

AN EVALUATION OF THE PILOT COMMUNITY SPORT PROGRAMME IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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INTRODUCTION

The long term focus of the pilot Community Sport Programme (CSP) is on improving health and helping those with long term health problems or a disability to have an improved quality of life. It aims to connect with the broader government outcomes of crime reduction and encouraging active citizenship. The establishment of the CSP aimed to begin addressing these key issues and to set targets for increasing sustained participation and building the structures to support this long term objective. This paper reports the findings of a programme of evaluation conducted on the CSP from February 2006 to June 2006. The overall aim of the evaluation was to review the impact of the pilot CSP on individuals, communities and partners. The central theme of this paper is a comparison between ‘what was supposed to happen’ and ‘what did happen’.

METHODS

The research was an independent evaluation of the CSP commissioned by SCNI and conducted the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University. The methodology utilised within this evaluation has been designed to measure the progress of the CSP against key objectives and to assess the current status against the project’s predetermined outcomes. The key investigative techniques employed included a comprehensive programme of desk research enabling methodical analysis of all existing information relating to the CSP, two stakeholder focus groups to identify key themes for further investigation, and 28 in-depth stakeholder interviews to identify critical success factors and areas for potential improvement in the future. In addition to this, two case studies were produced to illustrate good practice and suggest critical success factors.

RESULTS

On average, the original CSP objectives were scaled down by a factor of ten for the pilot programme. These scaled down objectives remain extremely ambitious for a project with a funding budget of £600,000 and a three year timescale, which was designed to operate in areas of high social deprivation and was aimed at traditionally hard to reach groups. Analysis of the 28 stakeholder interviews identified 20 key ‘learning opportunities’ which contribute to a system of good practice that can be considered in relation to community development initiatives of this nature - the key points of which are listed below.

Establish baseline data

Clear, realistic and achievable objectives

Finding the right approach

Increasing the duration of funding

Effective ‘bolt in’ monitoring and evaluation

Community focused approach

CSDO /capacity

An holistic / integrated approach

Adequate guidance and direction

In essence the CSP focused on the development of communities through sport, rather than the development of sport in communities. This emphasis generated the requirement for CSDO's to have a wider focus, potentially redefining what is understood by traditional sports development and instigating an holistic approach to community development.

Case-studies

The case studies identified a range of critical success factors in relation to projects of this type which serve as a guide to good practice. Key recommendations are as follows:

A familiar face

Focused work, maintaining a narrow remit

More than a job

Not just physical activity

A proactive approach

Strong partnerships

DISCUSSION

The research highlighted challenges involved in the development and delivery of the pilot CSP at a strategic level, and identified the common characteristics of successful projects, in terms of both 'sporting outcomes' and 'societal outcomes'. With reference to sporting outcomes, the stakeholder interviews and case study analysis identified substantial efforts to eradicate barriers to participation, and also demonstrated considerable evidence of innovative approaches to community development work. Several interventions had succeeded in developing a 'joined up' approach between schools, community initiatives (i.e. health, nutrition, alcohol and drugs awareness) and the CSP. Due to the abstract nature of some societal outcomes it can be extremely difficult to operationalise and measure the impact of the CSP against these objectives, however the range of qualitative methods was instrumental in identifying the wide reaching impacts of the CSPs. The diverse nature of the CSPs and the differences in demographic factors, existing infrastructure, capacity to deliver, personnel and management structures within each CSP area, highlighted the need for bespoke planning and delivery rather than a standardised approach. There was agreement amongst the stakeholders that community development work needs to be conducted over a greater period of time than two years (the average length of CSDOs posts). Therefore longer planning horizons are essential. There is a requirement to set focused targets to be achieved within a feasible timescale, which take into account the existing baseline measures, infrastructure and the capacity for delivery. A 'true' baseline measure must be available to enable the assessment of any programme outcomes. It was recommended that CSDOs should work within a narrow remit, concentrating their efforts on small and specific target groups. It was acknowledged that one person with a limited budget cannot achieve everything and reach every individual, and that by trying to do too much it is easy for people to lose focus and achieve very little. A further consideration is that targets should be prioritised. In the pilot CSPs there was an implicit assumption that all targets were of equal merit.

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