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The impact of a community free swimming programme for young people (under 19) in England



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ABSTRACT

A national free swimming programme for under 16s in England was a central government initiative to increase participation in 2008/09, although not all local authorities adopted it. One implemented a bespoke free swimming initiative (FSI) for under 19s in the community instead, aiming to improve the health of young people through the programme and provide value for money for managers. The FSI saw 33% of the eligible population participating at least once. However, the programme evaluation demonstrated that, despite cost being removed, participation decreased over the programme. Furthermore, the FSI had a large market penetration effect, where the majority of participants were already swimming regularly prior to the intervention. Overall, the programme provided some health benefits to the more engaged participants, but in terms of wider social benefit there was little evidence to suggest the intervention had any additional impact. The cost per swim of the community investment was almost six times more per head than the central government funded scheme, suggesting that widespread programming did not provide value for money when compared to a more targeted programme.

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1. Introduction

There is growing evidence to suggest that sport can create social change. Regular sport and physical activity can create healthier individuals, happier and more inclusive communities, and wider social benefits to society (Cox, 2012). In the United Kingdom (UK), policies to increase and sustain participation in sport can be traced back to the 1960s and remain an on-going priority to the present day, with initiatives targeting participation in young people a critical part of this. The focus on participation is heightened due to the high proportion of young people classified as overweight or obese in England, as evidenced by health surveys undertaken in England (The National Health Service (NHS) Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2008).

The involvement of central and local government in England, in terms of providing sporting opportunities for young people both in and out of the school setting through policy intervention, is significant. There are numerous examples of programmes designed to increase participation by young people, including the £36 million Sport Unlimited project from 2008 to 2011 (Sport England, 2008a), the £56 million Sportivate project from 2011 to 2015 (Sport England, 2011) and the

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£150 million Sainsbury's School Games from 2011 to 2015 (Sport England, 2013). These projects are funded and managed by the government Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the non-governmental department Sport England. This added investment in community sport outside of the school timetable is in addition to the enhanced role of Physical Education in the English National Curriculum, which has developed since the 1988 Education Reform Act. This included Physical Education (NCPE) in the National Curriculum in England and Wales (Houlihan, 2008).

Part of the targets introduced around Physical Education (PE) in English schools was a required target of at least two hours of PE per student each week. Data collected by Quick (2008) demonstrated the proportion of young people (aged 5–18) doing 120 minutes of PE in schools was increasing (77% in 2003/04, and 79% in 2009/10), although there are considerable differences by school and by age, with younger students doing more, and pronounced drop-off between the age of 15 and 18. This target of two hours was removed as a requirement in schools following a change in central government in 2010 (Paton, 2012). In addition to PE, central and local government investment (through leisure departments) provides sporting opportunities on a subsidised (or free) basis in order to facilitate sport participation by young people living in the surrounding catchment area. However, there are questions around whether free provision actually makes a longer term difference towards increasing the participation rates of people, as price is only one determinant of demand for sport (Downward & Rasciute, 2010).

This paper examines the impact of a community free swimming programme for young people (under 19s) in one English local authority area. The programme, referred to within this paper as the Free Swimming Initiative (FSI), is an example of a strategic investment by a local authority to address health inequalities in the local area and to tackle obesity through increasing participation in sport. The paper presents the key findings of the FSI evaluation, comparing the anticipated and actual outcomes before discussing the implications for managers in the context of programming and delivery. It argues that although the removal of price was designed to increase participation and thus drive health equalities and value for money, the reality was a series of unintended impacts, which will be discussed.

Before the evaluation is presented, the paper firstly discusses the link between sports participation, health and other social impacts and the national policy context around participation in England, particularly young people.

2. Sport for social change

There is a widely held belief that participating in sport can create wider impacts to society. This is not a new phenomenon and is reflected in both social policy and academic literature. In the UK, although government interest in sport can be traced back to Sport and the Community (Wolfenden Committee on Sport, 1960), it is from the early 1970s that public policy emerged around the use of sport for societal good (Houlihan, 1997; King, 2009). The formation of the Sports Council by Royal Charter in 1971 was closely linked to enhancing social welfare and the subsequent development of sports policy through the 1970s and early 1980s clearly promoted this agenda (Department of the Environment, 1975; Henry, 2001). While the neo-liberal agenda of conservative governments in the late 1980s saw a decline in concerns with the wider societal impacts of sport, the 1990s again saw a revival in the notion that sport could deliver wider individual and community outcomes. The election of the Labour government in 1997 formally placed sport at the heart of its broader social policy agenda (Coalter, 2007), where it has remained ever since.

In parallel to the growing recognition and use of sport within public policy in the UK and elsewhere, there has been a similar growth in academic interest and evaluative research on the social impacts of sport. Dating back to the 1980s, there is substantial research to suggest that sport can create wide ranging impacts on society in health, education, crime and social capital (e.g. Cox, 2012; Oughton & Tacon, 2007). However, this body of research is contested with critics such as Coalter (2005, 2007) arguing that despite the growth in volume, evidence for many of the claimed impacts are limited by various factors including the difficulty in isolating the impact of sport from other factors and causality, especially in relation to the evidence based on cross sectional research.

Although research on the social impact of sport remains contested, there is convincing evidence to suggest that participation in sport generates health benefits to individuals and ultimately society, in terms of health care cost savings. Previous studies allude to participation in sport and physical activity as a vital part of using prevention of long term health issues rather than a measure to cure. There is a consensus in the literature, based on scientific evidence, that participation in sport and physical activity creates preventative and therapeutic health benefits including prevention of premature death and chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, obesity, osteoporosis and depression (e.g. Cox, 2012; O'Donovan, Blazeovich, & Boreham, 2010; Warburton, Nicol, & Bedin, 2006). Furthermore, research suggests that the health benefits of participating in sport and physical activity relate to both adults and children, although there is some negative evidence that participation in some sports can lead to an increased risk of sports injuries for children (e.g. Grimmer et al., 1999).

There is evidence in the literature that participation in sport can generate other social impacts. In relation to sport and educational attainment, proponents argue that participation in school sports can lead to a range of positive outcomes, including reduced absenteeism, a stronger commitment to school and improved discipline (e.g. Keays & Allison, 1995), which ultimately leads to higher educational performance. Moreover, Cox (2012) highlights a range of recent literature that suggests there is a positive relationship between physical activity and academic attainment. Coalter (2007) suggests that there are various methodological issues with this evidence, arguing that it is difficult to prove positive cause and effect relations, or an understanding of the mechanisms involved, resulting in research with mixed and inconsistent results. While

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