



NOTTINGHAM
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An external evaluation of a London based outdoor table tennis pilot scheme run by the English Table Tennis Association

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1. Introduction

The Outdoor Table Tennis pilot project run by the English Table Tennis Association (ETTA) in partnership with local authority sports development units in five London boroughs was launched in March 2010. This report was commissioned by the ETTA in October 2010 to produce a pilot scheme evaluation and report to assess the following aims:

2. Research aims

The project aims as agreed through consultation with the ETTA were:



- To establish 'what works and why' by evaluating the effectiveness of the London OTT pilot (table types and the surfaces tables sit on, locations, durability, weather, bat & ball provision)
- To identify the processes and pathways that can improve the initiative for future roll out of the scheme
- To develop on-going monitoring and evaluation processes between ETTA, and the NTU PE and sports development research team and other partners.

3. Original project proposal

The data analysis from this project will then inform the priorities for the next stage of the fieldwork. Here the focus will be on answering some of the following key questions What current evaluation methods/systems are in place for measuring impact of the tables?

- How do participants feel about the tables and why do they use them?
- Have ETTA linked the tables into the existing development systems in the area?
- What levels of usage do the tables get and why?
- How will the synergy between the ETTA facilities and clubs impact upon improved pathways, exit routes and participation levels?
- What is the impact of self organised 'casual' play?

4. Methodology

This evaluation used a predominantly qualitative ethnographic research methodology in the pilot scheme areas that drew upon observational techniques to frame a detailed understanding of whether the pilot has been effective in delivering its aims and objectives. This involved consulting participants and using 'ethnographic techniques' to gather data on the communities of usage that are involved in a sample of the tables. Photographs were also taken of sites in Newham to establish a different level of data and to consider photo- elicitation methods for future evaluation given their usage in other parks research (Hawkins and Mackintosh, 2011 forthcoming).

Three local authorities were selected and case studies developed. Some quantitative data was also gathered to compare with the qualitative information in an attempt to provide a 'proxy measure' of actual usage. It has long been recognised in the research and evaluation literature that usage data is notoriously difficult to gather and robustly measure for informal leisure facilities. A proxy measure is developed through the best available data and triangulated against interviews with expert local project partners and users themselves. This way one site in particular at Regents Park was used as a detailed in-depth case study for this measure due to the availability of hard quantitative data on hire/usage and CCTV evidence. This is also recognising the caveat that each site in each park had vastly varying usage, uptake and developmental opportunities. Informal interviews with local officers, police, youth workers, parks staff (where applicable) and participants will provide a rich and powerful evidence base to suggest "what works?" and "why?" Where possible quantitative data was also gathered if available and reliable. But, in the timescale of this short term study detailed quantitative data for sites was beyond the feasibility of this evaluation proposal (See original brief and proposal). The aspiration of the ETTA is to consider roll out of the initiative nationally or at least in a sample of selected areas such as Hull and Birmingham. This report will provide a baseline of information to help support evidence and thinking behind the roll out. The report has been produced by the PE and Sports Development Unit that is part of the wider European Sports Development Network (ESDN) authored by Chris Mackintosh the lead academic in the network.

5. Sports development background

Green (2005) suggests that there are three key aspects to a new normative model of sports development that focus upon the linked concepts of recruitment, retention and transition. This unified new evolving model of sports development arguably replaces the now defunct sports development continuum. In this field of public, and, largely 'Third sector' sports practice this new model has yet to be clearly adopted or tested in the United Kingdom but can easily be applied to sports such as table tennis. In the context of this report, this pilot is mainly linked to the recruitment phase for example, but, given the nature of 'play' as such in the game it can also be used to retain and transition potential players into the game 'proper' as such. So, for example, a player can clearly move through the Long term athlete development (LTAD) pathway that is in place in table tennis by starting off playing in a park on an outdoor table tennis table.

The key considerations theoretically are the 'barriers to transition'. Here, such factors as family (Kay, 2009) transport and coaching linkages (Collins, 2000), quality of partnership working (Mackintosh, 2008; Mackintosh, 2009; Mackintosh, 2011) are centrally important. Implicit within this are levels of communication, fragility and complexity of partnerships that are developed, for example between the ETTA and local boroughs. This may be increasingly important given 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) implications around school sports partnerships (SSPs) and local sports development units (SDUs) that will experience downsizing in the current 2011 economic downturn.

Local facilities in parks need to also be of the appropriate quality, location and have the necessary support structures



around them for maintenance (possibly through linkages to outreach youth work development officer presences). Further detail on this re-evaluation of sports development models, practice and delivery systems can be found in forthcoming academic literature (Mackintosh, 2011b). Central to the development of sports development practice is the increased need to draw upon theory as is present within associated fields of social work, youth work and teaching (Mackintosh, 2011). Here, theory driven practice and evidence based evaluation and decision making can help inform and shape far better practice and delivery on the ground. In the case of this specific project, it is hard to identify the specific rationale and evidence based for decisions related to location, choice of partners, developmental process and recruitment, retention and transition models drawn upon. Theory and conceptual models in sports development can much improve the final delivery as is evidenced by the associated fields mentioned above. Whilst a new field of sports practice, unlike PE teaching and sports coaching/science there is a clear role for outdoor table tennis to be informed by past practice in outdoor facility and play development, evaluation and appraisal literature. One example, is the Tisch Tennis example in Berlin and wider associated outdoor play/recreation facility area evaluation (Mackintosh, 2011b).

6. The policy and practice context

The ETTA works around a Whole Sport Plan (WSP) and this drives the work they do in areas such as facilities, player development and participation based work for the period 2009-2013. Key aspects of this include (although not definitively listed) the development of 14,000 volunteers, 90 new 'premier clubs' and an ETTA regional club facility register development. How outdoor table tennis fits with these wider ETTA strategic priorities can be in part informed by this pilot evaluation. For example, the need to grow, but, also sustain and get participants from outdoor tables to 'play on' is crucial. There is little point investing in such wide scale facilities, developing interest and demand if potential future elite athletes, or indeed club players have limited exit route awareness. Or what Green (2005) refers to as 'transition' and 'retention'. She considers the case of Volleyball in the United States which has a very different club structure and recruitment process. Likewise, it is clear from just this initial pilot that outdoor table tennis needs to be clear about how it links into the 'traditional club' game of fixed table tennis as those participants encountered as part of the ethnographic study in Newham, Greenwich and Westminster were often at odds with what SDO's and RDO's perceived as the traditional players and participants in their existing club structures. The detail behind the outdoor pilot, its inception and development as a Sport England funded project can be located elsewhere (ETTA, 2009). It does have clear goals, a sound rationale for why it is in place and is also neatly located as a recruiter for the wider game. However, the rationale and evidence/theory behind locations, choice of parks and local authorities was less clear. Future roll out needs to be cognisant of perhaps 'critical success factors' that are identified within this report.

7. Local Sports development priorities

There was not time to speak to all staff involved in local sports development and as with all evaluations, some were more forthcoming than others. However, a sample of Local Authorities in very different settings ranging from the Royal Parks through

to more inner city sites with significant graffiti and maintenance issues in the London Borough of Newham were used as sites for ethnographic observations, photography and informal conversations with users. This allowed a deeper sense of how the tables fitted with local sports development priorities. Indeed,

it also became apparent that the local priorities for some were focused around youth engagement and even crime prevention/youth work. Whereas for others the tables played a far lower priority and if they were used then so be it. This range and variation in 'strategic take up' of outdoor tables needs to be recognised in sports development terms.



8. The National Context

It is also necessary to recognise the shifting national context of sports development that was occurring at the time of the initial proposal being developed and fieldwork conducted. The CSR of November 2010, huge shifts in local authority budgets and potential movements in NGB priorities meant that the outdoor pilot evaluation was undertaken during a period of instability and change. This may have impacted upon respondent take up of the offer of face to face interviews and guided site visits and also has implications for the recommendations, findings and future plans. A very clear good example is the linkages between outdoor table tennis, the ETTA and the competition frameworks for NGBs in SSPs. The future of the SSP systems at the time of writing this report are still unclear. Sport England and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) need to further clarify where these structures will, or will not be in a year so initiatives such as outdoor table tennis can plan their developmental role out around links to SSPs and associated staff and structures. For example, can outdoor table tennis link directly to table tennis competition structures or even offer a different 'type' of competitive structure in more informal self managed play. This may depend upon local and regional viability of each SSP and how they develop post March 31st 2011.

9. Findings

9.1 Introduction

A huge range and variation in the methodology for assessing usage and effectiveness have been put in place across the 47 outdoor table pilot sites in London. It was not the remit of the pilot evaluation to assess all such sites. Instead the purpose of this report is to assess a sample of the approaches taken to evaluating the pilot on behalf of the ETTA. The ETTA worked in partnership with London borough councils to site 47 permanent outdoor table tennis tables in park locations. A six month evaluation report was undertaken which provided some overviews of the scheme and anecdotal evidence as to success, however, more detailed and comprehensive evaluation is needed to provide more meaningful and strategic evidence as to impact of the scheme. The purpose of the scheme was to raise awareness of table tennis, open up a non traditional entry route into the sport and to investigate the merits of different locations and table types. Without doubt the project has gone beyond its remit to raise awareness and has taken table tennis in some local parks from zero usage and awareness to what can only be described as a seismic shift in local development work. This is supported not only by this report but also the six month informal evaluation undertaken by the team. Evidence from some sites will be presented later in this report to give a feel for the deep importance some sites now hold for local youths, gangs and children as well as informal adult users from local employers. The tables provide a safe, informal, self managed sports environment for users to 'dip into' as they demand.

It fits with wider shifts in sociological patterns of sports and leisure participation linked to the obesity crisis (Smith et al, 2005). Here, the participant is central to the developmental process not the SDO, coach or club. What seems apparent is that if the user, be they an older lady or a gang member is empowered to play themselves, from both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors then a far more sustainable model of sports development can evolve (Lindsay, 2009). Sustainability of sports development initiatives as has been highlighted by Lindsay (2009) is a key gap in current research in this field of practice. Why establish all the outdoor sites if we do not know whether participants 'play on' or transition or influence others (family or friends) to start or transition. What if the traditional transition to a club structure one mile away is no longer demanded? It is the view from this research that a new model of sports development is needed, specifically for outdoor table tennis. Here, perhaps it is limited to a more summer/spring 'activity'? But, it is also focused on the parks as 'the new version of a traditional club' base and with a hub of local league, informal and competitive opportunities based around the sites. If players are then interested or capable of developing then they can progress from their own choice or be selected by roaming local talent scouts from clubs that are linked into the process.

9.2 Table choice and facility recommendations

Each site is different, however, factors such as shelter, drainage, access and visibility of park users are key issues and critical success factors in the development of a good table site. Consideration should also be given to clustering tables where a community hub could be developed for online ladders, leagues, coaching and talent scouting. This way a Borough such as Newham could utilise sites that are a success, build upon their success and grow and sustain demand. Some sites reported very minimal usage. Other such as the Regents Park site had 116 users hire bats in May, 84 users in June, 90 in July and 154 in August and even 108 in September. This is a considerable level of demand and the most accurate figures to date on a table included within the pilot as bats that were hired were monitored. However, in the same park free standing tables could have been added as required to build upon this demand.

In addition, conversations with community parks police officers, users, tennis club coaches and other passersby confirmed winter usage is low and also that the table had to be moved in winter due to leaves. This is a further key physical facility issue that sits alongside the graffiti issues encountered

in ethnographic observational data (see photos) in Newham. Here, the quote "This is our table" and "F**kers play here" show signs of deep sense of local gang culture and criminogenic conditions common with most graffiti. The level of ownership the youths feel for their table shows the real impact the pilot may have had. At the Newham site evaluators observed a 'gang' of 12-13 mixed race Asian and white children that make regular competitive use of their table. On site development officers (RDO and SDO) noted the potential for talent identification and the opportunity for developmental links to the local club. This link was made for one child and illustrates the benefits of action research evaluation process (Mackintosh, 2011b).



10. Evaluation methods/systems for measuring impact, effectiveness and sustainability

There is an inherent contradiction at the very heart of monitoring and evaluating a casual pay and play facility in any sporting setting. Here, it is unhelpful to attempt to quantify usage for a facility that is geared around casual use. This has been established as a challenge by numerous academic authors in the sports policy and practice evaluation field. However, this is not to say that 'proxy measures' cannot be given and estimations be made. It is part of the role of this report to establish the figures that reflect usage and also point to innovations that have been identified in 'the field'. By far and away the best quantitative measure was that located in the 'Play to Win' in Regents Park site where bats and balls were loaned out and numeric data recorded on spread sheets in a printable format day by day. They also have CCTV footage of their table being used from 7am until 4am in the morning so actually usage will be far higher than that 'recorded'. Eitherway, a huge volume of players came through the one table and this reflects other more anecdotal observational/ethnographic findings experienced by the lead researcher in this evaluation. Cross triangulation with police officers, development staff, facility lettings officers and local (same site) tennis club members revealed a startling level of use far beyond the expectations of the evaluator or ETTA. The table in Appendix 2 shows the usage patterns. It is impossible to give an exact number but, what is clear is that the facility made a significant, sustained impact on the sports community of that area, local tourists, passersby

and individuals ranging in age from 5 years old to 83 years of age. Capturing the rich significance and in some way anecdotal qualitative aspects of 'impact' may be far more crucial than putting an arbitrary number onto a single site.

The research team are still awaiting a response from some local authorities regarding evaluation data and usage estimates so until this is received it is hard to provide a robust overview.

The project also used ETTA evaluation proformas which were of limited success, few sites and local authorities were able to feed this data back and the mix of questions needs significant rethinking informed by good practice in monitoring and evaluation. The resultant six month report does provide some insights into the success of the project but a much clearer, robust evidence is needed if and when outdoor table tennis is rolled out on a national scale. Monitoring and evaluation is both an art and science and combined mixed methods approach is recommended to capture both quantitative and qualitative data.

11. User groups and player feedback and levels of usage

Respondents at sites commented on varied usage. In some parks groups using facilities expressed how significant a healthy lifestyle activity the tables were part of. A theme also emerged about the positive accessibility of the sites across the boroughs and how it had raised the profile of a more 'minority' sport. A further theme that emerged was the diversity of use from single mums, pregnant mums and older people through to gangs of youths. The appeal of this 'new' sport seemed very diverse and people did return to the parks to play again.

Perhaps one key observation is the ability of some groups to self-manage and develop their own informal systems of play. Be it 'round the table, competitions and even informal matches. It may be this aspect which is most hidden by quantifying usage and misses the central benefit of the scheme that it has started to develop a genuine local community of players. This could be the four university lecturers that use the park at lunchtime or the group of 20 multi-ethnic college students that regularly participate in their own matches against each other. The subculture of outdoor table tennis is emerging as a genuine new field of participation that is bringing new people to a new sport.

The genuinely hard to engage groups that were interviewed as part of the ethnographic study did argue that the lack of regulation around the sites was appealing. They were even slightly concerned as to who the evaluation team were, why they were asking questions and in some cases were they the Police. Thus, user group feedback was in the main very positive. The only negative feedback related to knowledge and awareness of other clubs and developmental opportunities around the tables. Similarly, some groups expressed concerns over table location near to trees, lacking shelter and being too hidden from sight.



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12. Sports development system linkages

There was a great deal of variation in the linkages between SDU's and the ETTA as well as minimal links into school systems such as the SSP network. The pilot was specific in terms of park rather than school based because it was aimed at 16+ and also that outdoor table tennis on school sites is developing by itself. For this reason, minimal evidence was found at sites of children's or indeed adults awareness of local club network, leisure centre based facilities or even who to contact if they wanted to play on. Much clearer focus is needed on how to capture, sustain and develop the at times high levels of demand present in local communities to move players into a more developmental environment. At the same time given previous comments regarding the changing nature of sports development practice and emergent new models (Mackintosh, 2011b) who is to say any players in this system wants to develop or progress to a club? It is perhaps more pertinent to recognise new forms of play and new systems of developing this demand where players determine themselves what they want from their opportunities. Do the gang members encountered in this project use the site as a site of their group gang identity as opposed to a site to develop skills?

It is evident from initial conversations and observations at the sites that the deep complexity of such group dynamics will not be shifted by the simple locating of an outdoor table tennis table. Instead, a range of partner youth and welfare agencies would be needed to invest time in these young people to develop relationship and engagement levels to actually address crime prevention priorities.

Here, evidence and theory from criminology and sociology point to the undoubted complexity and fragility of sports development practice to address such social agendas (Mackintosh, 2004).

13. Synergy between the outdoor tables and clubs: The impact upon improved pathways, exit routes and participation levels

The ETTA clearly has sound strategic frameworks in place at national and in this case regional level with good operational systems to develop the clubs and table tennis settings that work around the outdoor context. It is the concern of this evaluation that closer linkages are needed between the facilities in these case studies and the 47 sites to the associated 'traditional' clubs that are the mainstay of the WSP vision from 2009-2013. The OTTI systems do have a potential recruitment and growth role to play with demand for the wider game. Although, it needs to be made clear that many of the participants interviewed, observed and photographed as part of this deeper qualitative study showed limited interest in 'Joining a club', playing regular club training and becoming a potential Olympian. There was interest in attending showcase events with Olympians in OTTI facilities in a form of role model manner. Likewise, some more mature participants hinted at the opportunity to link into a workplace based initiative as they played in lunchtimes but wanted to play more. The demand development therefore needs to be seen as not necessarily linked to traditional sports development continuum models that are increasingly being recognised as outdated, empirically weak and lacking a clear evidence base (Green, 2005; Mackintosh, 2011). Further work is needed to develop a logic model (Weiss, 2000; Harrison, 2004) for outdoor table tennis to illustrate where players can and should go to sustain demand, interest and indeed potential performance opportunities.

The implications from this are that it is at the very local level that real impacts are made, in the parks, at the clubs, linkages into sports centres, community clubs, lone tables in changing room facilities and the like. This far removed from the WSP vision and one that local participants rarely want or need access to. Or, should the marketing of the ETTA vision be linked into the outdoor mass participation game far more clearly, be it through signage, local posters, table design and artwork and wider parks literature. The Olympics is a great opportunity to use the Games as vehicle for raising the profile of local opportunities too. An example is that of canoeing where the National Water sports centre in Nottingham that received 800 requests for information the day after the silver medal regional winner was on TV in 2008. Likewise can the ETTA make better use of its role models, regional players and county level participants to raise aspirations of the outdoor parks player?

14. What is the impact of self organised 'casual' play?

This project aim is hard to answer from a small study such as this, however, ethnographic field data and notes from sites visits, conversations with participants showed several key themes. These themes that emerged from the data using coding techniques (Hammersley, 2010) using the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1967) included; A sense of local table tennis community, freedom to play when friendship groups wanted to, a lack of awareness of the 'next step' for better or improving players and finally self coaching and self development over coach-led improvement. Further detail in these themes can be found in a future forthcoming academic research article (Mackintosh, 2011b). There is a need for a far longer term study impossible to say from the five days fieldwork that it took to produce this evaluation.



15. CONCLUSIONS

Outdoor table tennis has clearly been a success in the areas where it has been implemented. There have been cases of tables appearing to receive minimal use, but also, in the main qualitative evidence to suggest park users ranging from pregnant mums through to gang members using the facilities in a range of diverse ways.

What is even further evident is that traditional patterns of sports development practice struggle to 'fit' with contemporary sociological shifts in how sports participants use such informal facilities. Likewise very few of the users had moved into clubs systems or the more 'traditional' sports development continuum. It is debateable whether such a system, upon which much policy and practice in this field centres upon, is of any real used at all (Green, 2005, Mackintosh, 2011 forthcoming). It also needs to be recognised that the options for clustering facilities, developing youth worker outreach programmes, improving marketing of local clubs and developing self-guided and self managed development work led by user groups needs further research and is central to understanding the processes that underpin the future role out of this scheme to Hull and Birmingham.

Whilst this scheme targeted certain parks there was a clear complexity to usage linked to territory and parks that draws similarity with other initiatives that have addressed youth engagement such as Street Games (Evans, 2011). The role and clarity of evaluation processes needs further work as well, given that the rather ad hoc data collection by local authorities in this pilot provided minimal robust data. Evaluation needs to inform the development of pilots and full programme roll outs in the interim not just as a retrospective evaluation. Otherwise lessons learnt are applied after the scheme has finished. Overall, a successful concept but one that needs to be better informed by theoretical notions of sports development recruitment, retention and transition (Green, 2005) and the broader call for evidence based practice.

16. Recommendations and proposed actions

1. Tables made of concrete such as the Glendinning or Concrete Leisure models are seen as a more durable option than tables made of composite materials. They are not likely to need much if any maintenance and are therefore the preferred table even though they are more expensive. Steel tables also seem to be very durable, however they are one of the more expensive models used. Tables made of composite materials generally have good playability, look good when they are new and are much cheaper, however they are generally much less robust. They could of course be used on supervised sites or in more affluent areas.
2. To redesign the transition model for player pathway in ETTA terms (DG/CIM)
3. To consider the critical success factors in roll out (CIM)
4. To embed evaluative research driven by theory within the programme (CIM)
5. To appoint a research consultant or internal member of staff to oversee the development of the research programme, data collection and evidence base behind the national scheme (DG and ETTA/CIM)



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Appendix

APPENDIX 1: Table Tennis Usage figures for 'Will to Win' site location

Date	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
1	3	4		9	
2	4	4	1		
3	1	2			
4		1	2		
5	2				13
6		3			
7					
8	7			20	
9	8	3	2		
10	1	5			
11		1	3		
12	11	1	3		9
13		3			
14			3	11	
15	2	1			
16	4	1			
17		4			
18	1		4		
19	1				22
20			2		
21					
22				18	
23		1	2		
24	4	1	4		
25	3	4	6		
26					10
27	1	3	3		
28	1		5		
29			1	19	
30	4		2		
31			2		
	58	42	45	77	54

NOTE: these are doubled as this is per pair of bats





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