

# University of Salford – Written evidence (NPS0005)

## About this response

The University of Salford welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to the House of Lords National Plan for Sport and Recreation Committee. This response has been produced by Dr Alex Fenton, Salford Business School.

The University of Salford is a higher education institution in Greater Manchester. With over 20,000 students we are fastest growing university in the north west. Established 50 years ago, but with our roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Royal Technical Institute of Salford, we take an industry-led approach to teaching and research. Our goal is to provide our students with real world experiences that set them up for life and to work with partners to tackle real world social and economic challenges through research and enterprise.

Salford Business School is at the forefront of understanding digital transformation and exploring the role of digital technology in business and in our everyday lives. This response is based on work undertaken to develop and roll out Fan Fit, a smartphone fitness app designed to engage sports fans into getting more active (see: [www.FanFit.co.uk](http://www.FanFit.co.uk)). It directly addresses question three in the inquiry terms of reference "How can adults of all ages and backgrounds ... be encouraged to lead more active lifestyles?".

## Response

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1. Smartphone ownership by people around the world has continued to increase. Meanwhile, we are seeing a rise in dangerous levels of diabetes, obesity, and heart disease particularly amongst 'hard to reach' groups, including middle aged and older males who are often thought of as synonymous with football fans.
- 1.2. Yet amongst these groups that are known for lower levels of physical activity, there are high rates of smartphone ownership in the UK with, 91% of 35-54 year olds and 51% of 55-64 year olds in 2018.<sup>1</sup> This creates opportunities for engagement in digital health related projects. Social media and fitness apps can be used to combine people's love of football, support interaction with fans and players, and to help fans become more aware of their own fitness and wellbeing through friendly competition.
- 1.3. Fans can be engaged in physical activity through their support of sport teams and their use of smartphones. Fan Fit is a project at the University of

---

<sup>1</sup> Statista, 2018

Salford working with sports clubs and foundations to create branded fitness and wellbeing smartphone apps. It can be applied to any sports club brand and therefore can be designed to be an official sports club app.

- 1.4. Fan Fit includes fitness tracking and wellbeing elements for fan engagement. Fan Fit builds digital communities of participation which increases interaction, physical activity levels and wellbeing. This submission will draw from the experiences of Fan Fit and make recommendations around the use of digital engagement around sports clubs to increase rates of physical activity amongst traditional hard to reach groups for engagement of this nature.

## **2. Fan Fit**

- 2.1. The exciting area of digital fitness is a booming industry. Research by Accenture estimated the health and wellbeing global market to grow to \$737 billion by 2018. Fitness hardware and software such as smartphone apps support this growth with an estimated 1.7 billion people having at least one digital health app installed. The Fan Fit project aimed to create fitness apps for people that may not traditionally have used fitness apps or wristbands.
- 2.2. Fan Fit started off life as an idea to engage football fans through their love of their favourite teams. The idea was to combine fitness as gamification with social media information from their club using a white label approach. We have so far produced versions of the app for Salford Red Devils and a version for Rangers fans in Scotland, working with Rangers Charity Foundation.
- 2.3. Fan Fit tracks walking and running and allow fans to compete with one another via league tables that count steps. The leagues are designed to create an active community, with more people choosing to walk on match days, and encourage them through the app, which in turn can reinforcing achievement and improve motivation. Working in partnership with a sports club means this can be done through physical prizes linked to the club (e.g. season tickets, shirts and fitness wristbands). For all users, digital badges (graphic designed icons) can also be earned for maintaining levels of fitness to encourage the maintenance of behaviour change through a process of reward and recognition.
- 2.4. This type of fan app provides a productive way in which fan groups can interact with each other, through sharing their achievements on the app and through social media such as Facebook and Twitter. For example, the people involved within a network (e.g. fans of a club) offer support, advice, and gain the drive and additional resources that can help to motivate achievement of personal exercise goals. Word of mouth and social media conversation about the app and the use of club based and exercise based competition between fans can help to reinforce their motivation.

- 2.5. The fitness element is also combined with social media feeds and video with live information embedded directly into the app within the brands of the club. Having engagement from all aspects and players (which fans can often most want to engage with) can also support the adoption of an app.
- 2.6. Fan Fit was designed as a fitness app for people that may not traditionally use this kind of app. User centred design was an important feature of the project, ensuring that the demographic that this was targeting was included in the development of the app, and feedback from the project has been really positive, with fan testimony praising Fan Fit for helping them to be more active and healthy.<sup>2</sup>
- 2.7. As of January 2021, the demographics of the app users mirror the fan populations of the partner clubs, with around three quarters of users being male and a quarter female. There is also a range of ages of fans that downloaded the app from 18-64 with the most popular age being 25-44 years old, a key demographic for many health and wellbeing initiatives.

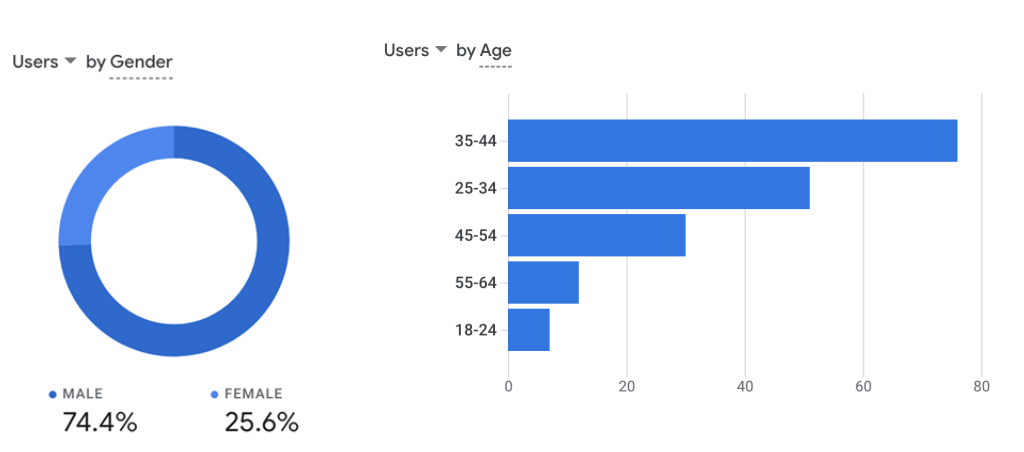


Figure 1. Demographic information from Fan Fit app usage January 2021

### 3. Conclusion and recommendations

- 3.1. The use of digital tools to engage sports fans through their clubs can lead to increases in physical activity. Through user centred design and by linking physical activity to sporting passions, engagement of this nature can reach hard to reach groups such as older males who have typically lower levels of activity.
- 3.2. Through initiatives such as Fan Fit, health practitioners could prescribe social activities to support people's wellbeing by linking them with social activities such as football, as it is known that harder to reach groups can be

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.salfordcitynews.co.uk/news/18235925.rangers-fans-walk-globe-five-times-fitness-challenge-app-designed-salford/>

reluctant to engage with traditional services. As such, digital sports communities could offer attractive support environments and camaraderie both online and offline.

- 3.3. Clearly, not all sports clubs have the resource to support such initiatives, but by working with the sports industry, government could seek to incentivise or encourage corporate social responsibility activity that is aimed at addressing the public health challenges in our communities. Furthermore, research establishments such as Universities can facilitate such projects and their evaluation through funding opportunities. The role of major professional sports clubs in engaging their fan bases and promoting positive behaviour change because of the strong ties that people have with their clubs should be a key consideration in any future national plan for sport and recreation.
- 3.4. Fan Fit features in a recent book called 'Football as Medicine - Prescribing Football for Global Health Promotion'<sup>3</sup>. The chapter outlines Fan Fit as part of a social prescribing strategy where local agencies can refer people to link workers that can give people time based on 'what matters to me'. The chapter also discusses the action research approach of plan, act and reflect used on Fan Fit and impact research designed to make a difference through research. The book editorial also features a key call to action for policy makers, which reads, 'When Football talks, people listen', which in the case of Fan Fit demonstrates the importance of fandom to public health and social prescribing.

*26 January 2021*

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.routledge.com/Football-as-Medicine-Prescribing-Football-for-Global-Health-Promotion/Krustrup-Parnell/p/book/9780367248888>