

Sported – Written evidence (NPS0059)

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Sported is a UK-wide charity promoting fairness and creating opportunities for young people through grassroots sport and physical activity. We are the UK's largest network of community groups supporting half a million young people to overcome barriers to reach their full potential.

The 2,600 groups within our network are deeply rooted within their communities and led by highly committed, passionate local people who often give up their time voluntarily to run initiatives that help young people from their community to succeed.

We specialise in supporting the survival, growth and long-term sustainability of local community sport and physical activity organisations, by providing free professional expertise, resources and operational support. Most of our groups are under-funded and under-resourced, often run on shoestring budgets by only a handful of dedicated staff and volunteers, but their ability to engage and enhance the lives of the young people and tackle the problems that matter in their local community is unrivalled.

For over ten years, Sported has supported grassroots groups and provided them with vital support. Through giving this support we have a good understanding, experience and expertise in sport and recreation practice. We will therefore be submitting evidence on questions 2, 3 and 6.

Q2. How can children and young people be encouraged to participate in sport and recreation both at school and outside school, and lead an active lifestyle? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.

Supporting the role of community groups in getting young people active

Grassroot sport groups *know* their young people. Often the coaches and leaders are from the area, and the sense of community that the group creates is key to attracting young people. Often programmes that are "parachuted in" or "top down" are not as successful at engaging and retaining young people, as those that are community designed and led.

"How do we engage them? It's through the fact that I'm from the area, I've been doing this work here for the last 15 years" Boxing club, London.

They create a safe and stable space for young people, that is inclusive and welcoming. Often, they are intergenerational; families train together, parents come along, and over the years older generations bring the young ones in. They provide a sense of belonging, and recruitment is often done by word of mouth within the community.

"We don't care where you're from, what your background is, how much money you have" Netball club, London.

The leaders of grassroots groups are passionate, committed and have a desire to provide something for their community. They are exceptional role models and often act as more of a mentor/ youth worker than a coach.

"As long as I'm here and there's breath in my lungs I'll continue to pursue it and continue to deliver what I'm delivering on a daily basis." Boxing Club, Manchester.

We must recognise the vital role grassroots groups play in reaching and engaging young people and provide them with the support that they need to grow and thrive. You can read more about the work of our groups through these recent [articles](#) featured in the Times and The Sunday Times.

Facilitating better connections between school and community settings

Our work is focused in the community but we notice a disconnect between in-school sport and community sport and believe a more joined up approach would be of benefit to young people. Sported contributed to CSJ's recent [report](#): A Level Playing Field: Equalising Access to Sport and Exercise for Young People after Covid-19.

Education sites are a key provider of sports facilities in England, as they own over a third (39%) of all facilities; 77% of sports halls and 61% of artificial grass pitches are located on school, college, and university sites. In contrast, 85% of community groups do not own their own facilities, causing one of their biggest challenges. Ensuring community use of these facilities is vital, especially given the pressures on local authority resources and the drive to rationalise and transform how services are delivered. Adopting a strategic approach to how the stock of facilities on school sites is viewed as part of the overall facility supply, is crucial to addressing increased demand by community groups.

The importance of the school asset, at the heart of all local communities, cannot be under-estimated (asset-based community development). Schools are perfect examples of safe and trusted spaces and environments for engagement and delivery, for young people and delivery partners.

Ensuring sport and physical activity provision is accessible in school holidays

Sported is currently partnering with ukactive on the GLA funded [Open Doors programme](#). Open Doors is part of ukactive's wider policy call for government to invest in its schools as Community Hubs, unlocking school facilities outside of the school day to support young people. The model focuses on utilising school sports facilities as safe, trusted spaces where the most vulnerable young people can regain confidence, receive positive encouragement, and be directed towards a career pathway, facilitated by positive role models, mentors and coaches.

By creating hubs for activity and youth engagement, Open Doors works to reduce youth violence and crime by making positive community connections, whilst also improving physical and mental health.

Success of the programme/Good Practice

- Enthusiasm and willingness of schools and groups to support delivery, and the enthusiasm of the children and young people who attended
- Utilised local organisations to support delivery, with exit pathways signposted
- Relationships developed between schools and delivery organisations
- School staff volunteered time to support programme delivery in school
- Groups benefitted from locked-in school hire costs due to relationship with ukactive school network and facility booking providers (e.g. Schools Plus)
- Pupils who attended during the holiday periods, admitted they would have been doing nothing if it weren't for the programme
- Groups were able to dedicate time to most vulnerable children and young people with one-to-one coach support
- Opportunity for small local delivery organisations to learn from more established delivery organisations

Challenges

- Running since October 2020, Covid-19 both affected the recruitment of children and young people and the delivery itself
- Challenges of data sharing between schools / activity providers
- Challenge in quality assurance of delivery

Q3. How can adults of all ages and backgrounds, particularly those from under-represented groups, including women and girls, ethnic minorities, disabled people, older people, and those from less affluent backgrounds, be encouraged to lead more active lifestyles? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.

Sported's network supports young people that are typically under-represented. The age range that our groups support is generally 11–25-year-olds. Within our network, 42% of our groups are working with people living in poverty; 21% are working with disabled people; 17% are specifically targeting young women and girls; and 16% are specifically targeting young people from ethnic minority communities.

Grassroot groups who work with these audiences have several common characteristics which means they are very good at delivering to these marginalised audiences, and therefore it is essential these groups are supported and encouraged. However, recent research by Sported has found that these common characteristics mean they are disadvantaged when it comes to applying for funds. Reasons include:

- They are driven by local need and are deeply rooted within their community so have little need for an online presence.
- Being led by volunteers, and often one or two key people, means they have limited resources and aren't able to commit the necessary time to write applications.
- They are running on a shoestring budget and therefore may lack the necessary financial requirements and governance making them appear unrealistically frugal.
- Small local organisations are often unknown to funders.

- Being driven by a migrant population means they may have different cultural reference points compared to those who write funding strategies.
- If they are educated outside of the UK, and have English as a second language, formal written English is harder.
- Delivering informal and accessible activity means they may struggle to find funding pots that fit or understand what they do.

Often there is relevant information and research from industry experts on how to engage under-represented groups, but it is vital that this material is made accessible to the community groups on the ground for whom it is intended to support. Group leaders are often time-poor (over 50% of our groups are entirely volunteer-led) and tend to be disconnected from the wider community sports system. Sported's role is to ensure information and insight is made suitable for our groups' needs and that groups are supported to develop engagement plans to help them translate their learning into practice.

We have found that to reach, engage and retain typically underrepresented groups, it is vital to consider:

- Motivations – It must be recognised that these are often different for different groups and motivations must be supported (e.g. Evidence shows that women and girls are motivated by fun and friendship, not formality and competition.)
- Confidence - People/leaders of groups need to gain confidence in order to work with new audiences e.g. disabled people
- Intersectionality – We must not consider people as just female, or disabled, or less affluent. We need to promote a more flexible model and one that works in practice.

Women and girls

Sported has delivered 3 women and girls projects to date that encourage participation – EngageHer (in Northern Ireland), Project 51 (in England and Scotland) and Girls Unite (in England.) The purpose of each project was to change attitudes and confidence levels amongst young women, reduce and tackle negative stereotypes, and better equip community group leaders on how to provide inclusive sessions.

The main learning from all of our women and girls work on how best to encourage participation is:

1. Consultation – Importance of consulting with your audience to avoid assumptions around what they want and tailor activity to their needs. It's important to turn consultation into action to show you have listened and made changes.
2. Experience – First impressions count; the welcome, a friendly face, pairing them with a buddy, bringing along a friend, the follow up. Making women feel comfortable and confident is imperative for retention.

3. Representation – Ensure they think the club/sport/activity is for them. Show women/girls like them in the marketing materials, on the website, in the membership. This is especially important for minority groups.

Using Project 51 was an example, we identified the successes as:

- Genuine relationships
 - Strong working partnership between Sported and Women in Sport
 - Sported Regional Manager's close relationship with the groups on the ground
 - Great rapport built between Sported mentors and group leaders
 - Strong connections between community groups and their participants
- Quality of knowledge - The knowledge and learning shared in this project draws on the years of expertise and insight generated by Women in Sport, and therefore is authentic and highly relevant.
- Willingness of groups - Community groups from across the three regions, Scotland, South West England and the West Midlands, were keen to engage in the project and learn, and have integrated that learning into their strategies. 80% of groups remained engaged throughout the lifetime of the project and many are starting to see female participation increase within their groups.

The full Project 51 programme evaluation is available [here](#).

Disabled people

Disabled adults face a wide range of barriers to participation and this can be different for different types and levels of disabilities, so it can be a very personal experience and story for every individual who has a disability when it comes to being physically active.

More needs to be done to work with local community groups who have disabled participants as part of their core audience. Either to provide them with the tools to deliver physical activity themselves with confidence (through support of an umbrella organisation) or through working in partnership with an existing provider who is keen to work in this field. The partners must be willing to listen and take on board the requirements of the disability focused group to ensure activities are suitable and appropriate for that what the participants want and need – not what that delivery organisations want to do.

Disability projects and work will cost a lot more than those for non-disabled participants. Therefore funders/stakeholders/partners need to build this into their expectations of what is realistic to achieve. Cost of additional equipment is one element, but it can also be much more expensive to deliver activities where double the space needs to be booked, more coaches/support staff are required and transporting people to and from venues is necessary. All this needs to be built in and considered in isolation – such projects should not be compared to their non-disabled equivalent because such comparisons are unhelpful and constrain development of exciting, engaging and inclusive activities.

The disability sports sector needs to become more proactive in driving change themselves. It is no good 'just' being advisory or supporting mainstream organisations to become more inclusive – they need to demonstrate the good practice themselves and deliver projects and opportunities to drive this change with their engagement and support. Show the way rather than just showing the theory.

Support is needed to help mainstream sports and activity centres to be more inclusive, both their physical space and their staff/volunteer understanding and attitudes. This also needs to form part of a holistic approach – it is no good making a venue and its people inclusive and accessible, if there is no programme of activities running there that could encourage disabled people to join.

As with all these things, many successful disability sport providers are relatively small but quickly get requests for their services from across the sector desperate to increase their disability provision through a strong, reliable organisation. However, it is often the case that their success is built on a few key individuals who drive it forward and have the right attitude to supporting participants. If they get stretched or have no more capacity, then the 'product' suffers. For such 'expert' providers, more needs to be done to help them train up suitable support staff who they can trust to deliver activities just as effectively. They also need the support to cover their core costs and wages, so it enables the organisation to expand without it penalising their own organisation.

Inclusion needs to be built into all future sports and physical activity developments and projects. Umbrella organisations should have accessibility built into all they produce if they wish to receive state funding (e.g. through Sport England). Their websites and communications must be fully accessible (e.g. subtitles on videos, documents readable for those with VI, etc.) and they should have inclusion board or champions to help scrutinise all developments internally for accessibility. Boards should be more inclusive with disability representation at all organisations.

All this creates a groundwork that allows disabled people to feel that the sports and physical activity sector is working for them too and gives them the confidence to get active.

Q6. How can racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and ableism in sport be tackled?

We conducted a piece of qualitative research in 2020 in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. Between August and September, we consulted with 15 grassroots organisations in our network, across all four home nations, in order to understand directly from groups their experiences of racism with the community sport sector.

According to Sporting Equals research from 2018, just three per cent of Board members of national governing bodies are Black, while 40% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic participants said their experiences of local sport or leisure clubs had been negative, compared to just 14% of white British.

Our research found that Black, Asian and minority ethnic people working or volunteering in community sport can feel “patronised and poorly represented” within the grassroots and community sport sector.

Some of the comments in the report, which are all anonymous, include:

- On systemic racism: “We’re not trusted with money.”
- On equality: “The experiences I had growing up, I don’t want that for the next generation.”
- On representation in sports governance: “Whatever we feed in, the strategy will still be played out through a white lens.”

Recommendations from the report include:

- Create capacity for an ongoing BLM working group to discuss findings and agree actions.
- Ensure safe spaces or focus groups to share experiences and develop ideas, e.g. community cohesion events.
- Challenge sports councils and national governing bodies to review representation and pathways for individuals.
- Identify leaders from different sectors and provide platforms to amplify or spotlight issues.
- Review potential bias in funding streams, and continually question suitability for target audiences.
- Generate more multi-media content and case studies to highlight best practice and case studies.
- Allow participants to describe their own identity (including protected characteristics) and agree to be open and honest.

The full report *Tackling racism at the grassroots* can be read [here](#).

An example of a success story/ good practice here is that Sported partnered with Nike to deliver the *Future Leaders in Sport* programme. The project recognises the ability and ideas of young Black, Asian and minority ethnic Londoners and gives them the tools and support to realise a sports project designed to tackle local issues facing young people.

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