

KU LEUVEN



SPM 75
Sport Policy & Management

Policy recommendations to promote health-enhancing physical activity and social welfare in the EU

Results based on the European RUN for
HEALTH project

Kobe Helsen
Jeroen Scheerder
Vassil Girginov
Aila Ahonen

2020

In cooperation with



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Sport Policy & Management Studies (SPM)

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PREFACE

1. The RUN for HEALTH research project

‘Promoting health enhancing physical activity and social welfare through outdoor running events - RUN for HEALTH’ is a project financially supported by the European Commission in the context of the Erasmus+ Sport programme (602887-EPP-1-2018-1-EL-SPO-SCP). The project’s aim is to study how running events can be used as a mean to promote health-enhancing physical activity (<https://runforhealth.eu/run-health-project>).

The following partners are involved in this project:

- Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
- Breda University of Applied Sciences
- European Association for Sport Management
- European Culture and Sport Organisation
- Lithuanian Sports University
- Mulier Institute
- University of Leuven



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2. Reading guide

This section of the ERASMUS+ RUN for HEALTH report draws on the best practices and lessons learned from the data collected through interviews (with event organisers and event promoters) in five countries (Belgium, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands) and offers policy recommendations. The diverse nature of the running events involved in this project entails that they have been owned, run, and supported by several stakeholders, which allows for some generalisations as well as offering specific policy recommendations.

The report¹ is organised in several parts. Following an introduction on the health impact of running events, several recommendations for two categories of recipients, namely event promoters on the one hand and other organisations or agencies in the field of events on the other hand are discussed. Since not only event organisers aim to increase the physical activity of the population, the next part entails

¹ Chapters 1 and 3 were written by Kobe Helsen and Jeroen Scheerder. Chapters 2 was written by Vassil Girginov and Aila Ahonen. The preface and chapter 4 are written by all authors.

recommendations that can be taken by organisations which do not have a direct focus, but nevertheless an indirect influence, on events. This report ends with a conclusion and implications for future research.

For an overview of the qualitative and quantitative outputs of the RUN for HEALTH project, we wish to refer to the project's website (<https://runforhealth.eu/tools-materials>). For a comparative analysis of the quantitative results of the project we wish to refer to Helsen & Scheerder (2020).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: HEALTH IMPACT OF RUNNING EVENTS

For most running events, participants execute at least some training before the event (Derom et al., 2015; Funk et al., 2011; Schoemaker et al., 2020). This training is often associated with a healthier lifestyle (e.g. eating healthy, drinking less alcohol, etc.). The motivation to train varies between individuals (e.g. Scheerder, Breedveld & Borgers, 2015). Some need encouragement and challenges by their peers, others follow their training schemes that are set up to reach a specific goal (e.g. a personal record on a certain distance; Van Dyck et al., 2017). Some event participants, however, do not train specifically for events. They are active in another sport than running and participate in running events for social reasons (e.g. participating with friends). In that way, they are trained to some extent (however, not in running). Others only participate in short distances. For these distances training is sometimes not necessary. It gets dangerous, however, when the event participant is unprepared and the body is not ready for such efforts. This gets worse when the individual has the urge to do more events and longer distances without any training. There do exist some initiatives to get people active before the event and these should be encouraged to prepare event participants. For example, training sessions by the organizing athletics club. Everyone is able to participate in these training sessions, which are organised according to the different fitness levels of participants. Other event organizers offer individual training schemes, which are made by professionals.

There is less to no believe for a post-event health impact or health legacy of running events on the long term (Coleman & Sebire, 2017; Lane et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2015; Willem et al., 2017). There are several reasons why people do not remain active after the event has passed. It seems that once the running event is finished, everything that is associated with it is shut down. Training sessions that were offered by athletics clubs before the event are not continued. For professional event organisers, the event day (and corresponding tension) has passed and they start focusing on their next event. The event participants have reached their goal (e.g. having a lovely day with friends, improving their personal record on a certain distance, etc.) and they continue their everyday life.

CHAPTER 2: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS IN THE EVENTS SECTOR

This chapter is organised in eight sections pertinent to the nature and life cycle of running events. These include (i) event identity, (ii) event objectives, (iii) event offer and target groups, (iv) event management, (v) the role of public, non-profit and private sectors, (vi) events impact, (vii) event marketing, and (viii) event sustainability. These specific policy recommendations that follow are designed for two categories of recipients. The first category is labelled 'events promoters' and includes all key stakeholders such as events owners and organisers, events partners and sponsors. The second category is specific and concerns the work of a named organisation or agency.

1. Running events identity

The study has provided further evidence that running events in Europe have been growing in popularity with some countries like the Netherlands and Belgium having over 2000 and 600 such events annually respectively. This raises the question of the identity of an event if it is to be recognised, appreciated, and sustained in such a competitive environment. Developing the identity of an event takes time and is shaped by several social, political, and economic factors. A critical identity factor is the geographic location where the event takes place. Ninety percent of the events in the study are associated with cities as their permanent site and only one event follows the ambulatory principle and changes location each year (i.e., BoslandTrail). A close city association instantly positions events on the geographical map and evokes certain historical images, traditions, and stereotypes. There are three running events in the sample which fall under the category of 'heritage' (or themed events) events because they explicitly celebrate the historical memory of a place including its culture, people and natural beauty (i.e., Kaunas Citadele, Eindejaarscorrida Leuven, Chiavari). The rest of the events in the sample could be classified as primarily competitive events and for several of them the involvement of local authorities has been minimal or non-existent.

It is recommended that:

1. Event organisers ought to clearly determine the geographic scale of the event – local, regional, national, or international. Adding an international dimension to an essentially local/regional event will not enhance its reputation and can only confuse its identity.
2. Event owners and organisers establish strategic links with local authorities. This will enhance the legitimacy of the event and will allow for greater mobilization of resources including public support.
3. Event promoters need to identify suitable facets of city/place history and align the event with these. This will open new opportunities for place and event marketing, as well as for forging links with different industries, which are not currently partnering the event.

2. Events objectives

Running events' objectives are closely linked to their identity and are critical for their success. Currently, all events in the sample claim a rather broad range of objectives including promoting health, fitness, education, community spirit, supporting good causes and providing fun and entertainment, among others. Despite most events' well-defined competitive focus, they also cater for broader audiences and try to accommodate diverse groups of people including children, families, competitive and recreational runners, and people with disabilities. Well-defined events objectives are critical for their identity, communications, management, and sustainability. A tension between 'competing vs completing' was identified in almost all events studied. This tension is hugely indicative of the focus of the event and its objectives and has ramifications for the event offer, which is discussed in section 3.

It is recommended that:

1. Event owners and organisers formulate clear objectives allowing them to appeal to the main target group involved.
2. It is important that the event has attainable objectives which can be measured and documented.
3. Event promoters (i.e., partners, sponsors, media) ought to creatively work around the main objectives of the event to encourage inclusiveness without distracting from the main message of the event.

3. Event offer and target groups

An event offer refers to the specific exchange that participants enter into with the event organisers. It is different from the event objectives but closely complements them and the exchange may take a tangible (e.g. paying a registration fee and receiving a service pack) or intangible (e.g. one gains self-confidence and pride in exchange of their time and support for the event) form. Naturally, the offer needs to be made relevant to different target groups. The events in the sample do have an offer but it is not always clearly spelled out. General invites such as 'join us and have fun' do not usually deliver the desired results.

It is recommended that:

1. Event organisers offer well-specified information, support, logistical and security services.
2. Event organisers offer clear incentives for different types of participants and target groups.
3. Event organisers clearly spell out what is expected from participants in return.
4. Event promoters outline pre-event, event and post-events services offered.

4. Event management

A good, passionate, and people-centered management is critical for the success of any running event. The three management adjectives above do not include 'professional' as the use of this term could be misleading. Because of their broad appeal and stated aspirations for improvement of delivery and participants' experiences, all events in the sample require systematic planning, implementation, and evaluation. Thus, running events' management could not be considered as a temporary activity rather it needs permanent attention. A common concern identified across the sample was the lack of professionalism at least in some respects of delivering the events. This entails that the management of event volunteers ought to be prioritised. It is also critical to approach the event from participants' point of view and consider it as a journey.

It is recommended that:

1. Event owners and organisers dedicate at least one full-time manager who will be responsible for key aspects of the event including its planning, communications, volunteers' training, and public engagement.

2. Events management ought to be focused on delivering the event offer to different target groups.
3. Event organisers develop a 'participant's journey' including three key stages of pre-event physical and psychological preparation, during the event activities, and post-event engagement.
4. Events promoters need to carefully choose the site of the event to allow for smooth logistics and enhanced spectators' experiences.
5. Running events involve a fair degree of routine operations, so, it is critical that management knowledge is codified in appropriate technical manuals and guides to ensure the smooth transfer of knowledge.

5. The role of public, non-profit, and private sector

Since all running events studied pursue complex social and economic agendas (i.e., enhancing wellbeing, fitness, education), ensuring involvement and coordination between public, non-profit, and private sectors becomes a priority. This requires agreeing priorities, and varying degrees of resource mobilization.

It is recommended that:

1. Event promoters develop a policy/charter which clearly fixes the role of the event in their strategic priorities.
2. Event promoters establish a clear governance structure to steer collective efforts, and to ensure democratic participation, transparency and accountability of all parties involved.
3. Regardless of the scale of the event, ensuring the involvement of local authorities is critical.

6. Events impact

All events, regardless of their scale, have an impact where the larger the scale of the event the greater its impact. Events impacts fall in two broad categories including tangible (i.e., building new facilities, road improvements, job creation) and intangible (i.e., enhancing community spirit and people's self-confidence). Owing to the difficulties in documenting intangible impacts, most events promoters tend to focus on the tangibles and use them for promotional and resource-generation purposes. Given the typical one-day duration of most running events, their tangible impact has been relatively limited,

although they tend to stimulate national and international tourism and business activities. Without exception, all running events have much greater stated intangible impacts such as healthy lifestyle benefits, which directly correlates with their broader wellbeing objectives.

It is recommended that:

1. Event promoters develop clear understanding of the nature of impacts generated by the event.
2. Events' organisers need to ensure that the projected impacts must be closely aligned with the event's identity, objectives, and management.
3. Event promoters use evidence-based approach to document the impacts of the event.
4. Event promoters creatively use impact data for promotional and management purposes.

7. Event marketing

Running events marketing is closely connected to their identity, stated objectives and management structure. Event marketing is compounded by the presence of several stakeholders where each of them is looking for a perfect fit. The study revealed a further complicating factor concerning the tension between competitive and recreational runners. National governing bodies of athletics in the five countries show little interest in recreational runners and keep no record of their participation, needs and experiences. As a result, in several countries, the studied running events are not included in the annual sporting calendar, which negatively impacts on their promotion. The analysis of social media uses also confirmed this tension and revealed that content generation and use has involved predominantly the competitive runners, and very little attention has been afforded to recreational users.

It is recommended that:

1. Event organisers acknowledge that the value of the event is in the eye of the beholder, that is, in the perceptions of different participants.
2. Event promoters regularly study participants' needs, perceptions and experiences of running events and share information with stakeholders.
3. Event promoters ought to explore the advantages of integrated marketing communications and try to develop coherent inter-organisational marketing plans to ensure a greater synergy, resource coordination and maximum effects.

4. Event promoters need to pay particular attention to the use of social media and integrate them in a meaningful way in the overall marketing strategy.

8. Event sustainability

Some 50% of the studied events have been running for over ten years which illustrates their viability and sustainability. Nonetheless, even events that have been around for over 20 years are still facing serious challenges to their survival. The issue of a running event sustainability cuts across all 7 previous aspects, and its importance increases exponentially with the increased number of competing events. The issue of events' sustainability does not concern only the competition with other events but a range of other important aspects that have gained prominence recently. These include the interactions of organisers and participants with nature, the use of environmentally sound management approaches, waste management, compliance with event industry sustainability standards (i.e., ISO20121) and others. These are complex issues that require careful planning, execution, and resources.

It is recommended that:

1. Event promoters consider the issue of event institutionalisation through its inclusion in international/national/regional cultural and sporting calendars. This will add an extra layer of significance and responsibility to the event profile. It will also create opportunities for greater support across the board.
2. Event promoters focus their efforts on building organisational capacity in its various forms including enhancing aspirations, decision-making ability, governance, individual and collective skills, and knowledge acquisition.
3. Event promoters review management practices and ensure compliance with current event industry sustainability standards.
4. Event promoters endeavour to document best practice in sustainable event management and share these widely.

CHAPTER 3: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RELATED SECTORS

This chapter is organised in two sections which relate to different sectors/entities which do not have a direct focus, but nevertheless exercise an indirect influence, on events. These include (i) local governments, and (ii) sponsors/companies.

1. Local governments

Governments often have a logistic role in running events, such as making the route traffic free, scheduling diversions, providing fences and police control, etc. Some governments even provide financial support (e.g. subsidies based on certain conditions). According to event organisers, this support is necessary and for some (smaller) organisers indispensable to survive. It is not desirable, however, for local governments to assume the role of event organizers themselves.

Governments strive to improve physical activity and sport participation among citizens. One way to reach this is to increase participation in running clubs. In some European countries, sports and running clubs receive direct subsidies from local governments (in addition to the funds of sports federations). The conditions for granting subsidies can be quantitative (e.g. based on the number of club members) and/or qualitative (e.g. by organising running events) in nature. In addition to organised participation in running clubs, governments can also improve *light* running participation. Participation in running events is a popular example of light sport, as this is not tied to an ongoing competition. In addition, research shows that running events have a positive health impact in terms of increased physical activity before the event (Crofts et al., 2012a; 2012b; Lane et al., 2010; Schoemaker et al., 2020). However, local governments indicate that different running events are on their own. There is no continuity or coherence between running events.

It is recommended that:

1. Local governments develop a targeted policy of different types of running events all year round. By promoting events of different nature in the city throughout the year, runners can keep challenged and motivated to be active.

As indicated earlier, local governments need not take the role in organizing running events themselves. However, this means that they do not exert any direct or organizing influence on the organisation of running events itself. Therefore, local governments should look for matters on which they have direct influence and that in turn indirectly influences participation in running events, such as the construction of the public domain.

It is recommended that:

1. Local governments develop and construct attractive, exercise-friendly environments. These environments can be used during running events. In that way, participants become aware of the beautiful and exercise-friendly environment (in the neighbourhood) and may want to go back to these environments to be active after the event. Furthermore, a maximum use of the already existing sports infrastructure should be encouraged for recreational runners (e.g. opening sport halls, athletics tracks, etc.).

Finally, and related to paragraph 2.8 of this report, the promotion of sustainable transport from, to and during running events is already occurring in many places throughout Europe. Just a few of the many examples are offering bicycle racks or free transportation with public transport for participants, the use of electric cars for event organisers, etc. However, there is also a large number of event organisers who can still take major steps in this issue. Moreover, the topic of sustainability will only receive more attention and importance in the future.

It is recommended that:

1. Local governments continue to develop campaigns to promote sustainable transport in three ways. First, by promoting of, imposing standards of, and supporting in developing initiatives as regards sustainable transport among event organisers. Second, by continuing to run and develop campaigns for their citizens alongside those focused on running events. Third, by actively looking for and sharing best practices with other (local) governments.

2. Sponsors/companies

Running events come in different shapes and sizes (e.g. many or a few participants, high or low participation fees, none or very extensive supplies on the course, etc.). Therefore, the financial viability varies between running events. Sponsorship represents an attractive option for both the event organiser and the sponsor/company (as sponsors are very often companies, we will use 'sponsor' in

the remainder of this paragraph). By attracting sponsors, event organizers can reduce costs by using the obtained resources (financial or in kind), and sponsors receive additional exposure by committing themselves to the running event. This exposure can be local, national and/or international, depending on the size of the event. Moreover, running events have a rather positive image and connecting one's company to a running event therefore has a positive influence on the companies' image. The past years, however, questions are raised on the possible decreasing commitment for sponsors to running events. This could partly be explained by, among others, very accessible and low threshold ways for event organisers to get started with promoting the event on their own social media channels.

It is recommended that:

1. Event organisers 'sell' and sponsors claim title partnerships for certain parts of the running event itself with targeted visibility (see also paragraphs 2.2 and 2.3).
 - a. For example, one of the different distances that is covered during the running event (e.g. a company that claims title partnership of the longest distance of the running event, because participants of that distance pass the head office of the company).
 - b. For example, a side event. This is an event that is a part of the main event concept and may not exist if the main event did not exist (Hover et al., 2014; e.g. an insurance company that claims title partnership of the preparatory training program because they want to attract new possible customers).

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Results of this project show that, like ten years ago, national athletics federations still experience difficulties to grasp, understand and respond to the needs of recreational runners (Van Bottenburg et al., 2010). The main focus of athletics federations, with associated organised running clubs, has been on competition. Therefore, they struggle to attract light runners. However, the largest health impact can be achieved among these light runners. This report outlines the many aspects of running events (i.e., planning, objectives, impacts). If running events want to get/keep sustainable and impactful (and avoid fading to the background and becoming a niche market with limited impact) in the future, the different stakeholders should strive for cooperation. In the events sector, it seems that everyone is a competitor. Competition between organisations is necessary to some degree, as to get the best out of your organisation. However, everyone does pursue the same goal: encourage as many people as possible to run. Therefore, the different stakeholders should find a healthy balance between competition and cooperation to survive.

1. Implications for further research

The running market evolves rapidly. The profile of runners nowadays is somewhat different compared to a couple of years ago. Furthermore, new types of running events are invented each year which in turn attract new types of runners. Because of these rapid changes, there are no insights into a general profile of road runners or of participants of running events. The RUN for HEALTH project partly responded to this need. However, there has to be an overall image of the European road runner and/or running event participant to be able for stakeholders to specifically target these groups. Therefore, there is a need for further research as regards running and running events. There are some opportunities for future research to meet this need. First, a combined European database with race results can be constructed. Most results of running events are online (often with a mentioning of age, sex, ranking and finish time). By combining all these race results, a good database can be created as regards the profile of running event participants. Second, initiatives such as the RUN for HEALTH project should be encouraged and further extended. Based on a uniform questionnaire that is executed in different European countries, it is possible to create profiles based on incentives, (health) motivations, etc. (advantage of harmonised data vs. country-specific data; Scheerder et al., 2011). An extension is needed (and opportunities arise) towards runners in general.

The data collection of the RUN for HEALTH project was executed in the period before COVID-19. In this period, the digital aspect of running events was gaining in importance and attention. However, this digitalisation has gained momentum and many major steps have been taken in a short time as regards participatory virtual running events. This aspect will remain very important in the future and will present many challenges for the different stakeholders.

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