

# The Birmingham Community Paddle Sport Project



## INTRODUCTION

The Birmingham Community Paddle Sport hubs are an innovation driven by Olympic canoeist Andy Train and supported by British Canoeing in partnership with the Canal & River Trust and StreetGames. The project attempts to reach into the most underserved communities, increase access and encourage participation in paddle sport across Birmingham's canal network. June 2022 to July 2023 has been about capacity building. So, the opportunity to carry out research to assess reach and impact in the Summer of 2023 via the HAF programme is timely.

Amongst the 1.1 million population of Birmingham, a small proportion of residents have historically taken part in paddle sport activities based on the city's extensive canal network. The reasons are complex but include concerns for personal safety and fear of criminal activity in the inner city in particular. But more significantly, a lack of role models, ownership and sense of belonging that local people are entitled to use those green and blue spaces has resulted in limited access and an underrepresentation in paddle sport on Birmingham's canals.

Supported by British Canoeing, Canal and River Trust and StreetGames, the project has received £100k in funding during 2023. This collaboration, or system change approach, has enabled the rapid development of seven community organisations to build capacity and add paddle sport to their local youth, community and family offerings.

By taking this approach, paddle sport is now reaching deep into local communities with a wide range of ethnic and social diversity. So, people who otherwise would not be accessing the water are now taking up paddling for the first time and being coached, helmed and organised by local people in locally trusted organisations (LTOs) within their own community. [This article](#) is an example of the impact of paddle sport on the doorstep. A truly place-based approach.

British Canoeing sought to evaluate the impact of this initiative and recognised that StreetGames possesses significant expertise in research and insight. Consequently, the two organisations joined forces, with StreetGames taking the lead in formulating research questions, survey formats, and subsequent report generation. British Canoeing provided funding for local coordination to facilitate the survey implementation, with the primary objective of optimizing response rates by ensuring that participants and project leaders completed the surveys promptly.

In this way StreetGames plugged the Birmingham paddle sport initiative into the city-wide Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme that reaches 10's of thousands of children annually via more than 350 local HAF providers. Easter HAF introduced Bell Boating as an enrichment activity by way of '[Into the Green and Blue: Testing the waters – Bring it on Brum!](#)' and together with the summer programme 30 HAF providers have now introduced over 1,000 young people to the sport across the seven hubs in more than 50 Bell Boat paddle sessions. The research findings from the summer start to tell the story in terms of impact and reach in this new and exciting approach to create access to paddle sport across the most underserved communities in Birmingham.

# SUMMER HAF 2023 BELL BOATING IN NUMBERS



**5**

**Delivery Locations**



**28**

**Organisations Engaged**



**54**

**Sessions Delivered**



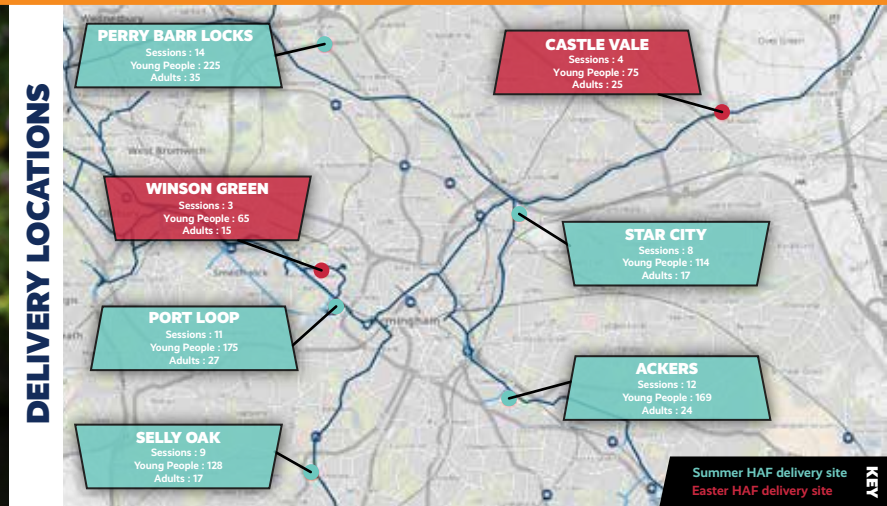
**811**

**Young People Participated**

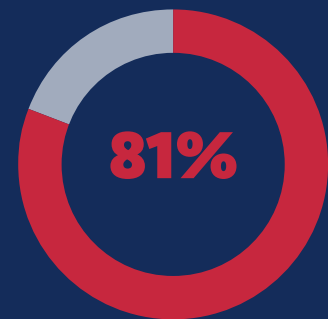
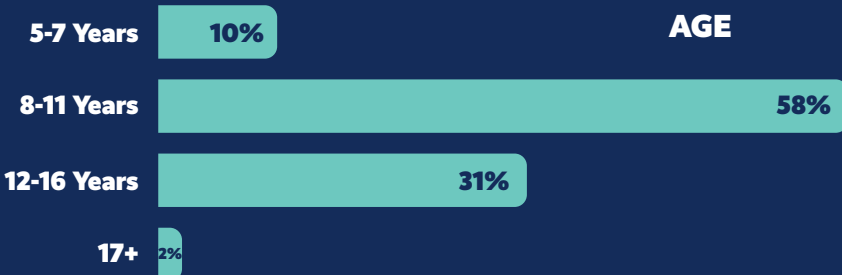
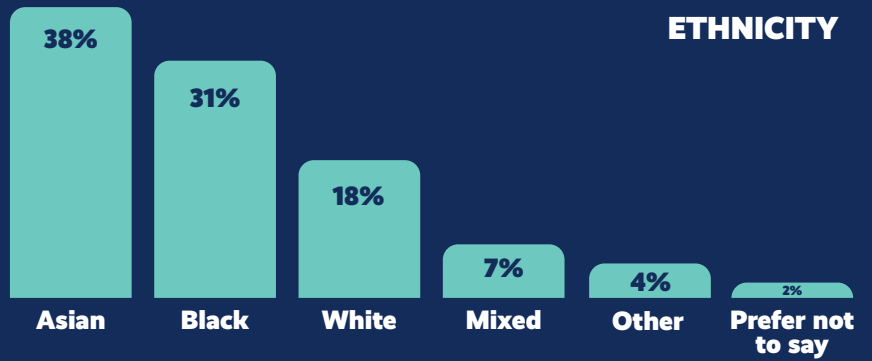
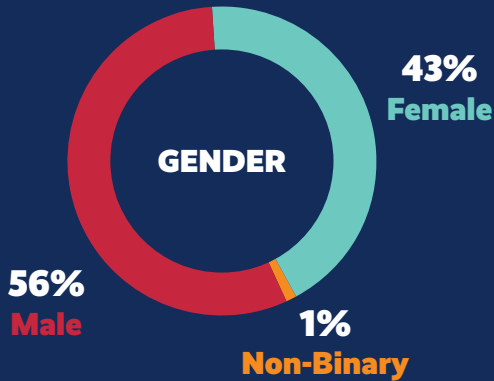


**120**

**Adult Supervisors Attended**



## ATTENDEE PROFILE



Of attendees live in an area of high deprivation.  
(Top 3 most deprived deciles according to IMD)

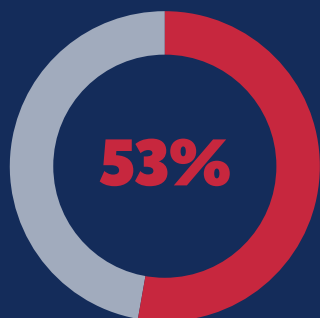
Project leaders were asked whether their programme supported specific groups:



## IMPACT

After attending their Bell Boating session, the attendees were asked to complete a short survey which explored their experience of being on the water, and what the impact of this experience had been.

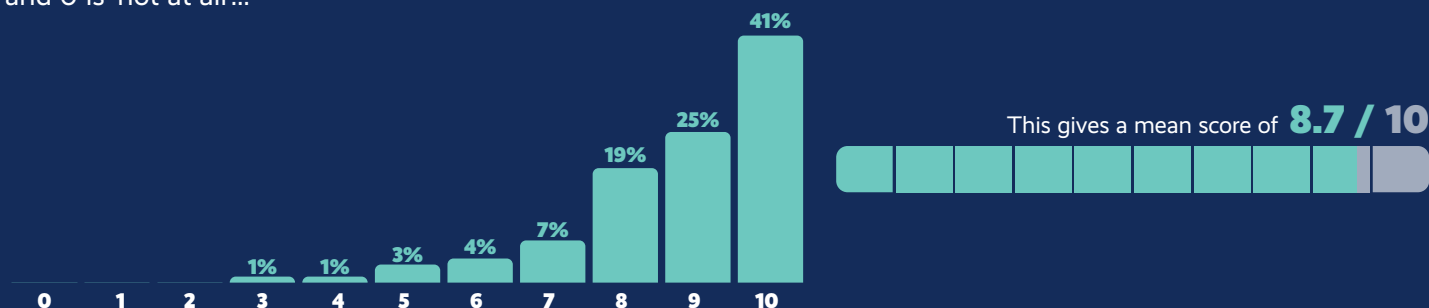
In total, **317 young people completed the survey**, a summary of the responses is shown below.



53% of respondents had **never taken part** in paddling before and this was their first experience of taking part in paddle sports.

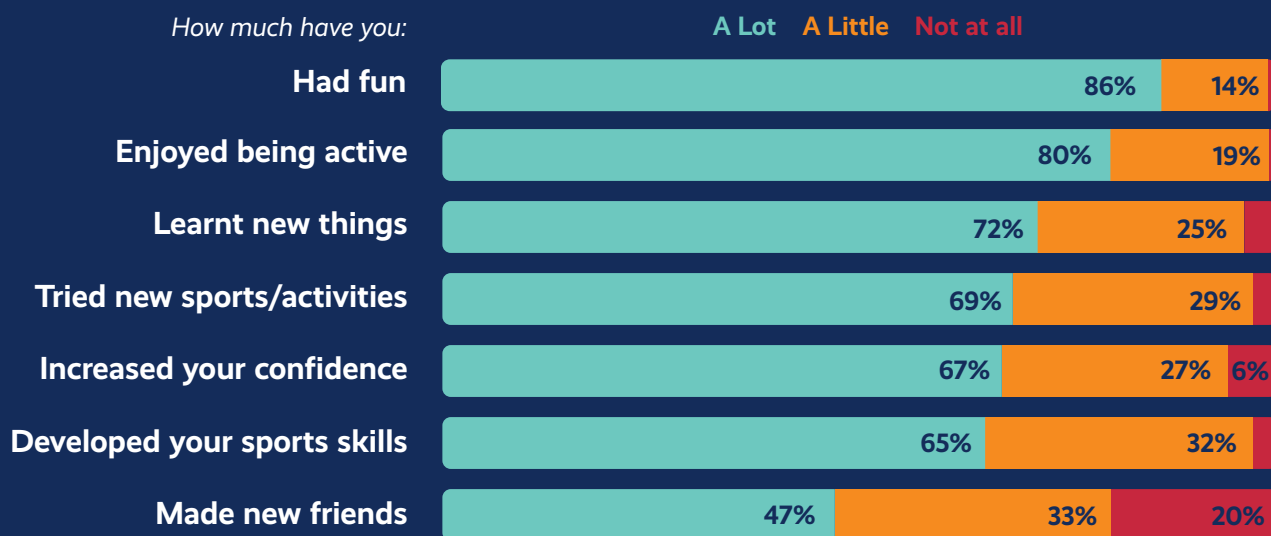
*(Paddling includes Bell Boating, kayaking, canoeing and stand up paddle boarding)*

We asked participants, how much they enjoyed taking part in the session, on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being 'A lot' and 0 is 'not at all'...



The results above showcase the overwhelmingly positive response from the attendees with regards to their Bell Boating experience, reflected in the average score of 8.7 / 10 reported by respondents.

Attendees were also asked to reflect on their experience at the session and feedback on how much they felt they had developed across a range of aspects:



The results above demonstrate that the respondents felt they developed 'A lot' as the majority response across all but one of the aspects. This shows that young people really took a lot from their time on the water and is testament to the enriching environment that was fostered by instructors as part of the sessions.

It is worth noting that the majority of organisations brought existing groups of young people who will have already known each other, but 47% of respondents still felt they had made new friends as part of their experience which is again a positive reflection of the sessions.

Attendees were also asked what they had enjoyed most about the sessions, with a selection of responses shown below:

*"Fresh air and seeing Birmingham from a different angle."*

*"We won the race and explored the canal."*

*"Going on the boat with my mates."*

*"Doing it without help, paddling, teamwork, bonding with the group, learning and communicating well."*

*"Being on the water."*

*"Feeling a sense of togetherness and making closer bonds with the people in my boat."*

*"First time trying it and was excited."*

*"It was very adventurous and felt secure."*

*"How amazing the view was."*

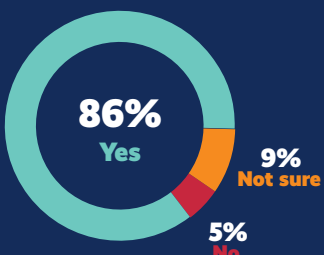
*"Beating the other team in the race and have the opportunity to explore nature in a fun way."*

*"seeing the ducks."*

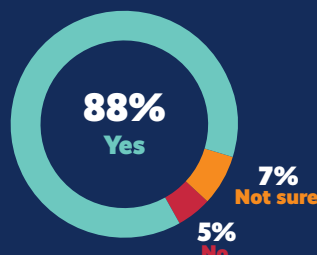
*"I loved making new friends and having time to get to know everybody. I came here only having 4 and now I have so many."*



Looking ahead, we asked attendees whether they would be keen to continue paddling in the future;



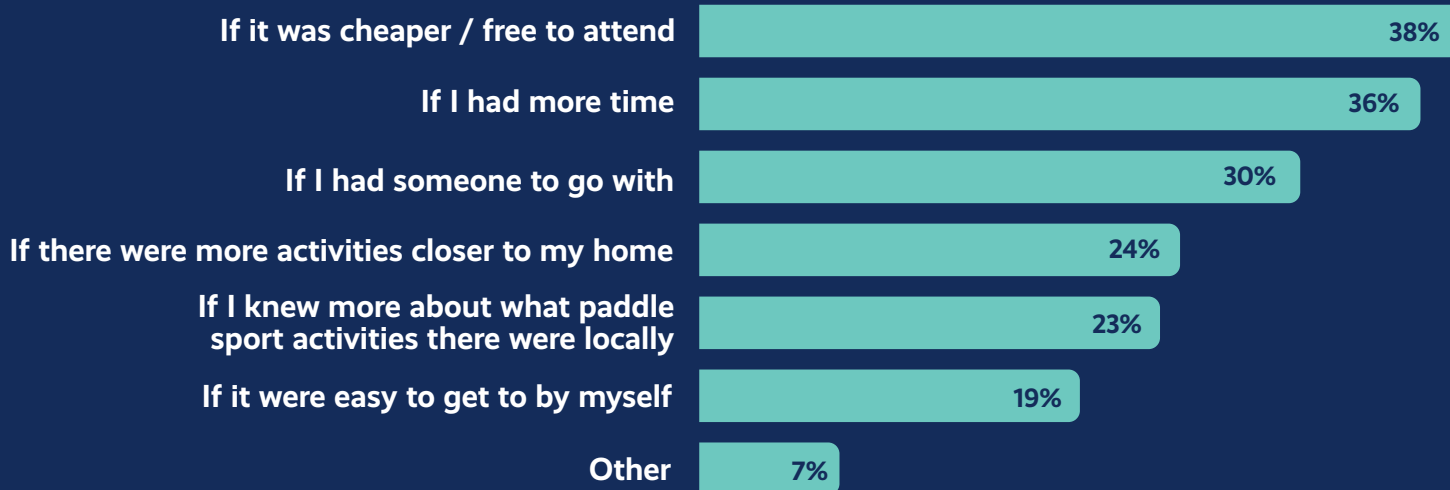
86% of respondents stated that they **would like to come back again** to this hub during other school holidays.



88% of respondents stated that they **would like to take part in paddling again** in the future.

The overwhelmingly positive responses show that the young people's experience this summer has encouraged them to want to continue participating in paddle sports in the future.

For those respondents who answered that they would like to take part in paddling activities again in the future, we asked if there were any particular aspects that would likely encourage them to do so, responses are shown below:



Responses under 'other' including things like; Having access to a wet suit, knowing to bring a change of clothes and if the water was cleaner.

Attendees were also asked to feedback on whether they had any improvements or suggestions for the sessions, the most common themes within responses were; the environment - ensuring the water is clean and pollution free, the equipment - mainly in terms of clothing, but being able to prevent getting too wet, and session timing - having more time on the water.

*"There should be a cheater alarm"*

*"No but I would like to do it again but I would go in the front I hated the water being splashed in my face because it was so dirty."*

*"By having my dad with me"*

*"A bit more time and explore things"*

*"Should be cleaned, canal should have no waste, bushes and branches trimmed."*

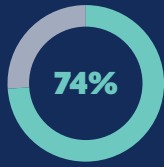
*"For it to be longer I want to go to London in a boat."*

*"Improve the smell, it smelt like garbage and waste."*



## PROJECT LEADER FEEDBACK

Project leaders who brought their group to a session were asked to complete a short survey which asked them to think about what they felt had been the impact of this experience on their group and whether they would like to implement paddling into their sessions in the future. In total, **44 project leaders completed the survey.**



Similarly to the responses seen from the young people, for the majority (**74%**) of project leaders, this was **the first time they have taken part in paddling** as an activity with their group.



As a reflection of how positively the sessions had been received by the young people each project leader brought, **98%** of respondents said they **would like to offer this opportunity to take part in paddling again in the future.**

Project leaders were also invited to reflect on the impact that participating in this paddling session had on their organisation and the young people who attended. A selection of the responses is shown below:

*"It has allowed children who are introverts to come out of their shell and make new friendships. The paddling has also allowed the children to face their fears and apprehension towards the water, which has boosted their self confidence as they all took part despite a few reluctant children."*

*"It gives young people the opportunity to try a new sport and access the canals which many didn't know existed or what they were there for. The young people got to see the city from a different point of view and one young people said they felt they they travelled 100 years back into the past history of Birmingham."*

*"We were very lucky to be 10 min walk away from Port Loop. To see the children in the area so close to the canal. Seeing the barjees sail past. Wearing their life jackets and feeling that excitement build up before they even sat on the Bell Boats. Watching some of them scream with delight and a little fear as the paddle wobbled away from the edge was pure delight. These kids live so close to the canal and have never enjoyed them. They wouldn't be able to pay for canal trips that are offered in town. We had some challenging children who shined in their leadership skills."*

*For some of the children this was the first time they'd been on a Birmingham canal. None of us had ever been Bell Boating before and it was such a fantastic experience to listen to the conversations taking place. The children were looking at wildlife, talking about blackberries, concerned about the rubbish in the canal. We had a really great time.*



*It was a fantastic opportunity as most of our young people have never taken part in this sport. It was something that took them out of their comfort zone.*

*The children were excited to try Bell Boating as it was new to all of them. They had to work together as a team and built stronger relationships that was built of fun, excitement, challenge and a bit of fear. The buzz from the children was amazing - thank you*

*Some young people will never experience these activities in their life so for them to be able to have the opportunity to do this within the local community sparks passion and excitement for the activity which they can do again or become invested within.*

*It gives children, who normally wouldn't have the means, the opportunity to be active on the water locally. It is/was a once in a lifetime experience for many of them*

*These activities have helped these young people develop their confidence by expanding their comfort zone as many of those participating were initially nervous to get onto the water having not had access to this opportunity before. Gaining confidence in this way will help young people to extend their comfort zone and try new things in other areas of their lives enabling them to take full advantage of other opportunities that may be available to them which will help them to reach their potential*

*90 % of our children are from minority backgrounds and new to Birmingham. They don't know the canal routes they wouldn't trust the canal routes so even if there was a scheme were the children wanted to go boating their parents would not take them as they wouldn't feel comfortable as it's a unknown experience for them but out of their comfort zones. Arrange family outings, encourage schools to take their kids and their families to go and once parents saw and went they would definitely be involved or send their child to any further boating events.*

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Building on this success, a formal 3-way agreement has now been signed at a local level between British Canoeing, StreetGames and Canal and River Trust to underpin the further development of this Birmingham-based project. Plans are in place to determine how best to further support the growing capability of the seven paddle hubs in the coming year and sustain their development via doorstep sport club networks. Further research and insight is being planned for including not only community impact but also well-being. This base line information will be built on during each holiday gap period until the end of 2024.



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