



Research Report Synopsis

Kirklees Council & NHS Kirklees

Evaluation of a Programme to
Reduce Obesity Among the 16-24
Student Population
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The Evaluation Programme

Introduction

The Department of Health publication, Ambitions for Health, has set out the important role social marketing is seen to have in improving health and that it will play in the policy making process.

Kirklees has focussed its efforts on changing behaviour that contributes to obesity in students aged 16-24. The programme ultimately aims to increase the number of students involved in healthy eating, physical activity, and identifying potential risks in their lifestyles.

Kirklees PCT wished to commission an evaluation to enable decisions to be made as to whether the approach should be rolled out more widely, or sustained for this group. This report contains preliminary findings from initial events which have take place as of 10th March 2009.

Evaluation Objectives

The social marketing objectives of the programme are to achieve:

- A halt in the year on year rise in overweight and obesity levels within 16-24 year olds
- Movement of the target group from sedentary behaviour to more active behaviour
- Exchange of unhealthy food for quick and healthy food options.

The specific evaluation objective was to understand the effectiveness of the interventions which have been implemented to achieve these social marketing objectives. Following the initial scoping insight, which showed that students favoured interventions that did not focus on health and were fun, social, quick and easy, the decision was taken to use a 'stealth not health' approach to encouraging behaviour change, where the health aspects of the events were covertly promoted through fun and enjoyable activities.

Methodology

A mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies was employed. The quantitative research was designed to provide an indication of attendance at events, including demographics and motivation to attend. The qualitative elements were intended to provide an in-depth understanding of motivations and behaviour in terms of lifestyle and weight management.

The research incorporated the following events:

Freshers' Fayre Event

Contact details from the 2008 cohort of students from the University of Huddersfield's Freshers' Fayre were obtained by Kirklees PCT. These students had been given free Up For It bags containing ingredients and recipe cards at the Freshers' Fayre. These students were then contacted and invited to attend a focus group.

Two focus groups which were split by gender took place on 5th February 2009 at the Cotton Factory in Huddersfield. The first group took place with six males and the second group with nine females.

Focus groups lasted for approximately 1½ hours and respondents were given an incentive payment of £25 each.

Health MOTs at Huddersfield College

Health MOTs of students were carried out at New College, Huddersfield as part of health week which took place from 9th-13th February 2009. To evaluate these MOTs, two in-depth interviews took place with practice numbers who had conducted the MOTs with students.

Interviews last for approximately one hour each and were conducted on 23rd February 2009.

Interventions

The following interventions were arranged and were conducted by PR agency, Wolfstar:

- Dance Your Ass Off Club Event
- Dodgeball Event
- Come Dine with Me/Take on the Takeaway event.

To evaluate the interventions four researchers attended each event, and using Handheld Mobile Digital Assistant (MDA) equipment conducted a survey of the audience at each event. This survey was intended to provide a snapshot of participants attending the event and their lifestyle & motivations.

The surveys were followed up with in-depth telephone interviews to gain feedback specific to each intervention. Five interviews were conducted per intervention lasting for approximately 30 minutes. Respondents to the telephone interviews were given an incentive of a £15 Amazon voucher. The findings from these interviews are reported alongside the survey results.

Summary of Findings

Student Focus Groups

In the focus groups which were held prior to the interventions, students tended to describe their health as “appalling” and had deteriorated since starting university. This, they said, was mainly due to their erratic lifestyles and inability to cook meals from scratch. Many meals came from fast food establishments or were purchased on the University campus. Furthermore, the majority of students, particularly females, reported that they rarely exercised.

All of the students in the focus groups recalled receiving the recipe bags of ingredients at the Freshers’ Fayre, however, only a minority realised that the bags contained recipe cards. Several respondents said they had made meals using the recipe cards and some had also devised their own meals using the ingredients. Some students commented that they would have preferred to have received recipes for meals similar to the type of food they were used to at home, such as cottage pie, sausage and mash, stew and corned beef hash.

Feedback on the ingredients in the bags was fairly positive. The majority of students said that they would use all of the items at some point and, some had enjoyed being introduced to herbs and spices which they had never tried cooking with before.

Facebook was the most popular means of communication between students in the focus groups. Word of mouth was also a popular source, particularly for students who were living in shared University accommodation. In terms of communicating the Up For It events, students recommended that a calendar of events be produced and given to students at the start of the academic year.

Interventions

Dance Your Ass Off

The concept of the Dance Your Ass Off event was received favourably by female respondents in the focus groups, however, male respondents commented that it was “like an event for girls”. A number of students reported that they usually went to the Camel Club on a Thursday night anyway, so they would be there regardless of whether an event was being held.

Awareness of DJ, Chris Lake was extremely low amongst respondents in the focus groups. Indeed, the survey results from the event show just 6% of respondents attending the events to see Chris Lake. Furthermore, in the subsequent telephone interviews some respondents reported leaving the club earlier than usual due to the music "*not being as good as usual*". However, several female respondents already took part in street dancing classes and liked the idea of a display at the club.

Respondents attending Dance Your Ass Off tended to have found out about the event through a friend (30%) or via facebook (22%). However, just over one in five respondents were unaware that an event was taking place, and were at the venue for the club night. Just over four in ten (42%) survey respondents said they were attending the event because they just wanted a night out at a club, and a further three in ten (28%) came because friends were coming.

Survey respondents were most satisfied with the 'cost of entry' for the event and least satisfied with pre event publicity.

Encouragingly, three in five respondents felt that they were more interested in dance as a result of attending the event, showing the success of the 'stealth not health' approach, and just over a third were interested in attending the dance classes run by the dancers who danced at the event – the Errol Barrows dance troupe. The most frequent reason given for not wishing to attend the classes was not having any interest in street dancing. Disappointingly, despite the level of interest expressed in street dancing during the event, numbers at the subsequent dance classes were low. This could in part be due to the lack of opportunity to sign up for the classes during the event.

Unfortunately, during the subsequent telephone interviews with people who had attended the event, several respondents reported not having seen the street dancing display or being aware that it was taking place.

Take on the Takeaway

Again, the concept of the Take on the Takeaway events was favourably received by female respondents in the focus groups compared to the male respondents who commented that they had never heard of the chef, James Martin and was unaware of the Take on the Takeaway television programme.

People who attended the Take on the Takeaway event tended to have heard about it through a friend (38%) or because their catering lecturer had arranged for them to come (22%). Anecdotally, it appeared that a large proportion of the audience had not planned to attend the event but had happened to be in the right place at the right time – in the union shop or bar for example,. Similarly, a number of catering students attended the event with their college lecture arriving on a pre booked bus.

The main reasons given for attending the event was James Martin (45%) and to learn new cooking skills (28%).

Feedback from the event was fairly positive with the highest scores being achieved for 'encouraging me to try cooking new dishes', the 'amount of people here', 'raising awareness of healthy cooking' and 'encouraging me to cook instead of ordering a takeaway'. In the subsequent telephone interviews respondents said they were very impressed with James Martin's demonstrations at the event. Nearly all of these respondents said they would try the recipes themselves.

Three in five respondents at the event said they cooked their own meals everyday, however, 17% said they ordered a takeaway 2 to 3 times a week. Over half of respondents (55%) said the event had encouraged them to cook more from scratch.

Two-thirds of survey respondents said they would be signing up for the Come Dine with Me Challenge. The main reasons given for not signing up were no interest in cooking and that they would need more information.

The event benefited from promoting healthy cooking as something fun and sociable instead of overtly promoting the healthy lifestyle benefits, showing the 'stealth not health' approach in action.

Dodgeball

Having seen the film by the same title, male respondents were particularly enthusiastic about the idea of playing Dodgeball.

Just 25 students took place in the Dodgeball event, all of whom completed an interview. Respondents tended to have found out about the event at college, University, the Students' Union or via a friend. The main reasons given for starting a team was that friends were coming or wanted to do it (76%) and the opportunity to try something new (52%).

Respondents thought the event was best at 'encouraging me to try new activities' and 'promoting Dodgeball as a good form of exercise'. They were least satisfied with the amount of pre event publicity.

Positively, over seven in ten respondents said they would consider playing Dodgeball again. The reasons given for not wishing to play again included lack of facilities, not enjoying the game and the fact that it was too hard.

Up For It Brand

Awareness of the Up For It brand was low across all of the interventions, though some students became aware of the brand after attending an event. Even the school nurses conducting the Health MOTs were unaware of the brand and what it stood for. However, it is important to remember that the 'stealth not health' approach behind Up For It means that awareness of the brand is not as crucial as the interventions that it promotes.

Encouragingly, more than half of all respondents at each intervention said they would attend other Up For It events, however, they were unaware of a programme of forthcoming events. The main reason given for wanting to attend other events was that they had enjoyed the event that they had attended. Other reasons given were: the desire to try something different, to be more active and to socialise with friends, which again shows the success of the 'stealth not health' approach.

In terms of the impact of these events, students commented that a one-off event was unlikely to have a long lasting impact on students' lifestyles, however, they were believed to be a useful means of reinforcing healthy lifestyles.

Health MOTs

Lifestyle checks for students ran over four days at Huddersfield New College, with each individual slot lasting for 20 minutes. In total, 75 students attended a check.

The majority of students taking part in the lifestyle check were found to have a healthy BMI (71%). However, 19% had a BMI of 25 or over in the overweight category. School nurses commented that, on occasion, physically fit students had a high BMI due to the amount of exercise they undertook and the resultant muscle weight. Likewise, some of the students classified as having a 'healthy' BMI had poor diets, smoked, drank alcohol or did not participate in any exercise.

As part of the lifestyle checks, the nurses recommend that the students get more involved in family shopping to ensure that more healthy food is available at home. However, in some cases they reported that often the students' own families are lacking basic cooking skills. The suggestions made here was to provide students and their families with simple and quick recipes.

Following the lifestyle check, all students received a goodie bag containing leaflets, a water bottle and recipes and other Kirklees young people friendly items. All students were invited for follow up appointments regardless of their BMI, however, disappointingly only five students booked in for this follow up.

Nurses struggled to recall a specific instance where they had supported students primarily for weight management issues. Rather these issues were secondary to the primary reasons for contact such as help with quitting smoking, discussion around contraception and anxiety. In the main, the nurses felt that students believe they are too young to be affected by the repercussions of their unhealthy lifestyles.

In order to maximise attendance at future interventions, the school nurses thought that promotion should be undertaken using a combination of methods, for example, posters as well as word of mouth persuasion to attend events. They commented that any support provided to students should be non-judgmental and that they should be treated as young adults, rather than children. Nurses thought they would benefit from additional training in using motivational language, delivering messages for maximum impact and counselling skills.

Conclusions

This evaluation has provided a good foundation on which NHS Kirklees & Kirklees Council can develop further interventions to achieve the programme's social marketing objectives.

The target audience concede that, in the main, their health is deteriorating as a result of their lifestyle. However, they are generally very accepting of this fact and believe poor diet, lack of exercise and excessive consumption of alcohol to be an integral part of being a student. This belief is substantiated by the availability of cheap, unhealthy food both on the University campus and in the town centre. Offers on healthier options in food outlets on the University campus might go some way towards addressing this. Furthermore, the perception that, as students, they are too young for their lifestyle to have any impact of them is adding weight to the belief that health is not a hugely important issue.

Challenging the perceived 'student lifestyle' will represent a major task for the Council & PCT. The current approach of working within the students' social sphere is clearly the tactic which will yield the greatest results.

The bags of ingredients handed out to students at the University's freshers' fayre were gratefully received, however, a short briefing for students on the purpose of the bags and the inclusion of recipe cards would have been helpful. If this scheme is continued in future years, students would appreciate the inclusion of 'traditional' recipes in addition to some new dishes for them to try. Furthermore, many students would benefit from basic cookery classes to enable them to gain the skills to cook from recipes.

The Dance Your Ass Off event appears to have had a limited impact on students in terms of encouraging them to become more active, particularly when they go out. This intervention will require a longer-term approach in order to encourage behaviour change in students. It would also benefit from greater above the line publicity.

Feedback from the Take on the Takeaway event was fairly positive, with the celebrity chef, James Martin being the biggest draw to the event. The event scored highly on encouraging students to try cooking new dishes, the amount of people there, raising awareness of healthy cooking and encouraging students to cook instead of ordering a takeaway. The event also benefited from promoting healthy cooking as something fun and sociable instead of overtly promoting the healthy lifestyle benefits. Again, however, this event could have benefited from greater pre event publicity.

Lowest satisfaction was seen with pre event publicity, and indeed, several students commented that they had only found out about it by chance.

Similarly, while participants who attended the Dodgeball event gave positive feedback, there appeared to be an issue with lack of pre event publicity. Encouragingly, the majority of those who attended were very interested in going to similar events, which shows the effectiveness of the 'stealth not health' approach, but were not aware of any that were arranged.

Brand awareness of Up For It is low, and if this branding is to be used for future events, then familiarity with the brand and its objectives must be increased. This could probably be best achieved via events for freshers in the coming academic year. However, this low level of awareness is not surprising given the 'stealth not health' approach that was taken to the programme, where awareness of the brand is not as important as the events and interventions themselves, and the health agenda is not overtly promoted.

Discussions with nurses at the College indicate that a holistic approach to tackling obesity in students is required, as their experience suggests it is often related to other factors. Key success factors in the student MOTs, was allowing students to attend in pairs with peers which adds to their comfort. A more strategic approach is advised in terms of joining up with other interventions which are also targeted towards promoting healthy lifestyles.

The students in our sample tended to have little involvement with University clubs and societies, both sporting and non sporting. Indeed, University sports clubs were deemed to be highly competitive and, therefore, unsuitable for students wishing to partake in them purely for fitness and pleasure.

What is needed, therefore, are opportunities for students to become involved in sports both new activities, such as the Dodgeball tournament, and also sports with which they are already familiar such as football, netball and hockey. The main criteria for students' involvement are that the activities are accessible and free (or cheap). Students also generally want to be involved in sports that are non competitive and, therefore, open and accessible to all.

In terms of communicating with students about interventions, Facebook is a key vehicle. Future interventions might also benefit from utilising some of the suggestions made by students, such as the distribution of a calendar of events at the beginning of the academic year. This will help to ensure that key events fit into students' programmes of activity which will help to build sustainability into the desired behaviour change.