



# Mapping Sports Ministry

**Community Sport and Wellbeing Ministry:  
Developing an evidence base**

A research report prepared for the Diocese of Gloucester and Sportily  
by Mark Balcar and Andrew Parker

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## Introduction

This report provides an overview of the current landscape within sports ministry, for the benefit of sport and wellbeing ministry projects and looks to support the Church of England's National Sport and Wellbeing Strategy with new insight and understanding. In so doing, the report presents the findings of desk-based and empirical research into the role of faith-based (Christian) organisations in contemporary social life and their potential contribution to sport and wellbeing agendas. It combines a mapping of policy debates surrounding faith and civil society and mainstream sport and wellbeing with critical analysis of contemporary sports ministry provision by church and para-church organisations.

A central aim of the report is to highlight the current social and political backdrop and to consider the way in which sports ministry activities might lead to the establishment of new worshipping communities, this being a central aim of Sportily, a sports ministry project of the Diocese of Gloucester. Moreover, the report aims to collate evidence from current and relevant best practice in sports ministry to create a stronger evidence-based narrative and rationale for innovative sports ministry approaches.

Developing an evidence base is critical to the establishment of these approaches and for building partnerships, securing funding, and influencing the future success of sport and wellbeing ministry across the Church of England. The report highlights some of the challenges around constructing this evidence-base, in particular, the lack of evidence surrounding the success of sports ministry nationally to delivering new Christians into churches or individuals on a faith journey and clearly articulated theories of change which map sports ministry interventions through to a faith journey or church engagement. The report however, also examines the growing robust evidence base across the community sport, youth and wellbeing sectors. These frameworks alongside the current limited understanding of the success of sports ministry and the creation of new faith journeys towards New Worshipping Communities will provide a critical and timely step change in sport and wellbeing ministry.

## Methodology

The methodology has sought to bring together information from a broad range of external sources including those from the public policy and community sport sector alongside emerging research on sports ministry and other faith journey research. These sources have helped us to identify what evidence exists around the role of faith groups in civil society and the delivery of public policy where it touches on sport and wellbeing. This includes developing a more in-depth understanding of the wider role that sport and wellbeing ministry might play in supporting public policy objectives and highlighting new delivery opportunities for the Church around wider health and wellbeing agendas.

## 2. Mapping Sports Ministry

The research for the report was carried out between October 2020 – May 2021 and was funded by the Diocese of Gloucester. The desk-based element of the research comprised a mixture of policy and secondary-source analysis with the empirical element focusing on one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with sports ministry project leads as part of the development of case studies. The empirical data collection process was selective in order to provide a cross-sectional analysis of current activity in this area.

Whilst the overall aim of the research was to provide a snapshot of the key issues to be considered and addressed by Sportily, it is believed that its findings should be of wider interest and use. Therefore this executive summary is made available in a hope that it will provide insight, support reflection, generate conversation and support further investment in sports ministry.

## Key Findings

### The Role Of Faith Groups In Civil Society

- The report highlights that there is good research and evidence that faith groups are quietly undertaking significant social action - estimated at £3+ billion annually - and engagement in the community which also provides insight into how churches should best do this.
- There is increasing recognition that faith-based organisations are builders of social capital, social cohesion and, more specifically, their impact on public health continues to be underplayed including wellbeing. There are a great number of health-related activities taking place in and around churches that are so well ‘embedded’ that they are seldom thought of as interventions or evaluated as such.
- There is an emerging change in attitude by policy makers, funders, charities, and businesses especially local authorities, towards faith-based organisations. They are realising that faith-based organisations have a significant part to play in building better and more cohesive communities and have the assets to do so and should be considered further within the context of civil society policy making - the Churches response to the Covid pandemic has highlighted and potentially accelerated this.
- Within the context of civil society there are potentially opportunities for dioceses to help trail-blaze new approaches to community engagement and develop new partnerships with local and national government to enhance the Church’s role within local delivery through the Government’s new Levelling Up policy: the Levelling Up White Paper was published in January 2022.
- Problems persist around the general perception that the Church prioritizes proselytising over and above civic contribution and that as an institution, it is ‘dying’.



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- The evidence suggests that such perceptions need to be challenged and churches must work hard at building trust with public and private agencies by proving the quality of their governance, their ability to successfully deliver outcomes, and their accountability around funding.
- Sport and wellbeing ministry projects should align with policy, evidence-based approaches and outcome frameworks, and be able to meet due diligence requirements and utilize and develop existing insights and theories of change.
- Furthermore, the development and implementation of robust monitoring and evaluation protocols and practices around evidencing project delivery are crucial.
- Any effective progression at diocesan level should be scaled to the national level.

### **Sport And Wellbeing Ministry In Society**

- Sports ministry has a long history in the UK and today this is predominately driven by parachurch organisations.
- While sports ministry continues to evolve and there are pockets of success, it is not clear that sports ministry has grown much in the last thirty years – in fact it may have declined in most areas.
- The sector has generally not connected with mainstream policy around social outcomes and a broader health and wellbeing agenda including, thereby providing effective solutions to a wide range of social issues.
- Research undertaken by the Diocese of London highlights that demand around sports ministry is no longer seen in terms of just ‘sport’ but as sport and wellbeing ministry ‘through sport’. This incorporates a much broader base of community interventions including play, recreation, fitness and social prescribing that have an impact on the long-term health, happiness and satisfaction of individuals and local communities.
- Scripture Union has made one of the most notable contributions in the parachurch sector developing its sports ministry offer, underpinned by its 2014 research evaluating sports ministry.
- Some parachurch organisations have developed new approaches to meet the changing demand from young people, however, they have not effectively evaluated its impact: monitoring and evaluation is still not seen by the sector as a priority and there is little empirical evidence to support the claims parachurch organisations make about their impact, especially faith pathways.
- Two major collaborative campaigns that sought to use major sporting events in the UK - the London Olympics in 2012 and the Rugby World Cup in 2015 - as a tool of community engagement and mission made a significant impact on the sector and the church.
- In undertaking evaluation reports, they have provided vital fresh insight for the sport ministry sector including there is still a demand and enthusiasm for sport and wellbeing ministry from churches but that they need significantly more support than simply the provision of resource and where the sector

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works together strategically with churches, there is a greater impact. This has been supported by further research by the Diocese of London and Sport England.

- The limitations however, of relying on those parachurch organisations using sport as a tool for mission to drive the development of sport and wellbeing ministry in the church have also been recognised.
- Existing interventions highlight the significant challenges for sport and wellbeing ministry in operating in silos without an overall strategy or framework to address many critical issues nationally to ensure the sectors develops and works effectively with the church.
- The importance of good leadership cannot be underestimated in terms of the development and rejuvenation of sports and wellbeing ministry in future years.
- A major development in sports ministry in the last ten years has been that the Church of England has become much more active since 2012 as it has explored how sport ministry could be better utilized by dioceses and parishes as tool for community engagement, mission, and ministry.
- The Dioceses of London, Gloucester and Norwich, have led the way, alongside the Church of England's first Sport Ambassador and the Seven Pilot Diocese Project all who continue to provide valuable insight and learning for developing sport and wellbeing ministry and leadership at diocesan level.
- The Seven Pilot Diocese Project could potentially provide the Church of England with the critical foundation it needs to transform sport and wellbeing ministry over the next ten years.

### The Evidence Base For Community Sport, Youth And Wellbeing

- There are three relevant evidence bases outside sport and wellbeing ministry that should be considered in detail.
- Consideration should also be given to the evidence around the church investing in civil society including the Government's new Levelling-Up policy: a moral, social and economic programme to spread opportunity more equally across the UK.

#### **i. The Evidence Base: Community Sport**

- The use of **sport-based activity** to deliver a set of complex social outcomes is now firmly embedded in policy thinking, funding mechanisms and delivery frameworks.
- This is centred on getting more people active especially disadvantaged young people, women and girls, disabled people and ethnic minorities active and to deliver successful outcomes across four key areas: physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, and social and community development.

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- Research suggests that sporting activity has a broad positive impact on society, and the evidence-base surrounding **sport and social outcomes** is both credible and robust, however these are multifaceted and complex. Findings found that:
  - There is a well-established evidence base that sporting activity improves physical wellbeing and has a whole host of positive impacts on individuals and their lives.
  - Mental health also has a well-established evidence base which can improve life satisfaction and self-esteem and confidence.
  - Likewise, individual development has a substantial evidence base including improving educational attainment improving employability and building character and resilience through volunteering and leadership.
  - While community development is harder to measure there is evidence, particularly around the role of sport and the integration of people of different backgrounds, that sport helps people to interact and builds bridging capital via participating, volunteering and spectating.
- While physical wellbeing has a range of validated and well recognised measures, the outcomes of sport and physical activity does present some measurement challenges: there is an on-going need for evidencing social outcomes through sport and physical activity including the impact of volunteering and around community development, using more consistent forms of measurement.
- From the data researchers were able to provide many critical principles for the successful delivery community sporting interventions including how to target certain groups and tackle a wide range of issues: inactivity, obesity, mental health, and isolation/loneliness; improve community cohesion and integration; build character and resilience; reduce anti-social behaviour and low-level crime; and increase volunteering and employability; poverty, disadvantage, and inequality.

## ii. The Evidence Base: Youth

- The evidence base for **youth interventions** has grown significantly in recent years.
- Research suggests that open access youth provision has the potential to significantly improve social and emotional learning skills, social capital/connectedness, and wellbeing for young people, particularly those with most to gain.
- Open access youth work is provision **that a young person may access regardless of their background, needs or position in society** (Robertson 2005). This can include a range of open access services including youth clubs, detached youth work, open access play sessions and targeted sessions for specific groups of young people. The aim is to provide a safe environment where young people have access to informal learning opportunities and information and guidance around a whole range of issues meaning that they are better informed about life choices and the opportunities that are available to them.

- It also shows that higher quality youth provision is related to better outcomes for young people: those attending targeted provision make greater gains across some social outcomes related to social skills, leadership, self-regulation and communication and self-expression than those attending universal provision only.
- Young people relish safe and supportive environments where interventions are inclusive, stimulating, positively challenging and fun.
- Particular attention should be paid to the needs of girls and young women, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Further attention should be given to strengthening the links between youth provision and sporting activity.
- Sport and wellbeing ministry should seek to adopt these practices.

### iii. The Evidence Base: Wellbeing

- The evidence base for **wellbeing interventions** is an emerging area that measures ‘how we are doing’ as individuals, communities and as a nation.
- There is already evidence of what works to improve wellbeing which provides a coherent and common approach for determining the efficacy of interventions.
- Wellbeing has a wide range of determinants and there are seven broad dimensions that matter most to people. These dimensions are the natural environment, personal well-being, our relationships, health (good health improves wellbeing and good wellbeing improves health), what we do, where we live, personal finance, the economy, education and skills and governance. Key areas to personal wellbeing include feeling purpose, social relationships, trust and belonging and mental wellbeing.
- There is limited good quality evidence for sport and dance impacts on wellbeing; existing evidence shows that doing activities outdoors can be good for people’s wellbeing but there is limited evidence about the wellbeing of children and very little is about adults and children together in families.
- There is also promising evidence that places and spaces also boost social relations or community wellbeing: community hubs can promote social cohesion by bringing together different social or generational groups; increase social capital and build trust; and interaction between community members; and increase people’s knowledge or skills.



- There is also emerging evidence to suggest that attending and volunteering at church/faith-based activities increases wellbeing.
- Furthermore, there is also evidence that social prescribing, PE and Sport in schools, opening school facilities, and being active in nature could potentially support the aims and objectives of sport and wellbeing ministry projects.

### The Evidence Base For Sport And Wellbeing Ministry

- Sports ministry continues to evolve in the UK and the last decade has witnessed several significant developments which have changed conventional working practices in the sector.
- The best developments have predominately highlighted the need to connect more readily with mainstream policy, and to incorporate and encompass a broader wellbeing agenda thereby providing effective solutions to a wide range of social issues.
- The insight and learning that has emerged from a number of new approaches to sport and wellbeing ministry has not been sufficiently understood or embedded in sector approaches and practise including the broader sector taking a strategic approach to grow and develop the sector through strong partnerships, links to local parishes, workforce and leadership.
- There is a lack of in-depth theological thinking and insight into the practical application and ground-level development of sport, health and wellbeing initiatives in the UK.
- There is also an underlying theological narrative persists which suggests that the Church should not use sporting activity to deliver social outcomes or mission: this reflects the limitations to relying on parachurch organisations using sport as a tool for mission to drive the development of sport and wellbeing ministry.
- Sports ministry finds itself in need of a new theology; one which relates directly to, informs, and emerges organically from practitioner work within the sector.
- Where churches and church leaders fail to promote sport as a 'spiritual good' they deny people of all ages the opportunity to further explore their relationship with God around who they have been (uniquely) designed them to be. For young people in particular, this can be a detriment both to their physical/emotional and spiritual growth. It is up to churches and church leaders to model a positive mindset towards such activities.
- There is evidence to suggest that such theological thinking (and reflection) is emerging and this needs to be developed further.
- The adoption of such thinking and reflection should serve not only to influence and underpin work within and across the sector but to inform theories of change and monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

- Existing interventions highlight the significant challenges for sport and wellbeing ministry in operating in silos without an overall strategy or framework. Critical key factors need addressing urgently, such as:
  - (i) strategic thinking and planning around the development of sport ministry over the next 10-20 years;
  - (ii) the successful monitoring and evaluation of sport and wellbeing ministry projects and campaigns;
  - (iii) the need for evidence-based frameworks for different types of sport and wellbeing ministry models;
  - (iv) understanding of the social outcomes through community sport and partnerships with public bodies to embed this thinking and insights into sport and wellbeing ministry;
  - (v) new models of delivery that are sustainable long term;
  - (vi) the need for evidence-based frameworks for faith pathways, the role of the local church and church schools, and new worshipping communities;
  - (vii) appropriate education, training and continuing professional development for sports ministers and volunteers;
  - (viii) a framework for using major (and other) sporting events as a means for initial (marketing) community engagement and mission;
  - (iv) good quality leadership – a new generation of sports ministers and leaders.
- This has led to the Church of England seeking to find its own path to strategically develop sport and wellbeing ministry at both the diocesan and national level. Good leadership is critical in this respect and the importance of this cannot be underestimated in terms of the development and rejuvenation of sports and wellbeing ministry in future years.
- There is also a dearth of evidence concerning how best to create pathways into faith or new worshipping communities through sport and wellbeing: while some sport and wellbeing ministries have developed models of engagement these have limited theological basis and are often the basis of the 'live experience' or church growth models.
- There is some good evidence and insight that the sector can draw on such as the 9Dot Research Faith Journeys Research Report for the Church of England (2018).
- Further consideration about the theological implications of the Church working with public bodies to understand embrace and frame sport and wellbeing ministry within the public policy framework is required.
- There is some thinking and evidence on how the Church can deliver social outcomes especially around social cohesion but little about how sporting activity can do this.

- As endorsed by mainstream sport, youth or wellbeing policy, sport and wellbeing ministries should seek to develop robust theories of change including the key contribution of sport-specific interventions in the faith journeys of participants.

### **The Evidence Base For Community Sport And Sport For Development**

- The community sport sector – outside of the grass-roots based provision provided by individual National Governing Bodies of sport - has emerged as a significant force in the sports sector through successfully tackling stubborn inactivity levels and achieving more social value.
- This has seen the emergence of a new sport for development sector which often delivers both community sport (as defined by increasing participation/getting and maintain more active people) and social outcomes.
- The community sport and specifically the sport for development sector is mostly made up of voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations: sport and wellbeing ministry projects might best fit within this sub-sector.
- Important to note that like the church, VCSE organisations are least understood, inadequately monitored in national data and require further focus by policy and planning makers.
- Several of the social outcomes that the sport for development sector priorities dovetail well within the churches broader remit to tackle poverty and food poverty, develop youth leadership and resilience, and support mental health and mentoring.
- The sport and wellbeing ministry sector already has many of the key evidenced-elements that are required for successful intervention through sport: local placed-based approach, community focus, volunteers and caring about the community and those in it.
- There are many similarities between the sectors: sport and wellbeing ministry finds itself where the community sport and sport for development sector was ten years ago needing to create a more relevant delivery approach, build a stronger evidence base and develop robust theories of change that are refined by impact and outcomes data.
- StreetGames, OnSide Youth Centres, SLQ, Play Gloucester, Youth Sport Trust and the Bromley-by-Bow Centre case-studies provide relevant examples of approaches, models and insight about what works: they also provide examples of project and programmes that could be adopted and modified to local conditions with the addition of a faith/church dimension.
- Sport and wellbeing ministry projects should explore and assess relevant programmes seeking to build relationships with these organisations/networks to utilise their expertise, resources, and training to build life transformational opportunities for individuals and communities whilst at the same time creating an appropriate and distinctive mission element to their work.

- Sport for development also has its limitations – while academic studies support the using of sport to enhance social capital, social inclusion and youth interventions around mentoring, education, employment/training they also note that some of the claims surrounding the transformative potential of sport can be exaggerated. This is also true of sport ministry.
- The sector continues to work hard to create credible theories of change and expand a more robust evidence base to provide much needed data to support its claims of impact and refine its approach to delivery: organisational evaluations these show that these programmes have specific characteristics, and which are intentionally orientated towards targeted non-sport outcomes deliver more substantial returns and wider community benefit.
- The evidence shows that a good theory of change is the main tool to design a successful programme and is the roadmap for good evaluation and measurement.
- The Sport for Development Coalition’s Outcomes and Measurement Framework is helping individual organisations and the sector to improve the way they measure, record, and demonstrate the impact they are making: to improve the sector’s evidence base and improve outcomes for young people by outlining of the essential principles of building logic into a theory of change supported by an outcomes-led methodology to designing sport for development programmes and showing the links and assumptions between the immediate changes, longer-term changes and the goal, and the factors that will affect an organisation’s ability to reach these.

### The Evidence Base from Sports Ministry Case Studies

As part of the research case studies were produced with six organisations all of which concern themselves with the provision of sport and physical activity: Hoxton Sports and Wellbeing Hub, Adventure Plus, Corby Chapel Gym, Kick, Sports Factory and Inspire (Church Children and Families Football Initiative). Our thanks is expressed to these organisations for their involvement in the research.

- Findings from the empirical case study research highlight community wellbeing outcomes that support existing systematic review evidence, as well as describing additional and unforeseen outcomes, including those that arise from the benefits of more informal spaces - as well as benefits to the organisations responsible for the delivery of the interventions.
- Findings also highlight how important consideration of the local context is, that the response to local needs is often complex, and that community involvement in the delivery of projects is important including planning to successfully improve wellbeing outcomes.
- Case study data also demonstrates that sport and wellbeing ministry projects which adopt sound



governance structures, robust approaches to strategic planning, and active and co-creative relationships with local churches and communities, have a firm foundation on which to build sustainable practice.

- However, case study data reveal that the adoption of sound monitoring and evaluation processes are lacking across the sector, hence, there is limited good quality evidence for the impact of sporting interventions on the overall wellbeing of related communities.

## Conclusions

- This report concludes that sport and wellbeing ministry projects have the potential to make a valuable contribution to the personal and social development of those with whom they engages.
- While historical evidence suggests that the promotion of sport and wellbeing through faith-based organisations can be effective in not only engaging individuals in sporting activities but also in their wellbeing and faith journeys, the nuances and complexities of contemporary social life require a re-thinking and re-calibration of the way in which this work is designed, implemented and developed.
- Sport and wellbeing interventions can provide a variety of support mechanisms and faith/life-course pathways for those who choose to access such opportunities.
- The report highlights that there is some good research and evidence supporting the churches engagement in the community which also provides insight into how churches should best do this and there is some learning around innovative sports ministry, which, on the whole, has been ignored to date.
- There is lack of in-depth theological thinking and insight into the practical application and ground-level development of sport, health and wellbeing initiatives, to ensure they lead people into faith pathways, new worshipping communities and traditional church – there is some other evidence to suggest how this might be best achieved and the Church of England project is looking to address some of these issues nationally.
- There is a lack of in-depth theological thinking and insight into the practical application and ground-level development of sport, health and wellbeing initiatives in the UK.
- There is also an underlying theological narrative persists which suggests that the Church should not use sporting activity to deliver social outcomes or mission: this reflects the limitations to relying on parachurch organisations using sport as a tool for mission to drive the development of sport and wellbeing ministry: Sports ministry finds itself in need of a new theology.
- There is evidence to suggest that such theological thinking (and reflection) is emerging and this needs to be developed further to not only influence and underpin work within and across the sector but to inform theories of change and monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

- The sport and wellbeing ministry case studies produced as part of this research provide an important start in better understanding current sport and wellbeing ministry approaches and outcomes however, underline what is found in the reports and literature – there are several fundamental issues and challenges in sports ministry today including the lack of:
  - a) Evidence surrounding the success of sport and wellbeing ministry nationally to delivering new Christians into churches or individuals on a faith journey
  - b) Clearly articulated theories of change which map sport and wellbeing ministry interventions through to a faith journey, new worshipping communities or traditional church engagement
  - c) Replicable models for sport and wellbeing ministry that make the case for its inclusion in mainstream mission and ministry for the whole church
  - d) Joined up thinking between the church sport and wellbeing ministry and public policy objectives to deliver social outcomes.
- More in-depth research is needed to get further insight from the case studies and to expand the study to other parish projects and parachurch work alongside a more systematic review of past evaluations: however, the lack of simple data collection, monitoring and evaluation frameworks and independent evaluations is always going to restrict what insight can be uncovered.
- The report also demonstrates that by embracing insight from wider community sport, youth and wellbeing approaches that the project is highly likely to create a significant base from which to achieve successful engagement with the local communities.
- There is a robust enough evidence base across the community sport, youth and wellbeing sectors to show how community sport organisations impact on a wide range of highly relevant social outcomes.
- To help do this it sports ministry should include wellbeing alongside the delivery of social outcomes and tackling inactivity.
- The evidence shows that a good theory of change is the main tool to design a successful programme and is a roadmap for good evaluation and measurement and these examples, approaches, monitoring and evaluations frameworks, evaluations and theories of change should be used to inspire, draw learning and insight – and potentially partner with the relevant organisations.
- The report concludes that sport and wellbeing ministry cannot continue to evolve successfully without reference to public policy and especially the community sport, wellbeing, youth, and civil society/community cohesion sectors: it should embed itself within this growing and increasingly significant work, help shape these environments, as a key leader and deliverer in the community.
- Exploring these frameworks will provide sport and wellbeing ministry projects with critical insights about what works in a variety of contexts and inform and guide the development of theories of change, that will aid the future development of sports ministry and help to ensure success.

- These will be attractive to funders, partners and policy makers and help sport and wellbeing ministry projects to replicate what works from the outset, avoid mistakes and better articulate vision to a wide range of stakeholders.
- This will be crucial in building partnerships and ultimately in the future success of sport and wellbeing ministry in the Church of England.

## Recommendations

Sport and wellbeing ministry projects should:

- Consider assessing and considering what the community sport and sport for development sector has done and is doing – there is significant insight, inspiration and opportunities here.
- Consider the investing in developing a new sport and wellbeing theology that relates directly to, informs, and emerges organically from practitioner work within the sector.
- Consider in depth working out how sport and wellbeing ministry projects can create real pathways into relationship, faith, new worshipping communities and church life – this needs many levels of engagement and approaches and is in its infancy.
- Consider working hard to join up community sport, youth, wellbeing and faith approaches by creating innovative models, theories of change that can be monitored and evaluated, and then communicated.
- Consider working in partnership and communicating with local institutions and organisations to build trust, knowledge and recognition and to be incorporated into local strategic thinking and delivery.

## Sportily

Sportily is creating a network of fun-loving sport and activity groups, where all children, young people, and their families can try different sports, make new friends and encounter the Christian faith with others. It was formed in 2021 with the support of the Diocese of Gloucester, by building on the foundations laid by Gloucestershire based sports ministry charity PSALMS, which had been established in 1995.

For more information please see [www.sportily.org.uk](http://www.sportily.org.uk) or contact [hello@sportily.org.uk](mailto:hello@sportily.org.uk).

