



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Sport Unlimited was a three year (2008-11) £36 million programme of Sport England funded projects to encourage semi-sporty young people to engage in, be retained in and sustain more sports participation. It was an important element of the PE and Sport Strategy for Young People, part of the 2012 Olympics legacy objectives: "The DCMS will deliver a successful and inspirational Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012 that provide for a sustainable legacy and get more children and young people taking part in high quality PE and sport". The programme implemented precise plans generated by County Sports Partnerships (CSPs). Their major role was to undertake a planning and implementation process and identify providers that could offer high quality and sustainable activities for young people in 8-10 week blocks. In essence Sport England funded CSPs to manage the programme in their county areas who in turn funded local deliverers to implement sporting activities for young people.
2. The aims of the evaluation of Sport Unlimited included:
  - To support County Sports Partnerships (CSPs) with advice and guidance on core KPI data collection.
  - To support CSPs with advice, guidance and tools to evaluate projects at local levels.
  - To share good practice and learning on a regular basis to support the development and delivery of Sport Unlimited, including the production of case studies, bulletins and reports.
  - To identify and report on the impacts of Sport Unlimited.
  - To make recommendations to inform future delivery and the ongoing evaluation.

### Key Performance Indicators

3. Sport Unlimited was set an ambitious target to retain 900,000 young people in sporting activity by the end of March 2011. The programme attracted nearly 1.2 million young people and retained nearly 82% of these in activity - exceeding its retain target by 60,938 young people. Participants were deemed to have been retained if they attended 60% or more of an 8-10 week block of sessions. This overall success was equally apparent for males and females and for different year groups - 36% of the 960,938 young people retained in activity were from

years 1 to 6, 53% from years 7 to 11 and 10% aged 16 to 19. The numbers of young people retained in activity by the programme increased year on year.

4. The programme did not exclude either non sporty young people (defined as those young people doing less than one hour of activity per week) or sporty young people (those doing sport on 3 or more hours per week outside of any curriculum activity), but was aimed specifically at semi-sporty young people (doing sport between 1-2 hours per week outside the curriculum). Overall, of the young people who reported their previous level of sporting activity, 62% of those retained in activity were semi sporty and a further 9% were non sporty. This compares favourably with the sporting landscape of young people overall, whereby 30% are classified as 'sporty', 50% as 'semi sporty' and 20% as 'non sporty'.
5. Of the young people who stated their ethnic origin, 82% of participants engaged in the programme were of white origin and 18% were from other ethnic backgrounds - the latter having slightly lower retention rates. 7.2% of young people registered on the Sport Unlimited programme were disabled and their retention rate was lower than the non-disabled young people.
6. The programme also had a target of sustaining 300,000 young people in activity - i.e. continuing to participate in activity once their Sport Unlimited sessions came to an end, either by joining a club or participating in informal environments. Several elements of the evaluation suggest that this target was achieved:
  - Over 85% of all participants completing exit postcards intended to continue participating.
  - The initial online polls to 'track' sustainability show that over 50% of those surveyed were taking part in more activity (than prior to their involvement in Sport Unlimited) and over 45% joined a club in the 3 months after completing Sport Unlimited taster sessions.
  - According to a survey of programme deliverers, the overall Sport Unlimited target for sustaining participation (33% of participants) was almost achieved by transition to club membership alone - as this survey indicated that 29% of participants were joining clubs after their initial sessions.
  - Triangulation of the data from programme deliverers (the supply side), along with the data from the exit postcards and participant tracking, provides evidence that Sport Unlimited did generate sustained participation.

## Critical success factors

7. Five critical success factors were identified before and during the programme. These were joined up delivery; student voice; activities framework; signposting; and sustainability. Regarding joined up delivery, from the start of the programme CSPs both reinforced existing partnerships and developed new partnerships, including organisations both from traditional sports delivery backgrounds as well as organisations whose primary activity is working in the youth and health sectors. In a large number of cases new partnerships provided the impetus for match funding of programmes.
8. Regarding student voice, all CSPs were originally required to undertake some form of consultation as part of their planning of delivery. Throughout Sport Unlimited, CSPs committed to ensuring that young people in their regions were consulted with and listened to. This consultation not only helped to engage young people in activity but also helped to retain young people, as they were taking part in activities that they had expressed an interest in doing. Survey evidence suggests that student preferences varied considerably by gender and by age.
9. Regarding the activities framework, the purpose of the eight-ten week taster sessions was for young people to sample a broad range of activities. The programme helped to facilitate the creation of new sports and activities and adaptations of traditional sports, designed to appeal to semi-sporty young people and those who are deterred from participating by the nature of traditional sports delivery. Successful variations in activity choice included urban activities e.g. parkour; dance and cheerleading; fitness based activities; NGB / deliverers' modified versions of sports; outdoor adventure activities and innovative activities for disabled young people.
10. Regarding signposting, CSPs and deliverers demonstrated over the three years that they ensured sound exit routes were in place and worked hard to develop strong links with established clubs and academies. These links meant that young people could develop skills and continue participation in their desired sport with an easy transition from Sport Unlimited sessions to a club environment. Marketing techniques, external coaches and taster sessions were the backbones to the successful implementation of signposting and exit routes.

11. Regarding sustainability, there are many success stories of young people carrying on with the activity once their Sport Unlimited sessions came to an end as participants. Components that helped to ensure that a project leaves a sustainable legacy include partnership working; capacity building through the purchase and transferral of equipment to clubs / exit routes; incentives to join clubs, continue participation, and train as junior leaders and volunteers; and careful planning of the transition from the school/project to the club setting.

#### The views of CSPs and Sport England officers

12. Overall, the tone of the responses from the CSPs to Sport Unlimited was extremely positive. All 46 CSPs that responded identified strong partnerships as a key element of what went well and this has consistently been highlighted as a beacon of good practice throughout the programme. Many CSPs also pointed out the importance of the broad range of activities offered and the funding of Sport Unlimited, which allowed more freedom to allocate resources based on local knowledge and local networks. CSPs were happy with the support they received from Sport England according to the responses received to the CSP online proforma.
13. A number of features were identified by the Sport England officers as successes of the programme. These include the volume of young people engaged and retained in activity; continuous improvement in achieving targets throughout the three years of the programme; the attraction of semi-sporty young people to sports programmes; and the even balance of participation of both males and females.
14. Several reasons were suggested by Sport England officers for the successful outcomes of the programme. These key elements in the process of programme management and delivery included partnerships, particularly new partnerships for sports organisations; responding to what young people want, having consulted with them; the wide range of sports on offer; the setting of ambitious targets for the programme; a consistent national framework for the programme, with clear objectives and progress monitoring; local flexibility which enabled sports development professionals to organise delivery in the ways they felt were best to meet local needs and priorities; and valuable qualitative and quantitative evaluation outputs which both incentivised local projects and offered best practice exemplars to CSPs.

15. The main recommendations from CSPs for future programmes are for greater flexibility, more time allocated for consultation and planning programmes, and easier reporting of the KPI data. For Sport England officers, the main lessons for future programmes, derived from the successes and challenges of Sport Unlimited, are:
- ensure clarity in programme objectives and priorities, including sustainability, at the outset;
  - more set up time and wider and more inclusive planning with CSPs at the onset
  - have a lead officer nationally plus regional link officers, to facilitate effective communications;
  - encourage a wide range of sports and adapted sports in programmes of this nature;
  - emphasise exit routes for participants and incentivise these for participants and clubs;
  - continue to invest in promoting sports with young people.
16. The in-depth programme evaluation was viewed to benefit both CSPs (through sharing learning, case studies and data) and Sport England. Additionally, the evaluation enabled Sport England to inform the design of future programmes (such as Sportivate) and demonstrate to a new Government just how successful Sport Unlimited was and why it was important to continue publicly funded interventions of this nature.

### **Conclusions and implications**

17. There is no doubt that Sport Unlimited was a successful programme, exceeding ambitious targets for retention of young people in the blocks of sessions and laying the foundations for sustained increases in participation.
18. Government intervention was the key catalyst for the increased participation - funding enabled a range of providers to supply relevant subsidised opportunities; Sport England and CSPs successfully managed the distribution of funding to deliverers; a range of partnerships were established to deliver activities to specific groups of young people; and a wide range of activities were promoted.

19. Sport England have learned important lessons from Sport Unlimited, particularly, if timescales allow, the desirability for an appropriate gestation period for the planning and development of activities; and also the need to evaluate carefully the sustainability of increased participation resulting from such interventions.
20. The accelerating effectiveness and efficiency of Sport Unlimited during its three year life raises an important question about the optimum time period for such interventions. In this particular case it could be argued that three years was too short and that learning from the national network could only be fed back and absorbed from about half way through a programme of this length.
21. Several processes contributed to the success of Sport Unlimited, including Sport England's identification of and support for CSPs who were initially performing below targets, the 'action learning' value of the evaluation evidence, and above all the ownership of and commitment to the programme shown by CSPs.
22. An important principle employed in evaluating Sport Unlimited was to give CSPs choice over which methods they preferred to evaluate their projects and demonstrate their successes. This choice gave CSPs and providers more ownership of the evaluation process.

### Testimonials from the Sport Unlimited programme.

Thanks to the project I have gotten back into sport, become significantly fitter and started biking everywhere, including to and from school ... I didn't used to enjoy PE lessons too much in school, but now I have really got back into it  
**Participant**

To get 50 kids on a field who really haven't accessed much sport in the past is just fantastic. They are buzzing, they absolutely can't wait until next week's session.  
**Multi Sport Project Officer**

We have been able to lever in support from schools, NGBs and clubs to enable these children to carry on their sports once their Sport Unlimited experience has finished. It's grassroots development at its very best. We are really grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of the Sport Unlimited programme.  
**Community Development Manager**

My sailing experience was one of the best things I've done in my life. I enjoyed every minute.  
**Participant**

We have never seen (our son) so enthusiastic - thank you very much for showing him that there is more to life than his Playstation.  
**Parent**