

SPORT ENGLAND

Active Communities projects – A Review of Impact and Good Practice
Edited Summary Report July 2002

INTRODUCTION

1. Sport England appointed Leisure Futures Ltd in September 2001 to research the impact and good practice of the Active Communities projects to date. In February 2002 Leisure Futures delivered an overview report on Active Communities projects as well as a report on individual projects.
2. Active Communities projects are interventions aimed at increasing sporting opportunities for priority target groups within the population (Black and other ethnic minority groups, women and girls, people with a disability and people on low incomes) that historically have relatively low levels of participation in sport.

BACKGROUND

3. There is growing recognition that sport and recreation can play an important part in tackling a range of social problems. Sport can present an opportunity to engage young people in a positive alternative to the “hanging around” and drug misuse culture, not just in terms of participation in activities, but across a range of social exclusion issues including education, employment and training, community leadership and healthy lifestyles.
4. Sport can also provide opportunities for disadvantaged groups of all ages to become more ‘included’ in their communities and experience the personal benefits an active lifestyle can bring. By working together at both a national and local level, organisations are able to pool their expertise and resources and invest more effectively in both the lives of young people and the communities in which young people live and in extending sporting benefits to a wide cross section of the population.
5. Sport England is increasingly required to demonstrate with sound evidence that its investment is making a difference for the people and communities that it is targeting and that good practice is identified and promoted. It is seeking to achieve this through a more systematic approach to evaluation drawing on an evaluation framework that identifies key indicators of achievement that are closely aligned to the specific objectives of any intervention.

6. In total there are 14 Active Communities projects in place across England that are included in the review.

Name
Birmingham Race Action Partnership
Leicester Racial Equality Project
West Hams Asians In Football
Leyton Orient Community Project
PRIDE
Peabody Trust Sports Project
Black and Ethnic Minorities in Sport
BEM Sport Specialist Advisers
Race Equality in Sport – Newcastle & Middlesbrough
Asian Sports Association
Pathways 2000
Bedfordshire Project
Girlsport – Bristol
Kent Rural Disability Project
YouthSport

7. Active Communities Projects On The Ground:

7.1 Variety of Projects

Different projects focus on different aims and on the different needs of their respective communities. But this understates the wide variety of projects that are currently active under the ‘Active Communities’ banner. There are striking variations between projects not only in terms of their aims, but also in terms of management structure, scale, and ways of working. Projects are working at two very different levels. At the first level, there are projects which work directly at delivering sports opportunities to communities and individuals excluded from mainstream sports provision and/or are helping to improve the quality of coaching. This level can be viewed as the level of *sports development*.

Other projects are working at a different level. For instance, PRIDE aims to establish a framework for continuing professional development which will enable black and ethnic minority staff to build a career in the leisure industry. The Community Network Alliance aims to support new and fledgling organisations in the ‘community sports network’ through networking, training, advice work, etc. Finally, there are organisations such as BEM in Yorkshire which aim to empower communities and to help develop the capacity of black and ethnic minority sports organisations, including assisting with management, training and help with funding. These schemes can be viewed as a mix of *business development and community development*, working at a more *strategic* level

(To complicate matters further, the lines between the two levels of schemes are blurred – training Community Sports Leaders in voluntary organisations is, in a sense, developing the capacity of these organisations, while schemes like BEM also help in the promotion of sports opportunities for their communities.)

Working at all levels will be necessary, if Sport England is to deliver its aim of “creating the most comprehensive sports development programme in the world.” But working to change the structure of sport and the way it is delivered is both more difficult and a more long-term process, than the direct provision of sports opportunities. Plus, providing sports opportunities where none have been provided before can be viewed by the mainstream sports industry as ‘additional’; but changing the structure of sport may sometimes be perceived as more of a threat.

7.2 Research and Development Nature

While there is a huge variety in the Active Communities projects reviewed, they are all trying to find solutions to deep-seated structural imbalances in the provision of sports and sporting opportunities, much of which are related to wider, social imbalances. There are no easy solutions to this problem. There is no ‘quick technical fix’.

Viewed in this light, the Active Communities projects can be seen as the ‘Research and Development Department’ for the whole sports and leisure sector, in terms of increasing participation, increasing and developing employment, improving the quality of services and in developing the capacity of the sector.

This is an ambitious undertaking. Projects are attempting to achieve what hasn’t been done before and the expectations on the programme as a whole are high. But Research and Development, which by its very nature is about trying out new things or new ways of doing things, also means that sometimes things don’t work out as well as planned.

7.3 The credibility the lead organisation has with the group being targeted is also key to the success of the project

A wide range of non-traditional and, on occasions, innovative partnerships are being tested across the range of Active Communities projects. In many cases, choosing lead partner organisations with credibility with the community the project is working, helps to ensure the success and significance of the project. Such partners already have close links with, and understanding of, the community. They have gained the trust and respect of the group and, usually, have better two-way communications with their community. They are able to make

things happen where previous attempts at involving the community had failed.

8 The Findings of the report relate to the following AIMS of the programme:

8.1 AIM: Social Justice and Social Inclusion

The first aim for 'Active Communities' is to promote social justice and social inclusion. There is little doubt that all of the schemes are working with, or targeted at, groups that Sport England would consider as 'hard to reach' in terms of mainstream sports participation. For a number of schemes, there is some quantitative evidence, typically showing the numbers of participants in activities organised through the scheme, though there is often a lack of baseline information to show what the level of sporting activity was by these groups before the scheme. Other quantitative evidence includes the achievements of some schemes in helping new groups from excluded communities access Lottery funding. Yet other evidence is in the number of training courses attended, or qualifications gained, by individuals from traditionally excluded communities as a result of the work of the schemes.

In terms of qualitative evidence, most schemes considered that they were being successful in achieving this aim, with an average rating of 4.3 out of 5. This is particularly the case with those schemes which are principally concerned with developing and providing sports opportunities (e.g. Azaad, Asian Sports Association. Kent Rural Disability). With these schemes there was a very strong sense that sporting opportunities were being provided for – and enjoyed by – communities who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream sports provision. In a number of cases, the benefits to the individuals participating are not just sporting but extend throughout their lives.

8.2 AIM: Increasing Participation Amongst Specific Communities

In terms of qualitative evidence, the average stakeholder rating in terms of being successful in achieving this aim was 3.7. This rather low rating may be accounted for by the fact this aim was not a primary aim for some schemes (which would tend to depress the rating). It is also affected by individual ratings, for instance that of YouthSport who consider that their focus is not so much on increasing participation as increasing the varieties of sports and the quality of coaching available at youth clubs throughout London.

It should be underlined that increasing sports participation *amongst the specific communities targeted (usually under-participating groups)* is one of the 'Holy Grails' of public policy. Much of the development of

local authority leisure centres from the 1970s onwards was predicated on attracting usage from all sectors of society, but quantitative evidence (including Sport England's, 'Survey of sports hall and swimming pools in England' (1999) has shown this has not been achieved. Similarly the high profile national campaign of 'Sport for All' promoted through the 1980s by the Sports Council appears to have had little effect in increasing participation by under-participating groups. While there is the need for better, independent evidence of participation from some of the projects, it is nevertheless clear that these targeted interventions are having an impact within the catchment areas of the projects. The strategic decision and task now is: how to roll out the successes of Active Communities more generally across England?

8.3 AIM: developing Community Sports Leaders

Developing Community Sports Leaders and providing sports training and qualifications generally, was an integral part of a number of the schemes. Indeed, nearly all the schemes which provided sports activities and opportunities also organised training so that volunteers and workers could become officially qualified. This was viewed as a key tool in cascading further sports opportunities within the community and in helping to build the capacity of the community.

Again, in quantitative terms, there is a lack of baseline research to show how many qualified leaders and coaches there were before the scheme started. While there is a reasonable amount of quantitative evidence available now, this tends to be in different formats, buried in internal reports, and not aggregated across the schemes to show the impact in national terms.

In qualitative terms, the average stakeholder rating for this aim was 4.0 ("successful"), even though this was depressed by a low rating on one scheme. Training and development appears to be one of the strengths of many of the schemes.

8.4 AIM: Developing Community Sports Programmes and Facilities

Once again, there is a lack of baseline evidence while little quantitative evidence of current performance was made available to the Study. Nevertheless, though we are unable to quantify the amount of sports programmes that have been developed, it appears that a significant amount of activity has been generated by those schemes focussing on this aim, including Kent Rural Disability, Peabody Trust, YouthSport, Bolton – Pathways 2000, West Ham Asians in Football and the Asian Sports Association.

To our knowledge, just one scheme, the Bolton Pathways, has established new sports facilities within deprived neighbourhoods as the

base for new sporting programmes and activities.

In qualitative terms, stakeholders are fairly positive about the success of their schemes with an average rating of 3.8 (“almost successful”).

8.5 AIM: Contributing to wider Objectives

This is a more complex aim in that different projects relate to different sets of wider objectives – some to social inclusion and health, others to community development and community safety, yet others to lifelong learning. As we have noted above, many of the projects have developed successful and innovative partnerships – another aspect of ‘contributing to wider objectives’.

Individual schemes have been successful in different ways in contributing to wider objectives. Leicester Race Equality has developed links with both the Local Strategic Partnership and with the Local Cultural Strategy – and, thus, has the opportunity to make a larger impact. The experience of Bolton – Pathways 2000 is considered an example of good practice by the local authority which is looking to roll the programme out and is integrating some of the learning from the project in its Best Value Review of Parks and Open Spaces.

In qualitative terms, stakeholders have, on average, rated schemes at 3.7 (out of 5) on this aim. Underlying this in some cases is the recognition that this is still early days for the schemes, that the issues to be tackled are complex and deep-seated, and that this aim is long-term.

9 KEY ISSUES

The Leisure Futures report identified a number of Key Issues:

9.1 Place of Schemes within the ‘mix’ of Sports Providers

The reasons behind the success of Active Communities projects are clear –

- They are targeted at specific communities
- They involve those communities and are led by agencies with credibility in those communities
- While being action-orientated and focusing on specific tasks, they take a more holistic approach than more traditional schemes, e.g. they include training and coaching qualifications, courses in healthy lifestyles, in addition to ‘straightforward’ sports participation

Sport England is to be congratulated for the ambition and courage in

launching these schemes. In the main, the traditional sports providers – members clubs / governing bodies and local authorities – have failed to extend participation to the excluded communities in their midst – far less develop programmes of volunteering, support or career development. Members clubs / governing bodies have not done so because they do not see this as part of their agenda or integral to their vision. Local authorities have made attempts to address this issue but – despite long campaigns such as ‘Sport for All’ and occasionally developing new sports facilities in areas of sporting and social deprivation – these have not always met with success because they have not taken the specific steps necessary to attract these communities.

This means that the Active Communities projects are genuinely ‘cutting edge’. It means that – within their local areas – a number of them are achieving gains in participation by the specific communities they are targeting which have not been achieved before. Others are beginning to achieve having spent the first nine months to a year engaging with the local communities and building networks - ie. putting the foundations in place. The significance of this achievement should not be under-estimated.

It also means that some of the schemes, e.g. PRIDE, BEM, by their very nature will not gain easy support from other sports providers including local authorities. At best they will be seen as competitors for scarce resources, at worst threatening. Sport England will need to have the courage of its convictions. This will involve supporting the projects and advocating the benefits that arise from the projects. It will involve establishing a better evidence base.

9.2 Evidence Base – Focusing on one or two main aims for each project

Though we believe that the projects have achieved the aim of increasing sports participation amongst under-participating groups, the case is by no means incontrovertibly proved. The Home Office document ‘Evidence Based Practice’ (1998) points the way to basing practice upon substantiated findings. This illustrates the general trend which is that all government departments now need to substantiate their arguments with ‘hard facts’ in order to win continuing funding.

In order for Sport England to use its existing Active Communities funding as a lever to gain more resources from external budgets and agencies, this will mean providing firmer, more robust quantitative evidence. This will be easier for those projects which aim to increase participation or to increase the number of qualified coaches than for those other projects whose aims are more focused on building community capacity.

The first step to providing this evidence base is, we believe, to agree

with each project which are its key aims while recognising these may need to be reviewed in the light of feedback from the community say at the end of Year 1 and then fixed. With all grant funded projects, there is always the danger of aims being set in stone during the application planning stage and not being amended in response to the findings of more detailed community engagement once up and running.

9.3 Evidence Base – Agree a few simple performance indicators

The second step to providing the evidence base is to develop a small set of simple to gather performance indicators to track the extent to which these aims are being achieved.

We are not supporters of compiling statistics for the sake of compiling statistics. We are only too aware of the pressures at the grass roots which makes even simple monitoring fraught. We understand that the wide range of projects with their differing aims makes it impossible or almost impossible to 'aggregate' statistics from the different schemes.

The monitoring proposed, although basic, will require more support from Sport England both centrally and in terms of organisational resources for the projects. This in turn will require a more formal relationship between Sport England nationally, Sport England regionally and the projects themselves so that there is a clear and timely flow of information to/from all parties.

9.4 Relationship between Sport England and Projects

Sport England needs to realise the complexity of tasks facing the projects; the 'research and development' nature of the projects and their search to find solutions to deep-seated structural imbalances in sport and in society; and the long term nature of the tasks. It must live and breathe the ambitions of the national Active Communities programme. It must avoid the danger of 'setting some schemes up to fail' by not giving the schemes enough priority, focus, resources and support.

9.5 Many of the projects are suffering from inadequate administrative and office support structures

A number of the projects started very small with ad-hoc administrative arrangements. Most have grown significantly and in many cases have 'outgrown' the original structures that were hastily set up to support them. In some cases this is leading to inefficiency and in some cases professional tensions and difficult working environments.

9.6 The short term nature of funding for the programme is incompatible with what the programme is trying to achieve

The consensus from the Active Communities projects (as with the

Positive Futures projects) is that it takes considerable time to establish the necessary partnership and delivery structures, to recruit staff and to establish credibility with the community. As one project partner said to us: "It's a slow process. But people look for quick returns. People need to understand it's not realistic for these projects which are changing two to three decades of policy". We find this view persuasive. This means that a typical project may only start to be really effective some 18 months to two years down the line - by which time the project may be near the end of its funding.

9.7 There is a need for more female deliverers especially for those projects targeting ethnic minority communities

In at least two of the projects targeted at ethnic minorities (Azaad Youth and BEM Yorkshire) the difficulty of recruiting female leaders/deliverers was noted. With the Azaad Youth project, which is targeted at the Asian community, this appears to stem from the fact that many older people within the community did not see sport as a desirable or legitimate career path for girls and therefore the supply of potential female workers/ development officers was extremely limited. Some other projects appear to be mainly geared towards male rather than female participation.

10 Conclusions

From the Overview Report On Impact and good practice of the programme the following lessons can be learned:

The Active Communities programme nationally is an exciting and courageous programme which attempts to address deep-seated structural imbalances in sport – and in society generally. The scale of the ambition which lies behind the programme – and other Sport England initiatives including Positive Futures and Sport Action Zones – needs to be clearly acknowledged and warmly applauded.

The very nature of the programme – its new thinking, its development of innovative partnerships, and its 'research and development' nature – means that it will have both immediate successes and short-term failings. But the real benefit of the programme can only be judged in the long term.

While there is less quantitative evidence and it is still early days for some projects, we consider that the projects are beginning to deliver positive results both in sporting and social terms.

