

# Encouraging physical activity: what works

*Most people in the UK know they should be doing more physical activity, even if they may not always know why or tend to overestimate how much exercise they are taking. However, many are not acting on what they know. For example, research by Sport England found that 75% of women surveyed said they wanted to do more exercise – but often weren't.*

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## SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES

This short article considers which approaches to encouraging physical activity have achieved measurable increases in exercise and lessons we can learn from them. These include Bike-it Reigate and Banstead, where the proportion of children cycling regularly increased from 8% to 30%; Forest Schools in Scotland, where activity levels were 2.7 times greater on Forest School days than on 'inactive' school days; FFIT (Football Fans in Training) where a 12-month randomised controlled trial showed overweight male football fans increased physical activity and lost nine times as much weight as non-participants; 10,000 Steps, which grew from a whole-of-community intervention in a single Australian town to involve

more than 14,000 workplaces and community organisations; Park Run, with around 350,000 people taking part each week; Fit at the Free, whose results included a team of facilities staff at the Royal Free Hospital walking up Mount Snowdon; Fujitsu UK and Ireland's participation in Global Challenge, with more than 1000 employees taking part in 2017, 80% of whom ended the challenge with a daily average in excess of 10,000 steps, compared to 18% before the challenge; This Girl Can, which in just 1 year encouraged 2.8 million women to do more exercise; and Race for Life, which has resulted in 8 million women taking part to raise money for Cancer Research UK.

Our analysis suggests that a number of factors help explain this success (Table 1).

Most are targeted initiatives, focusing on specific groups (such as overweight male football fans or women aged 14–40). Compared with a 'one size fits all' approach, this appears to increase engagement. Conducting market research beforehand, listening to people and acting on what they say also increase success rates. For example, Active Bucks undertook 4 months of community engagement, with 3248 residents, to identify what activities local communities were interested in. They then used this to design 193 6-month projects, with activities filtered by age, disability, interest/s, calendar availability and radius from postcode to further increase the chances of participation. Similarly, This



Girl Can's successful formula was based on market research that revealed the major obstacle to female participation was fear of being judged – for their appearance (e.g. being sweaty, having a red face and how their body looks during exercise); their ability; and spending time exercising instead of being with family, friends, studying or working. This Girl Can therefore helped women deal with this fear of judgement in a number of ways, from positive role models to providing a strategy for dealing with the judgement they feared. This fits with cognitive behavioural therapy, which suggests that to beat a fear, you have to face it.

Most successful initiatives also provide what we describe as ExercisePLUS. In addition to the health benefits of physical activity, at least one further motivator is provided. Examples include fun/enjoyment (typified by Zumba's US slogan, 'Ditch the workout. Join the party'); a sense of belonging (e.g. a local organiser described Park Run as 'the new church – you feel embedded in the local area'); raising money for a good cause (as with Race for Life); involvement with a professional sports team you support (as with FFIT); and an opportunity to enjoy nature and the outdoors (e.g. Forest Schools). Given the reported gap between people knowing they should be doing more physical activity and actually doing it, ExercisePLUS helps provide the extra impetus many people need.

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Table 1. Successful initiatives.

Case studies	A targeted initiative	Listening and market research	Exercise PLUS	Accessible and inclusive	Empowers to overcome obstacles	Effective promotion	Other success factors
Active Bucks <sup>1</sup>	✓ Tailored options	✓		✓		✓	Community engagement
Bike It – Reigate and Banstead <sup>2</sup>	✓ Primary schools	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Whole systems and partnership working
Blogilates <sup>3</sup>	✓ Girls and young women		✓	✓	✓	✓	'It's a way of life'
Couch to 5K (NHS Choices) <sup>4</sup>	✓ Non-runners			✓	✓		Simple, doable
FFIT (Football Fans in Training) <sup>5</sup>	✓ Overweight male football fans		✓	✓	✓		Taps into fans' loyalty to club and love of football
Fit at the Free <sup>6</sup>	✓ Facilities staff (Phase 2)	✓	✓		✓		Reviewing who isn't participating and why
Forest schools <sup>7</sup>	✓ Primary school children	✓	✓	✓	✓		Novelty, Nature/ Outdoors
Fujitsu – Global Challenge <sup>8</sup>	✓ Company employees in the UK & Ireland			✓	✓	✓	Part of the company's Wellbeing Strategy
Man V Fat Football <sup>9</sup>	✓ Overweight men who want to lose weight		✓		✓ Where there are local leagues	✓	Incentivisation (if 2 people lose weight = an extra goal)
Park Run <sup>10,11</sup>			✓	✓			Volunteer commitment, Nature/ Outdoors
Race for Life <sup>12</sup>	✓ Women (until 2019)		✓			✓	Most participants know someone with cancer
10,000 steps <sup>13</sup>	✓ The Australian city of Rockhampton			✓		✓	Whole system approach, goal setting, pedometer monitoring
This Girl Can <sup>14</sup>	✓ Women aged 14–40	✓		✓	✓	✓	Partners and supporters
Zumba <sup>15</sup>			✓	✓			'Ditch the workout. Join the party'.

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gratification. Physical activity which is enjoyable overcomes this obstacle by providing immediate gratification.

Being accessible, welcoming and inclusive is another factor. Zumba and Park Run, for example, welcome people whatever their size, shape or level of fitness. An ability to empower people and help them overcome perceived obstacles

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to physical activity also feature strongly. This can be logistic interventions, such as Bike It providing an opportunity to buy secondhand refurbished bikes from a local, trusted source to enable more children to participate. Particularly important is psychological empowerment. For instance, blogilates was described by one participant as making her, 'feel like a kick-ass-boss-bitch'. Similarly, This Girl Can empowered young women to overcome their fear of being judged. Effective promotion also helps, as both Race for Life and This Girl Can indicate. At the same time, Fit at the Free found that extensive internal promotion had mixed results. Initially, only 10% of participants were from the lowest pay bands, whereas 91% of the employees taking up the cycle to work scheme came from the highest pay bands, illustrating that simply providing health at work opportunities may attract the higher paid and healthier, rather than those who most need help. Fit at the Free therefore surveyed and talked to lower paid staff, to find what was preventing them participating. They found

these staff members, for instance, often had little control over their timetable, in order to attend events, and therefore started a scheme aimed specifically at facilities staff (on the lowest pay bands, with the highest sick rates), designing programmes just for them.

## CONCLUSION

To increase physical activity in the UK, we can learn from and apply more widely what has already worked. Successful approaches often apply established marketing principles, perhaps unsurprisingly as marketing is designed to encourage specific behaviour. Examples include the following:

- Targeting (market segmentation);
- Listening (market research);
- ExercisePLUS (ensuring you have a product or service people want which is accessible, affordable and effectively promoted).

To these factors we would add partnership working, a whole systems

approach, personal support, and activity that is simple and doable, as well as the importance of empowering people to overcome perceived obstacles to physical activity.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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