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**Closing the gap – increasing participation in sport and active recreation for young people at risk of social exclusion**

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There is clear evidence that indicates that regular participation in physical activity can reduce levels of poor health, crime and improve educational attainment and social inclusion (1). However, as Sport England (2) state, such improvements are dependent on sport providers creating opportunities for regular, high quality provision within local communities. Stoke-on-Trent is in the bottom 20% of the most deprived areas in the UK with high levels of obesity, poor health and unemployment. Sport and physical activity participation rates in Stoke-On-Trent are amongst the lowest in the country. Currently 85% of Stoke-On-Trent's population is not doing the recommended level of sport and activity, which places Stoke-On-Trent in the bottom quarter nationally (3). Tackling the issue of low participation levels in the city is a priority and targets are set to achieve a 30% increase of people undertaking at least 30 minutes of physical activity of at least moderate intensity on three or more days per week by 2012 (4). This objective primarily falls on local authority and bodies of sport to deliver interventions for the benefit of socially excluded people.

Closing the Gap (CtG) is a Lottery funded project aimed at ensuring young people at risk of social exclusion, who are resident in Stoke-on-Trent, experience the same opportunity to take part as other young people in the city. It is expected that levels of participation amongst socially excluded young people are to be lower than the general population; however there are no exact studies confirming this theory and no data exist to this effect. The project works in partnership with local organisations engaged with socially excluded young people up to the age of 25 to build and catalyse organisational change as a method of increasing opportunities for participation. Sustainability is fundamental to the programme, ensuring that physical activity interventions are adopted by the partner as a means of achieving their own organisational objectives and improving the lives of targeted young people.

Initial research undertaken by CtG showed low levels of participation by young people at risk of exclusion prior to the intervention. This research focuses on evaluating the work carried out by CtG staff with a variety of community groups catering for these young people in Stoke-on-Trent, including Children Centre's, organisations working with excluded and disengaged young people, young carers and those in residential social care, an adult disability group and a mental health charity(5). The aim was to increase participation opportunities for young people by facilitating staff to make use of sport to meet the needs of their clients. The findings identified many barriers to participation faced by these young people and the staff and volunteers working there. In

addition to cost and availability of their chosen activities, most of the respondents highlighted the low levels of confidence felt by young people with regards to sport and physical activity. Staff and volunteers also discussed this issue, together with the need to provide local activities and enable the young people to exercise together, in order to reduce isolation and the fear of attending somewhere new alone. The responses from staff, volunteers, young people and management informed the development of a bespoke action plan for the introduction of physical activity at each of the partner organisations. The action plans involved several different types of intervention, including training for staff and volunteers to lead physical exercise activities themselves. In addition the setting up of sport and physical activity sessions was facilitated, equipment ordered, support provided for bids to grant agencies and sports policy documents written to maintain good practice. After a period of intervention by Closing the Gap, research was repeated to evaluate the success of each individual project and this report evaluates the project in its entirety.

As CtG takes place across numerous contexts, each set of data and action points produced is context specific. This has enabled CtG to be analysed both on a discrete level and also on a broad holistic one. Context, mechanism and outcome (CMO) is used to facilitate this process (6). Each context produced its own action points which translated into specific mechanisms for delivery. The success of CtG can be measured on both the local and holistic level by measuring the outcomes which each of the mechanisms produced. Measurement is achieved through periodic repetition of the above methods to assess the level of change taking place within the two core groups, organisations and young people.

By analyzing the evidence from across the projects included in this work, it is apparent that CtG was able to facilitate cultural change towards the way sport and physical activity is both viewed and utilised within a number of the organisations. Where the host organisation's staffs were supportive and enthusiastic partners this enabled the successful establishment of sporting activities and increased participation levels. However, where staff turnover was very high, communication between CtG and the host organisation was poor or resources were restricted unexpectedly, success was far lower.