



**SPORT FOR  
DEVELOPMENT  
COALITION**

# Active for Employment

**Enhancing employability  
through sport and physical  
activity participation**



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# The challenge

The recent global COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing national cost of living crisis have profoundly impacted employment, education, and training across the UK, with the impact most acute for young people (16 to 24 years old).

Recent Office for National Statistics data (October 2022) revealed that the UK labour market is showing signs of a recovery, with the current unemployment rate (3.5%) representing the lowest percentage for nearly five decades and job vacancies at record levels. However, economic inactivity continues to rise, with 629,000 people in the UK not currently seeking work, an increase of over 225,000 in the last year, of whom the highest proportion is those aged 16 to 24 years old (28%)<sup>1</sup>. Underemployment also remains problematic, an issue which tends to disproportionately affect those aged 18 to 24 years old. Consequently, the long-term, delayed, and detrimental effects on young people's confidence, motivation and preparedness for employment remains uncertain, particularly for those facing additional barriers to entering the labour market.

Participation in sport-based employability interventions can contribute to employment policy interventions, and there is also evidence that these interventions can support multiple returns on investment, both in terms of providing a cheaper alternative to many active labour market policies, such as job search assistance and targeted training programmes<sup>2</sup>, and as a mechanism to promote cost savings.



This policy brief has been produced to help inform public policy interventions by demonstrating the potential impact of sport-based employability interventions on developing key skills for work and providing opportunities to secure and sustain employment.

The brief has also been designed to support and inspire public bodies, funders, commissioners and policy-makers as well as community-based programme providers aiming to better utilise the impact of sport and physical activity on employability. It presents clear evidence-based recommendations and case studies to enhance the contribution of physical activity, sport, and sport for development on employability in the UK.

**“We have faced a generational crisis and experienced substantial health, economic and societal impacts. In this context, it is essential that all societal assets which can help fight inequality and generate positive social outcomes are mobilised.”**

**Andy Reed (Chair of the Coalition)**

- 1 Office for National Statistics. (July, 2022). Labour market overview, UK. Retrieved from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/july2022>
- 2 Morgan, H.J. & Bush, A.J. (2016). Sports coach as transformative leader: Arresting school disengagement through community sport-based initiatives. *Sport, Education and Society* 21(5), 759-777.

# Our main recommendations

1

The physical and mental wellbeing of participants should be an essential first step within a sport-based employability intervention and a necessary component within the employability pathway. In addition, given the clear benefits of sport and physical activity on physical and mental wellbeing, relevant Government departments and agencies should consider how the benefits of sport and physical activity may be integrated into employment-based interventions.



2

Sport for development interventions often play a key role in enabling populations outside of formal education and training systems and those furthest away from an employment destination to access education, training and work experience opportunities. The sport for development sector should be supported to partner with relevant public and private funding bodies, and evidence how they contribute to enabling and maintaining engagement with formal education and training systems. The Government should engage directly with the sport for development sector to expand the use of sport and physical activity organisations as sites for engagement in work-related programmes.



3

Sport for development organisations should be supported by commissioners and funders to develop networks and connections with employers from a range of sectors and industries, both within and beyond sport, to facilitate potential pathways into employment, education and training for their beneficiaries. However, sport for development organisations should be supported by public and private sector funding to create tailored training and support opportunities to prepare employers for recruiting and working with their beneficiaries.



4

Investment into the career development of the sport for development workforce should be addressed. This could be achieved by identifying and developing opportunities to ring-fence core funding for sport for development organisations. Looking after and supporting the sport for development workforce, particularly those in 'front-line' programme delivery roles, is fundamental to the success and sustainability of the sector.



5

Measurement frameworks and methods which evidence the breadth of personal development that young people achieve through sport for development interventions need to be generated by commissioners, funders, project implementers and research partners. Any such frameworks should be able to measure the impact and added value of interventions that support young people who are furthest from employment destinations. Measurement frameworks which are generated by the sport for development sector need to be recognised and adopted by funders.



# Our research



## The research involved a mixed-methods approach in three overlapping phases:

- 1** Eighteen interviews were conducted with representatives from a variety of sport for development providers and organisations working in the youth employability sector. Participants consisted of people working in both 'strategic' and 'frontline' roles and came from multiple geographic locations. An additional interview was conducted with two members of the Sport for Development Coalition Youth Advisory Group<sup>3</sup>.
- 2** Seventy responses to an online questionnaire that captured wide-ranging perspectives on the contribution of sport to employability outcomes, and the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of sport-based employability interventions. Responses were received from both sport for development organisations and non-sport organisations, but all respondents had an interest in youth employability.
- 3** Stakeholder engagement activities run by the Sport for Development Coalition including consultations with the Coalition's Working and Advisory Groups and a roundtable discussion with input from policy and practice experts.

The research was led by a team made up of academic researchers from the University of Bath (Dr Haydn Morgan, Dr Anthony Bush, and Dr Harry Bowles).



3 Sport for Development Coalition Youth Advisory Group is one of the Working or Advisory Groups that lead collective action across the Sport for Development Coalition network. For more information: <https://sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/article/sport-development-coalition-unveils-leadership-group-drive-collective-action>

# Our key findings

1

**COVID-19 has adversely affected the physical and mental health and wellbeing of young people and in many cases, has impacted their confidence and motivation to engage in employment-focused activity.**

However, sport and physical activity provide a number of clearly defined benefits to aid progress towards enhanced employability, especially for those who are furthest from an employment destination or are not engaged in formal systems of Government support for employment.

2

**Sport-based employability interventions that are individualised towards participant aspirations, and which are developed to accentuate existing strengths,**

are effective in progressing young people to employment destinations or further education and training. Interventions which focus on enabling career readiness, as well as job readiness, support more meaningful and sustainable work opportunities both in and through sport.

3

**Strong connections with local employers are vital to enabling work opportunities for participants of sport-based employability interventions.**

Sport for development organisations with established employer networks often provide ongoing mentoring for young people once they have entered the job market and are able to address the employment precariousness (or 'cliff edge') experienced by some young people.

4

**The impact of sport-based employability interventions is often measured by employment destination data and hard progressions**

(e.g. the number of young people who have transitioned into employment), which may encourage sport for development organisations to support only those most easily transitioned into employment destinations. Focusing on employability and employment outcomes would help to support those furthest from employment and tackle inequalities in the most disadvantaged communities.

5

**The sport for development workforce is experiencing severe challenges in sustaining meaningful careers in the sector,** which can be the result of zero hours contracts and/or sessional work. Work in the sector is often poorly or underpaid, with limited career progression opportunities, which leads to challenges in retaining talent.

# Key areas in sport and employability policies and strategies

## 1. Considering the physical and mental wellbeing of participants is an essential first step within a sport-based employability intervention and a necessary component within the employability pathway.

COVID-19 has significantly affected the physical and mental wellbeing of many young people and this has seriously impacted on engagement in formal education and training programmes designed to enhance employability. In addition, individuals who faced significant employment inequalities prior to the pandemic have been further disadvantaged by it.

Rebuilding the wellbeing of young people is essential in the short term and should supersede efforts to focus purely on enhancing employability through sport. Addressing adversity exacerbated by the pandemic and re-building the foundations of mental wellbeing using sport and physical activity should be a central component of related employability interventions and future delivery.

As there are clear benefits on physical and mental wellbeing from participating in sport and physical activity, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) should consider coordinating with other relevant Government departments (ranging from, the Department of Work and Pensions and the Department for Education to the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities and the Ministry of Justice) to explore how the benefits of sport and physical activity may be integrated into employment-based programmes.

### Case study



#### Bath Rugby Foundation: Supporting mental health

Bath Rugby Foundation's approach to supporting young people on their journeys towards employment is to understand and recognise the psychological needs of learners. Many of the young people they support on their employability programme 'HITZ' enter with low self-esteem, protective coping strategies and other mental health challenges that act as barriers to engagement with formal learning structures. By providing a safe space for learners to be seen and for their emotions to be validated, Bath Rugby Foundation builds a bridge to employment that invests in the psychological needs of their learners as a starting point for helping them develop a vision for themselves. Engagement in sport and physical activity is central to the learning process by offering a more conducive environment for addressing psychological challenges and practising new coping behaviours.

## 2. Sport for development interventions can play a key role in enabling populations outside of formal systems and those furthest away from an employment destination to access education, training, and work experience opportunities.

The sport for development sector should be supported by relevant public and private funding bodies in evidencing how they contribute to enabling and maintaining engagement with formal systems.

The effectiveness of employment policies is often measured through 'hard progression' outcomes which quantify the number of people who transition into clearly defined employment, education and training destinations. This often advantages individuals with fewer barriers to employment who are most easily transitioned into these destinations meaning that those who face significant disadvantage or are furthest from an employment destination are overlooked. Employment interventions which use sport as a foundation are highly effective at engaging individuals who face disadvantage or are outside of State provision (e.g. those who are on Jobseekers Allowance), reinforcing the clear potential that sport for development organisations hold in complementing efforts by the Government (both UK and devolved) to enhance employability and pathways into work.

Furthermore, Government should engage directly with sport for development organisations as sites for engagement in work-related programmes.



### Case study



#### EFL Trust: Partnering with national and local agencies

The EFL Trust is the charitable arm of the English Football League (EFL) with the vision to create stronger, healthier, and more active communities. The EFL Trust has worked collaboratively with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to provide opportunities to enhance employability and support employment into the sport sector. Not only have they been a host for work placements and apprenticeships schemes (including the Government's recent Kickstart scheme), but their network of Club Community Organisations has also supported local Job Centre provision, with several member clubs hosting Youth Hubs across England, where DWP work coaches can work directly with young people who have been engaged in sport-based employability interventions.

### 3. Sport for development organisations should be supported to develop networks and connections with employers' from a range of sectors and industries, both within and beyond sport, to facilitate potential pathways into employment for their beneficiaries.

A key mechanism in interventions (sport-based or otherwise) that enhance employment is the establishment of strong connections with local employers who provide pathways for paid work or opportunities to obtain workplace experience. The identification of employers who can provide the quantity and quality of employment opportunities has proven difficult. Furthermore, partnering with employers who share similar cultural values to sport for development organisations - and recognise and accept that the individuals who graduate from sport-based employability interventions often face significant personal challenges - has also been a problem. However, the graduates of sport-based interventions can often provide solutions to employers' recruitment challenges and add value by offering diversity in the workforce. Employers often lack the specialist knowledge to work with some of the populations engaged by sport-based employment interventions, which presents an opportunity for sport for development organisations to be proactive in trying to address these capacity issues and offer bespoke training to potential employers.

#### Case study



#### Coach Core: Making connections with local employers

Coach Core focuses on providing community sports apprenticeships specifically aimed at young adults currently not in employment, education or training. Central to their work is the development of a network of co-invested employers who share and embody the same organisational values as them. Apprenticeship opportunities enable participants to engage actively in their local communities, which not only helps young people to find employment in their locality but also provides employers with fully trained and career ready individuals, who are prepared for paid employment on completion of their apprenticeship.





#### 4. Investment into the career development of the sport for development workforce should be addressed, and opportunities to ring-fence core funding for sport for development organisations need to be explored.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the midst of a cost of living crisis, it is clear that the sport for development workforce is under significant pressure, with many skilled practitioners opting to leave the sector for better paid and/or more secure and regular employment elsewhere. These practitioners play a pivotal role in engaging, motivating and mentoring participants of sport-based employability interventions and are the single biggest factor in enabling participants to develop their employability skills and prepare themselves for the employment market. Taking care of the sport for development workforce by investing in their career development and ensuring a level of fair and sustainable remuneration should be addressed - particularly for those in 'frontline delivery' roles.

### Case study



#### Change Foundation: Developing and supporting the workforce

The Change Foundation has invested in specific, tailored staff development packages designed to support and progress the personal and professional wellbeing of their employees. This package mainly focuses on dedicated personal development planning activities and identifying avenues for staff to acquire higher level qualifications. However, it also provides access to a reflective practice facilitator, which offers staff the time and space to engage in conversations with an independent mediator and discuss their wellbeing as well as challenges in both their professional and personal lives. The Change Foundation reports lower staff turnover since this package was introduced.

This is fundamental to the success and ongoing sustainability of the sector, and the continued support for individuals who are engaged by sport for development interventions. However, only a commitment to ring-fenced core funding will see this ambition realised.

## 5. Measurement frameworks and methods which are sensitive to the breadth of personal developments that young people make through sport for development interventions need to be generated and recognised by funders.

Too often the impact of employability interventions is measured in simplistic terms and relies upon metrics such as 'hard progressions' into paid work, full-time education or employment focused training as the sole gauge of their effectiveness. This often has implications for whoever is engaged in employability interventions, with those most easily transitioned to defined employment and training destinations supported, and those furthest from employment often overlooked. Given the strong potential of sport for development interventions to engage and support those furthest from employment, and facilitate their development along the initial stages of their 'journey to employment', alternative measurement

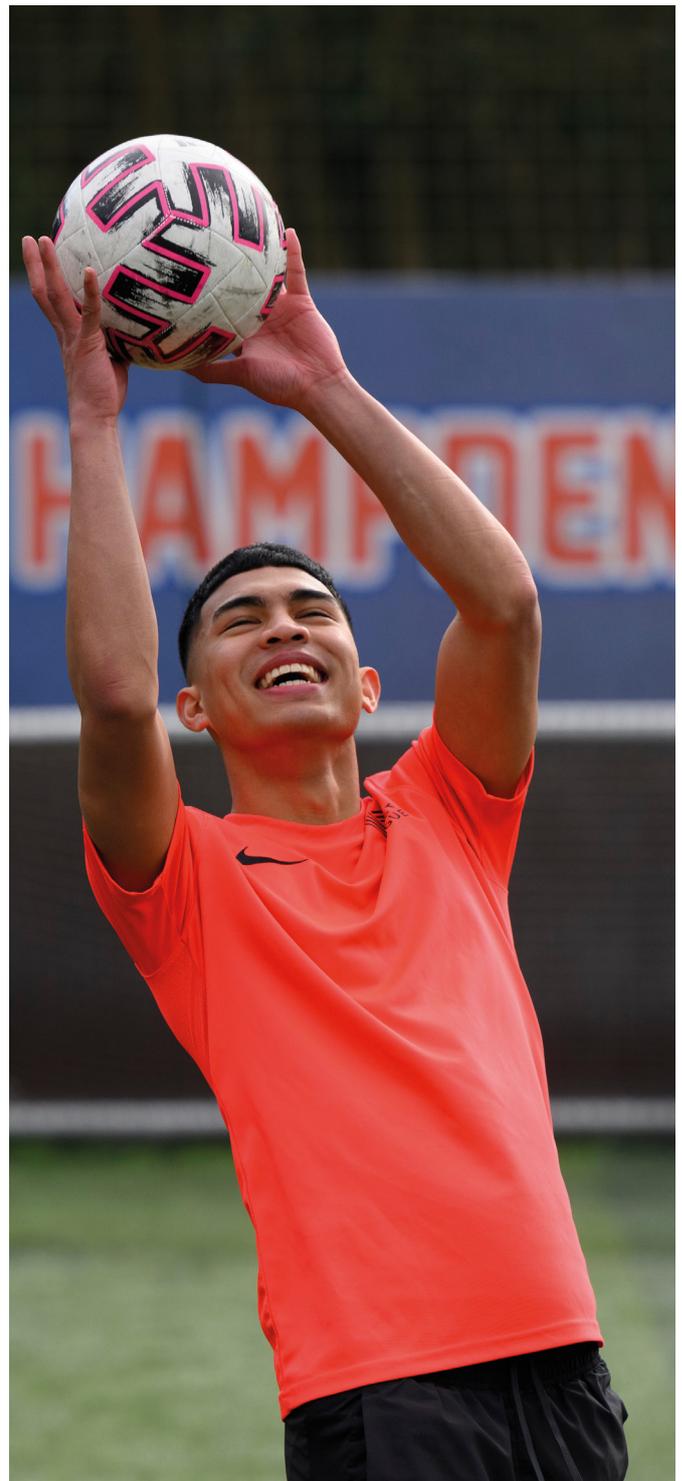
frameworks which measure and recognise the impact and added value of sport for development interventions should be established alongside those which focus on hard progressions.

### Case study



#### Dallaglio Rugby Works: Ways of measuring progress

Dallaglio Rugby Works has developed a pioneering web app-based platform called Player Profiles which places the ownership of personal development in the hands of participants. Player Profiles was co-designed with their young participants to ensure it meets their needs and looks and feels like their other everyday applications. Player Profiles focuses on the skill areas identified by the World Economic Forum as essential for the 2025 workplace, and uses gamification as an engagement technique to enable young people to assess their current skillset/ level, address any gaps by identifying and setting goals, plan progression towards these goals, and access support from staff to identify how the Dallaglio Rugby Works programme has helped them to achieve their goals.



## Additional recommendations for sport-based employability interventions

- Sport for development organisations who provide access to qualifications should be encouraged and supported to broaden the qualification offer to include a wider array of jobs in the sport and physical activity sector. They should also be encouraged and supported to provide access to qualifications that are transferable to other employment sectors.
- Broadening the focus of sport-based employability interventions to consider a wider array of physical activity pursuits (e.g. physical activity, fitness, dance, health related activities, 'activities of daily living', exergaming and e-sports) should be encouraged to appeal to a wider diversity of potential beneficiaries and respond to the shifting nature of youth physical culture.
- Sport for development organisations should be encouraged and supported to incorporate ongoing mentoring support for 'graduates' of their programmes as part of collaborative efforts with employers to mediate against the often cyclical nature of youth unemployment.
- Sport for development organisations should implement a 'strengths-based' and 'person-centred' approach to employability interventions, working with the young person to build foundational personal awareness, develop individual career aspirations, and tailored developmental activities. In addition, sport for development interventions should seek to facilitate the acquisition and accumulation of human, social and psychological capital, which are critical to enhanced employability.
- Innovative and more proactive approaches, which are less reliant on formal referrals, to identify and recruit young people to sport-based interventions are needed.

**We invite policy-makers and practitioners to consider these recommendations, and we welcome the opportunity to work together with partners on how best to implement them in a meaningful and impactful way.**



# Conclusions and next steps



Following stakeholder engagement by the Sport for Development Coalition, experts in policy and practice provided valuable insight to develop and operationalise the research recommendations. This highlighted three key priority actions to support the implementation of the research recommendations.

1

**An alignment of national policies and funding systems to better enable the coordination and development of local policy and practice.**

This could be supported by a partnership approach involving private, public (local and national), and VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise) organisations.





2

**Developing a common language around employability outcomes within the evaluation of sport for development interventions.**

Fundamentally, this needs to involve debate and consensus on what outcomes should be measured and how. A wide variety of skills frameworks are employed within the sport for development sector to assess personal skills development, so obtaining a consensus may present a challenge. Focusing on how sport for development interventions enable the acquisition and accumulation of human, social and psychological capital could offer a novel way forward.

3

**A greater developmental focus on the sport for development workforce.**

This is to address career progression, professional recognition and a remuneration system which rewards the qualities that the sport for development workforce possesses. Future policy campaigns and lobbying efforts should prioritise the value of both learned and lived experience within workforce development and amplify the breadth of career opportunities that lie within the sport industry.

**The Sport for Development Coalition and stakeholders who informed this policy brief are ready to mobilise collectively to implement the key actions and evidence based recommendations locally and nationally and would welcome the opportunity to work with policy makers, funders and commissioners on what happens next.**

# Sport for development: It's an #OpenGoal!



This report supports the 'Increased employability and skills' section of the #OpenGoal Shared Advocacy Framework, which has been co-designed by members of the Sport for Development Coalition.

The Coalition is a growing UK-wide network of more than 250 organisations and networks over-arching thousands of projects and programmes using targeted sport and physical activity-based interventions to help tackle key health and societal inequalities. Targeted interventions delivered by Coalition members can

help to create significant public cost savings since they generate multiple returns on investment, ranging from improved physical and mental health, to increased educational attainment and employability, and reduced crime and anti-social behaviour.





## Further reading and resources

Read the full 'Active for Employment' Research Report, and the set of submissions that informed this policy brief, at [sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/research-and-reports](https://sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/research-and-reports)

This report is supported by:

[londonyouth.org](https://londonyouth.org)

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In January 2022, the Coalition published 'Moving for Mental Health' in partnership with Mind, Edge Hill University and Loughborough University.

To read the report, visit [sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/moving-mental-health](https://sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/moving-mental-health)

