

Challenging Perceptions to Enable Meaningful Experiences

Daniel loves sport and physical activity but having been born with a congenital impairment, resulting in him being non-ambulant and non-verbal, opportunities for him to engage within any type of physical activity have always been limited. In summer of 2021 Daniel's Occupational Therapist enquired with Conwy's Inclusion Officer to see if he would be able to attend the Leisure Development Team's Beach Sports Club which was held at Porth Eirias in Colwyn Bay. Whilst the department had programmed sessions specifically for disabled youngsters, in addition to their inclusive open sessions, there was some uncertainty around Daniel's ability to engage within the session due to the severity of his impairment and the associated barriers with taking a non-ambulant power-chair user out onto the beach and into the sea. However, after a positive solution-focused conversation between staff, with members of the Ffit Conwy team engaging with Daniel's parents to find out more information, a plan was agreed with all involved eager to find a way that ensured Daniel could take part safely and in a way that genuinely engaged him in a positive experience.



"Our son Dan is a full time wheelchair user but has such a keen interest in sport. We are always looking for ways to get Dan involved in sport and the outdoors but due to the nature of his disabilities have struggled to find meaningful engagement for him. That was until we met Mark Richards and the team from Ffit Conwy. When we first heard about the beach sessions we wondered how it would be possible for Dan to participate but we turned up anyway with very little expectations. We were so wrong! The team were incredible and worked with us to get Dan on the SUP and into the sea. It was incredible to see him on the board experiencing something that we honestly didn't imagine would be possible.

That was two years ago and we've been regulars to the beach sessions ever since. Roger and all the team are incredible at making Dan feel included and giving him such a positive experience out on the waves. Through connections we made Dan has gone onto take part in other sports events such as the disability rugby session and made great friends in that group too. He always looks forward so much to taking part in activities and sports that he only really enjoyed previously as a spectator. It has given him a huge sense of accomplishment, made some new friends and develop a greater love for sports and the outdoors. None of this we would have thought possible without the help of Mark, Roger and all the team and we will forever be grateful for the opportunities it has opened up to us as a family."

- David and Sue, Daniel's Parents.

With the use of adapted equipment, including a giant SUP paddle board and a large foam bean bag used to support Daniel, his parents and the Ffit Conwy team set about tackling each challenge in turn, which initially started with his parents getting him in his wetsuit on to ensure he didn't become too cold out on the water. Before long, Daniel was ready to take part in the session with his Dad, David also fully engaged in supporting his son take to the water as Mum, Sue, watched alongside other parents on the beach.

The Ffit Conwy Team have always taken a pro-active approach with regard to inclusion, recognising that it is everybody's responsibility to facilitate inclusive provision and provide opportunities for all. Whilst there will inevitably be a need for specialist advice, guidance and individuals that champion inclusion, there is also the need for services to ensure that they embed inclusion within the planning and delivery of their offer rather than developing a non-disabled focus that does not have the scope to adapt and engage with a wide range of abilities and impairments when needed.



Daniel thoroughly enjoyed his time out on the water and being a part of Porth Eirias Beach Sports Club and it was to prove to be the start of more activity for him. Links were made with the Welsh Rugby Union and their Disability Holiday Camps where he had a fantastic time and even got to attend an RGC match and meet some players.

There has been fantastic progress made within disability and inclusive sport over the last decade however more still needs to be done to ensure that everybody can access physical activity and sport in a way that they value and feel genuinely engaged within. Daniel, and his family are a great example of what can be achieved with a positive approach and an openness to collaborative thinking when tackling barriers and challenging perceptions.

"It's vitally important that we continue to challenge our own perceptions of what can be done and not settle for the easy option just because something has never been done before. It's never been about ticking a box with regard to disability but instead looking to create meaningful experiences for disabled people and their families. Some of the greatest successes are born out of challenges so with a positive approach we can all play our part and enable inclusion."

- Mark Richards, Ffit Conwy Inclusion Officer.



"It has been a real pleasure for our team working with Daniel and his family. With good pre-session communication we can plan for very diverse scenarios and we pride ourselves on having a flexible but safe 'can do' attitude on the day. This really helps make things happen. We're acutely aware of the trust that the family places in us during these sessions and we are extremely pleased and proud to be a part of Daniel's journey."

- Roger Pierce, Ffit Conwy Outdoor Activities Development Officer.