

The Public Health Practice Evaluation Scheme (PHPES)

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



Entrance charges for facility based leisure activities are more likely to be a barrier to physical activity for people living on low incomes.

Background

The amount of physical activity that people undertake is important for preventing a whole range of health conditions. There is a gradient in levels of participation with people from 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 tool that local authorities (LA) have available to reduce these inequalities in activity.

Limited robust evidence exists about the impact of cost on participation by socioeconomic group, or the effect of different concessionary policies.

Our practitioner partners

The PHPES scheme enables people working in public health, who are introducing innovative initiatives aimed at improving health, to work in partnership with NIHR SPHR to conduct rigorous evaluations of their cost-effectiveness.

Seven local authorities (Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Knowsley, Lancaster, Liverpool, Preston, South Ribble) in North West England were involved in different components of the study.

NIHR SPHR researchers worked with:

- Public health and leisure practitioner collaborators in these areas
- APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence)

Pricing policies of LA supported leisure facilities include components such as:

- Concessionary charges (e.g. for over 60s)
- Universal and targeted free leisure offers
- Differences in standard entrance charges
- Payment methods (pre-paid membership or pay as you go - PAYG)
- Peak and off peak pricing structure

Supported leisure facilities include swimming pools, gyms and sport facilities subsidised by the LA.

Many LAs across the country are reviewing the extent to which they subsidise facilities or are considering whether to invest ring-fenced public health budgets in leisure. This research provides evidence to inform such decisions.

Key issues

- NIHR SPHR researchers found LA pricing policies that offered free access and more flexible payment options more likely to contribute to tackling inequalities in physical activity for lower socio-economic groups.
- Due to cuts in LA budgets, funding for leisure services is under pressure and some authorities are considering increasing charges. As yet, this does not seem to be widespread.
- However, the extent of budget cuts does mean that free or concessionary schemes are still at risk.

Key research questions

- Does reducing the cost of accessing local authority leisure facilities increase physical activity and does that differ by socioeconomic group?

Method

We treated LA leisure pricing policies as 'natural experiments' and used a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques to investigate their health inequalities impact. This included:

1. Detailed exploration of pricing policies and their underlying rationales - interviews with 33 leisure and public health practitioners in the north west
2. Analysis of leisure data (transaction data from leisure management systems and Active People survey) to investigate the impact of variations in pricing policies (universal free offer, free holiday swimming, concession for over 60s)
3. Capturing public experiences of entrance charges - interviews and focus groups with 83 users and non-users of leisure in four LAs with high deprivation.
4. Practitioner and public involvement in shaping priorities for, and recommendations from research.

Key findings and learnings for practice

- Universal free offer – substantially increased participation in swim and gym activities – particularly in more disadvantaged groups
- Free holiday swims for children –relatively large effects, particularly for those in more deprived areas
- Concessions at 60 - temporarily delay the decline in participation at older ages
- Public experiences - people receiving welfare payments, low wage households and retired people most constrained by price. Charges also affected user participation more generally - people often attended at times when charges lower or free where circumstances allowed.

References/resources

Published outputs from this evaluation will be available in early 2017. This will include journal articles reporting findings from all stages of the study.

SPHR Contact/Find out more

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“I’m struggling with my work and only get bits of work. So I have been going when it’s been free really.” (Male leisure user)

“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 leisure user)

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About PHPES

PHPES projects are:

- **generated by front line practitioners,**
- **designed to provide transferable, robust evidence on the impact of local practice for local practitioners,**
- **developed and delivered in collaboration with NIHR SPHR academics building evaluative capacity in public health practice.**

About NIHR SPHR

The NIHR SPHR aims to build a high quality evidence base for cost-effective public health practices. We work with local practitioners and members of the public, carrying out a wide range of research projects and programmes with a school wide focus on alcohol, ageing well and health inequalities