Evaluation of the New Opportunities for PE and Sport programme

Working Paper 3:

Sustainability: Learning and Lessons from the NOPES Activities programme

Iain Lindsey and Barrie Houlihan
Institute of Youth Sport
School of Sport and Exercise Sciences
Loughborough University

March 2007

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Published by:
Big Lottery Fund
1 Plough Place,
London, EC4A 1DE
Tel: 0207 211 1800
Fax: 0207 211 1750
Email: e&r@biglotteryfund.org.uk
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Introduction

The Big Lottery Fund committed £35 million in Scotland to the New Opportunities for PE and Sport Activities programme. This funding was allocated to local authorities who were required to manage a portfolio of projects. Individual projects could receive funding for up to three years. The first NOPES activity projects began to operate from the spring of 2003.

The Activities programme has two different strands: Out of School Hours Activity (OSHA) and Active Steps. OSHA was designed to offer young people a wide range of sporting and cultural activities, including dance, outdoor education, adventure and other challenging activities. Active Steps was intended to fund activities designed to use sport to divert young people from crime, or behaviours likely to lead to crime, and to promote positive behaviour in school.

As with any time-limited funding programme, sustainability was a key issue within the Activities programme. Assessment Criterion 10, which was used to judge initial NOPES applications, stated:

_The grant scheme has the potential to be sustainable for the life of the grant scheme and beyond._

From the outset, sustainability was also a prominent issue raised by stakeholders in the Activities programme during interviews with the evaluation team.

Therefore, as the Activities programme nears its end, the purpose of this working paper is to examine the key lessons from the NOPES Activities programme for the sustainability of time-limited programmes. It is intended that this learning will be useful for a variety of stakeholders in developing future policy and practice in similar time-limited funding programmes.

Methods

Data for this paper came from two sources. Firstly, a number of interviews were conducted with stakeholders in the NOPES programme. Interviews examined the ways in which sustainability was addressed in the NOPES programme and also the factors affecting approaches to sustainability. These interviews were undertaken with the following stakeholders:

- Two BIG staff involved in the policy and operation of the NOPES programme
- Local authority staff responsible for NOPES activity portfolios in six local authorities

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1 Some projects were subsequently granted extensions to continue to utilise NOPES funding beyond three years.
Staff responsible for seven NOPES projects in case study areas. These interviewees were each interviewed at least twice throughout the duration of their NOPES project. In total, 28 interviews contributed to this working paper.

Secondly, BIG required local authorities to submit sustainability plans for each of their projects as a term of their grant. These plans were submitted in a common format. Sustainability plans from nine local authorities were analysed for this working paper.

Defining Sustainability

In order to examine sustainability, there needs to be a clear definition of the meaning of the term. However, this definitional issue is problematic. In the sport context, the word sustainability is often used with a variety of meanings. Furthermore, there is a lack of sport-based research on sustainability to draw upon.

One definition of the verb ‘sustain’ in the Oxford English Dictionary is to ‘keep (something) going over time or continuously’. This definition leaves the question of what the ‘something’ is that should be sustained. Examining literature on health development programmes (e.g. Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone, 1998; Crisp and Swerissen, 2002) suggests that there are a number of different levels at which it is possible to sustain programmes such as NOPES:

- Individual Level
- Community Level
- Organisation Level
- Institutional Context Level

The discussion of sustainability in the NOPES Activity programme will be structured around these four levels and a fuller description of what is meant by sustainability at each level will be given at the start of each section.

Individual Sustainability

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<td>Individual sustainability concerns long-term changes in individuals’ behaviour as a result of an intervention. In the NOPES context this could mean sustaining participation in sport or wider personal changes in behaviour or skills.</td>
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Sustaining individual participation was a key objective of the NOPES programme from the outset. NOPES Outcome 4 encapsulates this form of sustainability and suggests some of the processes required to achieve it:

Establish new links between schools and their communities that encourage young people to enjoy lifelong involvement in sport and cultural activities.
There was a reliance on voluntary-sector clubs to provide opportunities for continued participation for young people involved in NOPES activities. However, in some geographical areas, interviewees suggested that there was not a sufficiently developed club infrastructure for young people to access after involvement in NOPES. For outdoor education, in particular, voluntary-sector clubs tended to be adult based and did not provide a suitable environment for young people.

Coupled with these issues regarding the provision of opportunities, young people often also faced individual barriers to accessing clubs where they could participate in the longer term. Integration of clubs in the planning and delivery of activities from the outset as well as providing young people with support to access clubs were both important in overcoming barriers encountered by young people. However, from sustainability plans, it appeared that efforts to encourage young people to continue participation in other spheres were often limited to ‘signposting’ of other, relevant opportunities. Example 1 shows how an Active Steps project was specifically designed to address barriers to continued participation.

**Example 1: Scottish Borders Active Steps**

Young people referred to the Active Steps programme worked on a one-to-one basis with a sessional worker to access a sporting opportunity of their choice for twelve sessions. Often the young people had not been previously engaged in sporting activity. The sporting opportunities accessed were typically pre-existing activities delivered by sports clubs, sports development and other providers. After the twelve week period, young people were encouraged to continue taking part without the ongoing support of the sessional worker.

**Community Sustainability**

**Definition**

Community sustainability concerns changes in the community in which the programme is delivered. A community could be defined geographically, culturally (in the case of a sporting community) or organisationally (as in a partner organisation). Often community sustainability is concerned with building capacity within individuals and other organisations.

Elements of community sustainability, especially the provision of training for club members and volunteers, was emphasised in the guidance notes for the NOPES Activities programme. A number of NOPES projects provided training to volunteers in order to develop local capacity to deliver sport and physical activity opportunities. From interviews and sustainability plans, a number of issues have been identified with this approach:

- There appear to be challenges in attracting suitable volunteers in rural areas.
• Utilising volunteers to develop sustainability is not possible for certain types of activities (especially outdoor activities) or client groups (especially those targeted by Active Steps projects).
• After training, volunteers often require placement in suitable opportunities and appropriate support in the longer term. These issues may be particularly important for projects with a remit solely to provide training (Example 2 shows a project that has effectively addressed these issues).
• Interviewees recognised that volunteers who had received training had a ‘life span’ often dependent on personal circumstances. Requirements to ‘pay off’ training by undertaking a certain amount of voluntary coaching hours were often used to try to expand this ‘life span’.

**Example 2: Leadership Development, Fife**

The Sports Leadership project in Fife provided training to potential sports leaders. The Sports Coaching Development Officer (employed through NOPES funding) was able to match people who had undertaken the sports leadership courses with requests from organisations that required people with these skills. This system helped meet the need for sports leaders across Fife as well as providing placements for people who had undertaken training.

In two local authorities, a key issue was the negative effect that NOPES funding had on volunteering. Paying coaches through NOPES funding had created an expectation of payment and, in one local authority, initiated a ‘whole breakdown in the volunteer programme’. Other evidence from sustainability plans supported this finding. In one local authority, the NOPES portfolio manager recognised that this negative impact had been the result of the initial design of the NOPES programme in that area.

Alongside the training aspect of community sustainability, many NOPES projects aimed to develop and expand provision by sports clubs and other organisations. Example 3 highlights an Active Steps project that was effective in changing the approach of external organisations. In another example, an outdoor education project offered free training courses and improved access to facilities as an incentive to encourage local clubs to integrate young people into their activities.

**Example 3: Active Steps, Fife**

Developing a long-term legacy was integral to the design of the Active Steps programme in Fife from the outset. NOPES-funded officers supported existing organisations already working with young people, such as youth groups, to integrate targeted, ‘at risk’ young people. As well as integrating particular young people, the organisations also gained an increased capacity to target and work with similar young people more effectively in the future.

More commonly, however, stakeholders believed that the differing objectives of local clubs and organisations compared to NOPES projects, particularly
those delivering outdoor education or Active Steps activities, created challenges in addressing community sustainability. Linked to this issue, there was evidence that staff responsible for NOPES projects often wanted a degree of control over these voluntary clubs to ensure they delivered a positive experience for young people. Another challenge to addressing community sustainability was the level of apprehension in some organisations about working with short-term projects such as those funded through NOPES.

Organisational Sustainability

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<td>Organisational sustainability represents the continuation of programmes within the same organisational setting. This form of sustainability may involve accessing further funding or integrating programmes into the existing work and capacity of the host organisation.</td>
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Interviews with all stakeholders, from BIG through to project staff, as well as sustainability plans (both their structure and content) provided clear evidence that organisational sustainability was the dominant form of sustainability addressed within the NOPES programme.

Funding from BIG is, by its very nature, time-limited. Therefore, from the perspective of BIG staff, NOPES was like other funding streams in that continuing activities after the end of the funding period was a desired outcome. Organisational sustainability was implicitly prioritised both in application criteria for the NOPES programme and in the format provided by BIG for sustainability plans.

Stakeholders from local authorities and NOPES projects placed a similar emphasis on organisational sustainability. The issue of future funding was an issue for case study projects from the outset with one interviewee describing a ‘constant’ search for new funding. Throughout Scotland, a number of NOPES projects were set up as pilots with the intention of developing innovative and new ways of working. Initial planning for such pilot projects anticipated seeking further funding to sustain activities if they were successful.

There was a tension between the dominance of this form of sustainability and the recognition by stakeholders at all levels that the scale of NOPES funding made it difficult to replace in its entirety. Finding further mainstream local authority funding was affected by the pressure on local authorities to reduce budgets. Alternatively, accessing external funding was affected by two related timescale issues: a) that external funding was not something that could be planned for and in some cases it was ‘accidental’ if funding streams were aligned with projects and b) that decisions on external funding, by projects and funders, would only be made close to the end of NOPES funding. One interviewee described the effect of these external funding issues as ‘sitting with their fingers crossed hoping’. A different approach adopted by a number of projects was to continue programmes on a self-financing basis with costs covered by charging participants. This approach was often challenging,
particularly for NOPES projects that addressed barriers to participation connected with, for example, deprivation, rurality and disability.

Besides accessing further funding, the final approach to addressing organisational sustainability was to integrate NOPES programmes into the work of existing local authority staff after funding from NOPES ceased. From sustainability plans Active Schools staff and to a lesser extent sports development staff were most commonly believed to have the capacity to do this. As a BIG interviewee suggested, the effectiveness of this approach may have been increased by a long-term partnership approach between NOPES projects and the staff targeted to sustain NOPES activities.

In general, projects that were more effective in addressing organisational sustainability had one or more of the following features:

- A flexible project structure that enabled specific activities to be re-funded separately or responsibility for sustaining activities to be devolved to other organisations.
- An approach that addressed gaps or found new, effective ways of working. Active Steps projects were particularly successful in demonstrating new approaches that addressed ‘a lot of agendas for funding’.
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems that demonstrated the effectiveness of programmes.
- Continued involvement of elected members and high-level local authority staff to gain political support for efforts to address sustainability.

**Institutional Context Sustainability**

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<td>Institutional sustainability concerns wider policy, practice and structural changes in the context of the programme that continue in the longer-term. Structural changes may include the development of partnerships that will continue once the programme ceases.</td>
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BIG staff suggested three ways in which they hoped that NOPES would influence the wider institutional context:

- Developing new partnerships around sport and physical activity (as in Outcome 4)
- Using innovative projects to learn about effective approaches to, and inform future planning in, the delivery of sport and physical activity.
- Using NOPES to contribute to a higher political profile for sport and physical activity in Scotland.

The first of these aspects of institutional context sustainability, the creation of new partnerships, is covered more fully in NOPES annual evaluation reports. However, both interviews and sustainability plans demonstrated that across Scotland a variety of new partnerships were developed through NOPES.
In areas where sport and physical activity previously had a low profile or where links were made with sectors that had little prior engagement with the sport and physical activity, there was greater evidence of new, sustainable partnerships arising. The design of projects supported the development of new partnerships. For example, the design of the Active Steps programme in one local authority included a stipulation that support and funding would only be provided to multiple organisations that were working in partnership together.

A number of projects identified learning and wider changes in policy and practice that had resulted from the delivery of NOPES programmes. Linking with the number of pilot projects (highlighted in the previous section), interviewees suggested that externally funded projects had more flexibility to innovate and learn from new approaches than existing mainstream, local authority services. There was evidence that NOPES had a significant influence on wider learning, policy and practice regarding particular target groups. In particular, Active Steps projects often provided a catalyst for a re-orientation of policies and practice towards services for young people with particular needs or who are at risk. Where girls were a target group, there was often a wider appreciation of the effectiveness of dance activities on improving levels of physical activity.

In addition to target groups, there is also evidence that NOPES had a significant impact on the profile of outdoor education. An example of this impact was given by one interviewee who commented that NOPES

"has certainly made senior management aware of what we do and, consequently, they have got to support that and to be fair to them, they have."

This quote also demonstrates the link between increasing the profile of a particular service and affecting issues of organisational sustainability.

From the interview and sustainability plan data, there were a number of other factors that affected the ability of programmes such as NOPES to influence the wider institutional context in the longer-term:

- As with organisational sustainability, the use of appropriately disseminated evaluation results to both highlight the outcomes of, and learn from, provision was highlighted by a number of stakeholders.
- There were comments in sustainability plans regarding the learning that individuals had gained through involvement with NOPES. With the dangers of staff moving on increased due to short-term funding, it is essential that learning is passed on rather than being lost.
- For some NOPES projects, influencing the wider institutional context was not an objective at the outset. However, there were good examples where elected members had been continually encouraged to be involved in NOPES portfolios throughout the lifetime of projects.
Conclusions

The importance of sustainability is highlighted by the potential negative consequences if it is not addressed effectively. Interviewees highlighted the negative effects that sudden removal of services may have on young people, particularly vulnerable young people who have often been targeted by Active Steps projects. As one interview commented:

*We have no alternative but to find ways of continuing to serve the needs of our most vulnerable and challenging children and young people.*

A number of interviewees, including those from BIG, suggested that a three-year programme did not give sufficient time to effectively address sustainability as well as delivery. The scale of NOPES funding and the resultant activity opportunities made this issue particularly pertinent. Interviewees suggested that tapering funding in the later years of a programme may aid sustainability. Immediate withdrawal of funding after three years was, as one interviewee commented, 'like running into a brick wall'.

These issues link to one of the key findings of this paper: the prevalence of attempts to address organisational sustainability through applications for further funding. This focus is understandable but has some inherent challenges. Of all the forms of sustainability, accessing further funding is the one over which projects have least direct control. In particular, the national context was not particularly conducive to accessing further funding to continue NOPES activities. Furthermore, there was little overlap between processes designed to achieve NOPES outcomes and processes to achieve organisational sustainability. As a result, organisational sustainability was also addressed towards the end of projects' funding periods resulting in substantial uncertainty within projects and associated challenges with the loss of staff towards the end of short-term contracts.

Interviewees from BIG expressed disappointment over the limited involvement of the voluntary sector in the NOPES programme and addressing sustainability. Organisations within the voluntary sector have been relied upon to address aspects of sustainability, particularly relating to continued participation by young people and building community capacity (individual and community sustainability respectively). Commonly, devolving some responsibility for sustainability to voluntary and other organisations was also effective, for example in accessing types of funding unavailable to local authorities. Voluntary sector organisations need to be integrated into the planning and design of projects from the outset in order to fully utilise their potential to address sustainability.

Despite these challenges, the evidence from the NOPES programme demonstrated approaches that were effective in addressing sustainability. The evidence demonstrates that different forms of sustainability are linked. For example, addressing institutional context sustainability can increase the
effectiveness of approaches to organisational sustainability. Those NOPES projects that have addressed existing gaps or demonstrate new approaches have been most successful in addressing these forms of sustainability.

There are other important links between developing longer-term community capacity and providing young people with opportunities to continue their participation in sport and physical activity. Addressing these forms of sustainability was most successful where there was some existing community infrastructure prior to the NOPES programme. Developing both individual participation and community capacity in geographical areas (or in particular activities) where there had been little previous development of opportunities for young people was extremely challenging for NOPES projects.

However, the discussion above demonstrates the importance of understanding the key facilitating features of the local context in addressing sustainability. Moreover, responding to the local context was a key issue in what the evidence demonstrated was potentially the most important factor regarding sustainability: the need to address sustainability from the outset of projects. There were examples in which a lack of consideration of sustainability in the design of projects led to negative long-term issues resulting from the NOPES programme. Conversely, some NOPES projects were successful in addressing sustainability as this was included in the design of programmes from the outset. Where this was the case, these projects were clear on the desired forms of sustainability and the methods to be used achieve these objectives.

**Recommendations**

Recommendations are intended to utilise the learning from sustainability in the NOPES Activities programme in order to inform future policy and practice. Separate recommendations are provided for BIG and other organisations at a national level and those involved at a local authority level in the design and delivery of programmes such as NOPES.

**BIG and other national organisations**

- As has been integrated into the design of subsequent BIG programmes, national funding agencies should encourage funding applicants to think about sustainability in the initial design of programmes. Sustainability may be included to a greater extent in application documents which may also be designed to promote thinking about different forms of sustainability.

- National agencies distributing short-term funding may wish to prioritise projects that address identified gaps or demonstrate new approaches to addressing sustainability as these types of projects appear to have been particularly effective in the NOPES Activities programme.

- Across Scotland, the prominence of Active Schools has potentially affected the sustainability of the NOPES Activities programme. National
organisations are recommended to work together to ensure programmes are complementary both in delivery and addressing sustainability.

• Within their own constraints, it is recommended that funding agencies consider the possibility of tapered funding towards the end of funding programmes.

• It is recommended that national agencies facilitate learning from programmes such as NOPES. A national forum at the end of the NOPES programme may enable stakeholders involved in the programme to share learning which may benefit other programmes in the future.

Local Authorities and Projects

• Short-term funding brings particular challenges and opportunities for local authorities and projects, including those related sustainability. In applying for short-term funding stakeholders should consider the issue of sustainability, other challenges of short-term funding and the local context in the initial design of programmes and projects.

• Sustainability may be more effectively addressed by projects and other stakeholders by diversifying the forms of sustainability to be achieved. In particular, a sole reliance on accessing further funding inhibits attempts to address sustainability. Integrating approaches to achieve different forms of sustainability has been shown to be more effective in ensuring projects have an impact in the longer-term.

• Furthermore, projects and other stakeholders are recommended to diversify the methods by which they address sustainability. Devolving responsibility for sustainability, using different, locally appropriate methods to address sustainability and integrating a wide variety of stakeholders into these approaches are techniques that were effective in addressing sustainability in the NOPES programme.

References
