The Government’s agenda has an increasing focus on young people and sport with the recognition that by 2010, they should have opportunities to participate in at least two hours of PE and sport in school per week, with a further two hours available outside school hours. This article describes the findings of an evaluation study recently completed by members of the research team at the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA). Commissioned by Sport England during 2005-6, the research was a two-phase evaluation of the Community Sport and Enhanced PE, School Sports and Club Link Strategy (PESSCL) pilot programme. The research addressed key reasons why some young people only rarely, or perhaps never, engage with sport or recreational physical activities beyond the school curriculum.

BACKGROUND

The national PESSCL Strategy was launched by the Government in 2002 and is led jointly by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The aim is to increase the percentage of young people in school who spend a minimum of two hours a week on high quality PE and school sport within and beyond the curriculum to 75% by 2006, and then 85% by 2008. The long-term ambition is that by 2010, young people in school will be offered at least four hours of sport every week, made up of at least two hours of PE and sport within school, and an additional two or three hours beyond the school day delivered by a range of school, community and club providers.

The Community Sport and Enhanced PESSCL pilots set out to investigate the best way to provide future opportunities for participation amongst those
young people who currently only rarely, or perhaps never, engage with sport or recreational physical activities beyond the school curriculum. In agreement with the Youth Sport Trust and Sport England’s regional offices, nine School Sport Partnership (SSP) areas were selected across each of the Sport England regions (i.e. the East, East Midlands, London, North East, North West, Midlands, South East, South West, and Yorkshire). Given there is already an emerging body of evidence on what influences young people’s participation in PE and sport, the major focus of the pilots was to go beyond finding out ‘what young people want’ and to avoid eliciting potentially simplistic ‘wish lists’, which contribute little to the current knowledge base. Instead, the pilots aimed to collect local knowledge from both the young people and the local sporting community, and to test out local interventions based on this knowledge. Moreover, the pilots aimed to examine the practicalities of what could be provided in each pilot area, and explore how the young people would respond to an implementation programme that is tested over an agreed period within each pilot region. In short, the pilots aimed to test out the types of opportunities that ‘work best’ to attract young people to sport.

LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Fieldwork for the research was conducted in two phases. During October 2005 Phase One of the pilots investigated young people’s views on a number of issues via focus group discussions. Phase Two focus group discussions took place in February and March 2006 and followed an interim period in which pupils were encouraged by the schools to participate in sport via new activities or positive changes to existing provision that were identified in Phase One. These second focus group discussions sought to establish and gauge young people’s reactions to these programmes of change.

During each phase (in most schools) two focus group discussions were held with Year 8 young people (12- to 13-year-olds) and with Year 11 (15- to 16-year-olds) who ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ participated in sport and physical activity. The young people were selected from the host secondary school, and discussions lasted for about an hour, covering a range of topics such as reaction to the words ‘sport’ and ‘physical activity’; likes and dislikes associated with participating in sport in school and in the community; benefits of participating in sport; views about sport in particular in school; reasons for not participating, and so on. The young people were also asked their views on ways to increase participation in sport, and what they saw as being ‘ideal’ activities to take part in.

Given the extent of the research programme, in this article we only present a very brief synopsis of the Phase One findings that explored young people’s views on sport and physical activity in school and in the community.

PE, SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SCHOOL

‘I hear the word sport, and football comes to mind, and I hate football.’ (Year 8)

As the young people who participated in the research were generally disengaged from PE and sport in school, the majority of views expressed were unsurprisingly negative. Young people made reference to specific sports or activities that they disliked, suggested that they found sport boring and complicated, and felt that they were not good enough at sports. Young people also felt that there was too much pressure from other people to perform in sport. For many people, being ‘no good’ or being less skilful than other pupils was highlighted as being a major factor underpinning their dislike of an activity. It was clear that, for some young people, PE is a school subject likely to embarrass them, and they not only feel picked on but can also suffer from the attitudes of their peers:

‘We just stand around and not doing anything. People who are good at sport never pass the ball or let us get involved in the game, so it’s boring.’ (Year 8)
Pupils said they wanted to do the sports and activities they enjoy, not just the usual ones the school demands, such as football, cricket, rugby, basketball, hockey, and netball.

‘People get left out...you know, they say, get in partners and then there’s like, people left over and some people say I’m not going with her, and it upsets ’em.’ (Year 8)

CHOICE AND VARIETY
Most pupils felt there was no choice or variety of sports at school despite the facilities being available. Pupils said they wanted to do the sports and activities they enjoy, not just the usual ones the school demands, such as football, cricket, rugby, basketball, hockey, and netball. Whilst these are fine for some, they do not appeal to all. Young people reported wanting schools to offer more variety taking into account less ‘mainstream’ sports such as skate-and-snow boarding, BMX racing, and outdoor pursuits:

‘It’s all the normal sports here – like football, rugby, basketball. With us being a sports college, we haven’t got many different types introduced to us.’ (Year 8)

‘There is no choice – we just go for what the majority want and end up doing football.’ (Year 11)

CHANGING FACILITIES
The process of having to get changed, together with the clothing required, was mentioned time and again as being a significant barrier to participation. Most commonly, young people reported that school changing facilities were unhygienic, and that communal showers afforded little or no privacy. Where changing facilities did have private cubicles, these tended only to be in the girls’ changing rooms and many boys felt that such arrangements were unfair. PE kits were also seen as archaic and a source of embarrassment, particularly for girls. For example, in one school, girls reported ‘being stared at’ by boys and said that they wanted to be able to cover-up (e.g. by wearing tracksuit bottoms) and/or to do single gender activities: this was especially salient for many of the Muslim young women in the London region.

EMBARRASSMENT AND POOR TEACHING METHODS
For many, the sense of embarrassment that doing PE and sport could generate was seen as a major factor influencing participation. Being made to perform in front of peers who laughed at them, the negative attitudes of some PE teachers, and boys dominating girls during classes were all noteworthy barriers for some young people. For example, some pupils felt marginalised by teaching methods and styles which left ‘unsporty’ pupils on the periphery, watching the ‘sporty kids’ participate. Young people also disliked teachers not knowing the rules fully (especially when they were substitute teachers). Other factors included a lack of enthusiasm by some teachers, poor quality lessons (e.g. teachers not being able to organise games or control classes), pupils being left to their own devices, and being shouted at for not being able to do something.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR CLUBS
We also asked young people about their participation (or lack of participation) in extra-curricular clubs and activities. Responses were generally ‘more of the same’ with young people reporting that after-school clubs were full of ‘sporty-types’, offered the same activities as the school curriculum (e.g. football, rugby etc), and were poorly organised. Some pupils commented that the ostensible favouritism shown by some teachers in lessons also carries over into the extra-curricular setting:

‘It starts in junior school. I lost all my confidence in like, playing football and things.’ (Year 11)

What was clear from these discussions was that many negative attitudes about PE, sport, and physical activity are often ingrained, and are long-standing views that will be difficult to change. Even by Year 8, some focus group members had firm anti-sport views, and by Year 11, young people were able to articulate these negative views in no uncertain terms.

SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY
With respect to sport and physical activity in the community a number of issues emerged regarding lack of participation including transport to sports facilities, cost of activities, poor quality facilities, having no friends to go with, and a lack of awareness of what is on offer. Even by Year 8, some focus group members had firm anti-sport views, and by Year 11, young people were able to articulate these negative views in no uncertain terms.
INAPPROPRIATE FACILITIES
For some pupils in Year 8, the local facilities were also seen to be inappropriate: they had a reputation for being dangerous places, due to the types of people using them, and in some cases were unsupervised. Moreover, some Muslim young women felt that parental attitudes and religious commitments were often contributory factors to their non-participation in community sport and physical activities:

‘Girls are meant to stay at home and cook and clean. If we are cooking and cleaning what chance are we going to get to try sport?’
‘(Year 11)

‘Some parents just want you home – it doesn’t matter what you are doing, where you are going, even if it is just girls and it’s supervised – they just want you home.’
‘(Year 8)

SPORT IS NOT ‘COOL’
For some boys not participating in sport and physical activity in the community was due to them feeling that they would simply be out of place, particularly if their friends saw them. In other words, sport for them was simply not ‘cool’. Such perceptions are likely to be linked in with particular constructions of masculinity (and femininity) whereby being physically competent in accepted ‘manly’ sports can demarcate peer group memberships for some boys, and consequently, attitudes and behaviours to sport and physical activity:

‘People laugh at you…say if we went off and played tennis, and people see us from school, you’re gay – you play tennis…people just think it’s a gay sport.’
‘(Year 8)

MOVING FORWARD: YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS ON INCREASING PARTICIPATION
Despite some apathy during the Phase One consultation, many young people had clear ideas about how existing or new sports provision could have a positive impact on participation. Young people said they wanted to be able to do something that they could be good at, even if this fell outside mainstream ideas about what constitutes sport (e.g. football, netball, rugby etc). Young people reported wanting a much bigger choice and variety of alternative sports and physical activities on offer, in school PE, after-school provision, and in relation to community facilities.

Increased differentiation by ability (such as increased opportunities for beginners to learn with other people at the same level), and the opportunity to try ‘taster sessions’ in local facilities specifically targeted at young people was also seen as important. Other improvements suggested by young people included the ability to drop in and out of participation as they wished, increased standards of changing facilities with greater privacy and individual (curtained) cubicles, and more information and detail regarding the costs, equipment, and age group suitability of community facilities:

‘I would like to try more activities out of school – to make new friends and get better in a sport that is different from something we do in school.’
‘(Year 8)

‘More alternative sports – like skateboarding, skating, BMX-ing. The thing with these sports is that no one laughs at you if you fall over, even if you are really bad no one takes the mick out of you. If you are a footballer you have to be naturally good at it, but with skateboarding everyone is rubbish to start and it is something you can learn and get better at it.’
‘(Year 11)

CONCLUSION
What was clear from Phase One of the focus groups with young people was that current PE and school sport programmes generate a profound and deep-seated anti-sport attitude in a considerable number of pupils from both genders and amongst both of the Year 8 and Year 11 age groups. The findings from this first phase are not new: young people have been reporting significant dissatisfaction with existing provision in and out of school for some time now, but nothing has changed. If participation by young people is to increase, and the process of engagement to be addressed, the offer on both sides of the school gate must be much more inclusive – it must be appropriate for all young people whatever their ability level. Provision needs to be flexible and young person led, with appropriate curriculum offers for both late primary and early secondary years. Moreover, there needs to be greater clarity and precision about what is actually ‘on offer’. Sport and physical activity programmes need to look and feel ‘attractive’, be easily accessible (within the bounds of health and safety and child protection considerations), whilst still recognising the limited financial resources of many young people. Only then can we start to hope that the attitudes of many young people to sport and physical activity may begin to change.

FOOTNOTES: