

Best practice in physical activity evaluation

1 **TITLE**

2 An evolving model of best practice in a community physical activity programme: A case
3 study of 'Active Herts'

4 **ABSTRACT**5 **Background:**

6 Community-based physical activity programmes typically evolve to respond to local
7 conditions and feedback from stakeholders. Process evaluations are essential for capturing
8 how programmes are implemented, yet often fail to capture delivery evolution over time,
9 meaning missed opportunities for capturing lessons learnt.

10 **Methods:**

11 This research paper reports on a staged approach to a process evaluation undertaken within
12 a community-based UK 12-month physical activity programme that aimed to capture change
13 and adaptation to programme implementation. Twenty-five one-to-one interviews, and
14 twelve focus groups took place over the three years of programme delivery. Participants
15 included programme participants, management, and service deliverers.

16 **Results:**

17 Programme adaptations that were captured through the ongoing process evaluation
18 included changes to the design of promotional material, programme delivery content,
19 ongoing training in behaviour change and the addition of regular participant community
20 events. We address how these strands evolved over programme delivery, and how the
21 process evaluation was able to capture them.

22 **Conclusion:**

- 23 The pragmatic evaluation approach enabled changes in response to the local context, as
24 well as improvements in the programme to be captured in a timely manner, allowing the
25 delivery to be responsive and the evaluation flexible.

26 **BACKGROUND**

27 Experimental designs such as randomised-controlled trials (RCT's) are considered the 'gold
28 standard' scientific method¹, yet a challenge is that high intervention delivery fidelity may
29 be difficult to replicate outside trial conditions due to diverse practice and settings². These
30 considerations particularly apply to community-based approaches^{3,4}. Research that is
31 acceptant to changes in delivery model, and utilises diverse methods and procedures,
32 guided by the research question, is commonly referred to as 'pragmatic'⁵. Pragmatic
33 evaluation aims to maximise the applicability of evaluation findings to real-world, usual-care
34 settings⁶ via responsive and adaptable protocols⁷. In the case of community-based
35 interventions, pragmatic evaluation brings substantial benefit by allowing evidence to be
36 generated within the crucially important context of programme delivery, though they are
37 often carried out with limited time and resource⁸.

38 A vital component of a pragmatic evaluation is the process evaluation. Bauman and
39 Nutbeam^{9(p51)} describe this as a "*set of activities directed towards assessing progress in*
40 *implementation of a project or programme*". The process evaluation is central to pragmatic
41 evaluation, allowing researchers to assess fidelity of delivery, the active ingredients that
42 generate effect, the degree of acceptability, and population reach^{9,10}. This is particularly
43 important for providing insight into the changes to the programme that may have been
44 made and the impact they have on outcomes. Process evaluations can provoke community
45 conversation about the wider barriers and facilitators to the intervention; for example,
46 changing communication material for children as they become older, or modifying data
47 collection methods¹¹.

48 Despite their critical importance, process evaluations of community-based physical activity
49 interventions are rarely published, meaning vital evidence on programme implementation is
50 lacking⁹. An even greater concern is that often, process evaluations are reported with
51 limited focus on exploring how and why an intervention has changed over time, particularly
52 in response to context in the early delivery stages. This is key as the context of the delivery
53 can vary, requiring intervention evolution and development; thus, while overarching
54 changes to programme delivery may be captured and reported through, for example, the
55 Template for Intervention Description and Replication (TIDieR) checklist¹², rich descriptive
56 insight into change may be lost. The lack of reporting of process evaluations also means that
57 there is little insight into why a programme may or may not have been successful in
58 achieving its outcomes, and what modifications may need to be implemented in order for it
59 to be successful in the future⁹.

60 Community-based physical activity programmes aim to improve the health of those who
61 reside in a location or identify as belonging to a community grouping which may, for
62 example, be based on race, culture, or socioeconomic situation¹³. They can be especially
63 effective as they can encourage members of the community to be involved in design,
64 implementation, and evaluation. In doing so, the community feel ownership and the
65 interventions can be better tailored to reach a large number of participants, increasing
66 impact and promoting sustainability¹⁴. Community-based approaches also allow researchers
67 to evaluate how interventions perform in real-world settings, as opposed to the often-
68 controlled conditions of a RCT, generating evidence that can lead to population-level
69 improvements in physical activity¹⁵.

70 The delivery method is a crucial component of effective community-based physical activity
71 interventions¹⁶. A review by Kahn et al¹⁷ highlights the importance of personal support,
72 either delivered via face-to-face interactions or by telephone. Bock et al¹⁸ provide further
73 support in a meta-analysis, where they identified tailored intervention content to be highly
74 effective among community-based physical activity interventions. Further, the authors
75 identify, as do Morgan et al¹⁶, a need for more physical activity interventions to undergo
76 continuous improvement by identifying factors that have either helped or hindered
77 programme success.

78 Using a case study of a targeted community physical activity intervention delivered in
79 England, this paper explores how a responsive, ongoing process evaluation focusing on
80 programme delivery, recruitment and sustainability, generated a trail of evidence about
81 programme development and evolution in real world contexts, and considers the need for
82 wider adoption of this approach within community-based physical activity interventions.

83 **METHODS**

84 **'Active Herts' programme**

85 'Active Herts' was a community-based physical activity behaviour change programme,
86 delivered in four socio-economically disadvantaged districts of Hertfordshire, England over a
87 three-year period, funded by Sport England, the local government agency and local Clinical
88 Commissioning Group. Each participant spent up to 12 months on the programme, which
89 ran for three years in total. The content of the programme was based on a systematic
90 review of effective behaviour change techniques for the promotion of physical activity and
91 the reduction of sedentary behaviour in inactive adults¹⁹. The target population were
92 inactive adults (who identified themselves as achieving less than 30 minutes of moderate to

93 vigorous physical activity per week) who had one or more risk factors of cardiovascular
94 disease (CVD) and/ or mild to moderate mental health condition. Programme participants
95 were either referred by their health care professional (e.g. General Practitioner) or self-
96 referred. The programme had an initial one-to-one consultation with a staff member known
97 as a 'Get Active Specialist' (hereafter known as the Specialist), where programme
98 participants' barriers and enablers towards physical activity were explored using a COM-B
99 behavioural diagnosis^{20,21} and future engagement facilitated using a selection of behaviour
100 change techniques, aided by motivational interviewing²² and a behaviour change booklet.
101 The consultation ended with the selection of a favoured physical activity or exercise class for
102 the coming 12 weeks. Follow-up consultations between the Specialist and programme
103 participant took place at 2-weeks (by telephone), three, six and twelve months.

104 Programme funding was conditional on the production of evidence on programme
105 effectiveness, and therefore a quasi-experimental approach was developed and described in
106 the Active Herts delivery protocol²³. This used two models of delivery; the 'standard' model
107 involved the Specialist referring to existing physical activity provision in the community,
108 whilst delivery was 'enhanced' in two localities by an added free-to-access twelve-week
109 group-based physical activity programme tailored to the needs of programme participants
110 and often run by the Specialist. The enhanced model also planned to include a volunteer
111 'Buddy' scheme to support participants by attending the first session with them. Over the
112 course of the programme, changes to the delivery models and methods of participant
113 recruitment occurred, as highlighted by the process evaluation.

114 **Ethics**

115 Ethical approval for the evaluation of Active Herts was granted by the Faculty of Medical
116 and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia (Ref:
117 2015/2016 – 28). Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the
118 process evaluation.

119 **Design**

120 A qualitative design was used, involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

121 **Participants**

122 Sixty-one participants were involved in the process evaluation interviews. In total,
123 qualitative data was collected through 25 one-to-one interviews and 12 focus groups.
124 Participants included programme and operational management, deliverers and providers,
125 recruiters, programme participants, and university academics/ behaviour change trainers.

126 **Data Collection**

127 Semi-structured topic guides around several key themes provided a structure for data
128 collection, whilst enabling new topics to be introduced and explored (see supplementary file
129 1). Sessions were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone, and took place in three
130 phases, one for each year of the programme. Whilst some individuals were interviewed
131 more than once, no participant completed more than one interview at any phase.

132 Phase One focused on participant recruitment and included six sessions (2 focus groups, 4
133 one-to-one interviews) lasting between 20-120 minutes. Phase Two focused on the
134 programme delivery and included 10 sessions (5 focus groups, 5 one-to-one interviews),
135 lasting between 20-90 minutes. Phase Three involved 21 sessions (5 focus groups, 16 one-
136 to-one interviews) focussing on programme sustainability, and lasting between 15-90
137 minutes.

138 Data Analysis

139 Data collection and analysis over the three phases involved different researchers (LB, SD, JH,
140 and RO). Each wrote an end-of-year report whilst a separate set of researchers (SC and AB)
141 synthesised the findings from the previous years, for this manuscript, referring back to
142 original transcripts when required.

143 Sessions were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Interview transcripts were read and
144 coded using NVIVO11 software package produced by QSR. A thematic analysis²⁴ approach
145 was undertaken, using the broad themes of the interview topic guides as the priori
146 framework. This was then supplemented by additional themes that were identified during
147 an iterative reading and coding process. We present findings based on elements of the
148 programme which were substantially adapted, and elements that were seen to make a
149 significant contribution to the success of the programme. Their selection was initially based
150 on the research team's analysis of process evaluation interviews, but were further verified
151 during annual reporting of process evaluation findings to programme management and
152 delivery staff.

153 RESULTS

154 Figure 1 outlines the original delivery model as described in the Active Herts Protocol²³
155 along with the final delivery model followed at the end of the programme. Significant
156 differences between the programme delivery, recruitment, and methods to support the
157 ongoing sustainability of the programme, as described, and as ultimately delivered are
158 apparent. Figure 1 also addresses the drivers for changes to delivery that would not have
159 been captured without the ongoing process evaluation.

160 We report on five key themes of the programme: 1) *'Engagement with primary care'*, 2)
161 *'Tailored exercise classes'*, 3) *'Training in behaviour change'*, 4) *'Conversation Cafés'* and 5)
162 *'Recruitment material'*, and highlight their role and evolution during the course of delivery,
163 recorded by the process evaluation.

164 1) *Engagement with primary care*

165 Recruitment of the target audience through primary care settings such as General Practice
166 (GP), was an important feature of the programme. However, referral rates were initially
167 lower than anticipated and the Specialists found that GPs in some areas did not embrace
168 the scheme. This appeared to be due to competing priorities, a lack of time and a wealth of
169 initiatives to which Practices could refer patients onto.

170 *"When we started this project ... it was envisaged that the GPs would jump on board,*
171 *love it and refer loads of people in. But it sort of soon became apparent they've only*
172 *got 10 minutes with the patients, so they're in a rush so and so many different things*
173 *that they can refer in to, so many competing projects as well, that the referrals didn't*
174 *come thick and fast."* (Specialist, Phase Three)

175 However, in one district, the Specialist was located within a community trust that had a
176 strong local reputation, helping to gain local buy-in.

177 *"The fact that we've had the name and the brand of the football club which the GP*
178 *knows that quite well. Because it's not NHS it's not public health, that's not a local*
179 *council so it's quite a neutral ground in that way. It is a recognised and trusted brand*
180 *that people have seen"* (Specialist, Phase Three)

181 Over time the Specialists were able to build relationships with GPs, and referrals increased.

182 *"I think a lot of the time with NHS staff, especially clinicians, you really do have to*
183 *kind of prove yourself, and [the Specialist] has done that. He's proved to be reliable*

184 *and knowledgeable and trustworthy and that's really reaped dividends in terms of*
185 *that kind of partnership between the camps of the NHS" (Specialist host employer,*
186 *Phase Three)*

187 An important factor was not only building relationships with clinicians but also practice
188 managers and locality leads.

189 *"After about nine months I got introduced to the locality manager. ... now if I want to*
190 *know a practice manager, I want to know who a lead GP is, I need an email address, I*
191 *need help, I need support,... so I think, you know, not only is it practice managers*
192 *within the surgeries, it's the other hierarchy that sort of sit above them" (Specialist,*
193 *Phase One)*

194 Despite the initial difficulties, GPs were the most common route of referral throughout the
195 programme, comprising 76% of all referrals. Programme participants, the Specialists, and
196 programme management consistently reported how referrals through GPs provided
197 programme credibility and additional quality assurance for potential participants.

198 *"The fact that it's in the GP's surgery adds a bit of credibility to the project, because*
199 *people are used to going there and they sort of respect what you're doing, perhaps a*
200 *little bit more than somewhere else, it's a professional environment" (Specialist,*
201 *Phase Two)*

202 2) Tailored exercise classes

203 Tailored exercise classes were originally introduced as an additional option within the
204 enhanced delivery model areas. These were run by either the Specialists or local instructors.
205 Programme participants thought highly of these instructors and developed a good rapport
206 with them.

207 *“Those activity sessions have proved so valuable in terms of the way that [the*
208 *Specialist] and the coaches that he’s recruited have supported people.” (Host*
209 *employer, Phase Three)*

210 The tailored activity sessions enabled a wider range of options for participants, along with
211 additional ongoing support over and above other activities that individuals could be referred
212 onto.

213 *“I’ve been treated for a mental illness the last twenty years but come a long way...It’s*
214 *nice, the whole group being mature, you expect they have an ability to respect one*
215 *another.” (Programme participant, Phase Two)*

216 They were also seen by the Specialists as an opportunity for programme participants to
217 meet one another and take part in a welcoming exercise class for all abilities.

218 *“I try and kind of reaffirm the individuals that I am seeing, to say that the sessions*
219 *that we run through the Active Herts programme are suitable for all abilities... I just*
220 *try to make this point clear, we’re not sergeant major, we’re not there blowing*
221 *whistles, shouting, and pointing fingers. It is more of a relaxed atmosphere, and*
222 *actually, we’re trying to make exercise fun, and actually more about the social*
223 *element.” (Specialist, Phase Two)*

224 In contrast, participants who were signposted to activity sessions elsewhere, out of the
225 control of the Specialist, felt that they were not suitable for participants like themselves,
226 and some also found provision unreliable.

227 *“There have been some providers that have left, let us down I suppose. Like groups*
228 *that have been up and running and I’ve, for example, sent people onto them, and*
229 *then suddenly [The Instructor has] stopped the group and not told anyone... I’ve got*
230 *another group....designed for fifty plus, a men’s only group, and...because he*

231 *[instructor] needed to cover a spin class, so he's taken all of the...guys into to do*
232 *spin... and when you've got guys in their 60s, 70s who were meant to be doing quite*
233 *gentle circuits, spin is not the one, and they've come back to me, to complain about*
234 *it; even though there's nothing I can do ... it does infuriate me quite a lot." (Specialist,*
235 *Phase Two)*

236 Through feedback gathered during the process evaluation and conversations amongst the
237 Specialists, one district delivering the standard model recognised a gap in their provision
238 and gained additional funding to deliver classes that they were able to refer programme
239 participants onto, in a similar manner to the tailored exercise classes in the 'enhanced' arm
240 of delivery. The Specialist was involved in the delivery of this programme, so whilst the
241 tailored exercise classes were not exclusively for Active Herts participants, they were invited
242 to attend.

243 3) *Training in behaviour change*

244 The use of a theoretically-driven behaviour change approach by the Specialists was an
245 integral part of the programme model from the beginning. Prior to delivery, Specialists
246 received tailored training^{25,26} across two days by AC to perform a COM-B behavioural
247 diagnosis^{20,21}, using motivational interviewing^{27,28} and Health Coaching²⁹ to identify barriers
248 and enablers to physical activity, and to deliver a selection of Behaviour Change
249 Techniques^{30,31} to support future engagement.

250 *"I think this training element is one thing that doesn't happen routinely in other*
251 *programmes. So the training isn't just motivational interviewing and health coaching,*
252 *it's behaviour change theory and so what we've managed to do is not only train the*
253 *Get Active Specialists in why people may or may not engage in behaviour but they*
254 *know how to deal with those in conversation." (Academic, phase two)*

255 This training offered a 'Road Map' to consultations and was followed up after three months.
256 During this follow-up training, from a role-play exercise with the Specialists using the
257 Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity Scale³² and listed BCTs²³, it was clear there
258 was a need and desire for additional training and 'supervision' to support skill development,
259 application, and programme delivery and fidelity. A key development was regular quarterly
260 'booster' behaviour change training sessions to support the Specialists with challenging
261 consultations. Their ability to effectively utilise this behaviour change approach had a
262 positive impact on the programme. One Specialist explained how using motivational
263 interviewing and the behaviour change booklet during the initial meeting and follow up
264 helped break down programme participants' barriers towards engaging in physical activity.

265 *"Using the booklets in consultations has been integral..., you're creating a bit of*
266 *dialogue to get more of these answers and responses that are very powerful for me*
267 *to then continue that conversation but then for me to eventually signpost to*
268 *something they would like to try and then to get their foot in the door and give it a*
269 *go." (Specialist, Phase Three)*

270 The person-centred approach plus ongoing support that the Specialists provided enabled
271 participants to feel a sense of continual support.

272 *"She was very proactive, she's there by email and there by phone. The contact and*
273 *the advice is great because it's always been advice that's detailed towards you."*
274 *(Participant, Phase Two)*

275 The addition of ongoing training, supervision and support from AC and NH around the use of
276 the behaviour change approach allowed the Specialists to grow in confidence and advance
277 their knowledge and ability to use such techniques. This grew throughout programme

278 delivery, meaning that the experience of programme participants towards the end of
279 delivery was enhanced from that at the outset.

280 4) *Conversation Cafés*

281 Conversation Cafés, a concept that encouraged programme participants to meet one
282 another and their Specialist in a local setting with refreshments, were introduced following
283 discussions with the Specialists and Behaviour Change Trainers during Phase one of the
284 process evaluation to encourage participants to complete follow-up evaluation
285 questionnaires. The Specialists found that the Cafés became an important peer-to-peer
286 support mechanism, allowing programme participants to meet others and to discuss their
287 physical activity journey over a hot drink.

288 *“Initially it was trying to get more evaluation questionnaires completed, then it evolved*
289 *so that it was almost like a feedback forum, so we could find out what people enjoyed,*
290 *what they didn’t like, what their suggestions were. We also found that it was an organic*
291 *form of buddying so the people that came along would talk about certain sessions that*
292 *they go along to” (Project Co-ordinator, Phase Three)*

293 Though not included within the original delivery model, the importance of the interaction
294 provided by the Conversation Cafés became more evident as the programme evolved. In
295 particular, the opportunity for participants to talk to one another without a structured
296 agenda.

297 *“We had lots of fruit, we had drinks after, and I asked if anyone would like a*
298 *presentation, each time I do it I can talk to you about a different subject. And they*
299 *said “You know what, no, we would rather just meet up and talk to you and talk to*
300 *each other”, and I love just. I’m kind of I’m the facilitator within this, so we kind of sit*

301 *within a group and I ask some questions, always open-ended of course, and I let them*
302 *lead the conversation and they just bounce off each other.” (Specialist, Phase Three).*

303 They also allowed programme participants to give feedback on the exercise classes they
304 have been attending, allowing others to consider if this might be a class that they would like
305 to attend.

306 *“So, they’re using each other to overcome barriers, and my last one last week - one of*
307 *the gentlemen said “I found this really, really valuable. I’ve got ideas from other*
308 *people just from coming today”, and he ended up coming to my class this morning,*
309 *so... I think it was really effective.” (Specialist, Phase Two)*

310 The evolution of Conversation Cafés illustrates how integral they became to the core of the
311 programme; whilst their initial purpose was to improve engagement with the evaluation,
312 they soon became highly valued as an opportunity for participants to meet and share
313 experiences.

314 *5) Recruitment material*

315 At the start of the programme, promotional literature was created to advertise Active Herts.
316 However, programme management soon realised that the material was not portraying the
317 right message to encourage individuals to join the programme.

318 *“A couple of the messages within the initial marketing were things like... ‘I’m doing it*
319 *for the team’. That one really stands out for me... People who’d be doing it for the*
320 *team, you’d expect they’d already be taking part in sports, so we have reviewed the*
321 *messages. We’ve kept with the ‘I’m doing it...’ as the motivator, and then the*
322 *additional messages... We’ve looked at the reasons why people are doing it...we*
323 *asked the participants and Get Active Specialists what sort of messages might be*
324 *useful,” (Project Co-ordinator, Phase Two)*

325 Following consultation with participants and the Specialists, the promotional literature was
326 revised to better reflect the intended target audiences' likely motivators for participating in
327 physical activity. All stakeholders felt that the revised promotional literature was much
328 more relatable to the intended target audience.

329 *"Our second round of marketing I think has been more effective than the first lot...
330 Some of those were working but when [Project Co-ordinator] took it on to do some
331 different ones, which was like 'I'm doing it to improve my diabetes', 'I'm doing it to
332 lose weight' ... and I think they're much more effective"* (Specialist, Phase Three)

333 Two delivery areas produced short videos that were effective in conveying the nature of the
334 programme for the target group. They helped individuals looking to join the programme the
335 chance to better understand the programme and what they could achieve if they joined.

336 *"It was really trying to portray an image of showing people in the programme.
337 There's a lot of different ages, shapes sizes, and abilities as well who have been in the
338 programme for a good three months, some maybe a year or more... it's been useful
339 for me to use that in the initial consultation for anyone that's in the pre-
340 contemplation phase, you know, they're still a bit anxious about starting."* (Specialist,
341 Phase Three)

342 Whilst conversations about changing the promotional material took place outside of the
343 evaluation, the annual cycle of process evaluation gave the opportunity to capture the
344 importance of developing the promotional materials that the target audience could identify
345 with; whilst also illustrating the importance of on-going consultation with the intended
346 audience and the difference appropriate marketing materials can make to people
347 overcoming participation barriers.

348 **DISCUSSION**

349 This paper identifies how a pragmatic process evaluation closely aligned with programme
350 delivery can provide transferable learning that can enhance the delivery of similar public
351 health interventions. The process evaluation undertaken on Active Herts extended beyond
352 the five themes addressed in the results, but the scope of material presented in this paper
353 was deliberately limited, in order to focus on key adaptations to the programme evolution,
354 and elements of the programme which contributed to the success of Active Herts. The
355 model of Active Herts described at the launch of the programme differed substantially to
356 that ultimately delivered. Indeed, such diversion is to be expected; in community-based
357 delivery, evolution valuation and adaptation is common, whilst the requirement to adhere
358 to a protocol can be problematic and even undesirable as the intervention adapts from
359 learnings from delivery and the evolving needs of the target population.

360 Conducting process evaluation as an on-going activity enables a more fine-grained
361 understanding of the programme to be gathered than would be the case if a single snapshot
362 was taken at delivery conclusion. For Active Herts, the process evaluation was conducted
363 through annual cycles of interviews, across three years, rather than through more on-going
364 approaches such as the use of participant diaries, or the analysis of programme
365 documentation such as meeting minutes. Our approach was taken to make the most
366 appropriate use of limited resources. The change of researchers at each cycle of interviews
367 allowed for diversity of perspectives but meant it was somewhat challenging for the
368 research team to stay familiar with any changes to the programme delivery model.
369 Nevertheless, the annual cycles of reporting assisted with this matter by allowing
370 researchers to keep track of any changes. Additionally, researchers were present at
371 programme steering group meetings and this enabled them to stay aware of changes to the

372 programme and make necessary amendments to interview schedules. The yearly interviews
373 were informative to the research team but, in the case of Active Herts, they also allowed
374 management to adapt the delivery model to ensure the programme improved and fitted the
375 local context and target population. Conversation Cafés provide an example of this; initially
376 set up to increase follow-up data collection, they became an important mechanism for peer
377 support. This method of social support within a community setting has been shown by
378 Heath et al³³ to reinforce physical activity behaviour. The impact of social support is also
379 supported by Matz-Costa et al³⁴ who highlight the effect of peer-to-peer support on
380 participant's activity levels and retention rates.

381 Tailored, free exercise classes were a consistent element of the programme for enhanced
382 delivery model areas, and these were later introduced into one of the standard areas as a
383 result of the constant positive feedback. Tailored activities have been shown to have a
384 positive impact on individual's level of physical activity³⁵. Their benefits are also highlighted
385 by Bock et al¹⁸ and amongst recommendations within the 'physical activity strategy for WHO
386 European Region 2016-2025'³⁶ who identify the need for physical activity to be tailored
387 towards individual's health needs and preferences. Tailored messaging and materials have
388 also been shown to be important to successful adoption and adherence^{37,38}. Within Active
389 Herts, the tailored messaging and advice that Specialists provided encouraged participants
390 to maintain participation during their time on the programme. The training that the
391 Specialists received by experts on behaviour change techniques, motivational interviewing
392 and health coaching was also crucial to this success.

393 Engagement with primary care has been widely found to be an ideal setting for recruitment
394 into physical activity interventions^{39,40} and within this programme, recruitment through

395 primary care was felt to add assurance and credibility for programme participants. Though
396 the programme had lower referrals levels through this sector than first anticipated, the
397 process evaluation was able to capture the challenges that the Specialists initially had
398 engaging with primary care, such as competing opportunities being offered to GPs. Such
399 learnings allowed primary care to be the most common route of referral into the
400 programme across all three years of delivery and should be considered among future
401 community-based interventions.

402 A key strength of the process evaluation was the ability to gather thoughts from a range of
403 individuals with different perspectives of the programme over time, including stakeholders
404 and programme participants. Additionally, a-priori testing of programme theory to develop
405 interview schedules and a deductive coding framework which was then supplemented by
406 additional themes that were inductively identified during the reading and coding process,
407 allowed programme modifications to be captured and interviewers and participants to
408 discuss issues beyond the interview schedules^{41,42}. The use of annual cycles of interviews
409 may have meant that minor changes to the programme were missed, but we are confident
410 that all major successes and modifications to the programme were captured and are
411 reported in this paper. In reporting our work, we were guided by the Standards for
412 Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR)⁴³ however, some elements of the SRQR were found
413 to be more suited to a focussed qualitative investigation of a specific research question,
414 rather than to our use of qualitative methods to gather multiple views of a complex
415 intervention.

416 The willingness of programme management to adapt their approach and their openness to
417 feedback was crucial as without this, the programme would not have been able to evolve.

418 This was found by Schneider et al¹¹ who adopted a continuous process evaluation that
419 allowed them to monitor success and challenges of an intervention and make quick
420 modifications to elements of the programme which were poorly performing. Findings were
421 regularly shared with programme management and delivery teams during programme
422 meetings and within yearly evaluation reports. This strong relationship among stakeholders,
423 participants and researchers enabled quick modifications to be made, and ensured that
424 stakeholders had access to evidence on the programme for use in future funding
425 applications⁴⁴. Though this research highlights the importance of conducting a process
426 evaluation, it is of concern that identifying and reporting adaptations and programme
427 changes within physical activity research may still be overlooked. A recent taxonomy for
428 reporting physical activity referral schemes by Hanson et al⁴⁵ includes participant measures
429 within the monitoring and evaluation of a referral scheme (for example, attendance and
430 uptake of physical activity) but does not include any recommendations to report
431 adaptations to programme design.

432 **CONCLUSION**

433 Community-based programmes are inherently complex and often need to adapt to meet the
434 needs of the environmental-setting, or target population in which they are being carried
435 out, yet these adaptations are often not known prior to programme delivery commencing.
436 Pragmatic evaluations fit well within community-based interventions with data collection
437 cycles, allowing the capture of challenges and success of the programme over its course of
438 delivery, and enabling delivery to be responsive to need. This work extends current
439 knowledge and practice in the area of programme evaluation and future intervention
440 designers should consider the adoption of pragmatic programme evaluations.

441 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

442 We would like to thank Lucy Bain (LB), Sarah Dalzell (SD), Julie Houghton (JH), and Rebecca
443 Owens (RO) for their contribution to the evaluation of Active Herts, as well as all the
444 programme management at Herts Sports Partnership, the four Get Active Specialists, the
445 service providers, and all programme participants for their invaluable help with the
446 evaluation.

447 **FUNDING SOURCE**

448 This work was supported by Sport England (ref: 2015000295), Broxbourne Borough Council,
449 East and North Herts Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Herts Valley CCG, Hertfordshire
450 Public Health, Herts Mind Network, Mind in Mid Herts, and Herts Sports Partnership.

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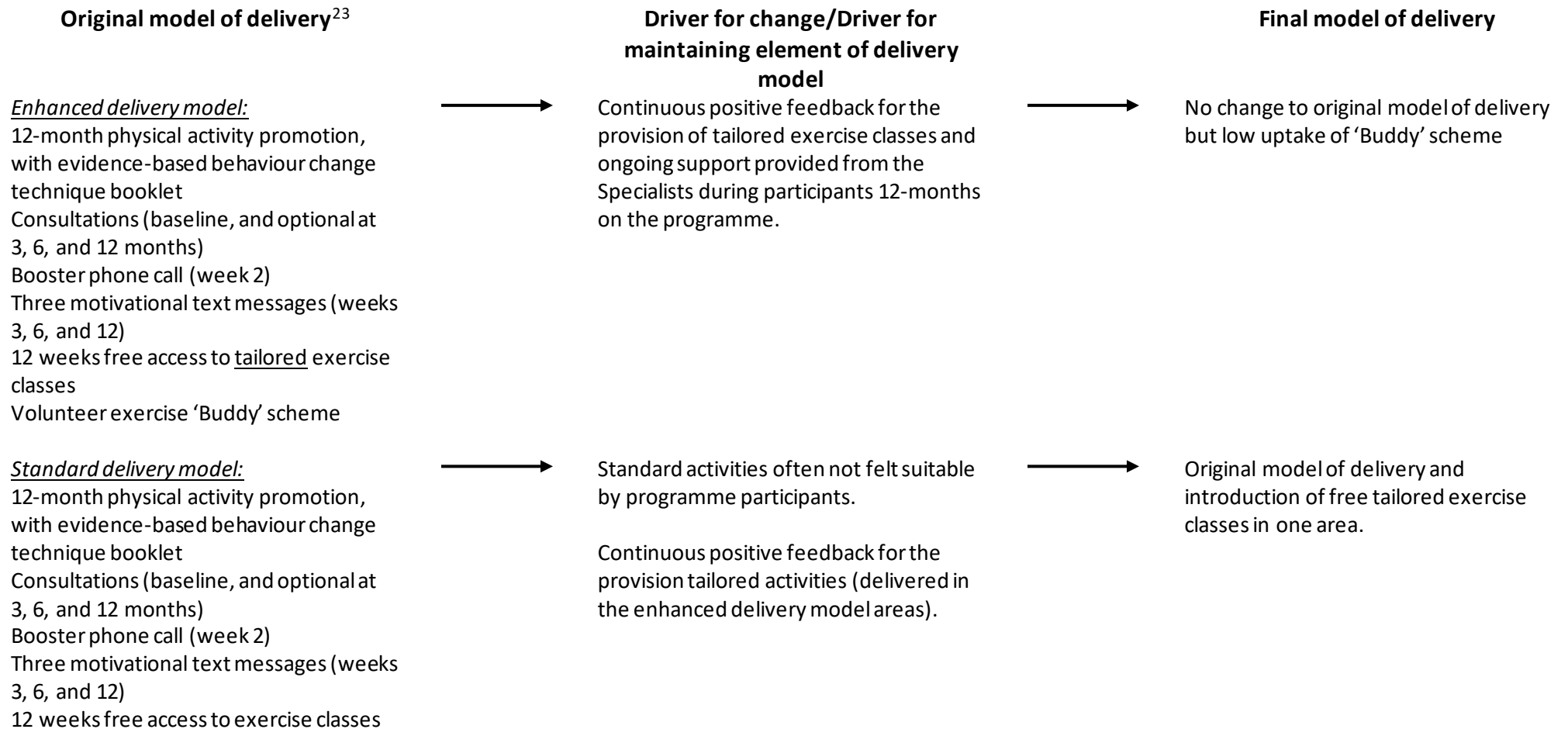
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FIGURES

Figure 1

Outline of original delivery model, final delivery model and the drivers for changing, or maintaining an element of the delivery model.



Best practice in physical activity evaluation

Primary route of referral through primary care, particularly GP surgeries



Lower number of referrals than first anticipated through primary care.

Referral through GP surgeries was felt to add credibility and assurance to programme participants joining the programme.



Other referral routes were also explored in order to encourage more people onto the programme; for example, referral through support services.

Primary route of referral remained through primary care, particularly GP surgeries, but lessons learnt about how to engage with practices.

Specialists use a tailored behaviour change approach during consultations with programme participants



Need to provide ongoing support to Specialists in behaviour change techniques, motivational interviewing and health coaching to enable reflection, further learning and skill development.

Specialists found to be a key driver for change in programme participants attitudes and behaviours towards physical activity.



Continued behaviour change training and supervision through ongoing support, training, and feedback provided from qualified academics in behaviour change, motivational interviewing and health coaching.

No formal mechanism in programme design for informal peer-to-peer support between programme participants



Need to capture more follow-up evaluation data and provide an opportunity for programme participants to meet one another.



Provision of Conversation Cafés (programme participant community event) highly valued by participants.

Promotional material created to advertise the programme



Promotional material was not found to be relatable for the target programme audience or in the right formats e.g. video case studies.



Revised promotional material (content and delivery method) based on feedback from programme participants and the Specialists.