

LONDON ASSEMBLY

June 2026

Health Committee - Rapporteurship

This document contains the written evidence received by the Committee in response to its Call for Evidence, which formed part of the rapporteur’s investigation into enabling community use of school sports facilities

Calls for Evidence are open to anyone to respond to. In December 2025 the rapporteur published a number of questions related to its investigation, which can be found on page 2. The Call for Evidence was open from 17 December 2025 to 4 March 2026.

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Questions asked by the Committee

1. How easy is it for your group to access good quality sports facilities?
2. What specific challenges have you faced, if any, when trying to access school sports facilities for your youth group?
3. What impact does access to school sports facilities have on the young people you work with?
4. How should schools and youth and community groups work together to enable better access to schools sports facilities?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share that could help improve community access to school sports facilities in London?



London Sport response to the Rapporteurship:
Enabling community use of school sports facilities to support exercise and reduce health inequalities for young people

About London Sport

1. London Sport is a charity that exists to help all Londoners live longer, healthier and happier lives through being active. As part of a national network of 42 Active Partnerships with a collective voice to influence nationally, our work aims to break the link between inactivity and inequality to improve the health and wellbeing of those from the most deprived communities.
2. We are supported by Sport England and the Mayor of London, and collaborate with London's local authorities and other organisations, to provide better access to sport and physical activity across the capital. With physical inactivity responsible for 1 in 6 premature deaths, we want to help every Londoner find their way to move more. We work to identify, implement and advocate for solutions to overcome the key systematic challenges across key areas of the grassroots sport and physical activity sector in London and the UK.
3. 40% of adult Londoners are not meeting the recommended levels of physical activity for their health and wellbeing¹. Adults in the most deprived areas of London are twice as likely to be inactive compared to the least deprived areas. Londoners with, or at risk of, long-term conditions face a 'postcode lottery' of support in the use of physical activity to help prevent, treat and manage their condition. Because of this, as per Sport England's place-based approach, we focus our effort on helping children and adults in the most deprived communities who face the greatest challenges of inequality.
4. We work to identify, implement and advocate for solutions to overcome some of the key systematic challenges across key areas of the grassroots sport and physical activity sector in London and across the country.
5. Physical inactivity is estimated to contribute to 1 in 6 deaths, and cost society more than £7 billion each year². The WHO anticipates 3.8 million additional new cases of depression and anxiety, 2.5 million new cases of hypertension, and direct healthcare costs of £16.6bn in the UK by 2030 attributable to physical inactivity³. 40% of ill health is from six major conditions (cancers, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, mental ill-health, dementia and chronic respiratory disease) that physical activity is known to help prevent and play a positive role in treatment⁴. In addition to this, there is an underused physical activity workforce (400,000) and millions more volunteers to support the health and care workforce in the community.

¹ [Adults' activity levels in England bounce back to pre-pandemic levels | Sport England](#)

² [Public Health England – Everybody Active, Every Day: An Evidence-Based Approach](#) (2021)

³ World Health Organization – Global Status Report on Physical Activity (2022)

⁴ [Physical activity: applying All Our Health](#) (2022)

RESPONSE

Facility availability and accessibility

6. London Sport has consulted with local community sports clubs and found that one of their biggest challenges, particularly in underserved communities, is access to sports facilities. This issue has also been raised by National Governing Bodies via the London Sport-led London National Governing Body Network.
7. Recent consultations within London Sport's Priority Places confirm that barriers such as cost of access, lack of facilities, location of facility and journey times remain barriers that restrict Londoners' ability to access sport and physical activity.
8. This consultation also highlighted that, whilst facilities may exist, there are other barriers that limiting their availability or use, including:
 - a. How much information is available for a facility (when available, how to book, who to contact).
 - b. A lack of resources, both human and financial, to allow facilities to be opened up and used effectively.
 - c. For example, Sported Community Pulse highlights that community groups are often unsure as to when they can access a facility, which makes planning more difficult to manage and consumes vital resource within organisations⁵.
9. Research for the Office for National Statistics has highlighted that where there are more sports facilities per 10,000 people, a greater proportion of adults are active for over two and a half hours per week. 12 of the 15 Boroughs, with the **lowest** number of publicly accessible sports facilities per 10,000 people nationally, are in London. Our insight highlights that these boroughs have some of the highest inactivity levels in London and where inequalities around access to sport and physical activity are highest, these inequalities are likely to be further exacerbated by the restricted level of facility provision available.
10. In terms of London's facility provision, 40% of sports halls, 32% of playing fields and 22% of swimming pools are located behind school gates. London Sport research has found that only 42% of schools in London open their facilities for community use, therefore there are a number of facilities that are still not accessible to the community. Issues around access to facilities are experienced most around independent schools and schools that are managed via PFI contracts, even when there is clear evidence of demand for facilities access in the communities where these schools are located. The poor quality of facilities within a school setting has also been identified as a barrier that restricts schools from providing access to their facilities.
11. Further to this, there are massive disparities between private and state schools in the amount of land they own and what is available to their students. While state schools sold off 223 of their playing fields between 2010 and 2020⁶, the top 250 wealthy private schools own 38,086 acres of land (approx. 59 miles²) – compared to the state school system where the

⁵ Sported - [Facilities-report_Feb-2022-final-full.pdf](#)

⁶ [Playing fields sold off, swimming pools closed down—state-school children don't have a sporting chance](#), The Guardian (2024)

average student has access to a tenth of that. **Policymakers should explore what incentives can be offered to private schools to offer up their large open spaces and facilities to provide a benefit to the communities that surround them, including what transportation can be made available for local people unable to easily and safely access these spaces.**

OPENING SCHOOL FACILITIES (OSF) FUND

12. London Sport, on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE), distributed the Opening Schools Facilities (OSF) Fund across London from 2023-2025. The programme was designed to help schools to open their existing sport facilities, including school swimming pools, for a broader range of young people and the wider community by partnering with sporting organisations, who can help deliver activities in these settings.
13. The first funding round ran from January 2023 – March 2023 and supported schools in setting up their facilities for opening. Subsequent, second (April 2023 – March 2024) and third (April 2024 – March 2025) rounds supported project delivery in schools. We have included learnings from delivery across the three funding rounds of the programme reflecting on programme delivery up to March 2025.

Barriers

14. The OSF fund had specific criteria for what could and could not be funded including capital expenditure, transport costs (except for swimming), and wraparound care, amongst others. The application forms showed that the main barriers schools themselves identified from a funding condition perspective were as follows:

Barrier	No. of times mentioned
Purchase fixed equipment (e.g. fixed outdoor gym equipment, fixed basketball hoops, pitch re-surfacing)	58
Make repairs to sport facilities (e.g. court markings)	48
Make repairs to school facilities to aid opening sport facilities (e.g. to school infrastructure, fix fences, provide more storage)	33
Pay for transport (e.g. bus to and from home for children after extra-curricular OSF activities)	15
Have more flexibility of how to spend budget due to being a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) school	5

Source: Round 3 OSF Applications (n=147)

15. The remaining barriers could be classed as more generic reasons for not opening school facilities:

Barrier	No. of times mentioned
Need to buy more sports and activity equipment (e.g. balls, moveable nets, bats etc.)	64

Investment in training or paying staff overtime to open the school facilities out of hours	55
Development of a community offer	55
Being unable to open school facilities for longer after school hours	39
Being unable to open school facilities in holidays	31
Being unable to open school facilities at weekends	33
Need to update / alter security systems (e.g. install cameras, lock pads)	13

Source: Round 3 OSF Applications (n=147)

16. In addition, there was also an open text option where schools could share additional information relating to barriers that were important context for their facility opening. Thematic analysis of these identified the is following main categories:

- a. **Facility conditions:** Schools need to repair or refurbish their facilities so that they can be used by communities, requiring capital spend. This is particularly relevant for community members with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), who might benefit from specific facility adaptations.
- b. **Staff capacity and resource:** Not having dedicated members of staff to manage lettings effectively; both admin and manning the facility (opening / closing).
- c. **Lack of equipment:** Not having the necessary equipment to be able to offer lettings.
- d. **Security and safeguarding:** Having an access system that is trusted, having a way to vet the organisations and clubs that are using the school – this links to capacity too, as you need someone to organise this.
- e. **Storage:** Some clubs that hire out facilities need storage space (e.g. trampolining), and this can be difficult for schools to provide.
- f. **Viability:** Costs vs profit - operational costs, staffing costs, business planning.

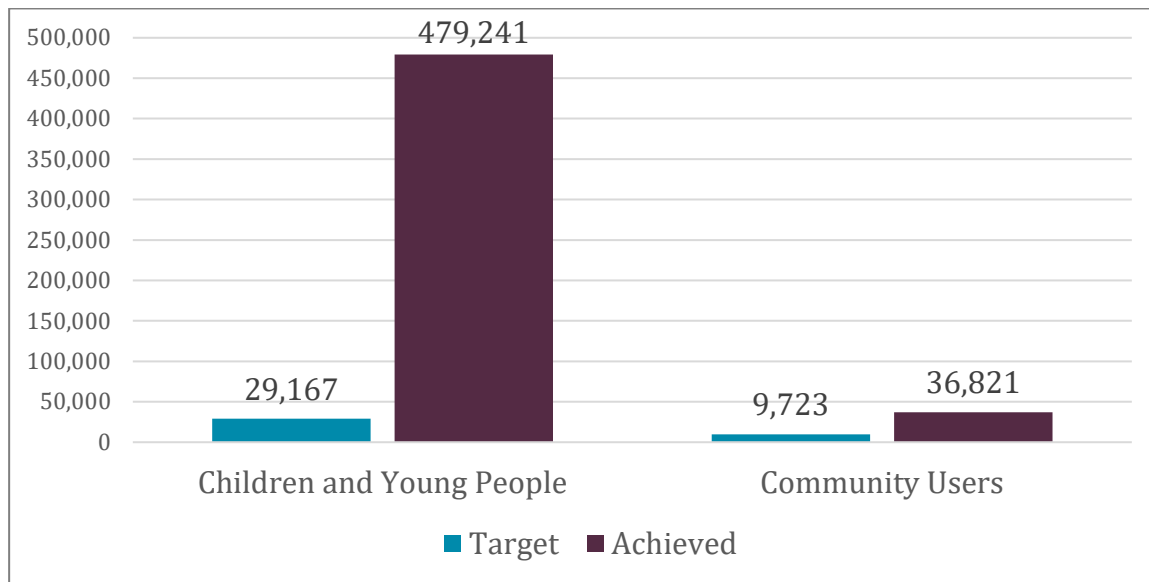
Supporting schools to open their facilities outside of the normal school day to allow children & young people and the wider community to access more opportunities to be physically active

17. During the application process, many schools needed encouragement from the London Sport project team to develop community-focused initiatives. The London Sport project team attribute this to several factors:

- a. School staff naturally prioritised the benefits of physical activity for their pupils, especially given the existing constraints from on school budgets.
- b. DfE's application questions were not specifically geared towards community use.
- c. Community engagement typically demands greater resources, including time for relationship-building, than pupil-focused projects.

18. Participation targets for **children and young people** in London were exceeded with 479,241 attendances - based on 30,605 individual pupils taking part in the programme.

19. Participation targets for **community users** in London were exceeded with 36,821 attendances (see figure 4). This is based on 3,880 individual community members taking part in the programme.



Source: OSF Programme Monitoring Information:
OSF Programme throughout delivery (Round 2 and Round 3 – data was not collected for R1)

20. In Round 3, the majority of projects were aimed at pupils eligible for Free School Meals, however, many schools tried to deliver sessions for multiple target audiences.

Breakdown of target priority group

Priority target group	No. of projects
Ethnically diverse communities	398
Free School meals	405
Girls	394
SEND	326

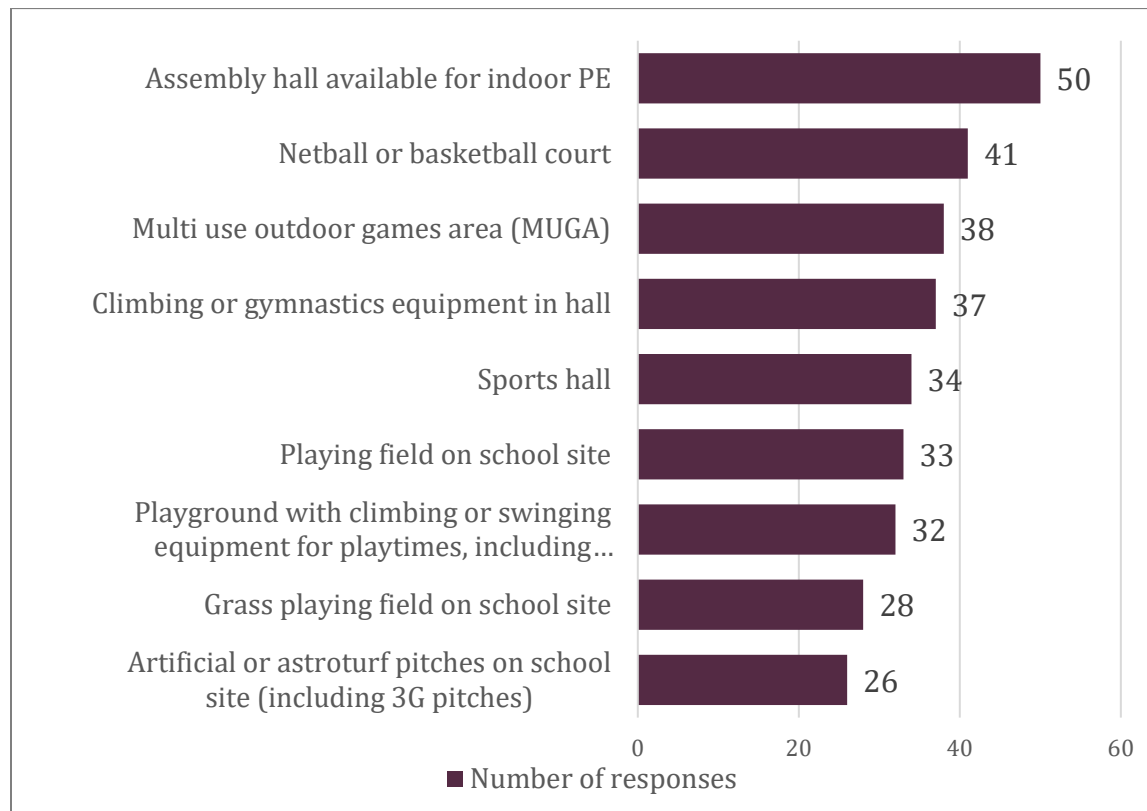
Source: OSF Programme Application forms (n=171)

21. There were issues with schools uploading participant data, which led to errors in reporting figures. The Active Partnership Network (APN) built a system to discount the data known to be incorrect and provides a percentage representation for the “true” data. This data shows that for London:

- a. One fifth of the participants (19%) were from ethnically diverse communities.
- b. Over half of participants (56%) were eligible for Free School Meals.
- c. Three fifths of participants (60%) were female.
- d. Just under half of participants (45%) were disabled or had special educational needs.

Adapting spaces and managing facilities

22. The most common types of facilities schools said they have are assembly halls, netball or basketball courts, multi-use outdoor games areas, climbing or gymnastics equipment in hall, sports halls, playing field on school sites, and playgrounds.



Facilities schools have available for use in the 2024/25 academic year

Source: End of programme school survey (n=72)

23. Many schools identified that a barrier with the funding restrictions was that they could not spend anything on capital repairs, whilst 42 (37%) schools said that another barrier to optimising the funding was not being able to purchase fixed equipment.

“Our field area for football is not great and when I’ve spoken to football clubs about using it for weekend matches, it’s not suitable, it’s too uneven, there’s divots in there. So, I would have loved to have been able to have our field repaired so it [can be] used for some of these sports and that would extend [our offer] even more”.

24. Multi use outdoor games area (MUGA), playground with climbing or swinging equipment for playtimes (including adventure playgrounds and trim trails), and netball or basketball courts were the most popular facilities that schools would have applied for capital funding.

Facility	Number of responses	Percentage
Multi use outdoor games area (MUGA)	17	25%

Playground with climbing or swinging equipment for playtimes, including adventure playgrounds and trim trails	15	22%
Netball or basketball court	12	18%
Assembly hall available for indoor PE	7	10%
Climbing or gymnastics equipment in hall	7	10%
Artificial or astroturf pitches on school site (including 3G pitches)	7	10%
Playing field on school site	6	9%
Sports hall	5	7%
Gym or fitness room	5	7%

Facilities schools would be interested in applying for capital funding

Source: End of programme school survey (n=67)

25. Schools could use their funding to make adaptations to their sites to improve facility access (e.g. improving security or providing access keypads) and/or to improve accessibility.

Schools noted that whilst they had sporting facilities they could rent out, they did not always have additional facilities that external clubs would need when using these spaces, such as access to toilets, or a water fountain.

“I think the major change I had to make was about entry and exit...[we changed our access system] to Paxton Net2. I had to add some more security locks into places to let people in. We modified a gate point to make sure it was on a magnetic lock to get into our fields...all these changes, they’re quite good because it does help in the future to run these things independently because people can enter and exit, not freely, but securely.”

26. From Round 3 of funding applications, 310 projects said they opened their indoor facilities compared to 235 projects taking place in outdoor facilities. Schools highlighted that there were advantages and disadvantages to opening both indoor and outdoor facilities. Whilst outdoor spaces could be used without access to the main school building, they could be affected by weather meaning there was no guarantee that bookings could be made consistently across the year. Whereas indoor facilities, whilst unaffected by weather, needed improvements to accessibility and security.

“We’ve got a really lovely grass pitch but about five months of the year it’s waterlogged so it’s not always [usable]. Whereas our local high school has got a 3G pitch which you can use all year round. So, they’re more likely to advertise because they can consistently have bookings through the year, whereas ours will be hit and miss based on the grass. Our playground space is ok, but then it might not be ok for, let’s say, a football match.”

27. Schools that a lot of their maintenance and deep cleaning work took place during the school holidays. When extra-curricular clubs take place, where staff, children, and the wider community are using facilities, this can interrupt this essential maintenance work and needs to be factored into planning around facility opening.

“We don’t rent our facilities like most schools do, or rent the hall, because that’s when we try and get a lot of the maintenance work done, or our contractors in, because you’ve got to squeeze them in as well somehow in the whole school year. The reason why I’m looking at security systems and works is to make sure that I can carry on doing the work and the partner organisation running the activity feels like they do it safely and securely.”

“Some of the caretakers, a lot of the time during the school holidays, they like to do deep cleans. So, we’re trying to deep clean but then you’ve got children going into the toilets, you’ve got staff coming inside to use our staffroom.”

Supporting the wider community to access more opportunities

28. London Sport research shows that 25% of schools in London currently open their school facilities for community use. Of the 72 schools that completed the end of programme survey, 79% currently open their school for community use for sport-related activities.

29. From the end-of-programme survey, assembly halls, sports halls, and Multi-Use Outdoor Games Areas were the most popular facilities offered for community use.

Facility	Number of responses	Percentage
Assembly hall available for indoor PE	31	53%
Sports hall	28	47%
Multi use outdoor games area (MUGA)	24	41%
Playing field on school site	20	34%
Grass playing field on school site	18	31%
Artificial or astroturf pitches on school site (including 3G pitches)	18	31%
Netball or basketball court	16	27%

Facilities offered for community use

Source: End of programme school survey (n=59)

30. Schools understood that their facilities/clubs could provide additional opportunities to the wider community by providing more local sport and physical activity venues, and so reducing transport costs for users. Of the 559 projects funded through OSF in Round 3, 229 projects were being delivered for the community in evenings, weekends, and over school holidays.

“The holiday activities are not just for our children, our pupils, they’re open to anybody who lives in the area. We get people coming over [the other side of the borough] because there aren’t any free cycling courses going on, so they’re coming over to the other side of the borough to access these courses because there’s nothing like that where they are.”

“Ealing has a lovely hockey club but sometimes when you have a big borough, the hockey club might be in a location that’s actually quite a way away from us. That’s not convenient for parents to travel if they don’t have a car as well, so it’s quite nice to have different locations within a large borough where children can access it in different venues.”

31. When letting out facilities to external users, schools are conscious of providing access only to areas that are needed, and so have considered how they can open/close different spaces within their schools, or if this presents challenges to opening at all.

“The hall that we’re using was built in 2016 and so is slightly more modern. And so therefore, where the hall comes off into the main part of the building, [there are] other doors

to stop people moving around the school for us to be able to lock. So, it makes it easier for us to be able to actually close off those areas. But I think if we didn't have [this in place], that would make things a lot trickier. We would then be having to install more internal doors that are then lockable."

"A lot of them want access to kitchens and things, and I can't do that because I've got an external catering company...or [receiving feedback saying] "you've only got children's toilets, not adults' toilets, therefore we couldn't bring adults on site because we don't have that facility."

32. Schools stated that to rent out their facilities to external providers, they would need to make adaptations to their sites, such as improving access (e.g. improving security or providing access keypads) or improving accessibility.

"One of the other things with the hall and being able to rent that whole space out was that there was no drinking water available...we are able to go ahead with having a water fountain installed which is really helpful."

33. Of the schools that said they open their facilities (n=58), the majority of them use a caretaker (34%) or a third party (29%) to manage access for community use.

34. Almost half (47%) of schools (n=58) use a digital booking system for managing external bookings. 'School Hire' and 'Sharesy' were the most popular booking systems. Of the 31 schools that do not use a booking system, they shared this was due to:

- a. Cost of using systems
- b. Not having enough demand for external bookings to justify having a formal booking system
- c. Not having a need for a booking system due to using third-parties (such as Mitie, Schools Plus, School Space) or office staff managing bookings

35. Almost two thirds (64%) of schools (n=58) said they thought their OSF projects had 'a great deal or 'a lot' of impact on their local community. Schools said the OSF funding enabled them to:

- a. **Improve access and inclusion** by allowing them to open facilities during school holidays as well providing free sessions to their pupils, their families, and the wider community
- b. **Expand their sports offerings** by offering specialist-led clubs (such as gymnastics, karate, tennis, and boxing) and purchasing a wider range of physical activity equipment.
- c. **Build partnerships with the local community**, particularly local coaches and sports clubs. This strengthened relationships between the schools and the local community as well as created pathways into sports beyond what is offered at schools.

PATHWAYS FROM SCHOOL TO COMMUNITY SPORT

36. Strong partnerships between schools, local sports organisations, and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are essential for ensuring seamless pathways into community sport. These collaborations enable better resource sharing and alignment between school activities and community offerings, ensuring well-rounded programmes that cater to diverse interests and abilities. Schools also need to proactively collaborate with clubs that promote diversity and inclusivity, to ensure that pathway programmes are attractive to a wide range of young people.
37. The OSF Programme has shown that by opening their facilities to the community, schools can organically build partnerships with local organisations and clubs. As these partnerships develop and trust is built over time, PE teachers are more likely to encourage students to attend these clubs' sessions outside of school hours, helping to create a natural pathway into community sport. **It is critical for support for this type of programme to be provided to capitalise on the impact it had and enable schools to further expand their networks with local clubs.**
38. The costs associated with joining community sport clubs can present a barrier for students transitioning out of school, especially for those from lower-income backgrounds. Membership fees, equipment and travel expenses, which were previously covered by the school, can discourage or even prevent participation in community sport. **We believe that policymakers have an important role to play in facilitating financial assistance programmes, such as subsidies or grants, to make joining community clubs more affordable.**
39. Empowering young people to shape their own pathways into community sport is essential for fostering lifelong engagement in physical activity. Pathway programmes must actively incorporate youth voice to ensure they are relevant, engaging and truly meet the needs of young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

40. **New facilities have been made available to children and young people and community users:** opening school facilities could provide additional opportunities to the wider community by providing more local sport and physical activity venues, but more targeted identification of facilities is warranted.

Recommendation: Conducting desk research to identify leisure facilities in each borough alongside school locations could identify “gaps” where there are fewer opportunities for local residents to be active. Strategically targeting these schools to open their facilities to the wider community could improve access to local venues for residents and provide new opportunities for people to be physically active.
41. **However, there is a need to be conscious that not all schools are interested in opening their school facilities:** schools highlighted several barriers that are preventing them opening their facilities for community use including: Not having dedicated members of staff to manage lettings effectively, viability (cost vs. profit), safeguarding concerns, security, and storage for equipment.

Recommendation: work should be done to ascertain which schools have an interest in opening to community and only work with those who have ambitions to open facilities.

42. **Wider community access to facilities needs further planning to maintain safeguarding and protect the wider school estate:** schools are receptive to opening their facilities, but considerations need to be made when opening to the wider community access such as security and accessibility.

Recommendation: If opening school facilities to the public, consider if facilities have access to water and toilets, and how access to a facility can be controlled.

43. **One of the challenges with opening facilities for community use was limited interest from the community in some initiatives**

Recommendation: Build in more research at the start to understand the needs of the community and what activities they want to do, particularly if there is a stronger emphasis on opening facilities for community use.

44. **Funding capital repairs would widen the range of facilities made available through the programme:** many schools identified that a barrier with the funding restrictions was that they could not spend anything on capital repairs. Schools said making capital repairs to their facilities would have enabled them to open their facilities to a greater extent.

Recommendation: grant funding could help remove restrictions around capital spend. If this is not possible, consider other fundraising opportunities (through grants, sponsors, and investors) to create an alternative programme that could fund capital repairs.

45. **Schools need help connecting to coaches and organisations that might use their facilities:** one of the main challenges schools identified in opening up their facilities externally was finding and building a network of coaching and user organisation contacts. School staff a very busy and identifying new contacts can be time consuming work.

Recommendation: There is an opportunity for local councils or other organisations like London Sport to act as a convenor to recommend and/or introduce local coaches or community organisations.

46. **Schools were worried about the additional administrative burden that came from opening up their facilities:** by opening facilities this can bring additional administrative burdens on schools including bookings and invoicing management, user liaison and management and monitoring of facility use, if managed in-house. External agencies can manage these for a school, but this can significantly reduce the financial benefits to schools facing unprecedented budgetary pressures.

Recommendation: To cover the additional staffing overhead costs, the programme should consider incorporating full administrative costs in funding applications. The OSF funding did provide administrative costs for 12 weeks, but not for the full length of projects. External lettings organisations provide an alternative management system, but there are costs associated with these. Organisations such as London Sport who have supported multiple

schools to open their facilities, could support this by providing a checklist of policies or best practice examples.

47. **Programme management and associated administrative needs must be factored into programme delivery:** When project managing a large funding programme, some tasks, such as processing invoices or reviewing applications, are time-consuming and process heavy.

Recommendation: Build in additional time within the project plan around 'pinch points' or areas of work that take a longer amount of time such as processing invoices or reviewing applications.

Response from Merton Hockey Club (info@mertonhockey.co.uk)

1. How easy is it for your group to access good quality sports facilities?

Difficult, especially affordable facilities. Schools (and their intermediary letting agents) are very commercial, trying to get the highest price with a very poor service, so it takes real persistence.

2. What specific challenges have you faced, if any, when trying to access school sports facilities for your group?

Schools and letting agents don't adhere to Community Use Agreements if they are in place and are mainly interested in generating revenue for minimal effort. Enquiries go unanswered, booking systems are not fit for purpose and facilities go to the highest bidder. There are also complications regarding the legacy of onerous PFI school contracts that have created barriers. Private schools are especially bad, they seem to be taking revenge for having to pay VAT.

3. What impact does access to school sports facilities have on the people you work with?

Frustration that facilities that could be used more are not. We deal with letting agents in Manchester with no local knowledge who thinks that just by increasing the price revenues go up, but actually a lower price would get more bookings. Means that people who are most in need are effectively out-bid.

4. How should schools and youth and community groups work together to enable better access to schools sports facilities?

Encourage partnerships which sit outside of letting arrangements with commercial third parties for mutual benefit. Broker conversations between schools and groups to better understand why it's not working currently.

5. Is there anything else you would like to share that could help improve community access to school sports facilities in London?

Basically there's a shortage of facilities across London which is the root problem, but perhaps encouraging local authorities to enforce Community Use Agreements more proactively – a centralised resource for London would be useful so people could look up where they are in place.

Response from Phoenix Rising NW10

The main obstacles faced:

Safeguarding & Compliance Concerns: Phoenix Rising knows that Schools operate under strict safeguarding frameworks. Even when children aren't present. All of our staff and volunteers (external staff) have DBS checks. We have all of the necessary insurances so that Liability is not an issue if something goes wrong. The schools' general stance: The **perceived safeguarding risk outweighs the benefit**, even when organisations such as Phoenix Rising and St Michael & All Angels Steel Orchestras are fully compliant.

Limited Site Management Capacity: Schools say that they do not have caretakers or site staff available outside core hours and look to pass these costs to community groups, making access unaffordable.

High Hire Costs & Inconsistent Pricing: Schools frequently charge, Commercial rates, Minimum booking hours, Additional fees for security, cleaning, or utilities. So, for small community organisations, especially those working with low-income families, these costs are prohibitive. Pricing also varies widely between schools, with no standardised approach.

These barriers mean that **schools which are now the most accessible, central, and trusted community spaces, remain underused**, especially during evenings, weekends, and holidays.

For organisations like Phoenix Rising, this limits the ability to deliver:

- Creative wellbeing programmes
- Intergenerational learning
- Cultural and heritage activities
- Safety and skills workshops
- Community cohesion initiatives

Rapporteurship: Enabling community use of school sports facilities to support exercise and reduce health inequalities for young people

Dear Health Committee,

I am responding on behalf of Sport England to the call for evidence on enabling use of school sports facilities.

Assess current levels of community access to school sports facilities in London

Sport England's Active Places tool could be used to inform a full review of the levels of access to school sports facilities. Active Places is an open dataset managed by Sport England on behalf of the sector. The database records 15 facility types (example facility types include grass pitches, swimming pools, sports halls) with over 200 attributes used to describe a facility and its associated site.

At present the database holds information on c. 115,000 sports facilities, located at c. 41,000 sites. The database is updated daily with each facility being audited on a rolling annual basis.

<https://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/planning-for-sport/active-places-power>

The database identifies those London schools that have facilities including sports halls, swimming pools and artificial pitches. Information about the facility can include the access arrangements and disabled access to the site.

Where Boroughs have up-to-date playing pitch strategies and built facilities assessments (which is a London Plan requirement see Policy S5 and paragraph 5.5.3/4) these documents may also identify which schools have facilities that they let out to the community.

Sport England's planning team for over 10 years has sought community use agreements through planning permissions across England. This is our model planning condition 16;

- Use of the development shall not commence [or no development shall commence or such other timescale] until a community use agreement prepared in consultation with Sport England has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority, and a copy of the completed approved agreement has been provided to the Local Planning Authority. The agreement shall apply to [describe facilities forming part of the development] and include details of pricing policy, hours of use, access by non-[educational establishment] users [/non-members], management responsibilities and a mechanism for review. The development shall not be used otherwise than in strict compliance with the approved agreement."

*Reason: To secure well managed safe community access to the sports facility/facilities, to ensure sufficient benefit to the development of sport and to accord with Development Plan Policy **.*

<https://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/planning-for-sport/community-use-agreements>

Sport England's planning team apply our community use condition to school facilities in public and private schools. Occasionally we may also use it for commercial facilities, but this is often more challenging to implement as these are not public facilities.

Various funding programmes (which London Sport has supported) over the years have also helped open up schools in London. We developed web pages in 2015 to support this work as well as our planning role; <https://www.sportengland.org/funding-and-campaigns/use-our-school>

Through a project with London Sport last year we looked at examples of community use in London. I attach some examples. There are many more applications where we have requested community use agreements in London.

Through planning, we can only ask for a community use agreement to cover those facilities that are within the red line/included within the planning application. A further difficulty is that local authorities are very unlikely to enforce community use agreements due to insufficient resources available for all types of enforcement in planning. However, by securing these CUAs through planning, this provides a public record which community groups and other stakeholders can then use to help access facilities if the school has stopped fulfilling the terms of the CUA agreed.

Agreeing pricing policy can sometimes be challenged. We usually ask for charges to align with local authority pricing of facilities, to cover the school's costs, as schools cannot run these facilities at a loss. Since we started asking for CUAs over 10 years ago, some local authority facilities have become expensive for local communities to hire so this comparison as a mechanism has become less effective over time. Few schools would likely agree to free to use unsupervised access and it would be unreasonable to ask them for this.

Identify the barriers that affect the ability of state funded and private schools to open their sports facilities to youth and community groups outside of school hours

Sport England has met with occasional reluctance from some schools and education authorities to open up their facilities for community use. However, many schools in London and elsewhere in the country recognise that community hire provides an opportunity to secure a contribution to the long-term maintenance of their facilities. Sport England's Use our School website provides help and support on how schools can overcome barriers;

<https://www.sportengland.org/funding-and-campaigns/use-our-school?section=introduction-section>

These are some private school examples.

St Dunstan's College (Catford)

There is a community use agreement in place for this school's artificial pitch and netball courts.

Attached;

- Decision notice – planning condition 17
- Community use agreement

https://planning.lewisham.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=_LEWIS_DCAPR_93359

King's house School

- Decision notice – planning condition 4
- Community use agreement

Sport England uses the same template agreement for all secondary schools. Primary schools may sometimes open up their facilities, but as they have smaller facilities and less resources, it is often more challenging for these schools to open up for community use.

If Sport England loses its role as a statutory consultee on planning applications affecting playing fields (as suggested in the Government consultation that took place at the end of last year) the opportunity to continue to secure these agreements through the planning process may be reduced in the future.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforms-to-the-statutory-consultee-system/reforms-to-the-statutory-consultee-system>

Investigate how these barriers can be overcome to promote young people's access to school sports facilities, especially for those experiencing health inequalities

The community use template that we use in planning contains sections on; arrangements for hours of use, community use, targets for community use, marketing, management and an affordable pricing policy. Pricing policies set in these agreements usually align with local authority charges.

Schools will often prefer to operate their facilities by hiring the facilities to local sports and community groups rather than have in place a pay and play policy. This helps the schools with addressing safeguarding concerns as clubs and community groups should have policies in place for safeguarding of young people and the school will be able to check this.

For more information about safeguarding children and young people in sport please visit buddle (provided by Sport England); <https://buddle.co/learning-and-support-resources/safety-welfare-and-wellbeing/safeguarding-essentials/safeguarding> and the information on the Use our Schools; <https://www.sportengland.org/funding-and-campaigns/use-our-school?section=operating-safely-and-safeguarding-section>

A club can then hire the sports hall or other facility from the school and set its own charging rates for members, this enables them to set lower rates for junior members.

Setting up a management committee to oversee these types of agreement is intended to help address any operational issues and support a positive relationship between the school and its hirers.

Securing community use policies through planning policy

Sport England recommends community use policies are included in development plans. The London Plan commentary on community use is in adopted policy S3.

We haven't undertaken a comprehensive review of how many authorities in London also have a planning policy to support school community use but the following boroughs have these policies in their local plans;

- LB Southwark – Policy 27 Education Places pg 152
- LB Lambeth – Policy S3

- LB Tower Hamlets Policy D.CF2 & D.CF3

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/planning_and_building_control/planning_policy_guidance/Local_plan/local_plan.aspx

This policy from just outside London is also useful to review;

- Brentwood Local Plan - Policy PC11 Education Facilities

<https://www.brentwood.gov.uk/adopted-local-plan>

Sport England would like to see the next London Plan contain a strengthened policy requiring community use of new school sports facilities.

Explore how community access schemes should be designed and delivered to support the physical health and wellbeing of young Londoners.

A community use agreement (as described above) provides an opportunity to work with schools to develop plans for the community to access to their sites.

The physical design of new school sites is also important to maximise their community use. Sport England has been working with the Department for Education and their partners for many years now on the design of school schemes. Together we ensure that facilities such as sports halls and artificial pitches that the community will wish to use can be accessed separately from other school buildings that are not open in the evening or at weekends where possible. Please see our archived design guidance on designing for PE and Sport (2013);

<https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/designing-for-pe-and-sport-school-sites-february-2013.pdf>

Conclusion

Dual use also improves school and club links, creates a better sense of community and can provides facilities that are within local communities that people can reach through active and sustainable transport means.

Sport England is constantly reviewing its advice and guidance. We will be interested in the findings of this call for evidence and that you will find the information set out above useful.

It is important not to rely on school sites alone to meet needs as facilities are required within the community that can support day time use.

Vicky Aston

Planning Manager

E: vicky.aston@sportengland.org

Response from StreetGames

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation on community access to school sports facilities in London. Our response draws on delivery experience and learning from the Department for Education's Opening School Facilities (OSF) programme.

1. How easy is it for your group to access good quality sports facilities?

Access remains inconsistent and often difficult. While the OSF programme temporarily improved availability in some areas, access for community organisations is still too dependent on short-term funding and informal relationships rather than secure, long-term agreements.

In practice, many schools favour internal delivery models or contracted providers rather than establishing sustained partnerships with local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. This makes access fragile and uncertain. Where relationships are strong, access can work well — but this is not systemic or guaranteed.

We are also concerned that community use agreements attached to planning consent are frequently not being actively enforced. In several cases, facilities that were approved on the basis of community access are not meaningfully accessible in practice. Without monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, these agreements risk becoming symbolic rather than operational.

Additionally, the increasing use of private school booking system providers is creating further barriers. In some cases, these systems prioritise commercial bookings or impose processes and pricing structures that effectively prevent community organisations from securing regular, affordable access.

2. What specific challenges have you faced when trying to access school sports facilities?

The key challenges include:

- Transactional engagement, where community organisations are treated as session deliverers rather than strategic partners.
- Lack of involvement in planning and governance, limiting long-term security.
- Operational barriers within schools, including insurance, safeguarding, staffing, and booking processes.
- Private booking systems that are not designed with community organisations in mind and restrict affordable access.
- Short funding cycles, which make sustainability planning extremely difficult.

- A lack of enforcement of community use agreements linked to planning consent.

We also want to emphasise that many of the young people attending our community organisations are part of the same school communities whose facilities are being opened. However, they are often unable to access regular community sport outside school because of cost. When school facilities are not genuinely accessible or become commercially priced, these young people are effectively excluded from provision in their own communities.

3. What impact does access to school sports facilities have on the people you work with?

When access works well, the impact is significant. It:

- Increases physical activity levels.
- Improves mental health and wellbeing.
- Provides safe, structured activity outside school hours.
- Strengthens community cohesion.
- Creates pathways into volunteering, leadership and employment.

For the young people we work with — many of whom face financial barriers to participation — affordable, local access to school facilities can be transformative. However, when access is time-limited or withdrawn, trust is damaged and participation drops. Sustainable, affordable access is therefore critical.

4. How should schools and youth and community groups work together to enable better access?

We recommend the following:

- Community organisations should be central partners in governance and planning, not add-ons or subcontractors.
- Funding programmes should include a partnership development phase to build trust and shared ownership.
- There should be ring-fenced investment in VCS capacity (governance, safeguarding, business planning).
- Co-design with young people and communities should be a requirement, not optional.
- Community use agreements attached to planning consent must be monitored and enforced by local authorities.

- Booking systems must be transparent and equitable, with safeguards to ensure community organisations are not priced out or deprioritised.
- Multi-year funding models (with tapering support) should be introduced to enable sustainable joint business models.
- Alignment with youth hubs, public health, and NHS Integrated Care Systems should be embedded to support pooled funding and long-term sustainability.

5. Additional comments

If London is serious about tackling inactivity and inequality, then access to school sports facilities must be treated as community infrastructure, not commercial opportunity.

Headline participation figures alone are insufficient. Success should be measured by:

- Sustained participation among young people in deprived areas.
- Reduced cost barriers.
- Retention and progression.
- Stronger, more resilient local community organisations.

There is enormous potential in London's school estate. However, without enforcement of community use commitments, equitable booking systems, and genuine partnership with trusted grassroots organisations, that potential will not be fully realised.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further and contribute to the development of practical solutions.