

Getting On Track

Reducing youth offending and re-offending through sport and physical activity



Supported by:











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The challenge

Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour is a long-standing public policy concern which has become more acute as rates of incidence increase and the prison population in the United Kingdom continues to rise.

Recent statistics indicate that the number of people in prisons and young offender institutions in England and Wales now exceeds 88,000 and is projected to rise to more than 106,000 by 2027¹. With the cost per prisoner being approximately £47,000 per year², a spiralling prison population has significant impacts for the public purse and taxpayers. Indeed, youth crime alone costs the taxpayer £1.5billion a year and research reveals that over three quarters of adult prolific offenders received their first caution or conviction as a juvenile³.

It is now recognised that many children and young people who offend have experienced multiple disadvantages and that contact with the criminal justice system can compound this disadvantage further. This recognition has led to a greater focus on trauma-informed approaches which reflect the inter-related and cumulative influence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and to the adoption of child-first practices within Youth Justice. ACEs include physical, emotional and sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, household substance abuse, domestic abuse, parental separation or divorce, household mental illness and a member of the household in prison. ACEs are associated with both offending and other negative life outcomes⁴. Child-first approaches seek to mitigate the harm that can arise from offending behaviours through adopting strength-based approaches which aim to develop pro-social⁵ identities, and prevent offending and create safer communities with fewer victims. These approaches are reliant on developing supportive and empowering relationships with children focused on fulfilling their potential and making positive contributions to society⁶.

Supporting vulnerable young people at risk of involvement in crime, anti-social behaviour and serious violence is critical, especially those who present 'risk factors' such as school exclusion, prior involvement with the police, or other challenging socio-economic circumstances. Sport and physical activity has long been utilised as a cost-effective tool to address criminal justice issues, whether to prevent, divert or rehabilitate⁷, and there is a growing evidence base which highlights the strong potential of sport, when used alongside other mechanisms, as an effective intervention tool with young people both in the community and within the secure estate⁸.

In 2023, the UK Government's Ministry of Justice invested £5million into a Youth Justice Sport Fund to support 218 voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations across England and Wales to conduct targeted work supporting vulnerable children considered to be at risk of being involved in crime and violence, using sport as a vehicle to address problem behaviour. This evidence-led policy brief draws on the experiences of these VCS organisations and aims to help inform public policy and spending decisions by demonstrating the potential impact of





sport-based interventions on addressing some of the risk factors associated with engagement with the criminal justice system, or as a diversionary tool to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour.

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

"The current challenges facing the criminal justice system in the UK demand a consistent, collective commitment to utilising and building on the positive, expert practice as outlined in this policy brief. The Coalition's growing UK-wide network is dedicated to supporting this work."

Hitesh Patel, Executive Director, Sport for Development Coalition

- https://howardleague.org/prison-watch/
- 2 https://www.statista.com/statistics/1202172/cost-per-prisoner-england-and-wales/
- 3 <u>http://www.gov.uk/government/news/youngsters-to-take-up-football-boxing-and-rugby-in-5-million-bid-to-cut-crime</u>
- Fox, B., Perez, N., Cass, E., Baglivio, M. & Epps, N. (2015). Trauma changes everything: Examining the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders. Child Abuse and Neglect, 46, 163-173.
- 5 Pro-social is the opposite to anti-social. Positive behaviours, attitudes and decision-making.
- 6 https://yjresourcehub.uk/images/YJB/Child First Overview and Guide April 2022 YJB.pdf
- 7 Morgan, H. & Parker, A. (2023). Sport, physical activity and criminal justice: politics, policy and practice. Routledge.
- 8 Meek Report (2018).

Our main recommendations

Invest in the professional development and wellbeing of the workforce and prioritise staff retention: Actively reducing youth crime is complex and, critically, requires staff who have the necessary skills and understanding to prevent further harm to young people and their communities. Appropriate supervision, training and qualifications, along with impactful ways of sharing effective practice, are needed to build and sustain sector capacity. Training needs include trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity training, youth work approaches and tackling inequalities.



2

Utilise trusted specialist organisations to maximise the return on investment: Locally-trusted specialist organisations are well-positioned to understand the intricacies of local need and have a track record of delivering bespoke projects within challenging social and economic contexts. These organisations will have a clear vision of what they need to achieve, grounded in a shared theory of change, assuring high-quality expectations are embedded within sport-based projects from the outset.



3

Strengthen partnership working between the youth justice and sport sectors to address the inconsistency and fragmentation in existing structures: Delivering sport-based projects to support criminal justice outcomes is highly reliant on the integration of effective partnership working between youth justice and sport organisations operating at a national, regional and local level. Strengthening ongoing organisational relationships, disseminating effective practice and mobilising projects efficiently will maximise the contribution of sport-based programmes and ensure timely access to the opportunities that sport-based programmes provide.





4

Support and empower organisations to commit to this work in the long term, to be agile and responsive to identified need, and exercise autonomy in their resource allocation: The complex nature of this work and the dynamic contexts in which it takes place requires a reliable, flexible and responsive approach to delivery as situations can change and escalate quickly. Short term and unreliable funding limits what organisations can achieve and risks causing more harm to the vulnerable young people who place their trust in these organisations. Directly supporting organisations to access funding in more innovative, creative and consistent ways is instrumental to achieving this recommendation.



5

Facilitate the meaningful involvement of beneficiaries and experts by experience: Ensuring the voices of beneficiaries are accessed and heard is critical to influencing the planning of future programmes and evidencing impact at both strategic and delivery level. Consideration must be given to how beneficiaries can be better involved in influencing the design, implementation and evaluation of sport-based programmes and projects that focus on reducing offending and re-offending. This recommendation connects to wider considerations around appropriate funding and support structures for monitoring, evaluation and learning.





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

Our research



The recommendations presented in this policy brief are drawn from the final external evaluation report 9 for the Youth Justice Sport Fund. The external evaluation was based on a rigorous mixed-methods approach comprising:

- Project feedback surveys provided by representatives of organisations from across England and Wales that were funded as part of the Youth Justice Sport Fund and delivered local projects (n=218).
- Insights gained from visits conducted by StreetGames staff to observe locally-delivered projects (n = 172 sessions).
- Insights gained by the external evaluation team through attendance at regional engagement days (n=4).
- Semi-structured interviews with regional project leads (n=8).
- Semi-structured interviews with local project leads (n = 14).
- The Youth Justice Sport Fund Consortium facilitated further round-table events with policy and practice experts to advise on this Policy Brief (n=2).

The research was conducted by a team comprising Dr Carolynne Mason (Loughborough University), Dr Haydn Morgan (University of Bath), Dr Caron Walpole (Loughborough University) and Professor Rosie Meek (Royal Holloway University, London).







Our key findings

Sport-based projects are well-placed to support young people who demonstrate a secondary level of need because they are engaging in behaviours associated with either offending or which put them at risk of being a victim of crime. However, it is vital to recognise the complex nature of working with some of the most vulnerable young people in society and the multiple risks they experience, including poor mental health, complex family circumstances, and negative peer group influence.

2

This complex work needs to be undertaken by organisations with staff and volunteers who are experienced and well placed to recognise the associated risks of working with vulnerable young people. The size of the organisation is less important than their position within the community and the trust that their staff and volunteers engender with young people when mitigating risk.

3

Adopting a sport-plus approach¹⁰ is vital in supporting vulnerable young people. 'Plus' activities may include mentoring, education, volunteering and social action. Sessions with high ratios of staff members to young people enable staff to identify young people's unique strengths, respond more effectively to their needs, and result in fewer disruptive incidents during sport-based sessions.

4

The experiences of the organisations responsible for delivering the Youth Justice Sport Fund indicates this specialist work requires staff with high levels of expertise, but a lack of job security, progression and casual contracts associated with short-term funding has led some skilled practitioners to leave the sport for development sector. In addition, exposure to incidents or sensitive conversations can act as a 'trigger' for vicarious trauma and/or mental health challenges for staff. Staff recruited because of their lived experience, and the potential this provides to undertake this specialist work¹¹, may require additional support due to their lack of prior formal training.

5

Sport-based projects have a significant contribution to make towards supporting young people with a secondary level of need¹², but there is a necessity for organisations to work together to support young people. There is considerable variation in the nature, formality and robustness of networks and partnerships that sport-based organisations engage with¹³. There is a strong appetite for greater collaboration to build upon the partnerships and relationships established during the Youth Justice Sport Fund to ensure young people access support in a timely and joined-up manner.

- 10 An approach which capitalises on participation in sport (and other related activities including volunteering and mentoring) to achieve broader positive social outcomes. Coalter, F. (2007). Sport a wider social role: Who's keeping the score? London: Routledge.
- I I https://www.streetgames.org/research-and-insights/ youth-justice-sport-fund-external-evaluation-report/
- 12 Young people who may be at risk of either entering the criminal justice system or being a victim of crime.
- 13 https://www.streetgames.org/research-and-insights/ youth-justice-sport-fund-external-evaluation-report/



Key considerations in sport and criminal justice policies and strategies

1. Invest in the professional development and wellbeing of the workforce and prioritise staff retention:

Actively reducing youth crime is complex and, critically, requires staff who have the necessary skills and understanding to prevent further harm to young people and their communities. Appropriate supervision, training and qualifications, along with impactful ways of sharing effective practice, are needed to build and sustain sector capacity. Training needs include trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity training, youth work approaches and tackling inequalities.

The organisations undertaking this complex work are ideally placed to create positive relationships with young people in ways that other agencies and organisations within the community or youth justice sector may not be able to do. Working with some of the most vulnerable young people who face the greatest challenges in their daily lives requires a high level of skill and a consistent offer that young people can rely on. Building these skills and retaining highly-skilled staff is an ongoing challenge for the sector which has experienced funding cuts and short-term funding models.

Case study



Rap-Aid Youth Football Club

Rap-Aid Youth Football Club resulted from a football project which was initiated in 2009 to support newly-arrived Eastern European and ethnically diverse young people trying to build lives within a diverse and disadvantaged London community. The project was based on values of equality and fairness while the whole organisation focuses on family orientation and togetherness. The success of the project consequently saw the development of Rap-Aid Youth Football Club which now has 18 coaches, more than 15 volunteers and over 300 players ranging from under six to under-20 levels. Living in the community he supports, the founder is acutely aware of the pressures that some of the players and their peers experience which can result in offending, and how tense situations can escalate very quickly during adolescence. Support from the Youth Justice Sport Fund provided additional activities which were designed to be 'meaningful and impactful' (mentoring, accredited referee courses) to keep young people engaged and on a positive pro-social trajectory and away from anti-social influences and behaviours. The success of the project built on the pre-existing relationships with young people and their families.

https://www.rap-aidyouthfc.com/about-us



2. Utilise trusted specialist organisations to maximise the return on investment:

Locally-trusted specialist organisations are well positioned to understand the intricacies of local need and have a track record of delivering bespoke projects within challenging social and economic contexts. These organisations will have a clear vision of what they need to achieve, grounded in a shared theory of change, assuring high-quality expectations are embedded within sport-based projects from the outset.

Given the complex nature of this work it is vital that it is undertaken by organisations who are able to work effectively. If organisations do not understand the importance of adopting child-centred, strengths-based approaches they risk doing further harm to children and young people. The organisations funded through the Youth Justice Sport Fund were acutely aware of the importance of understanding the local contexts in which young people live and of not letting young people down when they had probably been let down by other adults in the past. It is therefore important that organisations who are supported to undertake this work can demonstrate their ability to meet a higher threshold of expectation than those associated with providing a universal, diversionary, community sport offer.

Case study



Ride High

Ride High is a charity based in Milton Keynes that transforms children's lives through opportunities to learn to ride and care for horses. Referrals are made by a range of organisations including the Local Authority, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), counsellors and bereavement support services, police, the Youth Offending Team (YOT), the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), the British Red Cross and refugee support programmes. The starting point is an initial consultation with a referred young person to ensure a good match between the young person and the organisation. Programmes can involve riding lessons, equine care and time spent in the 'club room' working on themed projects which provide targeted support for young people. Participants record their progress in a portfolio and for some this is the first time they have been able to experience success and document this. The value of the approach varies for individual participants because of their unique needs and experiences, and for being trusted to work with animals which was very significant because they had previously been let down by the adults in their lives.

https://www.ridehigh.org/



3. Strengthen partnership working between the youth justice and sport sectors to address the inconsistency and fragmentation in existing structures:

Delivering sport-based projects to support criminal justice outcomes is highly reliant on the integration of effective partnership working between youth justice and sport organisations operating at a national, regional and local level. Strengthening ongoing organisational relationships, disseminating effective practice and mobilising projects efficiently will maximise the contribution of sport-based programmes and ensure timely access to the opportunities that sport-based programmes provide.

This recommendation recognises that whilst sport-based projects have great potential to contribute to reducing offending and re-offending, they cannot do this in isolation. The Youth Justice Sport Fund demonstrated the value of adopting a consortium approach which connected projects who were all working towards a shared vision and aims. There were a number of benefits that arose from operating at scale including projects having access to national support with practical aspects of delivery (e.g. monitoring and evaluation) and access to opportunities to share effective practice.

Case study



Community Action Isle of Wight

Community Action Isle of Wight (IOW) is a voluntary sector support organisation that connects over 1,500 voluntary and community organisations on the island, and supports the maintenance and development of community amenities and services to ensure residents have access to the services they need. In the absence of comprehensive youth services on the island, Community Action IOW has worked across a number of youthfocused themes, identifying need and bringing together single agencies as collaborative groups to solve local issues related to young people. For example, Community Action IOW has successfully developed formal referral arrangements with neighbourhood policing to engage targeted young people and support them towards positive outcomes. Sport is used as a mechanism to engage these vulnerable young people, in particular those who have been removed from mainstream education or are known to police, and connects them with support services that may facilitate engagement in their communities in a positive and participatory way.



4. Support and empower organisations to commit to this work in the long term, to be agile and responsive to identified need, and exercise autonomy in their resource allocation:

The complex nature of this work and the dynamic contexts in which it takes place requires a reliable, flexible and responsive approach to delivery as situations can change and escalate quickly. Short term and unreliable funding limits what organisations can achieve and risks causing more harm to the vulnerable young people who place their trust in these organisations. Directly supporting organisations to access funding in more innovative, creative and consistent ways is instrumental to achieving this recommendation.

The contexts in which these organisations operate are often challenging and unpredictable, so it is important that projects have the flexibility to respond quickly to changes in the local environment. Young people's circumstances can also change very quickly, and issues can escalate in a short space of time. It is important therefore that sport-based projects can be dynamic in their response to changes in the context rather than being constrained by outdated project plans.

Case study



Thru Life

The focus of Thru Life is on young people and their families who are offered a range of activities and support, including bespoke leadership programmes to enable young people to develop the necessary skills to make better pro-social life choices. Programmes are flexible and tailored to meet both group or individual needs and include one-to-one mentoring, work experience placements and numerous sporting activities. The approach adopted is dynamic and practical and draws on the founders' personal experiences and benefits from the strong connections and partnerships the organisation has built.

https://thrulife.uk/



5. Facilitate the meaningful involvement of beneficiaries and experts by experience:

Ensuring the voices of beneficiaries are accessed and heard is critical to influencing the planning of future programmes and evidencing impact at both strategic and delivery level. Consideration must be given to how beneficiaries can be better involved in influencing the design, implementation and evaluation of sport-based programmes and projects that focus on reducing offending and re-offending. This recommendation connects to wider considerations around appropriate funding and support structures for monitoring, evaluation and learning.

There has been an increasing recognition of the importance of adopting 'Children First, Offenders' Second' (CFOS) practice within youth justice. Interventions that adopt CFOS principles are designed with children and young people, are future-orientated, asset-based and reflect the aspirations of the child. Success is demonstrated as much in the delivery as it is by the outputs and outcomes. Staff and volunteers understand the importance of working collaboratively with young people to design and implement projects that support young people to navigate their complex lives. Enabling youth voice promotes empowerment and efficacy which emerges from young people having a say in settings which affect them, sharing their thoughts, being listened to, influencing decision-making processes and providing them with a level of responsibility. Youth voice also promotes self-efficacy and agency which both

underpin the personal development journeys that are at the heart of sport-based interventions focused on reducing offending and re-offending. When demonstrating the impact of sport-based interventions, it is important to recognise the priorities that young people identify as critical.

Case study



North Paddington Youth Club

North Paddington Youth Club was established in 1942 and has become embedded in the local community where it is trusted by local people and organisational partners. The young people who access the youth club are offered a much-needed safe and supportive environment where they can engage in informal education and thrive. The youth club is open throughout the week, late into the evening, over the weekend and through the school holidays. The voices of the young people are reflected in the design, delivery, evaluation and sustainability of the varied programme. The members' forum and peer mentoring schemes are two of the ways in which these voices are accessed and heard.







Case study



Cathays & Central Youth & Community Project

Cathays & Central Youth & Community Project (CCYCP) operate a wide range of youth provision and community projects in Cardiff. Through its Sports + initiative, CCYCP provides beneficiaries with dedicated mentoring support and opportunities to obtain recognised qualifications in conjunction with sport activities to support the development of positive behaviours and pro-social identities. The Youth Justice Sport Fund was instrumental in strengthening its sport-based provision through the creation of new partnerships with local sport organisations and providing staff with access to trauma-informed training to better support beneficiaries.

Case study



People Empowered CIC

People Empowered CIC was funded to deliver diversionary sports activities including football, rugby, basketball, dodgeball, wrestling, dance and boxing for young people in Merseyside. Weekly one-to-one sessions were provided for a minimum of three months with 20 of the participants who were experiencing anxiety, displaying unwanted (anti-social or criminal) behaviour and some that had experienced ACEs. The participants demonstrated improved wellbeing, reported less anti-social behaviour and were better able to deal with anxiety using the strategies they developed. Parents provided positive feedback including one who said the project had by far the biggest physical and mental impact on their child, and another stating "thank you for giving me my boy back". A young participant, who had signed scholarship forms with a professional sports club, said "Thanks so much, you have changed my life. I wouldn't be where I am without you."



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 key priority areas for action to support the implementation of the research recommendations.

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Partnership

We must continue to convene critical partners, stakeholders and locally-trusted organisations to build on this and other emerging evidence, with the aim of identifying areas of relevant strategic and operational crossover, maintaining momentum in this space, and enhancing evidence and understanding of the role that sport can play to address youth crime and anti-social behaviour. This should be in partnership and alignment with any specially-commissioned taskforces or Government / policy-making bodies seeking to maximise the contribution of sport and physical activity to public policy goals, such as the National Physical Activity Taskforce (NPAT) established by the UK Government as part of its 2023 'Get Active' strategy.



2

Workforce development

Investment in workforce is critical to any sport for development approach. These roles require a high level of skill and a consistent offer that young people can rely on. Investment in training and career progression, such as in trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity training, youth work and tackling inequalities, and the wellbeing of the workforce must therefore be prioritised. This may be done through investing in the core costs of locally-trusted organisations.





3

Meaningful involvement of beneficiaries and experts by experience

The lived experiences of the young people that are engaged by, and benefit from, participation in sport-based programmes are a critical resource that must be encouraged to inform programme design, delivery and evaluation. A commitment to the principles of co-design is essential to developing sport-based programmes that have meaning and purpose for beneficiaries, and which, in turn, lead to long-term behavioural change. Focusing on issues derived from beneficiaries' lived experience and that intentionally and meaningfully recognise their viewpoints and perspectives will ensure that sport-based programmes are targeted and have impact.

4

Support the #OpenGoal Framework

Help build advocacy and awareness for sport for development by supporting the #OpenGoal Shared Advocacy Framework (above) co-designed by Coalition members. 'Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour' is one of five key outcomes highlighted within the framework which aims to demonstrate to policy-makers how sport for development is providing multiple returns on investment across numerous policy goals and can help to stem rising public costs.

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 at both local and national level, and welcome the opportunity to work with policy-makers, funders and commissioners on next steps.

Further resources from Coalition partners



Get Well Stay Well

In March 2023, the Get Well Stay Well (GWSW) Agreement was launched, marking a significant stride in integrating physical activity and sports into the welfare and justice systems. Endorsed by Stuart Andrew MP, Minister for Sport, Tourism, and Civil Society, this agreement provides a strategic framework for fostering health and enhancing collaborative efforts. Building upon this foundation, the GWSW Charter aims to further this mission. Central to its strategy is the biannual feedback from Charter signatories, a crucial element in developing a National Work Plan. The plan will be dedicated to increasing physical activity levels and addressing inactivity, with a focus on inclusivity and accessibility.

The GWSW initiative represents an innovative, policy-led approach to health-focused reform within the criminal justice sector, showcasing a model for effective integration of physical wellbeing into broader social systems. It also serves as a testament to the efficacy of cross-Government collaboration in effecting meaningful change.

https://allianceofsport.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/GWSW-Report.pdf





Levelling the Playing Field

The Levelling the Playing Field project exemplifies the transformative power of sport in fostering social change and reducing crime. Focused on ethnically diverse children and young people, the project focuses on those at risk of entering or who are already part of the criminal justice system. Spanning across England and Wales, the initiative has enabled 49 specialist delivery partners to positively impact the lives of over 22,000 ethnically diverse children and young people. It underscores the significant role of sport and physical activity in shaping lives and strengthening communities. This impactful reach is further highlighted through the promotion of over 180 articles and success stories. These narratives vividly illustrate the profound influence that engagement in sport and physical activity can have in altering life trajectories and nurturing community cohesion.

https://www.levellingtheplayingfield.org/

A Right to Sport

In September 2023 the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) called on the Government to guarantee two hours of extra-curricular sport every week for secondary school pupils to help boost academic attainment and reduce youth crime. The CSJ outlined what it calls a 'Right to Sport' for Britain's 3.6million secondary pupils in its report entitled 'Game Changer: A plan to transform young lives through sport'. Report authors say the radical plan is much needed in the wake of the Covid pandemic, which led to the closure of schools for long periods. The two additional hours a week of sporting activity would be delivered on top of traditional PE time, and as part of new funds supporting extra-curricular activity provided on school premises by local community organisations, including sports clubs and charities.

https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/ library/game-changer

Read more from the Coalition's #OpenGoal series

Moving for Mental
Health produced in
partnership with Mind,
Edge Hill University and
Loughborough University.

Moving for mental health

How bysical activity, sport, and sport for development can transform them after COVID-10.

Active for Employment produced in partnership with London Youth, Premiership Rugby, Sports Leaders UK, StreetGames, Street League and the University of Bath.



To read the report, visit

https://sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/moving-mental-health

To read the report, visit

https://www.sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/active-employment

Sport for development. It 's an...









