



**University of  
Nottingham**

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

# **Instructor and client views of a community falls prevention service in England: a qualitative exploration**

**A service evaluation commission by Age UK Derby and Derbyshire**

Leah Jayes, Sophie Carlisle, Ilze Bogdanovica, Tessa Langley & Jo Morling

Lifespan and Population Health Sciences, School of Medicine, The University of Nottingham, Clinical Sciences Building, Nottingham City Hospital, Nottingham, NG5 1PB

March 2022

## Table of Contents

<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Strictly No Falling .....	4
SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19).....	4
Project aims.....	4
<b>METHODS</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Interview and focus group schedules .....	6
Participant recruitment and data collection .....	6
Data analysis .....	7
<b>RESULTS</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Participants .....	8
Thematic analysis.....	9
Theme 1. Clients: Motivation and benefits of attending .....	10
Theme 2. Instructors: Motivation and relationships with clients .....	13
Theme 3. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNF .....	14
Theme 4. Barriers to attend and facilitating attendance .....	19
<b>KEY MESSAGES</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>24</b>
Ethical approval .....	24
Funding source .....	24
Conflicts of Interest.....	24
<b>Supplementary files</b> .....	<b>25</b>
1. Interview Guides .....	25
2. Thematic Map .....	29

## SUMMARY

- Strictly No Falling (SNF) provides approximately 130 community classes throughout the Derbyshire region, with approximately 2000 weekly attendees.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, where possible, SNF moved to holding classes online and SNF instructors were encouraged to maintain contact (via phone, text messages) with their class members before returning to face-to-face classes.
- This evaluation comprised of ten individual interviews with SNF class instructors and five focus groups (totaling 41 participants) with SNF clients.
- Thematic analysis identified four main themes:
  - Clients: Motivation and benefits of attending
  - Instructors: Motivation and relationships with clients
  - The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNF
  - Barriers to attend and facilitating attendance
- All clients and instructors spoke about the enjoyment they had during SNF classes. Clients praised instructors for their 'person-centred' approach and felt they went 'above and beyond' to support them during the pandemic.
- Clients felt the benefits of the class went far beyond improving physical health and preventing falling, and included mental wellbeing and an opportunity to socialise.
- The importance of SNF, beyond an exercise programme, was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Word of mouth brought most new clients to the programme therefore clients and instructors thought more could be done to advertise the programme, especially linking in with community and healthcare services.

# INTRODUCTION

## Strictly No Falling

Older people are at an increased risk of having a fall compared to younger adults, and falls are the most common cause of injury related deaths in people over the age of 75 years<sup>1,2,3</sup>. Since 2005 Age UK Derby and Derbyshire (AUKDD) has been a primary provider of community falls prevention services in Derbyshire, in partnership with Derbyshire Community Healthcare Services. The service, known as 'Strictly No Falling' (SNF), is a community-based exercise programme which aims to support people who have fallen or are at risk of falling to improve their strength, balance and coordination. The service is available for residents of Derbyshire who are over the age of 50, however it is also accessible to younger people who are at risk of falling. In April 2021 SNF had a caseload of approximately 130 community classes provided throughout the region, with approximately 2000 weekly attendees<sup>4</sup>. The structured exercise sessions are delivered from community venues across Derbyshire and include chair-based exercise (CBE), Otago, postural stability groups and Tai Chi.

## SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19)

From 23rd March 2020, UK residents were asked to stay at home in the first SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic lockdown. SNF classes were amongst a multitude of services required to cancel all face-to-face activity. Where possible SNF moved to holding classes online or SNF instructors were encouraged to maintain contact (via phone, text messages) with their class members. As COVID-19 restrictions eased after the first lockdown, face-to-face classes were encouraged to re-commence in line with government guidelines. Towards the end of 2020 the UK went into its second COVID -19 lockdown, again preventing face-to-face SNF classes to be held in person till spring/summer of 2021.

## Project aims

The aim of this qualitative study was to evaluate, across a range of class types and geographical locations, the experience of providers (instructors) and service users (clients) of SNF in order to understand their motivations for initial and ongoing attendance/provision. In addition, to explore the

---

<sup>1</sup> Masud T, Morris RO. Epidemiology of falls. *Age and Ageing* 2001;30:3–7.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell AJ, Reinken J, Allan B, Martinez G. Falls in old age: a study of frequency and related clinical factors. *Age and Ageing* 1981;10:264–70.

<sup>3</sup> Tinetti ME, Williams CS. Falls, injuries due to falls, and the risk of admission to a nursing home. *New England Journal of Medicine* 1997;337:1279–84.

<sup>4</sup> Strictly No Falling, March 2020 – April 2021, Covid-19 Pandemic Response Report

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attendance and provision of SNF. To the authors' knowledge, no studies to date have explored the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on a community-based falls prevention programme.

## METHODS

A qualitative study was carried out with two groups of participants:

- those who organised and ran the SNF classes (referred to as ‘instructors’) were invited to complete a one to one interview and
- service users who attended SNF classes (referred to as ‘clients’) were invited to partake in a focus group.

### **Interview and focus group schedules**

Separate schedules were developed for the instructor’s interviews and for the client focus groups by the project team before being reviewed by AUKDD (for schedules, see [Supplementary File 1](#)). Both schedules included open ended questions to explore motivations around initial and continued provision/attendance to classes, the experience of being involved in the programme, and any potential barriers to client attendance. In addition, all areas discussed also considered any impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of data collection, participants were asked a short set of demographic questions.

### **Participant recruitment and data collection**

Researchers selected 25 SNF instructors (out of a possible 66 provided by AUKDD) covering a range of SNF class types and locations, inviting them via email to take part in a one-to-one interview. Potential participants were provided with an information sheet and asked if they had any questions before agreeing to take part. Interviews were arranged with ten instructors who outlined their interest in taking part in the study. All interviews were completed over an online platform (Zoom) with one researcher (SC) at a time convenient to them. On average interviews lasted 53 minutes (ranging between 31-70 minutes). In addition, interviewees were approached about the possibility of holding a focus group with clients from one of their SNF classes.

Focus groups were held with five SNF classes, led and facilitated by two researchers (SC & LJ) either face-to-face or online. Forty one clients attended a focus group discussion in total (groups ranged from 5-15 participants) and lasted on average 45 minutes (ranging between 27-65 minutes). Verbal consent was sought from all participants prior to participation and a £10 shopping voucher was provided to participants to thank them for their time.

## **Data analysis**

All interviews were digitally audio-recorded, assigned a unique code, and then transcribed verbatim. Following receipt of the transcripts, they were checked prior to uploading and managing in NVivo (Version 12). Instructor and client transcripts were analysed together by following the six stages of Braun and Clarke's inductive thematic analysis, an approach that allows coding and theme development to be directed by the content of the data (1). Using this inductive approach, one researcher (LJ) independently familiarised and carried out line-by-line coding on a sample of transcripts before establishing a set of potential groupings of codes into themes. Another researcher (JM) then looked at a similar number of transcripts before both researchers met to discuss and agreed upon a set of themes and what they encompass, resulting in a coding manual. This consensus-based approach aimed to minimise as much as possible individual biases and enhance the credibility of the analysis (2). One researcher (LJ) then coded the remaining transcripts using the agreed coding manual. Writing up the results of the thematic analysis in this report helped to finalise the four themes generated and supported the development of the thematic map (See [Supplementary File 2](#)).

## RESULTS

### Participants

Of the 10 instructors and 41 clients recruited, the majority were female and White British. Clients had been a member of their SNF class for an average of three years, and instructors had been delivering classes for an average of nearly 6 years (for characteristics of the participants see Table 1).

**Table 1. Characteristics of participants, by instructors and clients**

	<b>Instructors</b> (n=10)	<b>Clients</b> (n=41)
<b>Participant gender</b>		
Female, n (%)	9 (90%)	34 (83%)
<b>Participant age</b>		
Mean age (years)	57	75
Age range (years)	37-71	58-92
<b>Ethnic background</b>		
White British, n (%)	9 (90%)	39 (95%)
<b>Length of involvement (provision or attendance) with SNF</b>		
Mean (years)	5.8	3.0
Range (months)	1.4-12.0	3.0-7.8

Participating instructors held on average four classes per week (range, 1-7) and delivered a wide range of classes throughout Derby and Derbyshire. All apart from three instructors delivered CBE with the majority of participating clients attending a CBE class or a mix of CBE and postural stability group (PSG) or Otago. See Table 2 for a further breakdown of classes being held or attended by participants.

A small number of clients said they had been referred into SNF classes by a healthcare service/professional however the vast majority stated that they had heard about SNF classes through word of mouth and subsequently attended; corroborated by instructors. None of the instructor interviewees were currently completing the '12 week programme' with any of their clients, reasons included: current clients had already completed it, disruption of classes due to COVID-19, and not wanting clients to feel 'singled out' amongst a group who have already completed it.

**Table 2. Characteristics of SNF groups held/attended by participants**



Interview /focus group ID	Type of class/es	Area/s of class	Area type
<b>Instructor interviews</b>			
I1	Tai chi/CBE/Otago/Qigong	Barrow-upon-Trent, Swadlincote, Repton, Willington	Rural/town/village
I2	CBE/PSG/Otago	Ilkeston, Draycott, Long Eaton, Sandiacre	Urban/town
I3	CBE/Otago	Ashbourne, Hilton	Village
I4	CBE	Chesterfield	Urban
I5	Tai Chi	Matlock, South Wingfield	Rural
I6	CBE/Otago/PSG	Belpher, Etwall, Willington	Urban/rural
I7	CBE/Otago	Sawley	Village
I8	Tai Chi/Otago	Long Eaton/Sandiacre	Town
I9	Otago	Sawley	Village
I10	CBE/Otago/PSG	Swadlincote	Rural
<b>Client focus groups</b>			
FG1	CBE	Swadlincote	Town
FG2	CBE/Otago	Held online (by ability not area)	n/a
FG3	Tai Chi	Long Eaton	Urban/town
FG4	CBE/PSG	Overseal, Swadlincote	Rural
FG5	CBE	Hasland, Chesterfield	Urban

**CBE** Chair based exercises; **PSG** postural stability group

### Thematic analysis

Four inter-related themes are presented below with selected excerpts from interviews and focus groups alongside participant/focus group ID numbers. One theme was drawn from data collected from clients only (Clients: Motivation, experience and benefits and impact of attending) and another from instructors only (Instructors: Motivation and relationship with clients). The remaining two themes were obtained from information across the whole dataset. A thematic map demonstrating the relationships between themes is provided in [Supplementary File 2](#).

## Theme 1. Clients: Motivation and benefits of attending

Opinions outlined in this theme are largely derived from reflections on in-person classes occurring outside of national COVID-19 restrictions.

*Initial motivation to join:* For most, the primary driver to attend a SNF class was linked to improving their physical health, reasons included: to move more, support balance and movement, get stronger, ease pain, prevent falls, or because previous forms of exercise were no longer possible due to declining health or ailments. However, there were a few clients who said they were primarily interested in meeting new people through attending the sessions. Clients liked the fact that the SNF classes enabled them to start or continue to exercise into older age.

*Experience of attending and the role of the instructor:* All clients agreed that the classes were enjoyable and spoke about how much fun they had whilst attending their class. This enjoyment was attributed to both fellow clients and the instructors. Clients found the SNF sessions physically challenging however many said the fun and laughter experienced made the session easier to complete and unlike other exercise classes they had attended. Clients thought the classes were well organised and a few said they enjoyed the changing content of the classes.

*Client: It's fun. That is the important thing, it's fun. We don't realise we've done half a dozen jockey lifts, because we've laughed in the middle of it. Somebody's made some comment about something, and before you know it you've done six of them. And we've always joked about the counting haven't we? We'll tell her [instructor] we've done eight and we haven't. We've only done four –*

*Client: So I think the main part of [instructors name] class is it's fun. I don't consider I'm coming to an exercise class.*

*Client: No, no.*

*Client: I think it's a social gathering where we do a few exercises. However we work hard.*

*Client: We do work hard. (FG1)*

All clients spoke incredibly positively about instructors, describing them as approachable, clear, patient, and caring. Clients liked the instructors 'person-centred' approach, they said although exercises were challenging they could go at their own pace and this resulted in a non-judgmental and supportive atmosphere to exercise in. Clients thought instructors were attentive to their needs during the classes, watching over all of them and if necessary tailored the exercises to an individual's ability. Clients praised instructors for how they described and linked the benefits of the taught exercises to their everyday life. A few clients also said they had incorporated exercises into their daily lives (e.g. whilst boiling the kettle or brushing their teeth), as proposed by their instructor.

*Client: Well, they're instructive. They tell you what the exercises will do for you like you do one with pointing your toes and your heels and they'll say, "Oh, that'll help you walk along the cobbles in [local town]" It's instructing you but also light-hearted as well.*

*Client: They also make the point that you do what you can. You're not pushed into doing everything because if you're doing the canoeing one which is quite a violent figure of eights, if you can't do that then stir the porridge pot. You're using similar muscles and loosen them up. There's always an easier way out of it. Just do as much as you can how you can. It's not rigid 'thou shall do as I say'.*

*Client: It's not competitive. (FG5)*

Many clients spoke about the high level of knowledge and credibility instructors brought to their role. A few clients gave examples of where instructors had overcome their own health issues through exercise. Several clients considered their instructor a friend and a few gave examples of where an instructor had supported them during a particular difficult time in their life.

*Client: I've found them very helpful, very encouraging, but I think the most important thing is the way they can talk about how the Tai Chi has helped them overcome difficulties, it lends a level of credibility that you just can't argue with it..... it's very encouraging and as I say, they are very patient with us.*

*Client: I was going to say, I find [instructors name] quite inspirational..... And it's nice because they're not just like instructors, they're like people like you can approach, and they've been very supportive during that really difficult patch for me. So, I've got a lot of respect for them. (FG3)*

Many of those doing CBE said their class was one of, if not the, highlight of their week (outside of the pandemic restrictions period) and added that the class gave them something to structure their week around; for a few, their SNF class was the only face-to-face contact they had throughout their week.

*Client: Other than seeing my family, I think this is best thing that happens to me in the week.*

*Client: Yes, it's lovely to have something to fix the week around, because it's been, you know, quite difficult*

*Client: Most of the time it's my only outing, especially over the whole of lockdown. It has been your only time out. (FG1)*

**Impact of attending:** Clients outlined only positive aspects of being involved in the SNF programme. Clients spoke about how the benefits of SNF went beyond simply 'preventing falls', having a positive influence on their physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Since attending SNF classes clients highlighted improvements in their strength, balance, coordination, flexibility, and in their day to day

movement; a couple of clients said they no longer required mobility aids to move around. Client also gave tangible examples of how daily activities were now possible or had become easier as a result of the SNF exercises they completed (e.g. lifting grandchildren or washing their hair).

*Client: We all feel better. Some of the simple things you do, you don't realise how it's helping your arms because at one time I couldn't even lift my arms up to wash my hair. You don't realise how simple these exercises are, what they do for you.*  
(FG5)

Clients highlighted how they felt attending SNF sessions had prevented potential falls, and that instructors had taught them how to safely fall and get up after a fall. For many, these physical improvement had increased their confidence in moving around day to day.

*Client: Well yes, I've gone from a mobility scooter to not. That's a big benefit, yes.*  
*Client: And I haven't had so many falls and gouging skin on my shin or anything for two years.*  
*Client: Yes I haven't had a fall either and that gives you great confidence, doesn't it?*  
*Client: Yes. (FG2)*

Alongside improving their confidence physically, most clients said attending SNF classes had led to them feeling more confident overall and improved their mental health.

*Client: Yeah. I mean I'm exercising. I'm getting back into exercise. I might not be too frightened to go to other exercise groups now. I'm getting the courage back a bit. (FG4)*

Some clients enjoyed the fact that SNF had helped them to achieve something (e.g. passing a stage in the course or walking to the SNF venue) and they liked that the classes provided them with something to focus on or aim towards.

*Client: I'm actually getting now to a stage where I can do all of Tai Chi for arthritis part one and two, I feel like I've achieved something big, so that makes me feel really good. (FG3)*

The SNF sessions gave clients a 'sense of purpose' and facilitated group membership and friendships; clients described class sizes (10-12 people) as appropriate for this. Clients spoke about the camaraderie amongst group members, how they were a support network for one another, and that they enjoyed any additional social events.

*Client: It was interesting as well. Last week somebody mentioned some health problem they had, and it was so interesting that lots of people said, oh yes, I've experienced that, and I just felt it was such a supportive environment because, you know, at least if you've got that problem yourself you can see that other people have had that. And I just thought this is just so lovely.*

*Client: Sharing. Sharing.*

*Client: Yeah and I felt that was a very positive thing to come out of last week.*

*(FG1)*

**Motivation for continued attendance:** This subtheme encompasses many of the reasons why clients continue to attend SNF classes. Most notably these included: the enjoyment and fun of the classes, the nature of the instructors, the evident physical and mental health improvements, and the social aspects of being part of a supportive group. For many, although the initial draw of attending SNF sessions was to improve their physical health, these improvements were viewed as additional or secondary to the impact felt socially. Client views on the importance and benefits (physical, mental, and social) of the SNF programme intensified when face to face classes ceased during the periods of heightened COVID-19 restrictions (see [Theme 3](#)).

*Client: It's like a big social club with exercises thrown in.*

*Client: Like a big family, isn't it?*

*Client: It is really.*

*Client: If you have a bad day and you come up here, you forget. Even if it's only for a couple of hours you forget, don't you?*

*Client: Yeah.*

*Client: If you miss a week everybody wants to know why you weren't there. (FG5)*

## Theme 2. Instructors: Motivation and relationships with clients

**Initial and continued motivation:** Most participants were approached by AUKDD to become a SNF instructor as they had previously experience of working with older people or as an instructor either within the community or a healthcare setting. As a result people felt well placed to become an instructor and were largely motivated by the idea of supporting older people to keep active, acknowledging the benefits this could bring to those in later life. In addition, a couple of instructors mentioned how they were drawn to the role as they really enjoyed working with an older population.

*Instructor: Well, I've always loved working with older people. My whole career has been working with an older age group. I just really enjoy it so it gives me that opportunity still. And that you know, it's lovely to see that they are benefiting, and also it brings me in a little bit of pocket money. (I7)*

Helping older people keep healthy (both physically and mentally) and witnessing clients improve as a result of the SNF programme is what motivated all instructors to continue in their role. Several instructors outlined how teaching the SNF classes was also beneficial for them; keeping them socially active and supporting their mental and physical health. A few also mentioned their income from running the SNF classes however this was not what ultimately motivated them to continue in the role.

*Instructor: But if I didn't instruct as an instructor, I would not be motivated to do the exercise, so it's a win win situation. I'm getting the benefits from doing the exercise and keeping my brain healthy and helping others at the same time. (18)*

*Instructor: Yeah, seeing their improvement that is really key. And especially when they don't see it, until suddenly they become aware and then that's wonderful (15)*

**Enjoyment of the role and relationship with clients:** All instructors spoke about how much they enjoyed or 'loved' their role as an instructor, many linked this enjoyment to the clients they came into contact with. Instructors echoed the comments from clients relating to the fun and enjoyment they had during the SNF classes. A few specifically enjoyed the 'laughs' and 'banter' with clients, for example, when challenging the clients physically with new exercises or additional repetitions.

Instructors cared about, respected and valued client relationships. A couple of instructors mentioned socialising with clients outside of the SNF classes.

*Instructor: I love it. I just love it. I do.....I like coming up with the routines I like challenging them. I like them moaning at me when we have to do 56 stands, not all in one hit you know, I just love it.....they are just great people to be around and to lift you and they are just full of knowledge. Oh my god, they are full of knowledge so anything I get stuck on I can ask them they give me their ears and I love it so it's all good from me. They're all at that age that my parents would be if they were alive so I have a lot of respect for them and I wish my parents were here to join in, so I just thoroughly enjoy it. (13)*

Although most instructors could not think of anything they disliked about their role, a few did mention not enjoying the data recording and entry they were required to do for AUKDD; attributing this to their lack of confidence with IT. That said, these instructors outlined how AUKDD were always available to support with these tasks.

### Theme 3. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SNF

**Immediate impact of the pandemic on SNF classes:** Most classes moved online (via Zoom) during periods of heightened COVID-19 government restrictions however several clients said they had been

unable to access these because they did not have or could not use the technology required. In instances where clients were unable to join online classes or their class did not move online, instructors outlined how they attempted to keep in regular weekly contact with their class members over the telephone (this often included additional text messaging). In addition, instructors said they created a 'WhatsApp' groups for each of their SNF classes which enabled dialogue between instructors and fellow clients and a few instructors also spoke about visiting clients at homes (in line with government guidelines) so they could 'check-in' with them and distribute items such as: exercise games, a SNF DVD (both created by one of the instructors), face masks, resistance bands, exercise monitoring forms, and information on wellbeing. Instructors were thankful for the amount of support AUKDD offered during this time in setting up online classes, providing items for clients (e.g. resistance bands and masks), and offering them financial support to maintain telephone contact with all participants during lockdown restrictions.

*Client: She [instructor] texted us.*

*Client: We were on a WhatsApp and we still are.*

*Client: We say "Morning" every morning.*

*Client: Every morning, yeah.*

*Client: That's never stopped.*

*Client: No we still do that.*

*Interviewer: So you've carried on with that level of communication?*

*Client: Yeah [all agree].*

*Client: Every day.*

*Client: Plus she [instructor] also, she sent us a game*

*Client: It's like snakes and ladders.*

*Client: So that was good.*

*Client: Yeah.*

*Client: I used to roll the dice while the kettle was boiling and do an exercise. (FG1)*

Instructors and clients said the success of the online classes varied and that some initially struggling to get to grips with moving virtually. A couple of instructors who ran different types of SNF classes spoke about how they found it easier to move their Tai Chi classes online (versus their CBE classes) as the class members tended to be younger and therefore more IT literate. Clients said they sometimes struggled to see and follow instructors on their small screens and instructors felt it was difficult on occasions to supervise the whole group online and support individual clients with the exercises. A couple of instructors did have concerns over safety whilst clients completed exercises at home during their Zoom classes.

*Instructor: Yeah I think it's kind of less easy to kind of manage on Zoom because, you know yourself, don't you, casting your eye on a room of people, it is very different, different from looking at Zoom, as you kind of really have to peer into each box. So yeah it's harder. I remember being absolutely exhausted when I first started Zooming because I was doing short sessions, the same number sessions a day that I would normally do, it was just the mental concentration. And I think also, the worry was there as well, about people being safe doing this. (16)*

A few instructors also commented upon how they themselves were also dealing with navigating a global pandemic and that the regular telephone calls with clients sometimes became difficult to complete and were time consuming. A couple of instructors praised the support they received from AUKDD during this time, specifically in helping them to complete their client telephone calls and offering emotional support during this difficult time.

*Instructor: Oh, it was. It was really heart breaking actually. A lot of them didn't have any family visiting or anything, so I was like the only person contacting them that week, so you know, they were on the phone for nearly an hour. Some of them, some crying. It was hard I will admit. I'm not gonna lie, you know that some days it wasn't enjoyable. It was, just get through it. You've got this list of names and just get through it and some days it was like just checking that they're alive because it was really that brutal. (12)*

Although there were some difficulties with having classes online and telephoning clients, everyone spoke about how all of these forms of communication during periods of lockdown were a 'life-line' or a 'saviour' as clients described it was a very isolating time. Clients said they structured their whole week around their SNF contact and they truly appreciated how instructors went out of their way to support and care for them during periods of heightened COVID-19 restrictions. As a result, many said that they felt the function of SNF shifted from a physical to a mental health focus during these periods of COVID-19 lockdown.

*Instructor: twice a week we did it on zoom throughout the pandemic, which was a life saver for them and for me mentally. And it would be nice to have done more, but unfortunately because the nature of the age, a lot of them weren't tech savvy and um just couldn't get to grips with it. (13).*

*Client: One thing they did do, once a week during lockdown we got a phone call to see that everybody was okay.*

*Client: Yeah, that was good.*

*Client: They [instructors] kept in touch. They'd got a list of who they were going to ring to make sure everybody was still okay.*



*Client: But you looked forward to that because there were just the two of you not going anywhere, not doing anything, only walking. You really did look forward to that phone call.*

*Client: That one phone call. (FG5)*

Returning to in-person SNF classes: As the COVID-19 restrictions eased most SNF classes returned to teaching face to face. Instructors said they informed clients when they would be re-starting in person sessions and any COVID -19 restrictions that would remain in place (e.g. face visors, social distancing, reduced group sizes, sanitising). Clients felt reassured by this and praised instructors for creating a 'COVID -safe' environment to them to return to. Instructors also spoke about how a few of their classes had remained online restrictions once restrictions had eased, they said these classes tended to be newly established during the pandemic.

*Client: They've kept it safe all the way along. It's always been socially distanced. We've always been two meters apart or whatever when we started back and your masks and things like that and all the gel. It's always been really safe.*

*Client: You felt safe.*

*Client: Yeah, felt really safe. Today we were all a bit, I can't speak for everybody, but we were all a bit nervous about it but we thought knowing what we know with [instructor] and all the gang, they'll keep it safe for us (FG5).*

Once COVID-19 restrictions allowed, instructors said most of their client base returned to in-person classes. There was a general consensus amongst instructors that the client who did not return were the ones who did not participate in zoom classes (if available) or weekly telephone calls. As a result, instructors felt that maintaining contact via these channels was imperative to retaining people in the SNF programme during the pandemic.

*Instructor: The phone calls and the conference calls and the zoom that you kind of managed to retain most people that you saw came back. There were a few that kind of dropped out, just disengaged completely. I've only had three that haven't yet come back. And they are high risk and they're still very nervous about going out, but three out of 13 classes. It's not a big number. (I2)*

Additional barriers to clients returning to in-person classes included concern over catching COVID-19 and an overall loss of confidence (e.g. in leaving the house or driving to the SNF venues). Instructors said they also felt this loss in confidence was as a result of the decline in both physical and mental health of clients, something they had had observed in their clients on return to in-person classes. A few clients also felt both their physical and mental wellbeing has been negatively impacted as a result of the not attending in person SNF classes.

*Instructor: They're very much frailer and that that was one really frustrating thing about last year when we came back, we came back for about seven or eight weeks kind of September to November and I started to see a lady, just felt like she was starting to get some gains again from coming and you know that all then got lost again and we weren't back again till July time. So, it's a long time for people. Also yeah, you see sort of the mental decline in people which is sad. (I6)*

*Client: I didn't manage to do Zoom at all and I did deteriorate really quite a bit during the lockdown and I found coming back was really helpful to build me back up. (FG4).*

*Instructor: That's the other thing with the pandemic, some of them that used to drive before, because of the pandemic, you know they've lost their confidence and they don't like driving anymore (I3)*

*The longer-term impact of the pandemic:* The vast majority of clients outlined how they preferred in-person to online SNF classes, as outlined earlier (see Theme 1) clients thoroughly enjoyed their in-person classes and gained a lot from these; physically, mentally and socially. However, a few clients from one focus groups said they preferred online classes because they did not have to contend with weather conditions and enjoyed the smaller online class numbers because they received more focused attention from the instructor. Instructors felt there was still a place for online SNF classes even once all COVID-19 restrictions have been removed. Specifically they felt it was beneficial that online groups allowed them to cover larger geographical areas of the county which also enabled SNF classes to be based on client ability and not on area. A couple of instructors said they did not like the idea of online SNF classes for new clients as they would not be able to fully assess newcomers fragility or support them physically in completing the exercises.

Instructors and clients said the COVID-19 pandemic had reaffirmed the importance of human relationships, as previous outlined, some clients felt the contact made through their SNF class had been a 'life-saver' during the height of the pandemic. Both instructors and clients said they felt the communication they had had with one another throughout the pandemic had brought them all closer together.

*Instructor: So I think, I think the lockdown has made people closer to each other because we value the friendships a lot more especially those that have kept in touch, you know. (I1)*

*Instructor: But I just think we're more appreciative of each other because of what's happened in the pandemic and a lot of them have said, you know, as*

*they're at that, not end of life, but you know they are that bit older, they really just want to do as much as they can while they're physically able and to enjoy it.*  
(13)

For many, communication via 'WhatsApp' groups and instructor-client text messaging had continued since returning to in-person classes. Clients enjoyed this continued contact outside of the SNF session and felt this was something positive to have come out of the pandemic. A few instructors has also noticed since returning to in-person classes that many clients spent longer talking at the start of end of a session and/or they had started socialising outside of the exercise session.

*Client: And the WhatsApp thing that they've set up where people talk for this particular course, I find that very handy because I can keep up with what's going on with everyone else. (FG3)*

*Instructor: Before the pandemic it was like, coming in on time, get on with it, get it done. They [clients] would chat while we were doing it and then they'd leave again. But I have noticed that although they're not allowed to loiter in the building, I'll sort of have a little look out the door, you know, to check they've all got in their cars or lifts or taxis, or whatever, and they're all still stood around chatting and they are really supporting each other. I've had a lot more questions as well if there is there anything else we can do each week. A lot of them have started the local walking groups since the pandemic. There's a knit and natter group that goes on, so few have started that. And others have just meet at the coffee shop. (I2)*

Instructors and clients were pleasantly surprised and welcomed the fact that they had become more IT literate and had learnt how to use Zoom as a result of the pandemic, a few clients went on to add how isolated they would have been without it. A few instructors said they enjoyed meeting fellow instructors in meetings arranged by AUKDD online during the pandemic, a few said they would like for these meetings to continue as a way to share ideas for SNF delivery.

#### Theme 4. Barriers to attend and facilitating attendance

**Barriers to attend a SNF class:** Several clients spoke about how nervous or frightened they had been prior to arriving at their first SNF class and they felt this was one of the main barriers to attend a SNF class.

*Client: Yes because you don't know what you're going to encounter, do you. I'd been isolated as well, I'd been at home, I hadn't gone out much with my knee. I was also caring for my mum and I wasn't working anymore, so I'd lost a lot of my*

*support and friendship group, and that was the other thing, going to a group, you don't know, do you. Well, I'm always very anxious about going somewhere new... Client: I'm similar, I wouldn't have come if I hadn't have come with [friends name] because I don't go to strange places on my own and meet strange people, I have to go with somebody I know. (FG3)*

Several instructors said they also thought a lack of confidence (especially in physical ability) or fear around might be encountered prevented potential clients from attending a SNF class. As a result, instructors said they often tried to talk to a new client on the telephone prior to attending and would ask them to arrive earlier to their first class to ensure they felt welcomed and cared for.

*Instructor: But the actual going into these halls where people don't know what happening can be a bit off putting and that they may well be self-conscious. They may well not be happy mixing with people, but it's always that initial contact that often comes in by telephone and you can chat to somebody then and get them to understand that you know we're a social group and we have lots of laughs and we, you know, we're 'not serious'.(i5)*

Several instructors and clients said a lack of transport would prevent people from attending a SNF class, especially for those living in more rural areas. A few clients said they would not be able to attend if they were not driven by a friend, relative or fellow client. A couple of clients also mentioned how voluntary agencies who organised free taxis for clients to attend had ceased since the start of the pandemic. Although the vast majority of clients said they felt the costs of class attendance was extremely reasonable and did not think it would deter people from joining, they thought any addition transport costs (e.g. for those requiring taxis to and from the venue or fuel prices) could prevent people from attending.

*Client: I can't drive so I wouldn't be able to [attend] if it was somewhere else where there wasn't a bus service, I wouldn't be able to [attend].*

*Client: Me mum wouldn't come if it wasn't for me. I bring her. I mean before I packed up work me husband used to bring her, but he's not very clever now. So you'd be stuck if I was stuck, wouldn't you?*

*Client: I have a taxi here but then I walk back into [area name] and catch my bus from the bus park. (FG1)*

A few instructors and clients said they had noticed a decline in class attendance when the weather was poor (e.g. cold or icy) or when nights draw in over the winter months, especially for those with poorer mobility. One focus group said accessing their SNF class venue in poor weather was a concern due to a lack of hand rails.

*Client: I think what other people might find a barrier is in the evening when the weather got colder or it got darker in the evenings, that's when people started to drop out, especially if they're not very mobile, they worry, and that would have been one of my things as well. My class has changed to an afternoon one, which is better. (FG3)*

Several clients thought the word 'falls' in the programmes name might prevent people from attending as many older people might not consider falling to be something that might happen to them and that in fact the programme went far beyond simply preventing falling. One focus group suggested the name of the programme had changed recently to 'stronger for longer' which they preferred.

*Client: The only thing I think might turn people off is the No Falls bit because I thought, "Well, that won't really affect me because I don't fall," but when you come you realise what a benefit it is really and you are really saving yourself from getting into that state in the first place. I've noticed a big difference. (FG5)*

Tai Chi instructors and clients said they thought a lack of understanding about the discipline or its association with martial arts or religion might put people off attending that type of exercise class.

*Client: I think it's important that people understand the history and background of Tai Chi and Chi Gong because that I think may stop people coming along because they might think it's got maybe some kind of religious background....So, I think that is important for some people to know because some people think, oh no, I'm not doing that because that's to do with say an eastern religion or something like that.*

*Interviewer: So that could put some people off?*

*Client: Yes, definitely. I know a few people who won't do Tai Chi because they see it linked to religion, or spiritualism, I should say. (FG3)*

Facilitating future attendance to SNF classes: Although instructors and clients acknowledged SNF classes were currently advertised via the AUKDD website and through posters in local settings, there was a perception that not many of the target demographic knew about the programme. As a result, instructors and clients felt more targeted promotion could be done to promote SNF, ideas included: a national TV campaign, posters in supermarkets, adverts in free local magazines and on Facebook, and utilising links to community and healthcare settings. Again, instructors acknowledged that AUKDD had worked hard to try and work with healthcare providers (GP surgeries, hospitals, physiotherapy teams) in an attempt to increase referrals into SNF however they still felt these referral rates were well below what they would have expected from these services.

*Instructor: We ought to be getting loads and loads of people at the end of their six week therapy course coming to our classes and we don't, and it's such a shame because I'm sure there are loads of people out there, and I know [colleague at Age UK] tried to talk to the therapy teams about referring on. (17)*

In addition, a couple of instructors and clients felt the SNF advert and logo could be improved by making them more eye catching, attractive and modern.

*Instructor: Don't think the posters are very good if I'm honest. I don't think they are very eye catching and they always seem to pick really old people. You know when I'm with them [clients], when they [clients] see the posters, they say 'we don't look like that' and so I think they could be a little bit more eye catching to be honest. (13).*

A few instructors mentioned how their current classes were full and they were unable to take on any new clients, to meet this demand they suggested training more instructors.

*Instructor: The fact that more instructors are needed, I think, is one of the biggest, biggest thing. Because there's a lot of us out there, but there's a lot, there's a lot more that could be done if we had more people in the role. Yeah, there is certainly demand for classes and things I think. (11)*

Finally, a few clients felt IT training on how to attend online SNF classes would be beneficial just in case further COVID-19 restrictions came into place.

## KEY MESSAGES

- All clients and instructors spoke about the enjoyment and fun they had during SNF classes, for some clients attending the class was the highlight of their week.
- Clients praised instructors for their 'person-centred' approach and felt they went 'above and beyond' to support them during the pandemic.
- Most clients were initially motivated to join a SNF class to improve their physical health. However once they had joined, clients felt the benefits of the class went far beyond improving physical health and preventing falling, and included mental wellbeing and an opportunity to socialise.
- The importance of SNF, beyond an exercise programme, was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Client said having the classes available to them online was a 'life saver' and regular contact with fellow class members and/or the instructors brought them all closer together.
- Unfortunately, not all clients were able to access online SNF classes during periods of COVID-19 lockdowns, however instructors worked hard to maintain contact with all clients. Instructors thought continued contact throughout the pandemic was imperative to clients returning to face to face classes as covid-19 restrictions eased.
- Barriers to attendance included: fear around attending the first session, lack of or the additional costs of transportation to classes, poor weather conditions, and the word 'falls' in the programme name.
- Word of mouth brought most new clients to the programme therefore clients and instructors thought more could be done to advertise the programme, especially linking in with community and healthcare services.
- There was no difference in the themes emerging from the different geographies (rural vs urban) with the exception of transport related issues in more dispersed areas.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

### **Ethical approval**

This project was reviewed by the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (University of Nottingham, UK) Research Ethics Committee in November 2021.

### **Funding source**

This study was funded by Age UK Derby and Derbyshire.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

None of the authors from The University of Nottingham have any competing interests.



# Supplementary files

## 1. Interview Guides

### Instructor interview guide

#### Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to take part in the evaluation.
- Review the purpose of the study in general:
  - Interested in hearing about why they got involved in SNF and their experience of being involved, especially interested in hearing about the impact of the pandemic.
  - Make participant aware we are also holding focus groups with 'clients' as part of the evaluation.
- Statement on confidentiality, right to withdraw consent, recording of the telephone interview.
- Ask if the participant have any questions before starting the interview and that they are still happy to continue.

#### Background

1. Could you tell me about how you first heard about the Strictly No Falls programme?
2. How did you then get involved and become an instructor in Strictly No Falls?
  - what was your understanding of the programme/what did you think the job would entail?
  - Why did you initially decide to become an instructor – what motivated you?
  - How long have you been employed/when did you qualify as an instructor?

#### Nature of the role

3. Can you tell me about your job role as a SNF instructor, what it involves?  
(might want to talk about what it involved pre-pandemic first, then any changes since the pandemic/ongoing adjustments)
  - Which and how many classes do you run? (type of class – eg. CBE, online or in person)
  - Where are the classes (rural v. urban)
  - How many clients do you have contact with on a weekly basis?
  - How has this changed since the pandemic – face to face or online, any additional activities as a result of the pandemic? (pre pandemic, first lockdown announcement in March 2020, subsequent lockdowns until summer 2021, after restrictions were lifted)
4. Can you tell me about the interaction you have with 'clients'?
  - How often do you contact/see them – during and outside of exercise classes

- Has the amount of contact changed during the pandemic (pre-pandemic, first lockdown announcement in March 2020, subsequent lockdowns until summer 2021, after restrictions were lifted)

5. What involvement/interactions do you have with those who support you/Age UK?

- How often do you contact/see them – during and outside of exercise classes
- Has the amount of contact changed during the pandemic (pre-pandemic, first lockdown announcement in March 2020, subsequent lockdowns until summer 2021, after restrictions were lifted)
- What support have you received from Age UK?

### **Motivations behind/Benefits of SNF**

6. Why do you think people attend SNF?

- What motivates them to attend
- What are the benefits of the programme for them - Physical/psychological/social

7. What motivates you to continue to work as an instructor on SNF?

- What do you enjoy most about your role
- What do you enjoy the least about your role

### **Potential barriers/changes to the programme**

8. Do you know of any barriers to attend SNF for older people?

- Know of any reasons why clients might not complete the initial 12 week programme
- Differences in types of exercise groups/urban v rural
- Impact of the pandemic (first lockdown announcement in March 2020, subsequent lockdowns until summer 2021, after restrictions were lifted)

9. How could SNF be advertised/promoted to others?

- Continue as it is/any ideas?

10. What do you think the programme does well and should continue to do?

- As a result of the pandemic did anything change that you think should stay as it is?

11. Going forward, are there any areas where you feel SNF could be changed/improved upon?

Either to - benefit/facilitate the client

-benefit/facilitate the instructor

12. Is there anything related to SNF that we have not spoken about but feel is important to mention before we finish?

### **Closing remarks**

- Do you have any questions for me before we end the interview?
- Check demographic questions answered
- Thank you for your time
- Arrangement of inconvenience allowance/retail voucher?

## Client interview guide

### Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to take part in the evaluation.
- Review the purpose of the study in general:
  - Interested in hearing about why they got involved in SNF and their experience of being involved, especially interested in hearing about the impact of the pandemic.
  - Make participants aware we are also conducting one to one interview with instructors as part of the evaluation.
- Statement on confidentiality, right to withdraw consent, recording of the focus group
- Ask if the participants have any questions before starting the interview and that they are still happy to continue.
- Reminder of some house rules of focus groups – please do not speak over each other, everyone’s views are important even if they are not the same as yours, please keep anything mentioned in the session between ourselves....doubt these will be too ferocious!

### Background

1. How did people first hear about SNF and how did they get involved?

- From who?
- If referred – how was this process?

2. Prior to coming along to one of the sessions what did you think taking part in the SNF programme entailed?

- Types of exercise
- How and where it took place
- How did you feel prior to going along to your first session

3. Initially, based on what you knew at the start, what motivated people to attend?

### Being involved in the SNF programme

4. Tell me about what being involved with SNF entails?

(might want to talk about what it involved pre-pandemic first, then any changes since the pandemic/ongoing adjustments)

- How many sessions on average do people attend per week/month
- Which sessions do people attend
- Online v. face 2 face sessions
- How has this changed since the pandemic

5. Can you tell me about the relationship people have with instructors?

- How often do you communicate – just in classes?
- What are the instructors like – friendly/helpful/supportive
- What impact did the pandemic have?

### **Motivations behind/Benefits of SNF**

6. Have people seen any benefits to attending SNF classes?

- Health/physical/psychological/social
- Impact of the pandemic

7. Has attending/being part of SNF had any knock on effect/impact to other parts of your life?

8. What motivates people to continue to attend SNF classes?

- Has this changed at all due to the pandemic?

### **Potential barriers/changes to the programme**

9. Do people know of any barriers other might have when considering whether to attend SNF?

- Know of any reasons why people might not complete the initial 12 week programme/drop out
- Differences in types of exercise groups/urban v rural
- Financial barriers
- Impact of the pandemic

10. How could SNF be advertised/promoted to potential clients?

- Continue as it is/any ideas?

11. What do you think the programme does well at and should continue to do?

- As a result of the pandemic did anything change that you think should stay as it is?

12. Going forward, Are there any areas where you feel SNF could be changed/improved upon?

Either to -benefit/facilitate the client

-benefit/facilitate the instructor

13. Is there anything related to SNF that we have not spoken about but feel is important to mention before we finish?

### **Closing remarks**

- Do you have any questions for me before we end the interview?
- Check demographic questions answered
- Thank you for your time
- Arrangement of inconvenience allowance/retail voucher?

## 2. Thematic Map

