



# Breaking Boundaries

## Learning Paper

### Sport as a Tool for Cohesion Development

#### Introduction

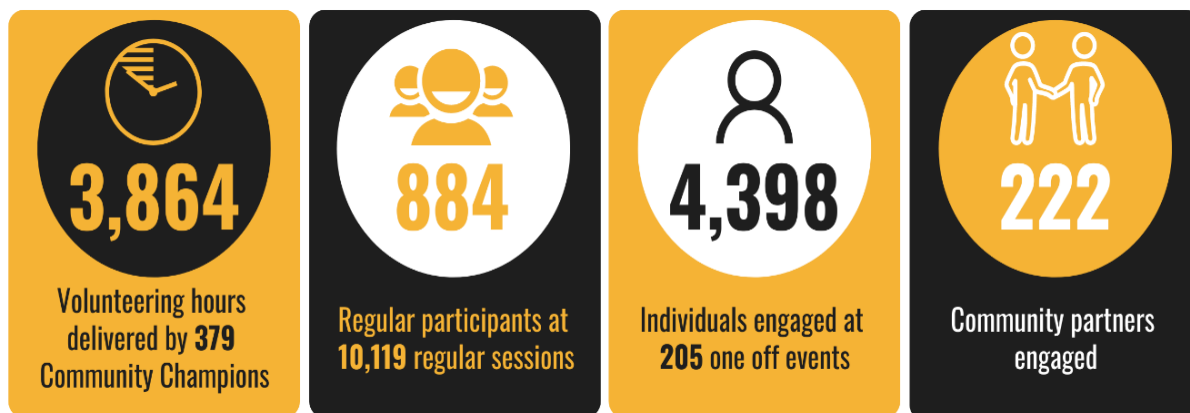
As a social cohesion programme, Breaking Boundaries' primary aim was to bring young people, their families, and communities together through regular activities/one-off events based around a 'cricket-themed' approach. This sought to improve community cohesion through projects in Barking and Dagenham, Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester, and Slough between 2018 and 2022.

Originally funded by £1.8 million from Spirit of 2012 through its Connecting Communities through Cricket grant, the programme was led by a partnership between the Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals. It generated key learning on how sport and physical activity can be used to develop community cohesion within and between communities commonly characterized as living 'parallel lives'.

This paper provides any organisation working in this important arena with insight and ideas on how they might replicate Breaking Boundaries practice and learning to use sport to improve community cohesion.

## Outcomes

Between 2018 and 2022, Breaking Boundaries delivered and engaged:



Breaking Boundaries demonstrated delivery strength around improved social connectedness, empowerment, community voice and participation and belonging for its participants and delivery staff, and new and additional cohesion knowledge and skills for its delivery staff and volunteers.

Its greatest strides came through the ways in which sport supported improved partnership working by bringing together partners who had not previously worked together or enabling them to address past tensions between themselves or communities. This was because:

- ✓ Sport was seen to engage all as it acted as a universal language that all targeted communities understood and were enrolled in.
- ✓ Sport supported community participation and was a good way to reach new groups.
- ✓ Sport was an easy way in which to facilitate and sustain social mixing.

Examples of how sport has been used to support community cohesion through Breaking Boundaries are outlined below.



### Improved social connectedness and attitudes to diversity

Breaking Boundaries fostered improved social connectedness and attitudes to diversity in the groups it targeted because its sport activities facilitated social mixing between community groups. This developed shared group ethos around exploring differences and commonalities between groups because of the universal language sport offered all groups. This meant groups developed better understanding of each other and thus were more willing to work together on shared challenges and issues because they were brought together through sport.

*"They have learnt about different communities from each other so they have broken down some of the stereotypes and taboos that might exist within the community, and obviously they have gone back and fed that back to their families."*

(Community Partner, Bradford)

## Greater community participation and sense of belonging



Breaking Boundaries created new opportunities for community participation. Sports activities that were delivered in faith centres and other specialist community centres fostered a greater sense of belonging.

This had success where it deliberately sought to tackle the 'parallel lives' of the groups it was working with by illustrating through sport and physical activity the commonalities in the lived experiences of the groups worked with.

*"There have been many new friendships formed through this particular project. During some of the workshop discussions, conversations were had about local tensions, why sport is important and what it means to be inclusive. This has led to trust being built between the groups and it has developed into a safe space for them to socially mix."*

(Community Coordinator, Manchester)

*"It was such an amazing platform for women to come together to a place where we could talk and comfort each other, it was a relief, it was our time, it was for us and we were allowed to have that time, for many women, they didn't have that opportunity before, those weeks and sessions have made such a difference, that one hour a week is embedded in now, it's an hour for us."*

(Female Participant, Slough)



## Enhanced knowledge and skills to support community cohesion

Breaking Boundaries has improved the knowledge and skills of local people and organisations to enable them to support community cohesion more effectively. Breaking Boundaries through the physical activity it offered highlighted the importance for organisations of the need to link effectively with local community organisations to reach community groups, and local groups. Individuals gained knowledge on how to effectively bring different groups together by using sport and physical activity as a vehicle to support cohesion outcomes.

*"The Archery activity was very well organised and the person leading the activities is very enthusiastic. I have really enjoyed the activity but more importantly I have been able to meet people and make new friends and I have been made to feel very welcome."*

(Male Participant, Barking)

## Lessons and Recommendations

- **Use sport to tackle cohesion challenges:** Cohesion issues may not just stem from conflict between, or the separation of, communities; such challenges may be driven by the lack of social inclusion of individuals. Sport can help identify these in a safe environment and support approaches to address them.
- **Bring together different groups:** This will tackle cohesion challenges that exist between individuals from within the same broad ethnic groups – Asian and Asian British, Black, and Black British, Mixed and Other groups and White groups.
- **Co-produce with communities:** Working with participants to co-produce activity delivery helps project engagement whilst also building in greater potential longer-term engagement.
- **Build on existing projects and infrastructure:** Using existing projects and existing venues such as faith centres or other community settings and then supporting them to focus on cohesion through existing social elements combined with additional facilitated physical activity sessions can be a good way to deliver cohesion focussed activities. This avoids the need to find new settings and the set up and marketing needed for newly created activities, helping also to sustain them.
- **Support informal, active social mixing:** Supporting active social mixing in an informal group setting through designated socialising time enables a sense of belonging and confidence to be developed. New types of physical activity can help foster this as all participants are at a similar level and can learn the new activity together further fostering social mixing opportunities. Participants will often reveal much more about these issues and having staff/volunteers on hand can help identify some of the issues people might want support around – perhaps mental health or financial issues.
- **Utilise local knowledge and expertise:** Engagement with delivery partners, particularly sport organisations, for social cohesion work should only take place where they are able to demonstrate specific cohesion expertise and detailed knowledge of the communities, tensions, issues and needs to be addressed.

*"I think it's been good for my children for them to gain that confidence other than in school as that was one of the key things that was picked up in one of my daughter's school reports was that she needs to participate in more sports outside of school to build that confidence and that was one reason why I was looking out for things. I enjoyed the fact that the children enjoyed it, and they were getting exercise at the same time and making new friends as well."*

(Female Participant, Birmingham)