



**AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL APPROACHES TO
PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORTS IN
CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS**

SUMMARY REPORT

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A note from the authors

This study was commissioned in response to a need for more detailed information on the different approaches to physical activity and sport promotion in children and adolescents in countries of the WHO European region.

This summary report is based on the full length version, available from HEPA Europe and is deigned to summarise the important findings.

Foreword

Physical inactivity has become a major public health issue and there is growing concern particularly about the situation in children and adolescents. Many European countries have developed their approaches to tackling this problem and there is a wealth of experiences from these projects and programmes. However, publications usually only cover a small part of these experiences and scientific articles in English that are readily available through electronic databases are the exception.

As one of its objectives, HEPA Europe has to "develop, support, and disseminate effective strategies and multi-sectoral approaches in the promotion of health-enhancing physical activity". The project presented in this report has been very successful in doing so, by crossing language borders, by facilitating exchange between experts from all over Europe and by distilling the results to a readily accessible format.

I thank the British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group at the University of Oxford, I thank the physical activity promotion programmes and their representative and I also thank the organisations funding the analysis for this important step which will hopefully only the first one in an important endeavour.

Brian Martin, Chairman of HEPA Europe, November 2009

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Executive Summary

Analysis Background

This report is a response to the need for more detailed information about the different national approaches to promotion of physical activity and sport in children and adolescents in countries of the WHO (World Health Organisation) European region. We report the lessons, experiences and learning of six projects and how they may apply to future and existing initiatives in the form of 36 guidance points. The report is designed to realize the aims of the HEPA Children's workgroup and to be a useful resource for HEPA promoters and projects across Europe.

Following an audit of European approaches six projects were selected. They were drawn from culturally and geographically diverse regions and represent a wide range of approaches and settings.

Beweegkriebels	The Netherlands
Handshake with Sport	Sweden
Kampagne Kinderturnen	Germany
Move with Us	Spain
The Sports Adventure around the Globe	Finland
Youth and Sports	Switzerland

The investigation comprised mainly of qualitative analysis methods. The data were collected in three stages; (i) a self-completed questionnaire, (ii) a three day workshop hosted in Orebro, Sweden in March 2009 and (iii) follow up emails and telephone conversations. Participant projects nominated one or more project representatives to provide data and attend the workshop.

The study was also an attempt to identify and refine a viable method of investigating and documenting the HEPA (Health enhancing physical activity) promotion for children and adolescents that is taking place across Europe.

Results

Project planning and development; all projects reported that enough time should be allocated to project planning and development. Ideally, a pilot project with built in formative evaluation should be used to direct a full scale HEPA project.

Parents and teachers; both are crucial to the delivery and implementation of a HEPA project. They should be involved in the development of the project and considered an intermediate target audience as to reach children and adolescents it is often vital to reach, engage and motivate the parents and teachers.

The Event model; running a shorter 2-4 week event type project gives flexibility and the opportunity to tailor approaches to the different target audiences. This can be considered a way to generate media coverage and raise public awareness, to launch a new project or invigorate an existing one. The Event model has been cited as a possible way to evolve and adapt a large national project, targeting new sub-groups without losing the positive aspects.

Reaching the active; HEPA projects might be deemed to have failed if they only reach those who are already active. However, given the documented drop out rates and decline in physical activity in children and adolescents with age, continuing to reach the active should be considered a success. To complement this it may be that different and tailored approaches are needed to reach the inactive.

Drop out; it is possible that the drop out from sport observed in adolescents may be in part due to the pressures and commitments required from sports and sports clubs. Finding suitable alternative activities to competitive sport such as active travel and non-organised sports, and working with sports clubs to foster participation are possible solutions.

The Internet; the internet is emerging as an important tool for HEPA projects. It is a way of communicating with and supporting implementers such as teachers. It is also a medium familiar to many in the target audiences and may be a good way to reach and engage them.

Project Setting; The primary settings for HEPA projects are schools and sports clubs. Results from this analysis suggest that schools are a good setting to reach many targets and certain sub groups, but that there are competing pressures for time and resources in the classroom. Sports clubs may not reach so many targets but may have a greater effect with those they do reach due to the resources and quality of facilities on offer.

However, they may not have the expertise to work with obese children or those who are least physically adept.

Evaluation; HEPA projects are benefiting from evaluation findings. However, there is still room for improvement, especially with regard to early formative evaluation to guide and refine project design.

Next steps

We feel that the approach to HEPA project analysis used in this investigation can be considered both a success and a valuable contribution to the research evidence of studies exploring national approaches to promoting physical activity and sport in children and adolescents. Repeating this type of study in more HEPA projects will generate an invaluable resource, making accessible for the first time and in one place, the experiences and lessons learned by HEPA workers across Europe. It is likely that a comprehensive databank of European HEPA projects for children and adolescents would be key to the success of this.

This report recommends that future analysis projects should look to select projects from a more geographically diverse region, focusing on Eastern and Southern Europe. The contacts and networks of central HEPA network staff will be crucial. Maintaining the diversity of age ranges in selected projects is also important.

Principal Findings

The following section contains results for the principle research questions.

What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the different projects?

The six participant HEPA projects' strengths were many and varied. For a full table of self reported project strengths and weaknesses see **Appendix 1 - Strengths and Weaknesses**.

A strength demonstrated by the projects was their ability to work across multiple sectors with many different parties and stakeholders. Projects worked in partnership with government departments such as health and sport, in schools and sports clubs, with parents and teachers and in some cases with industry and private corporations. The ability of the projects to adapt successfully to these environments can be considered a key to their respective successes. This was often associated with good leadership and skilled project staff.

A common weakness acknowledged by the projects was the time allowed for planning and preparation and the knock on effects of this throughout the life of the project. Projects reported that given more time they could produce a better product by working with children, experts and implementers, such as teachers and instructors. The knock on effect most cited was realising too late they should have been monitoring the project from the start with built in evaluation. If projects are able to learn from this and adapt in the future then this supposed weakness can be considered an invaluable lesson.

The projects also commonly came to realise that they had sometimes lacked understanding of the target audience. There is a need for more tailoring of approaches to the needs of children and adolescents, based on research and behaviour change models. This is related to the need for improved evaluation, specifically evaluation that starts at the beginning of the project. This formative evaluation of pilots will lead to improved design and development and possibly better engagement of implementers such as teachers.

How successful are the different projects at reaching different sub-groups?

Some of the projects' own evaluations have shown that there is a tendency to continue not to reach inactive children and adolescents. Spain is the exception by targeting obese children and those with low self esteem. Most projects did not report specific action to target different sub-groups. This is in contrast to other findings that suggested a very high targeting of specific groups by HEPA projects (Kunze, 2008).

A common perceived weakness seemed to centre on a tendency to reach the same children and adolescents, the active, over and over again if a project uses sports clubs or even the concept of sport. Obese and inactive children may not have the ability or interest to take part and clubs may not have the resources and expertise to cater for them. The environment of sport, often emphasising commitment, performance and competition is probably not suitable for these sub groups.

Using schools may improve reach to these target groups; by recruiting teachers there is the opportunity to recruit their whole class, including children who would not normally take part. However, there are other challenges and pressures in the classroom to be considered.

It is important to remember that reaching those who are not in a sub-group is not a failure; keeping active children and particularly adolescents in physical activity and sport and working to prevent drop out is crucial. The findings suggest that further and perhaps tailored approaches are required for sub groups such as the inactive or obese. Success has been found in these groups by working to identify children with low self-esteem and acting to improve this personality trait.

Other important sub groups include those from low SES (socio economic status) and migration backgrounds. In boys from these groups football has been shown particularly successful illustrating that popular sports have a vital role and that for these subgroups tailored strategies for reaching them, rather than new interventions may be the way forward. Research is still needed to show what may work best for girls in these groups, with dance often suggested as having potential.

How good is the structural integration of the projects and to what extent can they be considered to have sustainable impact after the completion of the programme?

Structural integration of a HEPA project can take many varied forms. There is the Dutch project which is integrated into the curriculum and day care system; there is the Swiss project that has integrated into the sports clubs, government departments and the lives of the population; the Spanish project is well integrated with primary care and schools; the Finnish project is also well integrated with the school system there; the German project has successfully worked through and alongside the national gymnastics association; and finally the Swedish project is working to integrate schools and sports clubs for the long term.

The nature of the integration will impact on the way that the project can be considered to be sustainable. Any project that provides training and support will leave skills in the community, while any project that has a message will have raised awareness in the population for a period of time, the length of which is difficult to determine.

Likewise, any project successful in raising physical activity levels during its life will have an ongoing effect on fitness and health, though again how long this effect lasts after an intervention is a question that has been identified as requiring further investigation (NICE, 2009).

Was the project financed by government or industry and how did project experiences of this differ?

Having a legal base in policy can help to secure government funding, however, there will be restrictions and challenges associated with this. It is considered difficult working across departments, such as sport, health, transport and education. Further to this, working with government departments and implementers in the field at the same time and attempting to reconcile the fundamental differences between the two has been raised as a critical issue for HEPA projects. An important consideration will be the extent to which a project aims to be devolved and 'bottom up', or centralised and 'top down' and the effect this choice has on project implementers and intermediaries.

On the other hand, funding from industry and private corporations may give more freedom but will come with challenges of its own. In this case the objectives and mission statements of the funders and financiers may diverge markedly from those of the project.

Further, by taking funding from one company or corporation, you may rule out the possibility of working with partners who have arrangements with other rival companies.

What was the legal basis of the projects?

Five of the six projects reported that their legal basis was in government or federal law or policy, with obesity and physical activity strategies specified. The exception was one project that reported they were initiated by a national sports federation. Whether this is representative of HEPA projects across Europe is unclear, but previous work has shown high involvement of ministry and the political mandate in the instigation of projects (Kunze, 2008).

What is the ability of the different projects to contribute to physical activity promotion?

The different nature of the projects enabled them to contribute to physical activity promotion in different ways. Those projects working through schools attained good coverage and reach, while those using sports clubs achieved good effects. All projects reported that whenever they could successfully get children to take up physical activity and sports, attitudes and perceptions of these activities improved.

It is not possible to determine in this investigation whether overall physical activity has increased as a result of these projects. However, as previously discussed, it is important to consider other intermediate impacts such as knowledge generation, skills training, partnership and network forming and increasing the awareness and profile of the benefits of physical activity. These are all likely to benefit future work.

What is the ability of the different projects to prevent the drop in physical activity often observed in adolescents?

Drop out from physical activity and sport is a problem in adolescents, particularly girls (Currie et al., 2002), and it is possible that the projects were more successful at this aspect than they may have realised. A common theme amongst the participants was disappointment at only reaching children and adolescents already involved in sport. However, this is a legitimate and important target group and keeping this population in activity and sport should be considered a significant achievement. Every active child kept active is a success in the fight against increasing physical inactivity.

What lessons have been learned from these projects and how do these lessons apply to future and existing projects?

The projects have learned significant lessons surrounding planning and preparation time as well as developing an understanding of the target groups. All projects reported that enough time should be allocated for project planning and preparation and that they

would like to use their target groups in the development of future projects. It was felt that ideally, a pilot project should be used to direct planning of a full scale HEPA project and that early pilot work with built in formative evaluation would allow for a better end product.

All the projects agreed on the importance of both parents and teachers to the successful delivery and implementation of a HEPA project and this was a key learning point. The value of considering them as an intermediate target audience has become clear, as to reach children and adolescents it is often crucial to reach, engage and motivate the parents and teachers. Project learning included how to involve them, engage them, motivate them and support them as a successful element of HEPA project implementation. Engagement and communication with parents and teachers was also a common theme for the design and development of better projects and project materials.

The internet plays a crucial role in some projects, and its importance is only likely to increase. Children and young people use the internet in large numbers, and tend to find it familiar and engaging making the potential reach and impact very promising. It has also been successfully employed as a communication tool for reaching and supporting teachers.

As discussed, projects learned that all too often they reach the already active. This may suggest that new and tailored approaches to reaching and then engaging specific sub groups are required. What is being done is working to an extent and does not necessarily require dramatic alterations, as keeping active children active is an important goal. However, it may be time to accept that novel approaches to compliment existing work are needed to reach and work with particular sub groups. Research to identify and understand the target groups is vital for this.

The use of the whole year is an important learning point. While the benefits of short event style models have been discussed, seasonality is known to have an important effect on physical activity levels in children and adolescents (Riddoch et al., 2007) and therefore interventions during the winter should not be neglected. However, using an Event model by running a shorter 2-4 week event type project gives flexibility and the opportunity to tailor many approaches to the different target audiences. This can be considered a potential way to start a new project, or invigorate an existing project and the Event model has been cited as a possible way to evolve and adapt a large national project, targeting new sub-groups without making wholesale changes to existing work and losing the positive aspects.

The projects learned that they have to make plans for later on in their project life. Whether this is to do with sustainability, or a successful exit strategy so that the target groups do not just revert to their pre-intervention state, depends on the nature of the project and the approach. For this, specific goals should be defined with a flexible plan for what to do next e.g.

- We want to secure extended funding – consider objectives to align with policy and use the media to raise your profile
- We wish to identify new directions and change our ways of working – use formative evaluation to inform your strategies and pilot studies to test new ideas
- We wish to have a continued impact after completion – consider your education strategies for the target groups and the resources and skills that may be left in place where you have been working

Guidance Points

For new projects

Understanding and combining multiple factors of need may strengthen the case for your HEPA project (Guidance point 1).

A project that responds to and engages cultural and social needs may find support more easily (Guidance point 2).

Initially apply for a smaller grant to plan and pilot the study, before rolling it out full scale. This may be more likely to be approved, and come with less pressure to show instant results while also allow for learning and knowledge and skills generation within you team that will benefit the full scale roll-out of the project (Guidance point 3).

Communicate with government, understand the political schedule and align your project aims where possible. Think about the best time to make proposals and funding bids (Guidance point 5).

Understand the differences and challenges in gaining funding from either government or industry, and select according to your project needs and capabilities. Be able to make an appropriate and strong proposal (Guidance point 6).

When deciding on your project approach consider the relative reach and impact of school and sports club settings. Also, understand the possible competing interests and objectives of the two settings (Guidance point 11).

Involving target beneficiaries and implementers in designing and developing tools and resources may lead to better products that can engage and motivate participation in your project (Guidance point 19).

Involve the delivery groups (instructors and implementers) early and facilitate communication and their collaboration with project development. Understand their competing needs and the ways of supporting your project's instructors and implementers (Guidance point 24).

Use small teams early on to initiate larger networks, and always keep an open mind with respect to involving external partners and enlarging the team to manage increasing workload (Guidance point 27).

Understand the reasons for and potential outcomes of different forms of monitoring and evaluation and be prepared to plan these in from the very beginning (Guidance point 34).

For projects looking to change existing ways of working

Small pilot studies with built in formative evaluation and involving experts and the project implementers in design and development can benefit a HEPA project (Guidance point 4).

Assign money for the long term to allow for planned evaluation and for the recruitment of the best professionals (Guidance point 8).

Plan ahead for increasing capacity and ensure that the structure of your project is flexible enough to be able to add components in the event of success and further investment. This may require acceptance of adding personnel to the core team, of changing the ways of working to be appropriate to the increasing size of the target group or committing resources to the monitoring the number and standards of implementers and instructors (Guidance point 9).

Define your objectives well, and be prepared to be positive about continuing to reach active children and adolescents (Guidance point 12).

Be aware of all of your project outcomes such as skills training, experience gained and knowledge generation as these will benefit future projects and can be part of the funders' value for money (Guidance point 17).

Planning and implementing an exit strategy may be necessary for projects that take children out of their natural school or home environment (Guidance point 18).

Employ a strategy to make sure your project and message will be seen and heard above the competition (Guidance point 26).

Be aware of the internal and external perception of your project and the opportunities and risks associated (Guidance point 32).

Projects that see the need for change but feel too big or established to implement this could find greater flexibility from launching small pilot projects to target different audiences and sub groups in different ways. Formative evaluation may show what initiatives are worth expanding to the whole project (Guidance point 33).

Sell the value of evaluation to funders based on the knowledge generation and skills training of project workers and implementers, as well as the media exposure and positive perceptions evaluation results can generate. Involve implementers and teachers in ongoing project development using evaluation results (Guidance point 35).

If sustainability is an objective of a HEPA project be clear about the kind of sustainability that is desired and how this may be achieved. Ongoing communication with targets or implementers may be important (Guidance point 36).

General Principles for all projects

The collection and distribution of funds is very important to project intermediaries and should be well planned and executed (Guidance point 7).

Funding streams should be directed towards investigating the target groups and their behaviour. There is a need for the behavioural change models that this research can generate (Guidance point 10).

When working in sports clubs work hard to encourage participation and enjoyment in favour of performance and outcomes. When scheduling programmes consider the daily schedule and other commitments of children and adolescents (Guidance point 13).

Consider your implementers when deciding your delivery model. The more your project relies on volunteers, the more freedom you may want to give them (Guidance point 14).

Targeting all the domains of physical activity behaviour increases the potential for having a greater impact. Active travel and non-organised activities (i.e. play) are possible examples. Also, consider that physical activity is just one domain of a healthy lifestyle, and there are possibilities for partnerships with other sectors (Guidance point 15).

A short 2-4 week event with intensive media coverage and participation may be a good way to start a new project or inject life into an existing project. Incorporate engagement activities during the lead in (Guidance point 16).

When using a Mega Event alongside a HEPA project be aware of the raised profile and opportunities for government funding. However, also consider carefully the added burden of time pressure and the effect this may have on planning and preparation (Guidance point 20).

If working with sports clubs act to encourage buy in to your projects aim and objectives. Understand that the interests and objectives of sports clubs may differ to your own (Guidance point 21).

If working in schools remember to give consideration to how much school and classroom time your project can reasonably ask for (Guidance point 22).

The message of your HEPA project should be addressed to parents and teachers, with their role in the mechanism of delivery clearly defined (Guidance point 23).

Communication strategies can be key to securing and maintaining effective partnerships. Choose partnerships that will be mutually beneficial (Guidance point 25).

Have clear communication strategies for target groups, implementers, teachers, and involved partners, with an understanding of the best medium for each (Guidance point 28).

The popularity of the internet amongst children and adolescents makes it a key medium for communication and project delivery. Ensure your project has this capability and access to the necessary expertise (Guidance point 29).

Use the internet to communicate with and support teachers. Web based resources can be used to compliment other classroom activities (Guidance point 30).

To gain media exposure choose a message that will interest the big media partners (Guidance point 31).

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