

Informal note from roundtable discussion with youth and community group representatives

Lack of access to current facilities

- All participants talked about lack of access to facilities and challenges they currently face in getting suitable facilities. They added that it was really difficult to find school sports facilities.
- Participants from youth football clubs spoke about how hard it is to get access to training facilities such as floodlight astroturf pitches. The example was given of one club paying £124 an hour to hire football pitch at private school. The consequence of high fees is that community organisations must cover costs and can lead to needing to pass on fees for participants.
- We also heard that gymnastics is a really underserved sport in terms of facilities and that this is uneven across London, with more facilities in outer London and less in inner London.
- There was general consensus that youth and community groups are on the lookout for new school facilities. Some participants stated they were less likely to want to work with schools, due to the barriers [explored below] that they had experienced thus far.
- We heard that facilities have been built and are not being utilised fully. London Sport research found that only 42 per cent of schools in London have sports facilities open outside of school hours. London Sport also know that 40 per cent of sports halls are on school sites and 32 per cent of playing fields.
- For community groups and charities, having access to spaces is one of the biggest challenges they face. We heard that there have been lots of closure of youth facilities and leisure centres in for example, Brent, which has a knock-on effect.
- There is a statutory requirement that state schools must have certain facilities, e.g. 4 court badminton sports hall, so we know these facilities exist. However, there are many challenges in accessing them.

Challenges of working with schools

- Almost all participants agreed that where they currently work with schools, it has been based on personal network or connections. We heard that without this, a cold approach to a school is very difficult.
- We heard that advertising by schools of facilities is poor, and that community groups have issues with
- Mentality in schools makes a big difference: many schools see leasing facilities as burden and hassle. Connected to this, stakeholders said that it makes a big difference if the Head Teacher is positive to sport and the value of community.
- Without this, community groups' experience was that they didn't get a response from schools generally.
- One participant shared that they have given up with schools and no longer have any wish to go into schools. Their experience is that schools are not outward facing, there is lots of bureaucracy, and schools are resistant. We heard that while there was the odd Head Teacher who will work with community orgs and community, this is rare.

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16 February 2026

- Groups shared that facilities are not well publicised, it was difficult to know how to book, costs are high, and small charities don't have funding to get space.
- Participants also spoke about differences in costs between private and state schools to hire facilities
- We heard from multiple participants about the long times it took to get access to facilities. For instance, examples where things took 1.5 to 2 years to get access due to issues with facility or getting community use established.

Quality of facilities

- We also heard that sometimes facilities are not good quality, and schools are not looking after and upkeeping facilities. For example, we heard about groups that had paid for use and found no nets on football goals, and bits of astroturf missing.

Good practice

- Participants shared an example of an integrated approach where a community organisation works closely with a school. In this model, the community coach also serves as the school's PE coordinator, delivering PE during the school day and providing consistent after-school provision.

Facilities booked out by corporates / unaffordable

- Community organisations told us they felt that many schools are incentivised to prioritise corporate bookings, such as corporate sports leagues, because these arrangements are easier and more profitable. Attendees felt this leaves community groups excluded.
- Participants gave examples where corporates or universities appeared to have near-exclusive access to school sports facilities. They said this often meant there was little or no time available for local residents, including those in more deprived areas.
- Several attendees believed that academisation has made access more difficult. They said academy trusts often sell space at the highest price and do not always consider the needs of youth or community groups when deciding pricing.
- Some participants suggested introducing dynamic pricing, using more affordable rates for community groups and higher charges for those who can pay more. However, they also told us that some school business managers questioned why schools should not simply charge full price for all bookings.
- Attendees emphasised the importance of external funding to subsidise lettings. They felt that without subsidies, schools either close facilities outside school hours or charge rates that community groups cannot afford.
- Several guests suggested that academy leases could include requirements to secure community access to sports facilities.

Other operational challenges

- Participants reported difficulty accessing up-to-date information about school facilities. They shared examples of broken contact details, unclear or non-existent booking systems, and no obvious point of contact. They felt that volunteer run sports groups often lack the time needed to overcome these barriers.

Enabling community use of school sport facilities in London

Health Committee - Rapporteurship

16 February 2026

- Many attendees said they would welcome an independent platform or directory listing available school sports facilities, although they recognised this would not address issues around pricing.

Benefits for young people and challenges when access is limited

- Attendees felt that community youth sports offer significant social and mental health benefits. They said sports sessions help young people build friendships, develop social skills and support their wellbeing, especially given that many children only receive one or two PE lessons per week.
- Participants shared specific examples, such as Catford Pits, which they said had once been freely accessible for football but later became restricted after a private school took over the site. They explained that young people had been prevented from using the area and gave examples of attempts to negotiate access.
- Several groups said they had seen young people climbing over fences to reach locked-off school facilities, which they felt showed the lack of available safe spaces.
- Attendees discussed concerns about high obesity levels in areas such as Brent and linked this to limited access to facilities. They also associated reduced access with increased antisocial behaviour after school hours and highlighted the role of youth clubs in providing mentoring and personal development.
- Some participants felt that schools are not consistently collaborating with youth organisations and charities, despite the benefits that these partnerships could bring.
- Attendees noted that state schools are required to have certain facilities, which led them to believe that the main challenge is not the existence of facilities but gaining access to them.
- One participant referenced the Department for Education's new tender on School Sport Partnerships and expressed concern about rising obesity and inactivity levels. They felt that schools alone cannot shift these trends without support from community clubs.

Benefits of schools as safe spaces

- Participants said that school environments are generally perceived as safer than parks or other open public spaces. They said parents often prefer their children to attend activities on school sites.
- Attendees suggested that because pupils are familiar with school buildings and routes, they feel more comfortable and are more likely to attend activities located there.

Potential solutions

- Participants proposed expanding dual use models so that schools are viewed not only as educational sites but also as community facilities outside teaching hours.
- Some attendees suggested practical measures such as keypad or automated entry systems to allow community access without caretaker involvement, and designing community use into new school buildings or planning applications.
- Others proposed improved coordination with cultural or arts organisations to create broader, more sustainable offers that might make community access more viable for schools.

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16 February 2026

Integrated working with community groups

- Attendees felt that short, standalone after school sessions are often not effective or attractive to schools. They said more integrated models, where a coach is present during the school day and also delivers after-school sessions, work better. Co-funded posts, such as those used by Greenhouse Sports, were cited as examples.
- Participants argued that schools need clearer reasons and incentives to work with community clubs. They noted that the PE and Sport Premium is only renewed every few years, making it difficult for schools to plan long-term partnerships. They felt that longer term guaranteed funding could support collaboration, especially in primary schools.

Funding

- Attendees said clearer funding criteria are needed so schools and community groups can more easily access resources.
- Participants spoke positively about the Opening School Facilities (OSF) fund, which they felt had benefited both schools and community groups. They expressed disappointment that government investment in this fund was withdrawn.
- Some attendees suggested that investment in mentoring and youth work is more cost effective than later spending in the justice system but said that these costs come from different budget areas, making joined up investment difficult.
- London Sport representatives told the group that they had struggled to build a strong relationship with the VRU and felt there were missed opportunities for collaboration. They said they had not been consulted on VRU activity and would like this to change.
- London Tigers shared their experience of receiving VRU funding and said they had seen positive outcomes, particularly around teamwork and trust.
- Participants said the Go!London fund is heavily oversubscribed and that this creates frustration among community sports organisations.
- Several attendees said it remains difficult to bring the right partners together to discuss innovation, challenges and opportunities in the sector.

Mayoral policy

- Participants noted that Community Use Agreements already exist in planning processes but felt that enforcement in London could be stronger.
- They said that while the Mayor has supported major sporting events, similar support for community sport could make a significant difference. Some attendees referred to initiatives such as a basketball taskforce.
- Finance was repeatedly highlighted as a major barrier. Participants felt that subsidising pitch costs could help expand community access.
- Several guests suggested creating a central directory of sports facilities with up-to-date contact information.
- Other ideas included training programmes for schools and community groups, online resources, and endorsements for schools that demonstrate good practice.
- Participants also suggested that collaboration between schools and local councils could help bring disused or underused buildings back into community use.