

Delivering great projects: what we've learned from evaluation

This top-level summary from 2021 presents what we've learned about how to deliver effective physical activity projects, drawn from evaluation of our major programmes and partnerships over 2017-20 (pre-Covid).

It relates to sport and physical activity initiatives that are based around delivering an activity or service to a target audience, but what we learned may be applicable to other sectors and ways of working too.

We've grouped the learning into five sections. The first four relate to stages of delivery. The fifth is about the role of the funder.

For further info or to look deeper into this learning, email tim.fitches@sportengland.org.

1) Design and set up your project

In a nutshell: time, local knowledge and assets, involve your audience, effective partnerships, clear vision, supportive funder
--

- Plan in enough time to prepare and mobilise all elements of your project (staff recruitment and training, digital platforms, evaluation, partnership relationships, co-design etc) and pilot it if possible
- Engage with and involve the target audience in project design from the start. Tailor your approach to their needs / motivations / barriers / lifestyles / cultures etc
- Use local knowledge, and insight from your partners and funder, to understand your audience and where physical activity fits in their lives (if at all)
- Identify and use places, assets, ambassadors, partners etc, that are already known to your audience
- Use the project as a catalyst to build new partnerships and support existing campaigns
- Partners can offer expertise, advice, facilities, equipment, training, contacts etc (not just funding). Make sure they're informed about the project, it's vision, and the benefit to the audience. Agree clear roles and responsibilities across partners,
- Help partners raise their own profile, even as you work to raise yours
- Target senior decision-makers for quicker buy-in and fewer blockages

- Consider hosting staff within a key partner to benefit from contacts, networks and practical support
 - Speak regularly and openly with your funder throughout. Use them as a critical and collaborative friend, and for help and support e.g. to recommend partners, to agree evaluation objectives (including targets vs learning), and for help with marketing and promotion etc
 - Be willing to take risks and think differently.
-

2) Reach and recruit the target audience

In a nutshell: Go where the audience is, build trust, use right imagery and language, relatable staff and role models, personalise the benefits

- Get to know your target audience. Build trust and rapport and find out the best ways (and channels) to communicate with them
- Explicitly address your audience's barriers in your messaging. E.g. if they worry that activity 'isn't for them', use real case studies and messages from relatable ambassadors or existing participants to reassure them
- Understand and promote the things that will drive your audience to participate – which may *not* be 'getting active'. Show what's in it for them: learn new skills, explore local nature/history, meet new people, improve sleep or mood, maintain independence etc
- Personalise the benefits of physical activity to the audience. Demonstrate how it can help them and fit into their life, and dispel any myths (e.g. that it's bad for people with LTCs)
- Go where your audience is – use existing networks, groups and referral partners to reach and recruit them. Use places and locations that are visible, accessible and familiar
- Events and taster sessions can showcase what the project offers to potential participants and partners
- Be creative and persistent (but not pushy) with recruitment
- Use multiple channels to communicate about your project. Word-of-mouth takes time but can be highly effective. Social media is cheap and targeted but not everyone has access and it can be hard to convert interest to engagement
- Use appropriate imagery and language. Take care with 'sporty' language and other divisive terms which can appeal to some but alienate others

- Recruit and deploy staff who can identify and empathise with your target audience
 - Watching friends or family members taking part can inspire others to do so
 - It is never as simple as 'provide [or build] it and they will come' – audience engagement, support, and quality provision (including facility, staff, equipment etc) are crucial
-

3) Provide a good experience

In a nutshell: supportive and sociable, build confidence, stay in touch, the right activity, the whole experience, friendly staff, partner support, learn and improve

- Participants may need extra support at the start to increase their confidence, or to discuss their personal goals or expectations.
- Satisfaction and enjoyment are key to retaining people, but may require different approaches. Some will look for fun and escapism, others for a safe and familiar experience. So too, already-active people and inactive people may enjoy different things. Design yours accordingly
- Consider what the full experience looks and feels like for participants (the customer journey)
- Involve people in developing the types and formats of activities you provide. Give them a voice, and use their feedback throughout
- Build in a social element to help coaches and participants get to know each other
- Think through the practicalities: location, travelling to sessions, venue access, signage, toilets, changing areas, refreshments, equipment and storage etc
- Keep in touch with people to keep them interested, remind them of sessions and enquire into absences
- Offering sport and activity as part of a holistic package (e.g. wider health) can increase success
- Use coaches / leaders who can support and understand the 'whole person', who can empathise and build rapport, not just deliver activity
- Invest in staff training, especially for front-line staff who interact with participants regularly
- Share service provision (facilities, equipment etc) with partners to reduce overheads
- Manage partnerships throughout to ensure they are delivering on commitments

- Share project news, updates and evaluation findings with participants and partners
- Ensure evaluation methods are suitable, inclusive and framed positively (not offputting)
- Adapt, change, and learn from evaluation and feedback to improve project design and delivery.

4) Sustain and continue your service

In a nutshell: plan ahead, talk with partners and funders, involve participants, share success, strong networks

- Think about sustainability from the very start
- Talk to partners and your funder *early on* about realistic end-of-project plans and how they can help you, such as through links to post-project services or extra funding to develop sustainability models
- Set evaluation goals early on, including evidence that can help secure your project's future. Speak to internal leaders or future funders, invite them to see the project in action and understand what evidence they need to support it in the future, to inform your data collection methods
- Involve participants in planning and discussing the future of the project and what might happen, including post-project opportunities for them
- Give participants opportunities to help with / give back to (even take ownership of) the project, e.g. through volunteering or support
- Buddying, handholding and mentoring can help pre- and post-project to engage people and support them as they move on
- Consider how your content can remain fun and engaging to participants, and how you can support or signpost them as they get fitter, learn new skills, want to try new activities or want to move on
- Talk about and share project success to encourage continued participation and partnership support and to attract further funding
- Strong social connections and networks built through projects could help generate more sustainable change
- Mitigate for staff absence or turnover, for example by writing delivery manuals or by training up additional staff, to ensure project delivery and success is not dependent on a select few

5) How the funder can support these projects

In a nutshell: trust, flexibility, support, connections, learning, clear expectations, simple processes
--

We learned that we can support projects more effectively as a funder if we:

- are more collaborative, open and trusting
- encourage projects to talk about and learn from success and failure alike
- allow more flexibility with funding
- help projects with promotion and marketing (e.g. social media or use of assets)
- provide audience insight and other specialist research, e.g. segmentation
- recommend known partners that could help you
- allow more time for project set-up
- support projects with commissioning and conducting research and evaluation
- discuss and agree clear expectations early on, such as for evaluation or sustainability
- help projects connect with and learn from other projects, such as through workshops
- simplify our processes, forms and ways of working, including communication and data collection