Getting Rother Active (GRA):
Evaluating the impact of a three-year sport and physical activity programme

Summary findings of University of Brighton’s evaluation report, commissioned by Rother District Council (RDC)
This document summarises the findings of an evaluation report commissioned by Rother District Council (RDC) on behalf of the Active Rother Partnership, from the University of Brighton. The aim was to evaluate the impact of the ‘Getting Rother Active’ (GRA) project.

Promoting learning through the sharing of outcomes and work done to assess the impact of projects is one of the strategic aims of Active Rother Partnership. The intended audience for the report includes partners of the project, key agencies with remits for sport and/or physical activity in East Sussex and at regional and national levels and other interested parties. The full report is available at www.activerother.org.uk/projects/getting-rother-active/

The Getting Rother Active project

The GRA project was developed following a successful bid led by RDC to the Sport England Community Sport Activation Fund (CSAF). It started in 2014 and reflected the increasing attention being given in the UK to developing successful sport and physical activity programmes which could contribute to public health policy-making and implementation.

The main aims

The main aims within the Getting Rother Active project as agreed with Sport England were:

- To focus on and attract participants from the priority wards within Rother; Bexhill Sackville, Bexhill Central, Sidley, Eastern Rother and Rye.
- To target the inactive groups within Rother and encourage them into regular participation in physical activity and sport.
- To train and recruit volunteers to help support the programme sessions and ensure sustainability once the project has finished.

The project focused on targeting inactive individuals in the wards of Bexhill Sackville, Bexhill Central, Sidley, Eastern Rother and Rye. The following sports were identified for development and delivery:

- Walking into running
- Outdoor/Combat Fitness
- Ping Pong care for older people linking into Table Tennis

The project started in July 2014 and came to an end in June 2017.

The final project report to Sport England in July 2017 noted that it had progressed well against the aims and objectives set out in the bid, exceeding targets in terms of number of participants and throughput, these being the two data sets that Sport England required for monitoring purposes. For example, the three-year target for the number of participant visits to a session was 1531, whilst the actual number of recorded visits was 3100.

3100
The number of recorded participant visits

However, the GRA project also collected richer data to enable better understanding of the participants, where they came from and their activity status on joining the project.
From further monitoring undertaken the project has had, at all times, over a third of participants from the five priority wards and up to 80% in some reporting periods. In the last six months of the project 54% of participants were not meeting the physical activity guidelines before becoming involved and 21% of these were completely inactive.

Case study – A participant

I used to always go out walking but I didn’t do very much other than that. My daughter and I used to do the Race for Life, but we used to walk it. After one year she said to me that we should go a little bit faster and start running a little. And then she said maybe we ought to jog it one year. I saw [Coach’s name]’s class advertised and I thought that the next time it came around I thought I would try to join and do the jogging.

My daughter and I then turned up for the Race for Life this year and I ran - not all the way but in the way [Coach’s name] taught us and my daughter could not believe what was happening. I was running with her and we did it completely together which persuaded me to think I could carry on. And then I did the Parkrun in Hastings. And [Coach’s name] was there cheering me on. Now I just go out on my own and I feel okay about it. When I started if I saw anybody coming down the street I would come to a stop and walk as I felt so embarrassed but then I suppose after a while you just felt used to it. Being older I thought people would look at me and think “what the hell is she doing?”

Source – Respondent at Bexhill Focus Group November 2015

Up to 80% of participants from priority wards

The evaluation report findings and recommendations

1. People exercise because they like it. The findings from this evaluation are generally consistent with previous research. People who exercise regularly are doing so for the many physical and mental health benefits and they also enjoy it. But despite understanding of the benefits by those who never exercise, and the actual experience of the benefits by those who exercise sometimes but not often enough, there are significant barriers preventing people exercising as much as they should or, indeed, as much as they would like.

2. There’s not one simple answer to getting people exercising. The experiences of people participating in GRA reflect previous studies. It is unlikely that a ‘single-bullet’ solution to inactivity exists although certain approaches have enabled inactive people from priority wards to be active. Similarly, based upon existing research, it is difficult to identify a single factor which has led to increased activity amongst GRA participants and which holds the same weight for all groups or even for individuals within a specific group. The challenge for any individual is the need to change behaviour and move from being motivated to exercise to habitual physical activity.
3. **Sports clubs learnt the key messages of project.** Some of the clubs involved in GRA have taken on key messages and adapted their approaches. In particular the Bexhill running session has restructured beginners learning to include more personal support for the transition from being inactive through to running regularly.

4. **Don’t focus on health benefits, make it fun!** Whilst many participants were reminded by others, such as family members or a healthcare professional, that exercise would be highly beneficial, GRA has strongly suggested that the appropriate message is not to attempt to make people even more convinced of their health benefits or more confident about their ability to be active but rather to make exercise more enjoyable or at least less unpleasant.

5. **Make exercise welcoming.** One way to put people at ease is to have an ethos that welcomes people, particularly those who may have initial fears, as individuals, reflecting the emphasis in the Sport England strategy: *Towards an Active Nation*.

6. **Role models such as coaches are important.** The importance of role models, such as a coach, in creating a positive environment for participation cannot be underestimated. Environments which anticipate the social and psychological issues relating to having the confidence to participate regularly are crucial to increasing levels of physical activity in Rother in the future.

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**Case study – The running coach in Bexhill**

The coach who ran the beginners running courses in Bexhill started to make us realise something. She was the lead coach. I'd say she did five to six beginner groups across a year and a half. Each beginner group was scheduled for 10 weeks and the coach got people to start building up their running during that time. By the end of the 10 weeks they [the participants] followed the “Couch to 5K model” building up with a bit more running each week and by the end the majority of people who participated were doing a 5K run.

In terms of her role as the coach I think she was more of a coach who understood people and some coaches who I don’t work with any more were all about technique such as “Get your head up” or “Lengthen your stride”, whereas with her it was like “I just want you to feel out of breath. I just want you to feel like you’re moving a bit more or move your arms a bit quicker”. It was at a level where people could understand it. They were out of breath; they were a little bit hot. In their heads they were doing the running.

So, the coach became a friend and she went above and beyond her role, or what we thought would be her role initially, by offering that little bit more. So, if someone didn’t come to a session she would contact them and say “I’ve really missed you this week is everything okay? I hope to see you again next week.” That built up a rapport and the coach took that time to get to know everyone, and they would be there next week or at least they would contact her and say that running is not for me. She would always get that response whereas other coaches might not get that personal level of interaction and we might never know why they came back.

*Source – Respondent at Bexhill Focus Group November 2015*
7. **Overcoming over barriers can lead to further change.** Overcoming barriers set by an individual's conscious or unconscious behaviour is an important element of individual behavioural change. For many, participation in GRA was a catalyst for them to move forward into regular physical activity.

8. **Behavioural change led to a change of lifestyle.** It was evident that, for many participants, behavioural change was the catalyst for broader social and personal lifestyle changes, a factor which Sport England’s strategy has highlighted.

9. **Family support.** A particular impact was the extent to which the individual's family had noted behavioural change, illustrating the importance of wider support networks for changing the culture surrounding an individual's physical activity behaviour.

10. **Support from coaches.** The sessions at the running clubs have been successful because the coaches have helped to build confidence and self-efficacy amongst participants. Health and skill development have been important with an added emphasis on technique. The sessions have also been successful in inducing a sense of belonging, community and fostering the social relationships which have been formed.

11. **Informal spaces.** For people involved in outdoor activities such as running, informal local spaces, such as footpaths, are just as important as formalised facilities.

12. **Clubs need to support their volunteers.** The importance of supporting new volunteers is essential to sustaining activities in the future. It is critical for voluntary groups to know when further capacity might be needed. An important factor in increasing and sustaining participation, is ensuring not just that clubs have participants but that clubs have people who can help develop the participation of others.

13. **Good coaching is the future.** The emphasis for the future must be placed on recruiting and training high quality coaches and ensuring that coaches are positioned appropriately to respond to the needs of participants.

14. **The Active Rother Brand.** There is still work to do on raising awareness of Active Rother as a brand but there is acceptance by participants of the importance of the Active Rother brand as a ‘kite mark’ for programmes of activity. The local authority's role in coordinating the Active Rother Partnership will be critical for future developments.
15. **Collaboration.** Key features of partnership working were in evidence. Good and productive partnerships centre on the concept of mutual benefit, where collaborative work can facilitate the delivery of goals, benefits or added value, which could not have been provided by acting alone.

**Case study – Partnership: the key outcomes for Rother Voluntary Action**

The project enabled RVA to grow their presence in supporting sport and fitness groups. Examples include:

- There are now sustainable support options going forward as more groups have engaged with RVA's wider services and can receive governance support, funding support and training opportunities through RVA's core services.

- There is strong interest in increasing opportunities for physical activity for people with long term health conditions coming from local self-help groups.

- A number of people with mental health issues identified as both wanting to participate in the programme and, with support, to volunteer.

- Extending learning from Getting Rother Active across the wider community to also support development of new activities in, especially, the more isolated rural communities in Rother.

*Source - RVA (2017) Getting Rother Active end of project report*
16. **Sport England shared the same conclusions.** Although GRA commenced in 2014 which was before the publication of the Sport England strategy *Towards an Active Nation*, the project did reflect many of the key messages in the strategy, namely:

- A move away from funding ‘already active’ to focus on inactive people
- A recognition that everyone is welcome with customer led not sport/activity led development
- A wider range of partners but with appropriate governance in place
- The use of insight to evidence need and the sharing of data and learning
- A focus on inactive people and addressing behaviour change
- A focus on under-represented groups, e.g. women and girls, older people, low socio-economic, disability, some ethnic minority groups
- The importance of supporting and valuing volunteers

**References**


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