MD Support Centre Magazine

Autumn - Winter 2025

Aquatic exercise classes to return with a splash

Care for your respiratory health this autumn and winter

Curtis and Tommy honoured for commitment to others

Plus:

- Move, breathe, thrive with seated yoga
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- and more..!

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Celebrate the festive season at MD Support Centre's

Christmas social!

Tuesday 9 December | 2 - 5pm
Coventry HQ

Our Christmas social is always a fantastic event full of laughter and good company. Join us for a fun and friendly event filled with festive cheer.

There'll be a raffle draw with some great prizes, plenty of delicious Christmas food to enjoy, and lots of opportunities to relax and socialise with others.

Head to page 11 for full details!

A word from our Board:

Following a successful summer recruitment process, we were delighted to welcome our new Chief Executive, Zoe Richardson, to the MD Support Centre team in August. From the outset, it was clear that her experience, values, and thoughtful approach to leadership made her the best person to guide us forward.

As you'll see from her message, Zoe brings a genuine passion for people and for building meaningful relationships. Her commitment to person-centred care reflects the heart of our organisation and the importance we place on listening to, understanding, and supporting the needs of our community.

In just three months, Zoe has already hit the ground running — continuing work on our next five-year strategy, progressing our consolidation plans for the year ahead, and developing partnerships to support our mission. Throughout this, she has kept her focus firmly on what matters most: our service users' independence, wellbeing, and quality of life. We're excited for the future and the positive impact Zoe's leadership promises to bring. If you haven't had the chance to meet her yet, we warmly encourage you to do so and explore how you can be part of the journey ahead.

Ruth Hereford

Chair of the Board of Trustees

A note from our CEO, Zoe Richardson

Welcome to the Autumn/Winter edition of the MD Support Centre magazine — and to my first edition as CEO. I joined the charity a few months ago, and if we haven't met yet, I'm really looking forward to changing that. It has been a privilege to step into this role and see first-hand the strength, warmth and resilience that define this community.

This issue is packed with everything that makes the Centre so special: determination, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to one another. It's been a season of growth and momentum, and I'm incredibly proud to see how the Centre continues to evolve — not just in what we deliver, but in how we deliver it.

You'll read about our therapists sharing their expertise on a national stage, shining a light on the specialist work they do every day. You'll see powerful examples of service users shaping the world around them — from influencing national policy to taking confident first steps (or train rides!) into new adventures. And you'll find stories of pure generosity, from individuals and organisations who step forward to support the Centre because they believe, as I do, that our services change lives.

We've also been busy strengthening our community spaces — whether that's our peer support groups, online classes, or our Christmas social. Everywhere I look, I see people supporting each other, learning from each other, and proving that belonging isn't a luxury… it's the foundation of everything we do.

As we look ahead to 2026, our priorities are clear: expand access, deepen impact, and keep building a charity that listens, adapts, and never stands still. We're here to champion independence, challenge barriers, and make sure every person living with muscular dystrophy has the support, therapy, and community they deserve.

Thank you for being part of this journey — whether you attend sessions, share your story, volunteer, donate, or simply cheer us on. Your involvement is what keeps this charity moving forward with purpose and heart.

Wishing you a warm, healthy and connected winter season. I hope to see many of you at our Christmas social (I promise the raffle prizes are worth the trip).

Zoe


Siobhan and Ulrike with Citta Dawber from Muscular Dystrophy UK

MD Support Centre shares expertise at national conference

In October, Siobhan and Ulrike represented MD Support Centre at the annual Muscular Dystrophy UK (MDUK) Allied Health Professionals conference, where they spoke about the role of physiotherapy in supporting people with muscular dystrophy.

Held in Birmingham, the hybrid event brought together 56 delegates in person and 138 online. It was a lively mix of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, dietitians, neuromuscular care advisors and others.

Siobhan and Ulrike's talk, *Physiotherapy – optimising function and inspiring independence*, shared the story and ethos of MD Support Centre, and the way our physiotherapists approach assessment and treatment. They explained that while the main symptoms of muscle-wasting conditions can't be changed, the secondary issues caused by muscle weakness often can.

They showed how improving flexibility, core stability, posture, strength, fitness and balance can make a real difference to someone's mobility and wellbeing. Their presentation also highlighted the value of a person-centred approach that can be adapted as a person's mobility changes and new challenges arise.

They spoke about the emotional and practical side of living with a neuromuscular condition too, and how peer support plays a vital role. Our Adapting to Change group, for example, gives people space to share real-life experiences and learn from each other. The presentation ended with a look towards the Centre's vision for the future.

The session was very warmly received, with great feedback shared both in person and in follow-up messages. It was the first time MD Support Centre had been invited to present at an MDUK conference — a proud milestone that reflects the growing recognition of our work within the wider community.

Other inspiring sessions covered topics such as speech and swallowing, counselling for people with rare conditions, nutrition, and housing adaptations. The event also offered plenty of networking opportunities, and Siobhan and Ulrike made valuable new connections while strengthening existing partnerships with others working in the neuromuscular field.

What’s new at MD Support Centre

Try out our new powerchair at the Coventry Centre

We’re excited to introduce a new piece of equipment at our Coventry Centre: the Roma Reno Elite Powerchair with riser function, now available for demonstration, purchased thanks to Coventry and District Charitable Trust.

This innovative powerchair can raise and lower the seat by up to 28cm, making transfers easier and boosting independence. The riser function helps users take a more active role in daily activities, join in with social and work situations, and enjoy the physical, mental, and functional benefits of increased mobility.

One service user who tried the chair during a physiotherapy session highlighted how it could make a real difference in the workplace, where accessibility can sometimes be a challenge.

To learn more or try the powerchair for yourself, please speak with your treating therapist.

Siobhan marks milestone

Please join the MD Support Centre team in congratulating physiotherapist Siobhan Crowton on completing five years with the charity. Siobhan joined in 2020, bringing a wealth of experience from the NHS and the private sector.

Since joining, she has spearheaded the charity’s work with student physiotherapists, forging connections with universities and providing opportunities for future physiotherapists to gain hands-on experience of working with people with muscular dystrophy.

Siobhan said: “The last five years have flown by. During my time with the charity we've gone from dealing with COVID 19 and treating in our reception area at the college, to expanding to a new centre, growing our team and increasing our services. I've been able to form lifelong bonds with not only staff but our wonderful service users. To be part of all of this has been a privilege, and I look forward to spending many more years being part of this amazing charity.”

Curtis awarded for dedication to others

Congratulations to Curtis Pugh on receiving the “I Give My Time” award at Birmingham Community Healthcare Charity’s first Learning Disability Service User and Carer Awards 2025, in recognition of his extraordinary commitment to helping others.

The event shone a spotlight on individuals who go above and beyond for their communities. Curtis, an MD Support Centre service user, was nominated by the Learning Disability Team for his tireless charity work and campaigning.

Since 2016, Curtis and his dad, Stephen, have been devoted supporters of Birmingham Hospice. Inspired by Curtis’s mum Tracey, who was cared for by the Inpatient Unit, they set up Tracey’s Dream and Friends to raise thousands of pounds for the hospice.

Their kindness extends further, from fundraising events to donating comfort bears to Birmingham Children’s Hospital’s cancer ward. Curtis often delivers the bears while dressed as a superhero, spreading joy wherever he goes. He also champions awareness of hidden disabilities, including autism and ADHD, and promotes the Sunflower lanyard scheme. He recently delivered training to Birmingham Hospice to raise awareness of hidden disabilities.

Curtis’s award is a heartfelt recognition of his compassion, dedication, and the positive impact he continues to make in the lives of so many.

What is the Sunflower lanyard scheme?

The Sunflower lanyard shows you have a disability or condition which may not be immediately obvious. It helps indicate that the wearer may need additional support, such as extra time in shops, an aisle seat at venues, or assistance using public transport.

Launched by Hidden Disabilities in 2016, the Sunflower lanyard is recognised across a wide number of sectors, including healthcare providers, central and local government, travel and tourism industries, retail, education providers and many more. It is recognised in the UK and many other countries.

Sunflower lanyards can be purchased from the Hidden Disabilities store.

Tommy honoured with Mayor's award

Tommy with Abbas during a physiotherapy session

Nineteen-year-old Tommy has been recognised with a Mayor's Award celebrating his dedication, determination, and contribution to his community.

Tommy, who has muscular dystrophy and attends our Coventry Centre for physiotherapy, works as a trainee accountant for a school trust and also serves as a governor for a primary school. "It's about making sure we're doing the right thing and that education is right for everyone," he explained. "In one of the last meetings, we agreed to spend money on new outdoor play equipment because the old ones were broken."

His mum, who nominated him for the award, said it was given "in appreciation of all the work he's done. He's gone through every school in the trust — from infants to juniors to secondary — and now works at the trust itself. He wanted to represent young disabled people in that kind of forum, and he's doing that too."

When presenting the award, the Mayor praised Tommy, saying he was "doing amazingly," recognising both his achievements and the challenges he has faced.

Alongside his work and volunteering, Tommy is completing an accountancy qualification. He has just finished his Level 2 course and is now progressing to Level 3, with plans to qualify as an accounting technician and eventually become a Chief Finance Officer. "Tommy's ambitious," his mum said. "He's determined, clever, and so committed to what he does. Once he sets his mind to something, he won't stop until he's achieved it."

Tommy was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at the age of six, but focuses on what he can do rather than what he can't. "It felt really good to get the award," he said. "I didn't expect to win, but it means a lot."

Do you have a story to share? If so, we want to hear from you!

We're always keen to share real stories in our magazine, website, social channels, and blog. It could be your journey, a recent achievement, or how the MD Support Centre has supported you. Your story can help others feel connected, raise awareness, and even support future funding.

Email communications@mdsupportcentre.org to get involved.

Caring for your respiratory health this autumn and winter

As the weather turns colder, it's especially important for people with muscular dystrophy and related neuromuscular conditions to care for their breathing and lung health. Cold, dry air and seasonal viruses can make it harder to stay well, but a few simple habits and targeted breathing exercises can help protect your respiratory health.

Why breathing needs extra care in colder weather

Muscular dystrophy and other neuromuscular conditions can weaken the respiratory muscles, making it harder to take deep breaths or cough efficiently. This can lead to mucus build-up, increasing the risk of infection, which can be more serious than for people without muscular dystrophy.

In autumn and winter, these challenges can be worsened by cold, dry air, seasonal viruses, reduced activities, and hunching for warmth, which can potentially limit chest wall mobility. However, there are ways to reduce these risks and support your breathing.

Simple ways to protect your breathing this season

Stay ahead of infections by keeping up to date with flu and COVID vaccinations and encouraging family and carers to do the same. Avoid crowded areas and close contact with sick people where possible. Wearing a mask can help reduce your risk of catching viruses.

Continue your usual airway clearance routine or speak to your physiotherapist about the best techniques for you. Stay well hydrated to help mucus stay thin and easier to clear. Try to sit upright and maintain good posture to allow your lungs to expand and make it easier to cough.

Use breathing exercises to strengthen and protect your lungs

Breathing exercises, like those taught in our Breathing and More classes, are a gentle but powerful way to strengthen respiratory muscles, improve oxygen flow, and support mucus clearance. Over time, these exercises can also help reduce breathlessness and improve overall comfort.

Some useful exercises include:

- **Diaphragmatic (Belly) Breathing:** Focus on expanding your belly as you inhale slowly through your nose, then exhale fully through your mouth. This strengthens the diaphragm and encourages deeper breaths.
- **Breath Stacking:** Take a small breath, hold it, and then take one or two more small breaths “on top” before exhaling. This helps expand your lungs more fully.
- **Pursed-Lip Breathing:** Inhale gently through your nose and exhale slowly through pursed lips, making the exhale longer than the inhale. This keeps airways open longer and helps control breathlessness.
- **4-7-8 Breathing:** Inhale through your nose for four counts, hold for seven counts, and exhale slowly through your mouth for eight counts. This technique calms the nervous system while supporting deep, controlled breaths.
- **Box (Square) Breathing:** Inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for four, and hold again for four. Repeat. This encourages steady, relaxed breathing and can be combined with mindfulness.

Support your wellbeing through mindfulness

Mindful breathing can calm the nervous system, reduce stress, and bring focus to your breath. Many people find it improves sleep, helps them feel more relaxed , and increases a sense of control over breathing. Even a few minutes of mindful breathing each day can support emotional wellbeing and make it easier to cope with the challenges of a long-term condition.

Osteopath France delivers an online Breathing and More class

Prepare for winter weather

- Make sure any respiratory equipment, such as cough-assist machines or ventilators, is serviced and working properly and that you have spare parts available.
- If you rely on powered equipment, register with your energy provider as a priority customer in case of power cuts.
- Have an emergency plan in place, including contact details for your care team and information about your usual respiratory support settings.

Stay supported through our online classes

You don’t have to manage respiratory health alone. Our team and the **Breathing and More classes** are here to help you stay well, strengthen your lungs, and support your overall wellbeing. You can also access **pre-recorded breathing classes** from our Trustee Jane, together with an accompanying Breathing Techniques leaflet. In addition, our **seated yoga classes** incorporate gentle yogic breathing to further support lung function.

To join an online class, please visit the Online Therapies section of our website. Classes are **free** and **no booking is required** for the online sessions. There are a limited number of in-person spaces in the Breathing and More class. Please call us on 02476 100770 to learn more and book.

Move, breathe, and thrive

with our seated yoga class

Chair yoga is a gentle and effective way to support physical and emotional wellbeing, especially for people living with muscular dystrophy. MD Support Centre offers **free** weekly online classes designed with your needs in mind.

Led by physiotherapist Rewati Bachute, the sessions combine gentle postures, therapeutic breathing, and guided meditation. This approach helps you tune into your body, move mindfully, and find a sense of ease and confidence.

As Rewati explains, the classes offer a safe and effective way to experience the holistic benefits of yoga, tailored to individual needs.

Why try chair yoga?

- **Maintain and support muscle strength:** Controlled movements help preserve existing muscle function without straining the body.
- **Improve flexibility and mobility:** Adapted stretches ease stiffness, reduce muscle tightening, and support comfortable joint movement.
- **Enhance balance and stability:** Strengthening your core and improving body awareness can reduce the risk of falls.
- **Boost breathing and lung function:** Therapeutic breathing exercises strengthen respiratory muscles and improve oxygen uptake, which is especially helpful for those with muscular dystrophy related breathing difficulties.
- **Manage pain and discomfort:** Gentle movement, stretching, and mindfulness can ease chronic pain and improve daily comfort.
- **Reduce stress and support emotional wellbeing:** Guided meditation helps soothe the mind, reduce anxiety, and build emotional resilience.
- **Reconnect with your body:** Chair yoga encourages mindful awareness, helping you feel more in control and empowered.
- **Feel supported in a welcoming community:** Classes offer a warm, understanding space where you can move at your own pace and connect with others.

Every aspect of the sessions is adapted for people with muscular dystrophy. Postures, breathing exercises, and meditation techniques are shaped around individual abilities to ensure a safe, comfortable practice. Rewati highlights how chair yoga, combined with mindful breathing and meditation, provides the stability and guidance you need to explore movement, breath, and inner calm.

Our free online chair yoga classes run every Thursday at 5.15pm. Join in from the comfort of your home with no need to book. To take part, visit the Online Therapies section of our website.

A pre-recorded class is also available on our resources page to follow along in your own time.

What's on

Online exercise classes

Seated exercise, Tuesday 2pm – led by Ulrike or Siobhan
Suitable for all levels, this gentle seated session focuses on upper and lower body movements, posture, and core stability, helping you build strength and confidence at your own pace.

Seated/standing mix, Thursday 10.30am – led by various therapists
An advanced class, this dynamic session combines standing and seated exercises, focusing on cardio, posture, balance, core strength, and range of movement.

Seated yoga, Thursday 5.15pm – led by Rewati
Unwind in a 45-minute session blending gentle stretching and deep relaxation through Yoga-inspired techniques Release tension, improve breath control, and cultivate a sense of calm.

Breathing and Mindfulness, monthly on Wednesdays 1pm and Fridays 2pm – led by France
Explore breathing techniques and exercises designed to enhance respiration and promote a more natural breathing rhythm. We also have limited in-person spots for these classes that must be booked in advance.

Find details of all our online classes at mdsupportcentre.org/online-services.

Celebrate Christmas

with MD Support Centre

Celebrate the festive season with us at our 2025 Christmas social!

One of our most popular events, the Christmas social is always full of laughter and good company. Join us on **Tuesday 9 December from 2 to 5pm** at our Coventry Centre for a friendly afternoon filled with festive cheer. There'll be a raffle draw with great prizes, plenty of tasty Christmas food, and lots of chances to relax and socialise. We'd love to see you there.

Book your tickets now at bit.ly/MDSCChristmasSocial25.

Tickets for our Christmas raffle are now on sale. Take part to support the charity, and be in with the chance to win exciting prizes. We already have Coventry City football tickets and an afternoon tea for two.

Raffle tickets cost £1 each or £5 for a strip. To get yours, call our reception team on 02476 100770 or pop into our Coventry Centre.

If you can donate a raffle prize, we'd be delighted to hear from you. Every contribution helps make the event more special.

We also have Christmas cards available in our shop at the Coventry Centre. Packs of five cost £5 and packs of ten cost £8. Every purchase helps fund our life changing therapies.

Community and Peer Support

Shape the future of our charity at our focus group

Join our newly relaunched Service User Focus Group and help shape the future of MD Support Centre.

By taking part, you can influence decisions, help shape future activities, and ensure our work is guided by real lived experience. Your insight helps us improve services, explore new opportunities, and keep meeting the needs of our community.

About the group

The group meets regularly with sessions held online after office hours to make it easier for more people to join.

You don’t need to attend every session – you are welcome to take part when you can.

Focus Group members play a vital role by:

- Giving honest feedback on ideas and plans
- Suggesting new activities, services, or improvements
- Representing the needs of the wider service user community
- Encouraging others to join, bringing fresh voices and perspectives

To register your interest, email getintouch@mdsupportcentre.org.


An Adapting to Change session

Adapting to Change through shared wisdom and support

Our new two-part Adapting to Change group kicked off on Wednesday 12 November, giving participants the chance to explore how to stay active and connected in the face of change. The refreshed format allows time to reflect between sessions, take stock of what resonated most, and return with new insights and questions for deeper discussion.

The group thrives on the idea of members as “Experts by Experience,” sharing practical tips and personal stories to support one another, while also providing connection and enjoyment, helping to tackle isolation.

November’s session focused on staying active despite new challenges. Members exchanged tips on maintaining physical and mental wellbeing, from using fitness trackers to set personal goals, to exercising at home alongside family for motivation.

The group also explored practical solutions for colder weather, including heated gloves, shawls, and portable power banks, as well as navigating accessible venues and transport. One attendee reflected that hearing others’ experiences helped him realise more was possible than he had thought.

The follow-up session will be held online on Wednesday 10 December from 6.00 – 7.00pm. You’re welcome to join even if you missed the first session. Register here.

Looking ahead, future discussions will cover topics such as navigating emotions with change and understanding shifts in relationships. If you’d like to be part of a supportive community that shares advice, practical tips, and personal experiences, the Adapting to Change group is a welcoming space to support you.

Visit our events page for future group dates.

David and Trust Hygiene heroes raise funds and awareness

Huge thanks to David Allman on raising £870 for our charity. David, a Sales Director at Trust Hygiene, held a fundraising day at work to support the MD Support Centre. The superhero themed day also featured wheelchair races to give people an insight into David's life while having fun.

Diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at age 16, David relies on regular physiotherapy to maintain his strength, mobility, and overall quality of life. He shares why he chose to nominate MD Support Centre for the fundraising event:

"I really enjoy my job; it's a big part of my life. Working with people every day and striving toward the same goal is a big drive for me. Another big drive is Lewis, my little one. I was diagnosed when I was just walking to school, after experiencing sudden pain in the back of my calf. At first, they thought it might be bone-related, but eventually, I was properly diagnosed at the QE in Birmingham. Over the years, I've moved from walking unaided, to crutches, to a manual wheelchair, and now a power chair. Covid wiped out the last bit of mobility I had for walking, and for the past three years, I've been adapting to life in the chair full-time.

"Physio is vital to my day-to-day life. I see Dan every three weeks if I can. When I go, I feel stretched, stronger, and healthier. He gets me on the tilt table, knows what he's doing, and pushes me when I need it. That's exactly what I need. It helps with pain, prevents muscles from weakening, and gives me a mental boost.

"I know the charity is stretched. There's only one Dan, and travelling to other centres isn't always possible. Ideally, I'd do physio every two weeks consistently. That's another motivation for me to support the charity with fundraising. I know the NHS can only provide so much, but the charity fills the gap. I'm also very aware the charity needs funding to continue and take on more people.

"For me, the physio is absolutely essential. Without it, my life expectancy and quality of life would be worse. My mobility and strength would decline more quickly, and I'd have more pain. Physio sessions aren't just exercise – they're part of a support network, and I want to help others benefit too."

Speaking after the event David shared his experience of fundraising for MD Support Centre. He said, "I really appreciate working with you and your team, the whole process has been straightforward with your help. From a personal point of view, it was important to give something back as the service has been a big help to me and we had lots of fun along the way. I know the funds will be very helpful in keeping the vital services you offer running to the high standards you all set."

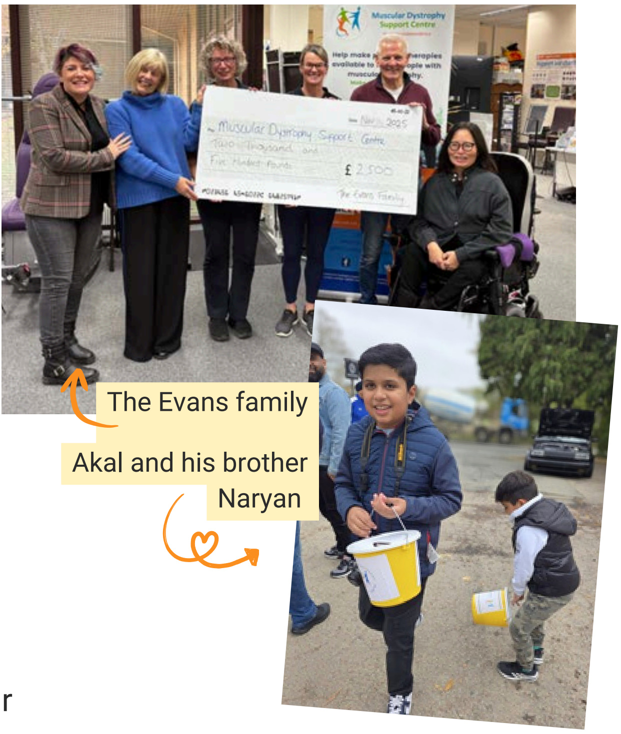
Fundraising and support

Thank you to our fantastic fundraisers

We would love to say a huge thank you to everyone who has donated to our charity. We could not do the work we do without your support.

Here are a few people who have supported us recently.

- Andy Collins for donating £488 from another packed Skittles Night
- Tristan Boedts, who ran the Oxford 10k and raised £1,152
- Diana Wright whose birthday fundraiser raised £325
- Trustee Gary Evans and family for raising £2,500 at their annual charity golf day
- Akal and family for donating £435. The family raised the funds through an exciting event that has to stay under wraps for now, but we hope to share details in the new year



The Evans family

Akal and his brother Naryan

We are deeply grateful to the families of Graham Fulcher and Graham Lance for choosing to support MD Support Centre through in-memoriam fundraisers. Your generosity is a heartfelt tribute to their memories. Thank you for helping us continue our life-changing therapies and support services.

Thank you to our amazing community

Huge thanks to all of our individual donors, especially those who have signed up to regular giving. Your continued support helps provide financial security, enabling us to plan for our future.

Thank you to Trusts and Foundations

- Garfield Weston have awarded us £60k over two years
- National Lottery Community Fund Awards for All £19k to support our work to enable peer support and a community to feel part of
- Provincial Grand Lodge of Warwickshire £1,500
- Eveson Trust £20k to support people living in the West Midlands, Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

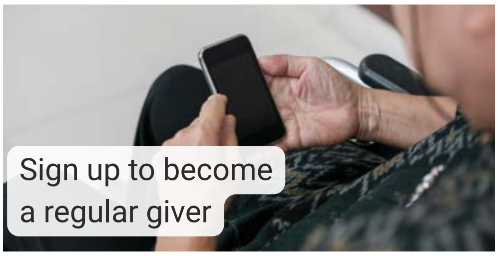
Garfield Weston FOUNDATION

PROVINCIAL GRAND LODGE OF WARWICKSHIRE

COMMUNITY FUND

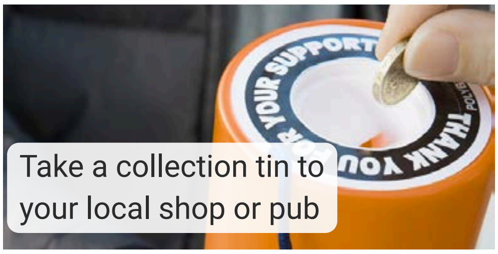
How you can help

If you'd like to support our charity, here are some ways you can help.

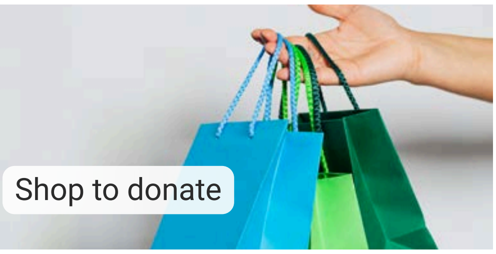

Sign up to become a regular giver

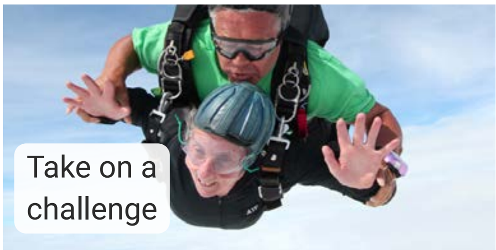

Hold a fundraising event


Make a one-off donation



Take a collection tin to your local shop or pub


Shop to donate

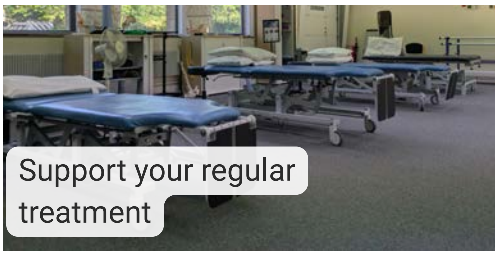

Take on a challenge


Hold an in-celebration collection

In-memory collection


Leave a gift in your will


Social media fundraising


Support your regular treatment


Corporate support

If you would like more information or support on fundraising for MD Support Centre, email fundraising@mdsupportcentre.org

Support us this Christmas

Give a special gift this Christmas by supporting our charity!

Join the global campaign of generosity on **Giving Tuesday**. Held on 2 December, Giving Tuesday is an annual global day dedicated to generosity, compassion, and community spirit. It encourages people everywhere to look beyond the rush of holiday shopping and focus on giving back.

Donate a prize to our **Christmas raffle** - see page 11 for details.

Shop to donate by signing up to **EasyFundraising**. Earn donations for us by shopping online or in-store. Learn more at easyfundraising.org.uk. (Don't forget to search for us under our official name of NMC Midlands)

Support us this Christmas with **Making a Difference Cards**. Every purchase of an online card generates donations for our charity. Find out more at Making a Difference Cards.

Aquatic exercise classes to return in 2026

Since the relaunch of our Aquatic Exercise classes in 2024, many people have discovered the benefits of water-based exercise. We are hoping to extend these popular sessions in 2026 so even more people can enjoy what they have to offer.

Physiotherapist Dan Foley, part of the Aquatic Exercise team, discusses the benefits of water-based exercises.

What is aquatic exercise?

Dan explains, “Our classes involve a mix of cardio, balance, and core-strengthening exercises, all performed in water at around breastbone height. It’s different from land-based physiotherapy because the water becomes part of the exercise; it supports you, resists your movements, and allows you to explore exercises safely.”

Why water works well for people with muscular dystrophy

“The benefits are vast,” says Dan. “Mostly, the buoyancy of the water offers an element of safety, allowing service users to explore functional exercises that they would otherwise avoid on land due to falls or injury risks.

“Being submerged in water allows us to take advantage of its many properties, including buoyancy, resistance, turbulence, hydrostatic pressure, and viscosity. When combined with the right exercises, these properties support balance, strength, and flexibility. Additionally, hydrostatic pressure and viscosity can aid lung function, provide gentle compression, and help with pain management.

Benefits beyond the physical

Aquatic Exercise classes offer huge emotional and social rewards. Dan says, “Having the aquatic therapy classes to look forward to gives people an extra day out of the house, into the community, and a chance to socialise. It seems to provide a newfound sense of wellbeing. The support and conversations with therapists and fellow participants can be the lifeline some people need to keep afloat (excuse the pun).”

What are aquatic exercise classes like?

“We begin the initial session gently to assess each participant’s functional and physical abilities while allowing them to get comfortable in the water and socialise. This can help calm nerves; some service users may not have been in a swimming pool for a very long time.

“We aim to target the four main elements of function within each class: cardiorespiratory fitness, balance, flexibility and strength.

“We have two therapists in the water during each class. One therapist leads the session, while the other moves around the group, supporting individuals with exercises they find challenging and helping them achieve the intended outcomes. We also have the added support of buoyancy aids, floats and weights. Plus, the pool has a height adjustable floor to ensure the water isn’t too shallow or too deep.”

What would you say to anyone nervous about getting in the pool?

“We have worked tirelessly to ensure the process is as safe, smooth and efficient as possible. All forms of mobility aid are allowed poolside for our service users, be that mobility scooters, wheelchairs or walking frames. We also bring a four-wheeled walker for service users to use if they are normally independent but would like extra support.

“There is an accessible pool lift, and our team assists with getting in and out of the pool lift, with additional support from the leisure centre team. With two therapists in the water, one can focus on leading the session while the other supports participants. And we tailor our exercises to different levels of ability. Those who have been nervous soon find they’re having such fun their initial apprehension is soon forgotten!”

“There are accessible showers and changing rooms, and a few with individual shower sections also. We encourage participants to bring anyone they need for support with changing and showering, and these carers or partners are welcome to use the other half of the pool for a leisurely swim during the class.”

The amazing feedback

“Many participants are overwhelmed by what they can achieve in the water,” says Dan. “It’s incredible to see their confidence grow. People are often surprised by what they can do and by the positive impact on both their physical and mental wellbeing.

"That moment when someone realises just how much they're capable of – that's the part I love most about running these sessions. Seeing that freedom, the fun, the socialising, and the joy. It never gets old."

Why give Aquatic Exercise a try?

"Most people will have experienced some type of pool in the past, be that hydrotherapy, aquatic therapy, or just a holiday pool. Try and reflect on your experience and feeling of weightlessness, function and comfort, and let that guide your decision. For those who may not have experience in water or are still feeling hesitant, ask us any questions you like. I promise we'll have the answers to help you make the right decision.

"If it is appropriate for you, I can't encourage you enough to give it a go. Everyone who has participated previously has had some level of benefit, be that function, balance, emotional or social."

What are your hopes or plans for next year's classes?

"That we reach more people and have more people join. Having the opportunity to continue this service for our service users is a godsend. We usually have eight to ten participants per session, but we have capacity for many more. We want to show more people how using the properties of water can unlock greater exercise, function, and long-term benefits for body and mind."

Next year's classes can go ahead thanks to fresh funding from an anonymous donor, which will help cover the high cost of running them. We are also having to make a small increase to the fee that we ask participants to contribute. Aquatic exercise sessions will be £15 each for anyone booking the summer block or £20 for a one off taster session. The Easter classes will be taster sessions at £20 each. For this cost, participants benefit from support from two physiotherapists, tailored exercises in the water, help with pool access, the option to stay and swim, space for carers to use the other side of the pool, and full privacy. If you would like to attend but cost is a barrier, please speak with a member of the team and we will do our best to support you.

Our Aquatic Exercise classes will return at Easter for two weeks and then in the six-week summer holidays. Keep an eye on our website and social media for confirmed dates and information on how to book your place.

> **"That's the part I love most about running these sessions... that freedom, the fun, the socialising, and the joy. It never gets old."**

Finding confidence on the road

Sanah’s first independent trip

Earlier this year, Sanah Rauf took her first ever overnight trip away without her family. Supported by her new PA, Sanah, who is an MD Support Centre service user, travelled to Scotland by train to attend a music festival. She shares her reflections on the experience.

My first trip away with my PA – Largs, Scotland

Travelling with a disability often means there’s a lot more to plan - things like accessible hotel rooms, equipment hire, taxis, and routines. But I was up for the challenge of planning my very first trip away with just my PA (no family members) and I’m so glad I did - it was a huge success.

Planning the trip

First, I chose the area I wanted to stay in: Largs, Scotland. I used Expedia to find accessible hotels, and I really liked that they included pictures of accessible rooms, so I knew what to expect. Once I found the right hotel, I called and booked directly.

Because my PA can’t lift me (and shouldn’t for safety reasons), SMA UK helped me hire a hoist and commode chair, which made things so much easier. Next, I booked my train tickets and arranged assistance through Passenger Assist - everything went smoothly.

The last big worry was taxis. I’ve had problems in other cities finding accessible options, so I searched “accessible taxis Largs” on Google and found Ravi’s Taxi, which had an eight seater accessible Caddy. I pre-booked all my journeys in advance, which took away so much stress.

My top travel tips

- Create a schedule of things you want to do.
- Stick to your routine – I got up and went to bed at the same times as at home, which made me feel safe and grounded.
- Choose a PA you connect with – you’ll be spending a lot of time together, so it’s important you vibe well.
- Plan your days like a triangle – a calmer first day, a busy middle day, and a slower final day to recover.
- Energy management is key – I thought I’d do three festival days, but with a six-hour journey, that was too much. Work around what your body can handle.
- Travel comfort tip: go to the toilet before long journeys. I didn’t take a laxative beforehand, and it made the trip uncomfortable – lesson learned!
- Ring the hotel – check if there is space under the bed for the hoist to go underneath. We

faced a little issue when the hoist wouldn’t go underneath so had to do a side transfer instead from the commode to bed.

- Ring the hire company – tell them the exact equipment you need. We received a commode chair but the bucket wouldn't slide out underneath and I had to get of the chair for the bucket to be removed.

The highlights

The whole weekend was a 10/10, but my highlights are:

- Going on the ferry to Millport.
- Attending the Om & Bass Festival at Kelburn Castle (I’m an accessibility ambassador, so it was amazing to embrace my hippie side and be in my element).
- Spending time with friends at the beach – which was only 10 minutes from my hotel. I hadn’t been to the seaside in years, so this was really special.
- The hotel breakfast on Sunday – gluten-free toast, avocado, smoked salmon and poached egg – absolute bliss after six months of the same breakfast at home!

Reflections

I feel so much more confident now about planning trips independently. This was a great starting point, and I’m excited for the adventures to come.

I’m incredibly grateful to:

- SMA UK, who funded the hoist and commode hire.
- SMA UK Smart Moves Grant, which part-funded my Permobil power chair that lets me change positions, tilt, backrest recline and elevate my legs – this made the trip possible.
- Pathfinders Neuromuscular Alliance’s Uplift Weekender which I attended. I admired their structured planning. Inspired by this, I used a similar approach for my own adventure, which made me feel safe and grounded.
- And of course, my amazing PA, Liz. Thank you for reassuring me, supporting me, and making this trip so enjoyable.

Right now, I’m physically tired but mentally so alive. I hope my story inspires you to plan your own adventure – because living with a disability doesn’t mean you can’t travel. It just takes a bit more planning, patience, and the right support.

> “Living with a disability doesn’t mean you can’t travel. It just takes a bit more planning, patience, and the right support.

Sanah with her PA

Share your reflections

Have something you want to share? Get in touch to let us know! We would love to share your comments, feedback, stories, and experiences. Our next magazine will be published in May 2026. Email communications@mdsupportcentre.org to be part of it.

Championing change: Ian helps shape national blueprint for accessible streets

MD Support Centre service user Ian recently attended the Westminster launch of *Improving Street Access: A Blueprint for Change* - a major new policy report by The Disability Policy Centre. The report lays out practical steps to make UK streets safer and more accessible for disabled people.

Ian was invited to join the expert panel at the launch and represent Coventry City Council's Disability Equality Action Partnership (DEAP), where he and his wife Jayne play an active role. "Jayne and myself had the privilege of being invited to this meeting which was a huge success," he said. "I had the honour of being invited onto the panel and speaking."

He shared how Coventry has been leading the way on accessible street design. "At the policy launch I was asked to explain the role myself and other DEAP members played in formulating the plan. We were the final cog in the process and it's pleasing that disabled persons were key to the final document."

The launch, which was MP-sponsored and already enjoys cross-party support, aims to push local councils to act on long-standing barriers to accessibility. Ian urged others to get involved too: "This is a hugely important blueprint and affects us all. It's worth a read, even if it's just the summary, so you can raise it with your local councils. Change has come — we need to be able to freely roam without obstacles, and this blueprint shows the way forward."

The next phase will focus on a national publicity campaign to keep accessibility firmly on the agenda. For Ian, being part of the process has been a proud moment: "It was an honour to represent Coventry's DEAP in this policy launch on a subject that's dear to everyone's hearts. Coventry is taking the lead, and to be at Westminster was exciting to say the least."

Read the full policy report at thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/street-transformation-execution-plan.

Pathfinders drop-in support sessions

Pathfinders Neuromuscular Alliance have launched a monthly online drop-in support group for people with neuromuscular conditions, their families, and carers.

These informal sessions will offer a safe, supportive space to chat, share experiences, and connect with others. Each month, they will explore different themes guided by what participants want to discuss.

Find out more at Pathfinders Neuromuscular Alliance Events | Eventbrite.

NCAT Accessible Transport Panel

Share your experiences of using public transport with the National Centre for Accessible Travel's (NCAT) Accessible Transport Panel. The panel enables members to:

- Get involved in shaping the future of transport for disabled people.
- Share ideas. Learn from others. Find solutions that work.
- Receive incentives for taking part in research.

To read more or to join the panel please visit the sign-up page.

Get involved

We would really love your input for our next magazine.

Have you found something helpful for others in our community? A brilliant book, a great podcast, a useful blog, an accessible place, or an experience that others might learn from? Maybe you have a story, reflection, or piece of feedback to share. Your contribution can help us build stronger resources, better signposting, and clearer information for everyone who needs it.

Our next issue comes out in May 2026, and we want you to be part of it.
Email communications@mdsupportcentre.org and tell us what you would like to contribute.

Stay connected

To hear about our fundraising, events and other news, sign up to our newsletters at bit.ly/MDSCsubscribe

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muscular-dystrophy-support-centre

Join our vibrant Facebook group as a way to connect with other service users, share ideas and support, and to ask questions. It's also the perfect place to chat with people who understand.

www.facebook.com/groups/mdscsocial

Support our charity

We rely on donations to provide physical therapies and support, without time limits or discharge letters. Each session costs around £100 to deliver, so late cancellations or missed appointments have a real impact on our resources. Please help us by cancelling only when you need to and giving as much notice as possible, so we can use our funding wisely and offer the space to someone else.

Every pound you give helps keep these life changing services free and available to all who need them.
Go to mdsupportcentre.org/donate to make a difference today.

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