

Active Partnerships

Engaging Communities, Transforming Lives

Opening School Facilities Final Project Report: Key Learnings February 2021

Funded by





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Executive summary

19 projects, covering 23 Active Partnership (AP) areas, worked directly with 230 targeted primary and secondary schools over the 15-month project lifespan. Despite the challenges presented by Covid which resulted in the enforced closure of school facilities for community use across the country during March, April and May and again in November 2020, the project still managed to gather significant amounts of learning to help inform future investment into the Opening School Facilities (OSF) agenda. 

To capture 'live' learning across the project, the Active Partnership National Team created a national report summarising each of the 19 monthly reflective project logs which can be accessed [here](#).

These national reports help stakeholders and our wider network to understand the project lifecycle and the affect of Covid-19 on the pace and impact of the project locally. A **six-month national report** was also created to capture the half-way reflections and learning from each of the 19 projects.

The project has challenged thinking around the key drivers and barriers of a school to open their facilities for community use and has better equipped Active Partnerships to support them with this agenda.

The most significant learning has been that schools are primarily driven to open their doors to strengthen links to the community.

As a sector, the narrative needs to change as well to focus on the driver to open school facilities from income generation

to supporting the health, wellbeing and social cohesion of their pupils and local community. This shift alone will help to connect educational outcomes with wider outcomes and enable school senior leadership teams to see the value of opening their doors during evenings, weekends and holiday periods.

The OSF project has identified the following top 3 drivers and barriers for a school to open their facilities for community use.

Key drivers



Strengthening links to the local community.



Income generation, in most cases is a secondary driver for both primary and secondary schools.



Mental wellbeing and physical benefits of opening their school facilities for pupils and the local community.

Key barriers



Lack of staffing.



Perceived or actual poor state of facilities or lack of facilities.



Site safety, perceived damages and security.



Many schools are already open for community use however they are a hugely under-utilised asset.

In summary, the key learnings from this project include:

- Schools are **primarily driven to open their doors for community use to strengthen relationships with their local community**. This presents a significant opportunity for schools to position themselves as a community hub as communities recover and reinvent from the pandemic.
- There needs to be a concerted and collective effort to **change the narrative** around a school's motivation to open their facilities. In most cases, income generation is a secondary driver for both primary and secondary schools and support and guidance to schools needs to reflect and reinforce this.
- Many schools are already open for community use however they are a **hugely under-utilised asset**. Community programming tends to be ad-hoc, dominated by traditional sports clubs and very few schools have consulted with their own pupils and local community as to what they want the offer to look like. Any future investment therefore needs to focus on adopting a place-based approach to supporting schools evolve their offer to reflect the needs of their local community.
- There is a **strong appetite from primary school senior leadership** to open their doors for community use however they have often been overlooked by the sport and physical activity sector as a potential space. There is a huge opportunity to reposition primary school facilities as an accessible, safe and trusted space within communities.
- **Senior leadership buy-in** and support is a critical success factor in driving forward the OSF agenda. Without this, little progress will be made.
- The OSF agenda is **highly complex** and requires a **systemic approach** to unlocking the school gates beyond 3pm. Success requires commitment and capacity within a school as well as external support and capacity to drive this agenda forwards.
- Future OSF investment needs to retain a **conversationalist approach** with schools and **not be driven by KPIs**. Active Partnerships are well placed to lead on this work locally and provide much-needed support to schools on youth and community consultation as well as mapping and connectivity to the sport and physical activity system.
- Successful OSF models require **behaviour change** at school senior leadership level and the project demonstrated that any future investment needs to have a **lifespan of two-to-three years** to embed and effect this change.
- Secondary schools need **small to larger scale capital investment** into their facilities to make them more appealing and suitable for community use. A significant number of secondary schools indicated their need for larger scale capital investment however the project found that community provision and access could often be improved through smaller investments into nets, keypads and portable floodlights.
- School facilities offer an **accessible, safe and trusted space** and insight from this project indicates that they are able to and have an interest in offering an appealing and welcoming environment for under-represented groups to be active in.

Context

Key considerations for Phase 2

- The need to create a **consistent, compelling and clear narrative** around the important role schools can plan in helping communities and the sport and physical activity sector recover and reinvent from the impacts of the pandemic. This will be critical if we are to influence school senior leadership teams.
- Pilot the **Open Active school facilities model** in Phase 2 with a view to testing what could be done to make it easier for schools across the country to market their facilities and to make it easier for individuals and communities to book pay and play/informal activity sessions.
- **Support NGBs** to find appropriate and available indoor and outdoor school space as Return to Play gets underway. Encourage NGBs to consider how primary school estates can be better utilised.
- Improve **marketing support and guidance to schools** to help them increase the visibility of their facilities.
- **Work in collaboration with the existing 23 OSF project leads and UK Active** to share learnings and good practice on how the leisure industry and schools safely re-opened their sport facilities to build much-needed confidence of schools to consider re-opening for community use.
- Strengthen, where relevant the **connectivity of OSF with the £220m DfE Holiday Activities and Food investment** as a way to help schools embark on a more needs-led community programme and as a way to test operating and management models.



There is a need to create a consistent, compelling and clear narrative around the important role schools can plan in helping communities and the sport and physical activity sector recover and reinvent from the impacts of the pandemic.

An overview of Phase 1

Project scope

As part of the School Sport and Activity Action Plan, Sport England invested £1.5m Department for Education (DfE) funding into the Active Partnership network to fund 19 projects (23 Active Partnerships) to support 230 targeted primary and secondary schools to open up their sports facilities, in order to broaden the offer of extra-curricular and out of school sporting and physical activities available to pupils and the wider community.

The project began in October 2019 and completed at the end of December 2020. Investment was also put into the Active Partnerships National Team to support the Active Partnerships, and to lead on capturing and sharing the learning of the project. The investment included a learning exercise to better understand the current situation, barriers, solutions and success factors for schools in opening up their facilities after the school day, at weekends and during the holidays as well as supporting schools to strengthen and broaden their community offer in response to local need.

Project outcomes

- Support schools to open up their sport facilities outside of the school day (after school, weekends and school holidays) in a way that responds to local need.
- Ensure that this is supported by a strong and varied offer of sport and physical activity that appeals to young people in these schools and communities with a focus on the least active, those from less affluent backgrounds and other under-represented groups.

School engagement

20 of the Active Partnerships used findings from their desk research and school facilities survey to identify targeted schools for the OSF project. In most cases, this process took around 2-3 months.

Active Suffolk, Active Gloucestershire and Active Cumbria identified their targeted schools first based on existing insights and then carried out the school facility survey and wider desk research to help build a picture of their community provision and potential for growth for each school.

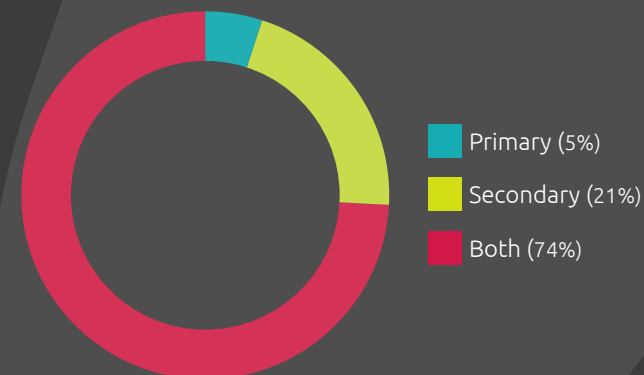
Overall, the 23 Active Partnership project leads worked with 230 targeted primary and secondary schools over the 15-month project.

Two-thirds of the Active Partnerships worked across both primary and secondary schools with 21% working with secondaries only and Active Black Country only working with primaries.

Four of the Active Partnerships worked with five special schools between them; Rise, North Yorkshire Sport, County Durham Sport and Active Gloucestershire.

A national discussion with Association of Colleges Sport during the early phase of this project indicated their interest in this project and we recommend that colleges are considered within the scope of any future investment for OSF.

Type of school engaged by the 23 Active Partnerships



Overall, the 23 Active Partnership project leads worked with 230 targeted primary and secondary schools over the 15-month project.

2020 School Facilities Survey Findings

Each Active Partnership carried out a school facilities survey with a set of nationally agreed questions with primary and secondary schools in their county in the first three-months of the project. County summaries and a national summary of school responses can be accessed [here](#).

Although the response rate varied across counties, a useful picture of school facility stock, community usage and barriers/opportunities for growth at both a national and local level was established.

The survey found that sports clubs were the predominant users of school facilities followed by block bookings, group exercise and after-school activities.

The image below summarises the most common facility types already available or potentially available for community use from the survey responses.



The survey found that sports clubs were the predominant users of school facilities followed by block bookings, group exercise and after-school activities.

Indoor Facilities

Sports Hall (min. 3 court)

Studio (often with mirrored walls and a sprung floor)

Gym

Changing rooms accessible only from the school

Outdoor Facilities

Playing fields

Pitch with markings

Outdoor tennis / netball courts

Floodlit 3G / MUGA

Changing rooms accessible only from the school

Key learning:

Schools

Key drivers

The OSF project found these to be the 3 biggest drivers for a school to open their facilities for community use:



Strengthening links to the local community.



Income generation, in most cases is a secondary driver in both primary and secondary schools.



Mental wellbeing and physical benefits of opening their school facilities for pupils and the local community.

Key barriers

The OSF project found the following to be the 3 biggest barriers to a school opening their facilities for community use:



Lack of staffing.



Perceived or actual poor state of facilities or lack of facilities.



Site safety, perceived damages and security.

As highlighted in the six-month project report, the key finding from this project has been that the primary driver for schools to open their facilities is to build a stronger relationship with their community which benefits both their pupils and their local community.

Active Partnerships found a direct correlation between school leadership teams being outward facing and community focused and their appetite to open or broaden their community offer. It is vital that the narrative around opening school facilities changes from income generation to being centred on strengthening community relationships.

We have learnt through this project that it is likely schools will make a loss or only break-even initially and may only make a small profit in the longer-term so income generation cannot and should not be the primary driver.

As a sector, we need to help schools measure the social value of opening their facilities for community use. Helping schools to demonstrate this social value will create the much-needed evidence-base and narrative to influence and engage school senior leaders to consider and prioritise opening their doors for community use.

“Baines School was at the start of opening their facilities to community use. As the new Headteacher and a PE specialist it is important that the school becomes a hub for the local community, with regards to community use of the PE facilities and activities based at Baines so that students have a link and potential outlet to playing sport and physical activity and enrichment activities beyond the school day. It also will hopefully build the reputation of the school in the local area.

I am so pleased with the progress we have made, even through the pandemic. We now have a number of football clubs, some ad-hoc adult physical recreation bookings, netball, badminton and line dancing.”

Ally
Headteacher Baines (Active Lancashire)

Chapman-

As a sector, we need to help schools measure the social value of opening their facilities for community use.

School appetite

Active Partnerships were pleasantly surprised by the amounts of schools, both primary and secondary, who were already open at evenings, weekends and holiday periods.

There is a strong appetite from primary schools to strengthen their links with their local community and they feel that opening their doors could help achieve this. Although this was positive and shows a willingness from schools to open their doors, as it is not a statutory requirement, community provision is often put on the backburner due to limited time, capacity or expertise.

We have learnt that schools need different solutions and varying levels of support to open their doors or broaden their offer. Schools are especially in need of support with youth and community consultation as well as understanding the role they can play in the local sport and physical activity ecosystem.

The dedicated capacity and support of the 23 project leads' and their wider Active Partnerships teams have acted as a catalyst for schools involved in the project. Active Black Country found that schools have felt very alone on the OSF agenda for a long time and welcomed the dedicated support and expertise provided by their Active Partnership.

We have learnt that schools need different solutions and varying levels of support to open their doors or broaden their offer.

Effecting change takes significant time

It became apparent that the focus of this project was as much about behaviour change as it was about increasing and broadening community access. All 19 projects emphasised the need for a longer-term approach for this project as it requires the changing of hearts and minds at school senior leadership level as well as the time needed to embed any new solutions, operating models or changes.

It was also noted that effecting change in secondary schools and MATs took longer than primaries as decision making processes appear to be more complicated and take longer.

There also needs to be an effective and sustainable operating model which has the backing of senior leadership teams. There will always be some quick wins for schools especially when they outsource the management of their community usage however this is not a sustainable and often not a needs-led solution. Covid-19 has highlighted the fragility of community usage in schools and the need to help make the operating models and offer more resilient.

North Yorkshire Sport and County Durham Sport strongly believe that schools should be a destination for sport and physical activity and that there is huge scope for schools to be offering a strong and high-quality sport and physical activity offer and they can achieve this with the right support and guidance.





The global pandemic had a huge impact on the pace of the project and many Active Partnerships feel they would have made more impact with schools had the national lockdowns and tiers not happened.

School pools

Active Norfolk focused their OSF project on school pools as 58% of the total stock of pools in Greater Norwich are on school sites. Active Norfolk produced **this summary OSF school pool document** to capture their learning. Key findings included:

- Schools have a clear desire to save and safeguard the future of school pools despite the challenges they have in maintaining and servicing them with many running at a loss.
- Local Authority subsidy for schools with a pool has ceased, placing the expectation on the schools to maintain the pools. The schools, already with stretched budgets are unable to pick up these costs from their core budget and the pools are falling into disrepair.
- There is a need to improve efficiency, aesthetics and access to ensure they are viable for sustainable community use and make it a more proportionate expense to the school.
- Potential solutions to keep school pools open include: increased booking availability during the day, invest in the condition of the pool and transfer the asset to alternative ownership and management arrangements.

Workforce

Finding the right contact within a school who has a passion and drive to establish their school as a community hub is critical in driving both the pace and success of this project. It was interesting to see the range of 'key contacts' Active Partnerships built with schools across a county and across the country. Contacts ranged from the school Bursar to business manager to headteacher to head of PE. The 'key contact' had to be motivated to open their school facilities and have the capacity and influence to drive this agenda internally.

The project also highlighted the value of bringing in different partners to support schools including local authorities, NGBs, local community groups and health partners. This collaborative approach locally helped schools to find innovative and joined up solutions which help to make their offer more sustainable.

Pace

The pace to which change can be affected varies between schools. Some schools have a greater readiness and ability to drive change on this agenda which is often a result of senior leadership buy-in and a dedicated contact within the school. The pace of this project can also be significantly impacted by a number of factors including school staff changes or illness, Ofsted inspections and other competing school priorities.

The global pandemic had a huge impact on the pace of the project and many Active Partnerships feel they would have made more impact with schools had the national lockdowns and tiers not happened. On this note, it is important to remember this was a learning approach and there has been vast learning gathered around the fragility of the school community offer and community sport sector and the need to increase the resilience of both.

Key learning:

How to help schools unlock their facilities and broaden their offer

Although we found that there are more schools open for community use than initially thought, it is clear that each is at a different stage of the journey towards having a sustainable and community-led offer. We have learnt that many schools have an ad-hoc community programme which is mainly servicing the needs of the more traditional clubs leaving little or no space for pay and play or non-traditional and informal activities which would appeal to a broader audience. We also found that many schools have not considered consulting with their own pupils and local community to help shape their offer despite their primary driver being to strengthen links to the community. These two factors combined often results in facilities being under-utilised and community programming not reflecting local sport and physical activity interests and needs.

Over the last 15-months, the project has demonstrated that there is no 'one-size' fits all solution to OSF.

SLT buy-in and capacity

This is by far the biggest critical success factor. Schools need to see opening their doors to the community as an integral part of their role at senior leadership level and not just an 'add on'. Opening facilities especially for schools at the earlier stages can be time consuming and hard work as they navigate operating models, set up booking systems, carry out community consultation along with marketing their offer to the local community.

Active Partnerships found a direct correlation between a school having a strong community offer where there was a dedicated staff member with sufficient capacity along with SLT backing.

We learned that SLT often have concerns over the cost of opening their doors for community use impacting on their educational budgets and that this alone can make OSF a non-runner. As a result, schools need to have a clear mission and vision as to why they are intending to open their facilities and how their offer will improve outcomes for children and young people.

Active Partnerships also found identifying OSF headteacher advocates hugely beneficial in engaging other schools in this project and effecting change at senior leadership level.

This worked particularly well where a school with a strong community offer was connected with a school who were at a much earlier stage of their journey.

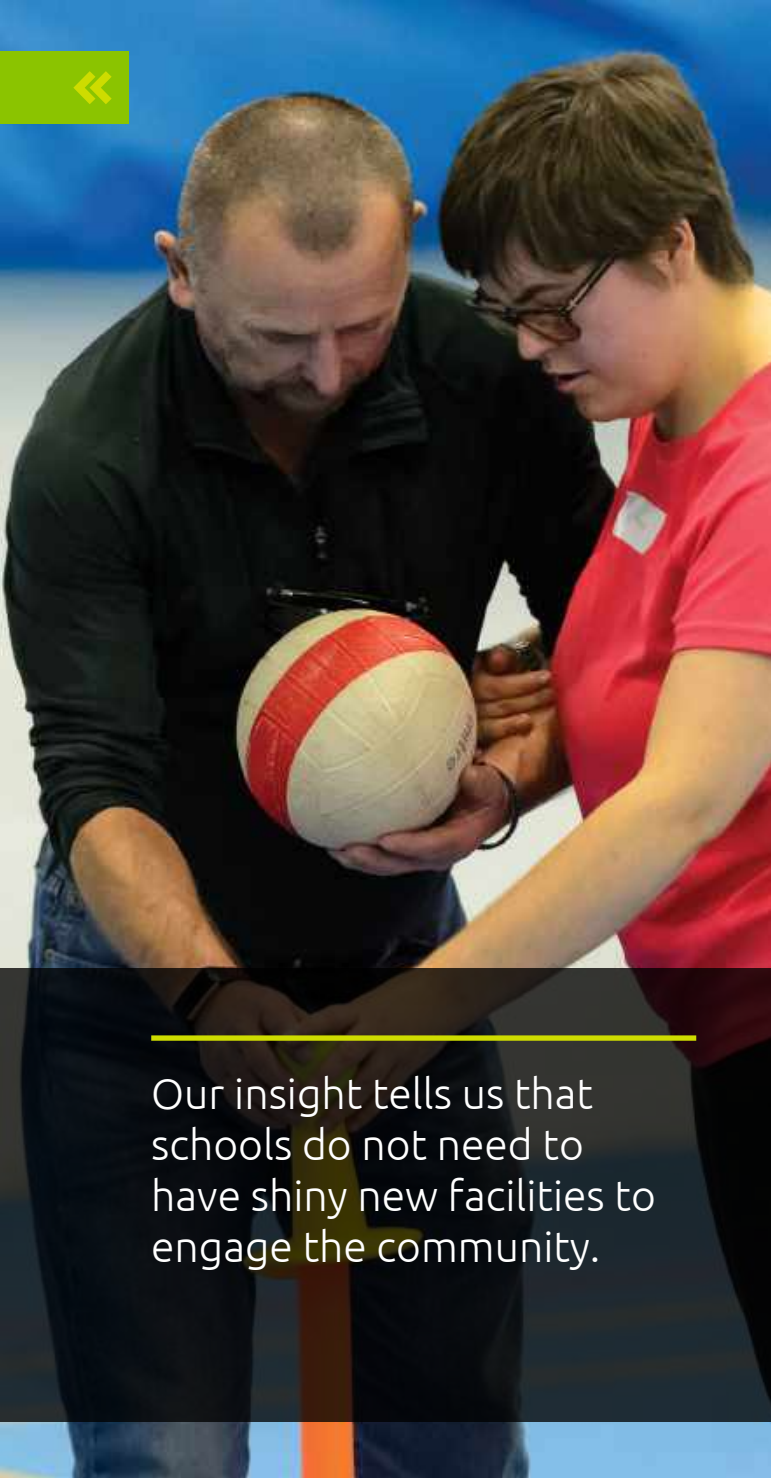


ACTIVE DORSET: SCHOOL SENIOR LEADERSHIP BUY IN

“ We were keen to work with Active Black Country and to be involved in the Opening School Facilities Programme, as there is a clear need for schools including ourselves to be able to access a resource such as this, offering support to schools to maximise the potential of their community programme; but we were also keen to share our knowledge and expertise to help develop the programme for the benefit of other schools in the Black Country. ”

Operations Manager,
The Streetly Academy (Active Black Country)





Our insight tells us that schools do not need to have shiny new facilities to engage the community.

Investment

This project has highlighted that secondary schools tend to have a self-perceived low level of confidence in their facilities and feel they are in a poor state of repair. This results in them believing that their facilities are not fit for community use.

The challenge here is to support secondary schools to see the true value of their facilities, especially their outdoor facilities to the community groups they are seeking to engage.

Our insight tells us that schools do not need to have shiny new facilities to engage the community, especially the communities we want to reach, and that offering a safe, convenient and accessible space is far more important.

What has become clear throughout this project is that schools do need some level of investment to maximise the extent to which they can open their facilities. For some

schools, this might require larger-scale capital investment however consideration needs to be given as to how any extensive investment would benefit the local community and not just the larger sports clubs. Secondly, the project has found that smaller scale investment such as investing in portable floodlights, zoned heating and electricity or buying new cricket nets can be hugely impactful in increasing the confidence of the school to open their doors and make it a more appealing space for the local community.

As an example, Active Dorset supported a number of schools with small capital investment and as a result, there were significant increases in the use of these facilities by children and local communities.



ACTIVE CUMBRIA: SMALL YET SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENTS

“ The use of portable floodlights at Haslingden High School will have a hugely beneficial impact on both our school provision and our community links. To be able to offer after school sports beyond the normal 4pm winter cut off will support students in both their sporting development and with their personal health and wellbeing. ”

Wes Haworth, Haslingden High (Active Lancashire)



Youth voice

This project has exposed the lack of youth voice in school community programming. As an example, Active Suffolk carried out a children and young people survey and found that only 41% (250 respondents) use school facilities out of school hours however 78% of children and parents would like to use them but feel there is a lack of choice or time to do so.

All 19 project leads have noted the need for schools to engage and empower their pupils to help shape the community offer. The challenge however is that schools are already stretched for capacity to lead on OSF and some may see youth voice as a 'nice to have' and yet another thing to do, however it is crucial in ensuring the offer is right and 'needs-led'.

As a sector, we need to help schools realise the importance of youth voice in shaping and driving the OSF agenda within a school.



LONDON SPORT: YOUTH VOICE

We learnt that schools need a greater understanding of how attitudes and behaviours towards sport and physical activity evolve over time if they are to get their community programming right for their target audiences. North Yorkshire Sport undertook an extensive youth voice survey which had over 1800 responses. They then worked with their targeted schools to create a bespoke school report on their youth voice responses to help the school understand what their pupils wanted to inform their future community offer.

The project has highlighted the valuable role Active Partnerships play in helping schools find the resource to carry out youth consultation as well as sharing local insights and trends. We feel that the Active Lives CYP research should be positioned as a useful tool to help schools understand the attitudes and behaviours towards sport and physical activity.

“Brocklewood is looking to develop a more compelling package for community use of the school. It is not just about filling the week with activities; it is about ensuring they meet the local needs and demands of those that live in the area.”

Chris Pinnington, PE lead at Brocklewood
(Active Partners Trust)





External support and expertise

Schools have been very receptive to the external support offered by Active Partnerships and local partners to turn their ambition into becoming a community hub into a reality. We have learnt that schools welcome and need external support and expertise in 3 areas:

- 1.** Insight and mapping: schools welcomed the breadth of insight Active Partnerships held to help them understand inequalities in sport and physical activity in their local community e.g. levels of inactivity, mapping of provision, supply and demand etc. This insight helped to drive connections between OSF and educational outcomes for their own pupils.
- 2.** Community and pupil consultation: we now know that schools are driven by a desire to strengthen their links to the community however many are unsure or unable to carry out community consultation due to a lack of expertise or time to do this. Active Suffolk and Active Gloucestershire led on pupil and community consultation on behalf of their targeted schools which is a model that worked well.
- 3.** Facility management: this project has been a timely reminder that a school's core purpose is not to open their facilities for community use and therefore they do not have the same levels of expertise and knowledge as leisure providers.

Tees Valley Sport and Active Essex found schools to be very receptive to external support from leisure providers in helping them navigate re-opening during the pandemic. There is a real opportunity here to strengthen these relationships locally to help complement and not displace community provision.

Schools need support with; where to start, who to engage and what to ask along with support in digesting these findings and turning it into a needs-led offer. A new section on community and youth consultation is needed on the Use Our School resource.

We now know that schools are driven by a desire to strengthen their links to the community.

Marketing

Active Black Country found through their OSF survey with schools that 53% of schools open for community use did not do any marketing and only 22% advertised their facilities on their school website. This severely limits the visibility of the community offer as there is a lack of awareness amongst pupils and the community.

Active Cumbria found that many of their targeted schools had not marketed their facilities to their own pupils and many pupils were unaware their school was open during the evenings and weekends. Active Partners Trust worked

with a marketing specialist to support one of their targeted schools to put together a marketing action plan and carry out some community consultation and had planned to scale this model to other schools prior to the November lockdown.

A common thread across the projects was the need to help schools recognise the importance of marketing their offer to the right audiences and that they needed to do more than have a website i.e. be more proactive and have dedicated capacity to lead on this. However, we also learnt

that there is no point in increasing the visibility of the offer if it is not relevant to the target audience hence the importance of community and pupil consultation.

The project highlighted the need for Use Our School to have a stronger marketing section and to explore Open Data Standards with the Open Data Institute to make the marketing and booking of school facilities easier for both the school and customer.

Active design and accessibility

From a systems perspective, the importance of active design in new-build schools cannot be under-estimated. We have found that the sports facilities in newly built schools tend to be well considered with community access available through 'part' of the school. However, in older school sites, sports facilities are often found in the heart of the school causing issues and concerns over access, safety and safeguarding as larger parts of the school needs to be opened and accessed.

This has a knock-on impact on the cost of opening as more areas need to be lit or heated. Active Partnerships have found several low-cost solutions to this challenge such as investing in a gate or door keypad systems to reduce the amount of access needed.

Starting small

We have learned that schools are often daunted by the prospect of opening their doors for community as they have concerns over safeguarding, staffing, security and whether or not they will cover costs. There was agreement across OSF project leads that schools should be encouraged to take small yet significant steps in opening outside of school hours.

A key learning was the power of school-based holiday hunger initiatives as a catalyst for a school to open their facilities during evenings, weekends and holiday periods. We have found that holiday hunger initiatives provide an ideal opportunity to align school outcomes to the OSF agenda as it enables schools to support their most vulnerable children and young people during holiday periods.

We have found that supporting schools to open for a few weeks at a time outside of traditional school hours helps schools to 'test' operating and booking system models and

navigate staffing issues and make mutual relationships with external partners e.g. local authorities, NGBs, Active Partnerships.



ACTIVE PARTNERS TRUST: DEVELOPING AN OFFER IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL

“ It ensured that some of our most vulnerable children had the opportunity to participate in a range of coach-led activities that were enjoyable, fun and helped keep them fit and healthy as well! ”

(Talking about the summer holiday activities)

Ian Baxter, Deputy Headteacher,
Awworth Primary School (Active Partners Trust)

Joining the dots

It is clear that schools need to think more creatively in terms of how their facilities could be used to help strengthen links to the local community.

Careful consideration needs to be given as to how all available space within a school can be accessed by pupils and the local community such as music rooms, kitchen and art studios. The opening and running costs of community programmes will be much more economical and sustainable when considering how different school spaces can be hired.

From a sport and physical activity perspective, Active Partnerships played a key role in helping schools to explore how their facilities could be utilised in less traditional and formal ways.

For example, Active Black Country are working with a school to become a hub for a social prescribing project and Active Essex worked with a number of schools in the summer to host holiday hunger camps. Hertfordshire Sports Partnership worked with community organisations

funded through the Tackling Inequalities Fund to access school sites during the pandemic.

GreaterSport worked with the CVS to overcome some of the negative experiences or perceptions community groups had of school sites. The project lead championed the value of school sites for under-represented groups, for example the privacy of school facilities over a leisure centre may appeal to Muslim women or autistic young people.

Schools therefore need support to think outside of the box and make meaningful connections with partners such as Police Crime Commissioners, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Children's Services to help use their facilities in a way that contributes to shared outcomes.

“Over the years we have gone out of our way to accommodate some of the less popular, but none the less important sports and pastimes. It would have been quite easy to have filled the Sports Hall with Badminton and football groups, but we managed to keep some slots to allow Jnr Cricket, Mini Rugby Tots, Baseball, Archery, Model Flying, along with Frisbee Trials on the 3G and Rounders on the school field. We have always worked to make it an economically viable operation.”

Brockington College (Leicestershire & Rutland Sport)

Careful consideration needs to be given as to how all available space within a school can be accessed by pupils and the local community such as music rooms, kitchen and art studios.



Use Our School

It is clear that schools need a one-stop-shop to access guidance and support on opening their facilities. Active Partnerships and schools have found the Use Our School resource useful however awareness of this was fairly limited across the schools' network. More work needs to be done nationally and locally to raise awareness of this resource as a useful tool for all schools to access. The project highlighted the need for the resource to be updated and include additional resources on:

1. Use Our School focusing on community links being the primary driver for schools instead of income generation and realism about the time it will take to build a strong and profitable offer.
2. Case studies of schools at different stages of the OSF journey and to include more case studies of primary schools.
3. Policies and procedures e.g. risk assessments, community letting agreements, operating models.
4. Marketing support and guidance.
5. Community consultation guidance.

Management and operating models

We have learned that there is not a 'one-size-fits-all' management and operating model for school lettings. As community lettings is not the core purpose of a school, they often need help to understand and navigate the different management, operating and staffing models available.

Schools would also benefit from learning what has worked well for other schools of a similar size, demographic or scale of community programming. We need to make this as easy as possible for schools to do moving forwards. As part of the project, we commissioned KKP to undertake an **options appraisal** of different booking systems which has helped Active Partnerships advise on various management options.

North Yorkshire Sport and County Durham Sport found that schools who had a strong and sustainable offer were exploring how they could overcome the need for a caretaker by giving trusted clubs a key or the code for a keypad to access the facility.

Other Active Partnerships also highlighted this as a potential operating model whereby schools and delivery partners should be building a trusting and two-way partnership rather than seeing it as just a school and user relationship.

“ The investment made by Active Lancashire has helped immensely, both the financial contribution as well as from a guidance standpoint. The information provided in terms of model letting agreements, lettings policies and safety documents, has helped me to update our out-dated documents and have a certain formality and security to our bookings. The booking system that we have purchased, is an excellent tool that allows site supervisors, myself and hirers to all have access to the same information. ”

Joe Frith-Jones- Baines Facility lead (Active Lancashire)

Social Value

A key point raised by WASP was the need to explore a monitoring and evaluation toolkit to help schools demonstrate the impact of their work in making their facilities available to their pupils and the local community.

This social value is the key driver for schools to do this and making it easier for them to demonstrate its value to both senior leadership teams and governors along with the community itself would be extremely powerful to then dedicate the necessary time to consider their community programming in a way that benefits the least active or those facing the biggest inequalities in a locality.

“ Baines School have been instrumental in supporting the growth of our club and the return to training after lockdown. We have approximately 300 girls who have been able to enjoy the physical and mental benefits from our sport after such a challenging year. ”

Wyre Netball Club (Active Lancashire)



Trends

Overall, it was felt that the short timescales of the project along with the global pandemic limited the ability to identify trends between the likelihood and appetite of schools opening their facilities for community use. Covid-19 has however highlighted how fragile the school-based community sport offer is and how much macro factors can affect the likelihood and appetite of a school to keep their facilities open as educational priorities take precedence.

Covid-19 has emphasised the need to re-position and better align OSF with a school's priorities around the health and wellbeing of their pupils, staff and communities and to help them recover and revitalise from the effects of the pandemic.

Primary schools

A surprising key learning to emerge from the project has been the strong appetite from primary schools across the country to open their doors for community use. Primaries are keen to strengthen links to their local community and see opening their doors during the evenings and weekends as a good way to do this. North Yorkshire Sport and County Durham Sport did a focused piece of work with primaries and the report can be accessed [here](#).

We also learnt that more work is needed to raise awareness of primary school indoor and outdoor facilities and the need to work with NGBs to consider how smaller spaces could be utilised for younger age groups, under-represented groups or pay and play sessions.

It is clear that Use Our Schools needs to place a greater profile of examples of primary schools who have a strong appetite or community programme in place to inspire other primaries to consider and do the same. Overall, any future investment in OSF needs to explicitly include primaries in its scope.

A key consideration from this project has been the impact of the PE and Sport Premium on influencing a primary school's interest in opening their doors for community use. The 5 Key Indicators of the PE and Sport Premium, especially around whole-school improvement, could be a catalyst in driving a primary school's interest in strengthening links to their local community and perhaps they have more capacity to do so given the annual investment they get into PE, school sport and physical activity.

Furthermore, primary schools seem less driven by income generation than secondaries and this could be down to them having the PE and Sport Premium and not trying to find ways to bring investment to support their PE, sport and physical activity provision.

Senior Leadership

The biggest driver for increasing the likelihood of a school opening their facilities for community use was senior leadership, particularly headteacher buy-in. Active Black County had two examples whereby the sustainability of the school community programme was dependent on the incoming and outgoing senior leadership teams.

In one school, the outgoing senior leader did not value community provision and had under-utilised facilities however the new leader has an appetite to build a strong community programme. In the second example, the senior leadership team have deemed the community offer as unprofitable and a drain on school resources and are likely to scale this back as a result.

This demonstrates the power of senior leadership in effecting change and realising the school's ambition to strengthen community links.



ACTIVE BLACK COUNTRY: LEARNING WHAT WORKS AND SLT SUPPORT

London Sport found a direct correlation between how connected to the community a school already was and how strong their PE and school sport offer was and their likelihood to open.

Support available

Active Partnerships found that many schools have the appetite to open their doors for community use or expand their offer but simply lack the capacity or time to do so. The key challenge is around their community programming in terms of making it reflective of the needs and interests of their pupils and local community rather than relying on block bookings coming to them.

A key learning from this project has been the need for dedicated capacity to support schools drive this agenda forward and raise it on their priority list especially as part of Covid-19 recovery plans. Without this dedicated support and expertise, the OSF agenda will remain for many schools on the 'nice-to-do' list.

Operating model

WASP found that in-house management of a community programme was less likely to have pay and play options which would be appealing to local communities whereas schools using a third-party supplier were more likely to offer this.

Active Lancashire also found that those schools who used School Lettings Solutions, who ceased trading in April 2020, have stepped back from community usage especially in the current climate. This indicates the value and necessity some schools place in having a third party manage their community bookings and programme.

The work of We Are Rise indicates the role Active Partnerships can play in helping schools to consider their future operating models as they look to re-open during the ongoing pandemic. As an Active Partnership, they worked with 1 large MAT to bring their community lettings in-house by supporting them to create a sustainable business model and create 2 new jobs to manage the community programme.

Although a higher percentage of schools were already open for community use prior to the pandemic, the majority of them had ad-hoc bookings or out of area bookings. The desire to 'fill' the booking slots tends to outweigh any interest of a local offering, prioritising their own pupils or local community.

This is where the Active Partnerships played a key role as they were able to share insights on the behaviours, inequalities and gaps in local activity provision and where a school could amend their programming or marketing to engage more targeted individuals and communities to have a far greater impact on their local community.

A key learning from this project has been the need for dedicated capacity to support schools drive this agenda forward and raise it on their priority list especially as part of Covid recovery plans.

Holiday programmes and after-school programmes

Active Essex found that initiating a conversation with a school around their out of hours provision was far more effective when framed around their involvement and appetite to host holiday activity programmes, especially in deprived areas. Other Active Partnerships also found that school facilities were under-utilised in terms of holiday activity programmes and as a result of this project, many are looking to engage more schools in the 2021 DfE Holiday and Food Activities investment. This will help to build the confidence of schools to consider starting or expanding their community offer and Active Partnerships feel they can then look to use this as a springboard to discuss how the school can begin to offer a community programme all-year round.



ACTIVE ESSEX: HOLIDAY AND TRANSITION PROGRAMMES

Active Partnerships also found that schools who have a strong after-school offer are more likely to open their doors for community use during the evenings, weekends and holidays.

Deprivation

There were mixed findings in terms of correlations between a school's appetite and likelihood to open and whether they were in an area of deprivation. Tees Valley Sport did find a correlation between the two and North Yorkshire Sport and County Durham Sport found there were increased concerns over vandalism and site security from schools in more deprived areas.

Ofsted

Active Dorset found that 'Outstanding' schools seemed to have more headspace and less pressures on them which enabled them to consider their community offering. Other Active Partnerships noted that for schools rated as 'Requires Improvement', exploring ways to strengthen links to the local community to drive change and improvement and raise the community profile of the school could be a key driver in them considering their community provision. It therefore appears that each of the Ofsted ratings could be used as a driver for OSF.

Initiating a conversation with a school around their out of hours provision was far more effective when framed around their involvement and appetite to host holiday activity programmes, especially in deprived areas.



Workforce

There was a strong correlation between a school having a dedicated member of staff or a third-party supplier in place to manage the community programme and their likeliness to open. It was noted however that having dedicated staff to manage the community offer only went so far as without the headteacher acting as a catalyst, facilities were not fully utilised nor reflective of local need.

Active Essex found that smaller school sites tend to manage their lettings programme internally between the finance and caretaker whereas larger sites used a third-party or had their own dedicated staff. Where a school had a dedicated community development role, there was a stronger understanding and appetite to grow and evolve their offer and try new ideas.

There was also a noted challenge around finding the right person to act as caretaker during the evenings and weekends as although some schools are willing to invest in this, finding the person to do this is sometimes hard. North Yorkshire Sport have found that schools who adopt a partnership approach with clubs can start to explore handing over the responsibility for opening and closing the facility with them to overcome the caretaking challenge however this doesn't help with pay and play bookings.

There was also a noted challenge around finding the right person to act as caretaker during the evenings and weekends as although some schools are willing to invest in this, finding the person to do this is sometimes hard.

“ The key is to build relationships with the groups. What can we do that makes their time here each week enjoyable? Finding the time to talk to the groups, to make them feel welcome is important, it stands you in good stead when new groups come on board as your experience can maybe offer something that they hadn't considered. It is surprising the number of opportunities that come our way from groups that already use the facilities. We like to think that this is not just because of the facilities but because we try our best to accommodate people and make them feel welcome, In essence, talk to your hirers. ”

Brockington College (Leicestershire & Rutland Sport)

MATs

A key learning from the project has been the challenges and opportunities presented by academies and multi-academy trusts. It is clear that to effect change across a MAT, the MAT operational lead needs to be engaged and be community minded. If this is not the case, an individual headteacher's drive to strengthen community links will be restricted by the decisions and appetite from the MAT trustees and boards.

On the other hand, there is a real opportunity to scale a community programming model if it is working well on one site.

Strategic links

Walsall in the Black Country had a local authority driven strategy in the 1970's and 1980's which led to significant development in sports facilities across their schools. The community programmes for each school has been run by a Community Association which has resulted in established community programmes still being run today. This demonstrates the value of a clear active design strategy, local authority commitment and building the right infrastructure to run this in the long-term.

Active Partnerships also found a direct correlation between the likelihood of schools being open for community use and having a varied and strong community offer and featuring in local Playing Pitch Strategies or Building Facilities Strategies. Schools not part of these strategies find it harder to attract capital investment and this presents a key challenge in enabling them to realise their aspirations to become a community hub as they deem their facilities substandard for community use.

“ We recently took part in the F.A. Local Football Facilities Plan and were highlighted for the potential development of our Multi Use Games Area to be developed into an indoor Futsal facility. This is part of the plan to develop small sided and junior football. In terms of growing the game and getting more children active in the area, this would be a fantastic development, allowing boys and girls of a young age to start playing football in a comfortable indoor environment. It would also allow for other sports to take place such as Dodgeball, Netball, Archery, maybe it could have a climbing wall section as well. ”

Brockington College (Leicestershire & Rutland Sport)



New builds and PFI

Active Cumbria have a recent example with Furness Academy. As a relatively new school, they built community use into their school planning before the school even opened. The new facilities and opportunity to position themselves as a community hub from the onset has been hugely valuable.

For other schools, mainly secondaries, they feel their facilities are too tired, old or out-of-date to be of any community interest. Active Partnerships felt that secondary schools need small to larger scale capital investment especially with regards to their tennis courts, lighting and pools to increase their likelihood of starting, expanding or evolving their community offer.

GreaterSport found that there were some concerns and restrictions over PFI builds with local animosity over community user agreements and a reluctance from all parties involved to accept responsibility.

Overall, in most cases, concerns over PFI agreements were able to be dealt with locally over the course of the project through better communication, consultation and mediation.

Key learning:

Active Partnerships

Learning approach

Active Partnerships embraced the opportunity to use this investment as a test and learn project and feel that despite the challenges of Covid-19, they have learnt a significant amount from the project. The focus on learning rather than KPIs enabled project leads to strengthen relationships with both schools who had a strong community offer as well as those who had yet to venture into this space. As a result, project leads built a stronger understanding of school motivations, challenges, opportunities and critical success factors for opening school estates. Our learning has shown that schools value a more conversationalist approach to OSF. Any future investment into OSF therefore needs to focus on outcomes (community cohesion, physical and mental wellbeing) and not outputs (number of facilities opened) as the former helps to drive a more strategic, meaningful and sustainable relationship with a school and local partners. This in turn helps to secure the buy-in of senior leadership teams which we now know is critical in helping to drive this agenda forward in a school.

It is clear that the breadth of insight and mapping work undertaken by Active Partnerships throughout the project will undoubtedly help schools and the community sport and physical activity infrastructure to recover and revitalise in the coming months. As an example, Leap carried out asset mapping of sport and physical activity opportunities around each of their targeted schools. This insight will be hugely valuable in continuing to strengthen relationships with their OSF schools and help them build the resilience of both the school community offer and local community sport organisations in the future and help schools become a destination for sport and physical activity.

Duration

The project extension was requested at a time when the pandemic restrictions looked like they would be easing into the autumn term. As it turned out, there was a second national lockdown in November and around a third of the counties remained in Tier 3 for the second half of the autumn term.

Feedback from the Active Partnerships indicate that 15-months for a test and learn project feels about right despite the challenges presented by Covid-19. There was a general consensus that any future investment into this area needs a commitment of 2-3 years to effect real change. Closer alignment of investment to the academic year would also help drive the pace and relevance of this project to schools i.e. planning, pupil and community consultation over the summer term ready for implementation from September onwards.

Active Partnership role

Schools valued and were very receptive to the amount of insight and mapping Active Partnerships were able to do and share to help understand their need to consider opening for communities and how to broaden their offer based on the gaps and needs of their communities.

In Cumbria, schools welcomed the customer centric approach Active Cumbria were taking to placing the needs and engagement of pupils and the local community at the heart of their project approach.

Adopting an insight driven approach was hugely helpful in identifying targeted schools for this project.

Each Active Partnership indicated that the OSF project has helped build stronger and more meaningful relationships with schools which has helped connect this to the wider children and young people work of the Active Partnership.

63% of Active Partnerships mentioned embedding the work into wider Active Partnership priorities and using the team's expertise as something that worked well with their project approach.

Adopting an insight driven approach was hugely helpful in identifying targeted schools for this project.

Active Partnership approach

The **six-month project report** outlines the different approaches taken by each of the Active Partnerships.

The majority of OSF project leads started their project with extensive desk research including the dissemination and analysis of the nationally agreed school facilities survey. Feedback from Active Partnerships indicate that this approach was hugely valuable in building a good understanding of the school facilities landscape, opportunities and challenges.

This insight was then cross-referenced with local intelligence from SGOs, local authorities, local partners and the wider Active Partnership team along with data on IMD, inactivity and obesity levels etc to identify a list of targeted schools. This helped to tie in the OSF project with existing outcomes and priorities for each locality identified.

Learning shared by Sport England from the previous Access to Schools project at the first learning event emphasised the need to strike the balance between desk-research and cracking on with the project as although a school may be identified for all of the right reasons, they may not have the appetite nor capacity to be involved. The term 'going with the willing' became more relevant throughout the pandemic as school priorities and their capacity to get involved changed on a weekly basis. A key learning has been the need to identify more primary and secondary schools in the first instance as the likelihood is that there will be attrition due to various reasons across the lifespan of the project.

The insight piece of the project cannot be underestimated in its ability to engage and influence school leadership teams on the importance of the OSF agenda. The hook for each school to consider their OSF offering varied and the

insight gathered by each Active Partnership helped to reach out and build a positive and trusting relationship with the school. Any future investment needs to focus on building these relationships with key decision makers in schools and Active Partnerships are well placed to engage and influence this agenda at senior leadership level. There was also value in Active Partnerships co-designing individual school OSF plans with a clear vision and mission on strengthening or building their community offer. A noted learning was also to consider any end of year/pinch points for schools which may impact on their ability to engage with this project and the need to have ongoing engagement with schools to keep this agenda moving forwards.

Once the insight work and relationships with schools has been carried out, Active Partnerships started to consider their approaches to youth and community consultation. Although this part of the OSF project was hardest hit by the pandemic, each project lead felt it was imperative to build a strong and varied community offer reflective of local need. Covid-19 has highlighted the value of online consultations and linking in with existing youth voice mechanisms in identified areas rather than creating stand-alone consultations for the OSF project.

Partner consultation and collaboration was key across all stages of this project to help schools think creatively and differently about their aspirations and ability to build a strong and varied community offer. The engagement of local and national partners will vary depending on the school aspiration and local need and the added value of any partner needs to be well articulated.



National project management

From a coordination and project management perspective, Active Partnerships valued the role of the Active Partnerships National Team (APNT) and Sport England. The dedicated capacity in the Active Partnership national team enabled the 23 project leads to work as a collective and the monthly webinars, reflective logs and initial learning events helped to share good practice and enable people to adapt their approach when it was needed.

The APNT facilitation of the work of the 19 Active Partnerships helped project leads to stay on task and maximise learning throughout what has been a very challenging year for this work as a result of the pandemic. In summary, the table below highlights what project leads noted as working well and suggestions for improvements in terms of national project support for projects like these.

Worked well

Monthly webinars: useful way to connect project leads, share good practice and benefit from peer support.

National contact and support: recognised value of Charlie Crane (APNT) and Alex Moore (SE) to help keep the project on track, help share learning, connect peers and offer support to the 19 projects.

Slack: noted as a useful communication tool where project leads could share resources and seek support.

Monthly reflective logs: worked very well nationally as a tool to gather local learning and developments and help share project progress with DfE, Sport England and the 19 project leads. Project leads who commented on the reflective logs in their final report indicated that completing them kept them on track and gave them an opportunity to reflect and refocus.

Learning events: helped to connect project leads at the beginning and seemed to be especially welcomed by colleagues new to the organisation/network.

Suggested improvements

Monthly webinars: consider more opportunities for breakouts/smaller working groups for project leads working in a similar way or looking to share learning around a specific element of the project.

Use Our School: some Active Partnerships felt the current resource was not fit-for-purpose and that the timing of it being withdrawn for an update wasn't ideal.

IT: consider using Teams to save project leads having to check different IT and communication platforms.

Monthly reflective logs: need to review the frequency of the logs and adapt the process to ensure all project leads find value in completing them.

Learning events: Hertfordshire Sports Partnership suggested they would have found it useful to have heard from more schools across the country to gain from their experiences.

Monitoring and evaluation: consider the value of a national M&E process if Active Partnerships have developed their own as found in Active Suffolk.



Opportunities for collaboration

There was an interesting range of partners involved across the 19 projects. 68% of the project leads mentioned relationships and partner involvement as something that meant their project approach worked well. There is a clear correlation between a school's ambition for community outreach and subsequent connections to local partners to achieve this.

The project exposed the need to change the narrative across all sector partners on a schools' primary driver to open their facilities. NGBs, community clubs, local authorities and wider sector partners need to understand that schools are looking for ways to strengthen links to their local community and opening their facilities is an ideal way to achieve this and it is not all about income generation.

We have learnt that schools need help in thinking creatively about how their safe and trusted spaces can be utilised in different ways by the local community and a collaborative approach by partners will help do this.

68%

of the project leads mentioned relationships and partner involvement as something that meant their project approach worked well.

Local Authorities

Local Authorities have been a key partner for each of the 19 projects however the extent of their involvement has varied. We found that Active Partnerships were able to align the outcomes of this project to the strategic priorities of numerous Local Authority service areas including the children and families' services, social care, active travel and community safety. A key learning from this project has been the need to further drive these connections with the various service areas across Local Authorities to help drive a more systemic approach to OSF e.g. engagement with estates, community safety, public health and early years.

Local Authorities have valued the insight gathered by Active Partnerships as part of the OSF project to help inform the development and implementation of Playing Pitch Strategies. This alignment has been a key success of the OSF project as we now know it helps to ensure a more holistic and joined up approach is taken to understanding the local need for accessible space for sport and physical activity.

There is an increasing opportunity for Active Partnerships to align the OSF outcomes with Local Authority Covid-19 recovery plans. As an example, Rise are working with Northumberland County Council to provide support for local communities during the pandemic.

NGBs

At a local level, NGBs who are reliant on indoor facilities and school estates to deliver their club and competition activities such as archery, badminton and netball have welcomed the support of OSF project leads to help find available space on school sites during the pandemic.

This has helped foster longer-term relationships around the opening facilities agenda and should help support the club networks to recover and revitalise once the lockdown restrictions ease. Swim England have also committed time and energy into supporting Active Norfolk with their focus on school pools which has been well received. The learnings from the Active Norfolk project has been summarised **here**.

At a national level, there has been some focused work with Badminton England and Archery GB to help understand their supply and demand for school facilities and explore together how school estates can be re-opened safely.

We have also been in discussions with England Netball and the LTA to discuss their proposal to raise awareness of Generation 2 pitches which enable schools to offer a more versatile space for a wider range of sports. Although put on the backburner during Covid-19, there is an opportunity here to revisit this proposal as and when schools being to re-open.

There is an increasing opportunity for Active Partnerships to align the OSF outcomes with Local Authority Covid recovery plans.

Open Active

At a national level, we have held several meetings with the Open Active team and UK Active to explore how we could look to work more closely with them. The OSF project has highlighted that schools do very little marketing of their facilities and that they would welcome support and guidance to do so. We feel that helping schools to become Open Data compliant would make it much easier for schools to market and improve the visibility of their facilities to the community sport sector.

From a customer experience perspective, adhering to Open Data Standards would also make it much easier for individuals, communities and organised groups to find and book school facilities. The project was able to kick start these discussions however more work is needed to realise the potential of this collaboration.

The OSF project has highlighted that schools do very little marketing of their facilities and that they would welcome support and guidance to do so.

Sport and physical activity infrastructure

Active Partnerships have long-standing relationships with their School Games Organisers (SGOs) and have consulted and involved them in the OSF project in a variety of ways. SGOs have provided additional insight into the mapping of facilities in some areas and have been part of the consultation process to identify targeted schools for this project.

Organisations such as Premier Education and Aspire Sport have been forthcoming at a local level to help OSF project leads consider the role they can play in helping schools to establish or expand a community offer. A key consideration moving forwards is the impact of Covid-19 on their local workforces as we have experienced high levels of furloughed staff amongst delivery partners and NGBs and anticipate some attrition of the workforce from our sector.

There will also be a 'confidence' factor to consider as and when the workforce can return to school settings. Our insight tells us that schools are going to be quite risk adverse and coaches and instructors want reassurance and clear guidance on what can and can't be done in terms of delivery as and when restrictions are lifted. This in turn could limit the ability of a school to provide a varied and high-quality offer.

Schools with existing and strong community programmes

Active Partnerships have found real value in identifying and working with those schools who already have a strong and successful community offer. By working with these schools, we have been able to identify critical success factors needed to develop a strong, varied and sustainable community programme.

Given the importance of senior school leadership buy-in to the OSF agenda, Active Partnerships have found it hugely valuable to identify OSF school champions to help advocate the wider benefits of opening their facilities as well as offering peer support to other schools in their local area.

Active Partnerships have also forged new and positive relationships with wider school colleagues through this project including business managers and MAT operational leads. Forging these relationships has helped to unlock wider discussions around how the Active Partnership can look to work with the school e.g. ALCYP, PE and Sport Premium support etc. This cross-pollination of school engagement can act as a catalyst for driving the OSF agenda within a school.

Another key learning was the ability to use the primary and secondary headteacher meetings which Active Partnerships either facilitate or attend as a useful mechanism in which to help secure SLT buy-in for OSF as well as sharing live learning from the project.

Leisure Partners

At a national level, we have worked closely with UK Active especially during the latter part of the project as OSF project leads were navigating what could and could not be delivered as part of holiday activity programmes during the pandemic.

This consistent guidance and the holiday programmes framework helped Active Partnerships to have a clear approach to supporting schools and delivery partners understand what could and couldn't be done which then helped to ensure some activity took place in the more challenging Covid-19-months.

At a local level, Tees Valley Sport worked with the Tees Active and Local Authority Leisure Services team to provide direct support to schools during the pandemic. This involved the leisure trusts giving schools a walk-through of their Covid-safe policies and practices and carrying out site visits at their own schools as well as sharing their risk assessments and procedures to avoid schools having to start from scratch at uncertain times.

This type of relationship is one we feel should be built on at a local level with leisure trusts and at a national level with UK Active given the breadth of work, frameworks and policies they have created to support the leisure sector to re-open safely during the pandemic.

There needs to be clear focus on sharing the learning and practice of the leisure centres with schools to help drive operating models, policies and procedures and help give them confidence to re-open as and when they can as restrictions lift.

Public Health

Active Partnerships feel that health partners could play a key role in the opening school facilities agenda given their focus on tackling health inequalities.

Active Black Country have been working with the Dudley and Netherton Primary Care Network to explore community-based solutions to health issues linked to inactivity. This has resulted in the piloting of a school-based social prescribing pilot as part of the OSF project to learn how schools can connect and play a role in tackling these wider health inequalities.

The Active Partnership National Team's Social Prescribing Manager is currently working with Sport England, NHS England and the National Academy for Social Prescribing to explore the social prescribing landscape for children and young people.

There is a real opportunity to use school sites which are known, trusted and welcoming spaces to children and young people and their families for social prescribing programmes moving forwards.

There is a real opportunity to use school sites which are known, trusted and welcoming spaces to children and young people and their families for social prescribing programmes moving forwards.

“The locality of this programme to our Medical Practice is key to enabling these patients to access the opportunity, and I think some of them will feel more comfortable taking their first steps back into physical activity in this more intimate setting than if it was being held at a large leisure centre; because of this we expect the patients to commit to the programme, and hopefully we can explore future opportunities to extend the project.”

Dr Richard Bramble, Dudley and Netherton PCN Clinical Director (Active Black Country)

Strengthening links to health partners has been highlighted in the new Sport England Strategy and we feel this local connectivity is vital in helping schools think creatively about how they can use their space.



Consultants

Given the timescales of the OSF project over a quarter of Active Partnerships have appointed consultants to help provide additional capacity or expertise at pinch points over the last 15-months. Tees Valley Sport has worked with Press Red to create Storymaps to illustrate how schools fit in to the local activity offer which has proved to be a useful tool to connect resources and joined-up solutions moving forwards. Leicestershire and Rutland Sport worked with KKP to support the site visits of their targeted schools and the creation of individual school OSF intervention plans.

At a national level, we have worked with Locality to upskill our network's understanding of Community Asset Transfer and worked with Strategic Leisure to help with some of our data analysis.

Letting providers

Active Cornwall has been working closely with Vivify, a community lettings agency to create a bespoke booking solution for schools across Cornwall as this was flagged as a key barrier in opening doors for community use. They are now exploring how this could link into Open Active to make it easier for both the school to market their facilities and for the customer to make a booking.

Active Lancashire offered support to all of their schools who had contracts with School Lettings Solutions who went into administration in the first lockdown however only 4 followed up on the offer of support.

This reflects the challenges schools faced during the pandemic and indicates that OSF was simply not a priority for many. A future area of development for this project would be to further explore the relationships with lettings providers to see how we could look to influence their operating models to become more community minded as many are primarily commercially driven.

As part of the project scope, we commissioned KKP to carry out an **options appraisal** on lettings providers to help Active Partnerships understand the breadth of options available to schools.

Given the timescales of the OSF project over a quarter of Active Partnerships have appointed consultants to help provide additional capacity or expertise at pinch points over the last 15-months.



Impact of Covid

The impact of Covid-19 on this project cannot be underestimated. 8 out of the 19 projects mentioned the pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns and tiered restrictions as having a significant impact on the pace and outcomes of their project. The pandemic hit just as most Active Partnerships were beginning their youth and community consultation and although adaptations were made including a transition to online meetings and virtual school facility tours, many OSF project leads felt schools understandably shifted their attention to the crisis in hand.

The 4-month extension did help to keep momentum going on the project however the November national lockdown set the project back again. The extension resulted in a lot of useful learning around the fragility of school operating systems and the community sport infrastructure and how to help schools re-open safely after a period of closure.

Unfortunately, but understandably, some schools had to withdraw from the project and for many Active Partnerships including Active Cumbria and Northamptonshire Sport, their focus and energies shifted to supporting schools who had been previously open to navigate re-opening.

GreaterSport, put together a small grants programme to help school facilities re-open during the pandemic. In some areas, new schools came on board with the project as they felt they had extra capacity to do so and wanted to be proactive in supporting their local community during the pandemic. It was clear that schools valued the external expertise and capacity that Active Partnerships were able to provide around community provision and the OSF agenda during the pandemic as they understandably shifted their priorities to the health and wellbeing of their pupils and staff. Careful consideration therefore needs to be given as to when schools have the headspace and ability to apply themselves to the OSF agenda in the coming months. A careful balance needs to be struck between not



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overburdening schools and capitalising on the opportunity for them to play a central role in the recovery and revival of their local community by providing accessible, safe and trusted spaces which will be especially important for those most affected by the pandemic.

The project also found that secondary schools seem to have been more affected by the pandemic. Local intelligence indicates that there is far less extra-curricular provision taking place in secondaries than primaries and that there are school concerns over Covid-safe policies and procedures and overall a lower risk-appetite to resume community bookings.

Linked to earlier insights from this project, it appears that the facility stock of secondaries is also fairly poor, and the lack of floodlights is further limiting their ability to open their outdoor facilities during these winter lockdown months. A concerted focus on supporting secondaries to re-open in Phase 2 is therefore needed.

The project also highlighted the impact of the ever-growing community sport facility crisis as leisure operators experience further closures and access to indoor school facilities remain very limited. London Sport have tried to support displaced clubs and activities but with limited success as the demand for facilities far outweighs supply. This challenge has been noted across the network and is starting to impact on activities aimed at vulnerable young people e.g., the Kicks sessions in Essex are struggling to find a suitable and affordable venue in this climate so Active Essex are supporting to find a solution. OSF project leads indicate that schools would welcome more clarity on what can and can't be delivered out-of-school hours aligned to NGB Return to Play Guidance along with Covid-safe policies and procedure templates and good practice. Although this is being created and shared locally, there would be value in creating a bank of these resources to include in the Use Our School resource.

On a positive note, the Active Partnership network have noted an increased profile of the importance of getting leisure and school facilities back open as the sector collectively tries to support the health and wellbeing of children and local communities, especially those most affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, half of the Active Partnerships were able to undertake activities that increased or initiated community use in their schools during the pandemic.

In one case, Active Partners Trust described how they enabled children from nine primary and secondary schools to take part in summer holiday activities on school sites during the pandemic. Tees Valley Sport also found Covid-19 helped to drive conversations around the need to host summer holiday activities on school sites as leisure operators repurposed their sports halls and community venues remained closed resulting in less space for such provision. The project demonstrated that focusing OSF conversations with schools around holiday provision especially for the most vulnerable young people helps to instigate a discussion around their wider community access.

There is no doubt that without the pandemic, more activities would have started to take place and a greater number of schools would have started to open their facilities in response to local need. It is however important to remember that this was a test and learn project and the timing of Covid-19, although bringing its own challenges actually helped to understand the fragility of school community access and provision. Overall, it is clear that Phase 2 of the OSF project presents a significant opportunity for schools to act on their primary driver to open for community use and work to position themselves at the heart of local recovery plans.

We also found that secondary schools seem to have been more affected by the pandemic.



