring theme in evaluations is how participants valued the non-clinical setting and the delivery by non-clinical staff. Participants report that they feel fitter, healthier and stronger. Key impacts relate to maintaining and losing weight, sleeping better and feeling positive about their future. The projects promote inclusion, help develop friendships, provide peer support mechanisms and reduce isolation; they also promote self-esteem and feelings of worth and value. This strongly echoes the findings of other projects based in football settings.

Since its inception in 1989, the FITC team has delivered a range of innovative programmes in the four key areas of health, education, social inclusion and sports participation.

Moving forward, the Community Trust continues to develop its community resource as a hub for promoting emotional health and wellbeing. Recently, the successful Recovery College ran by Nottinghamshire Healthcare Trust has opened a centre in the FITC premises.
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offering a number of courses which are aimed at promoting recovery by teaching people to manage their physical and mental health.

While there are many government and media reports on the increase of mental health difficulties, there are relatively few examples of contemporary responses to help meet the challenge of how to promote mental health in the 21st century. The FITC may be an example of a contemporary response.

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References