

Informal note from roundtable discussion with school representatives

Public access to school sports facilities

Experiences of opening school facilities

- A representative from Poplar Primary School described using the funding they received to help open its hall to a coaching company outside school hours to run extracurricular clubs, including sports and holiday clubs. They said this developed from trust built during earlier funding programmes.
- Laurel Park School shared that its facilities are managed by an external lettings company from 5pm onwards. They said this model grew due to the legacy of the OSF funding. Over 120 children come in to do trampolining off the back the fund.
- Oval Learning, who helps to support multiple schools, explained that they help broker relationships between schools and local voluntary or community sports groups in need of space, and that they encourage schools to expand usage beyond their own families.
- A representative from Jo Richardson Community School described extensive community use, including karate, dance, football on 3G pitches, cricket, and classroom hire. They said churches hire the building on Sundays and that they run their own booking and monitoring arrangements. Staff is present during hires to monitor the facilities hire.
- Another representative from Jo Richardson Community School explained that their large hall is also hired for weddings and large events, and that they have become well established in community lettings.
- A representative from Little Health School reported running after-school clubs for their students and partnering with a leisure provider (Redbridge vision leisure team) to host holiday programmes. They said demand is high, with long waiting lists, although they also described challenges in developing a cycle track due to planning issues.

Advertising facilities

- Several participants said they rely on word of mouth and social media to advertise their facilities. A representative from Jo Richardson Community School noted that physical posters and leaflets remain useful, especially when buildings are open even when the school is closed.
- Poplar Primary School said their facilities are limited and that outside areas are not in a condition suitable for hire.
- Oval Learning noted that councils, such as Southwark, are doing a better job at mapping community spaces in some areas, and felt schools could be included more consistently in these directories.

Challenges around opening facilities

- Participants highlighted practical barriers such as staff capacity, managing toilets, and losing access to sports halls during exam periods.
- Some schools said they prioritise school activities and exams, so community access is sometimes restricted.
- Jo Richardson Community School described having created a dedicated team to manage community use, saying this had become part of their long-standing model. They noted

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that they receive income from community engagement which is reinvested into the school.

- Participants discussed the condition of facilities, with some explaining their equipment or outdoor spaces are not fit for wider community use without investment.
- Planning constraints were raised, including PFI buildings or local authority decisions that limit improvements such as installing pitches or replacing court surfaces.
- Some schools described difficulties with external hirers not looking after facilities, leading to extra costs or the need for deposits, contracts, and regular monitoring.
- A few participants mentioned that external lettings companies sometimes bring their own staff, which can make accountability more difficult compared with using in-house staff or students.

Managing bookings and safeguarding considerations

- Schools reported the need for staff on site during lettings, safeguarding checks, and clarity on who is entering buildings.
- Some have booking systems that allow regular bookers to reserve long term slots and pay monthly.
- Others highlighted challenges in balancing safety, access, storage needs, and monitoring requirements.

Benefits of opening facilities

- Participants felt opening facilities helps build positive links with families, supports transition to secondary schools, and gives children more opportunities for structured activity.
- A representative from Poplar Primary School described holiday programmes as particularly beneficial for children who experience anxiety or who benefit from activity across different school sites.
- A representative from Little Health School said partnerships with leisure providers had been positive and had helped them expand provision, including SEN-specific programmes.
- A representative from Laurel Park School noted previous national partnership programmes (such as school sport partnerships) had created strong collaboration between primary and secondary schools, and they described a significant gap after these programmes ended. They further described that as soon as the OSF fund was launched, they jumped at the chance to apply for it.
- Others said local school sports partnerships continue to operate in some areas, but funding uncertainty creates challenges. A representative from Poplar Primary School highlighted the School Sports Partnership is well established in Merton which helps to provide links with secondary schools in the area.

Previous access schemes

Experiences with earlier funding

- Several schools described positive experiences with the OSF fund saying it supported equipment, access arrangements, and the ability to run clubs without additional staffing burdens.

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- A representative from Poplar Primary School highlighted that the OSF funding enabled them to separate access to facilities from main school alarms, making out of hours use easier. Coaching companies are able to use their main hall and decode the alarm without having to go into the main school. This has been beneficial for their schools as they do not have the site management onsite anymore to allow them to do more than this.
- Schools involved in long term OSF activity reported strong legacy programmes, especially in sports like trampolining that continued after the funding ended.
- Schools described challenges with sustainability when funding ends, saying that short term grants do not allow clubs to become fully established, whereas multi-year investment helped some programmes continue independently.
- A representative from Little Heath School described that their schools have “bulging” cupboards full of equipment but an unloved sports facility. They added that there is no point of equipment if a school playground is full of potholes. Schools need to be able to make capital improvements.
- Poplar Primary School added that there they had little flexibility with the OSF funding received – they were able to use the money for improvements they didn’t initially state.

Wider funding and access considerations

- A representative from Youth Sport Trust highlighted that schools need clear information about funding opportunities and application processes. They felt many schools miss out because they are unaware of funding pots or because processes feel complex.
- A few participants highlighted difficulties in finding coaches, especially post-Covid, and said this affects what activities schools can offer.
- Some schools reported success in helping external groups apply for funding using the school as a venue, which then supports holiday clubs or community sessions.
- Participants discussed the limits of certain funding streams, including restrictions on carrying money forward (for example PE and sport premium), which they said can lead to pressure to spend quickly rather than strategically.
- Some schools said they had received marathon funding or used apprenticeship levy funding to support activity.

Mayoral policy

Mapping, planning, and wider policy environment

- Participants discussed local authority mapping exercises and suggested that schools should be included as community assets within these maps, though practices vary between boroughs.
- Some organisations emphasised that even when schools have facilities, these may not be fit for purpose without investment, and they felt this should be acknowledged in mapping or planning discussions.
- Attendees highlighted planning barriers, such as restrictions related to PFI buildings or local authority planning refusals, that can prevent schools from improving or expanding sports facilities.
- Some participants said the Mayor could play a role in improving enforcement or expectations around community use where planning conditions exist.

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- Others said Mayoral support for major sporting events is valuable but felt a similar level of attention to community sport could be beneficial.

Funding considerations relevant to Mayoral influence

- A representative from Laurel Park School felt there could be a clearer recognition that fee structures affect participation, for example that adult club members can subsidise higher charges more easily than children's clubs.
- Some schools already differentiate hire charges for adult and youth groups and felt further guidance or support could help others adopt similar models.
- Several attendees said that long term, consistent investment would allow schools to develop sustainable models of community access, rather than the cycle of short-term funding that currently exists.
- A few participants highlighted that support with navigating PFI arrangements could be helpful, as they found this challenging when considering opening facilities.
- Participants said they would welcome support to make funding processes easier to understand, with clearer explanations of available programmes and direct points of contact during funding rounds.

Participants' requests for Mayoral support

- Schools and organisations expressed interest in:
 - funding that helps make facilities fit for use and accessible year round
 - more flexibility in how funding can be used, which should be school-led
 - support in identifying reliable community partners or providers
 - clearer guidance on navigating planning or PFI constraints
 - help promoting relationships between clubs and schools
 - recognition of the challenges schools face in staffing, safeguarding and liability when opening their buildings

Future priorities

- A representative from Youth Sport Trust felt upcoming national announcements on school sport could provide opportunities for London, and they hoped the Mayor would support longer term investment rather than short term funding. This would allow schools open its facilities in a way that is more sustainable.
- Poplar Primary School added that schools do not want to become commercial businesses but want sustainable ways to support physical activity for children and communities.