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An Investigation of Health Improvement Provision Delivered in La Liga Professional Football Clubs: Learning from a Pilot Study

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Professional sports clubs are important conduits for delivering on the health improvement agenda, especially in hard-to-reach (HTR) populations (Pringle and Zwolinsky, 2017). In the UK, Football League Club Community Trusts (FLCT) deliver physical activity (PA) interventions with far reaching Public Health potential (Pringle et al., 2014). However, at present, little, if anything is known about health improvement provision delivered in the Spanish Premier Football League Competition, 'La Liga' clubs. **PURPOSE:** This study formed part of a Master's Degree Major Independent Research Project investigating the health improvement provision in 'La Liga' Division 1-2 clubs. **METHODS:** This study adapted peer-review research methods previously used to investigate health improvement provision in the English Football League Community Trusts and Foundations (Pringle and Zwolinsky, 2016) that run health improvement across England and Wales. Following ethical approval and piloting, data were collected using the following approaches that were translated into Spanish by researchers who were fluent in both the English and Spanish language: (I) A review of La Liga Football Club websites to identify health improvement provision (n=42). (II) An online survey completed by the La Liga club employees who had a responsibility for health improvement (n=9). (III) Semi-structured interviews (n=3) with a sub-sample of La Liga club employees to identify issues associated with the provision of health improvement interventions. (IV) A reflexive approach was deployed by the researcher to identify the challenges of conducting research in this arena in order that it would inform next part of this programme of research.

RESULTS: (I) Review of the club websites identified 23/42 clubs who provided a total on 53 public health interventions, of these 32/53 were physical activity (PA) interventions and 21 were non-PA-led forms of health improvement interventions. Regarding the PA interventions, these were centred around intervention themes comprising a combination of population and topic issues including, social inclusion through sports (n=11), sports academy/sports practice (n=6), children/young people PA (n=6), generic promotion of PA for all groups (n=2), education (n=2), disease prevention (n=2), mental health (n=2) and healthy eating (n=1). (II) Regarding the online survey with club employees, (n=9), 7 participants conducted their programmes through their community foundation. Participants reported that interventions were predominantly targeted at children, young people, adults (n=8) and disabled (n=7). (III) Interviews with La Liga club employees (n=3), identified the importance of 'meeting the health needs of communities', 'using football and the club badge to connect to underserved groups' and 'working as part of a strategic collaboration'. Challenges include a lack of designated personnel for delivering health improvement services, 'short-term intervention periods' and 'a lack of development time for health improvement' and a lack of awareness of Public Health guidance. Many interventions also centred on football rather than other modes of physical activity which are not always suitable for all groups. (IV) 'A reflexive' approach identified a number of challenges when conducting this research including, the difficulty in the recruitment of La Liga clubs, an inappropriate first club contact in the club, a lack of an established named contact within the club translation of key concepts into a 'Spanish equivalent' (e.g. *NICE Public Health Guidance*), exclusivity

arrangements, where clubs were contracted to work solely with their University partner and would not entertain our invitation to participate in the research.

CONCLUSION: La Liga football clubs have enormous recognition from their local and national fan-base. Around half of clubs deliver health improvement services centred on physical activity-led health orientated themes. Health improvement provision is not ubiquitous and a number of challenges exist when developing public health work in these contexts. Learning from this pilot research project has informed the development of a more substantial programme of research currently underway. We aim report on our progress in the presentation. To the best of our knowledge this is the first investigation of health improvement delivered in La Liga Professional Football Clubs.

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Ethical Approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee at Leeds Beckett University. This pilot work is part of a larger programme of research supported by resources from the Institute of Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure at Leeds Beckett University.