

Strategies for Seniors and Sport

Landessportbund Berlin

27 and 28 May 2004

Summary

Physical activity has only recently become a social policy priority. There are two reasons for this heightened attention: (i) health-care and other costs have increased due to inactive lifestyles and (ii) demographic changes require new thinking in many areas, especially concerning how to support activity and foster independent living in older age. Three of the AGF's key themes – Work/Life Balance, Employment and Social Policies for an Ageing Society and Health Care Systems – intersect at this point, namely how physical activity programmes can contribute to the quality of life of older adults, while keeping them socially and politically active in their communities.

The Strategies for Seniors and Sport conference on 27 and 28 May 2004 at the Sports Academy of the Landessportbund Berlin hosted 25 physical activity and health experts from Germany, the UK and Canada. This was an opportune time to consider these issues as a series of flagship pilot projects were launched in Germany and the UK at the start of 2004. The expert conference made possible informed exchanges on these state-of-the-art programmes while the information could still be put to use. In addition, Game Plan, the UK government's policy plan to encourage sport and physical activity, is becoming a reality. UK representatives were able to report on how the inter-departmental cooperation was progressing and what other countries could learn from such a major coordination effort as the Activity Coordination Team charged with bringing government decision-makers together to make Game Plan work. This expert conference follows a major German public conference "Gesellschaft mit Zukunft" (Society with a future) on the challenges of demographic change. Another major meeting on preventative health, older adults and activity is being planned for autumn 2005 in Berlin by Prof. Steinhagen-Thiessen. The fostering of excellent physical activity programmes is slowly being recognised as a useful means by which policy-makers can navigate the societal effects of demographic change. Finally, the experts from Health Canada and the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging were looking forward to sharing the results of the discussions at the World Health Organisation-sponsored World Congress on Activity and Ageing, to take place in Canada in August 2004.

The conference got under way with greetings from Dr Ray Cunningham, AGF Deputy Director, and Gabriele Wrede, Vice-President of the Landessportbund Berlin, leading directly into an overview of the conference themes by conference initiator Dr Heather Cameron from the Centre for Technology and Society at the Technical University of Berlin. Dr Cameron's discussion paper "Strategies for Seniors and Sport" is based on 20 interviews with British and German experts working on physical activity for older adults. Dr Cameron discussed the national priorities and pilot projects and introduced the three conference organising themes: the design, implementation and evaluation of physical-activity programmes for older adults. (The discussion paper is available at www.agf.org.uk.)

The conference was structured around short impulse talks from the participants, who then broke up into groups of seven or eight for small-group work and then rejoined a moderated plenary to share results. The results of the sessions are grouped here by theme and the most important conference conclusions are listed at the end of this summary.

Design:

- Developing partnerships and knowing one's partners and their facilities is important for programme design. As data collection and programme growth rely on partnering, it is essential to include partners in planning and to make the reasons for data collection clear and understandable. Furthermore, it is important to be informed from the start about targeted participants – language barriers, educational background and socio-economic status.
- All the programme data, including formal evaluations and informal participant feedback, need to be collected, documented and fed back into the design process to improve new programmes.
- It was agreed that while overall models of physical activity need to include the broad spectrum of seniors, practitioners need to differentiate more according to participants' interests. The need here for a strategic fit between people's health, their individual agendas, cultural environments and projects was stressed.
- Problems with issues of language, culture and marketing were also raised. Delegates expressed frustration over use of the term "senior" for those under sixty and the fact that the word "sport" often repels rather than attracts participants. Finally, delegates recognised the need to promote a policy of independence and pro-ageing throughout the broader population.

Implementation:

- Local geographic data gathered on the physical activity patterns of a targeted area's residents can help with programme design and resource allocation. LEAP in Wigan uses this sort of data to decide where to offer services such as walking clubs.
- Partnerships with non-traditional providers – such as housing estates or card-playing clubs – make access available to new populations.
- The target groups have to be understood better and marketing approaches developed for different groups of older adults. "Seniors" do not constitute a stable group. Marketing expertise from those already selling to older adults should be used to help design physical activity campaigns.

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- In Germany, programmes are usually offered by groups focussing on sport. In the UK, more organisations that work with seniors in general, not necessarily in connection with sport, are initiating many physical activity programmes.
- A Game Plan–like action in Germany would focus efforts on one goal. Much is being done in Germany but often efforts overlap rather than move the project forward.
- In Germany, the available funding is usually limited to seed funding: later on, the participants must pay the full costs themselves. This barrier is absent from some UK projects which are tied into health care funding.
- The importance of both vertical and horizontal communication was stressed. Communication of results and of processes must be a priority.
- Partnerships must be worked at. Hidden agendas and competition between the partners bring ruin. Partnership agreements should be detailed in writing at the beginning of the project, explaining what each partner will do and how their work will be evaluated.
- A broad range of motives should be addressed and the activities have to link in with other areas, such as education, health, transport and leisure. Programmes need a broad and sustainable coalition of partners.

Evaluation:

- There is sufficient evidence on the physiological effects and health benefits, etc., of physical activity, but there is more work to be done on cognitive functions, particularly in relation to issues such as dementia.
- Much more work is needed on improving study design, implementing the results of “clean” studies, establishing the best time for intervention, increasing feedback from older adults and developing studies that look at interventions in different contexts (e.g. at home and in long-term care facilities).
- Improvements must be made to ensure that study results reach target audiences such as the older adult population and politicians. Furthermore, it was noted that studies suffer from inadequate data collection tools and that structural coordination is a problem, particularly in Germany, where data are not easily transferable. The question of standardisation and the need to include doctors in polls and studies must also be addressed.
- An international compilation of available evaluation tools would be useful and should be a long-term project. Reinvesting in trainers and their continued education was also suggested as a means of improving evaluation processes. Programme design needs to be improved so as to keep people in activity programmes and to collect long-term information.
- There was general agreement on the need to communicate more effectively with both government and public to stimulate action. Fears of remaining unheard by politicians (especially in Germany) were countered by encouragement to persist with clear communication, references to proven practices and maintaining good documentation to produce as evidence.

In the closing discussion the following points were made concerning future work in this area:

- The case for investment in physical activity has to be developed into a political priority. There is a need to demonstrate to political leaders that physical activity

interventions save money elsewhere and present an opportunity to confront, navigate and resolve demographic changes.

- Older adults need to be provided with information on how their quality of life and independence can be improved, not only through strength training but also through cardiovascular fitness. The CCAA are leaders in this.
- Different arguments must be made to persuade different groups. The argument that physical activity saves money is hardly the message for older adults themselves: instead, older adults should be encouraged to achieve and maintain a better quality of life through more independence and participation in community life. The focus should be on ageing with dignity, not “staying young”.
- Physical activity can be packaged with many other enjoyable activities to win new converts, e.g. through seniors’ travel.
- More information is needed on best practice for evaluation purposes and the results of these evaluations should be shared across the EU.
- German delegates were attracted by the British Game Plan model and the resulting integration of various government departments and agencies through ACT (Activity Coordination Team) and SAT (Strategic Action Team). It is worth investigating how a SAT or ACT model could work in Germany.
- National frameworks like Game Plan make it easier to strike coalitions at the national and local levels.
- Recruiting, training and retaining volunteers has to be a major focus, with stress on cost-effective training programmes for volunteers, including cascading training and ways of establishing quality control, including certification programmes. Volunteering among seniors is not as high as is generally thought. University training of sports and health professionals has to be included to provide enough knowledgeable staff.
- The UK and Canada are 5–6 years ahead of Germany in terms of work on older adults and sports. The Strategies for Seniors and Sport conference is unique because it was the first Anglo- German meeting on this theme and can help launch not just new bilateral but much needed European initiatives.
- The German government can be lobbied on the basis of Canadian and UK success with their national policy documents Blueprint and Game Plan.
- The Canadian experience has shown that policy initiatives and programmes previously considered impossible to fund and implement are possible. Networking activities need time to take root and coalitions need time to be built up, but this preliminary work leads to later success.

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The Anglo-German Foundation for the Study of Industrial Society (AGF) was established in 1973. The AGF is an independent bilateral body which funds comparative research and sponsors British-German events in the economic, industrial and social policy fields in both the UK and Germany.

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