



Supporting Positive Youth Development During a Global Pandemic:

AN EVALUATION OF THE

FRESH START THROUGH SPORT

PILOT PROGRAMME

Ulster University

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Delivered in partnership with



FRESH START THROUGH SPORT

Coyle, B., Murray, C., Breslin, G. & Walsh, C. (2022). *Supporting Positive Youth Development During a Global Pandemic: An evaluation of the Fresh Start Through Sport Pilot Programme*. Belfast: Irish Football Association Foundation.

FOREWORD

In October 2020, Ulster University (UU) was commissioned by the Irish Football Association (IFA) on behalf of the Department for Communities to conduct an evaluation of the Fresh Start Through Sport (FSTS) pilot programme across three phases. The core research team consisted of Dr Brendan Coyle, Dr Conor Murray, Dr Gavin Breslin, and Dr Colm Walsh. The evaluation was assisted by public agencies, community organisations, the IFA and their sporting partners – Belfast Giants, Ulster Rugby, and the GAA. They provided advice on the direction of the evaluation and participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Young people that participated in the Fresh Start Through Sport programme also assisted the evaluation by sharing their experiences in focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

The aim of the research was to assess the Fresh Start Through Sport pilot programme in relation to programme outcomes and targets. The specific objectives were:

- Measure programme outcomes via the Objective Based Accountability Model, which includes: indicators such as attendance levels, number of activities delivered, percentage of participants referred into coaching and/or volunteering;
- Develop an understanding of participants' experiences of, and attitudes towards, the Fresh Start Through Sport programme;
- Create case studies featuring participants or groups to showcase programme impact in line with outcomes and targets;
- Explore the benefits of the programme on participants and identify areas that could be improved;
- Provide material that could contribute to the development of an ongoing, iterative programme of activity.

This report examines each of these objectives and, in order to facilitate maximisation of impact, it highlights numerous examples of good practice and recommendations for further consideration. Many issues discussed in this report also have wider implications beyond Northern Ireland, and it is hoped that relevant stakeholders and scholars in other parts of the world will find it useful.

The research team is extremely grateful to everyone who kindly offered their time to be interviewed. In particular, the research team would like to express its gratitude to the IFA and key stakeholders for support and guidance throughout the research process.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction and Background	7
1.1. The Fresh Start Through Sport Pilot Programme	7
1.2. The Impact of COVID-19	8
1.3. Methodology	8
1.4. Data Analysis	9
2. Programme Delivery and Participation	10
2.1. Initial Overview of Programme Engagement	10
2.2. Final Overview of Programme Engagement	12
3. Key Themes from Interviews and Focus Groups	16
3.1. Breaking Down Barriers	16
3.2. Online Delivery and the Impact of COVID-19	21
3.3. Looking Forward	26
4. Recommendations	29
5. References	32

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary of Programme Outputs

- 41 participants engaged in and completed the FSTS pilot programme
- 14 online modules of activity were successfully delivered across the four sporting partners (IFA, Ulster GAA, The Belfast Giants and Ulster Rugby)
- 2 in-person collaborative training sessions were successfully delivered
- 93% of surveyed participants indicated that they had developed new knowledge and skills
- 100% of surveyed participants reported that they were treated well throughout the programme
- 100% of surveyed participants felt the programme met their expectations
- 78% of surveyed participants reported that the programme had helped them to find volunteering opportunities
- 86% of surveyed participants expressed a desire to continue to participate in a sporting activity on completion of the FSTS pilot programme.

Summary of Research Findings

Breaking down barriers

Programme participants consistently highlighted the value of the programme in helping to break down a range of barriers, be they related to personal circumstance, physical and mental health, or cross-community interactions. In spite of the ways in which the programme was impacted upon by the imposition of public health COVID-19 restrictions, it retained significant value and impact for the young people involved.

Definitely through sport it is one of the best ways to break down barriers and especially when it comes to cross-community...being part of a team, having a general purpose or cause and things like that there helps bring people together. (P1, FG2)

Give everything a go. Never say no. Just try it. I mean it did open a lot of doors like. Obviously it gave me more confidence to go down and actually volunteer, and go to actually help the community, and do it more often. (P2, FG2)

Online Delivery and the Impact of COVID-19

Although the pivot to an online model of delivery presented a range of challenges, for both the programme's organisers and participants, these challenges were often framed as opportunities for learning and collaboration between the four sporting partners. The result was a sense that, although the original vision for the Fresh Start Through Sport programme was constrained by circumstance, the modified mode of delivery played a catalytic role in fostering uniquely enhanced dialogue, cooperation and partnership between each sporting organisation involved. And while participants were often critical in their appraisal of the attendant frustrations and limitations that came with the online context in which the programme was largely delivered, they remained highly positive in their discussion of the content and delivery of the online sessions.

...nearly by fault and design...we are looking at...things we wouldn't have considered doing because of COVID restrictions...Hopefully then in the coming groups...we will be able to go indoors and deliver a programme that is set out. If not, then we know that we can improvise and look at other areas. (F1)

...it was delivered class and all that, like the people that delivered it were unreal like. (P1, FGI)

Looking Forward

The participants and facilitators offered a range of reflections that may help to inform future iterations of the FSTS programme. Many of these insights and views are reflected in the recommendations presented in **Section 4**.

*Even if you don't think it suits you, give it a go anyway. You know mate, I had no interest at all in doing it, and then I loved it, its class, unreal.
(P1, FGI)*

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2015, the 'Fresh Start' agreement was published. The agreement sets out the Executive's commitment to 'dealing with the impact of continued paramilitary activity' and associated criminality under four key areas of delivery: long term prevention; building capacity to support transition; strategies and powers to tackle criminality; and building confidence in the justice system (Northern Ireland Office, 2015).

Action A3 falls under 'promoting lawfulness, and generating a culture of lawfulness'. Action A3 states: "The Executive should work with leading figures and organisations throughout all sectors of society to take a stand against criminality in Northern Ireland and promote responsible cooperation with the authorities as part of a culture of lawfulness". The location of programmes to address action A3 are selected according to identified need.

I.1. The Fresh Start Through Sport Programme

Research has consistently identified that regular physical activity has a beneficial impact on mental health and well-being (World Health Organization, 2018); and in recent years sport-based interventions have been used effectively to reduce crime and radicalisation in the community (Richardson et al., 2017). Studies suggest that participating in sport may improve self-esteem, enhance social bonds, and provide participants with a feeling of purpose (Breslin & Leavey, 2019; Luna et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2022; Rodriguez-Bravo et al., 2020). The introduction of an education element and accreditations can improve outcomes following completion of the programme, providing participants with a pathway towards employment. In short, "sport can have a transformative effect in the lives of young people" (Patrick Nelson, Irish FA CEO).

In October 2020 the IFA, GAA, Ulster Rugby and the Belfast Giants partnered to deliver a sport-based intervention: Fresh Start Through Sport (FSTS). The ongoing aim of the programme is to 'use the universal appeal of sport to provide physical activity, sports-based learning and support for individuals, engaging with young people who are at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism and/or organised crime' (Department for Communities, 2020).

Supported by the Department for Communities, Department of Justice, and Police Service of Northern Ireland, participants to the FSTS pilot programme included young males and females aged 16-24 years from areas identified by the Fresh Start organisers and coordinators: East Belfast, North Belfast, Rathcoole and Carrickfergus. The four key sporting partners delivered a series of sport-based modules, focusing on areas such as disability, racism and mental health in sport. The purpose of these modules was to guide and support participants in identifying and making positive life choices, with the eventual goal of providing a pathway into coaching and/or volunteering through their chosen sport.

1.2. The Impact of COVID-19

The government-imposed public health restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) had an impact on the ability of the partnering organisations to deliver the pilot programme in the way that they had initially hoped, with all but two of the meetings with participants being forced into online delivery. These restrictions similarly had an impact on the process of the programme's evaluation, and the measurement of some of the proposed programme outcomes (see **Section 1.3.**).

In light of these restrictions being announced, UU's research team were invited to attend some of the governance meetings of the programme to gain an insight into the implications of the public health restrictions on the delivery of the programme. While other projects may have had substantial delays or cancellations, the Fresh Start partners quickly and effectively adapted their modules for online delivery. Details on the process and impact of this pivot are included in **Section 3.2.** of this report.

1.3. Methodology

The research underpinning this report was conducted over three phases, between October 2020 and August 2021, and involved a mixed methods approach. These first two phases of the research were administered by the IFA, and the data collated and analysed by the UU research team. Phase three was administered by the UU team.

The first phase of the research underpinning the evaluation involved the delivery of an initial survey to all programme participants (N=41) at the outset of the programme which asked them: basic demographic information; what sport they were most looking forward to engaging in; and their motivations for taking part in the programme. The second phase involved an additional survey at the conclusion of the programme which asked participants about: course preferences; the development of new skills and knowledge; and a range of summative issues regarding their experiences over the course of the programme. Both surveys included a series of standardised questions regarding three psychological global measures (Locus of Control / Self-efficacy / Well-being).

The first and second phases of the research were particularly impacted by the intermittent public health restrictions over the course of the research process. Specifically, the additional standardised survey questions mentioned above could not be administered in the second instance, rendering any measurement of the three identified global psychological metrics invalid.

The third and final phase of the research involved the completion of two focus groups (eight participants per group) and five semi-structured interviews with young people who completed the FSTS pilot programme. An additional five semi-structured interviews were conducted with programme organisers and facilitators. These focus groups and interviews centred on individual experiences of, and attitudes towards FSTS, with interviewees asked to reflect on the most positive aspects of the programme, as well as those aspects that could benefit from improvement. Interviewees were also asked to reflect on the online and/or mixed delivery of the FSTS pilot programme. It is not possible to identify interviewees for reasons of confidentiality, and care has been taken to ensure that no identifying information has been included in the report.

The research instruments used during each phase of the research can be made available on request.

1.4. Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was undertaken to inductively search for concepts, categories and themes emerging from the data collected. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The reliability and validity of the analysis process and final theme construction were established through a number of checks conducted throughout the study to ensure accurate and rigorous findings are presented to the reader (Sparkes, 1998).

Mean average, ranges, and percentages were calculated for key demographic information. The independent groups T-test statistic was calculated to show any statistically significant differences between groups. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Section 2. of the report addresses some of the key information arising from the survey phases of the evaluation, while **Section 3.** explores key themes emerging from the focus groups and interviews.

2. PROGRAMME DELIVERY AND PARTICIPATION

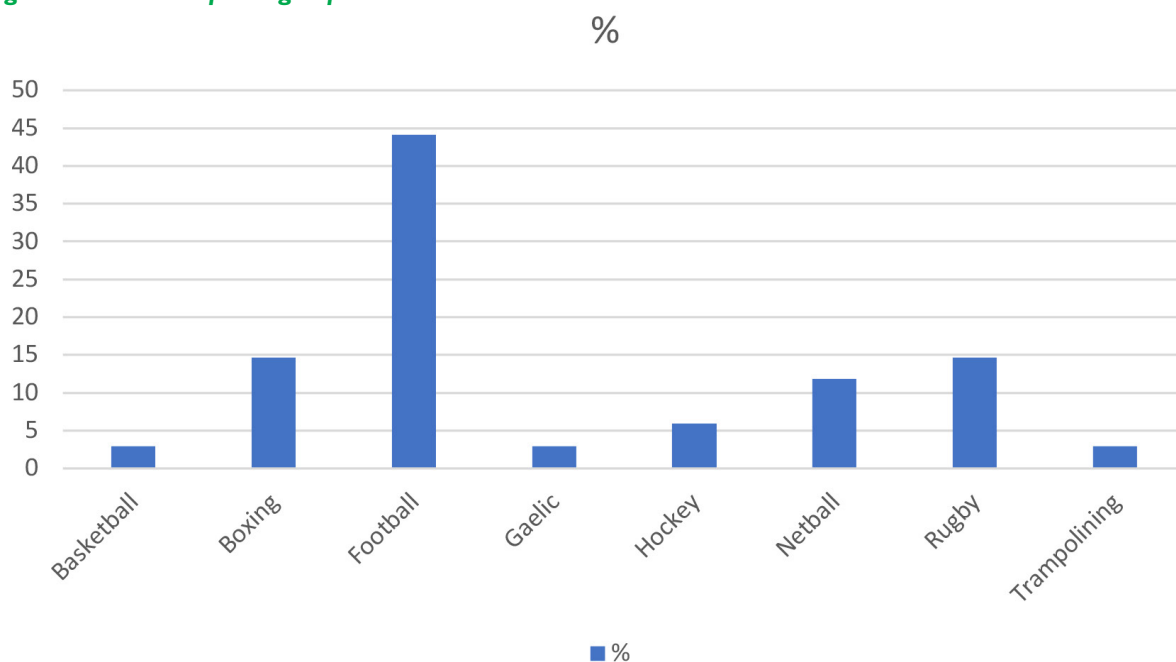
2.1. Initial Overview of Programme Engagement

The sporting partners successfully delivered 14 modules to 41 children and young people (21 were from Carrickfergus and Rathcoole and 20 were from North and East Belfast). Mean age of participants was 17.7 years old, range from 15 to 24. These participants all completed initial surveys.

In general, respondents were mostly male, with females constituting less than one quarter of the participants. However, there was significant geographical variation. In the Carrick and Rathcoole group, only 4.8% of respondents were female compared to 45% in the North and East Belfast group.

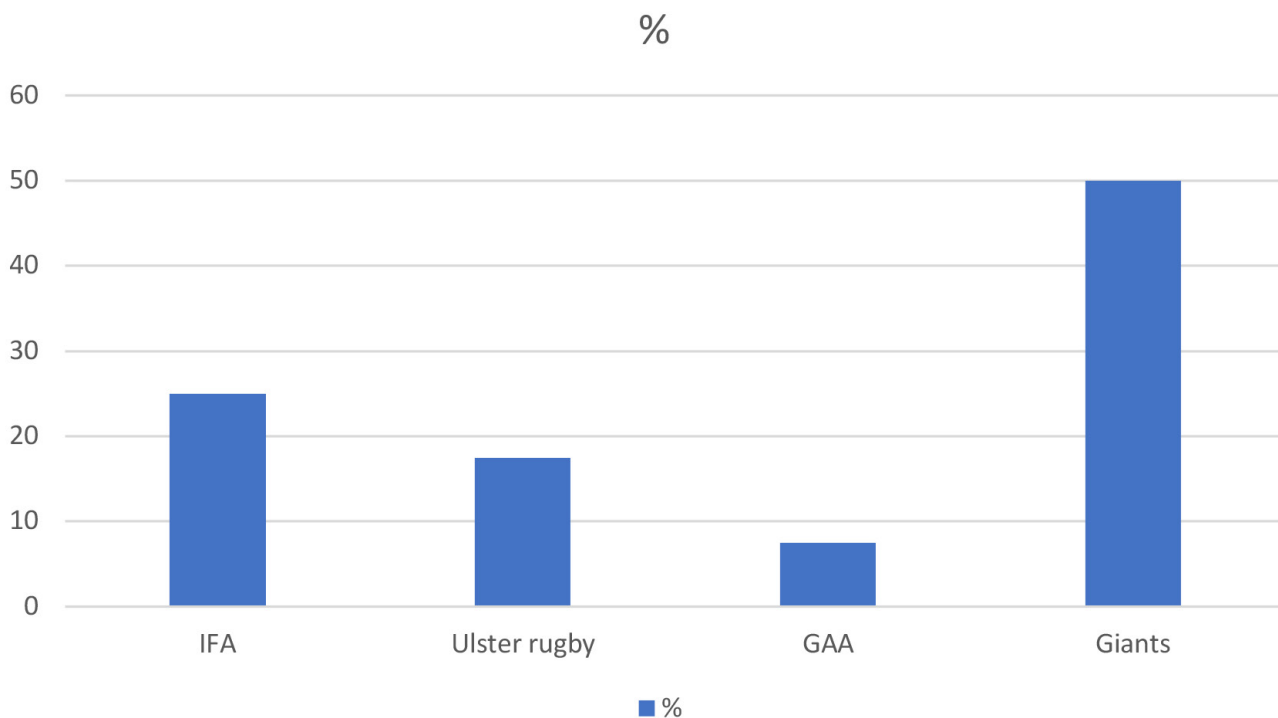
82.5% of the children and young people had played sport previously (see fig. 1). The majority had played football (44%), while boxing and rugby were joint second in terms of prior participation (14% respectively).

Figure 1: Previous Sporting Experience



Despite just under half of the participants prior experiences of playing football, prior to commencing the programme the training that respondents were most looking forward to engaging in ice hockey that was provided by the Belfast Giants (see fig. 2), indicating that many of the participants were keen to try something that they had not experienced before. That being said, many were also keen to engage in training provided by the other providers.

Figure 2: Sports Most Looking Forward To



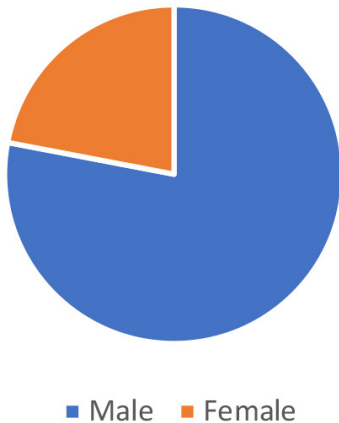
Participants were asked about what skills they were most interested in obtaining/developing. Most participants wanted to develop their volunteering skills (32.5%) and their physical fitness (32.5%). However, respondents were also interested in developing teamwork (15%), personal resilience (7.5%) and communication skills (10%).

The respondents were asked about their motivations for participating in the Fresh Start programme. A key motivating factor was the potential to gain a new qualification; 45% the children and young people cited this as one of their reasons for participation. While the opportunity to meet new people was cited second most by just over a quarter of the participants (27.5%).

2.2. Final Overview of Programme Engagement

Figure 3: Gender breakdown

Gender breakdown



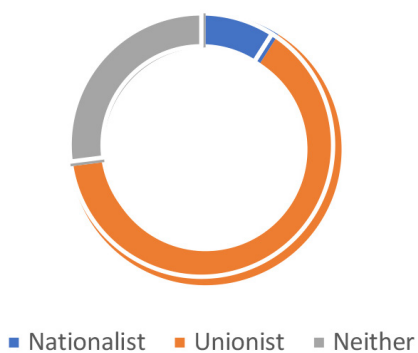
A total of 41 participants completed the final survey. 78% (n=32) were male and 22% (n=9) were female (see fig. 3)

On average, participants were 18.2 years old however this ranged between 13 years old and 28 years old, a range of 15 years.

90% of the total sample identified as Protestant. Interestingly, this did not appear to cross over onto political opinion given that only 54% of the total sample identified as unionist. In fact, less than 2/3 of those who identified as Protestant also identified as unionist (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Political affiliation

Political affiliation for those who identified as Protestant



Participants were asked to rate their overall experience using a scale ranging from 1-10 with 1 being the least positive and 10 being the most positive. On average, the self-reported score was 9.2. This ranged between 7 and 10 indicating a relatively high level of acceptability across the sample. Despite the significant age range, there was no correlation between age and this self-report measure of satisfaction indicating that there was sufficient variability across the programme to meet a range of developmental needs.

Participants were asked to identify from the five options (IFA, GAA, Ulster Rugby, Belfast Giants or all) the course which they enjoyed the most. Whilst there was a degree of variability in the responses, the majority of participants identified IFA as their preferred course (See fig. 5)

As figure 5 illustrates, there was not consistency between male and female participants. In fact, there was a statistically significant difference in several areas (P.033). In particular, there was significant divergence regarding the Belfast Giants and IFA, with females preferring the former and males preferring the latter. Whilst there was no statistically significant difference, there were subtle differences in how those who identified as nationalist and

how those who identified as unionist labelled their preferred courses. In particular, it appeared that nationalists were more likely to identify IFA, and unionists were more likely than nationalists to identify GAA. This suggests that both groups were being exposed to sports that they were previously unfamiliar with.

That said, the majority of respondents who completed the survey indicated that they had developed new skills (93%, n=38) and new knowledge (93%, n=38). There were no statistically significant differences between males and females, indicating that both were equally likely to report this effect. Interestingly, when this was disaggregated by political opinion, those who identified as neither nationalist nor unionist appeared less likely to report developing new knowledge (See fig. 6). This suggests that beyond the experience and in terms of knowledge acquisition, nationalist and unionists benefited more from the activities.

Figure 5: Course preference

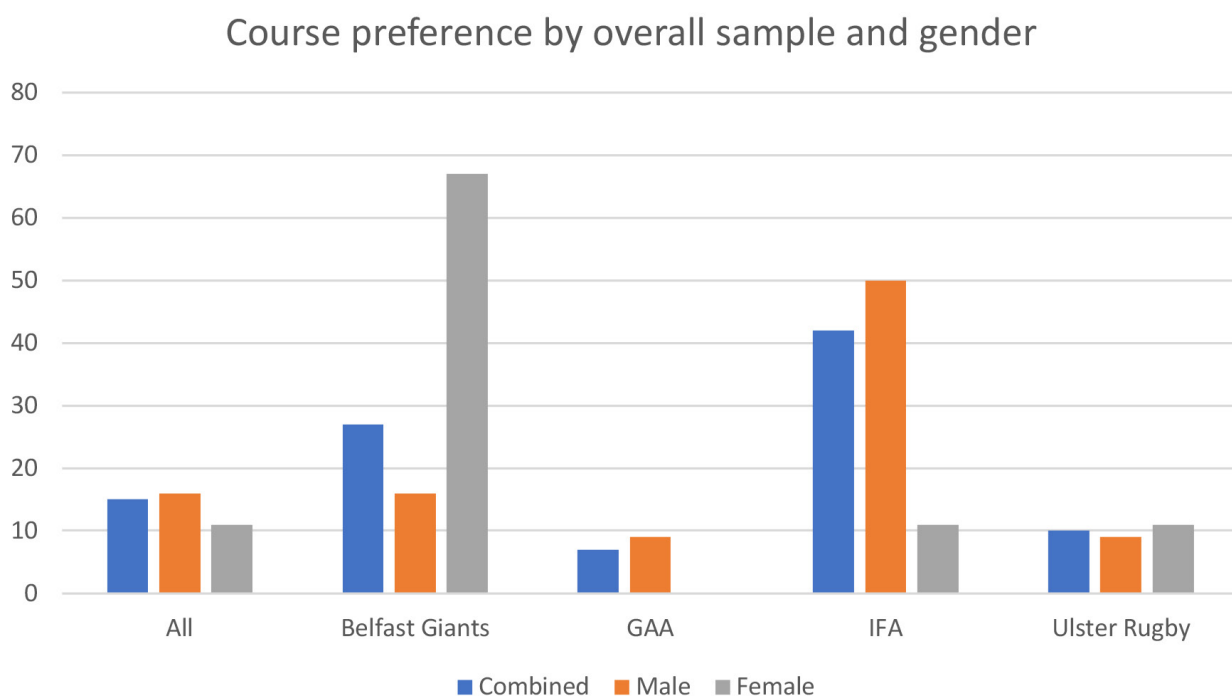
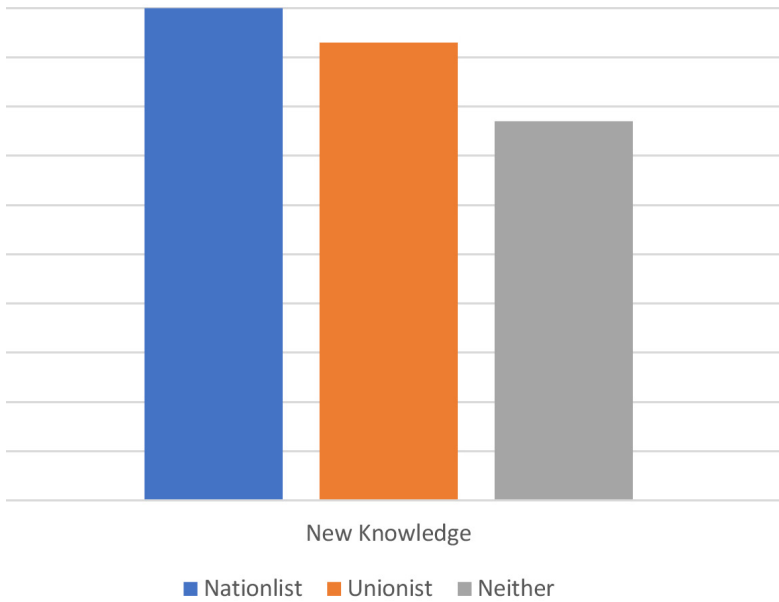
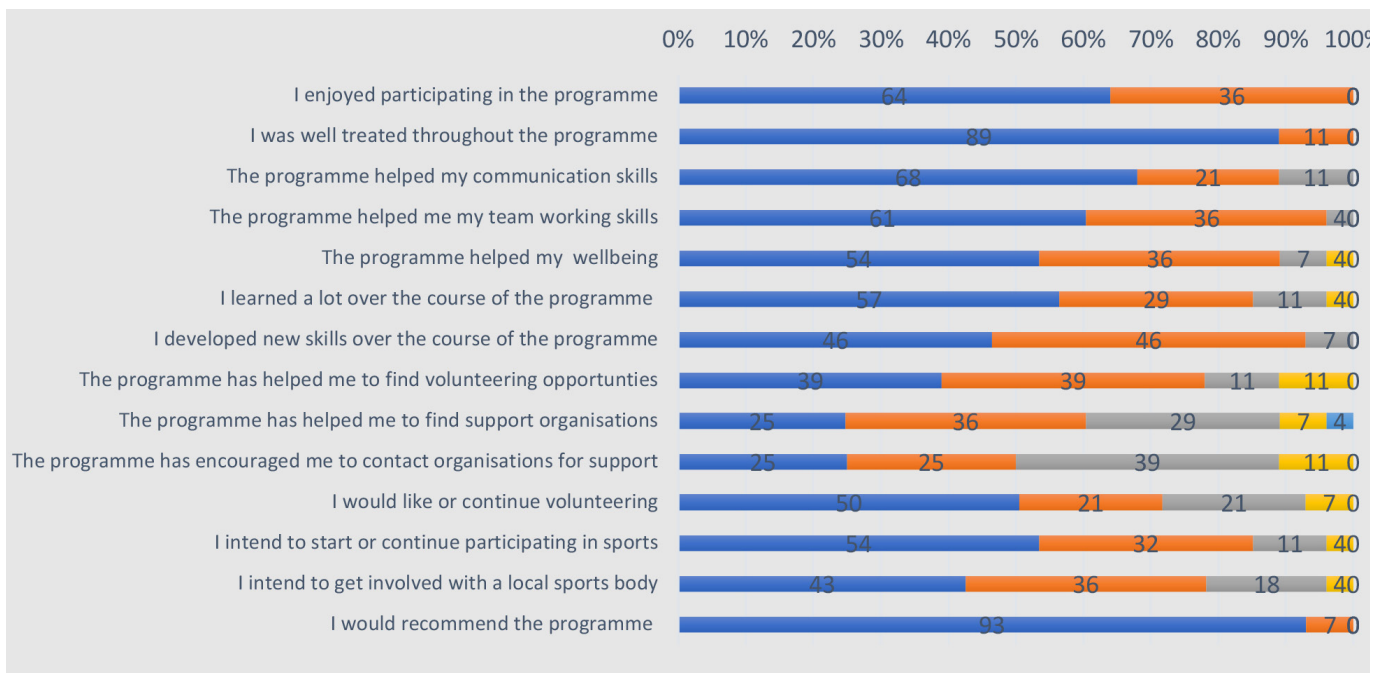


Figure 6: Knowledge by political affiliation



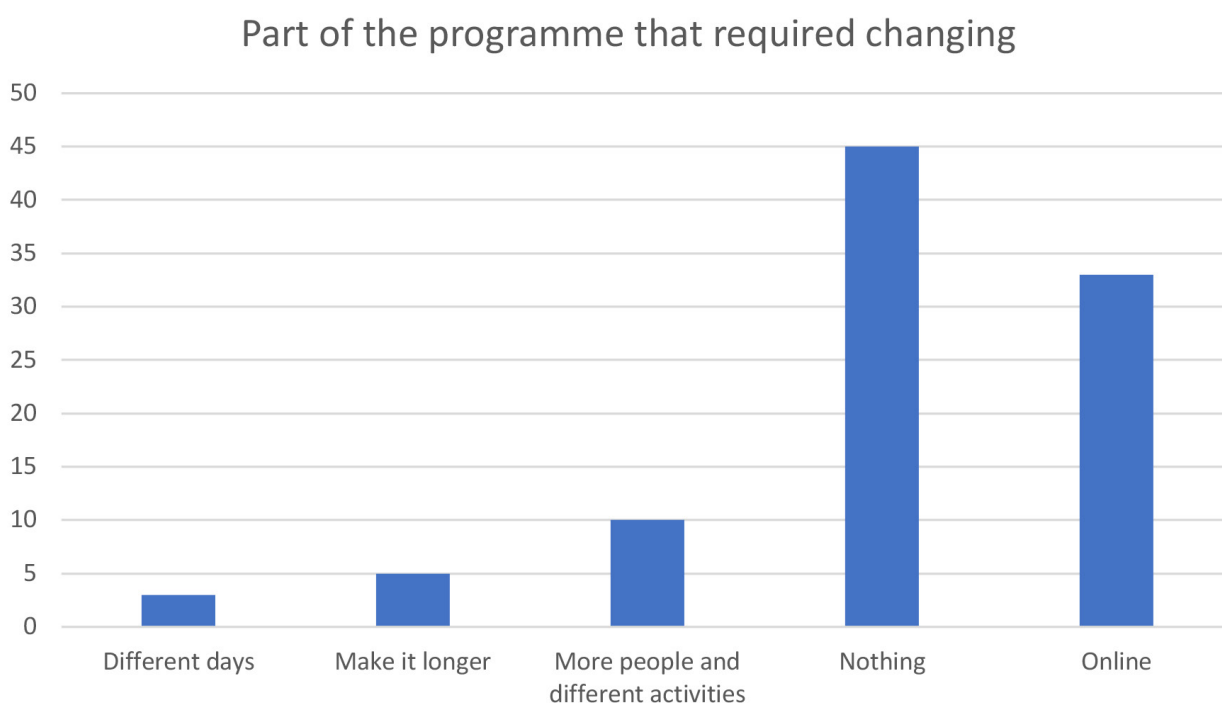
In total, 18 (43%) participants completed a series of ranked questions about a range of summative and evaluative issues. Fig. 7 provides an overview of the responses across the series.

Figure 7: Participant experiences



As a testament to the programme and experiences of the participants, 100% of respondents to the survey indicated that the programme met their expectations. The same proportion indicated that they would recommend the programme to others. That said, 22 respondents indicated that they would change some aspects of the programme. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of those who provided this data indicated that they preferred to move offline and engage in more practical and 'in-person' approaches (see fig. 8). **Section 3.2.** addresses these views in more detail.

Figure 8: Areas for development



3. KEY THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The following sections explore some of the key themes that emerged from the interviews (YP) and focus groups (FG) with FSTS participants (P), and interviews with the FSTS organisers and facilitators (F).

3.1. Breaking Down Barriers

3.1.1. Bringing people together

Across the focus groups and interviews the young people shared beliefs that these types of sport-based interventions were good at bringing people together and provided opportunities to meet new people:

Because they were all kind of like team-building things, you kind of got to know everybody. There were some people there...from different ethnic backgrounds...it was good to get out and meet different people and do different things. (P1, FGI)

The organisers and facilitators of the FSTS pilot programme also recognised the importance of bringing people together and meeting new people, they believed that this served as a vehicle for developing positive peer influence and building rapport. Particularly when the young people realised how many similarities they had with each other even though they were from different communities:

A lot of them are from a similar background, similar areas, facing similar challenges. Some maybe haven't had many opportunities in life. Some are obviously from traditional loyalist or nationalist/republican backgrounds...[Some] know who the drug dealers are, they know who the paramilitaries are. Some of them have been used in the past for various bits and pieces, and some have been involved in, maybe, more negative things within their communities. (F2)

The facilitators recognised how influential other peers can be for young people and hoped that they could use past participants as ambassadors in future:

I would like to have a number of ambassadors at the end of each of the programmes that would be involved in other programmes...some of the people that actually get involved that they actually are qualified at the end to deliver other stuff within their communities. (F2)

3.1.2. Encouraging cross-community interaction

The one-to-one interviews provided young people with the opportunity to talk about sectarianism at their interface areas, and reflect upon how sport-based interventions could be used to provide more of an understanding about other communities:

We used to cycle past the Short Strand to go round to the Woodstock...sometimes you would be cycling past and they were running out and trying to jump you. But it was the same in our community...As soon as they came down the Ravenhill Road they chased them to try and jump them and it was basically over nothing. There was no indication, there was no slabbering. It was just they're Catholic or they're Protestant. These programmes and courses are better for the community because they actually give you an understanding. (YP2)

Across the interviews and focus groups with young people there was a general belief that the programme encouraged cross community interaction:

Whenever you get talking to other people it brings them tensions down because whenever you are out and about, you are seeing each other as enemies... when you just get to speaking to them you realise everyone's just dead on. (P2, FGI)

Some of this was intertwined with maturity, as opposed to being directly linked to the programme:

P1: When we were all younger, I was probably trying to hit [P2] or something at that age, you know what I mean.

P2: I think there was constant fighting but as you grow you realise what are we at? You know what I mean like, you wise up. (FG1)

The programme helped facilitate cross community interaction in relation to different sports which may have been traditionally associated with one side or the other:

[There were people from] two different sides. Obviously half would play Gaelic; whereas on our side, everyone would turn their nose up at it and be like, I'm not playing that, that's only Catholics play that. But then that course brought us ones from the other side to come over and actually try Gaelic and some of them actually enjoyed it. (P2, FGI)

It completely changed some young people's opinions:

My views have definitely changed...Playing those sports that were so-called Catholic sports, like before I had no chance to play them; whereas now I know they are good fun to do. So if there was a chance to play them, it is a bit of fun, and we would do it now. So, it has definitely changed my views in terms of that. (P3, FGI)

They found learning about the governance of sports associated with other communities really interesting:

On the practical side of things... it was pretty good to actually play it [GAA] and take part and see what it was like. Even on the online session, that was pretty good learning about the different structure and stuff and the way of the GAA is made up – you know the way it being non-profit and the money going back into the community...It was new information and I found that pretty interesting... It is a good sport, I think if there was something like that in schools a lot of people would be interested in it...(P1, FG2)

It was evident that each of the sporting partners had a passion for their own sport, but also strongly believed that their sport was for everyone. For the sporting partners, breaking down barriers was not just about religious/political divides but was also about gender, age and disability:

Rugby is a game for all... rugby is for everyone, guys, girls of all ages and abilities. It is not just for people who have played it all through school... Historically, rugby would have been a middle-class Protestant sport, but we have thankfully thrown those shackles off... Rugby is fully inclusive; it is an All-Ireland sport as you are aware. Our growth area is the female game...we're trying to promote a mixed player sport. (F4)

Some of the facilitators/organisers had experience working with the young people in the community prior to the programme starting. They believed it could be a successful tool in diverting young people away from joining paramilitary/organised crime groups. In order to achieve this, they believed the programme needed to break down cultures and opinions about the role/influence/necessity of paramilitaries and police:

You have a good general base of what's going on in their lives beforehand and who they associating with in the community... Within these communities not many will come out and say I'm part of an organisation, but from your interactions or speaking to them you sort of read between the lines sometimes and get an idea that this is a big possibility for a young person... Sometimes, you get ones saying, but I'm protected... These statements really send alarm bells ringing. (F5)

The sporting partners spoke of being glad that they were not responsible for recruiting participants as this can often be a difficult task for similar projects:

We have ran events like this, but getting participants was always the challenge. Once that was taken off the hands of the sports bodies and into the PSNI or community links to get those young people involved that makes our lives easier in terms of delivering the programme...for us, the GAA, to go into Rathcool to try to get young people interested in Gaelic games, was always going to be a massive challenge, so when you had that link already made, and the participants are basically hand delivered to you, that makes our jobs easier and we can talk freely and do the activities. (F1)

Some of the facilitators queried whether the right people had been recruited i.e. were they at threat of joining paramilitaries or entering the criminal justice system:

My take is that this is a diversity programme, to encourage young people to stay on the right tracks, to broaden their knowledge and their horizon and learning about other sports and cultures. I suppose the challenge is that are the right young people involved? And that's something that I don't know... Are we always getting the good kids out of those areas, so the feedback's always going to be positive, or is there ones that definitely could have been led into other activities [paramilitarism/crime] and possibly through their engagement with this would have seen a bigger picture? (F1)

3.1.3. Challenging expectations and coming out of the comfort zone

Many of the young people that participated cited not knowing much about the programme initially, but just decided to 'give it a go'.

*I had just had the wee one and stuff...[that] took over my life, so I had zero interest [in taking part in the programme]...I was just a bit down in the dumps and **** just said to me 'look just try and give it a go', you know give it a go and you might like it. (P1, FGI)*

They believed that this would give them the confidence to engage in other similar programmes or sports in future:

It makes you are more willing to give anything a go, like any sports or like anything in general. You going oh flip, I might not do that, but do you know what, I'll just do it, what's the worst that can happen? (P2, FGI)

Many participants admitted not knowing much about some of the partnering sports, but they enjoyed participating in it:

I didn't have a clue about rugby. I knew nothing. Dare say I do know the basics now and I would watch it on TV now, I understand it more...I had zero interest in it. (P1, FGI)

'Giving it a go' enhanced the confidence of the participants:

Give everything a go. Never say no. Just try it. I mean it did open a lot of doors like. Obviously it gave me more confidence to go down and actually volunteer, and go to actually help the community, and do it more often. (P2, FG2)

Many of the young people cited that encouragement from friends and family was the main reason they took part:

The girlfriend, she was always saying just do, just do it...and when she was seeing me do it, she was saying Flip you're loving that, and you actually enjoy it, so it's good to see. (YP2)

By 'giving it a go', the young people realised how much they enjoyed participating in sports that are often associated with one community/background:

I knew nothing about rugby, I ended up buying a London Irish top, know what I mean, and I ended up getting really involved in it and all the guys deserve a lot of credit (YP1)

The GAA was actually the highlight...getting out and trying to play the sport, giving it a go myself...I actually would have thought, 'why kick and lift the ball, when you can just kick it?'; and then once you do it you actually realise it is a lot harder than it looks but it is actually great fun. (YP2)

3.1.4. New experiences, new skills

In the focus groups there was a clear motivation for young people to get out and try new things, new experiences and develop new skills. The more specialist and technical modules appeared to be some of the most interesting to the young people:

Belfast Giants were bringing in their medical coach who was like actually explaining what they go through and the procedures to help them back and what injuries they all get, which is interesting. (P2, FG1)

In a similar vein to the focus groups, in the one-to-one interviews the young people spoke of their desires to gain experience:

I wanted to gain experience within the different sports because I didn't know much...I gained a lot of knowledge [even about] the sports that I thought I knew a lot about...I didn't think I was going to get as much out of it as I did. I got way more out of it than what I thought. (YP1)

As with the focus group, the young people that participated in the interviews cited qualifications as a main motivator for staying involved:

We got to do the disability coaching Level 1...Coaching normal kids would be good, but I think disability coaching would be that much more rewarding...If the opportunity came up, I would be away. (YP1)

A lot of the young men spoke of wanting to volunteer, but were unsure of how to secure voluntary work:

Them getting you into volunteering too was actually an eye opener type of thing too. You sort of think of about doing it and you don't really know where to start. (YP2)

3.2. Online Delivery and the Impact of COVID-19

3.2.1. Programme planning and working in partnership through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Planning for the FSTS pilot programme began in advance of, and during, the widespread disruption caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Although planning was oriented towards in-person, face-to-face delivery, contingences were considered from the outset:

...so we did have a COVID backup plan – little did we realise that COVID backup plan was going to be used immediately...that was a massive, massive challenge...we had done very limited work on online delivery...that was a huge challenge for our planning but one that we overcame. (F2)

In pivoting to online delivery, the sporting partners placed an emphasis on developing and delivering the most engaging programme possible:

For us it was a completely new experience to deliver something online so it was really a brain-storming session - what can we do? What do we think we can do? What can we definitely do? What do we think works? What do we think is going to mimic what we intended to deliver as closely as possible? (F3)

The response to these questions was often framed as a process of learning and collaboration between the four sporting partners:

We had representation from the four sports on [the online workshops] just to see how they went...to see how the mechanics of it was working; to see the level of engagement; the numbers of young people on the call; all that type of thing was useful learning. (F1)

We were looking forward to...seeing what other organisations are doing and how they are delivering it and we are always looking to get better and deliver more...it was just a kind of “we will give it a go and see and, if it doesn't work, we will try something else and we will keep trying until we can't try anymore” (F3)

The facilitators and organisers consistently engaged in dialogue and feedback on what was working well, and what could be improved:

The conversation was ongoing so that at each regular meeting there would have been feedback...the regular meetings provided that opportunity to feed back and say what went well and what didn't work so well...(F1)

The result was a sense that the modified mode of delivery played a role in fostering enhanced dialogue and partnership between each sporting organisation involved:

If the pandemic hadn't hit...it would have been Giants delivering these modules; Ulster delivering these modules...there would have been a lot less meetings to change schedules, to see what can be [done], thinking on our feet. I would definitely say that the pandemic forced us into more of a partnered delivery than what was originally intended. (F3)

With this shared experience in adverse conditions, the organisers and facilitators described a sense of resilience with regards to the future prospects of FSTS:

...nearly by fault and design...we are looking at...things we wouldn't have considered doing because of COVID restrictions...Hopefully then in the coming groups...we will be able to go indoors and deliver a programme that is set out. If not, then we know that we can improvise and look at other areas. (F1)

3.2.2. Positives of online delivery

A number of participants noted the benefits that came with experiencing the programme in an online context. For many, the programme offered something to do and engage with during periods of lockdown:

It was something to look forward to like...they were going to open, and they were going to do stuff outside and then they had, stuff booked and you were waiting for that and then like, oh we can't do that we have to do a zoom. But then again you weren't minding because they were bringing in all different aspects...(P1, FG1)

The facilitators were consistently praised for their efforts both in hosting interesting and engaging online sessions 'in the circumstances':

...if they were ever doing the zoom they always had things like flowing well and they talked through things well and you could see that they actually did care and they did try...(P3, FG1)

The relative accessibility of the online sessions was seen by several participants as a positive factor in the programme's delivery:

If we had half on zoom and half in person, then, that would have been handy. If you are coming home from a job, you have to move fast to get caught up again that can be hard doing that each week, so if there is a balance, I think that would work. (P3, FG1)

Although there were benefits to the online delivery, the blurred boundaries of home life and programme participation also presented challenges:

I thought it was good and the boys that run it and us, we got out of it as much as we could...Half the time I was sitting out in the Mrs's car cos I couldn't go into the house because the kids were going mental...But everyone got what they could out of it. (YPI)

3.2.3. Limitations of online delivery

For the facilitators, attempts to build rapport with participants was stymied due to the relative disconnectedness of the online sessions:

The online engagement is fine but most turn off their cameras and it's very hard...it's the same for everybody they like to hide behind the camera and have their microphone on mute and listen to what's going on and that's fine you know, but...it's hard to really get to know the young people from a presenter's background. (F1)

Limited online engagement was similarly frustrating for the participants who felt that a lack of interaction was a key component missing from the programme of activities:

I thought there was a lot of people on it that didn't make the effort...There were people coming onto zoom and turning their video off and their audio off... I think that was COVID. I think if they had of met up they would have got a bit more enjoyment out of it. (YP1)

For some, a reluctance to engage stemmed from a discomfort with the online format:

I didn't like it. It was because at the very start there were 20 people on it and then there was the coaches too. It was really scary to talk. I feel like as it went on and it got smaller, I could turn my camera on and interact. (YP4)

Where participants did get to experience some face-to-face interaction at junctures over the course of the programme, the interactivity of these sessions threw the online format into a more negative relief:

The days when we got to meet up, they were good craic, they were, I mean it's a sports programme, so you want it to be in and around sport. The days we did get to do that - I thought the programme was actually pretty good. (P1, FG2)

I still think the sessions that they gave were really, really good and it was nice to get an insight on it, but I think they would be far better if they were face-to-face. (YP4)

While the online mode of delivery was a necessary component of this iteration of the FSTS programme, it limited some of the originally planned physical elements of several modules:

I think we missed a little bit as well by not having the face-to-face stuff for the young people...I think an element of physicality helps to break things down...I have seen it on numerous occasions that its transformative... (F4)

3.2.4. Learning from the online experience

The programme organisers and facilitators identified a range of potential learning opportunities arising out of the online mode of delivery, including the relative ease of facilitation across multiple organisations:

I think we found that some of the joint sessions...worked well and are easier to do in a digital or virtual setting... it's easier to be able to get panellists together for a one-hour session on zoom; it's easier scheduling wise and you might be able to get people who have a bit more to offer but who don't have a lot of time...(F3)

In addition, there was view that some online sessions may enhance accessibility and allow for attendance from a larger number of participants:

There's that sort of balance there, between engagement and attendance...making it assessable for people online might generate more people attending than bringing people it to a group. (F1)

This was supported by some of the participants, who highlighted the 'balance' that could be achieved by offering some online sessions:

If we had half on zoom and half in person, then, that would have been handy. If you are coming home from a job, you have to move fast to get caught up again that can be hard doing that each week, so if there is a balance, I think that would work. (P3, FGI)

Interaction with participants was highlighted as the core component of any programme moving forward:

Well, it's okay to do zoom things as well – there's been learning in that for us...but it's the interaction with young people that's what it's about you know. (F4)

Across all interviews and focus groups, participants noted their desire to have experienced more icebreaker activities throughout the programme:

P2: At the start of it they could have maybe made us all come onto camera and then do like a group activity and... at least we could see everyone's face...

P1: Yeah, like an icebreaker

P2: Introduce yourself. There was none of that, you were just straight in and you were just seeing names and you didn't know who was who. (FG1)

Participants were keen to note that icebreakers may have allowed for more participation during the online sessions:

If they had done the ice breakers that would have probably made the modules a bit better on zoom. If they had started with the ice breakers on zoom and got everyone a bit comfortable with talking in the groups then some of them that would have been more valuable...(P2, FGI)

Participants also noted that additional icebreakers may have improved their experiences during the few face-to-face sessions:

Obviously I would have done more ice-breakers, like getting to know each other's names...it would have been nice to go in in the first game and throw a ball pass to someone and call their name and then get them to throw to someone and call their name so you were sort of picking up an idea and putting a face to a name...you didn't really know [other participants] that well because a lot of people had their cameras off half the time...(YP2)

3.3 Looking Forward

3.3.1. Offering pathways and opening doors

There were examples where the course provided further pathways and future opportunities to be involved in sport and coaching. The participants found the prospect of gaining coaching qualifications and relevant experience really appealing:

Some people have kids, so if they are taking their kids to football there will be some football teams who are saying is there any chance that you would give us a hand to coach. Obviously, if we have those qualifications, it's going to make it easier for us to give more to them and stuff (P1, FG1)

I know with some of my friends, the older ones...the concept of the coaching...getting involved in different things along those lines and maybe there being more opportunities down the line, that would intrigue them (P1, FG2)

Quotes from the programme facilitators highlight their support for offering pathways:

I suppose the opportunity to participate in the sessions and again, accreditation to them and stuff, all of that is important, because they've just been offered their wall-to-wall disability football coaching course...I'm hopeful a few of our guys will sign up to that and that's then something that could potentially lead to offers for paid employment. (F6)

3.3.2. Volunteering and giving back

The benefit and opportunities of volunteering were highlighted by participants and programme facilitators. Furthermore, the programme provided an experience to attendees that made them realise that there are some people in their community that need help, and volunteering could contribute to helping:

We actually...volunteer[ed] by packing up parcels and stuff around Christmas time which was actually good to be involved and to give back to the community and stuff...you see everyone doing but sometimes you never get the chance to do it yourself or have like the confidence to go down and do it like, just 'can I come down and help?' Whereas they opened that door for you, you know what I mean? (P2, FG1)

I think it's something a lot of us take for granted is having a Christmas dinner sat down in front of you and a few toys around the tree whereas I in 3 or I in 4 kids in NI live in poverty and might not have that opportunity. So, it puts it into context about how lucky you are do you know about being able to give back even if it's just a couple of hours to help out towards that, it's always nice to do. (P1, FG2)

...most people you don't know are living in poverty and won't be able to get as much so it's be good to spend a couple of hours to know you'd be helping someone out. (P2, FG2)

In individual interviews, participants had these views about how the programme provided an opportunity to volunteer. As above, these opportunities were highlighted as one of the most significant and impactful moments across the programme:

I think it was getting involved, I always wanted to volunteer and I never really had the opportunity to...(YP4)

They also made us go down and volunteer which was a real highlight, it was sort of giving back to people who were less fortunate and stuff and trying to actually help people out which obviously makes you feel good about yourself about why flip haven't I done this before, where I can put a smile on someone's face just by doing this and its very beneficial towards yourself. (YP2)

*I think the best thing that we done...It was all of us involved in the course, we all went to the SSE before it was turned into the vaccine centre and sorted out the hampers for families that didn't have much. I think it was about two weeks before Christmas. I loved that. Literally, loved that. It was just you realise how much you are helping...ah, ****it was unreal. It was unbelievable. (YP1)*

Other areas in which participants were keen to explore volunteering opportunities also related to the sports industry more generally (e.g., club sport).

The facilitators shared the participants' views on the value of the programme's integrated volunteering opportunities. Across facilitators and organisers, there was an aspiration that the programme would encourage further engagement and participation in community-based volunteering opportunities:

From our side we were very impressed at how stuck in they really got into it and got involved in it. There was few that continued on past the time where we said right the session is over, you don't have to do this anymore and they were all we want to finish this what we are doing. I think it's important to us, it is important to our organisation and to our culture so I think to imprint that on the participants is an important part for us. (F3)

3.3.3. Programme impact and evolution

There were examples of the programme impact on those who attended focus groups:

This [programme] is a good thing because we're getting to learn new things instead of going round and getting affected by drugs, we're sitting here learning new stuff about football, rugby, you know? (P2, FG1)

Definitely through sport it is one of the best ways to break down barriers and especially when it comes to cross-community...being part of a team, having a general purpose or cause and things like that there helps bring people together. (P1, FG2)

It makes you are more willing to give anything a go, like any sports or like anything in general. You going oh flip, I might not do that, but do you know what, I'll just do it, what's the worst? Even if you don't think it suits you, give it a go anyway. You know mate, I had no interest at all in doing it, and then I loved it, its class, unreal. (P1, FG1)

Individual interviews revealed that the programme provided some participants with additional communication skills, helped those who had previous experience of anxiety to get involved in something different that they would not put themselves forward for, it developed the skill of patience for some, and for some the programme was beneficial in helping them to meet new people, get involved and engage in social activities. The participants also noted the potential of the programme moving forward:

I would say that it has potential...I think it'd be a great time to get more groups on the ground and get young people involved in cross-community, showing them that people across the road are just the same as you they just support a different football team or a different political party. It's not the end of the world, so there would be great potential to do something like that with this type of programme, obviously with great facilities and the backings of the major sort of organisations that they have. (P1, FG2)

All the programme facilitators had a positive view of the programme, its impact and its potential. These views are expressed below:

You can be caught in your own silos, and neighbourhoods and not go too far beyond that. If you are up for the challenge of educating yourself and going to university and things like that it can be a real eye opener and real life-changing thing. Hopefully, through some of the subtle messages fired into the groups you may well pick up...some of the young people may well pick up on that and decide on changes...It mightn't be something that initially or immediately changed but two years down the line, those experiences could manifest themselves into what choices that young person makes. (F1)

I think there always has to be a legacy, should that legacy be getting involved in coaching or volunteering or refereeing with sport, volunteering in the community, whatever it would be. I think outcomes in my mind are always very important so from that point of view, I think aspirations is to deliver the programmes that we are contracted to deliver but to make an impact in that they do say to us, "Right, this has been so good we want to extend this programme, we want to make it a mainstream programme over the years." (F2)

So, if we can get that going forward with this programme, where people are involved and people are coming back and people pitching in, I think that that sells the programme and it's important and hopefully will change the participants' lives because...people believe what they can see, so if they see it working for other people then, they will throw themselves into it more. That would be my vision for this programme going forward. (F3)

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recruitment

Recruitment to the FSTS pilot programme was influenced by the impact of COVID-19. The FSTS pilot programme was notably more successful at recruiting and engaging those from the PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) community compared with the CNR (Catholic Nationalist Republican) community. There were also significantly more males who participated, and the programme recruited several older participants potentially not at risk of becoming involved in extremist behaviours or joining organised crime groups. Evidence suggests that there are opportunities for a more formal and rigorous focus on programme recruitment to ensure that those who may benefit the most from engagement with the programme are encouraged to participate, and that there is a more balanced demographic of participants. There is scope to have all FSTS partners involved in a collaborative process of identifying referral partners, and monitoring recruitment to future iterations of the project. This can be accomplished via a Fresh Start Through Sport Working Group (see recommendation 11).

2. Volunteering

Engaging in community-based volunteering opportunities were highlighted by participants as some of the most enjoyable, enlightening and valuable experiences that they had over the course of the FSTS pilot programme. Further embedding volunteering opportunities, and signposting to volunteering opportunities, at key junctures over the course of future programmes will further enhance the participant experience, and encourage participants' engagement with community-based volunteering opportunities outside of their engagement with FSTS.

3. Qualifications

Participants frequently expressed a strong desire to take further opportunities for personal and career-oriented development, especially any opportunities to gain qualifications (e.g. coaching). This desire also played a key role in motivating participants to remain involved with the FSTS pilot programme despite the challenging public health context. Ensuring FSTS programme accreditation, and providing consistent signposting to voluntary and employment opportunities with local sporting organisations will further enhance the participant experience.

4. Icebreakers

Programme participants consistently expressed their desire to have had further interaction with their peers over the course of the various modules delivered. Although any scope for interactivity was inevitably stymied by the online mode of delivery, participants felt that integrated ice-breaker activities would have helped to facilitate increase dialogue and participation among a wider range of participants. Integrating a variety of ice-breakers over the course of future programmes, whether online or in-person, should improve participation and interaction.

5. Online

While participants and organisers consistently expressed their frustrations with the online mode of delivery, there are components of the online model that could be effectively maintained and integrated in future programmes. Where multiple sporting partners are delivering a single module or session, these may be more effectively facilitated via an online forum. In addition, sessions more heavily oriented towards classroom-based learning might also benefit from increased participation due to enhanced accessibility. However, the individual circumstances of participants must be considered when organising any sessions that may require stable internet access, and/or access to a suitable electronic device.

6. Collaboration

Members of each sporting partner involved in the organisation and facilitation of the programme emphasised the benefits of working in close partnership over the course of the FSTS pilot programme. This enhanced partnership was facilitated and prompted by the wider public health circumstances and the need to pivot to an online mode of delivery. However, this enhanced dialogue and reflexive approach was an example of good practice which should be maintained in future iterations of the programme.

7. Activity

Any scope for physical activity was invariably going to be impacted upon by the wider public health context. However, both participants and facilitators consistently highlighted the necessity for classroom-based sessions to be supported, textured and enhanced by physical activity.

8. Signposting

The data available, while coloured by the context in which the surveys were delivered, indicated participants' desire for clearer and more consistent signposting to available support organisations in participants' local communities. Integrating this signposting into programme delivery should increase pathways to support, volunteering and other opportunities.

9. Ambassadors

Related to recommendations 1 and 2, organisers of future FSTS programmes might consider using former participants to help in the planning, organisation, delivery and review of FSTS. Participants expressed a clear desire for further volunteering opportunities, and many also expressed a desire to be involved in training and coaching. There was also a sense that older participants may have played a valuable mentorship role for some of the younger programme participants. Programme organisers similarly indicated the desire for some participants to become involved as 'ambassadors' for FSTS. The potential for the shared ownership and co-production of future programmes represents a unique opportunity for future iterations of the project.

10. Evaluation

It will be important for the UU research team to take full ownership over the design and delivery of all survey instruments in any future iterations of the FSTS programme. Doing so will ensure consistent alignment with expected programme outputs and outcomes, and engender a clearer link between each of the three phases of the evaluation process.

11. Fresh Start Through Sport Working Group

The research team were invited to several meetings with the sporting partners and were impressed by the governance of the programme, particularly considering the public health context. The programme would benefit from formalising these meetings and establishing an Evaluation Working Group (EWG) that consisted of key stakeholders that meet monthly to provide advice and support across the following areas:

- Recruiting participants;
- Receiving input from ambassadors;
- Sharing expertise and information about specific community settings in which the programme is delivered;
- Sharing and, where relevant, adopting existing strategies to engage and accommodate the complex needs of participants;
- Working towards developing volunteering opportunities and further accreditations for participants;
- Having continued stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process to maintain focus, increase user involvement, and develop impact;
- Discussing the implications of the research and how it can shape future policy and practice.

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