

# A healthy example

*A health project in Blackburn has seen more than 3,000 people take up physical activity*

BY PHILIP WOODWARD

A new sport and physical activity project, based in Blackburn, has been heralded as a major force for good in the community, gaining both national and regional accolades.

Focused on the SRB5 postcode area of Blackburn, the project has five target wards, all with a high percentage of socio-economic deprivation, high unemployment, worrying health indicators and low levels of physical activity. However, sport and physical activity are at last starting to be recognised in the borough as an important route – in partnership with other services – to the key corporate aims. These are: increased local opportunities for local people; improved quality of life in the borough; better access to health opportunities; and improved cultural harmony.

## The Sport and Health Project

The Sport and Health Project was established to increase levels of sustainable physical activity by addressing the barriers which prevent people from participating and to help remedy failures in provision. The key aims were:

- To improve the opportunities for local people to access sport and leisure;
- To provide a forum so the local community can determine the development of sport and physical activity opportunity in the area;
- To break down barriers to participation;
- To enable local people to develop and gain new skills in sport and physical activity;
- To increase physical activity participation by adults and children in the area; and
- To increase the knowledge and understanding of the benefits of sport and physical activity.

An outreach officer was appointed, whose key task was to identify and break down the barriers in order to increase levels of sport and physical activity. This post was seen as invaluable different from current provision; it was neither medical nor sporting performance-based and was there to facilitate desire. Participation was for enjoyment.

The project's philosophy and approach to increasing levels of physical activity within the community had to be as diverse as the people within that community. We had to understand the motivational influences required to activate and engage different people. Moreover, the project's deciding factor would be its ability to explore and reflect the key requirements of the community.



Although the project was activity-based, the health effects and subsequent social impact of low levels of physical activity on individuals are well documented. Therefore, the project can directly be seen to have an important role in the drive to address these inequalities.

## Project outcomes and benefits

The dedicated outreach post working within the community has proven to be very effective at reaching difficult to contact groups, and has been extremely successful in engaging participation. For the first time in years, the borough was in a position to provide opportunities that local people were interested in, rather than simply delivering a programme of activities for those people, outside the immediate area, who could afford to pay.

The project has been 'needs-led', with the desires of the community setting out the initiatives and activities. Many of those participants now take a proactive role in the

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running of these sessions, with several having attained coaching qualifications.

The outputs of the project in such a short timescale have exceeded all target predictions and expectations, increasing the participation of the community in physical activity and sport significantly (see Table 1).

The Sport and Health Project has provided, enabled and worked in partnership with 63 wide-ranging new opportunities for the local community to participate in (see Table 2). All sessions were approached with the following principles:

- Be responsive to and reflective of community requirements;

**Table 1: Output – June 2001-April 2003**

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| Jobs created                                | 1       |
| Local residents benefiting from the project | 3,275   |
| Attendances                                 | 10,000+ |
| People gaining qualifications               | 30      |
| Individuals involved in voluntary work      | 25      |
| New opportunities                           | 63      |
| Partners                                    | 29      |

**Table 2: New Opportunities**

|  |
|--|
| Junior Sports Leader's course                  |
| Jump Start x 16 (8 schools/8 after-school)     |
| Nifty Fifties                                  |
| Junior Gym                                     |
| Fit for Owt x 13 (2 qualifications/11 classes) |
| Tai Chi Community Sports Days x 3              |
| Girls' Football                                |
| Saturday Fun Club                              |
| Social Badminton                               |
| P+T swimming                                   |
| Kickboxing                                     |
| Passport 2 Fitness                             |
| West End Kurling                               |
| Shadsworth Physical Activity Group             |
| Whitebirk Physical Activity Group              |
| Sportzactive                                   |
| Shadsworth Social Swim                         |
| Pool Playscheme                                |
| Adult Supervised Gym                           |
| Super Summer Swimmers                          |
| Barnardo's Family Fun Day                      |
| Shadsworth Juniors Badminton                   |
| QP High Badminton                              |
| BRFC/QP anti-racism football project           |
| Playschemes                                    |
| Water Polo                                     |
| NC Gym Club                                    |
| Sunday Junior Badminton                        |
| Children In Need Weekend                       |
| Top Tots                                       |
| Men-only Swimming                              |



### 'When establishing new opportunities, it was essential to appreciate barriers to participation'

- Have a developmental/capacity building approach;
- Increase community partnership and inter-agency work; and
- Be fun and enjoyable.

When establishing new opportunities, it was essential to appreciate barriers to participation. Moreover, it was important to understand and overcome these barriers in order for local people to feel at ease and enjoy the activity in which they are partaking. Put simply, the main barriers encountered were lifestyle, price, awareness and opportunity.

Local 'physical activity groups' were set up, involving local workers and agencies, such as

community development, school sport co-ordinators, primary care trust, Barnardo's, Groundwork, sport development, and health and fitness development. Physical activity in this format provides an excellent focus from which to address broader health and social issues, especially when delivered in partnership with other agencies. The project has worked with 29 different partners (see Table 3).

The community reacted positively to activities and events, with more than 3,200 participants in just 18 months. This represented a 600 per cent increase on the project's initial targets, and involved more than eight per cent of the target population. It put us well on the way to the 10 per cent required to meet the Government's 'invest to save' target, which it is estimated will save the Government £2bn. While this was no easy task, overcoming barriers to participation and local problems took commitment, enthusiasm and a positive outlook.

The project has made great effort to encourage and support partners and members of the community to improve their skill and competencies by attending relevant training courses and obtaining qualifications. Altogether 46 courses and qualifications were undertaken, each of which aided the capacity building within the community.

Additionally, the project aimed to make better use of public facilities. One dual-use site in Blackburn was criticised by a Community Health Needs audit report in 2001 which damningly stated that 'the centre did not meet the needs of local people'. But within the first six months of the Sport and Health Project, there were 32 new opportunities attracting 5,820 new attendances directly from the local community.

#### Conclusion

The Sport and Health Project has no over-analysed and all-exclusive targets. It operates with only one member of staff. It is there to 'increase levels in sport and physical activity' and 'to encourage a mass participation culture' to deliver health benefits (Game Plan, 2002). It has the



**Table 3: Partners**

|                                      |
|--------------------------------------|
| Shadsworth Neighbourhood Association |
| Community Development                |
| Barnardo's                           |
| SELF                                 |
| Blackburn with Darwen Foyer          |
| Age Concern                          |
| Groundwork                           |
| Connexions                           |
| Shad All-Stars                       |
| Beach Community Sports Club          |
| Sport Development                    |
| Eight primary schools                |
| Queen's Park High School             |
| School sport co-ordinators           |
| Active School                        |
| Recreation and Play Services         |
| Youthwork                            |
| The Prince's Trust                   |
| Shadsworth Leisure Centre            |
| Audley Leisure Centre                |
| Blackburn Rovers Football Club       |
| Road Safety Unit                     |

flexibility to be responsive to community demands.

To do so requires an understanding of what people want to do. Not developed through any single superior wisdom or experience, but by having a positive attitude which depicts that you do not have all the answers, there is no textbook answer and there are no stereotypes. You need to meet people and ask them what they want and then set yourself in action upon certain best practice principles.

It is about using a positive attitude to make members of the community the centre of attention. Why? Because they are!

## 'You need to meet people and ask them what they want and then set yourself in action upon certain best practice principles'

The project is funded through a health strand of SRB5 and operates on a total four-year budget of £108,000. The project continues to go from strength to strength, achieving greater successes than ever before, and has received accolades,



including the ISRM Significant Achievement Award and the North West Sports Board Best Local Authority Outreach Project.

It cannot be stressed enough that the support and teamwork of community workers and members has been a significant influence on the success of this project and all work done in the target areas. Additionally, we believe that the following key aspects helped ensure that this initiative produced results in such a short time :

- Initiatives focused on a small geographic area;
- Multi-agency network and real partnership working that provides a joined-up approach to local problems;

- Listening, learning and consulting;
- Being reflective of community demands;
- A positive approach, and;
- No formal audits and exclusive strategies - just getting on and doing it!

This project represents the very best in partnership working and is an example of best practice.

### Biography

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**Table 4: Evidence of need**

#### Shadsworth Community Regeneration Strategy

- High priority for quality recreation.
- Priority for more outreach workers, better communication on what's on offer already and an expansion of local schools (the leisure centre is a dual-use site).

#### Health needs assessment (PCT) initial comments

- Leisure centre is not accessible and not seen as part of the area.
- More play facilities and activities for young people needed.
- Lack of exercise is recognised as a problem area.

#### PAT 10 report (Social Exclusion Unit)

- Sport has a vital role in the development of social exclusion policies.

#### Health Education Authority and Sport England

- Investment in sport gives multiple returns: better health and education, facilities for young people, economic regeneration and improved job opportunities.

#### Government's Plan for Sport (DCMS and DfES)

- Role of sport and physical activity recognised in a wide range of agendas, e.g. crime and disorder, social and skills development.

Initial research was carried out before the pilot, through the community centre. This showed a demand for activities at the leisure centre, such as basketball, netball, football, and young children's and women's activities. Price was a possible barrier. Since then, more young people have been asked for their ideas, helping to develop some new sessions. The attendances have also shown that, given the right environment, and the personal contact (e.g. actually walking groups over from the estate), there is the local demand.

#### Active Communities Development

The project has developed important links within the borough council/Sport England Active Communities project, which looks at offering life chances to deprived/disadvantaged communities and contributes to the foundation for lifetime participation in sport and recreation, a key outcome for this project.