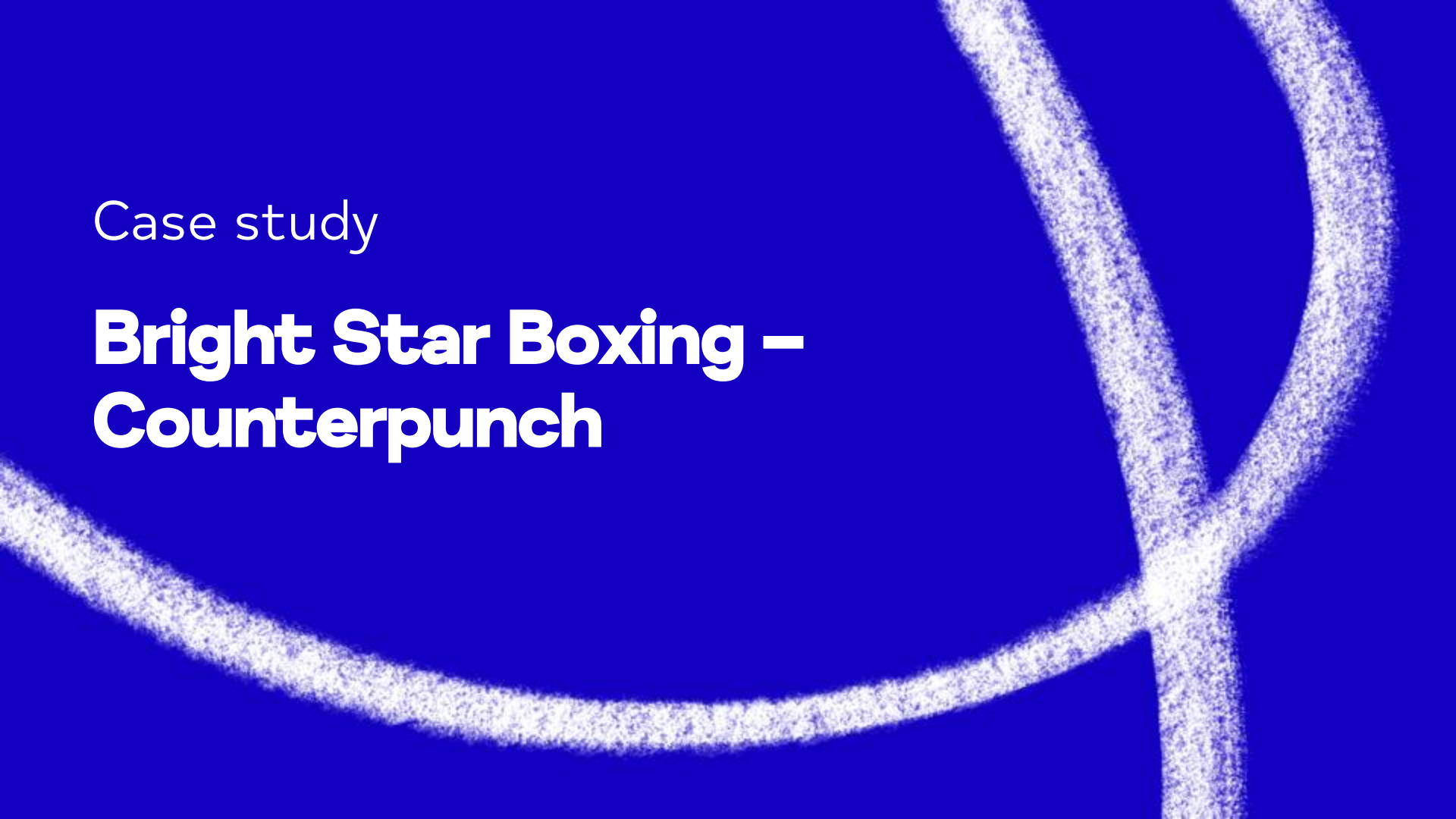


Case study

# **Bright Star Boxing – Counterpunch**



## Project at a glance

- Bright Star Boxing is a charitable organisation that uses boxing to help improve people's mental health.
- Counterpunch, the charity's free sessions, offer the opportunity for people to get active and receive informal mental health support from coaches – many of whom have experienced mental health problems.
- Bright Star's community programmes offer training for people experiencing mental health problems through coaching and support.

**96%**

of attendees say their mental health has improved after finishing the sessions

## The challenge

Bright Star Boxing is a nationally award-winning charitable organisation that uses boxing and education to empower vulnerable people to make positive changes to transform their lives.

Director Joe Lockley had personally seen just how powerfully boxing could bring people together. Now the challenge was to spread the physical and mental health benefits to more people in the community – including those who would never set foot inside a boxing club.

**“I used to think that getting your hand lifted up at the end of a bout was the best. But when you know you've supported someone who's going through something difficult, that's definitely the best feeling in boxing.”** Joe Lockley

## Bright Star Boxing's response

Bright Star runs boxing sessions for everyone at their boxing club in Shropshire. At the heart of their offer is [Counterpunch](#): free Saturday sessions aimed at adults experiencing mental health problems. They involve boxing and mentoring alongside peer support.

“It works out at about 45 minutes of boxing and 45 minutes of mental health support,” says Joe.

“We will sit around the ring or in the office at three different points in the session and start conversations around mental health, around what they would like to achieve and around how they are feeling. We have found being around those who talk about their mental health encourages others to open up and it creates an incredible atmosphere of belonging where everyone opens up.”

Joe understands that many potential participants might be put off going to a boxing club, however friendly and welcoming. So the charity actively reaches out to people in their communities.

“We have a structured 12-week programme that we run out in communities,” says Joe.

There's a referral pathway with various organisations: housing associations, addiction recovery centres and mental health support services.

“We go through crucial elements like core beliefs, thoughts and behaviours, coping techniques and goal-setting. Participants receive mental health training and coaching qualifications. After doing the programme people are more likely to come to Counterpunch for support, because they've already got a relationship with us.”

This also helps develop coaches with lived experience of mental health problems, which in turn helps beat mental health stigma.

“When you picture boxing you picture a really muscly bloke who's very angry and doesn't seem to care about anything,” says Joe.

**“But it's not like that. Our coaches are often big lads. But they open up about their mental health problems. And seeing that vulnerability in action helps other people open up too.”**

## The results

Research shows that 96% of people completing the programme experience improvements in their mental health. On a human level, people inspired and supported by the programme, have the chance to gain new qualifications and give back to their community.

For example, Stu Cook is Counterpunch Lead at Bright Star. Joe proudly explains that Stu had his own mental health problems and, after being supported by Bright Star, now “lives to support others.”

**“What we do isn’t about fighting. It’s not even about competing – it’s about being part of a family that supports each other.”** Joe Lockley

**“The programme has shown me how I can be in control. I am responsible and can achieve my goals.”** Participant

**“I don’t even know where I’d be without the boxing club!”** Participant

## Learning

- **Signpost to training**

“One thing that might stop people becoming coaches is that they don’t know what to say to people who are experiencing mental health problems,” says Joe. “But there’s so much great training out there they can access. People soon realise that it’s often about listening, not giving advice.”

- **Be accessible**

The Counterpunch sessions are free and include childcare. This allows a wider variety of people to get involved in the sessions. Funding from Sport England has helped cover some aspects of the programme, but all coaching is from volunteers and use of the club is free.

- **Use community power**

The charity has a WhatsApp group through which participants can share how they’re feeling. The chat is monitored to assess if anyone needs immediate support. But Joe says that the community can often help itself, before any problems need to be escalated.



## Relevant support available

Mental Health Awareness for Sport & Physical Activity+ eLearning

Mental Health and Physical Activity Toolkit: Introduction to mental health

Mental Health and Physical Activity Toolkit: Making physical activities inclusive to people experiencing mental health problems

