

Monitoring and Evaluation of Project Oarsome

The Amateur Rowing Association's Junior Development Programme

A Report for Sport England

Executive Summary

**Researched and written by
Leisure Futures Ltd
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Introduction

This report has been written by Leisure Futures Ltd. This is the Executive Summary. A full report (including individual club 'site visit' reports and appendices) has been submitted to Sport England.

We were commissioned by Sport England in November 2002 to carry out this monitoring and evaluation exercise in order to meet the following overall aim:

To evaluate the implementation of Project Oarsome (PO) by the Amateur Rowing Association (ARA) focusing on whether the programme objectives are appropriate, the extent to which these have been met and the effectiveness of links established between clubs, schools and the ARA.

A Brief Introduction to Project Oarsome

This report assumes that the reader has a working knowledge of PO. If not, the ARA has produced a range of material for those wishing to learn more about how the programme is structured and delivered.

Project Oarsome is part of the ARA's National Junior Rowing Programme (NJRP) and is aimed at attracting, supporting and retaining young people in rowing.

After a pilot phase the programme was formally implemented from the year 2000 with the aim of introducing 50 rowing clubs to the scheme on a phased basis over the first three years. Each club would then be contracted to deliver PO for seven years.

The programme is costed at nearly £2.5 million with approximately two thirds - £1.6 million – being awarded by the Sport England Lottery Fund.

Amongst the objectives of the programme is the desire to:

- Establish junior sections within 50 open clubs over 4 years;
- Provide rowing to around 100 schools in the LEA sector – currently non-rowing clubs;
- Increase the pool of qualified coaches in each of the clubs and within the ARA;

- Increase registered membership of the ARA by 35% over 4 years and retain the young people in the sport of rowing.

The main feature of PO is the linking of rowing clubs to state schools. The ideal model is 2 schools to 1 club.

The programme makes use of the ARA's junior rowing programme and awards schemes, with the aim of guiding children through two distinct but complementary phases:

Dry Start – using the indoor rowing machines predominantly at the school and then progressing via a water safety assessment to:

Wet Start – moving into rowing boats at the club.

It is hoped then that some of the young participants will go on to formally join the rowing club and develop their full potential within the sport.

Approach to Monitoring

Our approach to the work involved three main components:

- *Site visits* to a selected sample of 7 rowing clubs – in most cases this also included visits to partner schools and interviews with someone from the school;
- *Club Survey* – completed by all 40 clubs which are currently taking part in PO;
- *Young Rowers' Survey* – mainly administered on the site visits.

In addition to these core components we:

- Conducted *interviews* with ARA and Sport England officers;
- Reviewed a significant amount of *documentation* about PO supplied by Sport England, the ARA and also some of the clubs.

Main Findings and Issues

F1 Project Oarsome is clearly meeting its core objectives and is highly regarded by the young people taking part.

So far 40 rowing clubs have taken the project to 85 schools resulting in:

- 106 % growth in junior membership
- 34 % growth in overall club membership; and
- 134 % growth in qualified coaches at the participating clubs.

Approval ratings amongst the participants are extremely high with 94% rating it as 'Pretty Good' or 'Brilliant' and the same percentage wishing to 'do more rowing in the future'.

F2 The single most significant achievement of PO is the dramatic expansion in the number of qualified coaches available to the clubs. The ratio of qualified coaches to junior members is extremely high and this has got to be good news for the sport. This investment in human resources may well prove to be more significant and more lasting than Project Oarsome's investment in boats.

F3 We believe that the Project Oarsome 'Model' contains valuable lessons for many other governing bodies of sport, in working to generate interest and participation by young people.

F4 The equipment provided as part of PO is generally highly regarded although there are some specific exceptions to this.

F5 Schoolteachers did not appear to be taking rowing coaching awards in any significant numbers despite this being part of the PO agreement.

F6 The programme has been very successful at targeting its core market of 11-14 year olds but this very success has created more demand for an equivalent programme for the 14+ age group - a Project Oarsome 'Xtra' or Phase Two – which has yet to start on the same scale as Phase One.

F7 It is surprising, for a National Junior Development Programme, that PO has had all its 'above the line' funding directed at capital items (boats and equipment) when in reality the success of the project is as much dependent on human resources/ revenue funding. This has been achieved via an element of 'creative funding' on the part of Sport England and the ARA.

- F8** Rowing clubs are generally complimentary about the ARA's role in setting up and supporting PO but there were two aspects which received criticism: perceived bureaucracy regarding application and monitoring processes; and the complexity and costs of the Awards Scheme.
- F9** Junior Rowing is 'over branded'. To have three names currently in use all relating to development of young rowers means that there are at least two names too many.
- F10** Time and again, without any prompting on our part, schools mentioned that rowing seemed to appeal to many children (boys and girls) who would not otherwise get actively involved in PE and team games.
- F11** Indoor dry rowing emerged from our research as having real value in its own right. It appeals to schools because of its potential to be linked with other educational needs, particularly health related fitness, but it also offers great potential for developing new clubs and competitive structures and accommodating greater numbers of young people than the full 'wet' version of rowing.
- F12** The success of PO has exposed the limitations of club facilities in many cases, especially in terms of boat storage, but has also put pressure on changing and other ancillary areas.
- F13** There are a number of critical success factors in establishing club/school links and maintaining them thereafter but the most important by far is the presence of a committed Project Champion – a club volunteer with good interpersonal and motivational skills, able and willing to devote many hours to the project.
- F14** Finally, Project Oarsome has resulted in significant culture change at the clubs where it has been fully implemented. The influx of young people, newly qualified coaches and new junior events has transformed some clubs from the dull to the dynamic.

Recommendations

For Sport England

- R1** Sport England should continue to fund Project Oarsome ensuring that the original target of 50 clubs/100 schools is fully implemented.
- R2** Sport England should seriously consider providing further financial support to an extended Project Oarsome package (as in R4 below) and this package should contain combined capital and revenue elements in order to provide more flexibility than the first phase and to give more attention to investment in human resources. The revenue funding should allow for the possibility of paying 'young coaches' for their time.¹ The capital element should also include the ability for a small number of 'showcase clubs' to bid for clubhouse extension and upgrading alongside boats and equipment.
- R3** Sport England should promote the Project Oarsome 'Model' amongst other relevant governing bodies of sport and encourage them to adopt its core components in their own national development programmes ie:
- introduce the sport at schools using specially modified equipment;
 - ensure the recruitment and training of sufficient coaches before the programme starts;
 - keep the targets and links cautious, simple and realistic

For the Amateur Rowing Association

- R4** The ARA should introduce a natural extension to the Project Oarsome programme to cover the 14+ age group (Oarsome Xtra or similar). This programme should have its own equipment package able to accommodate older, heavier children.
- R5** The ARA should review the equipment provided as part of the original PO package and consider the lessons learned from this in any further extension of the scheme. In particular it should consider a greater range of boat weights and review the specified safety launches. Whatever the result of this review, the ARA needs to establish more effective communication with the clubs about the equipment options and the reasons for the choices which have been made.

¹ It is encouraging to see how successful some clubs have been at recruiting their own older juniors to take coaching awards. However, they are also the age group that are looking for part time paid work. They may prefer to coach rowing but cannot afford to make this their first priority. Some revenue funding to encourage more under 23s to coach may have value for all sides.

- R6** The ARA should review the terms of the PO agreement relating to teachers acquiring coaching qualifications. Based on our observations, this is not being universally enforced and, arguably, part of the appeal to the children is that they are being taught by outside experts. A better way forward may be to remove the compulsory element (which is being ignored in a number of cases) and to introduce incentives to the minority of teachers who are really interested in becoming more involved.
- R7** The ARA should review its application process and monitoring requirements – asking hard questions about whether all existing aspects are necessary. The aim should be to introduce a simplified system, the need for which is better communicated to the clubs.
- R8** The ARA should review the existing Awards Scheme, addressing particularly the issue of the number of certificates/awards at each stage and the cost of associated materials. They should consider producing the materials on CD, which can then be issued to clubs after an initial license payment. Distribution and production costs are then passed to the clubs with the advantage being that they then have greater control over quantity, quality and cost.
- R9** The ARA should simplify the packaging of its current junior rowing activity, ideally aiming for one overarching brand name which covers all of its development work in the sport.
- R10** The ARA should capitalise on the increased participation in indoor rowing which has come about via Project Oarsome. It should consider devoting greater resources to developing the sport as a significant part of its 'portfolio' as a governing body of sport. This may require the development of new competitive and administrative structures which recognises the value in developing indoor rowing in its own right and which also offers the potential of a much larger recruitment base for the 'real thing'.

Conclusion

Project Oarsome is a very successful sports development programme. It has introduced the sport of rowing to thousands of children in state schools, many of them in deprived areas. Junior membership at the clubs taking part has more than doubled and the number of qualified coaches has increased by 134%.

Our research shows extremely high approval ratings from the children taking part and the vast majority want to do more. This overall success is boosted by a number of individual stories of achievement; children who would never have set foot in a rowing boat were it not for Project Oarsome and yet have gone on to win national medals.

The use of indoor rowing machines (ergometers) has been critical to the success of the scheme. The dry rowing element is of great appeal to schools as it attracts many children who are not captivated by traditional PE or team games and offers links to other aspects of the school curriculum. There is a great opportunity to capitalise on this interest and appeal by further developing indoor rowing in its own right.

Whilst Project Oarsome has been constructively criticised by the participating rowing clubs (particularly relating to perceived bureaucracy and aspects of the equipment package) they are overwhelmingly in support of it and what it is aiming to achieve. Many clubs report that the scheme has resulted in positive culture change, affecting not just the junior section but the whole philosophy and atmosphere of the club.

The big question is, what happens next? We believe that the project should be extended into the older age groups and a more flexible funding package should be developed, which allows for the support of boats, equipment and clubhouse improvements, alongside revenue support for development and coaching costs.

Sport England and the Amateur Rowing Association have a responsibility to carry Project Oarsome on to the next stage, taking an excellent idea and making it even better.

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