



“A Whole New Experience”: An Evaluation of Fresh Start Through Sport 2022-23

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“A Whole New Experience”

An Evaluation of Fresh Start Through Sport 2022-23



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FRESH START THROUGH SPORT 22-23

Foreword

In September 2022, Ulster University (UU) was commissioned by the Irish Football Association (IFA) on behalf of the Department for Communities to continue its evaluation of the Fresh Start Through Sport (FSTS) programme for the 2022-23 delivery period. This report builds upon the evaluation of the 2020-21 and 2021-22 iteration of Fresh Start Through Sport. The evaluation was supported by public agencies, community organisations, the Irish Football Association (IFA), and their sporting partners, namely the Belfast Giants, Ulster Rugby, and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Facilitators and organisers from these groups provided guidance on the evaluation's direction and took part in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Young people who participated in the Fresh Start Through Sport programme also contributed to the evaluation by sharing their experiences in focus groups. The core research team consisted of Dr Brendan Coyle, Dr Conor Murray and Dr Colm Walsh.

The purpose of the research underpinning this report was to continue evaluating the Fresh Start Through Sport programme in alignment with its intended outcomes and goals. The research objectives were as follows:

- Assess programme outcomes by measuring indicators such as attendance levels, the number of activities delivered, and the percentage of participants referred into coaching and/or volunteering.
- Gain an understanding of participants' experiences and attitudes towards the Fresh Start Through Sport programme.
- Develop case studies featuring participants or groups to showcase the programme's impact and demonstrate its alignment with desired outcomes and targets.
- Explore the benefits of the programme for participants and identify areas that could be improved.
- Provide recommendations to contribute to the development of an ongoing and iterative programme of activity.

This report delves into each of these objectives, highlighting examples of good practice, identifying potential areas for improvement, and proposing a series of recommendations to inform future iterations of the programme.

The research team extends its gratitude to all individuals who generously participated in interviews and focus groups. Special thanks are also due to the IFA and key stakeholders for their continuous support and guidance throughout the research process.

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Introduction and Background

Section

Introduction

The 2015 'Fresh Start' agreement outlines the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to 'dealing with the impact of continued paramilitary activity' and associated criminality across four key areas: 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). Section A of the agreement specifically focuses on the promotion of lawfulness and includes a series of subsidiary actions aimed at fostering and sustaining cross-sector, community-oriented partnerships that promote lawfulness and the cultivation of a wider culture of lawfulness.

This report addresses the work of a primary intervention¹ operating under Phase 2 (2021-2024) of the NI Executive's Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC). Having adopted a benefits management approach in phase two, the programme has the strategic objective of promoting 'safer communities, resilient to paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control'. This primary programme objective is framed using two overarching end-benefits, around which EPPOC's work streams are organised:

1. **People and communities are safe from the harm caused by paramilitarism.**
2. **People and communities are more resilient to paramilitary influence and involvement in paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime.**

Where work stream one places an emphasis on addressing 'harm in the here and now', work stream two of the programme seeks to support 'early, preventative interventions', with a view to reducing risks, increasing and enhancing protective factors, and breaking the cycle of harm caused by paramilitaries and paramilitarism. As a primary intervention within work stream two, the Fresh Start Through Sport (FSTS) programme aims to contribute to the realisation of benefits related to increasing community resilience, and strengthening protective factors which can contribute to long-term harm reduction. **Section 5** of this report examines how FSTS contributes to the realisation of some of the specific intermediary benefits identified by EPPOC.

¹ A project designed to prevent harm before it occurs (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021)

1.1. Background to the Fresh Start Through Sport Programme

International human rights organisations, national governments, and sports governing bodies continue to promote participation in sports among children and adults (Spaaij, 2013; Yelamos et al., 2019). Many of organisations advocate for the concept of 'sport for development,' which encourages "the use of sport, or any form of physical activity, to provide both children and adults with the opportunity to achieve their full potential through initiatives that promote personal and social development" (UNICEF, 2019: 3). One aspect of the 'sport for development' approach involves using sports to engage and support young people who are considered 'at-risk,'² 'vulnerable,' or 'marginalized' (Luna et al., 2020). These programs, referred to here 'as sport-based interventions' (SBIs), are often implemented in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (see, for example, Kelly, 2010), and often with a specific focus on "education, employment and training, community leadership and healthy lifestyles"³ (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012). The underlying rationale behind such interventions is to view young people as individuals with "resources to be developed" rather than "problems to be solved" (Bruner et al., 2021: 1).

In October 2020, the Irish Football Association, Gaelic Athletic Association, Ulster Rugby, and the Belfast Giants, four of the largest sporting organisations in Northern Ireland, joined forces to implement a sport-based intervention called Fresh Start Through Sport. This program, supported by the Department for Communities, the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime Programme, and Police Service of Northern Ireland, aims to engage young people aged 16-24 from areas experiencing multiple deprivation, who may be 'at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism and/or organised crime' (Department for Communities, 2020). The underlying concept of FSTS interventions thus far is that sports have a universal appeal and can serve as a catalyst to motivate young people to develop their agency, self-confidence, and self-efficacy through opportunities for physical activity, sports-based learning, and person-centred support.

The four sporting partners collaborate to offer a range of sport-based modules focused on a variety of subjects including racism, disability, and the mental health benefits of sports. These modules aim to provide guidance and support to participants in order to help them identify and make positive life choices. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a pathway for participants to move away from paramilitarism and towards community engagement, coaching, or volunteering within or parallel to their favoured sports and

² 'At-risk' refers to multiple and interlinked risk behaviours, including substance abuse, disengagement from school, self-harm, suicide, extremism, criminality, and subsequent involvement with the juvenile/criminal justice system (Knight et al., 2018).

³ Studies suggest that participating in sport may improve self-esteem, enhance social bonds, and provide participants with a feeling of purpose (see e.g., Breslin and Leavey, 2019; Coyle et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Luna et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Rodriguez-Bravo et al., 2020).

activities. At Ulster University, our multidisciplinary research team has been investigating the use and effectiveness of this sport-based intervention as a means of engaging with young people who may be at risk of involvement in paramilitarism and/or organised crime.

1.2. Fresh Start Through Sport Programme To-Date

To date, we have seen a number of positive examples of the impact that FSTS can have on the lives of young people in marginalised settings. Through our ongoing evaluations of each phase of delivery, the evidence base concerning the effectiveness of the FSTS programme is becoming more readily apparent. We have found that bringing young people from different communities together through the conduit of sport has a positive impact on young people's aspirations, and can serve as a vehicle for developing positive peer influence and building cross-community rapport.

The 2021-22 iteration of FSTS saw a return to in-person delivery following the predominately online model employed during the Fresh Start Through Sport pilot programme (2020-21). Renewed opportunities to improve the physical literacy of participants were warmly received, and the intrinsic value of personalised, informal interactions and conversations before, during and after sessions became apparent over the course of the evaluation process. In

addition, the programme continued to challenge and disrupt negative stereotypes and preconceptions through its unique multi-sport model of delivery, while offering aspirational pathways and opportunities for participants.

The current report builds on the existing evidence base by further exploring the impact and effectiveness of the programme. Participants to FSTS 2022-23 included a total of 98 males and females from areas identified by the Fresh Start organisers and coordinators: East Belfast, Newtownards, Lurgan, and Derry/Londonderry.

1.3. The Ambassador Programme

2022-23 also saw the introduction of the Ambassador programme⁴, involving a number of participants who expressed a desire to further engage with Fresh Start Through Sport and the associated sporting partners. Although outside the scope of the current evaluation, this parallel programme was devised as a pathway for continued education via an OCN Level 2 in sport and volunteer development, offering participants the opportunity to engage in volunteering opportunities both within sport and their local communities. The programme's modular content was structured to align with learning outcomes regarding sports development and volunteer development. In addition, participants engaged with further specialised training delivered by Lauren O'Malley. "Achieve" is a personalised

⁴ In response to recommendations included in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 Fresh Start Through Sport programme evaluations (Coyle et al. 2021, 2022).

motivational curriculum tailored to assist participants in reflecting on their individual strengths, targeting areas for development, and identifying aspirations for the future.

The expressed goal of the Ambassador programme is to create a network of passionate advocates who can help promote Fresh Start through sport, engage with their communities, open future pathways, and drive positive change. As such, its introduction is a welcome, positive response to the ongoing development and success of the Fresh Start Through Sport programme.

1.4. Methodology

The research underpinning this report was conducted over three phases, between September 2022 and June 2023, and involved a mixed methods approach. The 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 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 programme⁵.

The third and final phase of the research involved the completion of six in-person focus groups (up to eight participants per group) with programme participants. These focus groups 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. We also completed six online semi-structured interviews with programme organisers and facilitators in order to review the ongoing development of the programme and collaboration between programme partners. Finally, for the first time, the research team also conducted semi-structured interviews with PSNI officers from the neighbourhood policing teams in each area of delivery to explore the impact of the programme from a policing perspective⁶. 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.

⁵ The content and mode of delivery for both the baseline and endline surveys were modified in order to constructively align with the survey tools used to gather data by the wider Ending the Harm research team. However, the use of an online mode of delivery caused a degree of disruption to the endline surveys, with respondents misremembering/misinputting unique identifiers and/or re-using a link to the baseline survey.

⁶ The inclusion of interviews with police officers was based on feedback from participations in previous reports which indicated improved perspectives towards both individual officers, and the police in general (Coyle et al, 2021, 2022).

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to search inductively for concepts, categories and themes in the data collected. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The method establishes the reliability and validity of the analysis process and final theme construction by means of several checks, conducted throughout the study, that ensure findings are accurate and rigorous (Sparkes, 1998). Mean average, ranges, and percentages were calculated for key demographic information.

Section 2 of the report addresses some of the key information that emerged from the surveys. **Section 3** explores key themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups.

Programme Delivery and Participation

Section
2

Programme Delivery

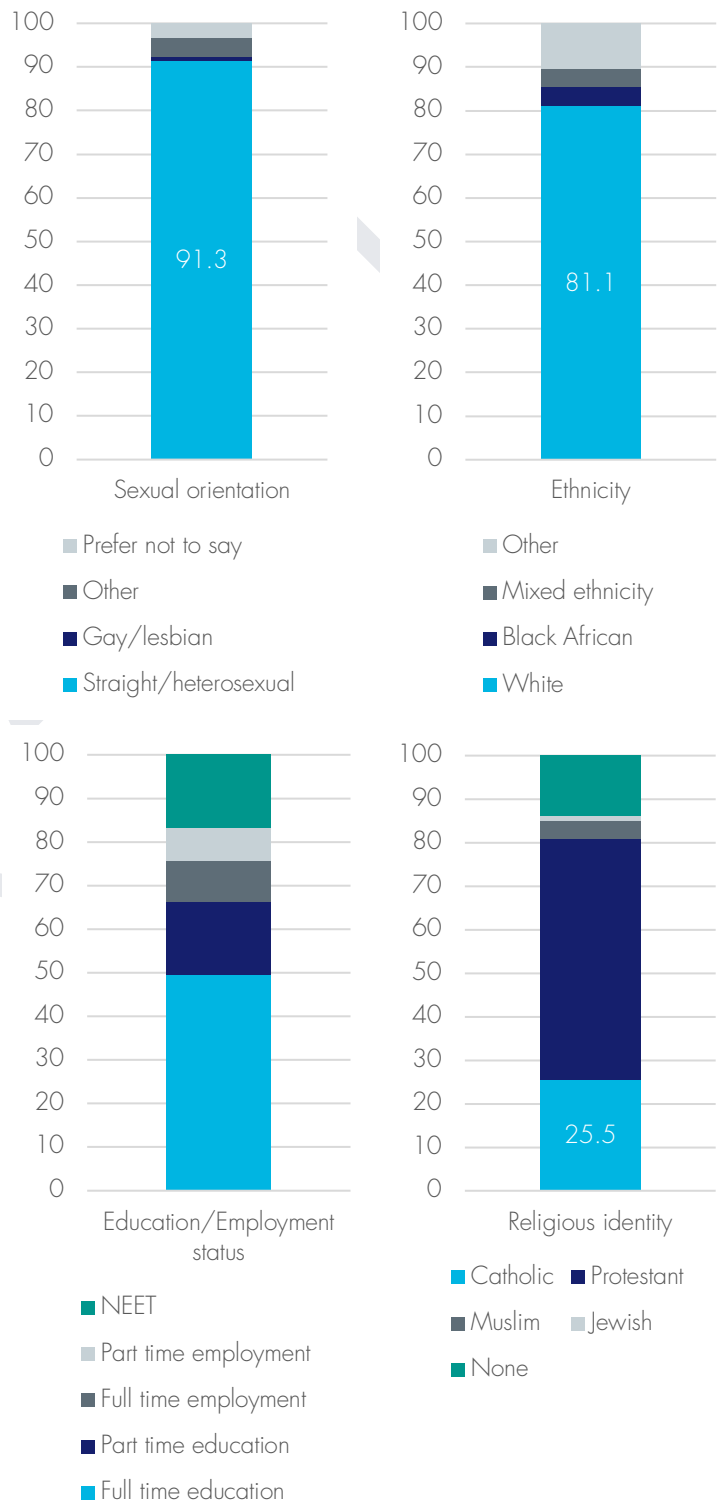
The 2022-23 iteration of Fresh Start Through Sport was delivered to four different cohorts, with participants drawn from areas surrounding East Belfast, Newtownards, Lurgan, and Derry/Londonderry. In total, 98 participants completed a baseline survey at the beginning of the programme. This provided details on key aspects of the participants characteristic as well as on a range of programme specific metrics prior to delivery.

2.1. Profile of the Group

On average, participants were 17.6 years old. The majority of participants were male, but only by a small proportion (54.6% v 45.4%). There has been substantially increased representation of females on the programme when compared with previous years (see Coyle et al, 2021; 2022). The majority of participants identified as straight/heterosexual, with only 1% of participants identifying as gay or lesbian (see Figure 1). Ethnically, the participants were highly homogenous with more than 90% of participants identifying as white. The majority of participants identified as protestant (55.3%), with a substantial minority identifying as Catholic (25.5%). However, a significant minority reported that they had no religious affiliation (13.8%). Whilst most reported being in full time education (49.5%), a significant minority reported that they were not actively

engaged in education, training or employment (16.8%).

Figure 1: Profile of the group



The majority of participants identified as being unionist (37.1%) and 20.6% identified as being nationalist. Interestingly, 42.3% reported that they were neither unionist nor nationalist. This trend was reflected in how participants characterised the areas that they lived in. For example, 41.2% reported living in a predominantly unionist area, a minority reported living in a largely nationalist area (22.7%) and more than a third (36.2%) reported living in a politically neutral area. Combined, this potentially suggests that Catholic/Nationalist/Republican participants are under-recruited during the programme.

2.2. Previous experience with sport

The majority of participants reported having had experienced football previously. Most participants indicated that they had no previous experience of playing ice-hockey (see Figure 2). Experience of football and rugby was highly gendered, with males more likely to report playing either of these sports in the past. This was not the same for

Gaelic sports and for ice hockey which males and females were equally likely to report having played previously. Gaelic was however influenced by political identity with nationalist more likely than unionist to report having played it ($p=.009$). This was not the case for rugby with nationalist and unionist participants equally likely to report previous experience.

2.3. Hopes for the programme

Participants described their hopes for the programme. The majority reported wanting to learn new things, and whilst this was relatively ambiguous, it reflected a hope across the sample of engaging in activities and with subjects that were relatively unknown to them. Thus, this ambiguity may reflect an embrace of the unknown. More objective hopes were also reported. These included a desire for accreditation and qualification (95.4%); the hope for increased health and fitness (86.6%) and; a hope that by engaging in the programme

Figure 2. Previous experience of select sports

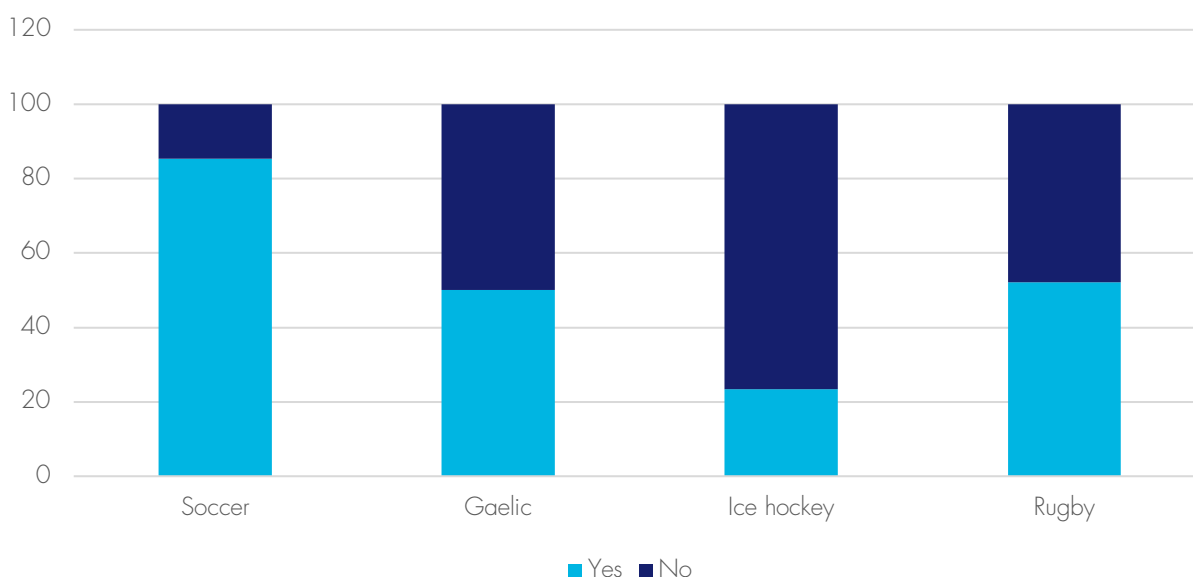
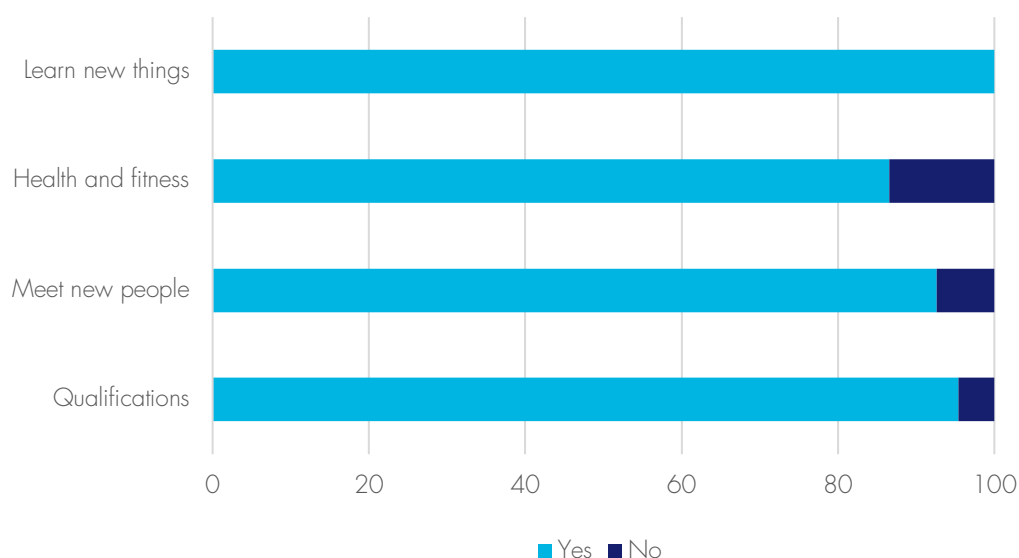


Figure 3. What participants were looking forward to



that they would meet new people (92.6%). Interestingly, participants also reported a desire to improve their more transferable interpersonal skills. Communication (97.6%), teamwork (95.3%) and volunteering skills (79.5%) were all reported to be important to the participants in advance of their engagement on the programme.

2.4. Efficacy

Standardised measures were taken regarding participants self-efficacy, locus of control, life satisfaction and the extent to which they believe that things that they did were worthwhile. These metrics are commonly asked among adults in NI as part of the continuous household survey and were included in the most recently published findings from the NI Behaviour and Attitudes Survey. As a result, the findings from the current baselines can be compared with the NI estimates for young people (see [Table 1](#)).

Self-efficacy pertains to a person's beliefs about their capability to produce results or

effects, to complete tasks and achieve goals. Self-efficacy is used as a way of measuring the confidence of people in Northern Ireland. This report considers two estimates for self-efficacy – average (mean) and proportion. The self-efficacy scores range from 6 to 24. On average this sample scored above the NI estimates. However, there was variation. To discuss low self-efficacy, this report has classed scores from 6 to 16 as low and scores from 17 to 24 as high. 28.9% of participants were within the low self-efficacy banding. This was particularly the case for older participants ($p=.028$) compared with younger participants. There were no observable gendered effects.

Locus of control – the degree to which a person feels they have control over their life. The locus of control scores range from 10 to 20. A low score indicates a belief that life is determined by outside factors (external). A high score shows a belief in one's own control (internal). Among this sample, scores were lower than the youth population.

estimate meaning that these young people felt like they had less control over their lives than what would be expected more widely.

Life satisfaction - a person's sense of contentment with their life overall. Life satisfaction is scored from 1 to 7, with 7 being the highest achievable score. In general, these young people appear to be more satisfied with their lives than what would be expected across the NI youth population.

2.5. Connection to the Community

Over half of the participants indicated that they had a role in their community (see [Table 2](#)), and this appears to be predominately related to volunteering. Even among those who indicated that they did not play an active role in the community, there was a sense that they would know who to contact in order to take on a role. Just over one-fifth of participants indicated that they did not have the requisite skills and/or experiences to take on a leadership role.

Interestingly, however, less than one-third of participants strongly agreed that their community was strongly knit (29.9%) and that people in the community looked out for each other (22.9%). On a measure of collective efficacy, participants scored an average of 13.7. Interestingly, those who described living in a predominately unionist area reported more strongly that their community was both closer knit and that people looked out for each other. There were no gender differences.

Table 1. Standardised measures

	Sample Mean	Comparison Mean	Difference (%)
Locus of control	15.62	16.6	-0.98
Satisfaction	7.43	7.1	+0.33
Self-Efficacy	17.53	17.1	+0.43

Table 2. Volunteering and leadership

	Yes	No
I have a role in my community	53.8	46.2
If I wanted to take part, I would know who to contact	85.4	14.6
I have the skills and experience to take part in decision making and leadership roles	78.7	21.3
I would like to volunteer	78.1	21.9
I do volunteer	47.4	52.6

2.6. Community Safety

Overall, most participants reported feeling safe in their communities. Only 3.3% reported feeling unsafe. Despite this, the participants appear to have been exposed to a range of difficult life events, including violence and paramilitarism. For example, 34% of participants reported that paramilitaries were active in their areas at baseline. 9% of participants reported that they had been threatened by paramilitaries and 19% reported that they had seen someone being attacked by individuals that they believed were members of paramilitary groups. However, exposure was not limited to paramilitary activity. 6.2% of the sample reported seeing violence at home and 8.2% reported being the victim of violence at home. A larger proportion of participants (28.9%) reported being witness to community violence. Interestingly, only 1% of the sample reported being the victim of community violence, a figure that is not aligned with the wider population estimates of around 20%.

2.7. Mental Health Needs

A total of 14% of participants reported ever having had a mental health issue at baseline. This was not differentiated by gender (i.e. males and females were equally likely to report an issue), however, there was a statistically significant difference for those who were victims of paramilitary threat, those who were victims of violence in the home, and those who were victims of violence in the community. In each case, victims were more likely than non-victims to report a mental health issue. This figure aligned closely with the screener for probable depression, for which 14% of the

sample screened positively. An even higher proportion of the sample met the threshold for probable anxiety (22%). Higher age was associated with higher rates of probable depression ($p=.028$), but not anxiety. Gender was not related to probable depression, however, there was a gender difference with probable anxiety, with female more likely to score above the threshold.

Table 3 illustrates the mental health effects of exposure to a range of violence related incidences, both as a witness and more directly as a victim. In general, exposure to any form of violence appears to have a negative impact on general wellbeing, but, for each, there appear to be a differential impact. For example, being a witness to violence at home is associated with higher rates of depressive symptoms than it is associated with anxiety related symptoms. Likewise, direct victimisation in the community appears to affect both depressive and anxiety related symptoms. Interestingly, paramilitary threat did not. Although this finding contrasts with previous studies, there are a number of possible explanations. Firstly, the proportion of this sample that reported being directly affected by paramilitarism was low and thus these tests are highly likely to be underpowered to detect such effects. Secondly, it is possible that victims of higher-harm violence such as paramilitarism could develop symptoms not commonly captured on screeners for either depression or for anxiety. It is common that victims of serious and prolonged violence could develop stress related symptoms which would require additional measurements.

Table 3. Mental health needs at baseline

	Any MH	Probable Depression	Probable Anxiety
	Statistically significant relationship		
Violence at home (witness)	No	Yes	No
Violence at home (direct)	Yes	Yes	No
Violence in the community (witness)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Violence in the community (direct)	Yes	No	Yes
Paramilitary threat	Yes	No	No

2.8. End of Project Observations

Across the sample, it was evident that participants had the opportunity to play a range of sports. Overwhelmingly, participants indicated that they had had the opportunity to play soccer. Participants were least likely to report having the opportunity to play ice-hockey (see Figure 4). It is not clear from the data whether this was because of a true lack of opportunity or because some

participants had opted out of the opportunity.

Participants who had engaged in rugby were least likely to report enjoying those activities (See Figure 5). Participants were most likely to enjoy the soccer related activities. Interestingly, it was participants from neither political tradition and those from

Figure 4. Opportunity to play select sports

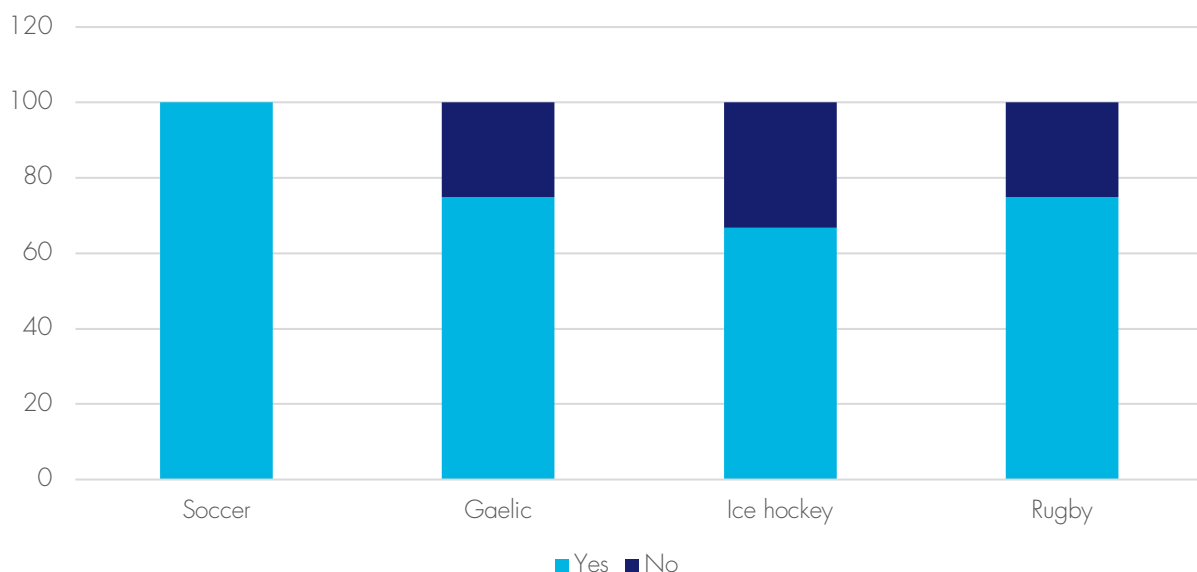
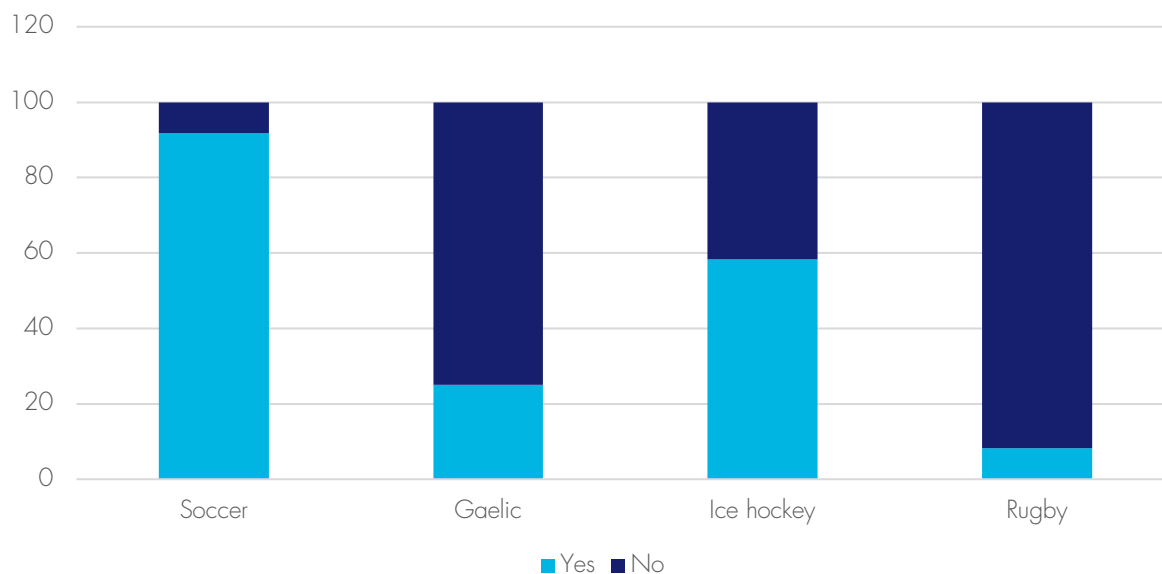


Figure 5. Enjoyed select sports



a nationalist background who were most likely to report enjoying Gaelic sports, indicating that those from a unionist background benefitted most from this experience. Those from neither political tradition were also least likely to report enjoying ice-hockey most. Males were significantly more likely to report enjoying Gaelic and rugby most, however, there were no gender differences with ice-hockey or soccer indicating that males and females were equally likely to favour these sports. This observation also suggests that overall, a gendered perspective on the design of the programme could be useful.

A number of items related to personal development were asked at endpoint. Participants self-reported on a range of these items (see Table 4). For example, 100% of participants who completed the end-point reported that they had developed their fitness skills. Likewise, participants reported having developed volunteering skills. Participants were least likely to report gaining qualifications. This metric is likely to illustrate some disappointment given that more than 95% of participants indicated at

baseline that they were looking forward to gaining a qualification.

Table 4. Personal development

	Yes	No
I developed volunteering skills	58.3	41.7
I developed fitness skills	100	0
I developed team work skills	100	0
I achieved qualifications	16.7	83.3
I met new people	91.7	8.3
I learnt new things	100	0
I improved my health and fitness	100	0

A range of items related to citizenship were again asked at endpoint and compared with baseline responses (See [Table 5](#)). Whilst the numbers were too low to run statistical analyses, percentage responses indicate change in both directions across the metrics. For example, whilst those who responded affirmatively to the statement that 'I have a role in my community' reduced by more than 38%, the proportion of those who were interested in taking on a volunteering role increased by more than 17%. Interestingly, however, those who indicated that they did volunteer, reduced by 65%, which may be an indication of the profile of those who completed both surveys rather than a true reduction in the number of participants who have ceased voluntary activity.

Table 5. Citizenship

	Baseline (Yes)	Endpoint (Yes)	% Change
I have a role in my community	53.8	33.3	<38.1
If I wanted to take part, I would know who to contact	85.4	75	<12.2
I have the skills and experience to take part in decision making and leadership roles	78.7	75	<4.7
I would like to volunteer	78.1	91.7	>17.4
I do volunteer	47.4	16.7	<64.8

Key Themes from Interviews and Focus Groups

Section
3

3.1. The Facilitator Perspective

3.1.1. What Makes a Programme “Work”?

The six programme facilitators who participated in interviews were asked to reflect on both successes and potential areas for improvement identified over the course of the 2022-23 phase of delivery. The following passages shed light on the facilitators’ perspectives on the personal qualities and human capital⁷ necessary for a programme’s success, the ongoing need for close collaboration and partnership across various stakeholders, and the value of a multi-sport model in tackling some of the challenges faced by programme participants.

What makes a “good” facilitator?

At the outset of each interview, facilitators were asked to reflect on the attributes of a “good” facilitator or coach on the Fresh Start Through Sport programme:

I think you need to be involved...you need to have the skills where you can actually sit down and speak to a young person from maybe a difficult background or has maybe some difficult issues...you can sit down and have a conversation with them...We know that it’s going to be a good programme because of the...engagement and because of the passion, should it be the

neighbourhood officer or the community workers...[people] who just inherently wants to do good in the community and within [their] job, you know. And just doesn’t turn up for the sake of turning up. [They] turn up and have those conversations and want to make a difference. (F2)

The sentiment that the programme’s successes are tethered to the commitment and level of engagement exhibited by coaches and facilitators was reflected across the facilitator interviews:

...personalities...engagement...understanding, all the things that I personally think a general coach should have. (F1)

Equally, the importance of understanding and relatability was consistently highlighted, particularly given the background and circumstances of many of the young people involved with the programme:

I think experience...being in and around these groups from previous work from previous volunteering, that’s key because you know the way they engage, you know the mindset...one thing is probably being on their level because...a lot of what they’re going through, is quite challenging...there’s maybe struggles at school or struggles at home, so they’re coming into an environment that is positively driven. (F4)

I think it is just trying to work out a way of relating to them, or something that interests them, and it just depends on each group, or each individual, and once you get one or two of them going, generally the rest will join in and give it a go anyway...You may have a plan in your head, but just adapt and change it

⁷ The abilities, knowledge, skills and experience that individuals acquire and develop over time (Becker, 1964).

*to what the needs of that group are.
(F6)*

The significance of adaptability was also underscored by others, along with an approach characterised by careful observation, sound judgement, and the ability of modify plans based on the needs of both individuals and groups:

It's finding a nice...balance point that still allows everybody to participate without them feeling as though they're missing out. Or we've pulled them back or we're trying to push them too far. It's inclusive, it's fun, it's not...you have to work out and you have to do this because I've told you to do it. (F3)

In order to complement and reinforce some of the individualistic qualities and criteria outlined above, some noted that there may be value in pursuing greater consistency and alignment across the programme's delivery by identifying opportunities for tailored training for facilitators and coaches, particularly in relation to the groups encountered in FSTS:

If you were to tell me that...I was going to do some sort of training in and around dealing with the individuals that we deal [with], I'd be all about it. If you're going to teach me something that going to help me in my day-to-day, brilliant. (F1)

Partnership and collaboration

Facilitators were quick to emphasise the necessity of strong community engagement and police involvement, particularly in order to allow the programme to reach the "right" participants:

...it's really down to your community and police engagement mainly. It's without the buy-in from sort of community organisations, then you're not going to get that or the right profile [of participant] either. So I think the success is really down to the partnership. (F2)

Others echoed this sentiment, highlighting the benefits of having dedicated officers who consistently engage with the programme, comparing it to their own role as facilitators:

We really benefit from having those engaging neighbourhood officers on the ground who really want to get involved in the programme...we understand policing shifts...but if you have one or two officers that maybe work it between them or you still have that same person and again...It's like us, if we weren't there every week to facilitate it...would you necessarily get the same relationship built up with the young people? No, you wouldn't. (F4)

The same facilitator goes on to note the positive impact of PSNI involvement on the participants' perceptions of the police. This is a theme explored further in Sections 3.2. and 3.3.

...you just see their reaction and they're taken aback because...their stereotype of the police is something that works against them. Someone that's not there for them. So for them to see them supporting this programme...you could really see the changing of the mindset especially and I think that's become apparent. (F4)

Both the evolution and stability of the relationships between each of the sporting partner organisations was lauded, both in terms of the programme's achievements, and

the creation of post-programme pathways for participants:

... the relationships with the various [partner] organisations...those relationships have evolved also...in a very good way in that...there's a real good understanding of the programme. (F2)

what sporting organisations and everyone who's collaborated on this programme...you know, we're bringing in local organisations, we're bringing in new facilitators...collaboratively it's an achievement in itself. To get everyone working for the same goals in developing and producing and giving pathways for young people outside of negative influences in their communities, is huge. (F4)

Some facilitators noted that communication between the partner organisations was perhaps less frequent than it had been at the outset of the programme in 2020-21:

I think the first year was certainly more engaging to get it up and running, to make sure modules were on the money, that we knew exactly what we were doing, what we were delivering. (F5)

While the frequency of discussions may have diminished, any discussions that do take place directly contribute to the programme's enhancement, particularly via the Fresh Start Through Sport steering group:

I would say we have less contact with [the other partners] but the contact we do have with them is very promising, whether it's the round tables we have, the discussions, after sessions, whether it be in the steering groups...We've always had very positive discussion with them in terms of this actually worked really well for us and when we've done

A, we've added B to it and we felt that actually enhanced...I think we could benefit from meeting as a facilitator cohort...more often and more regularly...maybe, we're reviewing it after every group and we're taking those lessons that we've learnt and applying them before we see the next group, so we can actually act on them slightly more swiftly...I think it's a case of small tweaks as opposed to wholesale changes and I think with the medium we're using to get that information from facilitators and a steering group...helps rectify maybe those small little things that we can change. (F3)

Given the evident value of collaborative input in enhancing and developing the programme, there is perhaps scope to consider mechanisms via which to support more frequent communication and feedback among programme facilitators to ensure continuous improvement and consistent delivery.

Sport as a vehicle

Facilitators were keen to note the inclusive nature of the programme, particularly in light of the varying levels of interest in sports among each cohort of participants (see [Section 3.3.1.](#)):

...you don't have to be hyper sporty to be involved in this programme. It's a programme for everyone, it's an inclusive programme. We want you to enjoy yourselves. If you take a little bit of information away from it, that's brilliant. (F3)

Others support this, emphasising a predominant focus on both encouraging participants' engagement across the

programme, but also on using sport as a platform for dialogue and problem-solving:

It's literally that we are focusing on that these sessions are fun and these sessions are engaging and these sessions, obviously they're driven by like a topic, because we understand how sport can be the vehicle to open up conversations around multiple issues that these young people are facing in their community. (F4)

The same facilitator acknowledges that the programme can sometimes bring sensitive subjects and experiences into focus for participants, and suggests a need for consistent and robust structures to effectively support young people when such issues arise:

I think for us more to have that structure in place I think, because...to protect the young people if we are going to look at challenging issues that they face and if they're going to bring that to the forefront during the programme and again, rather than us just going well there's a number to sign that, you know, that's a person you need to ring or whatever that there's maybe a little bit more than that. (F4)

In the same vein, this facilitator discusses the importance of engaging professional expertise in handling topics that frequently arise on the programme, such as mental health and resilience:

...when we're looking at long term, I think one thing that we identified early on was the need for outside services...to provide a greater knowledge and skillset in terms of issues that maybe young people are facing...for us then looking at mental health, resilience, we found that these were topics that kept popping up time and time again and I

think coming from a sporting perspective while we could add a little bit of value and resonate with the young people in certain aspects of it, we felt better placed that actually that was a professional organisation or a facilitator or tutor coming in with a high-level qualification and experience to talk about...what I would say is, probably within this country, quite a pandemic. (F4)

There is a recognition that while sports-based learning and activities can allow for a wide range of positive experiences, integrating tailored forms of professional expertise can serve to address sensitive topics more effectively, and potentially mitigating any programme limitations identified to date.

3.1.2. What Helps Overcome Challenges?

Any programme, perhaps especially those involving marginalised young people from diverse community backgrounds, is likely to encounter challenges in relation to buy-in, consistent participation in activities, and engagement from beginning to end. Fresh Start Through Sport also involves the navigation of boundaries related to cultural stereotypes and issues of ethno-political and class identity that may be intertwined with each of the sports offered on the programme. The passages below address facilitators' perspectives on navigating these challenges.

Securing participant buy-in

The reasons for which a participant may be initially reluctant to become involved on the

programme, or in the activities involved, can be diverse:

I think with any programme you're going to have reluctance no matter what it is...we definitely have had issues where there'd be like you know, "I don't want to do this tonight, I don't want to turn up", but it's maybe you don't know what's going on in their background...So, for us, we've always got something you know...to add on a little bit...like "yes you need to come tonight because we're going to tell you about the match night that's happening in two weeks", you know. (F4)

Combined with the kind of empathy and understanding outlined in [Section 3.1.1.](#), anticipation stimulated by the promise of future events or activities can serve as a potent tool to encourage continued participation. Although this may seem like a relatively minor detail, it underscores the importance of sequencing the programme's modules in a manner that encourages immediate buy-in and maintains ongoing engagement. This is particularly significant given that, as the programme progresses, the educational potential of elements of the programme becomes more readily apparent:

From them coming in...some of them are loud and boisterous, and sort of just talking for talking sake, but...at the end of that whistle happy session...the questions and all they were asking at the end...they were more informed, and more directed, and more specific than obviously at the start. They didn't really know much or anything about rugby and refereeing, and [the referee facilitator] talks about obviously the discipline, and the respect, and the integrity, and all that, and a lot of them did pick up on all that, and really did buy into it. (F6)

Another facilitator discusses how competition can be used as a method to cater to the diverse needs and preferences of programme participants:

We do have a little bit of competition in there so the ones that want that additional bit of competition can have it, and you will tend to see the people that will pair themselves up with each other and be competitive, which then allows the people who necessarily don't want to be competitive, to pair up with each other as well. (F3)

By adopting an inclusive approach, and catering to individual personalities, facilitators can both secure buy-in from some participants, while maintaining a comfortable and safe environment for the entire cohort. Following on from the above, the same facilitator emphasises the importance of getting to know participants:

...one of the things we'd said is it would be nice for us to get to know the young people a little bit more because when they're on the ice, we're not really having that interaction with them. We almost have more interaction with the young people who don't want to go on the ice, which is great we still manage to break those barriers down, have a chat and some of them will then go on the ice. (F3)

Perhaps contrary to initial expectations, this facilitator outlines opportunities to break down barriers and encourage participation among those who may initially be reluctant to get involved. With the benefit of extra time with participants, facilitators can play a role in not only overseeing activities, but also fostering connections and promoting inclusivity.

Overcoming cultural barriers

The enduring weight of cultural divisions and entrenched socio-political norms continue to pose challenges to the delivery of a programme like Fresh Start Through Sport in some communities. However, all facilitators remain committed to the unique, multisport design of the programme, and challenging some of the community biases and stereotypes that may otherwise derail participation:

...we've always found it's never the participants, it's usually those in the community who try and influence young people in different directions and tell them, no they shouldn't. And sadly, that's still the case. They do have a lot of control over areas, certain individuals. But...this year, I think it has got easier and we're quite firm and...if they say...we'll do it if we don't do the four GAA modules. No, you do the course...(F2)

Facilitators acknowledge the sensitivities tied to different sports, but emphasise the effective use of the diverse array of sports on offer as a mechanism for confronting stereotypes and fostering an inclusive and "safe" programme environment:

I think Northern Ireland is so divisive, you know, we have areas where the IFA badge isn't welcome...we have areas where GAA isn't welcome... rugby is still seen as quite a middle class...I think ice hockey...they've had that safe space where there's no football tops, no clubs sport, it still has that neutral venue so there's no issue there. But I think for us, it's still [important] to challenge those stereotypes. (F4)

By having the four sports, that makes that easier. Once you offer something, whether it's going to be football, it's going to be ice hockey, it's going to be rugby and...even if [they're] not too sure about the GAA...[they'll] do that anyway because [they] want to have a go at all of these...the breadth of the four sports I think helps the whole programme in engaging young people and giving those wider opportunities. (F5)

On rare occasion, a small number of participants were unwilling to engage with aspects of the programme. However, as has played out in previous years, the GAA elements of the programme seemed to prove most popular with those from a PUL background (see also [Section 3.3.2.](#)):

There may well have been some where the reception of kids or some groups didn't uptake the GAA side of the programme...[but] the constant theme coming through...the engagement from the group [from a predominately PUL area] was very, very positive, they really tried it, they had a go, they put their best foot forward and our coach on the ground definitely believes some barriers were broken down during the duration of this programme. (F5)

Capitalising on its inclusive ethos, the programme harnesses the diversity inherent in the sports it offers, focusing on fun and enjoyable activities, and in doing so dismantles barriers and brings participants together, irrespective of their ethnicity or socio-political backgrounds:

It's a multi-cultural country and I think it's accepting of everyone and it's something that we push within...Fresh Start Through Sport...And we're a big believer in having that at the forefront of our programme, and again, the

young people buy into it. Once they're in the fun, engaging sessions like, literally they don't care from what ethnicity you're from or you know what I mean, or what part of the country you're from, or what part of the town you're from. (F4)

Considering gender

There has been an increasing focus on gender diversity among participants on the Fresh Start Through Sport programme, as well as in similar initiatives (see Coyle et al 2022, 2023; Murray et al., 2023). This significance of this extends to fostering gender diversity among programme facilitators and coaches, too, particularly given the programme's focus on traditionally male-dominated sports:

It's quite, they can be quite standoffish...just from the nature of [the coach] being a woman, has definitely been a barrier and the general awkwardness of having a female coach or facilitator present in a football capacity because they're completely not used to that. (F1)

Any discomfort on the part of participants can be overcome as they become accustomed to the competence, skills, and personalities of female coaches:

...initially I have to build a rapport, gain a different level of confidence or a different level of trust with them and I kind of did that by joining in. Once they see I can play a bit ...once they see I can play a bit, then it's kind of, oh, [they] can play. (F1)

Having female facilitators and coaches on the programme can add a valuable dynamic, not only in terms of breaking down preconceptions and stereotypes, but also in

promoting greater engagement among female participants. The enhanced diversity of the wider coaching team across the programme can only be a positive factor in the ongoing development of Fresh Start Through Sport:

...having a female perspective in and around the programme...has been very, very useful...[for] female participation as well, that it's not just sort of two blokes. As much as we get on well with them all...it's always good to have that other dynamic, yeah. (F2)

3.1.3. Reflecting and Improving

To conclude, facilitators were asked to consider any long-term changes and developments that may enhance the delivery and impact of Fresh Start Through Sport.

Making a change

There was a shared understanding among the facilitators that there is always room for improvement and evolution within the Fresh Start Through Sport programme. All were keen to emphasise the importance of consistent reflection and assessment, as well as the need to adapt and enhance the programme based on the needs and feedback from participants:

...we'll self-reflect on a lot of...what's being delivered...what was piloted as our modules in the IFA...didn't really hit the needs of the young people...I think we had initially had coaching, we had football governance, we had...football fan violence...for us then we felt that there were prominent issues that were coming up that we needed to address these. (F4)

The same facilitator underlined the risk of complacency, suggesting that even if feedback is generally positive, there is always room for improvement:

[If] you rest on what's delivered because it's good...and it is good and we get good feedback...I think then you just rest on your laurels a little bit. It is good but could it be better? (F4)

Some facilitators noted specific areas where the programme could improve, indicating a willingness to modify or remove elements that could be more impactful, and replacing them with alternatives:

The women only in sport, that needs completely revamped...you're seeing the pros and the cons, okay what can we do better, how can we change this...taking out the things that don't necessarily work and putting in better. (F1)

Others expressed a desire to contribute more to the programme based on insights gleaned from observing modules delivered by other sporting partners:

...when we saw the other modules that other sporting partners were doing, we could be doing more...It's something I think we will be bringing up...just to say we think we can do more and give that little bit extra to the programme and the project with the group. (F3)

The shared commitment to ongoing assessment and adaption in order to maximise the programme's value for participants, based on their needs and interests, was clearly communicated across each interview:

I think the practical side of things is well covered. For me, if I was a participant, I'd enjoy the practical side of things. The games, the activities, all that. I suppose we could look at other modules that are learning based...we could do something on event management, we could do something on volunteer development and recruitment. We could give an overview of [a] club and what goes on within it. (F5)

Looking ahead

The growth and evolution of Fresh Start Through Sport emerged as a consistent theme across the interviews. Facilitators frequently discussed prospects for expansion, and the desire to offer further opportunities for those participants who show a keen interest and commitment over the course of their time of the programme:

I think the whole pathway thing, education, qualifications, I think that's something where you can actually say, okay right, well we can offer ten percent of participants or whatever, you know, a qualification. They could have placement opportunities, stuff like...you know, so you could plan a wee bit better around that even with the four sports so, as opposed to...so it's very difficult that we're sort of planning ahead now for this year to say right, if we find there's six, seven, ten participants who really want to sort of go a lot further and want to do something then we could support them over the next two, three years on a course or on a programme. So, you know, that's something that I think, yes, I think you could do. I think your day-to-day delivery's not going to change but certainly...you're looking to develop...people on the programme. (F2)

The prospect of a large celebratory event to bring together participants across each phase of delivery was raised by one facilitator as a means of enhancing a sense of community, and providing an additional incentive for participants to stick with the programme:

There's probably a fair age range between the youngest to the oldest that have taken part ...Could they all be brought together for some celebratory event in mid-Ulster? I don't know. A representative area? Might need a few referees and linesmen for that but it's probably...one thing we could look at the end of every year, if the four groups could come together. (F5)

To conclude, some facilitators suggested that the programme's successes could be shared and replicated by other organisations with similar goals and aims:

We're almost very insular in what we we're doing...so many people would get learning from what we're doing. So many organisations who get learning from what they do. This could be replicated. This could be rolled out...not in the same scale, but this could be rolled out on a local level. (F4)

...it's amazing how blown away people are when they come out and visit your programmes and they go, you know, my goodness. So I think sometimes we sell ourselves short regarding what we have and what we're good at. And I think on down the line it would be good to sort of put this on a platform where we are getting recognition for it across the world, you know. Long term, that would be a big one for me is that it's recognised in that way. (F2)

Through the sharing, dissemination and broad recognition of Fresh Start Through

Sport's design, implementation and impact, the programme could potentially benefit young people on a wider scale. Moreover, this could attract attention and support that could further bolster the programme's long-term mission.

3.2. The Police Perspective

3.2.1. Managing Perceptions and Risks

All six of the police officers involved across each area of delivery had extensive experience of working with children and young people in their local areas. As such, they framed their experience on the programme by talking about historical issues in their area with regards to engrained perceptions of policing, as well as some of the negative influences impacting on the lives of the young people they work with.

Managing negative perceptions

Officers spoke of the challenges presented by historically negative perceptions of policing in local communities:

I think my biggest challenge would be...the past, and any examples of that...well, on this occasion, young girls...who we've worked with, and have waved at us, followed shortly by their parents shouting at them, basically, for waving at us...So, that would be difficult because kids are going to obviously take after their parents in some respects to where they're brought up. It's going to have obviously the biggest impact on their lives. So, it's a huge challenge to try and overcome that, especially when you see this happening at such a young age. It's bound to have a lasting impact on them. (PO4)

This notion of the intergenerational transmission of negative perceptions was raised on several occasions, with officers

expressing concern about the impact of parents'; adverse reactions towards the PSNI having a lasting influence on their children's impression of the police and policing:

...those hard-line families, they influence the young because they brainwash them and that's how I'd describe it. They're my words in terms of...brainwash[ing] their local children into believing that we are some sort of oppressive force, some sort of parasite on their community. (PO6)

For one officer, engaging in tandem with both young people and their parents is crucial in order to take steps towards gradually reshape wider community perspectives:

Particularly for the green side in [my area], that the [negative] interaction I've had with the parents as well. And then if the parents then have a different perception automatically the kids are going to, where before they grow up with, "never speak to police, hate police". Is that because of the paramilitary influence? Whereas if by doing something with the kids you change the parent's attitude as well...it's a win isn't it? (PO2)

When reflecting on hindrances to trust-building efforts between neighbourhood policing teams and local communities, one officer introduced the concept of negative self-perception within their community:

Some of these guys have a really bad impression of themselves from even where they come from. We done a sort of spider diagram a few weeks ago of, well, what do people think about people from [your local area], and they were like, scumbags, they don't wear this, or they're low lives, or they're this,

that, and other... I think a lot of these young ones just want to feel a part of something, and valued, and involved...(PO1)

For this officer, managing perceptions of policing was nested within wider issues relating to self-perception, community and belonging. In this context, Fresh Start through Sport represented an opportunity to facilitate positive experiences, challenge negative local stereotypes, and build a renewed sense of community among the young people involved. This will be discussed further in [Section 3.3](#).

Negative influences

Police officers shared their insights into the potential vulnerabilities, risks, and challenges that young people face in their local areas. For most, this was a series of interconnected issues and harms that often coexist with the same area:

The two massive things is drugs and anti-social behaviour...It's definitely where I work where [paramilitary groups] would have traditional influence, so that mentality still exists but drugs is just as big a problem and it's within the same area. So, by pulling them back from one thing you're pulling them back from the other. And I think they're all at risk when they are at a certain age especially when they're old enough to start going on the streets on their own. (PO2)

Alluded to above, officers expressed concerns regarding the potential allure of paramilitarism and certain forms of criminality:

There's just a sense that there's always that underlying element, you know,

these young people could go down the wrong path, and it's about trying to veer them away from that. They maybe see the guy out in his flashy guy, and is this, that, and the other, and think, oh, look at him, or they'll maybe go, well, how are they making money, or this, that, and the other. (PO1)

Another officer expressed the view that, once young people become involved in certain harmful activities and behaviours, it can be challenging to extricate themselves from them:

They're not looking at the sort of side of the paramilitarism you see on the news, people being arrested or the effect it has on families in the wider community, they're seeing the fancy cars, the bling, the money that's associated and that's the attraction they're getting, it's only once they fall victim to that attraction then they see the real side of it once they've been pulled in. By that stage it's almost too late for a lot of them. (PO4)

Educational engagement and attainment was seen as key issue for some young people at risk of involvement in criminality and/or paramilitarism. One officer highlighted the gendered dynamics of disengagement from education:

I think with the females what we found with the group we were working with was the males had the educational difficulties but as well as that obviously the draw into paramilitarism and crime. Whereas the females it's more the educational side of things, they've lost all interest in school, they just want to hang about the streets and not go to school. And that's where their problems were coming from. (PO5)

Wider socio-economic issues were also highlighted, particularly the impact that these

can have on young peoples' perspectives on their opportunities and future prospects:

Then the other thing I think that impacts upon young people...is the cost-of-living crisis, like access to activities, and access to experiences, that take them away from that, or show them a different perspective...We're seeing an uplift in shoplifting. Some of that is from obviously organised criminals, but then some of it obviously is from real poverty, and the use of food banks, and the use of things, and that can be difficult for young people. Well, if they're thinking about it, well, what future plans do I have, what opportunities do I have, and I think that is something that affects all of them. (PO3)

[we've] touched on a couple of key ones there, poverty, deprivation...they're the issues that you're going to see day in, day out...that has to be one of the biggest things, the lack of opportunity for them sometimes, for jobs or whatever. (PO6)

Regardless of the age at which individuals become involved in problematic activities, or come into adversarial contact with the police, officers expressed an awareness of the scale of the risks some young people encounter:

Whether it's somebody that's had involvement with the police since they were 10 years old or whether it's somebody that's 16 and just started going out to these social areas...I think they're all just as much at risk and pulling them back. Whether you're pulling them back a metre from the back of the line or pulling them back 50 metres from the front of the line...you're just diverting people who have had different past experiences but they're massive, massive issues. (PO2)

All of the above collectively illustrate the multidimensional nature of the challenges faced by young individuals in areas of multiple deprivation, highlighting the intertwined influences of paramilitary groups, drugs and alcohol, materialistic attractions, socio-economic hardships, and gender-specific issues. This serves to emphasise the need for equally multifaceted and holistic approaches to addressing these issues.

3.2.2. Engaging with Disaffected Young People

The six police officers were asked to reflect on how young people were identified for recruitment to Fresh Start Through Sport, as well as on their experiences engaging with young people over the course of the programme. The passages below outline key themes around the challenges of engaging with "hard-to-reach" young people, the importance of collaboration, and the significance of breaking down barriers between police officers and young people.

Engaging "hard-to-reach" young people

Officers were keen to emphasise the importance of identifying and directly engaging with young individuals who may typically be difficult to reach. While they may have some interaction with local community or youth workers, they may not regularly or fully engage in organised groups or activities:

I think you need to be targeting those hard-to-reach young people, the people that don't really engage. They're

maybe not involved in local youth groups but they're causing maybe some of the antisocial behaviour out in the street. They're engaging with local community workers but not engaging in the groups...if you can reach that hard to reach bracket where they don't know what they want to do with their lives, they just want to sit on the street corners for the meantime, if you can get them involved that's where you're going to make the biggest difference but again, it's going to be the hardest ones to get involved. (PO5)

While the challenges posed in attempting to positively interface with young people in this "hard-to-reach" category may be substantial, officers consistently noted a need to initiate positive interactions and avoid enforcement-led practice where at all possible:

It's a hard-to-reach group, and it's a group that we really as community officers really try and reach out to on a daily basis. We're trying to do that stop, interact with young people. It's about being seen as approachable as possible. Like we are here to help, we are here to try and keep you safe in your community. (PO1)

In order to create a lasting impact and foster more positive relationships with young people who may hold antagonistic views towards the police, officers highlighted the need for ongoing and continuous efforts to connect with individuals and attempt to build trust over time:

I think that's very important [to be regular] if you're doing some sort of an engagement activity. I think one off isn't as effective as a multistage engagement approach. (PO3)

The value of Fresh Start Through Sport in facilitating such consistent efforts will be explored in more detail in [Section 3.3](#).

Recruitment and collaboration

As discussed elsewhere, the PSNI play an integral role in identifying and recruiting young people to participate in the Fresh Start Through Sport programme. This sometimes involved a direct and personalised approach with young people and their parents:

I worked well engaging directly with the parents and the young people who I felt would be appropriate for the programme. Pretty much all of them signed up and I think their personal approach was good. So, basically it was me sitting in living rooms talking to parents and the people who I was wanting to put forward for the programme. (PO2)

For others, individual discretion was tempered with concerted collaboration with local, youth-focused organisations. By leveraging existing relationships and networks, officers were able to generate a greater degree of interest among "hard-to-reach" young people in their area:

So, basically what we did was we contacted youth organisations and providers who we'd have worked with throughout the years and the neighbourhood team. Sat them down, told them about the programme. They then fed it back to the young people and said would they be interested. And a lot of the young people were what we'd class as hard to reach young people, they wouldn't engage with police etc. but because we were putting the carrot in with the sporting events and different types of sports and trips

out and stuff they were more than happy to get involved. (PO5)

We're looking at people that are on the cusp...through youth clubs, through schooling, through different parameters that we've identified, through internal agencies that we've got ...so obviously when young people are involved in...an incident with police, all their details go to a youth diversion officer...we have collated details of people that are involved so you can speak to them or somebody we know within youth clubs that we've been attending on a weekly basis, chatting to teachers and go, "Would these type of people benefit from this programme?" You ask around, yes, and then you try. (PO6)

Others underscored the value of collaboration in contributing to the success and sustainability of programmes and interventions:

It's collaborative working with obviously other partners that makes this work. We certainly couldn't be doing any of this on our own without all these other partners helping us, definitely not. (PO4)

However, in spite of the efforts involved in the organisation and delivery of multi-agency, partnered programmes, there was a recognition that recruitment can remain a difficult task. One officer made a case for increased parental involvement in and commitment as a key factor in any programme's success:

But opportunities - For me a key thing and I haven't really seen it on anything that I've been involved in is parental involvement. There's so many different agencies putting on things for young people and lots of them are doing fantastic work. A lot of it is time limited

and a lot of it sucks up a lot of money. But the thing with parental involvement, you know, I think this is where sport could make a difference...I think team sports when they become involved in it, it creates a good social atmosphere. It obviously has good health benefits but the parents then have a level of commitment. (PO2)

Getting involved

Many of the officers involved with Fresh Start Through Sport took active steps to get involved with the programme, build relationships with participants, and partake in many of the activities across each sporting partner's modules:

I was like, no, I'm going to go and participate in this, and go in my jeans and hoodie like everyone else, and just mingle, get involved, and kind of break down that barrier...I think it was good that maybe we weren't going in uniform, because sometimes a uniform can put people off, can put the young people off, and they might be a bit hesitant, but you're going like them, and you're getting involved. You're enjoying a game, you're having craic, you know, you're having conversations with them, and it just broke down that barrier that sometimes is there when maybe you're in a uniform or a police car. (PO1)

By actively participating in shared activities, officers were able to benefit from a more natural environment for conversation and interaction with the young people on the programme. Dressing in casual clothing also served to better level hierarchies, create a sense of equality, and removed any potential intimidation or antipathy associated with uniforms. This approach was shared across several areas:

Because we'd built that rapport with them that they had no reason to freeze. They saw that we were human beings and they were able to work with us and have a bit of craic with us so it naturally worked for us. (PO5)

We joined in in games where they were throwing things back and forward. We just joined in the groups, and that made it much more natural than coming over to a group of young people sitting at a table, and trying to sit down beside them, and be like, "hi, we're from the PSNI". It makes it just that bit more of an ice breaker really to chat to them...(PO4)

We didn't impose ourselves as police, and we felt with some of the young people in that it was very much the first step...I was asking them what did you enjoy most about the project, and what did you enjoy most about tonight, and that was much more interactive. And then we went and had pizza, and again they'd seen me loads of times...they were just more willing to engage...It was all still low level, but that's just the building of those relationships. (PO3)

By engaging in this manner, and proactively taking steps to build and sustain relationships with young people over the course of the programme, officers were able to garner unique insight into the capabilities of some of the young people that they had referred on to the programme:

I sort of got involved with them and they were really good at football, so developed a bit of respect and then they started talking to each other. So, building relationships within each other I thought was good and some of the more educational parts of the programme...I was surprised at ...how much they actually picked up once they

were engaged...when they were engaged it was obvious that they were picking it up. Some of the ones that you wouldn't expect to were the ones that was picking it up the most. (PO2)

The unique, multi-sport structure of Fresh Start Through Sport represented an ideal medium through which officers were able to create a proactive and positive interface with young people whom they might not have had the opportunity to engage with.

3.2.3. Police Perspectives on the Impact of Fresh Start Through Sport

Officers expressed their views on a range of benefits arising from Fresh Start Through Sport, both for participants, but also for local communities and the PSNI.

Community and belonging

As discussed above, officers communicated an awareness of the challenges faced by young people, particularly in the absence of suitable support, positive encouragement, and exposure to a variety of experiences and perspectives:

Someone is maybe, I don't know, just had a rough ride, been through a hard time, had maybe no sense of belonging. Maybe doesn't have a good family structure, or people of influence, you know, good positive role models, or influence, or someone who will push them on to do good things, or be better, or go out and even get a job, you know, things like that. (PO1)

For this officer, offering an opportunity for a young person to exercise their voice and feel heard, gain access to positive and

supportive role models, and have their potential recognised are some of the positive outcomes for young people arising from Fresh Start Through Sport:

That wee bit of support and encouragement...so as they feel valued at the end of the day and see a different maybe side of life outside of maybe just what they're used to, and be encouraged by people who are...positive influences...I feel that these young people, they do just want to be heard, and feel like they're a part of something, and involved in something...and feel like they have a voice in their community, in a good programme...[it's] an opportunity [to] feel that someone is really taking an interest in them, and they do have potential. (PO1)

Another officer underscored the positive connection between the sporting focus of the programme, and various aspects of mental health and resilience that can have a positive influence on the lives of programme participants:

...it's a way of connecting people, but also hopefully getting them involved in sports, even at a low level, also helps towards mental health and resilience, and part of the programme also covered talks that they had on resilience and mental health, and that's something that's really, really challenging for young people. (PO3)

Changing attitudes

Those officers who regularly attended and engaged with modules and sessions noted the visible influence of the programme on the behaviours and attitudes of some participants over the course of the twelve weeks:

Some of these guys probably would have looked at and went, "why would I want to get involved in that, no, I'm not doing that", or, "no, I'm just going on out on a Tuesday night" or, "no, Sunday morning I'll be hung over, I'm not getting up to get on a bus to go to so and so". But these guys and girls have made a conscious effort and a conscious decision to come out and get involved in this, and that shows and proves how good the programme has been, because there's been people there who have consistently went every week, and they're enjoying it. (PO1)

In addition to the sustained participation of the young people involved, some highlighted the impact of the programme in promoting empathy and in helping to create an inclusive and supportive environment for all participants:

There was a few kids in there...who had different maybe learning needs or capabilities. And you can see some of the ones who had in fact developed a bit of understanding in maybe some of their conditions. Whereas at the start of the programme they maybe would have been giving them a funny look. And especially through the interaction with the sport. Like they learnt their names, they started talking to them. They've got more involved with them. I thought that was a really positive thing. (PO2)

Another officer discussed the evolution of group dynamics within the programme, calling attention to a gradual positive shift towards mutual respect, understanding and collaboration among participants:

I think the first week or two weeks there was a lot of them going for that alpha male role, shouting over each other and the tackles etc. being put in. But as they

started to engage and as they started to understand and respect each other and the facilitators more and more, that all calmed down, there was no struggle for that position. Everybody started to respect each other and give each other their own place in the group. (PO5)

The programme's potential to sustain engagement, promote inclusivity, and shape positive group dynamics was commended by the officers involved.

Improving interactions

Of the positive impact and outcomes noted by officers, the most frequently lauded were positive transformations in the relationship between young people and the police in their local areas. Young participants, who may have previously held reservations or negative perceptions of the police before participating in the programme, now seemed to be more open to informal, personalised and positive interactions in the community:

Since I have participated in the programme over the past number of months these young people are actually, when I'm out on the street doing traffic duty, or out on the beat, or doing an engagement, and I come across them they're actually stopping in their car, rolling down their window, and saying, all right...what's the craic, where maybe that wouldn't have happened before...They've kind of recognised me out in my normal patrol, uniform, and whatever, and actually stopping, engaged, and had a conversation, which I know seems really small, but actually for me being out and about in the community it's really good that now they're actually stopping and having a chat. (PO1)

Officers were able to get to know young people with whom they might not have had the chance to interact, which in turn seems to have had a knock-on effect on interactions outside the confines of the programme:

There's young ones there involved in the programme and I wouldn't have known them beforehand, whereas now I could be out working at events, say for example doing a parade...and some of those young people who beforehand wouldn't have engaged with the police, they'll come up, they'll speak to you, they'll stand in their wee group, they'll have a chat. They'll stop and they want to talk to you whereas that wouldn't have happened before. (PO5)

Officers frequently expressed gratitude for the programme's ability to fill interactional gaps where traditional avenues, such as youth clubs or schools, may not have been successful in engaging some young people:

This project here...maybe some of these kids...may not be educationally motivated, they may not be attending school on a regular basis. So, just going into schools you might not link with them, but these programmes here you get to meet different kids from different backgrounds, link in with them all, and build a relationship with them all...you could miss that without programmes such as this. (PO3)

As a potential catalyst for young people's first sustained, positive interaction with the police, Fresh Start Through Sport can have a lasting impact on perceptions that shape future interactions, particularly in challenging situations. Thus, the programme can serve as a vehicle for helping to address negative stereotypes, and foster increased trust and confidence in the police:

...those young people, sometimes it's their first [positive] interaction with police. So, maybe they've been told, oh, a rhetoric about what the police are like, or what the police do...It means then if they do encounter them...you know, as a victim of a crime, or in domestic situations, that they feel confident about us, because it's the difference from the like essentially the bogey man figure that we've been portrayed as. (PO4)

Considering cuts

Some of the officers interviewed also struck a cautionary note regarding the ability of neighbourhood policing teams to engage in the kind of sustained participation that seems to have been so beneficial in the 22-23 round of Fresh Start Through Sport. The variability between the capacity of neighbourhood teams in different areas was raised as a potential issue:

I think just in relation to PSNI's involvement, we were lucky in the fact that our chief inspector at the time was so accommodating but if police are wanting the same faces getting involved [every week] there just needs to be that accommodation for the time that's given up, if it's the same night every week obviously we're not always on duty on those shifts. So just making sure the PSNI are giving that time to the officers involved. (PO5)

Equally, some expressed concern with regards to the impact of the wider funding landscape, and effect this may have on the potentially fruitful, proactive work being undertaken by neighbourhood policing teams, of which their involvement in Fresh Start Through Sport is an exemplar:

The other thing, the thing that is difficult, and it's difficult, like everybody knows the benefits of neighbourhood policing, and certainly the Chief Constable very much pushes it as the model that we should be doing...a small group of officers can do so much good, but the difficulty is the measuring of it. For years and years, they've been trying to measure what is the impact of crime prevention....If you ask people to go out on the street and ask them would you rather we caught bad guys or would you rather we stopped it happening before it happens, well obviously they're going to say before it happens...with the cuts that we have it would be becoming more and more of a reactive police service rather than proactive in terms of that. (PO3)

3.3. The Participant Perspective

3.3.1. Fresh Experiences

Across the six focus groups, participants were asked to comment and reflect on their experiences over the course of the Fresh Start Through Sport programme. The passages below explore some programme highlights, and the value that young people placed on gaining access to novel experiences and learning opportunities.

Programme highlights

To begin, participants were asked to reflect on the portions of the programme that they most enjoyed. Although there was a diverse array of responses, some specific modules and sessions were consistently highlighted in the focus groups:

Oh, the [GAA] wheelchair [session]. That's the best. That actually was the best. I'd love to do that again. My arms and my shoulders were aching for about six days after. (P4, FG2)

With the rugby. That was good. It was really about the different types of food that you can and can't eat before a game, good or bad, and all the boys playing football and Gaelic and all. So, it took us to a different perspective as well. (P2, FG5)

[Skating with the Giants] was probably the best one... Just how fun it was, and then we got to play with the professionals too, and they were out playing with us too, taking the hockey sticks, and just seeing some guys that's never been on ice before. Just very good. (P2, FG5)

The programme's combination of novel physical activities and educational experiences proved to be a consistent highlight for participants, who were able to establish meaningful connections between different aspects of the sessions and the programme in general:

...we do have a good laugh. I mean, we have an intense sort of half an hour where we're all calm and we all sit and listen, but then once we get to play the sport, or once we get the demo, then we can all chill and laugh, and give it a good go. (P1, FG3)

... I've really enjoyed, like you have a little lecture, then the sport, and then you also get to go and witness some other sports in person and go and see a real match and see exactly what the atmosphere is like. (P2, FG3)

Participants also praised the content and delivery of the programme's resilience talk, delivered by Lauren O'Malley⁸. Hearing directly from someone who had confronted a range of challenges in their life proved to be a powerful motivator for participants:

P1: The whole youth club was talking about [Lauren O'Malley's session] for about a week after it.

P2: Like fair play to her, she was really good.

⁸ Among a variety of endurance-based accomplishments, Lauren O'Malley completed the Marathon des Sables in 2017.

P1: So she was just talking about how she likes climbing up mountains... And then she was talking about how she got in an accident and she barely survived because like she turned around and she seen a car and if she hadn't like turned around, she would have went straight, like flat on her face and she would have died. (FG1)

As has been noted elsewhere in the report, participant engagement across the lifespan of the programme was notable. This appetite to consistently attend, participate and engage was consistently visible across the focus groups:

I came every week like. There was one week I couldn't come because I had the bug like, and I was raging. It was ice hockey week and I wanted to do it and I was raging. Although it was ...you're getting to meet new people, so that's good but all the sports I wanted to do, especially Gaelic, like that was class. (P1, FG1)

Exposure to new experiences and new perspectives

Beyond their favourite modules and sessions, participants talked about the value they placed on gaining access to new experiences over the course of the programme, be they related to the sports themselves, or the more social aspects of Fresh Start Through Sport:

Well, Gaelic is like a whole new experience, and you have never really watched it or heard about it. So, it was just a whole new thing to learn. (P2, FG3)

For someone that doesn't really go out coming here is like going out and

socialising. So, just makes me feel comfortable coming in and everyone being so welcoming. (P2, FG2)

Some sessions offered participants a fresh perspective on issues and experiences that they might not otherwise have considered in their day-to-day existence:

At the start the fella was talking to us about like how long blind football had been in Northern Ireland and stuff. And it's not just blind people, it's like other disabilities so you'd be like a single amputee and a double amputee and stuff. And then that was like half an hour for that and then we went outside and we had like glasses, but they like impaired your vision... It was like a five-a-side match and some of the glasses were like, you had tunnel vision and then some you were completely blind and others it was just like fuzzy. (P2, FG1)

The opportunity to gain an understanding of the impact of visual impairment encouraged participants to reflect on and empathise with the circumstances of others:

There was a course for the partially blind. That was strange, you know, with having the glasses on, and you couldn't see...but they make it look so easy. Fair play to them, you know, I put my hand up to be proud of them boys, even the ones in the wheelchair and all. (P4, FG6)

Learning and development

Although participants tended to prioritise the array of physical activities offered by Fresh Start Through Sport when asked to consider highlights, they also placed value in the sports-based learning opportunities afforded by the programme:

It was strange learning new things in like how other people interpreted sports for them, and it was good learning new types of sports...watching sports now I can actually watch it and say, oh, I actually know what's going on, I know what's happening, whereas before I'm like I didn't even have an idea of what was going on. (P1, FG3)

Rugby was quite interesting because you know what skills you have to have to play a rugby match. We only ended up learning how to handle the ball itself, and trying to communicate, and pass it, and try and score, but it was good to see how much concentration you needed to play that sport. (P2, FG3)

However, others, particularly those who may have limited experiences with sports previously, were keen to note that they placed value in the programme beyond physical activity and sports-based learning:

Well, growing up I wasn't really one of the sporty people, so I just thought I'd try it out and see if I'd be into it and all. (P4, FG3)

It's not all about sport. It's good fun. Went away and it's [not] all about the same sport, and you're learning. (P8, FG6)

Specialist sessions delivered on subjects running parallel to the sports themselves proved to be interesting and engaging for participants:

There was a couple of people that came in from St John's Ambulance. There was another woman who showed us about CPR. There was a couple of nutritionists, who came in and spoke to us, how a rugby player would eat, and keep himself fit, and just basically got us into

the daily life of a rugby player. (P4, FG4)

The sessions on various aspects on mental health were highlighted as particularly significant:

P2: I kind of knew a little bit [about depression and ADHD] because we'd spoke about it in school and stuff, but it did open my eyes a lot more.

P3: ... yeah, I was going to say the same thing. Just know that sort of thing to happen, but from the outside, looking at someone, it's hard to tell that they're either happy or sad. (FG3)

3.3.2. Breaking Down Barriers

As in previous years, the multi-sport approach adopted by Fresh start Through Sport helped to address a number of barriers and challenges confronting some of the young people involved on the programme.

Cross-community and cultural barriers

Most of the areas of delivery in 2022-23 involved a mix of participants from CNR and PUL backgrounds. Participants welcomed the chance to consistently interact with individuals from different community backgrounds to their own:

So, you've got a mix of who are Catholic, Protestant, and you've got most of the guys. It's good. When we were going away they talked about stuff and learn about different things too. (P4, FG5)

This was particularly reflected in participants' initial sporting preferences. The relationship between sport and politics can be highly

charged in Northern Ireland, and individual engagement with sporting activities can be textured by religious and community backgrounds. However, the programme served to break down barriers and perceptions associated with the different sports and sporting partners. For example, some young people from a CNR background had no experiences of playing football due to commitments to GAA:

I wouldn't be into soccer... I wasn't raised up to be a soccer man... My family never played football. It's just more Gaelic in my family. I really enjoyed it. I didn't think I would have enjoyed it as much. (P1, FG1)

Especially when it's a mixed community we're in. The Northern Ireland team is normally not a great follower through to the Catholic side. So, programmes like this brings the whole lot together. (P2, FG6)

Equally, as has been the case in previous iterations of the programme, young people from PUL background who had never been exposed or introduced to GAA sports spoke highly of their experiences:

[GAA] is completely different to your average sort of sport in school, because you wouldn't suggest Gaelic as being one of the ones that you'd learn in primary school or secondary school, but it was good to know what other people can play, and it was good to see everyone still giving it a good go. (P1, FG3)

The area we live in Gaelic isn't really talked about. You never really see anyone talk about Gaelic, or Hurling, or any of them sports. So, it was nice to try it out. (P2, FG3)

The first thing, from being from a different background that wasn't used to playing Gaelic, you know, it was good. I enjoyed it. (P1, FG6)

Relational barriers

Some of the young people involved in the programme expressed discomfort regarding the prospect of meeting and interacting with new people. However, the programme proved to be a welcome and effective catalyst in overcoming this initial reticence:

It gets me out of the house and gets me talking to different people in different communities and stuff... You can go and you're more comfortable speaking to somebody you don't know and getting to know them. (P3, FG2)

At the start I wasn't too sure about it and all, like before I actually went the first time, and once I went I really enjoyed actually going. I looked forward to it each week. (P2, FG2)

Some relished the chance to get to know new people, and in a supportive and constructive environment:

I mean, I kind of prefer being in a programme when we were all strangers at one point and then we all make friends, because you don't really go up to someone in the street and go do you want to go bowling with me. It's different. You get to basically communicate in one big group, where outside I don't think I would have gone, oh yeah, do you want to just come and play a game of football with me. (P1, FG3)

Well, I was expecting to meet new people, which we did, and be able to communicate without feeling like you're being judged, which worked well...I

liked the size of the group because it's not overwhelming, but yet you still got to meet new people. (P2, FG3)

Addressing barriers between young people and the police

Since the inception of Fresh Start Through Sport in 2020, the PSNI have been increasingly involved with the programme. Across each delivery area, local neighbourhood policing teams have been involved in referring young people on to the programme. Some of the young people felt this was still a good approach:

I: You mentioned something at the start about having police within the community, and them sort of steering people towards this programme. Do you think that's a good approach?

P1: Yeah, because it lets people know about it... [the local neighbourhood policing officer] got in touch with [the programme facilitators] and asked could I actually do it, so then they got in touch...and said that I could do it, and then yeah, got more people doing it. (FG1)

In more recent iterations of the programme, and in some delivery areas, the police have become more involved on a weekly basis and regularly attend sessions in plain clothes. This has allowed young people to interact with them on a more personal level:

P1: You want to see Jack [pseudonym, community police officer] when we were on the ice.

P2: See on the ice with him, he fell in front of me, and I was flying behind him, and I went flying over him.

P3: There was actually a video. He has a video of Jack. I don't know who took it, and he just slid right across the ice on his back, and he couldn't get up.

P1: Yeah, he didn't just fall on the spot. He just crashed into everyone. And it was like he didn't care where he was going. He would just land there and slid right across the ice [intermittent laughing and joking throughout]. (FG3)

In turn, the personalisation of police officers has helped to break down barriers between young people and the police in local communities (the perceived benefits of which are discussed in [Section 3.2](#)):

P1: It breaks down that kind of barrier between police and young people.

P2: Because young people do look up to police, and it would be like, ah, run.

P3: Say something happened and people are kind of scared to speak to the police, whereas because we know them, we'd feel more comfortable speaking to them.

P1: And it broke the, is it stigma? Is that what you would call it? Like people going, there's the police, like you don't want to speak to them, but really we know them now so we can say, all right, hiya, how's your day going. It makes you feel better. (FG3)

3.3.3. Feeding Back and Feeding Forward

In all of the focus groups, participants were asked to reflect on what worked well on the programme, and what could potentially be improved. Like any community-based program, some relatively minor issues were raised by participants that could be taken into consideration for future programmes. For instance, some participants expressed frustration with the provision of transport, noting instances of delays and even instances where buses did not arrive at all:

[We attended everything] except for the wheelchair [session] at the start. We were supposed to go to Queen's University and the bus driver took us to Kingspan. (P1, FG3)

We didn't get to see the [ice hockey] match because [the bus] never turned up... We weren't able watch him with a cup and all at the championship because the bus didn't show up... Standing in there for an hour and a half (P3, FG5)

The only thing for me was, I know it wasn't IFA staff and all, but the bus didn't turn up to go to Belfast, and that was the most exciting night of the lot, you know, you were really looking forward to getting to the IFA, but it wasn't their fault. (P4, FG6)

Other participants, particularly those from communities not in close proximity to Belfast, felt that the delivery across the four sporting partners could be rebalanced, and there was potentially more that could have been done to replicate experiences across the sporting partners:

P3: We've seen the rugby tour, [been] up at the ice hockey, and up here [at Windsor Park] as well, but none for Gaelic like that there. There was no tour, or nothing like that there. It was only their training session with Gaelic and that was it.

P2: It would be good as well to see a tour or something like that there, like a tour of Croke Park.

P3: Even Ulster. Ulster have a Gaelic ground...It would be good to get into a Gaelic match but see everybody would be thinking about a Gaelic match, you know the way you've got your fans on one side, and the other, see in Gaelic, they all sit together. (FG5)

Most of the young people acknowledged the diverse range of sporting abilities among the participants, which posed a challenge in delivering the sessions. However, some participants proposed that conducting a brief assessment of participants' skill levels at the beginning of each session would enable the facilitators to gauge the capabilities of the group. If there was a higher level of skill or capability, these participants expressed a desire for more focused sessions that emphasise technical skills:

The only thing I thought they could have done more was do more like technical drills. They didn't really do much technical drills before we play football, or on the actual course... It was a wee bit of a power walk and then into a match. So, they could done more technical stuff like that, I mean drills and stuff like that. (P3, FG5)

A testament to the value participants placed on their experiences over the course of their time on the programme, some suggested

that Fresh Start Through Sport should be extended and increased in scale:

P1: [the only problem was] probably how brief it was. Just as we said just one...session [per week] rather than getting more out it.

*P2: Yeah, if there was more days it would be more enjoyable, because it's just one night a week it's like forgetting what it is then, or it's Tuesday, and you felt like everything is too squashed.
(FG2)*

However, in the main, participants were quick to emphasise their positive regard for both the programme:

I can't really think of [areas for improvement really...I don't feel like that there was anything. I feel like it was all good. (P4, FG4)

In particular, programme facilitators were singled out for praise for their personable, engaging, and professional approach to organisation and delivery of Fresh Start Through Sport:

P1: You could have a laugh, and a joke, and a bit of carry on with them. It was serious, but there were a bit of fun in between it too.

P2: Your man [facilitator] enjoys the craic.

P1: I must say to you, [facilitator] is a very, very...I've had a whole lot of different coaches through the years, but that boy is pick of the bunch.

P4: Aye, he's very good.

P1: Oh, he is, he's top class.

P4: Oh, he is. He's brilliant. Very good. (FG5)

Summary and Recommendations

4 section

Summary

As a primary intervention under work stream two of the NI Executive's Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, the Fresh Start Through Sport programme for 2022-23 has contributed to the realisation of several key intermediary benefits. Progress has been identified in the following areas:

- **Community Resilience 1 (CR1): Get more people involved**
- **Community Resilience 9 (CR9): Improvement in relations between PSNI and Communities**
- **Protective Factors 1 (PF1): Increase in individual protective factors.**

98 participants engaged with the FSTS 22-23 programme, with a substantially increased representation of female participants (45.4%) (CR1).

The majority of surveyed participants reported that they would like to engage with volunteering opportunities on completion of the programme (CR1).

Participants self-reported an improvement in their orientation towards specific PSNI officers, and the PSNI more generally (CR9).

Data from interviews with PSNI officers indicated improved relationships with young people in their local communities on completion of the programme (CR9).

Interview and survey data indicated improved future orientation and positive attitudes among participants following the completion of the programme (PF1).

The majority of surveyed participants conveyed that they acquired new knowledge and skills during the programme. Many also expressed aspirations to pursue further education and training after completing the programme (PF1).

Data from participant interviews underscored the impact of various positive and supportive relationships formed with organisers, facilitators, and police officers during the course of the programme (PF1).

Recommendations

1. Training and Support

Programme facilitators were praised by participants for their professionalism, approachability, and skill sets. Similarly, interview data from the facilitators highlighted an array of qualities possessed by coaches that have improved the impact and value of Fresh Start Through Sport for the young participants. In building on this, there could be opportunities to explore specific, tailored training for FSTS coaches and facilitators, with a focus on supporting their delivery to groups of young people with often complex needs. Engaging with training opportunities would help to and ensure a consistency of approach across all of the sporting partners.

2. Consistent Involvement

The Fresh Start Through Sport programme for 2022-2023 saw a significant increase in participation from neighbourhood policing officers. In certain delivery areas, officers attended in plain clothes and took part in the majority of programme activities. As corroborated by the evidence in [Section 3](#), this had a substantial impact on the young people's attitudes towards the police and the subsequent interactions between the two parties. However, these effects were perhaps less evident in areas where local neighbourhood policing teams were unable to adopt a similarly consistent approach. This observation is not intended as a criticism of these teams; rather, it underscores the contemporary challenges faced by neighbourhood policing teams in Northern

Ireland. Nonetheless, the importance and value of supporting individual officers and teams to engage consistently throughout the entirety programme's duration cannot be overstated.

3. Spotlight on Mental Health

Modules and activities centred on mental health and resilience were enthusiastically received by participants. Based on the evidence above, further incorporating discussions and activities addressing the mental health challenges faced by young people in Northern Ireland would be a hugely worthwhile endeavour. By facilitating these conversations in the safe, supportive environment provided by the programme, and using sport as an impactful vehicle for discussion and dialogue, the programme has seen clear benefits. However, following recommendation 1, additional training may be necessary in order to further support facilitators and coaches if and when any issues arise. Additionally, inviting a wider range of relevant guest contributors could help bolster these initiatives across the programme.

4. Coproduced (Re)design

There is evidence of a consistently reflexive approach to programme design, with modules being amended and/or replaced where it is believed it may be beneficial for participants. To respond to feedback and address any issues raised by participants—thereby enhancing the programme's effectiveness and the participant experience—organisers and facilitators may find it beneficial to draw directly upon the experience and perspectives of Fresh Start Through Sport Ambassadors. Their direct involvement in workshopping the design and

redesign of future iterations of the programme would be invaluable in enhancing the programme's responsiveness. In particular, these former participants could be included in more regular steering group meetings. This long-term planning approach, involving former programme participants, can serve to sustain and extend the positive impact of Fresh Start Through Sport.

5. Tailoring Engagement

There is clear evidence of a high degree of responsiveness to the individual needs and circumstances of participants, a considerable accomplishment given the diversity of the wider cohort. There may be potential to further personalise some of the sports-based activities based on the participants' physical literacy, sporting interests, and varying skill levels. While interactional components of the programme, and the current emphasis on fun and engagement, should remain paramount, some modules involving drills and technical skills might benefit from brief assessments at the outset to understand and respond to the diverse skill levels and preferences of participants.

6. Achieving Balance

For some participants, their experience of Fresh Start Through Sport seemed uneven, with a perception that certain sports received more time and attention than others. Specifically, participants expressed a keen interest in experiencing match day events across all sports, including GAA. While this might be hindered by scheduling constraints, it could be beneficial to consider the balance of input across each of the four sports and sporting partners. Where possible, seeking an equitable distribution of

time and activities across all sports could further enhance participant engagement and satisfaction.

7. Revision and Expansion

Related to recommendation 4, facilitators indicated the need to revise certain modules. Some also expressed the desire to develop additional modules focusing on areas such as event management or volunteer development and recruitment. Such revisions and additions would ensure the programme remains dynamic and continually meets the changing needs of participants. Crucially, the active participation of all four sporting partners in this process of revision and expansion is vital. Regular steering group meetings, on at least a quarterly basis, and consistent communication can support this collaborative approach.

8. Networks

Facilitators noted the potential to offer qualifications or placement opportunities for participants interested in delving deeper into sports or pursuing related careers. Similarly, participants expressed their desire for qualifications and further volunteering experience, a consistent theme across each of the Fresh Start Through Sport programmes to date. Leveraging the wider networks and expertise of each of the four sporting partners more consistently could serve to enhance opportunities for the development of further pathways out of the programme. This would not only further motivate participants, but also foster opportunities for valuable experiences that could enhance their future prospects.

9. Annual Event

The proposition of hosting an annual celebration that brings together participants from each phase of delivery might seem logistically challenging. However, an event of this nature would provide an opportunity for young participants to interact with their peers from different areas and foster a wider sense of community across the yearly cohort. Recognising and celebrating participants' progress and accomplishments acknowledged and celebrated in a collective event could serve as a potent public affirmation of the programme's ethos, and further enhance both its individual and community impact.

10. Sharing Success

The positive impacts of the programme have been widely acknowledged by those involved. It could be beneficial to further publicise these successes more broadly to enhance recognition and potentially position the programme as a benchmark for similar initiatives in other jurisdictions. The dissemination of the programme's methodologies, lessons learned, and good practices could provide valuable insights for other organisations working in similar contexts, and with similarly marginalised groups of young people.

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Section

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