

Sport and the Church in London

A summary of research commissioned by Sport England and the Diocese of London

Introduction

Sport England, working with the Diocese of London, engaged Substance in 2014 to undertake primary research to enhance our understanding of the potential assets that the Church holds for sport in terms of places, opportunities and community reach.

The Diocese of London is an ecclesiastical administrative area of the Church of England covering 177 square miles and 17 London boroughs including most of Greater London north of the River Thames and west of the River Lea. The Diocese covers approximately 4 million people with 398 Parishes, 489 Church Buildings, around 550 worshipping communities and 70,000+ members - up over 60% in 20 years. It also runs 153 schools educating 54,000 children from all faiths and backgrounds.

The Diocese of London has recently launched its strategic intent: Capital Vision 2020. One of the 10 priorities within this Strategy is to engage more deeply with sport and the creative arts to reach new people and places by opening up church buildings, strengthening the links between schools and their local community and getting more young people involved in the local Christian community. This research is a starting point for this priority.

Objectives

The objectives of the research project were three fold:

- To conduct an audit of the current stock of places and opportunities for sport provided by churches within the Diocese of London
- To review the reach of churches within their local communities to identify which audiences they are engaged with
- To assess the potential for delivering more sport through the Diocese of London

Research methodology

The audit utilised a 'full-sample' survey of all known contacts responsible for church facilities and sport provision and all church schools across the Diocese. The church survey generated a 54% response rate and the school survey a 29% response rate.

The review of the reach of churches' sporting offer was based on responses to dedicated questions in the survey as well as field visits and interviews at a sample of 10 locations. These were selected on a stratified sample basis aligned to distribution of the location and type of facility identified following the initial parish survey analysis.

Case studies were undertaken at the following locations:

- St Mark's Church Hall Youth session, Islington
- Inspire Church Football session, Shoreditch
- St Mary's Church Hall Zumba class, Ealing
- St Barnabas Church Smash the Fat session, Bow
- St Paul's Church Football session, Shadwell
- All Saints Church Football session, Brentford
- St Andrew's Church Young men's gym session, Chelsea
- All Souls Church sport sessions, Regent Street
- St Andrew's Church of England Primary School, Islington
- Holy Trinity Brompton Football training, Clapham Common

Facilities audit findings

In headline terms, the facilities audit enabled us to estimate that there are:

- 365 church based facilities (including church halls) currently being used for sport and physical activity within the Diocese.
- 371 church school based facilities currently being used for sport and physical activity within the Diocese.
- 885 church hosted or led sport and physical activity sessions currently taking place most weeks within the Diocese, of which 72% are church facility based sessions.
- 507 school based 'out of school' organised sport and physical activity sessions currently taking place most weeks across the Diocese.
- An average weekly throughput attendance at sport and physical activity sessions across the Diocese of between 40,000 and 50,000 people.

The facilities audit also determined the following:

- Church based facility types mainly comprised of church halls (78%), whereas church schools had a far wider access to conventional sports halls (54%), outdoor multi-use games areas (35%) and non-specific outdoor hard surface areas (73%).
- The activities most commonly undertaken at church based facilities were Dance Exercise (49%), Aerobics (29%), Martial Arts (22%), Yoga (22%), Table Tennis (17%) and Badminton (9%).
- A total of 28 different sports take place outside church based facilities with football the most popular (74%), followed by running (14%) and cycling (12%).
- Activities at church schools were broader and included: Football (72%), Netball (52%), Dance Exercise (34%), Athletics (28%) and Cricket (28%). These activities are generally not organised or run by the schools but by a wide range and diverse mix of external organisations.

Key findings

Looking beyond the headline facility audit figures there are a number of additional key findings, incorporating results from the community survey and case studies:

Audience

- Above average engagement in church based activities by girls and women
- Involvement of people from age groups across the life spectrum, including older people
- Widespread engagement of non-congregational and multi faith groups at church facilities, with less than 6% of identified church based or organised sports activities incorporating specific Christian messages.

Sporting offer

- The Church of England community in London is already offering a diverse range of sport and physical activity from a variety of facility types both within and beyond the church estate, without distinct interventions.
- Site visits revealed a wide range of community engagement strategies which are attracting diverse and non-traditional groups as well as the benefits of outreach approaches, partnership working and involvement of church volunteers in growing participation.

- A positive correlation between churches that provide non-sport community activities and those that provide sport based community activities.
- 60% of respondents expressed enthusiasm and support to continue or develop a new community based sports offer.
- Most churches do not promote use of their facilities for sport and physical activity whilst those that do use a wide range of methods. Schools were even less likely to promote community usage of their facilities.
- Most parishes have variable and flexible pre-set charges for use of their facilities. Charges are at lower end of facility hire in London in the range of £10-50.

Opportunities

The research undertaken identified a number of opportunities for further consideration in order to support increased utilisation of Church facilities for sport use, and to broaden appeal to local communities within the Diocese of London.

- Significant spare capacity at both church and school sites which suggests the potential for future expansion of both the volume and timetable of provision as well as shared usage of facilities particularly given the limited evidence of widespread community use of school facilities.
- Whilst the church provision appears to consist largely of indoor, hard floor spaces suitable for a limited range of hall and gym based activities, the school sites offered up a greater range of facilities suitable for a much wider variety of sports which is reflected in the sports that are played in them.
- Given the above average engagement of girls, women and older people, who are currently under-represented in terms of their sport participation, it may be that church based provision has characteristics such as localness, size, suitability for non-contact and non-competitive sports and a non-threatening environment that make them more attractive to these market segments.
- Beyond the spare capacity, we also found that there is considerable potential and enthusiasm for expansion of the Diocese of London's sporting offer and opportunities to engage with new communities. This potential will however require organisation, with many Parishes lacking direct experience of running sporting offers.
- While there is limited evidence of widespread community use of school facilities, the link between Church of England schools and the Parish already exists and could be leveraged further to open up access to these facilities, combined with an outreach approach through utilising local and community sport delivery partners and religious sporting organisations.
- Existing provision of sport and physical activities is primarily locally driven and seemingly often uncoordinated. With such a real mixture of good practice already existing within the Diocese, the application of further design to participation opportunities could bring significant benefits, particularly when attached to increased promotion of opportunities.