

# QUICK WINS TO LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

An evaluation of Surfwell for promoting the health and wellbeing of police officers



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Research Council**

The Surfwell Project



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I can wholeheartedly say the only reason I didn't leave the police was because of Surfwell, because of the support I found from the facilitators and peers.

*Anonymous participant*



SURFWELL

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report presents an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of Surfwell, an innovative intervention that enables police officers to attend a supervised surfing session with the aim of promoting their wellbeing and mental health. Its unique basis combines the benefits of blue space (sea and waves), and the physical challenges of surfing, with strong peer support.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account (ESRC-IAA), and undertaken by a research team at the University of Exeter Business School, the research study was conducted over a one-year period from 2019-2020. It evaluated Surfwell's impact on mental health, wellbeing and work performance. The research assessed Surfwell's immediate impact on participants after their session and sustained improvements six to eight weeks later, as well as measured the benefits for the police force.

Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used in the data collection process. Participants were invited to complete pre and post intervention surveys. The results of this quantitative phase showed improvements to officers' wellbeing, and parallel gains for the force in areas such as enthusiasm and job satisfaction. Participants were then invited to take part in focus groups, which took place on the intervention day after the surfing session, followed by one-to-one follow-up interviews six to eight weeks after their session. This qualitative phase explored the reasons for the improvements in wellbeing, establishing whether the effects were lasting, and identifying key themes in the benefits for individuals and the force.

This report sets out all these findings in detail, with the clear conclusion that Surfwell delivers positive change both for individual officers and for Devon and Cornwall Police.

The results of the research study are provided in three categories:

### Immediate personal gains

- positive changes in mood
- a sense of achievement
- improved confidence
- acceptance of mental health difficulties
- renewed motivation.

### Sustained benefits

- greater resilience to cope with future stressors
- increased hope of coping with difficulties more effectively
- optimism represented in an ability to see the world in a more positive light
- a stronger belief in their own ability to improve their wellbeing, reflecting improved self-efficacy.

Some officers also developed lasting **self-care tools** to help them to manage their wellbeing, such as

- setting boundaries
- social reconnection
- mindfulness

### Benefits for the police force

- the development of a positive view of the force because of the implementation of the Surfwell project
- less sick leave
- decisions by some officers to stay in their jobs because of their heightened sense of resilience.

This report does not look at the perceptions of Surfwell and the operational challenges of releasing Devon and Cornwall police staff to run and participate in the programme. This is addressed in a separate University of Exeter report which draws on interviews with middle and senior managers of Devon and Cornwall Police.

## INTRODUCTION

Surfwell is a health promotion intervention that uses a recreational surfing adventure experience to promote workplace mental health, by combining action-centred therapy with enhanced peer support and group therapy.

It is arguably one of the first interventions of its kind in the world tailored to the police force. The programme has been specifically designed to address the escalating mental health crisis in the UK emergency services.

The scale of this crisis can be seen in the 47% increase in the number of UK police officers taking time off with mental health issues in the five years from 2012 to 2017, leading to a total of 47% of police sickness being attributed to such issues (Police Firearms Officers Association Admin, 2017). Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are risks of a further escalation in the mental health crisis owing to current and long-term challenges related to the coronavirus pandemic.

The organisation Police Care UK (2018) has found that as many as one in five police officers are living with some form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Its 2018 research also showed that more than 90% of all officers and staff were exposed to trauma, and that 65% did not feel this was well managed in their force. These findings echo the results of a 2016 online survey by the Police Federation, in which 80% of approximately 17,000 respondents reported high levels of stress and poor mental wellbeing, with the causes attributed to a range of organisational, occupational and psychosocial factors (Houdmont & Elliot-Davies, 2016).

These concerning levels of wellbeing issues linked to workplace stress extend to other emergency services. Another 2016 online poll, conducted by the charity MIND, found that one in four emergency service workers had contemplated suicide and two thirds had considered leaving their job.

Despite high-profile campaigns to destigmatise mental health issues, research suggests the problem continues to drive a low uptake of support services. Kings College London (2020) found in a study commissioned by the Royal Foundation that stigma was the most frequently mentioned barrier to emergency services workers seeking support, and that a “macho culture” was sometimes seen. Another significant finding was the need for users to trust that the support offered would be relevant to them, and that those providing it would understand their needs.

Surfwell tackles both the issue of the persistence of stigma and the need for relevant support through an innovative peer-based approach to managing mental health. The intervention was conceived in 2017 by two Devon and Cornwall police sergeants, Sam Davies and James Mallows, after an officer they supervised was left traumatised by an attack. Traditional clinical interventions had failed to help in many instances, showing a clear need for other forms of support for police officers and other emergency services workers. With the support of senior officers, they began trialling Surfwell in 2019. By the end of 2020, over 20 sessions had been held, catering for people who work for the police force or other emergency services.

This research study explores the individual impact on the wellbeing and mental health of Surfwell participants, as well as the organisational outcomes for Devon and Cornwall Police Force.



## THE SURFWELL INTERVENTION

Surfwell enables police officers who are struggling with wellbeing and mental health issues to spend a day in a challenging but safe environment – learning to surf under the guidance of expert facilitators who are themselves serving police officers.

The goal is to overcome personal boundaries – not to become an expert surfer. Surfwell caters for those ready to address their mental health. Some participants may not even be able to swim: simply donning a wetsuit and walking into the water may be a huge challenge in itself.

Officers can refer to Surfwell through Occupational Health but can also self-refer to the programme and are graded through a risk assessment tool called 'E-Grist'. This self-referral approach – which generated a great increase in referral numbers when implemented – removes the potential barrier and stigma attached to having to go through an occupational health referral.

The intervention enables natural experiences such as fear, apprehension and adrenaline rushes to be generated in the context of a major personal challenge that is taking place in a safe environment. This “managed fear” integrates a unique combination of psychological and physical experiences: a supportive peer group, expert facilitators who are also trusted colleagues, cold water, natural surroundings, the challenge of learning a new skill – and provides the opportunity for excitement and enjoyment.

After surfing, participants meet back on shore to reinforce their positive experience and, if they wish, discuss their own situations (though this is not a requirement). Sharing experiences happens spontaneously either in the surfing session itself or during the group conversations afterwards.

A second session builds on the positive feelings produced by the Surfwell experience.

One of the key pillars of Surfwell's success is the relationship with the facilitators, since their status as fellow officers means they are fully aware of the stresses and traumas linked to the job. Their role includes meeting and greeting, settling nerves, explaining the day, giving instruction on how to surf, running the group sessions throughout the day, encouraging and de-briefing individuals. Each Surfwell session has no more than six participants and a one-to-one ratio with facilitators.

Many of the participants choose to stay in touch with each other to reinforce the positive gains they have made together. Some of the participants have joined the police surf club and taken up surfing with colleagues as both a hobby and as a coping mechanism which they can utilise when the need arises.

## HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

The research study ran from August 2019 to May 2020 and involved 20 officers who had been referred onto the programme by the Devon and Cornwall Police force's occupational health team. The group comprised 6 females and 14 males aged 36 to 59, all of whom had current or recent mental health difficulties of a mild to moderate nature.

Each month, a group of between two and six of the officers attended a one-off Surfwell session run by two main facilitators and a number of volunteers who offered additional one-to-one support and were serving police officers. Each session was carefully constructed to create a safe environment, to provide support for the participants and to encourage them to relax and enjoy the day.

### Method

A mixed method approach included pre and post session survey, focus groups and one-to-one follow-up interviews. Information based on the participants' views (subjective outcomes) was collected in two main phases (before and after their Surfwell session) to measure factors such as wellbeing, organisational commitment, engagement and satisfaction. In addition to this quantitative phase of the research, qualitative data was gathered. This mixed-method approach enabled greater understanding, in-depth analysis and discussion of the programme's main results.

### Data Collection

The survey of seven positively worded items, with five response categories, was used to measure both the feeling and functioning aspects of positive mental well-being (NEF, 2012). All 20 participants completed the pre Surfwell survey, and 14 of them also completed the post-session survey. The data generated was analysed using SPSS, and statistical tests (t-tests) were conducted to identify significant changes.

Five focus groups were held immediately after the Surfwell sessions. These focus groups included all 20 research participants in groups of between 2 and 6. They lasted an average of 30 minutes, and created a safe space where participants could share their ideas in response to open interview questions that were predetermined to provide consistency across the groups (Irvine et al., 2013).

Finally, one-to-one interviews were conducted with nine participants six to eight weeks after the Surfwell session, to explore its sustained impact. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected from the focus groups and the interviews.

## AIMS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The study of Surfwell involved Professor Marwa Tourky, Principal Investigator, at Cranfield School of Management, and Professor William Harvey, Co-Investigator, at the University of Exeter Business School and Devon and Cornwall Police. It is the first research project to investigate the potential of surfing therapy to enhance employees' wellbeing and performance.

Its two goals were:

**1** To measure Surfwell's impact on mental health, wellbeing and work performance

**2** To establish whether surfing is an effective way to confront wellbeing challenge



# RESULTS

The combined results of the survey, focus groups and interviews showed a series of positive benefits not just for the individual officers who took part, but also for Devon and Cornwall Police as a whole. These are discussed in detail in the following sections.

T-Test analysis of the pre and post intervention survey focused on both individual wellbeing and organisational gains. The main findings, (Box 1) show positive changes across a range of indicators.

Firstly, the findings show statistically significant improvements to individuals' wellbeing and their optimism as shown in Box 1. These positive changes are shown in Figure 1, while the statistically significant changes to the individual wellbeing factors are shown in Table 1. Not all the factors statistically improved, which may be due to the small sample size.

Secondly, the findings show organisational gains in commitment, engagement and lowered burnout as seen in Box 1. The findings also show that reported feelings of being less interested in work statistically improved after the Surfswell intervention.

Figure 2 presents pre and post intervention mean responses to specific organisational factors, while the statistically significant changes are shown in Table 2.

Key Statistical Findings Box 1

Statistically significant improvements for individuals:

- Feeling optimistic about the future
- Feeling useful
- Feeling relaxed
- Feeling close to others

Statistically significant improvements for the organisation:

- feelings of job satisfaction
- enjoying discussing Devon and Cornwall Police with people outside
- feeling strong and vigorous on the job
- feeling enthusiastic about the job
- feelings of interest in job



## At-a-glance pre and post survey results: Benefits to individuals

Figure 1: Change in wellbeing indicators pre and post Surfswell intervention

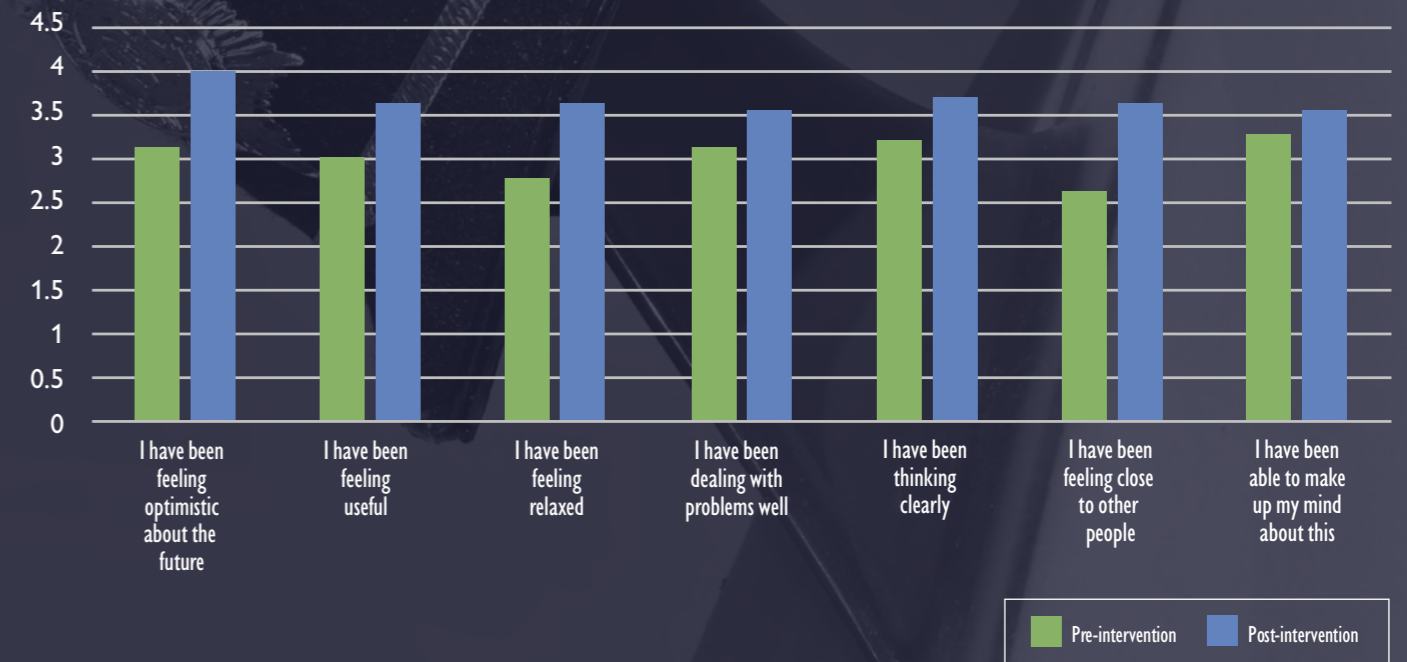


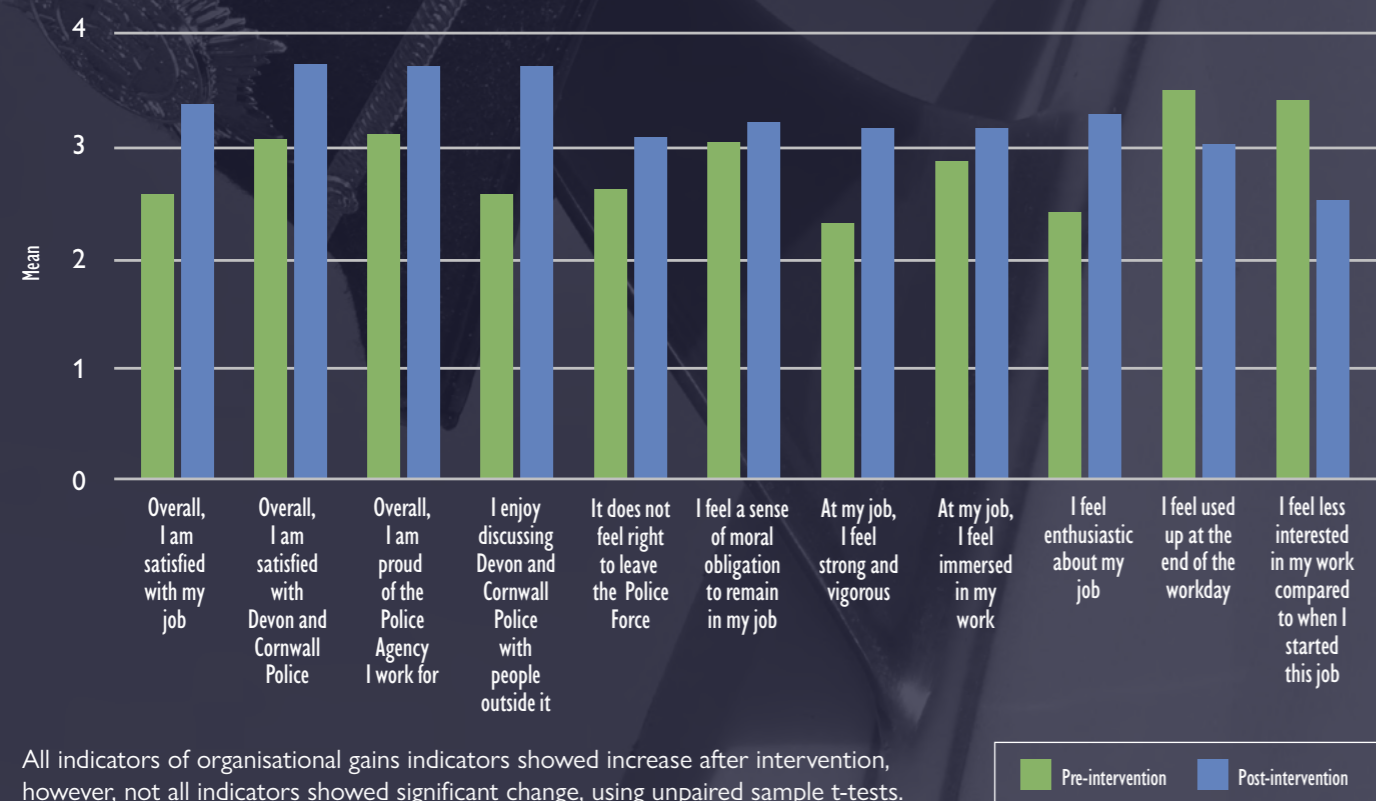
Table 1: Significant change in wellbeing indicators pre and post Surfswell Intervention

Wellbeing Indicator	UNPAIRED SAMPLE T-TEST RESULTS		
	Pre-intervention (N=20)	Post-intervention (N=14)	Significance
I have been feeling optimistic about the future	M=3.15; SD=.875	M=4.00; SD=.555	t=-3.462; p<.01
I have been feeling useful	M=3.05; SD=.945	M=3.64; SD=.633	t=-2.044; p<.05
I have been feeling relaxed	M=2.80; SD=1.005	M=3.64; SD=.633	t=-2.769; p<.01
I have been feeling close to other people	M=2.65; SD=.875	M=3.64; SD=.745	t=-3.455; p<.01

Key: M = mean score, SD = standard deviation (indicative of the range of scores), N shows the number of cases in brackets and p = the degree of statistical significance

## At-a-glance pre and post survey results: Benefits to the organisation

Figure 2: Change in organisational indicators pre and post Surfwell intervention



All indicators of organisational gains indicators showed increase after intervention, however, not all indicators showed significant change, using unpaired sample t-tests.

Table 2: Significant change in organisational indicators pre and post Surfwell intervention

Organisational gains	UNPAIRED SAMPLE T-TEST RESULTS		
	Pre-intervention (N=20)	Post-intervention (N=14)	Significance
Overall, I am satisfied with my job	M=2.55; SD=1.099	M=3.36; SD=.745	t=-2.386; p<.05
I enjoy discussing Devon and Cornwall Police with people outside it	M=2.55; SD=1.099	M=3.71; SD=1.139	t=-2.996; p<.01
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	M=2.30; SD=.923	M=3.14; SD=.663	t=-2.923; p<.01
I feel enthusiastic about my job	M=2.40; SD=.995	M=3.29; SD=.825	t=-2.734; p<.01
I feel less interested in my work compared to when I started this job	M=3.40; SD=1.231	M=2.50; SD=.855	t= 2.361; p<.05

Key: M = mean score, SD = standard deviation (indicative of the range of scores), N shows the number of cases in brackets and p = the degree of statistical significance

## Findings from the surveys were supported by qualitative findings

### Key Statistical Findings supported by qualitative findings

Attending a Surfwell session significantly improved individuals' wellbeing.

"So I've literally gone from driving home after every shift upset to coming here and feeling more energetic and more – they [Surfwell facilitators] just make you feel so special!" (Focus group 2, Female)

Statistical positive improvements in organisational commitment, engagement and job satisfaction.

"Just knowing there is the group out there that are looking out for me makes me feel much better towards the organisation so more invested in making sure I am keeping myself well and turning up and doing my best." (P6, Male)

### Key Highlights

The Surfwell intervention significantly improved police officers' health and wellbeing, especially feelings of optimism and usefulness, which had an impact on organisational gains such as job satisfaction.

### Recommendation(s)

Further research with larger sample size to identify statistical changes in all measures of health and wellbeing.

Ensure the sample size pre and post intervention is the same to enable paired t-tests to be conducted.



### Findings from the focus groups and interviews

The information gathered from the focus groups and one-to-one interviews (qualitative data) provided a much greater explanatory understanding of the reasons for the benefits for individual wellbeing and the organisation.

The words most frequently associated with Surfwell during this phase of the research were “feel” and “kind”. Other frequently used words included “reenergised”, “fun”, “enjoy”, “better”, “love”, “happy” and “good”. The most commonly occurring words are shown in the word-cloud below (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Word cloud representing the frequency of words related to Surfwell experience in the interviews. The size of each word indicates its frequency across the interviews.

**Table 3:** Participants' words about Surfwell “I just feel ready to deal with stuff now.” (Focus group 1, Male)

<p>“... one thing that opened my eyes is that I find it – it’s quite nice to be supported by people who know what you’re going through and kind – it kind of shows that people go through it, not just you.” (P2, Male)</p>
<p>“.. [I feel] physically tired, mentally kind of reinvigorated.” (Focus group 1, Male)</p>
<p>“... [I feel] reenergised, I thought that was a really good one. Refreshed.” (Focus group 1, Male)</p>
<p>“[it’s] fun. Certainly, had elements of fun, I thought it was a lot of fun. A lot of laughter all day.” (Focus group 3, Female)</p>
<p>“The first session was almost like a happy pill where there’s no talk of technique; it’s just getting in the water and experiencing.” (Focus group 4, Male)</p>

Analysis of this data revealed both immediate and sustained personal gains for Surfwell participants. The detailed findings on the immediate, sustained and organisational gains are explored in the following sections.



## Immediate personal gains

The immediate gains identified from analysis of the focus groups and interviews included a positive change in mood, sense of achievement, improved confidence, greater acceptance of mental health difficulties and renewed motivation (shown in Box 4).

The majority of participants noted a positive change in their mood during the focus groups, without direct questioning. Although it is recognised that emotions by their nature are fleeting, the Surfswell session provided participants with a platform to experience emotions, reflect and learn, as one female participant shares:

*“I’m probably in the worst headspace I’ve ever been in and I pretty much spent all of Monday crying and so to be here today smiling, is a complete leap. [...] [...] I feel energetic. I feel happy. Like there’s this buzz when you come out.” (Focus group 2, Female)*

More than half the participants (12 out of 20) reported a sense of achievement, which was related to encouraging words and/or reactions from the on-site facilitators. Despite surfing being considered a high-risk physical sport, interviewees identified that supportive words eliminated the pressure to perform and positive reinforcement urged the participants to engage with surfing. This positive reinforcement from the facilitators, coupled with cheering and encouragement from their peers, meant that – as one participant expressed it – they were able to ‘celebrate [their] little achievements’ (Focus group 2, Female), despite 3 of the 20 reporting that they normally struggled to acknowledge their successes in everyday life.

Participants described how their confidence developed as the facilitators and their peers supported them throughout the day. Improvements were reported in surfing skills (9 out of 20), relaxing into the group situation (2 out of 20), improved body image (4 out of 20) and being able to go in the sea (2 out of 20). One participant stated:

*‘I always wonder, you know, when I put [on] that wetsuit - you can imagine - and I always wonder what other people think and I used to think that for a little while when I was still in uniform and somebody once called me a fat police officer and it really hurt and so, when I went surfing I thought they’re just gonna judge me because I’ve got to put a wetsuit on and I’m big and they didn’t at all. They just didn’t at all and I forgot about my size when I was there.’ (Participant 8, Female)*

Another participant commented:

*“... [I am] very body conscious ... just to walk down the road in just a wetsuit is like huge. So, yes, I’m four sessions in now so [it’s] chipping away each time so [I] don’t worry about it as much now as I used to.” (Participant 3, Male)*

### Key Findings

Box 4

#### Immediate personal gains

- positive change in mood
- sense of achievement
- improved confidence
- acceptance of mental health issues
- renewed motivation

In terms of acceptance of their own mental health issues, 7 of the 20 felt that Surfswell had helped them to open up and accept their experiences. The positive factors that facilitated this acceptance process included connecting with peers from similar backgrounds and seeing colleagues in different stages of their recovery journey, which seemed to reduce the stigma. One participant stated:

*“It’s going to be a long-standing process with regards to I might never be 100% again, if I can put it like that, but [attending Surfswell] was certainly a way in which I gained more perspective of my condition.” (Participant 7, Male)*

A sense of being re-energised and reinvigorated was felt by 8 of the 20 participants by trying to learn something new, challenging and fun. These benefits were seen as extending beyond the session. Participants not only wanted to return to physical exercise, but also felt more ready to face the coming week at work. See Box 5 and Box 6.

### Key Highlights

Box 5

The Surfswell intervention improved elements of individual health and wellbeing including gaining acceptance about one’s current struggles by offering a reflective space to contemplate the benefits and costs of implementing changes for improved well-being.

### Recommendation(s)

Box 6

- Cultivate peer support
- Create ongoing social support through an informal surfing social group.

## Sustained personal gains

The sustained personal gains developed by participants emerged from the nine follow-up one-to-one interviews. The main themes are shown in Box 7.

A key outcome reported was the feeling of becoming more resilient and being able to cope with day-to-day stressors. Five of the nine interviewees reported that Surfswell had helped to reduce their stress levels and to create a belief in their ability to cope with the coming week. One interviewee commented:

*“I’ve felt so much stress over the last couple of weeks and today I feel better than I’ve felt in a long time and then I can go back and start again. I’d be like, right let’s deal with these challenges.” (Focus group 2, Female)*

The social network created by Surfswell was also crucial for individuals when they faced adversity; it helped sustain their resilience and ability to cope, as described by one participant: *“[there] is a [Surfswell] team who believes in me.” (Focus group 2, Female)*

Four of the nine interviewees reported hope and self-belief that they would initiate and continue goal-directed actions. Each person seemed to have gained something different from the Surfswell intervention, depending on the difficulties they had been facing at the time. The benefits included hope that they would change their exercise routine, improved body confidence so they felt more able to join their family on the beach, more positive thinking and an ability to cope better with their job role. One interviewee commented:

*“It got me out and about more where I was still within a reclusive mindset, it got me to get out there and to exercise. I won’t lie to you, I still do not tend to take regular exercise but it’s certainly something that I’ve felt that I am able to do.” (Participant 7, Male)*

### Key Highlights

Box 8

Surfswell enabled participants to develop personal gains that lasted at least six to eight weeks after the intervention. Hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy are all factors that enable sustained personal improvements in health and wellbeing.

### Key Findings

Box 7

#### Sustained personal gains

- growth in resilience
- growth in hope
- growth in optimism
- growth in self-efficacy

The above changes were voiced by returning participants who were able to reflect on the changes already achieved and voice their hope towards their next goalpost.

Six out of nine returning participants reported increased optimism weeks and months after the session. They found it easier see the world in a more positive light, and when faced with difficulties were able to attribute negativity to the outside factors. One stated:

*“It just gave me a sense of being somebody rather than I’m plodding along every day, getting on, not really getting any answers to my problems and my issues but that I was actually somebody that was worth it [...] – you can’t buy that.” (Participant 8, Female)*

Six interviewees reported an increase in self-efficacy and having the confidence to take on challenging tasks and put in the necessary effort to succeed at them. One commented:

*“I know that I can do what I set my mind to and I realise that now [...] I’d only started really concentrating on my running after going surfing.” (Participant 8, Female)*

See Box 8 and Box 9.

### Recommendation(s)

Box 9

Participants would benefit from participating in more than one session.

Further research is needed to determine the number of sessions which produce the best outcomes.



## Self-care Toolbox

One of the big changes noticed by returning participants was their shift in attitude towards their self-care. The follow-up interviews showed that participants identified several tools attributed specifically to the Surfwell session and which they had implemented in their day-to-day lives. These tools are shown in Box 10. These included the importance of setting boundaries, social reconnection, informal mindfulness skills and spending time in nature.

Four of the nine interviewees recognised the importance of setting boundaries between their personal time and work/family demands. Taking time out for themselves had allowed them to actively pursue reconnection with their friends and family members, as they felt their stress levels were reduced and they had the capacity to prioritise their family life and find a healthier work-life balance. One participant commented:

*“I’ve been a lot happier at home with my [family ...] I’m just awake a lot more. I was so grumpy and so tired all the time [...] I think I was selfish in that job in giving too much to the job, and this [Surfwell session] has made me refocus and think, ‘Do you know what, I need to give my family more time’, so it’s definitely helped me with that.” (Participant 4, Male)*

Utilising social support provided by friends and family has been an invaluable tool for maintaining wellbeing among participants. They felt that the nature of police work meant it was often difficult to fully convey to their families the intricacies of the stress and demands they faced. This situation rendered the Surfwell opportunities to share experiences especially valuable, restoring participants’ access to social support as an everyday tool for maintaining wellbeing.

### Key Findings Box 10

#### Self-care toolbox

- set boundaries
- reconnect socially
- use nature to aid cultivate mindfulness skills

Using the sea as an external focus for mindfulness was also highly effective and worked as a buffer for some participants, especially those for whom clinical language had been a barrier to engaging with other treatment approaches prior to Surfwell. Some participants reflected on the fact that Surfwell had no barriers or stigma associated with it:

*“for me as a man of a certain age, a certain generation in regards to mindfulness being something you are a little bit far out or a little bit left wing, this is a way of introducing mindfulness to me and forcing it upon myself, and I think that’s something I feel I need to take forward which, you know, I’d like to do if it progresses.” (Participant 7, Male)*

### Key Highlights Box 11

The development of self-care strategies through a toolbox enables individuals to continue improvements in health and wellbeing.

### Recommendation(s) Box 12

On-going encouragement for individuals to access the self-care toolbox

## Organisational gains

The organisational benefits that emerged in the focus groups and interviews included lower absenteeism, higher staff retention and positive perceptions of organisational support (see Box 13).

Many participants commented on how much they appreciated the police force taking the initiative to set up Surfwell, as this showed genuine care, prioritising of wellbeing, and commitment to and investment in officers’ wellbeing. One said:

*“A project like Surfwell that is clearly intensive in time and money and resources – when you see your own organisation commit to a project like that you realise that they are committed to genuinely valuing mental health and wellbeing in the workplace... because often we hear a lot of words and see them clash and that’s not been the case.” (Participant 5, Male)*

Many participants were peer supporters in managerial or public-facing roles, and believed that having a positive attitude towards the organisation affected how they represented it. One noted that if he was positive, it had a positive effect on his team.

A large proportion of participants reported a reduced level of sick leave, which they linked directly to the Surfwell session. This change seems to have been related to an improved sense of hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resilience, including dealing with challenges in participants’ private lives. One commented:

*“From a personal point of view I’ve got a lot of things on my mind right now that are not related to work [...] and I know that if I don’t have some way to deal with those issues then I’d be off sick quite easily [...] but by doing something like this it keeps you balanced. The organisation will gain massively because I’ll be at work as opposed to having to backfill me for the next six months.” (Focus group 5, Male).*

### Key Findings Box 13

#### Organisational gains

- positive perception of organisational support
- less absenteeism
- higher staff retention

Several participants said Surfwell had offered them a space to reflect and gain perspective on their difficulties. The absence of an effective support network emerged as a common thread, whether dealing with lack of career progression or an inability to cope with work pressures. Nurturing social connections and shifting attitudes towards self-care had left them better equipped to cope with forthcoming challenges and pursue further development in their role. Surfwell had directly influenced some to stay in the police force:

*“I was on the verge of leaving [...] I couldn’t cope with everything so I was about to hand in my notice and just say I don’t want to do this anymore. I love my job, but I was just struggling at that time and I can wholeheartedly say the only reason I didn’t leave the police was because of Surfwell, because of the support I found from the facilitators and peers, 100% that’s why I didn’t leave the job.” (P1, Female).*

### Key Highlights Box 14

Participants appreciated the Police’s initiatives for improving employees’ wellbeing and funding Surfwell, which improved participants’ perceptions of Devon and Cornwall Police. Retention and absence rates suggested that an individual intervention can have a positive impact on the force.

### Recommendation(s) Box 15

Devon and Cornwall Police continue to support non-traditional wellbeing initiatives, such as Surfwell, and improve mental health and wellbeing services.

Nominate Surfwell ambassadors to support other forces and emergency services to enable implementation.

## THE UNIQUE OFFERING OF SURFWELL

Surfwell's positive outcomes can be attributed to its unique qualities: blue space, surf, peer support and the strength of the relationships that were formed with the facilitators (see Box 16). Participants found being in the sea, the experience of surfing, being among colleagues (as peers and facilitators) powerful and helpful in many ways.

### The role of blue space

The sea has been a unique element of the Surfwell day. One participant directly reflected on the experience of blue space and its therapeutic nature:

*"It's another tool that you can use. It's a place you can get away [...] so if you've had a real rubbish day at work, just head to the coast and you know what that cold water therapy can do and you know, it's been freezing today but when I was out there not once did I feel cold."* (Focus group 2, Female)

Being in the sea provided a unique challenge. The grounding sensation from the cold water seemed to create an environment that enabled individuals to be aware of the present moment, through a combination of the physical demands of surfing and the surrounding elements of the water, such as the cold temperature and being caught up in the waves. One participant commented:

*"I think it is just that having time away from problems, being able to remove yourself, to put stuff back into perspective. To actually realise there is a big world out there, there is waves to go and splash about in and there are people that you know that you didn't (know) before [...]"* (Focus group 3, Male)

### The role of surfing

The benefits of this complete absorption in surfing while dealing with multiple stressors were summed up by one participant:

*"You've got all of this going on [multiple stressors] [...] and you're kind of pushing over, not really dealing with that, sort of compartmentalising. [...] and then you go out, you go for a surf [...] and you can only focus on that for that period of time and you kind of clear some of the stress. Like the physicality of it, the immersion in nature, the getting washed around [...] just being immersed in something, [it] kind of just wraps you up."* (Focus group 5, Male)

### Key Findings

Box 16

#### Surfwell's unique qualities

- blue space
- surf
- peer support
- relationship with facilitator

More than half of the participants (14 out of 20) described feeling completely absorbed, both during the warm-up exercise and during the surfing itself: their awareness concentrated on a single focus – catching the next wave.

One participant commented:

*"I have other methods of maintaining vague fitness. Walks, cycle rides, things along those lines, but that doesn't give me the adrenaline pure exhilaration that Surfwell does and it doesn't give me that shot of adrenaline/wellbeing that comes from it."* (Focus group 4, Male)

#### The role of peer support

11 out of 20 participants highlighted the importance of having other members of the force in the group, as it created a sense of being understood. Being in the same occupation seemed to give participants a sense of camaraderie and a heightened level of empathy towards each other, as they recognised the difficulties that police work and culture could cause when trying to address mental health difficulties. One participant summed this view up by commenting:

*"Just chatting to people here that are going through similar stuff to you, that's also helpful. Because not everyone at work who knows what's going on can understand it."* (Focus group 3, Female)

### The role of facilitator

The relatable support provided by the facilitators also encouraged participants to challenge themselves and come away with heightened positive emotions and maintain some longer-term gains. By providing genuine support, the facilitators provided an environment where competence and autonomy were encouraged.

The participants' shared context with the facilitators also created a sense of understanding, enabling them to get straight to the core of their difficulties without having to spend a long time developing a relationship. This was expressed clearly by one participant:

*"The whole idea of Surfwell being police officers [...] I think that's a very strong advantage to it, so this whole thing about you don't need to explain to the people you're talking to, you can almost get straight to the nub of it. Even the counsellor I had, she's worked with the police for I don't know, six years – you still need to explain things and put things in context."* (Participant 5, Male)

The majority of participants (15 out of 20) said they felt it was important for the facilitators to understand the uniqueness of their job. This helped them to feel more connected, affording them the opportunity to disclose information which some of them had not been able to share with anyone else.

### Key Highlights

Box 17

The unique attributes of Surfwell (blue space, surf, peer support and relationship with facilitator) are the factors of the intervention that had a lasting impact for participants.

### Recommendation(s)

Box 18

Facilitators and volunteers to have empathy, active listening skills and relatability.



## DISCUSSING THE PERSONAL GAINS IN MORE DETAIL

While any natural environment enables people to experience psychological fulfilment through meaningful and purpose-driven activities that encourage engagement and positive emotions (Mackenzie et al., 2014), surfing has been shown to have more psychological benefits than physical activity that does not involve water (Haefner et al., 2017).

### Immediate personal gains

**Positive change in mood.** Most participants were able to notice immediate changes in mood after the first session, however, attending more than one session appeared to enable participants to better engage with the process and subsequently experience greater benefits.

**Sense of Achievement.** Surfwell created a supportive space where participants could experience a sense of achievement. This is a crucial aspect of wellbeing, and can be difficult to experience when struggling with poor mental health. It is among the goals of other current first-line treatments, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), with the aim of breaking the vicious circle of reduced activity by increasing people's sense of achievement (Williams, 2001).

**Confidence.** Surfwell improved participants' confidence in different ways such as improving surfing skills, relaxing into the group situation, body image and being able to go in the sea, (sometimes for the first time) – which resulted in improved self-esteem. It has been estimated that one in three UK adults (Mental Health Foundation, 2019) have struggled with symptoms of anxiety or depression due to the concerns about their body image. It is encouraging to observe the changes in participants' perception of their body image after attending just two sessions of Surfwell. Given that changing the perception of one's body image can be a challenging process and current available psychological treatments, such as CBT, revolve around numerous sessions with a therapist.

**Acceptance.** Surfwell enabled participants to accept their experiences. Acceptance of mental illness has been identified as a process in which people recognise their condition and actively engage in managing their symptoms and experiences (Mizock et al., 2014). It has been linked to a number of positive outcomes including enhanced functioning, better illness management and improved quality of life (Cunningham et al., 2005; Kravetz

et al., 2000). Among the hardest obstacles to overcome in acceptance is stigma (Spaniol & Gagne, 1997). In Surfwell, connecting with peers from a similar working environment seemed to facilitate the acceptance process, and the stigma was further weakened by seeing colleagues in different stages of their recovery journey.

**Renewed motivation.** Surfwell re-energised and reinvigorated the participants, and renewed their motivation. This is significant because lower energy and motivation are seen as important warning signs of worsening mental health. Enjoyable tasks can help to create self-motivation and better performance (Kazén et al., 2015). Exercise, especially in water, can be part of preventative measures and complementary therapy for people struggling with mental health issues (Walter et al., 2019).

### Sustained personal gains

**Hope.** Participants reported that the sustained benefits of their Surfwell session included hope and self-belief. Hope is seen as a key resource that affects individual subjective wellbeing (Werner, 2012), which has been shown to impact on job retention and reduce the intention to leave (Amunkete & Rothmann, 2015).

**Optimism.** Many participants reported weeks and months after their Surfwell session that their optimism levels had remained higher. Optimism has two key roles: first, as a way of seeing future events with a positive orientation, which is capable of being developed (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Second, as an attribution style that interprets positive events through personal, permanent and pervasive causes and negative events through external, temporary and situation-specific ones. Studies show that there is an interactive relationship between optimism and resilience. Individuals who are optimistic in the face of stress tend to use effective coping strategies, and this in turn leads to a more resilient attitude (Bonanno, 2005; Carver et al., 2010; Yu & Zhang, 2007).

**Resilience.** Some participants described struggling to function on a daily basis and lacking the perceived ability to cope with their forthcoming weeks at work. After attending Surfwell, several people reported feeling more in control of their stress levels and having better resources with which to cope. Since many participants experienced a sense of achievement, growing confidence as well as heightened motivation from the session made participants experience positive emotions and fostered self-enhancement, which helped them to build resilience (Luthans, Vogelgesang & Lester, 2006).

**Self-efficacy.** Surfwell gave participants safe and non-judgemental space to reflect on how they were doing. Through open discussions and support from their peers, facilitators and volunteers, participants started to recognise that they were able to move forward in their recovery journey, feel positive about the future and develop belief in their own self-efficacy to improve their wellbeing. Self-efficacy is linked with work-related outcomes including retention (Bauer et al., 2007), and relates to people's conviction in their own ability to activate the motivation, cognitive resources and action they need to complete a task (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998).

These improvements in self-efficacy and resilience in turn helped them to feel better both physically and mentally. This is significant because exhaustion, cynicism and (reduced) professional efficacy are components of a cumulative and stable reaction to ongoing work stressors (Leiter & Maslach, 2004; Maslach & Leiter, 1999; Petitta & Vecchione, 2011).

### Self-care Toolbox

Surfwell enabled participants to recognise the importance of establishing a work-life balance by taking time for oneself, developing social connections and connecting to nature to maintain positive health and wellbeing. Establishing a work-life balance, alongside positive social connections with relatable peers (in-group members), is found to have a positive impact on employee retention (Sharma & Azmi, 2014). Work-life balance was deemed by participants to be hard to achieve and maintain. Typically, they fell in the trap of striving for perfection at work and prioritising work demands over personal wellbeing.

Each individual has limited cognitive and physical resources (Van Woerkom et al., 2016), which it is extremely important to replenish. Surfwell has shown that one way of boosting a participants cognitive and physical resources



is to take time out for themselves. By spending a day surfing with peers, participants found taking that time can have a positive and sustained impact in the following days, weeks and months.

### Organisational gains

Participants' perception of Devon and Cornwall Police improved after being part of Surfwell. This, according to participants' evaluation, can have a knock-on effect on the way they communicate and support their peers/supervisees or interact with the public. Evidence suggests that supervisors, to the extent that they are identified within the organisation, contribute to perceived organisational support and, ultimately, to job retention (Eisenberger et al., 2002). As Devon and Cornwall Police implemented the Surfwell intervention, participants felt that this demonstrated police force involvement and support towards their recovery. Engaging in the Surfwell session also helped individuals to see the direct impact taking time for themselves had on their ability to cope with following weeks. For some of the participants this meant meaningful change in the attitude towards taking time for themselves and reject the sensation of 'selfishness' when doing so.

# SUMMARY OF ALL THE MAIN FINDINGS

## PERSONAL GAINS

### IMMEDIATE GAINS

#### Positive change in mood

'I always feel invigorated after these sessions, that is what carries on into next week, the effect of doing this does last a few days.' (Focus group 3, Male)

#### Achievement

'It just rebuilds you. It reminds you that you can do things and you can achieve. You can start to feel better about yourself and think, 'Do you know what, I'm invigorated again.' (Focus group 4, Male)

#### Confidence

'I was scared but I came away – I get a bit tearful if I say it, he bumped my confidence up so much that I just wanted to – I came away feeling on top of the world and I just thought, no, I need to do this again.' (P8, Female)

#### Acceptance

'It is a case of well, it wasn't just me who was feeling that, and other people who have been through it or are going through it at different stages are able to say okay, I'm not right .' (P7, Male)

#### Renewed Motivation

'Exhilarated. I feel encouraged that I can go back and do it again. It's a reminder to retake this up as a hobby and just make an effort to do it more.' (Focus group 4, Male)

### SUSTAINED GAINS

#### Growth in resilience

'It's kind of reenergised me, give me a little bit more resilience towards dealing with what comes up in the week' (Focus group 1, Male)

#### Growth in hope

'And like I say, it switched something [...] just because I hate it and I'm depressed and all that sort of nonsense - not nonsense - you know what I mean. Whereas now I think about it and think, what else would I like to do with my life.' (P9, Female)

#### Growth in optimism

'I never used to be an optimist so perhaps that's something that's changed and come out helpful.' (P8, Female)

#### Growth in self-efficacy

'So it (attending Surfwell) gave me that confidence for achievement and rather than saying I can't, I was saying I can.' (P8, Female)

## ORGANISATIONAL GAINS

### Positive perception of organisational support

'When you see your own organisation commit to a project like that you realise that they are committed to genuinely valuing mental health and wellbeing in the workplace ' (P5, Male)

### Absenteeism

'Surfwell was probably the only thing that got me back to work and has kept me there!' (P1, Female)

### Retention

'I can wholeheartedly say the only reason I didn't leave the police was because of Surfwell, because of the support I found from the facilitators and peers, 100% that's why I didn't leave the job.' (P1, Female)

## SELF-CARE TOOLBOX

### Social re-connection

'I think the second session has reaffirmed to me how important it is to get out and be selfish with your own time and be close to the elements. Being connected is so important.' (Focus group 4, Female)

### Setting boundaries

'This [Surfwell session] has taught me to say, 'Do you know what, my rest days are my rest days. They're not do extra workdays or feel like I've got to do chores at home or commit to other things other than myself.' (Focus group 4, Male)

### Informal mindfulness skills using nature

'It [being in the water] is a case of forcing you to live in the moment and by its very nature aiding me in my own personal mindfulness.' (P7, Male)

## UNIQUE QUALITY OF SURFWELL

### Blue Space

'There's almost bit of a more practical element to this [...] You go into this and it's like an escapism, you go into that water and it's like you don't have much choice to dwell on the past because the future is coming at you in the form of a big swirling washing machine you're about to get smashed by! You can't switch off, you can't regress, you've got to look forward and you've got to think what's coming next.' (Focus group 3, Male)

### Surf

'The surfing's a really important part of it. [...] I found it brought the whole day together. [...] The excitement of doing it, the exhilaration of pulling off some waves, being in the water is fantastic.' (P2, Male)

### Peer support

'I think it's also just the support and the connection you feel when you're there, because you suddenly don't feel alone and like you're the only one having this issue, you suddenly are around people that really make you feel normal.' (P1, Female)

### Relationship with facilitator

'The day I spent in Bude, as soon as the instructor said, 'do you want to talk?' I said, 'well yeah' and he knew exactly where I was coming from. To have a chat with the same instructor on the second session it was the first time I'd probably opened up about certain things that I really wouldn't tell other people.' (P2, Male)

## CONCLUSION

The results of this research show that Surfwell has a positive impact on individuals' wellbeing and mental health, both immediately after the session and for a sustained period afterwards. The project's success flows from its unique factors, including cold-water therapy, surfing and social support from peers who share the same struggles and genuine facilitators. The positive effects of a single session of supervised surfing were found to include a sense of achievement, greater confidence, acceptance, motivation, resilience, hope, optimism and self-efficacy.

Alongside participants' consistent reports of positive changes in emotions, an ongoing momentum for change was also found. For some, this improved their resilience to face the coming weeks and cope with stress. For others, it led to the development of hope that they would be able to continue making changes in their lives and could view the world as a better place. For a few, Surfwell enabled them to believe in themselves and make lasting changes to improve their wellbeing.

The research also found benefits for Devon and Cornwall Police. These included increases in commitment, engagement and job satisfaction, and a reduction in burnout, as well as a more positive perception of the force, a reduction in absenteeism and increased staff retention.

Overall, drawing on the surveys, focus groups and interviews, the results of this research demonstrate that Surfwell is a successful wellbeing intervention, delivering positive outcomes both for individual officers and for Devon and Cornwall Police as a whole. This is a significant finding in a context in which increasing numbers of UK police officers are taking time off with mental health

issues, and these issues account for nearly half of all sick leave in UK police forces (Freedom of Information request, 2017). It is also important in a coronavirus context where health and wellbeing challenges are likely to increase in the coming months and years because of latent accumulation of stress.

This study also provides an exciting opportunity to explore the wider question of whether surfing is an effective way to confront wellbeing issues in other emergency services or indeed any workplaces where staff may struggle to maintain good mental health and deliver consistently high performance in a challenging context. The research found nothing to suggest that the benefits of Surfwell would not apply equally to other police forces or other emergency services. Its unique approach appears to have strong potential to assist staff who are struggling with wellbeing and mental health issues in other organisations where extreme levels of stress, persistent stigma and the need for "relatable" support are significant factors. An area for further research is to explore the relative benefits of Surfwell in relation to existing and additional health and wellbeing programmes.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Study a larger sample size and analyse paired t-tests

- further research should be carried out with a larger sample size to identify statistical changes in all measures of health and wellbeing. Ensure the sample size pre- and post intervention is the same to enable paired t-tests to be conducted.

### Offer multiple sessions

- all participants should be able to take part in multiple sessions, rather than the current single session, which many participants felt was not enough. When individuals did join multiple sessions because there was space, they consistently reported the highest level of sustained improvement. While we recognise the operational challenges of additional sessions, the benefits of enhancing employee wellbeing and reducing absenteeism warrants the offer of multiple rather than single sessions.

### Cultivate peer support

- The key role of peer support from both the facilitators and other participants, who serve in the police force, should be acknowledged and developed as it creates a unique sense of understanding and acceptance. A lack of hierarchy is also essential in fostering a sense of trust and safety, and should be maintained.

### Create ongoing social support

- an ongoing social support system such as an informal social group or network, should be created to build on the relationships formed at Surfwell, as social support is a crucial part of the positive experience. The fact that participants could have their difficulties heard and accepted without judgement was key to Surfwell's success.

### Provide access to the toolbox

- all participants should be encouraged to actively use the toolbox that some developed spontaneously. These specific mechanisms – such as setting boundaries social reconnection, informal mindfulness skills and spending time in nature – are likely to deliver the most effective long-term benefits for individuals and the force.

### Have a commitment to staff wellbeing, utilising of non-traditional therapies

- investing in and signalling the value of staff wellbeing should be given higher priority in all emergency services, given the rising levels of mental health issues and the extreme stress and trauma that many staff are likely to face during their careers. Further, non-traditional therapies, i.e. surfing, should be supported as it creates an environment that alleviates some of the barriers of traditional counselling in which there is often a negative power differential between the client and therapist. This delivers benefits not just to staff themselves but to the organisation in terms of motivation, engagement, productivity and retention.

### Make use of Surfwell ambassadors

- other emergency services should consider adopting Surfwell as a practical means of enhancing staff wellbeing. One means of achieving this would be for Devon and Cornwall police to nominate Surfwell ambassadors - facilitators and participants who can pass on key insights to other organisations wishing to trial the scheme. This could be costed to other organisations to ensure it covers the time of ambassadors.

### Recruit facilitators with the right skills

- organisers should continue to ensure that all Surfwell facilitators have empathy, active listening skills and relatability, as well as being genuine, enthusiastic, friendly and encouraging. The presence of these skills are fundamental to Surfwell's success, and was highlighted by many participants.

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