

Youth Justice Sport Fund - External Evaluation Report 2023

Executive Summary

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In the financial year ending March 2023, the Ministry of Justice invested £5m supporting projects across England and Wales to use sport to enhance positive outcomes for vulnerable young people. The funding facilitated voluntary and community sports organisations to undertake targeted work supporting children and young people with a secondary level of need who may be at risk of either entering the criminal justice system or being a victim of crime.

The aims of the programme were to:

Aim 1

Support vulnerable young people, aged 10-17, at-risk of involvement in crime, anti-social behaviour and serious violence through involvement in local sporting activities.

Aim 2

Build capacity and the capability of sport sector delivery organisations to work effectively with their local criminal justice partners, including Youth Justice Services, Police and Police Crime Commissioners (PCC)/Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) structures.

The programme was managed by The Youth Justice Sports Fund (YJSF) Consortium which brought together StreetGames, The Alliance of Sport in Criminal Justice, and the Sport for Development Coalition who worked collaboratively to deliver this ambitious programme.

This report presents the findings from an external evaluation of the programme undertaken by four of the academic members of the Advisory Group for the programme. The purpose of the external evaluation, which was limited in scale, was to:

- Undertake in-depth analysis of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) data collated from projects with support provided by StreetGames staff.
- Identify the key learning from the programme.
- Make recommendations based on the learning from the programme.

The insight provided in this report is based on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) data and Project Feedback Surveys (n=218) provided by project staff and insight gained from visits to projects by StreetGames staff (n=172 sessions). The evaluation team also attended Engagement Days (n=4) which brought projects and other stakeholders together at one of 8 regional events, interviews with Regional Leads (n=8) and interviews with project leads (n=14). They also attended the end of programme conference (27th April).

The application process for the YJSF began with Registers of Interest being received from 1718 organisations. More than 400 projects submitted applications for funding and 220 projects were awarded funding after an intensive review process. All organisations that received funding were required to capture and share Monitoring Data, Sessional Attendance and Participant Engagement Levels using an Engagement Matrix at least twice during the programme. Delivery occurred between January and March 2023 with support from Regional Leads and StreetGames staff. All projects were expected to attend regional Engagement Days which involved staff from other projects and other stakeholders including those from the youth justice sector, academics and Ministry of Justice staff.

Funded projects met the following criteria:

- Targeted at young people who all demonstrated a secondary level of need who were identified as engaging in behaviours associated with offending or which put them at risk of being a victim of crime.
- Built on, and extended, existing work due to the ambitious timescales for the programme and the complex needs of the targeted young people.
- Adopted a 'Sport-plus' delivery approach which provides sports activities and other personal development opportunities including gaining like-skills and qualifications, mentoring and volunteering.
- Underpinned by the 'Using Sport to Enhance Positive Outcomes for Young People in the Context of Serious Youth Violence' Theory of Change developed by Loughborough University and StreetGames with support from the Youth Endowment Fund.

The evaluation findings are summarised below to reflect the programme aims.

Aim 1

Support vulnerable young people, aged 10-17, at-risk of involvement in crime, anti-social behaviour and serious violence through involvement in local sporting activities

Programme delivery

The delivery organisations highly valued the YJSF funding that enabled them to work with small and targeted cohorts of young people within a very challenging context.

8,568 sessions were delivered which averaged 39 sessions per organisation over the twelve-week period which included group and individual sports sessions and 'plus' activities not integrated into the sports sessions.



Engagement of young people

7,832 young people were involved in the programme with a total of 68,741 attendances during the twelve-week period. An average of 36 young people engaged per organisation although this varied between organisations. There was an average of 9 attendances per young person over the twelve-week period which was encouraging in the context of the (often multiple) vulnerabilities experienced by the targeted young people. Regular and sustained attendance supports the engagement which maximises the benefit gained. The attraction of sport and the voluntary nature of young people's attendance at the sessions are likely to be contributing factors for these attendance figures.

Level of need and vulnerabilities

Of the 7,832 young people engaged 82% came from the most deprived communities within the bottom four IMD deciles. Most participants (88%) were aged between 10 and 17 years and 48% were aged between 13 to 15 years old. Most participants (77%) were male and 22% were female whilst 44% of young people were from an ethnically diverse background including 18% from a black background. Additionally, 12% of young people engaged in the programme had learning difficulties.

Participants recruited through this programme experienced numerous vulnerabilities and often young people experienced multiple vulnerabilities that were believed to heighten their risk of being involved in offending. Of the organisations involved: 88% engaged young people excluded from school or college, 76% engaged young people with mental health issues, 63% engaged young people associated with gangs and 57% engaged with young people in care/care leavers. More than half of the organisations engaged young people who had been arrested or cautioned in the last three months whilst 44% of organisations engaged with young people who had been a victim of abuse. Other 'vulnerabilities' included: substance misuse, parents with addictions, Special Educational Needs, bereavement, sexual exploitation, learning difficulties, disabilities, being groomed into gangs, missing episodes and homelessness.

The importance of engaging with young people at an early stage was noted because once a young person starts to become involved in offending it is extremely difficult to break the cycle because many of the short-term rewards of offending are hard to compete with. It was also noted that levels of need and vulnerability can escalate quickly.

Young people's experiences of YJSF

Delivery organisations reported that engagement levels had improved from an average of 2.7 at the start of the project to 3.3 at its conclusion. Uniquely non-attendance data was collated which enabled projects to follow-up on and respond to issues where possible. Reasons for non-attendance which included sickness, access issues (transport etc), poor mental health, complex family circumstances and negative peer group influence at the session. Providing food was an important engagement tool for many projects.

Pro-social Development through a Sport-Plus approach

Football was the most commonly provided sport (68% of organisations), followed by boxing (50%), multi-sport (48%) and gym fitness (42%). In some projects the choice of sport was driven by consultation with the young people. 42% of projects integrated the 'plus' activities into their sports sessions and 38% provided their 'plus' activities separately either before or after the sports sessions or on a different day. 'Plus' activities included mentoring, formal or informal workshops or discussions about areas such as consequences of involvement in crime or gangs, drugs and alcohol, the role of a community and making healthy and positive choices. Some projects offered non-sporting activities such as bike mechanic skills, gardening, music, arts and crafts and cooking and nutrition to engage the young people. Social spaces were also used as break-out spaces for holding informal conversations and eating food together.

This programme demonstrated that a sport-plus approach offers more opportunities to undertake meaningful work with young people experiencing high levels of challenge in their lives and enabled staff to build a strong rapport with young people. It also enhances young people's skills and knowledge and provides access to additional support.



Referrals

In terms of the sources of formal referral routes, the majority of delivery organisations engaged some young people from educational establishments (82%), this was then followed by youth justice services (39%), early help hubs (23%) and the police (23%). It is encouraging that 88% of organisations stated that they were working with some young people who were not attending or who had been excluded from school or college as not attending school is associated with offending and being recruited to gangs (Robinson et al., 2019).

Informal referrals are valuable in helping to recruit 'at risk' young people who would not choose to take part in more formal intervention programmes (Hennigan et al., 2015) as well as those who might not be known to statutory agencies.

Organisations need capacity to build partnerships with local agencies to develop and maintain referral routes. In some cases, there was evidence of feedback to the referral agencies about young people's progress as well as feedback from the referral agencies about the positive differences witnessed in the young people.

Aim 2

Build capacity and the capability of sport sector delivery organisations to work effectively with their local criminal justice partners, including Youth Justice Services, Police and Police Crime Commissioners (PCC)/Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) structures

Importance of the workforce

Delivery staff were critical to ensuring young people engaged with the programme and developed the skills and attributes that contributed to positive change. Over 1,000 internal staff members supported YJSF sessions. An additional 492 staff members from external and partner organisations were involved in the delivery of specific aspects of the programme as sports coaches (45%), mentors (28%), youth workers (25%) and staff that provided workshops, training/qualifications and administrative tasks. More than two thirds of organisations were able to engage additional staff into their sessions (67%) and were able to offer existing staff more hours of delivery (67%). Almost half of organisations were able to up-skill existing staff through relevant training (49%).

Experienced staff (either within the organisation and sourced from partners) with expertise in both delivering sport/activity sessions and youth work/mentoring were particularly valued as they were able to provide a consistent and sustained approach which built relationships and trust with young people.

Workforce requirements

A key contributor to the success of the YJSF was the opportunity to provide more focused and personalised support to young people. On average, the ratio of staff to young people within the sport sessions was 1:7, which reduced to 1:5 for the 'plus' activities. Most organisations reported that they worked with group sizes of less than 10 (87% for sport activities; 95% for 'plus' activities) which enabled staff to better understand young people's unique strengths and respond more effectively to their needs and challenges. Smaller group sizes also contributed to fewer disruptive incidents during sessions.

Many organisations (49%) reported allocating funding to train or up-skill delivery staff according to local and organisational need. Training to enhance trauma-informed practice or better understand the impact of adverse childhood experience (ACEs) is the highest priority for them (34%). Other training priorities included mentoring training (21% saw this as the top priority), advanced safeguarding (18%) and mental health first aid (16%). This training was valued to ensure that young people receive the appropriate ‘blend’ of support services, which ideally would be delivered by the same person or organisation.

Challenges experienced by staff

The evaluation indicated the importance of staff being supported with job security, career progression and development, and provided with access to services that provide support for their physical, mental and emotional well-being as 61% of organisations stated that additional well-being support is required for those working with vulnerable young people. Exposure to incidents or sensitive conversations involving young people they worked with sometimes acted as a ‘trigger’ for vicarious trauma or their own mental health challenges.

Partnership working

Many of the funded organisations reported that they had established collaborative arrangements with various local, regional and national partners prior to the YJSF, with 44% noting that they had an existing relationship with youth offending teams, 76% having an existing relationship with a criminal justice partner (e.g. community safety team or VRU), and 30% an existing relationship with a safeguarding partner. Given the relatively short duration of the YJSF organisations tended to draw upon these existing partnership relationships as a referral partner but 62% of organisations reported establishing new partnerships with local youth justice partners or strengthening existing connections.

The nature of existing relationships with key organisations in youth justice changed because of YJSF for some organisations. Prior to the YJSF most organisations revealed that their relationship with youth justice organisation was a ‘one way arrangement’ and that relaying the message about the potential for sport-based interventions to contribute to crime/community safety outcomes was a challenge. The regional Engagement Events brought different sectors together and strengthened connections, whilst enabling sport-based organisations to showcase the work they do as a ‘cross-cutting’ tool to support outcomes related to health, employability, and family support. Several organisations discussed the MoJ’s ‘Turnaround’ scheme as one example of how partnerships had become more embedded and created

opportunities to demonstrate to funders and commissioners how the sport sector can mobilise rapidly to tackle issues and offer a sound social investment.

However, establishing relationships with youth justice partners remained difficult, with 64% of attendees at the regional Engagement Events indicating a need for youth justice partners to better understand how sport can help young people, and 36% suggesting that better understanding is needed by youth justice partners about the role sport can play in supporting secondary tier interventions. The regional Engagement Events indicated that there appears to be a strong appetite for greater collaboration to build upon the partnerships and relationships established during the YJSF.

Capacity Building

A key aim for this programme was to build capacity within this sector which is an ambitious aim for a programme with a duration of twelve weeks of delivery. Two of the main ways in which this aim was achieved was through opportunities for training staff, volunteers and young people and the investment in MEL. Collecting high quality and consistent data has been an ongoing challenge for the sector because it limits the claims that can be made for the work that is undertaken particularly as Third sector and voluntary organisations often lack the capacity both in terms of expertise and staff time to be able to collate MEL. Another key element of the YJSF was the collaborative nature of the programme which enabled projects to share their experiences and insight and to feel connected with other and part of a bigger movement rather operating in isolation.

Challenges experienced by projects

Understandably projects faced some challenges in delivering an ambitious programme but the limited number challenges identified was encouraging and testament to the effective design of the YJSF programme, the application and decision process and the support provided to the projects by StreetGames staff. It also attests to the strengths of the delivery organisations.

Challenges that were faced by projects including the reliance on partnerships for referrals which demonstrated the need for improved collaboration between sectors. Linked to this is a need for improved understanding of the difference between primary and secondary level interventions and the need for greater understanding of the role that sport and sport-plus can play. The varied ways in which young people were referred to projects impacted the knowledge that staff had about young people and this can create risks to the work that is being done both for the young person, other young people and the staff involved in delivery.

The winter months required indoor facilities being used and additional non-sporting spaces such as social areas, games rooms and separate rooms were being used by projects to deliver some of the ‘plus’ elements. The value of indoor spaces is relevant in the wider context of the young people attending the sessions as 82% of young people come from the most deprived communities where access to warm, welcoming, and safe spaces is not always available. Some projects expressed concern about being able to provide support in the summer months, when young people are in public spaces more due to the better weather and longer days, as this can create increased vulnerabilities associated with a secondary level of need as young people feel the impact of poverty (e.g. an absence of free school meals and a lack of money to access activities) which make the offer of criminal activity more attractive for some young people.



Finally, staff voiced concern at the sustainability of the sessions particularly the targeted work with small groups of young people which requires resources to ensure continuity of provision. This continuity is important for helping to build trusted relationships between young people and staff and for providing them with the potential benefits that involvement in a Sport-plus intervention can bring.

▼ Maintaining the momentum

There was considerable apprehension at the start of the YJSF programme around the timescales for the project both in terms of the short lead time and also the short duration of the programme and because a Consortium approach to support a programme involving 220 projects, all working within the same parameters, to undertake meaningful work with young people with complex needs had not previously been tested. Of the 220 projects that were successful in their applications 218 were able to complete their projects within the ambitious timescales set for the programme. The determination of the projects to undertake this work was noted as being a key driver in achieving this success from the ambitions of the delivery organisations who highly valued funding that enable them to work with small and targeted cohorts of young people within a very challenging context. Regional leads suggested that smaller organisations were able to deliver impactful work just as effectively as some of the larger organisations who have access to much higher levels of resource because of their positioning within the community and the trust that this positioning engendered.

Some of the main characteristics of the fund that were considered instrumental in the success of the programme included:

- Ability to flex the original project plans to reflect with the reality of the context to respond quickly to any unforeseen challenges and adapt their delivery to continue to meet the overall aims of the programme.
- Autonomy to decide budget priorities to reach and engage the targeted young people in their projects.
- A high level of trust placed in organisations to deliver what was needed in their communities whilst meeting the expectations placed on funded projects.
- The consistent and ongoing support offered to projects throughout the programme by the Consortium including MEL support enabled them to collect and report data that would previously have been impossible without this financial and guidance support.
- Underpinning the programme with the shared Theory of Change and clear expectations of projects made clear from the outset.

Regional Leads and Project Staff raised some concerns about the sustainability of these impacts and ensuring that the short-term gains made during the project resulted in longer-term positive effects and behaviour change. Many spoke of the need for longer-term funding to continue the work that was started within the YJSF and ensure that engagement with these vulnerable young people was consistent, sustained, and prevented a regression of the gains made during the YJSF.

Concerns were raised about starting work with young people that could not be sustained in the long term as this can result in young people being let down. Access to additional funding to continue the work that has been started here was understandably an aspiration for all those involved in the YJSF. Survey data revealed that 88% of delivery organisations said that there are suitable local 'exit routes' for young people 27 (12%) of organisations stated that there were no suitable exit routes for young people. Where there were exit routes there often barriers associated with transport, cost or due to a mismatch in age and ability with local opportunities.

Whilst most of the projects were able to access some sort of exit route for those involved in the programme concerns were also expressed that this level of engagement and support for young people with complex needs requires appropriate levels of funding. Short-term funding limits what projects can achieve and makes staff retention challenging. It also creates risks for the credibility of the organisations with the communities they serve when delivery cannot be maintained. Some organisations are creative in the ways that they seek funding for their work and generate surpluses through some of their activities which they are then able to use to subsidise the support they offer to young people. Other projects are working with commercial partners to access resources which go beyond financial resources to provide young people with access opportunities that would not be available to them otherwise.

There is a strong argument to be made that the work that the 220 projects have achieved will prevent costs being incurred in the future. These costs are not only measured in financial terms but also the costs to the young people, their families and their communities which arise from offending.



Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the external evaluation findings. In presenting these recommendations it is acknowledged that these are not intended to be aimed at any one organisation but instead are considerations for all organisations with an interest in using sport to enhance positive outcomes for vulnerable young people.



This report has demonstrated how the YJSF programme was delivered successfully despite being ambitious in its aims and timescales. **The Consortium approach**, and the support offered by StreetGames, were important drivers of this success in terms of developing and delivering a programme which both united and supported LTOs to mobilise quickly and effectively to engage some of the most vulnerable young people in sport and sport-plus projects. It is therefore recommended that **the lessons that can be learnt from this approach are fully explored beyond the timescales of this evaluation to consider the implications for future programmes.**

The projects that were supported through the YJSF demonstrated at the point of application that they were able to meet clearly articulated expectations in terms of providing MEL data, using the Theory of Change and engaging young people with a secondary level of need. As a result, the YJSF funding was allocated to 220 projects which were ideally placed to succeed in meeting shared objectives whilst also being allowed flexibility to adapt their delivery if needed as trusted organisations. It is recommended that **greater consideration is given to how future investment can be awarded with principles of trust, collaboration and high expectations being embedded from the outset.**

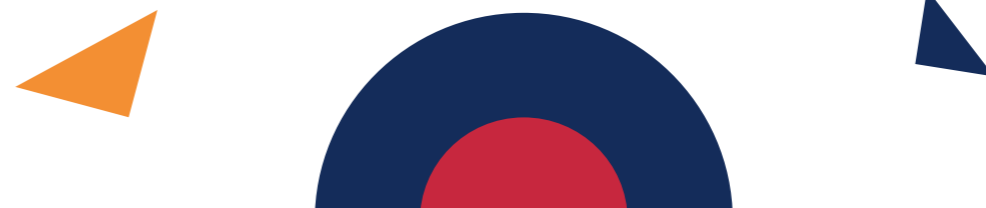
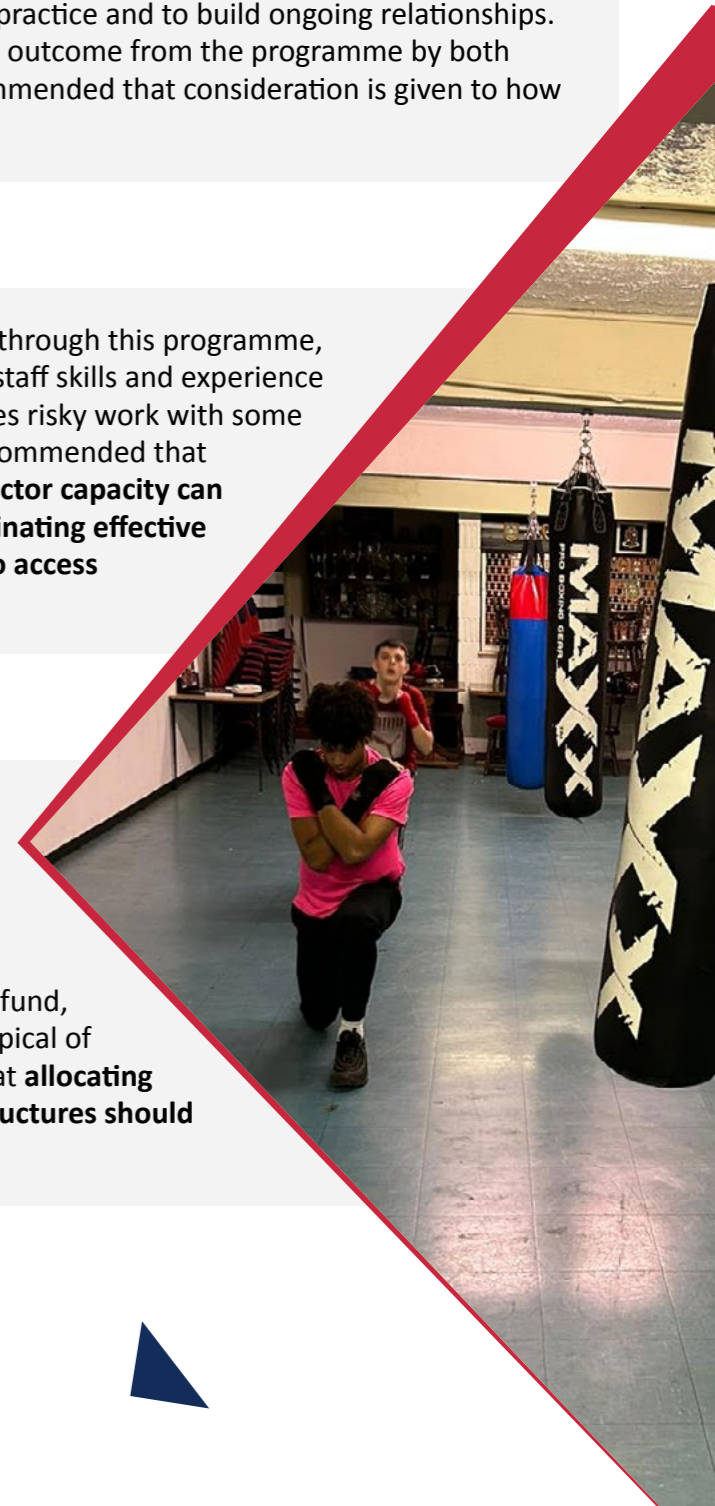
An important voice which is largely from this report is that of the young people who participated in this programme and whilst there have been opportunities for adults to connect with each other within this programme the same opportunities have not been presented to young people. Whilst Regional Leads were able to speak to young people the timescales prevented young people formally engaging in the external evaluation or the MEL. Many of the project leads described how the participants in their projects were consulted in planning projects and some young people were also involved as volunteers, mentors and staff in this programme. It is recommended that **consideration is given to how young people's involvement in this programme can be celebrated and to how young people can be involved in influencing future programmes at both strategic and delivery levels.**

An important factor contributing to the success of this programme was the flexibility of projects to design projects that they felt would be best suited to the targeted young people and the flexibility to adapt projects if needed in response to the reality of the context they faced. This flexibility was facilitated at the application stage where projects were selected based on clear criteria being met which resulted in organisations that could be trusted being funded. This flexibility was instrumental in demonstrating trust in the organisations that were funded and this trust was rewarded with projects being able to deliver successfully with a very short lead in time. It is therefore recommended that future programmes consider ways in which projects can be supported to flexible in how they deliver whilst upholding the Theory of Change principles which were shown to create an important foundation for the YJSF.

This programme benefited from the creation of regional and national networks which connected projects and other partners together to share effective practice and to build ongoing relationships. These networks were considered an extremely valuable outcome from the programme by both project staff and regional leads and it is therefore recommended that consideration is given to how these networks can be maintained in the long term.

In addition to the networks that have been established through this programme, projects have benefited from opportunities to develop staff skills and experience relevant to undertaking this highly skilled and sometimes risky work with some of the most vulnerable young people. It is therefore recommended that **consideration is given to how this investment in the sector capacity can continue to be developed through sharing and disseminating effective practice and through staff and volunteers being able to access training for this highly specialist work.**

The projects funded through this programme benefited from a range of support provided by the StreetGames network which enabled them to work in an agile and responsive way to meet their aims and fulfil their MEL obligations. This support was reliant on the financial resourcing that was allocated through this fund, but it resulted in fidelity and compliance that are not typical of other funding streams. It is therefore recommended that **allocating sufficient resources to provide appropriate support structures should be considered in future funds.**



This evaluation report presents the headline findings and the key learning from this programme but there is considerable detail that it has not been able to include in this report within the constraints of the evaluation. It is therefore recommended that **more consideration is given to extending the learning opportunities for policy, practice and theory that have been started through this programme in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders** (e.g. Delivery organisations, funders, policymakers, academics) with an interest in this work. **Considering the ways in which the learning from the project can be best disseminated to maximise the impact** is also a recommendation.

The evaluation indicates that this complex work is reliant on effective partnerships between organisations that support vulnerable young people. An important element of building effective partnerships is creating a shared understanding of what sport and sport-plus projects can achieve whilst also acknowledging that sport cannot work in isolation. It is therefore recommended that **consideration is given to how the learning from this programme can be shared beyond sport particularly where partners are looking for ways in which to access strength-based opportunities to support young people known to have a secondary level of need.**

The evaluation presents further evidence of the importance of trained staff, and the relationships that they develop with young people, as the most significant influencer of behavioural change. However, the evaluation also highlights the challenges being experienced in the sector to maintain workforce capacity and sustain a consistent level of provision. There is an **urgent need to continue to develop and support the workforce and ensure that staff have the right training to undertake this work. Providing resource to train delivery staff (both paid and voluntary) in trauma-aware approaches and supporting young people with adverse childhood experiences is essential** within work which uses sport to address secondary level concerns.

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