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Building Stronger Communities Research Summary

How do Access Sport clubs contribute to the building of stronger communities?



Research undertaken by University of Bath

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Introduction



This summary report outlines the findings of the Building Stronger Communities research undertaken by the University of Bath. This research project was commissioned by Access Sport to understand how sport and physical activity contribute to community engagement, a sense of belonging, and, in turn, the building of stronger communities. Focusing specifically on community sport settings, the research sought to establish:

1. The impact of, and barriers to, building community engagement and a sense of belonging.
2. The processes or conditions which enable increased community engagement and sense of belonging.
3. How Access Sport and other sector organisations can sustain these two outcomes so that participation in sport and physical activity benefits more children and young people in the future.

To read the full research report, please click on the link below.
[Building Stronger Communities Report >](#)



Research Methods

The research utilised a mixed methods approach, which involved three concurrent and overlapping elements:

1

A focus group with Access Sport staff to gain a holistic view of our programmes and delivery model.

2

Qualitative case study examinations of specific project sites and/or clubs across our Changing Places programmes in Bristol, London and Manchester. Four project sites/ clubs were selected in each location.

3

A quantitative online survey distributed across Access Sport's Inclusive Club Network, a national network of over 300 community sport clubs. The survey targeted parents/ guardians of programme participants and the participants themselves. The survey was completed by 193 parents/guardians and 270 programme participants.

Key Findings

The key findings of the research highlight that:

- 1. Community sport challenges the traditional idea that communities are solely defined by place or locality.**
- 2. Sense of belonging and community underpin the wider transformational benefits of community sport.**
- 3. Clubs provide essential opportunities for young people to have positive and safe social interactions.**
- 4. Clubs have a positive impact on parents/guardians as they enable them to socially interact with one another.**
- 5. Sense of belonging extends beyond the boundaries of a community club.**



1. Community sport challenges the traditional idea that communities are solely defined by place or locality

Traditional views that define community as a place or locality assume that people prefer community sport to be available close to where they live. In this project many participants were from the community where the club is physically located, however other participants were also willing and able to travel longer distances to participate. Some participants had to travel a significant distance to engage in sport because of a lack of accessible facilities and opportunities in their local area. Participants that travelled built a sense of community based on their sporting interests, rather than their geographic community. This finding challenges the traditional views that define community by place or location as individuals were able to create a sense of community and belonging based upon shared interests and interacting with like-minded people.

“There’s a mix, a definite mix, I’ve seen people from St George [Bristol], I’ve actually met someone who’s come up from Cornwall to go to Glasgow; they wanted to tick this [pump track] off their list.”

“Nothing is in the immediate community for us. Wiltshire FA have just started up a disability football team, which [our child] now goes to, but we’ve got four kids, and nobody knows about it. I think cos’ it’s quite a long way, it’s about a 35-40 minute drive for me, it’s quite a long way for some people on a Saturday, especially if you work as well in the week...we don’t live [close to the club]...”

2. Sense of belonging and community underpin the wider transformational benefits of sport

The survey data shows that both parents/guardians and children reported high levels of belonging and emotional connection to their sports clubs.

91%

of parents or guardians agreed that they felt a sense of belonging to their sports club.

88%

of parents/guardians agreed they had an emotional connection to their sports club.

97%

of young people agreed they felt a sense of belonging to their sports club.

95%

of young people agreed they had an emotional connection to their sports club.

In the interviews children and parents/guardians explained how they highly rate their sense of belonging and connection to their sports clubs as the basis for acquiring wider benefits such as improved physical and mental wellbeing. As well as unlocking improvements in physical and mental wellbeing, opportunities for socialisation within the clubs helped to improve educational attainment, addressed feelings of social isolation and acted as a vehicle to divert attention away from antisocial behaviour.

“I mean I’d go as far as saying, like, it’s potentially saved their lives ... a couple of these girls, their mental health was so poor because they’d acquired their disability at sort of teenage age and were very isolated.”

“I found that actually he’s doing better than what anyone ever expected because he’s got that confidence, and that confidence now has gone onto school ... and that’s a year and a half, you know, he’s in the Paralympic training team.”

3. Clubs provide essential opportunities for young people to have positive and safe social interactions

Clubs provide an inclusive space for positive, authentic and meaningful social interaction to occur. Clubs also support the development of strong intergenerational relationships. Participants indicated that this experience was something that more traditional institutions, such as schools, were often unable to replicate. Importantly, parents/guardians trust the activities at clubs, and they recognise the club offers a safe space for emotional connections and social interactions to take place. In partnership with Access Sport staff, clubs were able to establish an inclusive culture that focused on creating authentic interactions which fostered a sense of emotional safety and acceptance for all participants.

“... strangers become like, you know, a family to you...like, you're catching up with your family...to see the kids being able to, kids that were unable to even look at you...to hold a conversation to tell you how their day was, or tell you, 'hey I didn't like that' and so on, to see them going through that change, through the way you deal with them...is mind blowing”

“They've [volunteers] got a wonderful attitude, I mean when she arrived and they didn't know her, they were so welcoming. And Sarah looks at body language an awful lot, more than words and she felt, 'yeah, this is ok', I'm accepted here this isn't someone saying, "oh, so we've got one of them", you know, which sometimes the words say inclusion but the body language says I'm a bit scared of this, but they're excellent”

4. Clubs have a positive impact on parents/guardians as they enable them to socially interact with one another

The positive impact clubs have on building a sense of belonging and encouraging community engagement also extends to the parents/guardians of the participants. Volunteers and project staff highlighted how the clubs were able to provide an avenue for informal interaction to take place, allowing parents/guardians to socialise, share their commonalities and establish friendships. The clubs also afford a welcome break from the stresses and anxieties encountered in their everyday lives, and parents/guardians are able to build a network to share information and resources surrounding access to other inclusive activities for their children. This is often facilitated through social media platforms, however, 'in person' networks provide additional emotional support for many parents/guardians.

“Parents are on the side-lines they’re chatting, you find a commonality, your child is racing, your child’s training ... essentially, normal people will get together and they will chat and they will make friends ... I know even parents that I’ve met previously whose children no longer ride, and my child doesn’t ride, we are still friends.”

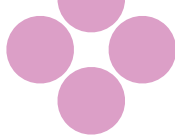
“Some of the parents that even come out, you know, they don’t get out half of the time. It’s good for them to mix, I always go along and ‘ave a bit of a laugh with ‘em.”

5. Sense of belonging extends beyond the boundaries of a community club

The research found that community sports clubs act as a first step towards integrating participants into different areas of their local community. The clubs are also able to bring together young people who were unfamiliar with one another and enable friendships to be established. Through this process, the programme participants form communities that engage socially outside the confines of the clubs, an unintended outcome that was perceived as hugely beneficial.

“I walk the dog down here most days and it can be quite daunting when you come across groups of say adolescents, even older people, that you’re not necessarily gonna interact with or talk to ... with everyone here [at the pump track] like this, sat around in a group all friendly, some of them [participants] bring them in as well. That’s what I was saying about engaging with the local anti-socialites I would say ... I’m trying to be nice about it, but that’s you know the honest opinion.”

“The females at our wheelchair basketball team have really, have shown the strongest community engagement outside of our space. They consistently meet up in their community to go to the cinema, to bake a cake, to go to the pub, whatever they wanna do. That has been one of the best, best outcomes of that club.”



Features of an Inclusive Community Sports Club

Building a sense of belonging is a significantly overlooked aspect of sport and community intervention work. Despite it being a central pillar of club development, too many organisations are failing to recognise the value of a community focused approach. By prioritising community engagement and a sense of belonging, clubs can maximise other social outcomes, including improved health, wellbeing and life prospects.

To support clubs, this research highlights five key features that contribute to creating an inclusive community-focused environment:

- 1. Know your participants** – investing time and effort to get to know and understand the needs, preferences and challenges facing the participants at your club enables deeper social connections.
- 2. Be flexible and responsive when session planning** – a sense of belonging is improved when participants are involved in the design of activities or are afforded opportunities to take ownership of how they engage.
- 3. Focus on individual, incremental improvement in participants** – inclusive sports clubs encourage opportunities for participants to develop and improve their sport skills at their own pace.
- 4. Provide support for club volunteers** – volunteers are the lifeblood of any community sport, so making volunteers feel valued is essential.
- 5. Integrate parents/guardians into the club** – sports clubs act as ‘community hubs’ and provide families valuable opportunities to build friendships, share information and connect with their community.

These five features form the basis of the Building Stronger Communities Playbook which supports community sport providers to create inclusive environments.

You can read the full document by clicking on the link below.
[Building Stronger Communities Playbook](#)>

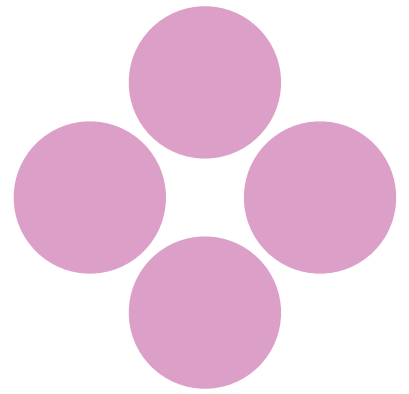


Access Sport Commitments

Access Sport will use these findings to:

- 1. Build our understanding of community engagement** and sense of belonging outcomes across our programmes and embed the measurement of these outcomes into our ongoing work to support community sports clubs, coaches and volunteers to be more inclusive.
- 2. Work with community sports clubs and groups** to support them in proactively working towards having the five features of an inclusive club to maximise their impact in creating a sense of belonging and increasing community engagement.
- 3. Collaborate with the sport for development sector** to raise awareness of community sport clubs' ability to give young people a sense of belonging and strengthen communities.
- 4. Encourage funders to recognise** that a sense of belonging and community are fundamental to unlocking the wider transformational benefits of sport and need to be prioritised when they support and fund the sector.





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**We would love to hear how you have used this research.
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Building Stronger Communities is a research project undertaken by Bath University, commissioned by Access Sport.

