

Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme

Addressing the challenges faced by 'front line' practitioners

The health inequalities impact of reducing the cost of local authority leisure facilities in the north west

Key issues

The amount of physical activity (PA) that people undertake is important for preventing a whole range of health conditions. There is a gradient in levels of participation with lower socio-economic groups less likely to be physically active than higher socio-economic groups.

Reducing or eliminating the cost to the public of using leisure facilities is one potential tool that local authorities have to reduce such inequalities. Leisure facility charges may be a greater barrier to access for groups living on lower incomes. However, limited robust evidence exists about the impact of cost on participation by socioeconomic group, or the effect of different concessionary policies.

What policy was evaluated?

Working in collaboration with leisure and public health professionals in 6 local authorities (LA) in the north west, this study evaluated the impact of variations in the pricing policies of LA supported leisure facilities, including:

- Concessionary schemes (e.g. for over 60s)
- Universal and targeted free schemes
- Differences in standard entrance prices

Supported leisure facilities are defined as indoor swimming, gym and sports facilities subsidised by the LA in a neighbourhood.

Methods

We treated the LA leisure pricing policies as a 'natural experiment' and used a combination of qualitative and quasi-experimental techniques to investigate their health inequalities impact. This involved a 5 staged approach:

- detailed exploration of the components of pricing policies and their underlying rationales
- quasi-experimental analysis of administrative datasets
- qualitative investigation of public perspectives of price
- analysis of national datasets
- engaging practitioners and the public in synthesising findings to identify policies that may reduce (or increase) inequalities in PA

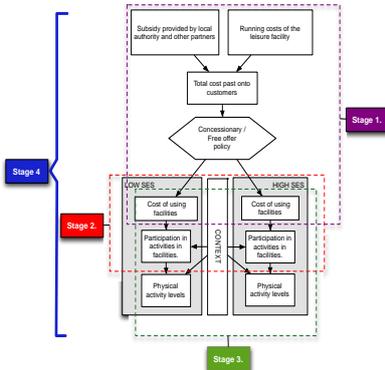


Figure 1: Initial logic model indicating relationship between public subsidy, concessionary/free offer policy and impact on inequalities in physical activity.

Findings – investigating the association between variations in leisure facility charges and participation

We conducted 3 quasi-experimental studies to estimate the effect of variations in pricing policy.

- The impact of a scheme introduced in Blackburn with Darwen (re:refresh) that provided universal free access to most activities in leisure centres.** Using Interrupted Times Series and Difference in Difference analysis we found the scheme led to a 49% increase in gym and swimming activity (95%CI: 36% to 64%), an additional 3.9% of the population participating in moderate intensity gym or swim sessions in a month (95%CI 3.6 to 4.1) and an additional 1.9% of the population having at least 3 x 30 minutes of moderate physical activity per week (95%CI 1.7 to 2.1). Effects were greatest in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic groups (see Figure 2.).
- Evaluating the impact of free holiday swimming in Blackpool.** Using a Difference-in-Differences analysis to compare the change in participation rates during school holidays over age groups in Blackpool to a similar local authority that did not offer free swimming, we found that the free swimming offer resulted in an additional 10% of children swimming at least once in the school holidays each year (95%CI 8 to 11%) and a total of 33 swimming attendances per 100 children (95%CI 28 to 38). Effects were greatest in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic group.
- Evaluating the impact on swimming of concessionary charges for people aged 60 and over.** We used Difference-in-Differences analysis to compare the change in participation rates over age groups in Blackpool and Knowsley (where the average fee for a swim reduced by £1 (30%) at age 60) to a similar local authority where price did not change at this age. We found this concessionary policy resulted in an additional 3 people aged 60-75 and over per 1000 population swimming at least 12 times a year [95%CI 1 to 5]. Effects were the similar across socioeconomic groups.

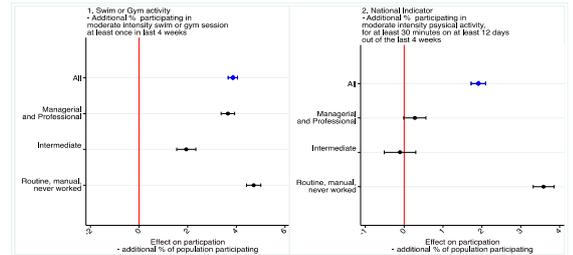


Figure 2: The effect, by socioeconomic group of scheme introduced in Blackburn with Darwen (re:refresh) that provided free access to most activities in leisure centres. Shows the additional % of the population participating due to the scheme.

Findings - public perspectives on cost

A total of 83 adults living in 4 participating LAs were recruited at leisure centres and through community contacts - 63 residents took part in focus groups and 20 in telephone interviews. This included users and non-users of facilities, who paid in different ways (e.g. free access, pre-paid membership, pay as you go) or who used facilities at different times of the day (peak/off peak)

- Affordability was most likely to affect people receiving welfare payments, low wage households and retired people
- For many existing users, price shaped decisions about how they participated in leisure (e.g. attending at off-peak times)
- Free access was highly valued by users and was reported to encourage participation
- Pre-paid options were also reported to motivate more frequent participation
- PAYG was viewed as more manageable financially for people unable to commit regular payments but paradoxically was the most expensive option if using frequently
- Users often had to overcome other barriers alongside cost, before they accessed the facilities (e.g. lack of transport)

"I don't think the discount is that big to be honest where people who are unemployed. If anything I think they could do more to help people because when you're on job seekers allowance and you're living on your own it is expensive to go over there. A lot of times you go over as well it can be quite empty so I feel if they reduced the prices surely a lot more people would go wouldn't they?" (Male, Not working)

"I mean some of the ladies from other sessions say that if they'd never been free they would never have started exercising. It encouraged them to take part in something" (Female, Community facilitator)

"The cost is a problem for me now I'm retired and I have less income so I've taken out the £15 a month but that restricts me; I've got to be between 9 and 4 o'clock so there are sessions in the evening that I would have to pay and that would be £5.50 a time." (Female, Retired)

Learning for practice – Using attendance data

By collaborating with practitioners to extract and use attendance data from leisure management systems, the project aimed to build capacity for local evaluation and practice. This includes learning about how routine data can practically support innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluating actions for their health inequalities impact.

Who was involved/SPHR contact

LiLaC (Liverpool and Lancaster Universities Collaboration for Public Health Research) Public Health and Leisure Practitioner Collaborators in North West (Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Knowsley, Liverpool, Lancashire) and APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence).

Many thanks to residents of the neighbourhoods who shared their experiences of leisure facilities as part of interviews/focus groups or were involved in public involvement activities. All photos provided courtesy of re:refresh, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.

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Conclusions

Due to austerity policies, many LAs are reducing the extent to which they subsidise facilities and in some instances are increasing charges. Many LAs are also considering whether to invest ring-fenced public health budgets in leisure. This research provides evidence to inform such decisions. It found free access substantially increased participation in swim and gym activities. Larger effects were identified for swimming in children and in more deprived groups. Providing concessionary prices at 60 years was also found to temporarily delay the decline in participation at older ages. Pricing policies that include components of free access and offer more flexible payment options are most likely to contribute to reducing inequalities in PA in disadvantaged groups.

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