

IMAS: A values-driven response to Covid-19

MAY 2021



As the Covid pandemic evolved, it became very clear that disabled people were being disproportionately affected¹.

Existing barriers to accessing essential services were exacerbated, and restrictions meant a need for sudden and immediate physical distancing, with much of the world moving online to work and socialise. Those without ready access to appropriate technology, or the digital literacy and support to adapt to online, were at risk of being left behind. With access to support systems, such as family and carers, also being restricted, and clear and accessible information in short supply, this has been an isolating and confusing time for many².

The IMAS Team, however, have been ensuring that this is not the case with their community, many of whom are disabled, and the IMAS Trainers have still been meeting weekly to lead the response through resource co-production. This research summary highlights the ways in which IMAS responded to the Covid pandemic, how their values and ways of working informed their response, and the learning that can be harnessed for the future.

Key highlights:

- The IMAS Team responded rapidly and effectively to Covid restrictions by moving activities online, securing additional funding and delaying their international tournament.
- IMAS' asset-based approach and knowledge and understanding of their community meant a safe space was created in the weekly Trainers' meetings for peer-support.
- The IMAS Trainers produced an impressive array of motivational resources to help and empower others in the IMAS community and beyond.
- IMAS' extensive, far-reaching networks were utilised to their full potential in mutually beneficial ways.
- IMAS' response was crucial given that their community includes some of those most at risk of being impacted negatively, both physically and mentally, by the pandemic.

How did IMAS respond to working under Covid restrictions?

1 MOVED TO ONLINE DELIVERY



The weekly meeting with the IMAS Trainers was moved online straight away as the IMAS Team know the risks involved with isolation for their community, and that keeping people connected is a priority. Presentations to sports clubs and other organisations, Mixed Ability activities, and student placements were later adapted to online delivery.

2 DELAYED IMART 2020



IMART was delayed until June 2021, and then again to June 2022, as soon as the IMAS Team could see it wasn't feasible to run the event. They knew that it would be beneficial for all those involved to know what was happening early on and be able to adapt to the changes.

3 PRODUCED MOTIVATIONAL RESOURCES



The IMAS Team co-produced a series of engaging videos, blogs and challenges, such as **Pandemic Positivity** and **Mixed Ability Connects**, to amplify the voices of the IMAS Trainers in raising awareness of barriers faced, tackling inequalities, challenging narratives around social isolation, promoting health

4 APPLIED FOR COVID RESPONSE FUNDING



The IMAS Team successfully applied for funding from the National Lottery, the Social Enterprise Support Fund and the Charity Aid Foundation. This went towards providing technology for those without access, developing online learning resources, supporting coaches, making the meeting space Covid compliant and producing and distributing face masks.

How did IMAS' values and ways of working inform the response?



IMAS' response was fundamentally underpinned by the organisation's commitment to an asset-based approach, an excellent knowledge and understanding of the community they work with and their extensive networks across a range of different sectors including healthcare, sports, disability and education.

The research suggests the online IMAS Trainers' meetings still provide the same **safe, welcoming, non-judgemental space** that the in-person meetings were providing. A space where people will be listened to, and where they can get non-patronising, non-coercive support and advice, with the focus being on autonomy and empowering people to make their own choices.

"It's on Zoom and not in [our meeting space], but it's still keeping that connection of the IMAS group alive and having that 'IMAS spirit'"

- Mason, IMAS Trainer



The IMAS' Team's **knowledge and understanding of their community's needs** meant they were aware of the individual capabilities and skills of the Trainers, as well as the likely challenges some of them would face in accessing appropriate technology, which would increase the risk of being excluded from opportunities to connect and socialise.



"I think it was brilliant when IMAS were able to get tablets and things to be able to connect people, and I think that's been pretty cool to see other faces as they've joined because they've got technology and confidence"

- Sam, IMAS Ambassador

Partnerships and networks

Local partnerships and networks played a key role in IMAS' response. The IMAS Team coordinated online Mixed Ability activities, as well as promoting affiliated organisations in order to increase the numbers of people that could be reached. These include:



Boxing from **Unorthobox**



Movement to music



Yoga from **Happy Times Activities**



Rugby fitness from **White Rose Rugby**



Drumming to music from **Sense**



A Fitness session from **InclusFit**

Sarah-Jane, founder of Unorthobox, said that working with IMAS helped her grow her skills and confidence in offering sessions online:



"When you know you've got the support from another organisation, that's what's helpful. Like somebody's got your back"

- Sarah-Jane, founder of Unorthobox.

National and international partnerships and networks also came to the fore. Online connections were made with IMAS Ambassadors in different parts of the UK and the 'Bradford Model' of resource and presentation co-production with the IMAS Trainers was replicated in the Italian, Irish and Canadian Mixed Ability communities. Each of these places recruited "Experts by Experience", who had overcome barriers to participation in sport, to meet regularly and begin co-producing their own presentations and resources, as well as promoting ideas of how to stay active and connected during lockdown.

"What Covid's done is remind us that part of our blinkers was around physical closeness, and actually losing that through Covid and having to connect to people virtually through the internet has opened opportunities to connect over distances that were previously a barrier."

- Doc, IMAS Non-executive Director



Partnerships and networks across the healthcare and education sectors also played a key part in IMAS' Covid response. Most importantly, these connections enabled the IMAS Trainers to be **vaccinated as frontline social care workers**. This recognised the importance of their work with IMAS, while also challenging a system that often works against them.



Katrina's Covid response Story

Katrina had previously been turned away from sports clubs due to her disability but met IMAS in February 2020 at a Physical Activity and Health promotion workshop. Katrina immediately started attending the weekly IMAS Trainers' meetings and participating in Mixed Ability rugby.

When lockdown started, Katrina joined the online meetings and reported that getting used to using Zoom was tricky at first, but she adapted quickly with the support of her peers. The weekly Zoom meetings have helped her during lockdown, and she has since got her sister involved as well!

"If we didn't have a [meeting] every week I'd have been really bored... I like talking about what we do and how we've done during the week."

Katrina has been heavily involved in the IMAS resources and presentations. She co-produced a motivational video for the **Pandemic Positivity** series and was one of the Trainers who were paired with a Medical Student from Sheffield University on placement with IMAS.

Katrina's story shows the impact IMAS is still able to have on people's lives and wellbeing, even when working virtually. Katrina is now waiting impatiently for the end of lockdown so she can enact her plan to set up the first Mixed Ability women's rugby team.

"Before I joined IMAS I didn't have much confidence, but now I'm with IMAS I've got more confidence. Now when people ask me, I can just do things and I couldn't do that before. Before I used to have Zoom calls with other people, but I wouldn't put my camera on, but now with IMAS I have camera on all the time and it's just confidence really."

What learning can be harnessed for the future?

Although the IMAS Team hope to get back to physical delivery as soon as possible, the online connections have been very useful in extending networks and challenging geographical boundaries. A hybrid approach could, therefore, be the best of both worlds.

"[Going online] gave us the ability to keep relationships going and maybe to reach those that may have become more isolated. It also gives us an opportunity to explore the way in which, as an international organisation, we will be able to use that medium to bring together stakeholders worldwide."

- Roy, IMAS NeD

However, an awareness that some of the IMAS community may have been left behind by the digital divide was also discussed by interviewees and it was felt to be very important that the organisation works hard to determine who the adaptations didn't work for and to improve connections as soon as possible in the future.

In the context of Covid restrictions negatively impacting the physical and mental well-being of many, and disproportionately affecting disabled people, the work IMAS carry out is absolutely critical. The IMAS Team have navigated uncertain and unsettling times with values-driven action and with their community at the centre of all they do.



The findings in this report are a result of research carried out by Nifty Sustainability between December 2020 and February 2021. Methods included **10 interviews** across key stakeholders such as IMAS Directors in the UK and Ireland, IMAS Non-executive Directors (NeDs), IMAS Trainers, and representatives from Sport England and Happy Times Yoga. Data were also gathered from a **desk-based review of relevant literature** and attendance at relevant **online conferences**, as well as participation in, and observation of, the **weekly meetings** with the IMAS Trainers, and Mixed Ability boxing and yoga sessions within the same timeframe.

References

- 1 [Nuffield Trust Chart of the Week](#)
- 2 [Max Landsborough IMAS placement blog](#)

About IMAS

IMAS believes that everyone should be able to benefit from the transformational power of sport to create healthy and happy communities. To make this vision possible, IMAS provides interactive and accessible training delivered by participants from a range of backgrounds to create sporting environments that are safe, welcoming and non-judgemental. This has been shown to overcome a huge range of barriers for people who may otherwise struggle to participate, as well as benefiting clubs and the wider community.

Sign our manifesto

IMAS' values are upheld in its Manifesto.

To find out more about Mixed Ability sports, and sign the Manifesto, visit the website:

 mixedabilitiesports.org

