



Transition, Evolution and Change in a Return to the “Old Normal”

AN EVALUATION OF THE FRESH START THROUGH SPORT PROGRAMME 2021-22

Ulster University

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Delivered in partnership with



FRESH START THROUGH SPORT

FOREWORD

In October 2021, 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 across the 2021-2022 period of delivery. This report builds upon the evaluation of the previous year's pilot programme, and was supported by public agencies, community organisations, the Irish Football Association (IFA), and their sporting partners – the Belfast Giants, Ulster Rugby, and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Facilitators and organisers across these groups provided advice on the direction of the evaluation and participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Young people that participated in the Fresh Start Through Sport programme also assisted the evaluation by sharing their experiences in focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The core research team consisted of Dr Brendan Coyle, Dr Conor Murray, Dr Gavin Breslin, Dr John Bell and Dr Philip McCready.

The aim of the research was to continue to assess Fresh Start Through Sport in relation to the proposed outcomes and goals of the programme. The continuing objectives of the research were to:

Measure programme outcomes, including indicators such as attendance levels, number of activities delivered, percentage of participants referred into coaching and/or volunteering;

Develop an understanding of participants' experiences of, and attitudes towards, the Fresh Start Through Sport programme;

Create case studies featuring participants or groups to showcase programme impact in line with outcomes and targets;

Explore the benefits of the programme on participants and identify areas that could be improved;

Provide recommendations that could contribute to the development of an ongoing, iterative programme of activity.

This report explores each of these objectives, highlights examples of good practice along with potential areas for improvement, and proposes a series of recommendations to feed into future iterations of the programme.

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary of Programme Outputs

80 participants engaged with the FSTS 21-22 programme.

74% of participants (n=59) completed the post-programme evaluation.

14 modules of activity were delivered across the four sporting partners (IFA, Ulster GAA, The Belfast Giants and Ulster Rugby).

98% of surveyed participants felt the programme met their expectations.

98% of surveyed participants reported that they were treated well throughout the programme.

95% of surveyed participants indicated that they had gained new knowledge during the programme.

86% of surveyed participants reported that the programme had helped them to find volunteering opportunities.

92% of surveyed participants expressed a desire to become involved with local sporting bodies following their involvement with the programme.

95% of surveyed participants expressed a desire to continue to participate in a sporting activity on completion of the programme.

100% of surveyed participants indicated that they would recommend the programme to others.

Summary of Research Findings

Returning to In-person Delivery

Following the predominately online model employed during the Fresh Start Through Sport pilot programme (2020-21), the 2021-22 programme saw the return of regular, in-person modules and sessions across each phase of delivery. Beyond the sporting environment, and substantially improved opportunities to develop the physical literacy of participants, both participants and facilitators identified the value of face-to-face, informal interactions and conversations before, during and after sessions. Facilitators had the chance to offer tailored support and mentoring to individual young people, while participants had a sense of being valued, supported, and listened-to.

...obviously because of COVID...there wasn't that social interaction, whereas this time there has been...it has allowed us to then go and chat to the young people, like in a more smaller group setting...So, when you're hearing their story, a lot of that is then resonating with me, and it's almost like a shared experience, where I feel like I have a voice there to be able to guide and support. (F1)

[Name] especially would have been, you know, sort of the go-to...if you wanted to have just a chat or anything, even if it wasn't about the course. I think that was probably because [they] did take part and he was good craic and all to be around. (P3)

Challenging Expectations and Stereotypes

Participants and facilitators consistently highlighted the value of the programme in challenging an array of stereotypes, be they related to the community background of participants, the nature of the various sports and sporting partners, or the presence and involvement of PSNI officers during some of the sessions. The unique, multi-sport nature of Fresh Start Through Sport, coupled with careful facilitation and a high degree of cross-community inclusivity, encouraged the young people involved to critically examine their expectations and preconceptions.

So obviously I'd never had the chance to like go out and play like Gaelic and stuff because if you were to mention the word Gaelic in like some of the estates I grew up... you'd be like, "No you're not doing that, you're not doing that. No." ...see doing the Fresh Start, like you could tell such a difference ... because they don't care what religion you are, they don't care where you're from...they're generally happy for you. (P1)

[Participants are] realising that the police aren't actually against them. They're involved in this programme, and they want them to develop, and they want them to be inspired, and they want them to be motivated, and they want them to have a better quality of life. So, for them to see them in that instance rather than one that's maybe disciplinarian...I think that works really well for us. (F1)

Developing Long-term Pathways and Long-term Impact

The dialogue, cooperation and partnership between each of the sporting partners continued in the 2021-22 iteration of Fresh Start Through Sport. This collaborative approach has proved beneficial in identifying, showcasing and developing pathways for participants into volunteering, education and/or future employment, beyond the confines of the core programme. Harnessing the potential of sport to help young people find their own pathways emerged as strong motivations for facilitators across the programme, while participants highlighted post-programme benefits and aspirations.

I'm...so glad I've still got like the people like from the Fresh Start group, like involved in my life. Like they're always going to be...a really great impact on my life now. If I need any help...like they're always there. You know? It's like I've got someone to go to now. (P1)

Well, you can't get enough qualifications like but definitely everything helps, it leads you to the person you are today. It is good for qualifications but it's not even about it, it makes you a good person like. (P2)

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The 2015 ‘Fresh Start’ agreement sets out the Northern Ireland Executive’s commitment to ‘dealing with the impact of continued paramilitary activity’ and associated criminality under four key areas of delivery: long term prevention; building capacity to support transition; strategies and powers to tackle criminality; and building confidence in the justice system (Northern Ireland Office, 2015). Section A of the agreement relates to the promotion of lawfulness, with a range of subordinate actions that encourage the development and maintenance of cross-sector, community-oriented partnerships that both promote lawfulness and the generation of a culture of lawfulness. Action A3 states: “The Executive should work with leading figures and organisations throughout all sectors of society to take a stand against criminality in Northern Ireland and promote responsible cooperation with the authorities as part of a culture of lawfulness”.

This report addresses the work of a tertiary 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 protective factors, and breaking the cycle of harm caused by paramilitaries and paramilitarism. As a tertiary intervention under work stream two, FSTS has sought to contribute to the realisation of key benefits pertaining to increasing community resilience, and enhancing protective factors which may contribute to long-term harm reduction. Section 4 of this report addresses how FSTS contributes to the realisation of some of the key intermediary benefits identified by EPPOC.

I.1. Background to the Fresh Start Through Sport Programme

International human rights organisations, national governments, and sport’s governing bodies continue to encourage children and adults to participate in sport (Spaaij, 2013; Yelamos et al., 2019). Many of these organisations have framed their advocacy around the ‘sport for development’ concept, 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).

¹ A project designed to minimise the long term impact of paramilitarism and organised crime and prevent further victimisation (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021)

One strand of the ‘sport for development’ approach uses sport to engage ‘at-risk’², ‘vulnerable’ and ‘marginalised’ young people (Luna et al., 2020). Referred to here as sport-based interventions (SBIs), these programmes are often delivered in areas of multiple deprivation with young people (see e.g. Kelly, 2010); and can be underpinned by a focus on “education, employment and training, community leadership and healthy lifestyles” (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012)³. The rationale underpinning such interventions is that young people should be regarded as having “resources to be developed” rather than “problems to be solved” (Bruner et al., 2021: 1).

In October 2020, four of the largest sporting organisations in NI, the Irish Football Association, Gaelic Athletic Association, Ulster Rugby and the Belfast Giants partnered to deliver a sport-based intervention: Fresh Start Through Sport (FSTS). Supported by the Department for Communities, Department of Justice, and Police Service of Northern Ireland, participants to FSTS include young people, aged 16-24, from areas of multiple deprivation who may be ‘at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism and/or organised crime’ (Department for Communities, 2020). The premise of the FSTS interventions to date is that sport has a universal appeal, and can be used as a hook to motivate young people to develop agency, self-confidence and self-efficacy through opportunities for physical activity, sports-based learning and support for individuals.

The four sporting partners deliver a series of sport-based modules, focusing on disability, racism and mental health benefits of sport. The objectives of these modules are to guide and support participants in identifying and making positive life choices, with the eventual goal of providing a pathway away from paramilitarism, and into community work, coaching and/or volunteering through their chosen sport. Our multidisciplinary research team at Ulster University has been exploring the use and effectiveness of this sport-based intervention as a means of engaging with young people who are at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism and/or organised crime through their chosen sport.

1.2. Fresh Start Through Sport Pilot Programme, 2020-21

To date, we have seen positive examples of the impact that FSTS can have on the lives of young people in marginalised settings, even in spite of the social, physical and practical limitations wrought upon the 2020-21 pilot programme by government-imposed public health restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Coyle et al. 2022).

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

2. ‘At-risk’ of engaging in 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 (Breslin & Leavey, 2019; Coyle et al., 2022; Luna et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2022; Rodriguez-Bravo et al., 2020).

I.3. Methodology

The research underpinning this report was conducted over three phases, between October 2020 and August 2021, 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 programme⁴.

The third and final phase of the research involved the completion of two in-person focus groups (eight participants per group) and three online semi-structured interviews with young people who completed the FSTS 2021-22 programme. An additional seven online semi-structured interviews were conducted with programme organisers and facilitators. These focus groups and interviews centred on individual experiences of, and attitudes towards FSTS, with interviewees asked to reflect on the most positive aspects of the programme, as well as those aspects that could benefit from improvement. 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.

I.4. Data Analysis

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

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

4. The research team at UU has guided the revision of these research instruments, in light of the findings of the 2020-21 evaluation (see Coyle et al., 2022), and the survey instruments are now more consistent with the survey tools used to gather data by the wider Ending the Harm research team. These revised surveys will be used for the first time in the 2022-23 iteration of the FSTS programme.

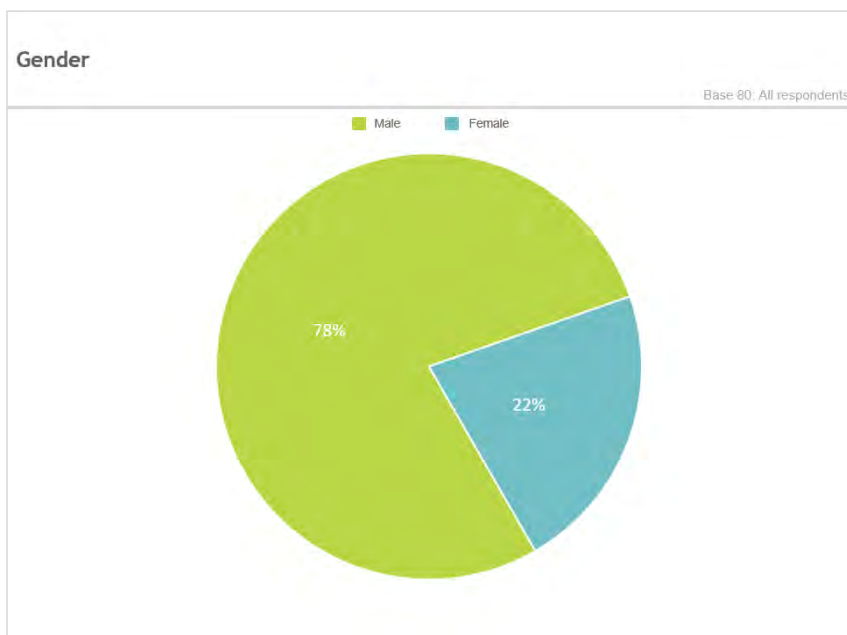
2. PROGRAMME DELIVERY AND PARTICIPATION

A total of 80 participants engaged with the Fresh Start Through Sport programme during the 2021-22 phase of delivery. There were 80 unique participants who completed at least one aspect of the survey instrument, with a total of 53 participants completing both aspects. 73 participants completed the pre-evaluation survey, while 59 participants completed the post-evaluation. The numbers of respondents to the survey instruments is not necessarily reflective of the total number of participants who completed the programme.

2.1. Participant Demographics

The following paragraphs detail the demographics of the 80 respondents who completed at least one aspect of the survey instrument. On average, survey respondents were 18.5 years old and ranged between 15 years old and 28 years old. 78% of respondents (n=62) were male and 22% (n=18) were female (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Gender Breakdown



A total of 50% (n=40) completed the equal opportunities form. From this form, more advanced demographic data was elucidated than could be gleaned from the primary survey (see Table 1).

Table 1: Detailed demographics

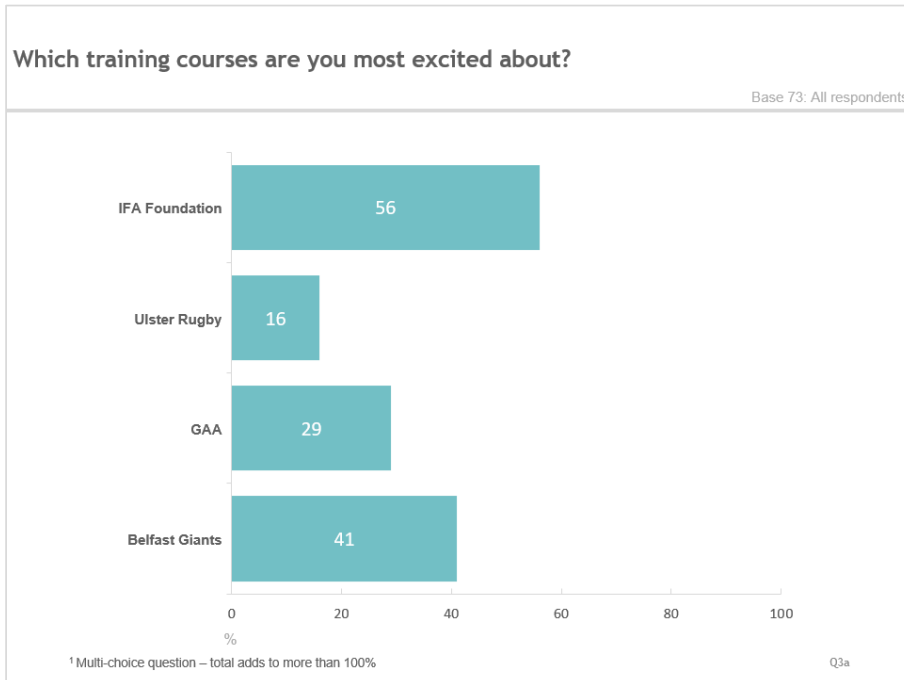
		%	n	Missing
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual/straight	95%	38	-
	Gay/lesbian	...	...
Marital status	Single	98%	39	-
	Married	...	...
Physical or mental health condition/illness	Yes	15%	6	-
	No	85%	34	
Caring responsibility	Child/children	88%	5	-
	None of the above	13%	35	
Ethnicity	White	88%	35	-
	Black African	...	...
	Black Other	...	...
	Other	...	...
Religion	Roman Catholic	45%	18	-
	Protestant	...	...
	Presbyterian Church in Ireland	13%	5	
	Other	33%	13	
	None	...	...
Political affiliation	Nationalist	33%	13	1
	Unionist	38%	15	
	Neither	28%	11	

2.2. Initial Overview of Programme Engagement

The vast majority of respondents to the pre-evaluation survey played a sport previously. Football/soccer (75%, n=55) was the most commonly played sport, followed by Gaelic football or hurling (41%, n=30). 14% (n=10) had played rugby, and 10% (n=7) had played hockey. Other sports participated in included boxing, martial arts, athletics, and basketball. Both male and female respondents were most likely to have previously played football, but while males were more likely to have played Gaelic, females were more likely to have played hockey. Half (52%, n=38) of respondents also said that football was their favourite sport, with one-fifth (22%, n=16) saying it was Gaelic football or hurling. Male and female respondents both mentioned football as being their favourite sport.

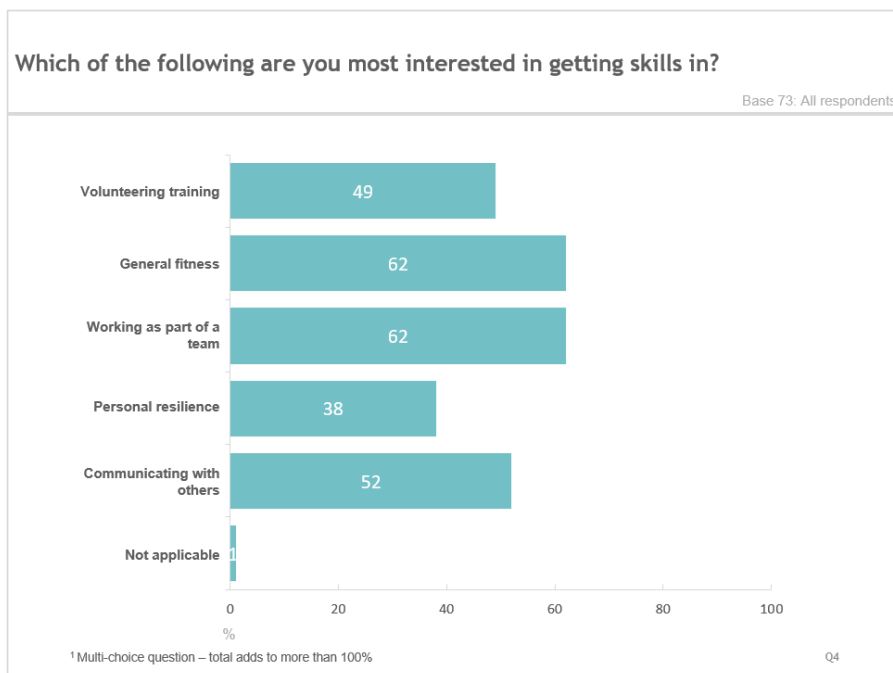
At the outset, participants were more likely to be most excited about the prospect of modules offered by the IFA (56%, n=41), followed by the Belfast Giants (41%, n=30), the GAA (29%, n=21), and Ulster Rugby (16%, n=12). Following, playing or wanting to play the sport were all given as reasons for respondent's preference of training course. Male respondents were more likely to be excited by the course offered by the IFA, while females were more likely to be excited about the Belfast Giants' course.

Figure 2: Most anticipated training course



Participants were asked about what skills they were most interested in obtaining/developing. Three in five respondents were most interested in getting skills in working as a team (62%, n=45) and in general fitness (62%, n=45). 52% (n=38) were interested in acquiring skills in communicating with others, while just under half (49%, n=36) would like to gain volunteering skills. 28 of the 73 respondents (38%) were interested in getting personal resilience skills (see fig. 3).

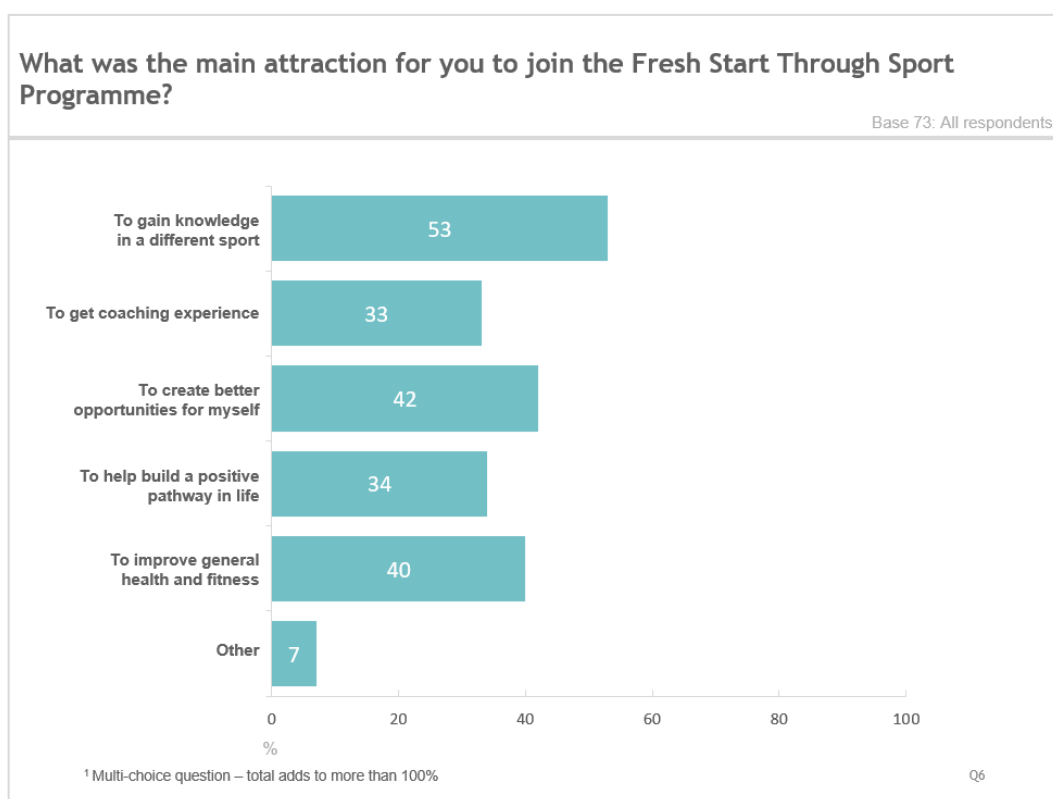
Figure 3: Skills



Only 15 (21%) respondents reported that they had volunteered previously, including in youth and community groups and through coaching in a sport.

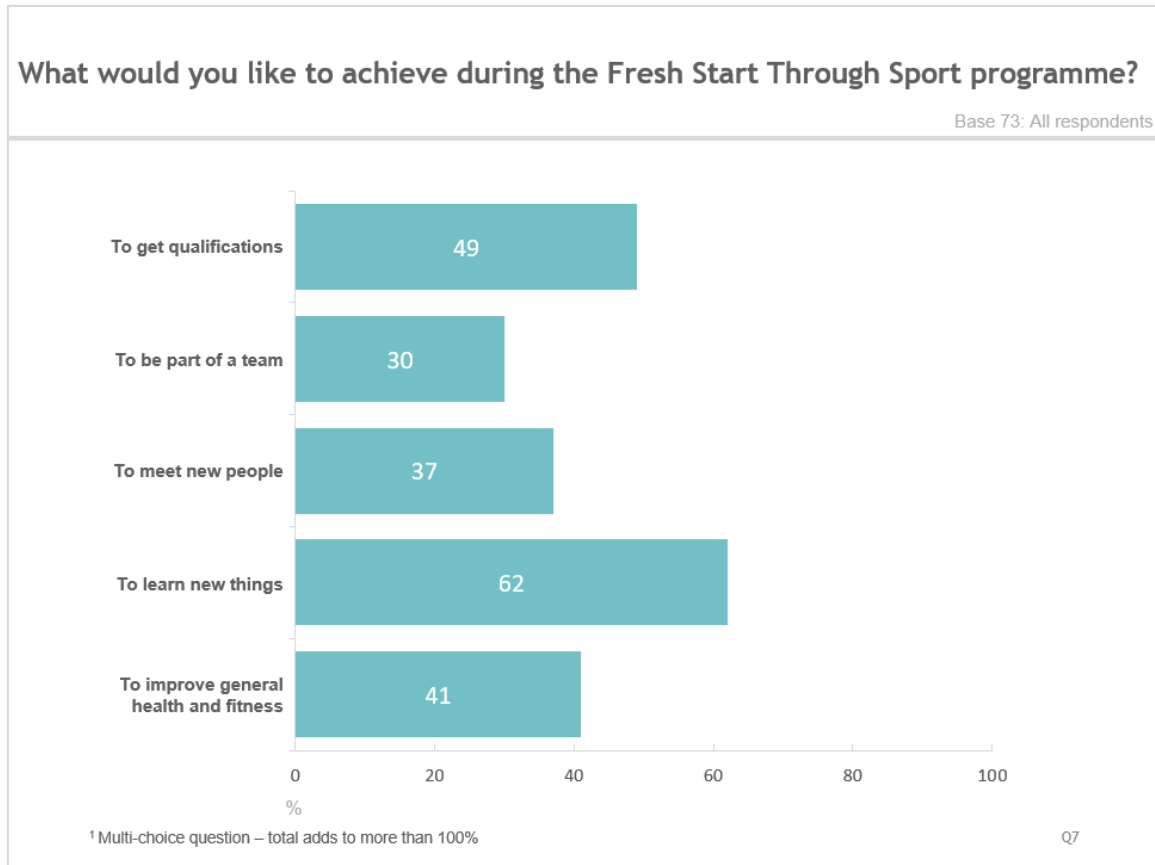
The respondents were asked about their motivations for participating in the Fresh Start programme. Respondents were most likely to say that they wanted to gain knowledge in a different sport (53%, n=39). 42% (n=31) wanted to create better opportunities for themselves, while two in five (40%, n=29) wanted to improve their general health and fitness. One third said that they wanted to build a positive pathway in life (34%, n=25), and to get coaching experience (33%, n=24).

Figure 4: Attraction to programme



Three in five (62%, n=45) wanted to learn new things during the programme, while 49% (n=36) wanted to get qualifications. 41% (n=30) were hoping to improve their general health and fitness, with 37% (n=27) and 30% (n=22) wanting to meet new people and to be part of a team respectively (see fig. 5). These reasons were also echoed when respondents were asked why they would like to complete the programme.

Figure 5: Aims of participating in the programme



While the majority (93%, n=68) of respondents had no concerns about participating in the programme, three respondents felt they would need support with reading due to their dyslexia, while two respondents mentioned they may have difficulties with using a computer.

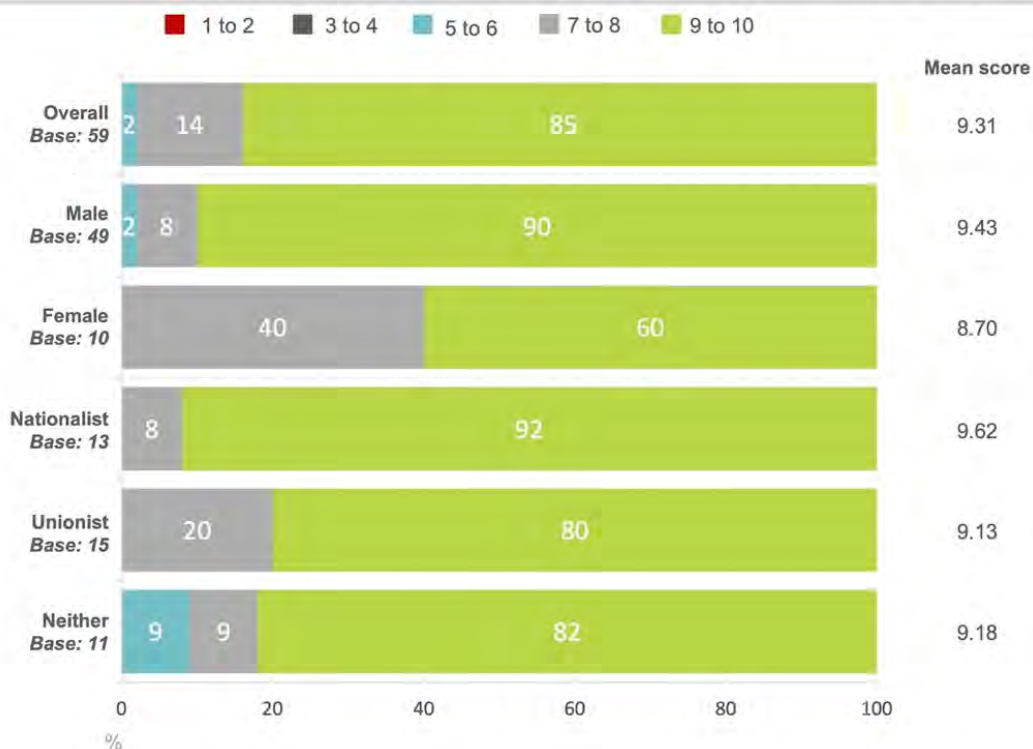
2.3. Final Overview of Programme Engagement

A total of 59 participants completed the final survey. Participants were asked to rate their overall experience of the programme using a scale ranging from 1-10, with 1 being the least positive and 10 being the most positive. On average, the self-reported score was 9.3. This ranged between 6 and 10, indicating a relatively high level of acceptability across the sample. Male respondents had an average score of 9.4, while females had a mean rating of 8.7. Respondents who identified as nationalists (9.6) were also more likely to rate their experience higher than those who identified as unionist (9.1).

Figure 6: Enjoyment of the programme

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much did you enjoy the programme?

Base 59: All respondents



¹ Due to rounding percentages add to 99%-101%

Q1

Participants were asked to identify from the five options (IFA, GAA, Ulster Rugby, Belfast Giants or all) the course which they enjoyed the most. While there was a good degree of variability in the responses, participants were most likely to say that they enjoyed the programme delivered by the GAA (58%, n=34) the most, followed by the Belfast Giants (44%, n=26). The most common reasons for enjoying the delivery partner mentioned were preferring the sport and the venues you could attend during the programme.

Figure 7: Preferred delivery partner

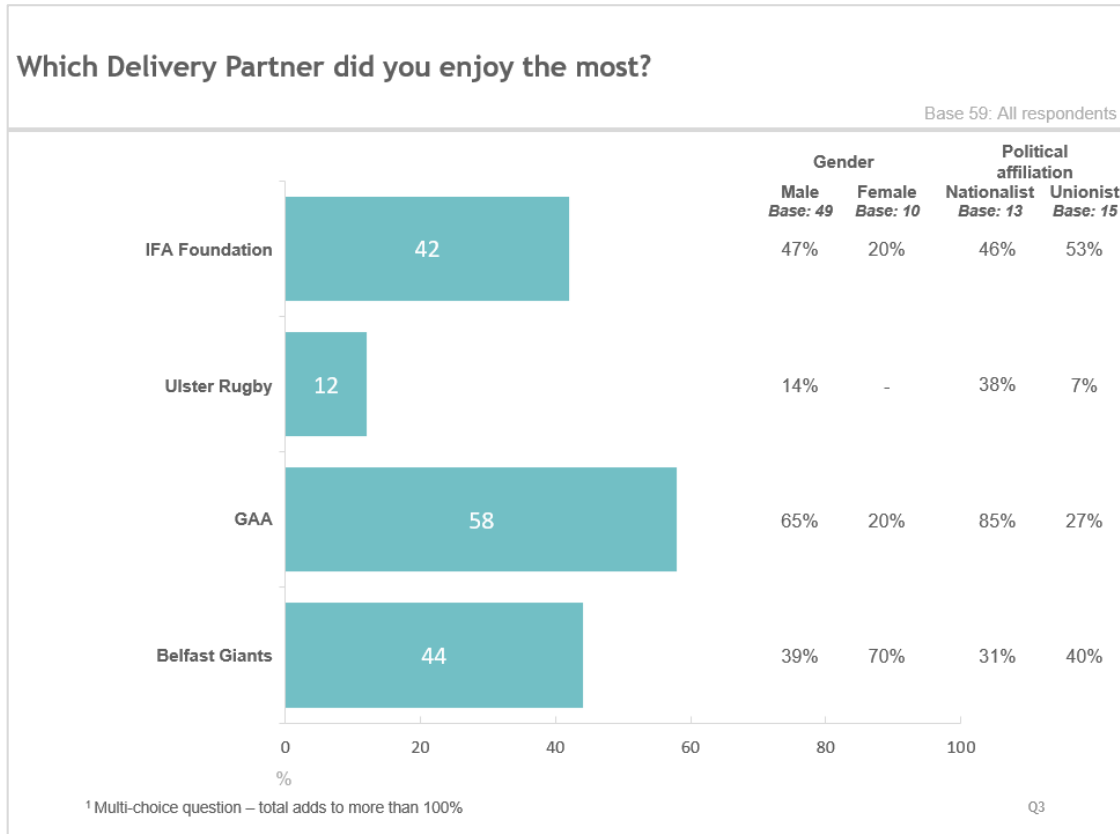
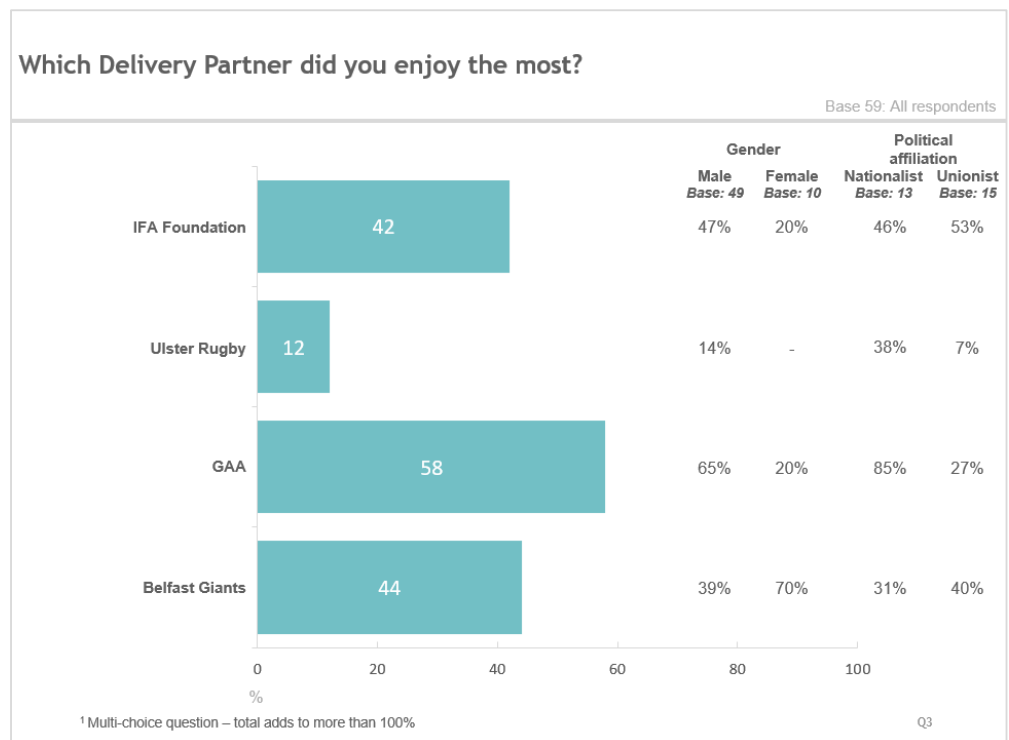


Table 2 outlines which modules offered by the delivery partners were enjoyed most by respondents.

Table 2 Preferred modules



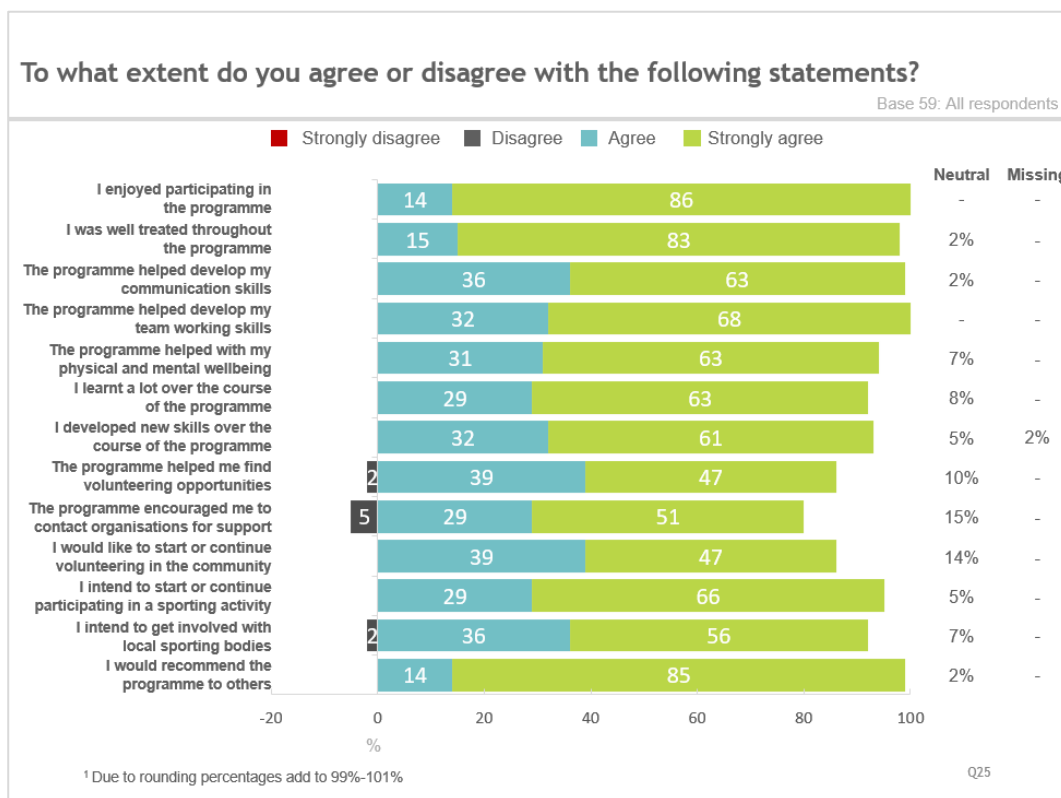
When asked what the most beneficial thing they had learned during the programme was, respondents said they had learnt more about sport (42%, n=25), how to be more tolerant and accepting of other people (20%, n= 12), and that they are able to try new things (20%, n= 12). Working as a team and nutrition were also mentioned, with only four respondents saying they had learned nothing.

Almost all (98%, n=58) respondents said that they had developed new skills during the programme, while 95% (n=56) said they had gained new knowledge during the programme. However, the identification of the specific skills and knowledge were not standardised. Instead, they were left as open questions on the survey, and whilst this had the benefit of allowing participants to identify more nuanced effects, it also reduced the capacity to code the responses and make connections to the programme aims.

All respondents to the post-evaluation survey completed a series of ranked questions regarding their experience of the programme. These questions can be used to measure the outcomes of the programme against the objectives set out prior to its inception, namely that 70% (n=56) of respondents would become involved in volunteering or casual employment with sporting bodies or the community, and that they would continue to participate in a sporting activity.

While only 15 (21%) respondents reported that they had volunteered previously, 85% (n=51) of respondents agreed they would like to start or continue volunteering in the community, while 92% (n=54) agreed that they intend to get involved with local sporting bodies in their community. Almost all (95%, n=56) agreed that they intend to start or continue participating in a sporting activity.

Figure 8: Participant experiences



As a testament to the programme and experiences of the participants, 98% of respondents to the survey indicated that the programme met their expectations. All of the 59 respondents said that they would recommend the Fresh Start Through Sport programme to others, with the opportunity to have fun and to learn and experience new things given as reasons for this. While two-thirds (66%, n=39) of respondents would not change anything about the programme, the addition of a greater variety of sports, having more sessions, and improving the transport to and from the venues were mentioned as ways in which the programme could be improved.

3. KEY THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

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

3.1. Successes of FSTS 2021-22

3.1.1. The return of face-to-face delivery

Facilitators drew a lot of positive experiences from this iteration of the FSTS programme, the first delivered fully face-to-face. Being able to deliver sessions in-person brought a lot of opportunities for facilitators to engage with and get to know the young people participating in the programme a lot more:

...there wasn't that social interaction [during the pandemic], whereas this time there has been...it has allowed us to then go and chat to the young people, like in a more smaller group setting...when you're hearing their story, a lot of that is then resonating with me, and it's almost like a shared experience, where I feel like I have a voice there to be able to guide and support. (F1)

I definitely noticed a big difference in how they communicate and participate in things from the online to the reality, real life ones. I think everybody is just glad to be back in a world of mixing. (F6)

The face-to-face delivery also brought opportunities away from the sporting environment to build relationships with the young people. The participants valued the approachability of FSTS facilitators, and having a “go-to” that they could speak with before, during or after a session:

[Name] especially would have been, you know, sort of the go-to...if you wanted to have just a chat or anything, even if it wasn't about the course. I think that was probably because [they] did take part and he was good craic and all to be around. (P3)

The value of a regular in-person interface with facilitators was similarly reflected in one particular focus group interaction:

P2: Aye they were all dead on...

P2: Aye they done brilliant like...

P3: They entertained it all...

*P2: They're sound as f**k...*

P3: Aye, [they're] people like who is easy to communicate with...

P2: ...they're friendly enough like, they're easy to talk to. Like I don't - it's hard to explain like, they're just easy to talk to. (FG2)

Some facilitators found that sharing their own journeys and life experiences enabled them to support and mentor the young people in a more effective way:

Just being a listening ear for them, which is obviously helping to build trust in a relationship, which I find is pivotal to these programmes...it's almost like you're sharing your story. But you're maybe sharing stories of other people who I've been involved with throughout my life. So, for them it's obviously quite motivational, so they can see what you can achieve. (F1)

... it was good to see that the young people felt confident enough to go and raise those conversations, whether it was at a one to one, or whether it was a couple of guys went over to talk of one the presenters. I think that's really good, and that's something that we would build in moving forward to try and keep the conversation going. (F2)

3.1.2. Maintaining collaborative relationships

Throughout the 2021-22 FSTS programme, relationships between each of the sporting partners involved has continued to evolve and remains strong, with good participatory communication. This, in-turn, serves to enhance programme delivery. By understanding the work they are doing, and the young people they are working with, there is a commitment and passion from FSTS staff across all four sporting organisations to engage collaboratively to respond to any issues and challenges they encounter:

We've built up a great relationship with all the sporting partners...it's great to be involved in a programme where everyone is striving for the same thing...they're always willing to...go above and beyond in terms of ways they can facilitate, review, modules being delivered...when you have a shared goal...those stumbling blocks that maybe could arise...they're kind of almost circumvented...because everyone believes in the programme. Everyone believes what it's trying to do. (F1)

As the programme has evolved since its inception in 2020, lessons have been learned by all facilitators regarding how best to tailor each module that is delivered. A key lesson learned is the need to ensure that, at the planning stage, a conscious effort is made to engage with the “right” partners:

I think the last 12 months it has developed greatly...its nearly lessons learned as you're going along. From our perspective...if you get the planning stage right, and you get the right partners in around the table, then you'll have a very successful programme. (F5)

One facilitator felt that, while young people enjoyed the opportunity to experience new and different sports (opportunities they may not have been afforded before), they also relished seeing a sports stadium on both matchday and non-matchdays, and to see the wide range of employment opportunities and roles that each sport can bring. The collaborative nature of the project ensured the participant feedback was actively shared between each sporting partner:

I think coming to a stadium is really good...getting the experience of sport just isn't about playing...there's multiple other opportunities, and the stadium tour enabled [us] to discuss multiple opportunities around

employment...grounds, for example, security, accounting, finance stadium management, and the list goes on and on. So, actually, the stadium tour again is themed, but actually it can deviate in whatever direction the young people want to go to, and a lot of it is fitness orientated around performance, and those are... are not key modules, but actually come up in conversation. (F2)

3.1.3. Fostering Police participation

Engagement with police officers is a core element of the programme, but officer participation was designed to be an organic part of the larger programme, rather than being a discrete or distinct module. Police officers were asked to attend out of uniform and chat with the young people whilst also getting involved in the activities:

I think we removed the stigma of policing. Again, that's why we don't ask them to turn up in uniform. We have them come along, and they give their names out, you know, my name is James, or whatever, and they talk about their experiences, their own life experiences...they are just people, and that have similarities - they have the same likes as you, and we ask them to get involved in the programme, and they're not just coming there to stand. (F1)

It was felt by some facilitators this was a more natural way to involve the police with the FSTS programme. Through this approach, there was a perception that the FSTS programme was able to challenge and change some of the perceived stigma associated with the PSNI:

[Participants are] realising that the police aren't actually against them. They're involved in this programme, and they want them to develop, and they want them to be inspired, and they want them to be motivated, and they want them to have a better quality of life. So, for them to see them in that instance rather than one that's maybe disciplinarian... I think that works really well for us.' (F1)

One participant described the impact of his shift in attitude towards the police officer he encountered on FSTS:

The one [police officer] that was at the course, he is actually dead on...There was one other boy there and he was trying to give the police guff and I just stopped him, I think the [police officer] from the course actually saw me doing it. (P2)

3.1.4. Participant Highlights

The focus groups and interviews with participants revealed an enjoyment of many elements of the FSTS programme, including, giving young people a reason to leave the house and interact with others, having an event to look forward to in the week, and a view that taking part could have a positive impact on mental health and self-esteem:

I just rather like going out than sitting in, so just thought, get experience. (P4, FG1)

... just getting out of the house...I didn't really know much about and then I just ended up doing it. (P3, FG2)

With that...Fresh Start programme then I was obviously like, after week one or two like, in my head I had something to look forward to every week then...if I didn't do that then ...I would have kept drinking. Like, I wouldn't have had anything to look forward to. (P1)

One particular focus group interaction emphasised several highlights for participants across the programme:

*P3: I enjoyed going down, playing the ice with Giants players like that was f**king mad*

P2: The rugby, we got to watch that match

*P1: That was good craic that was...What else... the wheelchair. The f**king GAA on a wheelchair was good...*

P2: Injuries of ice hockey...

P3: Aye it was lethal so it was... it was lethal learning about it...(FG2)

The FSTS programme brings together football, rugby, ice hockey and Gaelic games to allow young people the opportunity to experience some sports they may never have encountered or tried before. Having access to these unique experiences enhanced the value of the programme for participants:

I definitely enjoyed the ice-hockey, I thought it was amazing and the experience as a whole, I really enjoyed it... we got to go and play in the SSE, nobody else has got to do that before so you felt special and it was a good experience... (P3)

All the courses that would have got you out doing stuff, interacting like football, rugby, soccer, handball. All that stuff. Even a wheelchair competition, it definitely was enjoyable for everyone. (P2)

For some participants, trying Gaelic games was something they would never have countenanced before due to their family and community background:

So obviously I'd never had the chance to like go out and play like Gaelic and stuff...see doing the Fresh Start, like you could tell such a difference ... because they don't care what religion you are, they don't care where you're from...they're generally happy for you...they want to see your success whereas the people I was with and running about with and my family and stuff like, they don't... They're all about one thing, they're all about one religion and stuff whereas...I just wanted to keep busy...sports kept me busy and it was like, it kept me happy, too. (P1)

One participant, who identified as having come from a unionist background, discussed their apprehension and concern about trying Gaelic as part of the FSTS programme, for fear over how their family and friends may react. They enjoyed the GAA element of the programme and highlighted the support they received from facilitators (and from all sporting partners) to enable them to feel comfortable and safe throughout the programme:

I actually loved the GAA like, and that was one of the things I'd never done before. That was probably one of the things I thought I would have hated...I was like, "No, I can't play Gaelic, like my family will kill me."...I sort of like stressed out a wee bit and was all like, "I'll be fine, I'll be fine," because they obviously kept telling me I was going to be okay. So, I was all like, "I haven't got a clue what to do here or like how, like I don't know how to play this, I've never played it in my life."...I probably enjoyed that one the most because it was the one I was freaking out most about, but then when I got playing it, it was class. Like I actually loved it, like it was just fun. (P1)

Some participants noted that the programme offered benefits from all involved, even if some participants did not have any particular, pre-existing interest in sport and physical activity:

...there's people there of course, that definitely wasn't that good at sport and Fresh Start has made it interesting and fun and everything else. (P2)

Indeed, participants highlighted the exploration and development of their physical literacy as one of the most positive outcomes of their experience with FSTS:

P2: [a positive of the programme was] knowing that you could do more than you think you can

P1: Aye I was going to say that as well, you can do way more than you think you can like

P3: I wouldn't expect to be playing sports like this (FG2)

The support and care provided by facilitators is evident from an analysis of participant responses. Participants expressed that the environment fostered by facilitators was one that provided consistent reassurance and support for young people:

*[You'd get] positive feedback too that you're doing good at it and like you're good at it. Like I used to always come out of the sessions and be like, "I was s**t at that, I was s**t at that," and like [facilitator] and [facilitator] would be like, "No, you done well, you done well, just give it a go." Even if you didn't like something, like if you'd never done something or didn't want to do something, like they always would have told you, like you don't have to do it if you don't want to like. Whereas basically my whole teen life I was like basically forced into doing things I didn't want to do and stuff so they made it ... like they gave me the choice...which obviously made me feel a lot safer, which kept me out of trouble. (P1)*

From a participant perspective, the FSTS programme brings together a diverse range of young people, and focus group participants discussed friendships that they have made through the FSTS programme, including those that they have maintained beyond the time-scale of the programme itself:

Aye we met, all mates and all, over there. We still, like talk with them. They're coming to [the] cinema and all. Aye, we're mates with them and all. (P4, FG2)

3.2. Addressing Barriers and Challenges

3.2.1. Maintaining engagement and managing disruption

No programme is immune to an array of potential challenges, and given this is the first fully in-person delivery of the FSTS programme, it is perhaps unsurprising that facilitators and participants encountered some issues. For instance, some facilitators felt that the average age of participants meant that it could occasionally be a challenge to consistently encourage participants' engagement with certain activities, tasks and events:

... the way I try to look at it is I've to try and make [the session] as fun and as engaging as possible for someone of that age to get the most out of it. And if they're still not willing to sort of really put that effort in because, "No, that's not for me," - look, they're an adult, and they can make their own decisions... I'm not going to crack the whip at them, so I'm not going to shout at them. (F3)

Facilitators were conscious of their roles as mentors and educators, and sought to manage any potential disengagement through individualised, relatively informal conversations with participants. This was perhaps particularly important in the context of varying levels of physical literacy among participants:

You have a conversation with them...and you try your best to get them involved, and for the most part, that works. For others it's like, "No, I'm going to sit out here." You let them sit down and get a breath, and if they want to join back in you encourage them to get back involved again. They struggle with it...Where I would say my role comes into it is like try to influence it by making this fun and engaging, and if they're sitting out...It's having a conversation, chatting with them, "Right, come and get back involved here, five minutes." (F3)

I never try and force a lot of stuff on them...it's not like going into a coaching session...as if I'm coaching maybe 16, 17-year-olds that have been playing it all their lives. It's more that I'm going in and trying to gently break them into it. So, it's more than a coaching session. I suppose it is...trying to gauge what it is they're thinking about while they're doing it, and I suppose that's what I'd generally be trying to do when I'm taking Fresh Start sessions in comparison to any other type of coaching that we'd be doing. (F4)

Some of the participants reflected on the value of this approach, and recognised the efforts of facilitators in making sessions as broadly accessible as possible:

I think they sort of came in knowing most of these people might not have ever done any of this before... they weren't gonna find any superstars amongst some of us... [they] came in with an open mind to see like everyone, which was probably the best thing. And sort of how them types of things should be run rather than coming in and feeling annoyed when people aren't doing things right. (P3)

Conversely, some young people were seen as somewhat overenthusiastic in their participation, to the extent that some facilitators found it a challenge to manage some boisterous behaviour during their sessions:

...managing that enthusiasm, and that passion for maybe being involved in a session...we have found that maybe tricky, but never a pain, and never kind of insurmountable...again that involves that building

relationships and trust...but sometimes you maybe do need a quieter group, or you do need to say, "Okay, come on, calm down a little bit," so that they are hearing your voice, and they are responding to you in that way. (F1)

Facilitators were confident that the sometimes disengaged or disruptive attitudes and behaviours of the young people involved were not necessarily connected with a negative opinion of either facilitators or the FSTS programme, but rather part of a natural reaction to being taken out of their natural environment and comfort zone:

Anybody who hasn't got involved...it's not that they haven't got involved because of not wanting to get involved...it's been for other things that might be stopping them. Some people have had issues in working with a crowd and things like that...It's not because of the sports themselves, from what I can see. It's more because they don't feel either confident enough in their own ability, or they just don't want to be running about...some you can see are shy, and not confident in their own ability, and they don't want to highlight that in front of others as well. (F4)

3.2.2 Challenging cross-community preconceptions

In the recruitment phase, and in some geographic areas, there was a degree of reticence and an apparent, initial resistance to playing Gaelic Games as part of the programme. It should be noted that this seemed to be due to negative preconceptions regarding GAA in some areas, rather than any perceived limitations of the GAA elements of the programme:

I've always like grown up around like protestants and stuff so it's all been like a protestant background, culture thing....So obviously I'd never had the chance to like go out and play like Gaelic and stuff because if you were to mention the word Gaelic in like some of the estates I grew up... you'd be like, "no you're not doing that, you're not doing that". (P1)

These potentially negative, community-oriented preconceptions also seemed to occasionally impact on initial interactions among participants, which facilitators consistently sought to address:

I think one of the obvious stumbling blocks...is different parts of the community, and that's what we're mindful of. So, you will find that if they're coming in wee groups they'll sit with their wee group. So, for us, it's about mixing them up and when we are delivering those sessions...you're trying to get them to have conversations with other people, and building relationships even with other participants while they're on the programme. (F4)

The steps taken by facilitators to address this barrier proved fruitful, with participants' appreciating the opportunity to communicate with individuals from different community backgrounds:

The way they put you in some groups it would have been randomised and then you'd need to talk to them and there's no bad things you could say about them like, [they were] no different. (P2)

The opposition by some in wider society perhaps further highlights the benefits of and need for the multi-sport approach adopted by FSTS in order to break down stereotypes and negative perceptions:

I think it was viewed [negatively] by [some] within certain areas...we had a big push back that [the young people] wouldn't be involved. The kids wouldn't be involved if GAA was part of it...this programme is to break down barriers, and kind of bring communities together. So, for us to remove GAA just was never happening. So, it was a case of, in the nicest way possible, that you're stopping young people from enhancing their lives by what you believe is this wall and barrier that should stay within your community. (F1)

It is important to note, however, that on the few occasions where this issue arose, facilitators deployed skilful diplomacy and gentle reasoning with participants to encourage them to maintain their engagement with the programme:

A couple...were adamant they didn't want to do the GAA modules... we sat them down, and we had a conversation just in and around that. We didn't want to influence them in any way, but we were just like saying, "Why don't you come along and experience it? If you don't like it, if you don't want to be involved, you don't have to be, because we're not going to push you into anything you do not want to do." They came along, they didn't realise they were playing GAA, they didn't realise they were playing hurling. They loved it, they enjoyed it, and for them they were like, "You know, why have I been taken away from this sport because of influences from other people?" (F1)

It should also be borne in mind that some young people displayed a similar initial reticence in terms of anti-police attitudes until prior to their engagement with the programme and the police officers involved. Both the programme itself, and the programme's facilitators encouraged the young people to step outside of their comfort zones and challenge some of their preconceived ideas and perceptions:

*I had a real big thing against the police too...to me, my friends, my friends are telling me...don't listen to the police, don't listen to the police...But now I can see, no, it wasn't my friends, no it wasn't the police, it was my friends talking s**t and not the police. (P1)*

3.2.3. Understanding participants' backgrounds

Some facilitators felt that session delivery could be improved with the availability of more information relating to the background and experiences of young people prior to their involvement with FSTS. Some facilitators tried to find out some information beforehand to see if they could tailor their sessions accordingly, or felt that additional information may be helpful in planning and delivering specific sessions:

If I'm talking to any of the community policing team that's there, I tend to ask them...if they know of anything that I should know about...at the end of the day you could go in there blind to it and there could be somebody in there with some sort of health condition, and I'm going to take a session here that's going to elevate it or something. I try to get those questions across. (F4)

...coming into the session as a coach...I try to relate to the young people, but it's very difficult... [you] go in, in carte blanche, and not really knowing exactly who's who, who comes from where, kind of ability levels, really anything...So, I'm trying to tailor a session without any kind of understanding of who the people I'm speaking to are. So, to have even just a brief overview would definitely be helpful. (F7)

3.2.4. Organising facilities and transport

There were several practical, operational issues encountered by facilitators and participants around access to appropriate facilities:

The biggest challenge that I find is sometimes facility availability...Facility hire can be difficult because obviously universities are booked up, your local leisure centres...So, trying to get a slot and a time that suits is very difficult. (F4)

Access to facilities was also an issue for participants, some of whom experienced difficulties when getting transport to and from the venues. Transport was arranged for participants by FSTS staff, however participants were sometimes frustrated when their transport arrived early or late:

P5: [Everything worked] apart from taxis.

*P1: Aye they were s**te, waiting about 40 minutes.*

P3: They take ages, we were waiting half an hour.

*P2: F**k sake more than half an hour.*

P2: Fire the taxi men [laughs]

BC: What would work better?

P3: Get a wee minibus? (FG1)

While this is not the fault of the FSTS team, it is symptomatic of challenges experienced in the delivery of such a broad programme and a reliance on external service providers:

Operationally there's always going to be challenges and you just have to deal with those, you know, about taxis, and timings, and changing of dates. (F2)

The location of sites, and the potential for related travel difficulties, are important considerations for both FSTS organisers and participants, with a recognition that it is unfair to expect people to travel too far out of their area for weekly programmes:

I think there's always challenges, even the whole logistics around getting them there, and getting them home...everybody is back now engaging in sport face-to-face, [so] trying to get facility hire can be very, very tricky...Within this country you might have young people who have said, "No, I'm not travelling across, I'm going to that part of the city, or that part of the town." So, you do have those challenges. You do try to overcome them. (F5)

3.3. Exploring the Impact of FSTS 2021-22

3.3.1. Motivations for involvement

Participants spoke about a range of factors that brought them into contact with FSTS. For some, this involved referrals from the PSNI, and signposting from youth workers or other local, community-based organisations:

I worked in [my local youth club]...I was the only boy my age volunteered and I would know the boss well, he just said it would be a good course for you and...I put my name forward and he told me to pick other people that I thought would be needing it, so he took people that has definitely helped from it. (P2)

A number of participants were motivated by the prospect of gaining experience, helping them take a step towards potentially pursuing education, employment or volunteering opportunities in the long-term:

I sort of jumped at it knowing I'd be wanting to go uni and stuff like that, I thought it would look good on my references (P3)

Well, I'm trying to get as much qualifications as I can and either go to America or Australia or something... I'm trying to work to try to get a job over there, work within the companies over there, try to do something (P2)

In spite of these aspirations, participants rarely spoke about carrying specific expectations into their experience of FSTS, and were motivated, at least in-part, to "give it a go":

No expectations. I sort of went in pretty open minded. Obviously they're running a programme so just take part in whatever you can do and what's the worst that can happen other than the fact that I don't enjoy it but there were no expectations...(P2)

I just sort of thought, me and my mates said we'd give it a go and then I just kept it on...I was happy enough just to keep going by myself and it was grand. (P3)

The FSTS programme also benefits from the involvement of committed and motivated facilitators, whose passion for their respective sports, and the potential of harnessing its potential to help young people find their own pathways, play a significant role in starting and maintaining their connection to the programme:

[FSTS] really captivated me. I have quite a passion for working with young people, especially young people at risk...seeing other people's struggles, and them not having a pathway, a voice, or a focus...and I seen how much sport had helped me through my life. I felt I could add real value to the programme. (F1)

3.3.2. Facilitators views on the aims of FSTS

The duration of FSTS can be a substantial strength of the programme, and of direct benefit to participants, affording the opportunity to regularly and constructively engage with young people over a considerable period of time. However, this also requires a sustained commitment from young people to attend:

We know that we're there for 12 weeks, 10 weeks, 16 weeks...to do it in that breadth of time, you know, that's nigh on impossible, but at the same time if we can get a small cohort from the Fresh Start programme... onto a new pathway, or support that pathway, or support them in employment, or in a way through sport, I think that's what our hope is for the programme. (F1)

I think what's really important is the length of the programme, that it's not 4 weeks, see you later stuff. Sixteen week modules is long enough to keep that engagement going, and the variety of modules means that people are getting lots of experience of things that wouldn't have already happened, and actually a lot of in-depth experience of different sports, which is really, really important. (F2)

For some, the FSTS programme potentially affords the young people involved an opportunity to experience new sports away from the familial and societal pressures they may be living with:

For some it is just an escapism...to get away from the societal pressures that they feel within their communities. So, for them to get away and see what sport can do, and maybe just for their mental wellbeing being involved in these activities, for them to gain new experiences, you know, getting away to match events...is a big thing. (F1)

FSTS actively works to meet the needs of young people by iteratively developing modules that respond to contemporary societal issues faced by young people in their communities. These targeted modules work towards addressing vulnerabilities that may make young people susceptible to paramilitary attention, influence and control:

I think the design of our programmes just is a case of actually looking at the various problems in society as well, and trying to use that to help support people, and help get them away [from paramilitary influences]. Help support them in their lives as well. So, when you're putting it together it's not just a case of throwing in a mental health module, there's a rationale behind it. (F5)

Utilising a diverse range of sports in FSTS not only enables young people to have new sporting experiences also serves to equalise relationships between the young people. In particular, facilitators found that ice hockey and rugby, sports that the majority of participants had not tried before, were impactful means of imparting lessons regarding coping with setbacks mistakes and learning from them:

[T]hey are almost starting from the same position [with rugby and ice hockey]... rather than somebody being a really good footballer [and] somebody who hardly ever kicked a ball before. There's that obvious distance created unintentionally...but with something like ice hockey, anybody starting from that vulnerable

position...it's a bit of a laugh if [they] fall over, and that's what it's about. It's about making mistakes, providing opportunities, letting them go and figure things out, and challenge them in even some of the games, you know, problem solving, maybe risk-taking in a really informal way, getting a chance to know each other a bit better. (F2)

3.3.3. Supporting positive development and transitions

As with any programme involving young people, the full impact hoped for may not be realised with every participant (due to some of the aforementioned issues such as behavioural issues, external socio-structural factors etc.). But for some participants, the FSTS experience can have, and has had, a profound impact on their perspectives, outlook and circumstances:

...like actively I'm gonna see where this Fresh Start Through Sport took me through and then move on from there hopefully, progress from there. (P2)

Well, you can't get enough qualifications like but definitely everything helps, it leads you to the person you are today. It is good for qualifications but it's not even about it, it makes you a good person like. (P3)

For others, their experience of FSTS represented a significant turning point in their life story that has supported their transition towards a more stable, positive and healthy lifestyle:

So, I had stopped drinking then and then it was like week six or something and I was all like ... six weeks into it, and I was like, "I haven't touched a drink, like this is mad." So, then I had told the guys at the stadium from it, and they were all like, "Well then how can we keep it this way, like how?" ...It was just really, it was all down to like the Fresh Start too because obviously if I didn't do that, then I wouldn't have, I would have kept drinking. Like, I wouldn't have had anything to look forward to.

...So, it was about six weeks into the Fresh Start programme...I was like right, "I wonder could I go back to work, even if it's just like a cinema job or takeaway job or something?"...And that is all down to the Fresh Start programme because if I didn't do that then I'd still be drinking...I'm just glad I'm still alive and so glad I've still got like the people like from the Fresh Start group, like involved in my life. Like they're always going to be an impact on my ... like a really great impact on my life now. If I need any help like work, or like my housing or anything, like they're always there. You know? It's like I've got someone to go to now. (P1)

This powerful testimony from a young person, who attributed positive behavioural changes made in their life directly to their participation in the FSTS programme, is at the core of what the Fresh Start programme generally, and the FSTS strand of it more specifically, is all about.

3.4. Looking to the Future

3.4.1. Life after FSTS: The Ambassador programme

There was an appetite from some young people that successfully completed the FSTS programme for further involvement in both sports-based intervention programmes and, specifically, continued engagement with FSTS facilitators. In recognising the need to provide pathways and support for the young people, the FSTS team has introduced an Ambassador programme⁵. Over the remaining years of the FSTS programme, young people will have the opportunity to remain involved in the FSTS and work towards being involved in shaping and delivering future iterations of FSTS:

...after we've finished delivery of this programme, and we have maybe signposted a pathway, a lot of the participants wanted to stay involved with the Fresh Start programme...we felt like a duty of care there... we've built up a relationship and trust with these people to not let them down. We came up with an Ambassador programme. So, how they can stay involved with us, but also that it doesn't ask too much of them as well...to just believe in themselves what they can achieve, and they can go out to the workplace and gain employment (F1)

I think [the Ambassador programme] gives more than just a, "I'll turn up and it's done to me," whereas actually if I can go away and learn more, and engage more, I'd be more in control of the direction I'm going, and the opportunities that are presented to myself, and I think that makes it much better...that's an evolution to the programme, and a good evolution to the programme. (F2)

In a state of ongoing development, the intention of the Ambassador programme is to build upon the commitment, enthusiasm and capability of the young people that has been demonstrated throughout FSTS. In an ideal world all participants would progress to the Ambassador programme, but there is a recognition that this is neither possible from programme delivery, capacity and funding perspectives but also, this pathway may not be appropriate for all the young people participating in FSTS. The young people who become Ambassadors have expressed an interest in continuing with a programme once their participation in FSTS has come to an end:

What we do is we identify through our partners...how they engage in sessions, how they're involved in the programme, do they have a passion for a pathway? ...we would never discount anyone that wants to be involved, so it's not a case of "Here's what we're offering in our Ambassador programme, if you would like to be involved, contact me." Now, if all 20 contacted me...I'm going to have to take all 20, because you're almost turning [away] someone that wants to be involved in furthering their life, or furthering their involvement, but thankfully, so far, it has been in and around I would say 20% of our Fresh Start through Sport programmes. (F1)

For the young people involved in the Ambassador programme, the benefits extend beyond simple programme participation. For them, their continuing involvement with FSTS represents a source of optimism and aspiration – in some cases, a true “fresh start”:

5. This follows from Recommendation 9 in the FSTS 2020-21 evaluation report (Coyle et al., 2022: 30)

I've got people to look up to. Like I've never really had anybody...I never really looked up to anybody else. But now I've got the guys from the Fresh Start Programme to look up to and I'm still involved, I'm still going to the stadium (P1)

[FSTS] is only the start of it, I think. That's only one course and now they're leading onto this...ambassador programme, so you're onto that there and it could lead further and further (P2)

3.4.2. Refreshing modular content

As the FSTS programme progresses, facilitators expressed a desire to keep working towards introducing modules that were reflective of current trends societally. For example, the IFA modules have expanded from two to four, with the inclusion of new 'Women in Football' and 'Disability Football' modules adding to the series of established modules on fan football behaviour and club development:

We kind of felt that we needed maybe new themes that were current, and that's where we developed the Women in Football module. Having women coming and delivering, and sharing their experiences, and sharing how sport has changed their lives, was something we really wanted to put into Fresh Start going forward. We've had great success with that... (F1)

The 'Women in Football' session stood out as one of the more engaging and inspiring classroom-based sessions for participants:

The classroom football one...she had coached at a high level and was one of the only women to have pro-coaching badges...And it's sort of just like I realised then this can be a full career without having to play when there's so many different doors it can open through that as well. (P3)

In addition to the iterative development of new modules, where necessary, the ongoing revision and development of existing modules was also seen as important. The Belfast Giants, recognising the appetite shown by young people for visiting the SSE arena, moved to include a tour to showcase potential roles for young people connected to ice hockey and other events held at the arena:

...we got together with the Giants because we felt that there's maybe more they could do in showcasing other pathways in sport, and not just the playing side. So, there was a lot involved in event management. So, we looked at getting the group in and getting a tour of the SSE Arena, you know, meeting the various different teams that are involved in organising an event, whether that's the Belfast Giants, now whether that's a concert, so that they could see how they can be involved within sport. But it doesn't have to be just be the playing or coaching, it could be another area. (F1)

3.4.3. Deepening and broadening partner and stakeholder relationships

The four sporting partners have continued to build upon their collaborative working relationships since the inception of the FSTS. Several facilitators stated that, in order to ensure future iterations of FSTS are not beset by recruitment issues, it is important to build upon existing relationships with external stakeholders, such as the PSNI and other youth work providers across Northern Ireland:

I think also just having that engagement with stakeholders, you know, having the relationship with PSNI, the relationship with other organisations, you know, building up that database [of potential participants] so it doesn't have to be that struggle. (F1)

By strengthening communicative relationships with external stakeholders, some facilitators believed that the impact of FSTS would be enhanced by ensuring that the young people who would gain the most from FSTS would be afforded the opportunity to participate in the programme:

I think that's why having a good partner, a partner in the PSNI is really important, so actually the right people are coming on the programme...having those strong community links, again from a referral perspective. (F2)

There was a recognition that it was important to build relationships locally with youth workers and other partners as the programme continues to grow and develop, bolstering the local contextual knowledge and contacts of FSTS staff in some areas. Reflective of their commitment, agility and capacity to respond proactively to address challenges, facilitators continued to adapt their approach throughout the FSTS 2021-22 programme:

We had a different approach in [place] on our programme that we did go out and have conversations with the youth workers that were on the ground. We had more of an influence from PSNI Neighbourhood Team, and we found that was big...We had key youth workers that would come to every session... and they had the link...[that] worked brilliant for us, because whenever you're going into an area, and you're bringing a participant, they don't know you, you don't have that relationship, you don't have that trust built in. (F1)

With a view to utilising sports-based interventions further for young people who demonstrate an aptitude and interest in specific sports within the FSTS programme, there is also further potential for signposting young people to existing clubs in their local areas that may be interested in having young people join. This would require facilitators to have a strong knowledge of which young people would connect with sports teams who were potentially unaware of the uniqueness of the FSTS programme:

...I'd be letting them know that I've noticed that they're strong at the sport and they're good at the sport, and did they ever think about joining a club. Then I'd ask sort of what area they're from, and I do signpost, I says, "But there's a club not far from you if you ever did want to." ...Getting the clubs themselves involved would be a great aspect to do that...having somebody a wee bit closer involved to be able to say, "Do you want to come down and try it out, or would you like to give it a go?" (F4)

3.4.4. Participant induction

A FSTS participant believed an induction day for young people to get to know one another as well as the facilitators would be a good way to create a platform for communication and dialogue throughout the programme, as well as encourage the confidence of new participants⁶. The participant explained that they had attended FSTS alone and was reliant on the facilitators to provide an introduction to other participants and provide support when encountering the wider group:

6. Recommendation 4 of the FSTS 2020-21 evaluation report noted the potential benefits of additional icebreaker activities. The introduction of an induction day would be a step further towards addressing similar feedback from participants during this phase of the programme.

An induction day so like people for the twelve-week course will obviously, I think people coming in ... just in case there was a couple of people coming in by themselves, they would be able to get to meet the rest of the guys on the other team so obviously like the first day I went in, I sort of like sat by myself for a wee bit but then like the other ones sort of like got ... the leaders sort of like introduced me to a couple of people which was okay but it could have been better if like there was that introduction day, if you get me. (P1)

Another participant agreed that it was easier to settle into the programme when you had a friend to attend with you:

Obviously me and my mate both went at the start and then he sort of dropped off but no, I was happy enough with that. I think sort of coming with someone is your best bet, you become a wee bit more yourself and you'll not just knock about with them, but that can lead onto other people coming round you and stuff like that, but everyone else was fine. (P3)

Likewise, although the facilitators highlighted the benefits of in-person delivery in terms of getting to better know the participants involved in each programme, they recognised that further opportunities for informal engagement could be explored:

...you have to get to the point where they're comfortable... and that's not going to be on your first meeting... We can't just make the programme longer because we want to know everybody better. Maybe doing some of that kind of activity...I would like to get, maybe mix things up a little bit. Maybe just try to get to know them a bit better. (F6)

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence emerging from an analysis of survey responses and interview data from those involved with the FSTS programme indicates a number of positive impacts on project participants and partner organisations.

There has been a sustained focus on programme referral and recruitment since the conclusion of the FSTS pilot programme. Recommendation 1 of the FSTS pilot programme evaluation noted the potential to focus on a more balanced recruitment of participants from both PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) communities and CNR (Catholic Nationalist Republican) communities, and a further emphasis on the recruitment of female participants (see Coyle et al., 2022: 29). FSTS 2021-22 has seen a substantial increase in the number of individuals identifying as being from a Catholic and/or Nationalist background (see Table 1), resulting in an improved balance across demographic groups. The expansion of the programme in 2021-22 has resulted in an increased number of female participants. However, the balance between male and female participants, based on the survey responses available, has remained at the same level as the pilot programme (78% male, 22% female).

This was the first year of the programme that FSTS could be fully delivered on a face-to-face basis. This was believed to have been hugely beneficial in terms of allowing for those smaller, informal interactions and conversations between facilitators and participants which led to the building of relationships and trust to a greater extent than can be achieved in an online format. This in turn allowed facilitators to provide better tailored support and mentoring to individual young people, and it also allowed them to share more personal recollections of how young people in similar circumstances to the current cohort of young participants had managed to turn their lives around.

It became apparent that collaboration and partnership working between the sporting bodies has remained a critically important element of FSTS, and the planning stage was identified as one of the most important parts of the entire programme with regards to ensuring that programme recruitment, design and delivery flow smoothly and ensure maximum impact. This pre-planning and formative review of programme delivery has allowed for flexibility to ensure that the programme develops organically from previous iterations. The introduction of consistent match-day and stadium tours were viewed as invaluable with regards to showcasing to young participants alternative pathways into future employment in other sectors (such as hospitality) – alongside the enjoyable element of playing the actual sports themselves. Indeed, the core hook to the programme is the opportunity for participants to engage in the four sports, and this element retains its capacity to allow young people to challenge their own preconceptions (and those of their family, peers and community in many instances), step out of their comfort zones and engage in sports they thought (or have been told) are 'not for the likes of us.'

This theme of challenging stereotypes also emerged with regards to the role of the police in the programme. The participation of police officers in some sessions in plain clothes allows young people to see them as human beings and not mere uniforms or agents of the state. The importance of such work was highlighted by the initial reluctance of a small number of young people to engage in certain sports or with the police prior to the programme beginning. If anything, such responses suggest that the approach of the programme with regards to its inclusive and cross-community and multi-sport approach must continue.

Another core benefit of the programme related to the positive impact on the mental-health and wellbeing of participants. While some participants at the very least suggested the programme gave them some structure to

their week and something to 'get out of bed for,' several other participants spoke of profound impacts that the programme had on them. These narratives demonstrate the impact that the programme content and, perhaps even more importantly, the supportive and empathetic delivery by facilitators has had on a number of young participants.

The interview data also highlighted that some young people have managed to maintain friendships they made during the course in the aftermath of it ending, which is to be welcomed. This is a strength of conducting the programme over a longer period of time such as 14-16 weeks (although this also requires greater commitment on the part of the young people in terms of attending sessions).

There were also a number of challenges identified during the research. These included behavioural issues at times and facilitators tended to stress that their role was as a mentor and educator rather than a disciplinarian. Facilitators tended to deal with any breaches in behavioural norms during sessions by engaging with the young people in a conversational rather than punitive manner. It is also important to note in this context that several facilitators felt that programme delivery could be further tailored and improved if they were supplied with some more background information on young people at the referral stage.

Following from Recommendation 9 of the FSTS Pilot Programme evaluation (see Coyle et al., 2022: 30), The development of the Ambassadors programme has been a significant, positive development. Alongside the educational and employment support and advice provided by facilitators, it provides a longer-term pathway for those young people eager to continue their involvement in the programme or those hoping to build their CV and employability. Continuing a theme from the pilot programme evaluation⁷, participants to FSTS 2021-22 similarly expressed a desire for qualifications and voluntary/employment experience. There may also be further opportunities for signposting young people to existing sports clubs in their local areas which could help strengthen the pathways to education, volunteering, training and employment which have started to emerge.

In terms of sustainability, the wider funding environment is a concern, as is the recent cut to youth work budgets in Northern Ireland as a result of statutory spending cuts, which are also taking place in the wider context of the 'cost of living' crisis. Such cuts will result in less youth service provision, both in a centre-based format and also in terms of detached youth work out on the streets. The cost-of-living crisis is also liable to push more vulnerable young people into financial precarity which is further likely to increase the risk of some young people engaging in crime or turning to illegal money-lenders, paramilitaries and 'loan-sharks' for emergency loans (Payne et al., 2020; Bell et al., 2022). In such a context, the importance of the FSTS programme in terms of engaging with vulnerable young people on the margins, becomes even more pronounced.

7. Recommendation 3 from the FSTS pilot programme evaluation noted that, '*Participants frequently expressed a strong desire to take further opportunities for personal and career-oriented development, especially any opportunities to gain qualifications (e.g. coaching). This desire also played a key role in motivating participants to remain involved with the FSTS pilot programme despite the challenging public health context*' (Coyle et al., 2022: 29).

Summary:

As a tertiary intervention under work stream two of the NI Executive's Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, FSTS 2021-22 has contributed to the realisation of several key intermediary benefits, with progress identified in respect of the following:

Community Resilience 1 (CRI): Get more people involved

Community Resilience 9 (CR9): Improvement in relations between PSNI and Communities

Protective Factors 1 (PFI): Increase in individual protective factors

80 participants engaged with the FSTS 21-22 programme (CRI).

The majority of participants reported that they intended to continue to participate in a sporting activity on completion of the programme, that the programme had helped them to identify volunteering opportunities (CRI).

Participants self-reported a range of benefits arising from cross-community interactions and exposure to sports which would ordinarily have been unavailable to them due to their community backgrounds (CRI).

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

The majority of participants reported that they developed new knowledge and skills over the course of the programme, and many expressed aspirations to further their education and training following the completion of the programme (PFI).

Interview data with participants indicated improved future orientation and positive attitudes following the completion of the programme (PFI).

Interview data with participants highlighted the impact of a range of positive, supportive relationships with organisers, facilitators and police officers over the course of the programme (PFI).

Recommendations

1. Recruitment

The FSTS programme has strengthened recruitment processes based upon previous evaluation recommendations to ensure more of the 'hard to reach' and 'at risk' cohort of young people are included in the programme. This is to be welcomed. Project partners should continue to enhance the pro-active referral and recruitment process to ensure those participants on the programme are indeed those most 'at risk' of paramilitaries/armed groups/criminality and/or coming into contact with the police and the Criminal Justice System. In particular, a renewed emphasis on the recruitment of female participants would be a welcome development. The ongoing Fresh Start Through Sport Working Group⁸ can play an active role in monitoring this process.

2. Information

There could be improved sharing of information on individual participants with facilitators prior to sessions. Whilst recognising that there are limitations on what information can be shared under GDPR, more information would be useful to enable facilitators to better prepare for sessions, and tailor their approach to each cohort. It is important that programme facilitators are well-informed on specific individual circumstances as part of the recruitment and planning process, as far as is possible and practicable.

3. Support

Additional support and training could be provided for staff and facilitators in terms of teaching pedagogies and strategies to deal with potentially disruptive and/or challenging classroom and group behaviour, but which may be a manifestation of ADHD, ASD or other behavioural condition. Positive Behaviour Support Services may be a useful resource for the FSTS programme to link in with in this regard.

4. Behaviour

General behaviour protocols, establishing or reaffirming what is expected from participants in terms of participation and behaviour, should be established and shared amongst all project organisations and facilitators. While all facilitators will have their own style and way of dealing with certain forms of disruptive behaviour, standardising responses across sessions and organisations would be beneficial.

5. Induction

Consideration should be given to holding an induction day or 'meet and greet' prior to the formal commencement of the programme. This would allow for ice-breakers and young people and facilitators to get to know one another by name before the project commences. This would be particularly helpful for those young people entering the programme on their own and without friends or peer network.

8. Introduced in light of recommendation 11 in the FSTS pilot programme evaluation (Coyle et al., 2022: 31).

6. Contacts

It is welcome that programme partners have begun to develop a database of contacts and support services in differing geographic areas across Northern Ireland. This is an important practical step, but it also promotes greater institutional memory in the event that established staff with contacts and local knowledge move on. Engagement in the programme appeared to be most positive when youth workers and the police were more involved. This is a collaborative process which should be further encouraged.

7. Networks

Consideration should be given as to how to improve programme links with sports clubs as part of the programme. While there was evidence of informal signposting of individual young people to sports clubs in their locale, there is the potential for this signposting to become a more formalised part of the programme.

8. Pathways

While there are a number of informal 'pathways' out of the programme (such as the Ambassadors programme) which are used to maintain engagement with participants, consideration should be given as to how to make these more formal and clearly defined. For example, young people's strong desire for qualifications was evident in both the pilot and this iteration of the programme, the introduction of an 'educational pathway' which steers young people towards some form of formal accreditation would be greatly welcomed by participants. Similarly, several participants across both cohorts of participants expressed a desire to gain some sports coaching qualifications, a 'coaching pathway' could steer participants towards the varying coaching badges delivered by the sporting partners, such as the National Coaching Certificate delivered by the IFA.

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