Alternative and parallel sport organisations and structures, and their role in tackling inequalities

Research Summary

SPORT ENGLAND

THE *BEHAVIOURAL* **ARCHITECTS**

Scope

Sport England commissioned research partner The Behavioural Architects (TBA) to help fill a priority knowledge gap around alternative and parallel sporting organisations and structures, and their role in tackling inequalities in sport and physical activity.

The project aimed to:

- Identify what is working well (i.e. 'bright spots') across alternative or parallel structures in supporting under-represented or marginalised groups to be physically active, including understanding how and why they are successful in reaching and engaging those communities.

- Improve the sector's visibility of these types of organisations and develop learning on how mainstream structures, systems, and activities might need to think and work differently if we are to build a more inclusive sport and physical activity sector.

An in-depth case study approach was chosen to understand experiences of each organisation from multiple perspectives, including Founders/Organisers, workforce and participants.

TBA used a flexible, participatory research methodology involving co-designing an ethnographic immersion alongside interviews and digital diaries to capture in-the-moment experiences and reflections.

Eight Bright Spot organisations were selected to cover:

- A range of marginalised or under-represented audience groups

- A mix of different sports/activities

- Different locations across the country

- Newly established versus more established organisations

The Research Sample is shown in the table below:

Organisation	Location	Type of sport/activity	Group serving (all adults)	Fieldwork type
Bristol Frontrunners	Bristol	Running group	Male LGBTQ+	Online ethnography & 1 day in context visit
Manchester Powerhouse	Manchester	Football	Somali Muslim community	
Manchester Lynx	Manchester	Basketball	Women LGBTQ+	
Preston United	Preston	Swimming	Muslim men	
Strong + Bendy	London	Gym & fitness	Neurodiverse, range of abilities & impairments	
LGBTQ+ Martial Arts	Name and location not included due to risks to their community	Martial arts	LGBTQ+	Paired in-depth interview
The Wanderlust Women	Bolton	Hiking	Muslim women	Virtual in-depth interview with founder(s)
Emancipated Run Crew	London	Running group	Black & Brown community	

We would like to express our thanks to all the organisations who took the time to take part in the project, and others who we engaged with during the recruitment process.

Defining an alternative or parallel sporting structure

All organisations have a unique story but share common traits.

01: They emerged to fill a gap in provision, based on lived experience of exclusion.

Creating an environment where these experiences won't be felt again and people can be their whole selves is a key driver behind founders creating the organisations, and for members to join.

02: They are connected to mainstream structures to different degrees depending on their audience, the nature of the gap they fill and the journey the organisation has been on.

It is important to note that their connection to the mainstream can and does change over time.

We identified three broad groups of organisations:

On the Margins

Organisations that have a relationship with mainstream structures through events, leagues or in some cases affiliation to National Governing Bodies (NGBs) but they perceive and/or experience persistent barriers to mainstream sport for their communities, e.g. heteronormative assumptions.

Operating in Parallel

Organisations that have little to no interaction with mainstream structures due to ongoing discrimination or the fact that the existing provisions are not set up for them, e.g. faith or gender identity prevent them from accessing facilities.

Alternative Mainstream

Organisations operating with the same model as mainstream organisations but with an offer that breaks away from the mainstream norms, e.g. a commercial gym that does not focus on aesthetics and is radically inclusive of all abilities, such as designing for neurodiversity and sessions for local people with learning disabilities.

03: They are focused on meeting the inclusion needs of a specific community.

Supporting their community to take part - whether recreationally or competitively - is at the heart of everything they do. However, this does not mean that they exist exclusively for them. Organisations typically aim to be as inclusive as they can be, while respecting the needs of the core community they were set up for. For example LGBTQ+ organisations that are open to heterosexual allies.

Findings

The journey stages of Bright Spot organisations

The way our Bright Spot organisations have developed over time involves broadly consistent stages, which can be both helped and hindered by interactions with mainstream sporting structures. Their ability to adapt and evolve in the face of challenges demonstrates their resourcefulness and resilience.

The common stages are as follows:

01 Original inspiration

Organisations typically originate from the founders identifying a gap for a particular community or group of would-be participants to take part in sport. Founders are passionate about the transformative impact sport and physical activity can have on people based on personal experiences, and share a desire to give back and connect the community. **Awareness of other community-led organisations can inspire founders, showing them it's possible.**

02 Build and get the word out

Founders are attuned to community needs as they develop the offer and how to deliver. **However, they can appreciate templates or advice from mentors with experience of delivering the sport, e.g. key information to include when promoting the activity.**

They reach the community via existing social networks, with word of mouth and social media most important initially. **Free platforms for the specific sport offered are also utilised, e.g. Strava Club.**

03 Early days

The first sessions are important to gauge buy-in from the community and test the offer, which is adapted in response to what does or doesn't work. Organisations take a 'community first' approach, putting the needs of members ahead of the activity itself. The format is discussed and co-developed, with early members often then invested in the organisation's continuation.

04 Growing

As a group of regular attendees establishes and demand increases, the activities of the organisation evolve. This includes extending the offer (e.g. putting on more sessions; a second team) and involving existing members in organising the club's activities and future direction. Organisations continue to build their external profile, which can bring them into contact with other community sports organisations like theirs, with whom they collaborate with to cross-check and share learning. They often look at how to raise funds to cover the cost of building their profile, e.g. fundraising events, introducing fees if not done before and exploring access to public funding. **Time is a major barrier to growth with most organisations run entirely by volunteers, including the time it takes to navigate and apply for funding.**

05 Normalising and advocating

Organisations reach a turning point where the extent of their activities mean they cannot rely on ad hoc support and start to change the way they operate. Internal roles and processes start to become more clearly defined, and they become more focused on developing their workforce, including training existing members as coaches where possible. They start to interact more with mainstream bodies to access opportunities, particularly funding and opportunities to compete. **However, there can be tension engaging with mainstream structures due to a perceived risk it will compromise their values and freedom, often based on past experience of mainstream bodies overlooking or inadequately addressing community needs.**

06 Sustaining

Well established organisations who have reached their community impact goals are focused on future proofing their organisation's activities, including maintaining a reliable workforce. **They aim to secure more steady funding streams to both sustain and extend their impact, but can find funding processes remain challenging in general without specialist knowledge and due to the time they take up.**

It is important to note that not all organisations had moved through all six stages and they may not necessarily ever do so; due to barriers engaging with mainstream sport and/or a desire to keep things informal.

Findings

How and why Bright Spot alternative/parallel organisations are successful in meeting community needs

Four broad areas intersect to make Bright Spot organisations successful in engaging communities;

Representative leadership and workforce

Founders and leaders sharing common experiences with participants (especially experiences related to accessing sporting environments), gives them deep empathy with participants and builds trust. Furthermore, the workforce is developed from within the community, with members co-creating the way the organisation operates.

Supportive and respectful culture and environment

Passionate leadership sets the foundation for a positive 'community first' culture to flourish, including open lines of communication at all times. While all organisations develop their own unique cultures, acceptance, inclusion and connection characterise the atmosphere they create, regardless of how 'seriously' the sport is taken, e.g. played competitively or including more advanced skill levels. Participants are encouraged to come as they are with no need to buy expensive gear or have previous playing experience.

Targeted community outreach

Existing community networks and platforms help new participants find out about the organisation. For faith based, tight knit communities, word of mouth and trusted authority figures quickly help to spread the word. For communities less well connected, groups or individuals with an established platform e.g. a prominent LGBTQ+ community member's social media account, can be important for promotion. Organisations involved in advocating for their community externally may also feature on the webpages of mainstream bodies, including NGBs as they aim to increase their profile, attracting new members.

Flexible and inclusive session design, format and delivery

The offer is designed with the community's needs in mind, including respecting faith requirements or taking place in venues where identity isn't compromised, e.g. single occupancy changing rooms for transgender people. A range of different abilities and potential needs are considered upfront and leaders and coaches are quick to adapt so people can take part on their terms. Sessions themselves typically build in opportunities for connection.

It is the combination of these different areas that enables Bright Spot organisations to deliver more inclusive, safer and more enjoyable experiences for community members.

Findings

How Bright Spot organisations positively impact marginalised and under-represented groups and communities

Connecting and strengthening communities

Organisations provide an opportunity to connect with people who have shared experiences linked to identity and background, forming deep friendships (a 'family') and a support network. A sense of community togetherness helps individuals to feel 'seen' and able to be their full selves.

Growth in self-confidence

Inclusive and supportive activity design has a powerful impact on self-confidence - from leading an activity, to (re)learning how to do an activity, to simply interacting with others and forming friendships in a sporting environment. Enhanced self-confidence carries over into other areas of life.

Feeling safe, supported and comfortable taking part

Organisations provide non-intimidating spaces that respect individual identities, including gender and religious needs. This gives community members permission to try new activities without worrying about 'getting it wrong' or not being good enough. Support from other attendees, coaches and community leaders involved alleviates fear and makes people feel valued and motivated to keep going.

Sharing a sense of achievement

Overcoming challenges to taking part and achieving new things as a community is uplifting and a source of shared pride. Individual progress is celebrated collectively, with coaches and fellow members invested in supporting each other.

Tackling health problems in the community

Organisations raise awareness of and provide a safe space to discuss specific health issues affecting their community, e.g. Type 2 diabetes, sickle cell anaemia. They can also provide a place for people to heal physically and mentally, including developing a more positive body image and relationship with exercise.

Conclusions

➡️ Alternative or parallel sporting organisations play a differentiated role in tackling inequalities to mainstream organisations by virtue of being set up with inclusivity at their core. Their focus is and has always been on addressing the needs and challenges of marginalised or under-represented communities as much or more than the sports/activities they offer.

➡️ It would be difficult for mainstream organisations to adopt or replicate everything that makes alternative or parallel sporting organisations successful in engaging communities or have the same impact. However, mainstream organisations can learn from some if not all, the ways they work and engage communities, depending on the context.

➡️ Where the culture and systems of mainstream sports are not (yet) able to be truly inclusive of marginalised communities, Sport England and the wider sector can better support alternative or parallel sporting organisations' ambitions to grow and become self-sustaining.

This could include reconsidering funding approaches to be more inclusive; accounting for limited capacity to apply for funding, supporting collaboration, not competition between community groups, making funding criteria less rigid, and providing steady streams of financial support longer-term. Developing skills and qualifications for community members themselves to deliver the activity is also a key ambition where support can be appreciated.

➡️ The degree to which organisations need to be connected to or governed by mainstream structures warrants further examination. This research found some NGBs that are playing a positive role in upskilling community members and giving them platforms to promote their organisations and advocate for their communities.