

Evaluating the provision of outdoor gym equipment

Uptake and impact in Sefton, Merseyside: Summary report



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Introduction

Outdoor gym equipment is becoming increasingly available in parks and other outdoor locations in the UK and worldwide. Setting up gym equipment in green spaces provides people of all ages with opportunities to take part in physical activity in attractive environments, which is associated with positive outcomes for physical and mental health. Despite the increasing prominence of outdoor gym equipment worldwide there is little evidence about their impact on local communities.

The primary aims of this study were to:

1. Increase understanding regarding the uptake of outdoor gym equipment in Sefton, including the extent to which they are used and the characteristics of those using them.
2. Evaluate the impact of the provision of outdoor gym equipment on the health and physical activity levels of local people in Sefton.
3. Identify attitudes and common barriers towards using outdoor gym equipment and taking part in physical activity.
4. Identify and provide recommendations about useful approaches to increase effective use of outdoor gyms.

This summary report briefly describes the findings from our evaluation, and outlines recommendations to improve the uptake and effectiveness of outdoor gyms.

Methods

A questionnaire was administered across 10 diverse outdoor gym locations and through an online survey. Survey findings were supplemented with interviews and focus groups. The evaluation was carried out between May and August 2013.

Positive attitudes

75% or more of participants believed that outdoor gyms are:

- Easily accessible to them
- Beneficial for their health
- Enjoyable to use

70% of participants find exercising outdoors is more beneficial for health than exercising indoors

80% of participants find exercise more enjoyable when outdoors than indoors.



Survey Findings

In total, 162 participants provided useable data through the online and onsite surveys. In addition, interviews were carried out with nine participants and one focus group was undertaken with four participants.

- Participants generally had positive attitudes towards the outdoor gyms. Three quarters or more of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the gyms are easily accessible, and that using an outdoor gym is both beneficial for their health and enjoyable. More positive attitudes about the health benefits of using an outdoor gym, accessibility and the attitudes of friends were all associated with more regular use of the equipment.
- Two thirds of participants had used an outdoor gym in Sefton on at least one occasion. Just under half of participants used an outdoor gym at least once in a typical week, and just over one quarter reported that they used the equipment on two or more occasions a week. The average length of time using the equipment in one session was 19 minutes amongst all participants, and 22 minutes amongst those who used the equipment at least once in a typical week.
- Amongst all participants who had used the equipment on at least one occasion, over half agreed or strongly agreed that the outdoor gyms had an overall positive impact on their health and that since using the equipment they felt fitter or healthier, more confident when exercising and took part in more physical activity. Benefits for health were greater amongst those who used the equipment at least once a week.
- Further analysis of findings suggested that participants who were thinking of, or who had started to, increase their physical activity levels reported the greatest benefits of using the outdoor gym equipment for their health.

The health impacts associated with using an outdoor gym

Since first using an outdoor gym, between 44% and 54% of **all** participants who had used the outdoor equipment and between 52% and 72% of **regular** users who used an outdoor gym once a week or more reported:

- * Having increased confidence to take part in physical activity
- * Undertaking more physical activity
- * Feeling physically fitter and healthier
- * Benefits for mental wellbeing: feeling more relaxed and less stressed

- The majority of participants stated that exercising outdoors was more beneficial for their health (70%) and more enjoyable (80%) than exercise indoors. Over 80% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the aesthetic qualities of the environment that they exercise in are important to them. Positive attitudes about exercising outdoors were associated with more regular use of an outdoor gym.
- Over a quarter of participants indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had enough time to exercise and were confident exercising in public places. Similarly, over a quarter agreed or strongly agreed that they would feel embarrassed using outdoor gym equipment. Increased confidence to exercise in public and not feeling self-conscious using the equipment were both associated with more regular use of an outdoor gym.

Findings from the analysis of interview and focus group data

In total, telephone interviews were completed with nine individuals. In addition, one focus group was completed with four individuals who participated in an exercise class which primarily used the outdoor gym equipment.

A variety of common themes emerged from the analysis of interview and focus group data. The gym equipment was reported to be well used by adults and children, and suitable to be used by families and groups of friends. The benefits to children's health from using outdoor gyms and being around adults exercising were discussed. The gyms were believed to be highly accessible and easily incorporated into daily routines, and the benefits of having access to free equipment were clear. Participants believed that some gyms are more popular than others and more could be done to increase awareness in the community.

“When we came before there was a granddad, the mum and the daughter on it. From about seven to about seventy and everybody's going on it. I mean you wouldn't get people like that going to the gym, would you?”



“Whether it’s with the kids, or the dog, or on my jogs then I’m in the parks all the time. So I could just hop on and do 10 minutes or longer or, however long I need. It would fit right in with my normal life, my daily routine”

A range of health and social benefits were associated with the outdoor gyms. It was clear that the social aspect of using the equipment was important with participants reporting attending with friends and family. Exercising with others was associated with being more confident and feeling supported when using the equipment, and classes using the equipment were well-received and perceived as beneficial. Improvements to health included increased physical activity, feeling fitter and seeing improvements to physique. For some participants, the social aspects were as important outcomes as health benefits.

“These are popular because you can just go for a walk in the park with your mum, or your friends, or your children and just have a go, have a giggle and get your heart pumping”

“It’s fun doing something with your mates and seeing them struggle to do things like I did, and showing them ‘no that’s not how you do it, it’s like this’ and then helping them get it right. And then we have a laugh about it later on”

It was commonly identified that more information on how to effectively use the equipment would enable more use, and more effective use of outdoor gyms. It was clear that not knowing or not being confident about how to use the equipment can be a clear barrier to use, particularly amongst those with less exercise experience. Increasing the amount and quality of information aimed at people with different levels of fitness and experience of using outdoor gym equipment was believed to be likely to help beginners and enable progression to maintain use over time.

“There’s no good just putting the machines there and just expecting the local community to get on there and just use them, they need little bits of pointing them how to use the exercise equipment. There’s nothing there really to help them improve and to get better, and to push themselves”

“I guess the information they put there is to help people who don’t know where to start, who aren’t very fit. But it’s basic. You can’t have a “one size fits all” approach to exercise, that’s what I think. They should say ‘you start off doing this and then after a few weeks go on and do this’ or if you’re, say, ‘this fit then do 100 of these for 10 minutes’ or whatever. Make it more personal”

The participants enjoyed being able to work out in an open air location and the positive impacts that spending time and exercising outdoors in the natural environment can have on both physical and mental health were widely recognised. Participants commented about the value of the setting being pleasant and well maintained, and it was noted by one participant that keeping the sites tidy and secure was important.

“I love being outdoors and I think it’s the best place to exercise. If you’ve got a nice park with, you know, trees, lots of greenery, that’s away from the roads and it’s a nice day then it’s a lovely place to be. You can really relax there can’t you?”

Recommendations

- *Continue to actively work to promote the outdoor gyms*

To increase awareness and encourage use of the outdoor gym equipment it is important to continue to advertise the gyms. This may be particularly important over time when the novelty of having access to the equipment may have passed. Consider how to access those who exercise the least. For example, providing information in leisure centres near outdoor gyms may be a useful approach, but it is unlikely to reach the least active people. Promoting the features of the equipment that are most attractive to gym users such as the quality of the natural environments the gyms are located in, that the gyms are free and that families can exercise together. Highlighting how the equipment can be beneficial to everyone across different age groups and levels of fitness will help to attract those who may not believe the equipment is suitable for them.

- *Increase and improve the provision of instructions regarding use of the equipment*

Individuals, particularly those with the least experience of using exercise equipment, are likely to require more help using the equipment than currently provided in order to feel confident doing so, and to exercise in a manner that will benefit health. Clear instructions on how to use each piece of equipment including factors such as posture, intensity and repetitions will be beneficial. Tailoring information to different levels of fitness will encourage and enable people of different capabilities to use the equipment effectively and make clear progression over time as confidence and fitness improves. Emphasising that the gyms can supplement other exercise, for example as a warm up or alternative form of exercise, may appeal to currently active individuals such as those already jogging nearby. Information that increases knowledge on the purpose of each piece of equipment and how it benefits health may also be beneficial. Information can be provided in a variety of ways such as through leaflets, notice boards, QR codes on the equipment (barcodes that can be scanned by smartphones to take the individual to a website), websites and demonstrations. When developing instructions it is important to consider that local people will have different experiences of physical activity and different degrees of health literacy. Receiving instruction through demonstration may be useful for both adults and children. Engage with those with expertise such as fitness trainers or local people with experience of using the equipment who may be willing to teach others, and explore ways that enable them to do so.

- *Enable group exercise classes that incorporate the outdoor gym equipment*

Group sessions led by a person with expertise such as a fitness trainer can be effective for all levels of experience and fitness. Classes provide an opportunity for expert advice to encourage effective exercise and progression using the equipment. The social aspect will be a motivating factor for some and can have knock-on benefits for families and communities.

- *Ensure that outdoor gym locations and equipment are well maintained*

Scenery and the quality of the natural environment are important factors in decisions to use an outdoor gym. Ensuring that gym locations are maintained to a high standard and are pleasant places to exercise in

is important to enable physical activity to be enjoyable and rewarding. For example, if a location becomes associated with litter or antisocial behaviour this is likely to have a negative impact on equipment use.

- *Continue to monitor the use of equipment and public perceptions where possible.*

Keeping track of how many people are using the equipment, who these people are and recording their feedback will be useful to monitor the impact and success of the gym equipment. It will allow early identification of any issues and appropriate action to be taken. Involving those who are regularly in the parks such as park officers or rangers and exercise group leaders and engaging with individuals using the equipment may provide valuable feedback.

- *Continue to invest in activities and facilities to encourage outdoor exercise*

Providing a variety of facilities that encourage individuals and their friends and families to spend time outside and to exercise in the natural environment is likely to have health and social benefits. Additionally, providing more facilities near to an outdoor gym is likely to increase awareness and use of this equipment and bring more people into the park or site where it is located. Similar issues regarding promotion, quality of location and instruction for effective and safe use as with outdoor gym equipment are likely to be important to consider for any new facilities.

Conclusion

The evidence from this evaluation suggests that the provision of outdoor gym equipment in Sefton has been well received by local residents. Attitudes towards the equipment were generally very positive and uptake was high amongst the sample, with two thirds having used an outdoor gym at least once and nearly half at least once a week. Those who used the equipment on a regular basis frequently indicated that they believed there had been improvements to their health and that they took part in more exercise since having access to an outdoor gym. Although our study sample appeared more active than the general population, our findings suggest that providing outdoor gym equipment is a promising approach to increasing physical activity that may reduce some of the complex barriers to taking part in exercise. That the equipment is free, accessible and in pleasant natural environments was a motivating and facilitating factor for participants in this study. Our findings suggest that those who are not meeting the recommended physical activity levels and who want to increase the amount of exercise they undertake may benefit the most from having access to free outdoor gym equipment. It appears that further promotion of the facilities, increasing the availability of information on how to exercise using the equipment and facilitating group sessions is important to increase use of the outdoor gyms. Information will be most effective if it is aimed at both beginners and those more experienced with exercise and outdoor gyms to enable both uptake and progression using the equipment.



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