

The background

Move More Empowering Communities (MMEC) project aimed to support voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations across Sheffield work with communities with the lowest levels of physical activity. The aim was to work with these communities to understand what works to enable physical activity at a local level, what factors affect this, and ultimately enable more people to be active in ways and places that suit them. We have been working on this project from Apr '19 to Aug '22.

Themes

Findings are organised into five interacting theory themes, which explain how and in what circumstances organisations worked to enable physical activity. These are;

- Building capacity in the VCSE to understand the needs of the target communities (insight)
- Harnessing assets (use of facilities, green and blue spaces, networks),
- Working with partners
- Developing a supported and person-centred approach
- Building capacity to deliver activities

Building capacity in the VCSE to understand the needs of the target communities

All organisations were able to **develop an understanding of the needs of target communities**. Ring-fencing time for local officers to develop this insight made it central to local plans and provided a legacy of knowledge likely to be drawn on following the end of the funding period.

Time taken to establish trustful relationships was essential for honest communication about physical activity (both in conversation between organisations and clients, and between organisations and funders)



Figure 1 - Boxing class delivered by experienced community development worker (Kellyanne from MCDT)

Who the officer is, their personality traits and their outlook is important. They need to be experienced in both community development and have a passion for physical activity, and their host organisation needs to be bought into the role and importance of physical activity. It was helpful, but not essential, that the local MMEC officer was from the community and already had established links to groups and networks in the area.

Harnessing assets

We used a strength-based approach. Key to this is **recognising and building on what communities themselves identify as assets that help them to be more active**. Places, spaces, facilities, individuals, networks, and groups. Our findings highlighted that at the start of the projects relevant assets were the individuals and organisations that were working with the community as well as local parks and open spaces. Most individuals were not making use of more traditional leisure facilities and / or travelling far to access blue and green spaces.



Figure 2- Kids having fun at weekly football session lead by DESA. Invited in through the 100's of families DESA have contact with through their formal and informal networks

People appreciated being introduced to something new, **by those that they trusted**. Such as trips to the Peak District, the Botanical Gardens, the gym, and fun football / footysize sessions. The sessions included building confidence and practical knowhow about how to access these opportunities without the need for support in the longer term.

Whilst it is arguably less sustainable to simply deliver sessions, in the right circumstances, **these give people who are furthest from physical activity more than just the benefit of the session but make them feel valued and boost their self-esteem**. This is an important pre-cursor for people seeking out further opportunities.

Working with partners

MMEC enabled organisations to nurture a community base of interest in physical activity amongst those who are traditionally underserved. This increased demand for activities and opportunities. Prior to MMEC, organisations had tended to go to ‘the usual suspects’, that is those organisations who were well established and had a track record of effective delivery. **MMEC broadened that base and opened a wider range of connections from which we have already seen a sustainable legacy.**

Through the networking and conduit role played by VAS, **enabled greater connectivity between VCSE** organisations, for example by pairing smaller niche organisations with more established groups, which enabled greater reach and a wider range of support to be offered.

Important aspects of **working in partnership** therefore are to encourage facilitated opportunities for sharing learning and good practice between organisations and exploring ways to work together. Support to identify the ‘right’ partners to work with - what is going to work for different people with different needs (for example, choosing local providers who know the local community) and Move More continuing to explore ways to work with partners to potentially offer something different which might engage more participants, or those that are reluctant to be physically active.

Developing a supported and person-centred approach

The evaluation findings build on wider knowledge that supporting people who are less likely to be active to build physical activity into their lives **takes a person-centred approach**.

This is not just about putting on sessions that people have asked for but also about tackling wider needs simultaneously (for example, with childcare), and in some cases, as a precursor (for example with confidence building) to physical activity.

This takes considerable time and skill, but investment in working in this way **shows high returns in engagement and sustained participation**.



Figure 3 - Firvale Community Hub's Roma Slovak exercise and healthy eating class. Where, no doubt, people then went on to take part in other services (i.e. debt advice, advocacy) once in the building.

The evaluation approach, which did not stipulate high numbers of participants as a marker of success, **freed organisations to work in a way which built quality interactions.**

Building capacity to deliver activities

MMEC considered prior lessons that simply delivering activities did not tackle inequalities in physical activity participation. However, those who experience inequalities in physical activity are also highly likely to be living in deprivation and lack access to affordable, safe, and appealing options for physical activity. It is argued, therefore that some element of **provision of opportunities at low to no cost is an important aspect of enabling physical activity.**

Simply asking people what they want did not necessarily translate into high attendance, and a **degree of trial and error was necessary** to find an appropriate delivery approach. MMEC was designed incorporate this by being flexible and for local organisations to change their approach as they learnt what did or did not work.



Figure 4 - Harnessing the SACMHA lunch club so physical activity can be delivered where people already are. Nothing draws people in like socialising and good food

Consistently, the delivery of physical activities was enhanced when **sufficient time and opportunity was built in for socialising before, during, or after the session.**

Other lessons from other stakeholders outside the VCSE

Stakeholders reported that MMEC complemented and extended knowledge from the This Girl Can and Active Burngreave projects and provided an **example of best practice for working with communities.**

Several lessons have been learnt about how to commission and manage this work. **This includes the need to invest in capacity, and to allow for flexibility, learning and adaptation as part of the contract and governance arrangements.**

There are still challenges and opportunities that this work did not address

The adequacy, consistency, and breadth of funding available to the VCSE. If this could be resolved it would provide a more enduring platform to retain and build on the trustful relationships, holistic and flexible support and diversity of offer **which seems critical to working with communities.**

The pooling of resources across the city in an equitable and timely fashion. Some opportunities were, and are still being missed by some elements of the MMEC work not being fully joined up with other elements of Move More and the wider health 'system' in Sheffield. **Clear lines of responsibility to raise opportunities and resolve issues collectively** should be part of the planning associated with future investments.

Sharing lessons across VCSE organisations and wider strategic partners in a timely manner and appropriate formats. Investment in community of practice, with support for VCSE officers and volunteers to attend, and a communications strategy, may go some way to alleviating this, as will key stakeholders taking responsibility to advocate and share the learning within their spheres of influence.

Thanks to Katie Shearn and Kerry Griffiths at SHU for their hard work and skill on this evaluation. Found this interesting and want to chat more about these findings and their implications for your work? I'd be happy to discuss. Just send me an email on a.batty@vas.org.uk - Thanks, Adam