



Public Accounts Committee: Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity

Evidence from Spirit of 2012

September 2022

Spirit of 2012 was set up by the National Lottery Community Fund as the London 2012 Games Legacy funder. It aims to build sustainable social legacies from the inspiration of events, investing in projects that help people become more active, creative and connected.

Over the last eight years Spirit of 2012 has built up a strong evidence base about participation in sport and physical activity, and what works in supporting inactive people to become, and stay, active. Since 2013 Spirit has invested in projects that support those furthest away from physical activity to become and stay active, including the £7.5m, seven-year investment in Get Out Get Active, delivered by Activity Alliance and co-funded by Sport England and London Marathon Charitable Trust. The evidence in this submission is drawn from our own and others' research and learning from the projects across the UK we have funded.

More than just numbers – why evaluating impact and outcomes matters

Spirit welcomes the National Audit Office's (NAO) report recommendation that the biggest gains nationally to physical and mental health will be achieved by getting the least active, and those with the greatest barriers to participation, active in a series of small steps and for the long term. We have learnt through our investment that unattainable numeric targets do not work. Reaching and engaging the inactive is not a numbers game.

Participation can be a useful metric, but Spirit regards it as a starting point, not a strategic goal. We know that the legacy from major sporting events can deliver increases in participation. This can be achieved through a focus on people and change, and targeted and sustained investment. We also know that measuring legacy success in sport and physical activity participation through the inspiration of elite sports people is flawed.

Spirit's Get Out Get Active (GOGA) programme is an inclusive sport and physical activity programme which targets the very least active disabled and non-disabled people to take part in sport and physical activity together. Since 2015, the programme has been

delivered across the UK by Activity Alliance and their equivalent partners in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In 2019, Sport England and the London Marathon Charitable Trust joined us as funders of the programme.

GOGA is rooted in our research and insight which showed that there is no issue with supply, so there was no need for Spirit to direct investment into more interventions. Instead, the focus is on demand and reducing the barriers for the very least active to take part in existing sporting and physical activity infrastructure at a local level.

GOGA is on target to reach 40,000 people across the UK by 2023, with 7 in 10 participants in the programme being classified as physically inactive. Retention data shows that 2 out of 3 participants are sustaining their increased levels of physical activity during and after the programme. GOGA participants have told us they feel better, both physically and mentally, with increases in wellbeing and decreases in anxiety. **A social return on investment (SROI) analysis showed that GOGA was delivering an impressive £8.83 return on every £1 spent.**

Since 2014, Spirit has also been working with the Scottish Government to take forward the active legacy of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. This work has evolved from a focus on getting people to become and stay active, to using sport and physical activity to intentionally achieve positive change and change peoples' lives. In 2019, we also joined with **sport**scotland and The Robertson Trust to bring sporting and non-sporting organisations together to intentionally use sport and physical activity to change lives through a £1 million Changing Lives Fund managed by Spirit. The focus of the Fund was on individual and societal change, not increasing participation or providing pathways to a particular sport.

The Fund involved more than 13,000 people and demonstrated a positive impact and outcomes around strengthening communities, inclusion, health & wellbeing and skills as well as increasing levels of physical activity and participation in sport and physical activity.

A key finding from the independent evaluation of the Fund was that for real change to occur and healthy behaviours to embed and be sustained, the ideal approach involved smaller and more focused groups of people over a sustained period of time, rather than concentrating on targets around the number of people taking part in sport and physical activity. The full evaluation report can be found [here](#).

Spirit has taken a broad approach to participation which includes focusing on change and outcomes too. In order to bring about significant change and positive outcomes we invest in sustained, regular, in-depth activity and interventions. We want inactive people to not only become active but to stay active in the long term and, crucially, to influence people around them to become active. We recognise they are on a journey of small steps and the road to becoming active is not straight and can also be quite bumpy. These activities and interventions tend to be resource-intensive at a local project level, require additional funding, and often focus on smaller numbers of people. These

factors need be taken into account when considering both legacy and participation success and value for money.

The benefits of a people-led approach

The UK's population is now more physically inactive than at any time in history. Today, 14.5 million UK adults, nearly 28% of the UK population, are classed as physically inactive. Spirit has invested in a number of successful grassroots initiatives that have sustained impact in getting the least active to become more active, and stay active. What characterises this successful work is a strong focus on people and taking a person-centred approach which is tailored to individual differences and needs.

Inactive people are not one homogenous group. Spirit programmes such as GOGA and Changing Lives have at their core a focus on understanding the different barriers to participation as well as learning from the commonalities. But everyone is different, and some people may face a few or no barriers to being active, while others may face substantial hurdles.

Spirit's evidence demonstrates that it is essential that programmes supporting people to take part in sport and physical activity and become active adopt a person-centred approach, where individuals are placed at the centre of activities and interventions. They are involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of activities and interventions. We know that a one-size-fits-all or *'if you build it, they will come'* approach does not work. We know that engagement and recruitment can take time. We know that confidence is a significant issue for many people and is frequently cited as a barrier to participation. Just 36% of those who responded to a Spirit survey said that they *'would feel confident to turn up at a sports club or an exercise class by myself'*.

The causes of physical inactivity can be complex and varied. Motivation is also a key barrier, and our evidence suggests that meeting other people and having fun are just as important as getting fitter for people who are inactive. Our evidence suggests activities and interventions which build in social and fun elements are more likely to successfully recruit and retain inactive people.

Spirit has supported partners to build in social and fun elements by funding taster sessions which can engage and spark interest. This is particularly important for people who do not enjoy sport. Some 47% of people who responded to Spirit's survey stated they did not enjoy sport at school. This figure rose to 59% among women, and 53% who stated they were inactive. Taster sessions can help overcome negative memories of taking part in sport at school. Building in social time before and after an activity helps build friendships within a group, which in turn increases enjoyment and builds in peer-to-peer support and encouragement to take part and come back.

Taking a person-centred approach to participation in sport and physical activity which builds in social and fun elements are key success elements in the journey to becoming active for many inactive people. They have resource implications in terms of time and

costs. For many inactive people this active journey is a journey of small steps that needs to be realistic and appropriate to their level of fitness and needs. They will experience setbacks in their journey to becoming active and some people will need more intensive support than can be offered in large classes.

This means that it is usually more costly per head to fund programmes for the least active than to fund work that aims to increase overall levels of participation in sport and physical activity.

Giving providers the space and money to find out what works

Spirit encourages our funded partners to take a test-and-learn approach to their work. For programmes across our active portfolio this approach means working deeply in specific locations and with specific groups that are most likely to be excluded from taking part in sport and physical activity. By working this way, our programmes generate learning and insights that can be applied more widely to other inactive groups, such as home-schooled children in Wales, young trans people in Liverpool, older people in care homes in Greenock, and disadvantaged families in Derry. This helps us deepen our knowledge and understanding of barriers and how to overcome them, and share that with others.

Our funding is used to support this approach, and includes an independent evaluation of programmes so partners can capture their impact and learn about what works and what doesn't work. We consider these to be core costs, and expect to see evaluation and learning in programme budgets to enable partners to assess the success of their participatory programmes. We welcome the recommendation in the NAO report focusing on measuring success.

Spirit also recognises the need to upskill the sport and physical activity workforce so they can be confident in using learning and insight to change and improve their practice. Large-scale programmes such as GOGA and the Changing Lives Fund include investment in workforce development programmes so they can better engage the inactive and are empowered to focus on change and learning.

Step Change: working together towards an active society

Spirit's recent [Step Change report](#) distils the evidence from GOGA, together with other funded projects with the Scottish Government and recent polling, to consolidate Spirit's insight into [eight underpinning principles](#) for successfully engaging the least active in sustained physical activity. It also makes ten recommendations for more strategic change. At the heart of this is working in partnership, across government, locally and nationally. Some of the most powerful partnerships we have seen develop have been between sports and public health bodies.

Sport England's [Uniting the Movement strategy](#) is a very welcome step in approaching physical activity in a way that will help more people get and stay active, but as we set

out in *Step Change*, to make a real and lasting difference it needs wider commitment from across government, the voluntary and community, faith and education sectors.

Ten years on from the London 2012 Games there remains a significant opportunity to build the social legacy of major events to inspire people to be more active. But to really make the health and wellbeing change the nation needs, we need strong partnerships and targeted, intensive, person-centred work with the very least active, which intentionally uses sport and physical activity to achieve positive change as well as increased participation.