

London Youth Submission

Sport for Development Coalition
*Sport tackles the mental health and
wellbeing crisis*

| About London Youth

London Youth is the representative body for youth work in London. We are a youth charity on a mission to improve the lives of young people in London, challenging them to become the best they can.

We directly develop the confidence, resilience, and relationship skills of over 27,000 children and young people each year through our arts and culture, employability, outdoor education, sports, and youth social action programmes. In every borough of London, through programmes run every day and most evenings and services open to all, our members reach tens of thousands more.

| About this response

This is a response on behalf of London Youth and supported by our 650+ members, to the Sport for Development Coalition's consultation, "*Sport and physical activity, COVID-19 and the mental health and wellbeing crisis*".

Throughout this paper, we reference several different programmes that underpin our response. These include learnings from 117 London Youth members currently engaged in one of our Getting Active Sport Development programmes, which place a particular emphasis on supporting young people who are inactive/less active and those that face barriers in accessing regular sport and physical activity opportunities outside of formal education. These programmes intentionally use sport and physical activity to:

- Improve physical and mental wellbeing
- Strengthen and support peer relationships
- Improve attitudes and understanding of the importance of being regularly active
- Nurture and develop coaching and leadership skills
- Build confidence and capacity within community youth organisations

Active Talent: specific Sport For Development programme, working with 150 at-risk young people to improve their understanding of and ability to use sport as a tool for social integration, as well as to benefit Londoners' physical and mental health through sport and physical activity interventions.

Good for Girls: programme focused on supporting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic young women aged 10-14, who will take part in weekly sports/arts activities in their youth organisation to promote positive mental health, whilst youth workers are upskilled to become Wellbeing Leads and embed positive mental health practices into their delivery.

| Our response

| Key messages

- Young people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic
- Community youth organisations delivering sport and physical activity have been a lifeline for young people
- Young people place greater importance on their mental health and wellbeing since the pandemic
- Funding is required for youth organisations to continue supporting young people as we emerge from the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on young people, they are [most likely to have lost their job](#) and be [struggling with their mental health](#) due to the effects of extended periods of isolation. The 650+ community youth organisations in our membership have been working tirelessly during this time to minimise the effects of the pandemic on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Many of these organisations have been using sport as a tool to engage young people, adapting their provisions where possible to ensure that the young people they work with are remaining active and providing a safe space for them to connect with their peers and youth workers. These organisations need more funding certainty and unrestricted funding to be able to continue this work as we emerge from the pandemic and face the effects of the mental health and wellbeing crisis for young people.

| Young people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic

"We have found that the lockdown and general uncertainty of this pandemic has had a massive impact on the physical and mental health of our young people within our communities. We aim to support our young people who have shown increased: isolation / social anxiety / depression / weight gain." (FFEM) It was clear from their applications to our sports programmes that youth workers and organisations are aware of the benefits of sport and physical activity in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people and were actively seeking funding to support them to be able to continue delivering activities for this growing need.

The pandemic has affected different groups of young people disproportionately, with those who were less engaged and may have had existing mental health problems before lockdown, growing further away from their community and peers. "Covid-19 has aggravated the situation causing some serious mental health concerns over not being able to socialise, having movement restricted, not being able to come to our centre, a loss of income and boredom. Just not knowing what the future holds has been particularly depressing for some who, even before the pandemic, were at the fringe of society." (The Boys Clubhouse) The impact has been greater on young people who rely on youth organisations as a safe space to express themselves and be active outside of school or the home.

The data from our current Getting Active programme shows that of the young people engaged to date: 46% are young women/girls, 84% are from Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority communities, 15% have a disability or life limiting health condition (including mental health), and 32% live in the top 20% deprived communities in the country. As well as the traditional barriers to physical activity

faced by these target groups, including lack of facilities/clubs in their communities, affordability and accessibility, additional barriers have been identified because of the pandemic, including increased levels of isolation, low levels of wellbeing and motivation, social anxiety, and health issues.

| Community youth organisations delivering sport and physical activity have been a lifeline for young people

Many youth organisations have seen an improvement in the mental health and wellbeing of the young people they are engaging through their sports programmes. “We have seen growth in confidence and motivation. Many have been greatly impacted by Covid-19 in terms of loss, isolation, and anxiety. A young person who previously found leaving home challenging has requested to volunteer with video recording and editing. A young person who experienced anxiety and depression is showing a growing interest in being trained as a peer mentor.” (ASE) This is an example of sport being chosen as the tool to engage young people and resulting in personal development, providing young people with skills for later life.

Youth organisations were ready and willing to adapt their services to the ever-changing guidance and restrictions around youth provision and physical activity delivery. Many moved their services online to stay connected to their young people, ensuring they had access to opportunities for physical activity at home. “The impact on our kids lies in the relief and break from the negative feelings brought on by the pandemic. A chance to meet up with their friends (albeit online) to laugh and practice their skills make a difference to their mental health at this time.” (Positive Role Models) Some organisations had more success than others in engaging young people online and have had some unexpected outcomes as a result. “We have really created a model that works online that is engaging and beneficial for the whole community. As a team we have reflected and understood the importance of our own mental health and well-being, coming together to support each other to ensure mentally we are able to work effectively and create impact.” (Inspirational Youth)

Other organisations had to adapt their services to meet more immediate mental health and wellbeing needs of their young people. “During lockdown we provided YouTube clips and online clips but we realised the effect of lockdown on the girls so we had to provide telephone support and counselling to improve their mental wellbeing.” (ECYPS) Even those organisations who were successful in delivering sessions online expressed difficulty in replicating the unique environment of a community youth organisation. As we found out via our ['Space of Our Own'](#) report, youth organisations play a crucial role in strengthening the communities of London, bringing young people together and provide a platform for connections and relationships to form, providing a safe, welcoming space where young people have ownership and sense of control. Combining this with known, trusted and expert youth professionals, forms a strong foundation from which to deliver sport and physical activity from.

In the current Getting Active cohort, 41% of youth organisations have not been on one of our sport programmes before, and many are new to delivering sport and physical activity. These organisations are beginning to see the positive effects that sessions are having on their young people’s mental health and wellbeing for the first time. “We have never really tried to incorporate fitness or sport into the young leaders sessions, often concentrating more on arts

activities, so it is interesting to focus on fitness and health and it has connected really well to our discussions about mental health and wellbeing.” (Coin Street Community Centre)

We welcome the elevated status that physical activity has gained during this time; being one of only 5 legitimate reasons to leave the house during lockdown has meant that some young people have started to build active habits for the first time and youth organisations are seeing sport as a tool for personal and community development. We aim to use this momentum to focus on retention within our current programmes, as well as developing our sport for development strategy for future programmes.

It is important to note that these positive outcomes last longer than the programme duration. From our longitudinal study of young people on Getting Active last year, 92% feel more positive about being physically active, 90% feel more confident about taking part in sport or physical activity, and 89% feel better about themselves. Young people on Active Talent also reported an increase in wellbeing from taking part in the programme. The target audience for this project was at-risk young people. At the end of the programme, 78% of young people agreed that sport can improve people's lives and that the things they do in their lives were worthwhile. ‘I think the project has really, really, really helped him ... they've literally become like family. And I think that's really supported him because during the pandemic he lost his best friend and just finding that new circle and all of them have in common interests has been very beneficial’. (Youth Worker)

| Young people place greater importance on their mental health and wellbeing since the pandemic

The Active Talent programme has also changed the way the young people approach their roles as young leaders: “It's made me recognise and ensure I start each class by checking in on people, making sure they're okay. It's not just about the dance, it's supporting them as individuals.” (The Movement Factory) Some of our members contributed to the [Jack Petchey Foundation 'Shaping Our Future' Report](#) which provides evidence for this increased emphasis on wellbeing that young people have for themselves and their peers. Over half of respondents expressed more worry about their mental health and almost three-quarters were more worried about their friends'/family's wellbeing than before lockdown. 43% of young people said their clubs and extra-curricular activities were important for their wellbeing over the lockdown and 39% said mental health and wellness support is one of the top opportunities that they feel will help them reach their goals in the future.

Many of the social action projects in Active Talent were focused on the mental health of their peers and communities. The young people from Southwark Gymnastics developed a ‘mood box’, which included mood charts and prompts, such as a song of the day, positive activities/exercises, and a positive affirmation. “Well, because of lockdown, I kind of realised that like, my friends, family and even myself that I found that mental health for myself was kind of slipping. So when I found out about opportunity, I was like, it's a great way to kind of raise awareness and uplift people's mental health in my community.”

During our [Champion Girls](#) programme, there were two key themes connecting the young people together: female empowerment and mental health. ‘The young women wanted to raise mental health awareness from a young female perspective. During the programme, they developed mental health guidebooks, a book of mental health poems, but wanted to take it to the

next level'. They created a 'healthy eating and dance session to help activate other young women their age mentally, physically and emotionally'. At the end of the programme, 78% reported an increase in self-esteem and 79% reported they were now more aware of how to support their mental health and wellbeing. 'I've learnt fitness is important for the rest of my life and keeping active helps me manage my worries and concerns into achievable hurdles to get over'.

London Youth [Microgrants](#) provided up to £400 funding to encourage young people to create a project that promoted or raised awareness of positive mental health and wellbeing in their community. A young person from Streatham Youth and Community Trust co-led a series of sessions on fitness and discussion leading up to a residential to talk about mental health with young people who attend her youth centre. "It encouraged young people to talk about this issue and let them know that it's ok. It educated young people in the local community and helped them learn something new through fun activities." Young people chose to lead on projects that not only linked to positive mental health and wellbeing, but also found innovative ways to link this to their career interests. One young person from Mitcham Community Trust said, "I am really hoping that this is the beginning of my dreams becoming real-being able to teach dance when I'm older".

| Funding is required for youth organisations to continue supporting young people as we emerge from the pandemic

Young people have struggled during lockdown, with mental health and safety at home a particular cause for concern. Our ['Running on Reserves'](#) report during the first lockdown found 73% of youth organisations said that mental health of their young people has been affected and 54% are concerned their young people aren't in a safe environment during lockdown. "Our concern is whilst that we are able to make [mental health] referrals, there is a complete lack of specialist services available to our young people." The [Good For Girls](#) programme aims to tackle some of these concerns, helping youth clubs become mental health hubs; young women get support earlier, meaning fewer require referral to specialist services. Sport and arts sessions are used as the tool to engage young women, where trained youth professionals create safe spaces for young people to talk about their mental health and learn tools to manage their wellbeing.

The latest [Young Minds Covid-19 report](#) underpins our argument for sport for development programmes and the essential role of community youth and sport organisations, with one of their recommendations to government being to 'ensure that local charities and youth clubs, which provide vital early mental health support, survive the economic impact of pandemic'.

Based on our Running on Reserves report, London Youth published 4 recommendations to support the youth sector moving forwards:

- 1) Community youth organisations need funding certainty over the next 6-12 months
- 2) Community youth organisations need unrestricted funds
- 3) Prioritise young people's mental health**
- 4) Guidance for changing circumstances

Get In touch

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