

United in football and basketball – deterring young people from committing crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB)

A youth diversion initiative using football and basketball to divert young people away from crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB).

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Diversion Prevention Reoffending
Topic	Anti-social behaviour Community engagement Vulnerability and safeguarding
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Region	London

Key details

Partners	Police Business and commerce Community safety partnership Education Local authority
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	May 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people Communities Families Offenders Victims

Aim

United in football and basketball aims to:

- deter youth-related anti-social behaviour (ASB) and violence by providing safe and structured sporting activities as a positive alternative to offending or harmful behaviour
- build trust and positive relationships between young people and the police through regular informal engagement
- identify vulnerable or at-risk young people at the earliest opportunity and signpost them to the appropriate support services
- create accessible and free opportunities for young people, particularly in areas of deprivation or limited youth provision
- develop young people's confidence and teamworking skills

- strengthen community cohesion by bringing together young people from different neighbourhoods through sporting activities
- support local policing priorities and the wider clear, hold, build (CHB) by reducing tensions and fostering a supportive community environment

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of united in football and basketball are to:

- reduce the number of youth-related ASB incidents in targeted neighbourhoods during programme delivery periods
- reduce youth involvement in crime or violence, including reductions in repeat contact with the police
- increase positive engagements between young people and the police
- increase participation of young people in structured sport activities, particularly those who have been identified as vulnerable or at risk
- reduce the number of youth congregations in hot spot areas, particularly during evenings and school holidays
- increase referrals to early help, youth services, mentoring programmes, or diversion schemes
- increase school and partner agencies reporting improvements in young people's behaviour, confidence and social interaction
- sustain growth in attendance numbers year-on-year, to ensure programme continuity and long-term engagement

Description

The united in football and basketball initiative was developed in response to the:

- increase in reports of youth-related ASB incidents
- concerns about youth vulnerability
- gaps in safe and accessible activities for young people, particularly during the school holidays

Local engagement activities also highlighted a lack of trust between young people and the police. As part of the CHB strategy, Heaton neighbourhood policing team (NPT) sought to develop a proactive approach that diverted young people away from crime and improved community

cohesion. A review conducted by the NPT identified sport as the most effective and inclusive way to engage with young people.

Planning united in football and basketball

The planning process began with an assessment of youth needs, identifying hot spots and community feedback. Officers engaged with schools, youth workers and community groups to identify suitable venues, age groups and existing gaps in provision.

A delivery model was designed by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), Havering Council and local sports coaching companies, to ensure the sessions are safe, structured and attractive to young people. Risk assessments and safeguarding procedures were then completed for each venue. A communications plan was developed using schools, social media and local authority channels.

Roles and teams

United in football and basketball includes:

- an acting chief inspector and a police constable (PC) who are the operational leads, providing partnership coordination and day-to-day oversight
- First Touch Sport and Bad Thunder, who deliver the football and basketball sessions alongside accredited coaches
- West Ham United Foundation Premier League Kicks Programme, who deliver professional football coaching at standalone tournament sessions and attract participants
- Havering Council Youth Services, who provide outreach, safeguarding support and help identify young people who would benefit the most from the initiative
- Havering Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF), who provided initial funding and access to refreshments for young people in attendance
- local schools and academies who promoted the sessions, encouraged attendance and referred young people to the initiative

Implementing united in football and basketball

The programme initially launched with basketball sessions in identified hot spot areas and then expanded to include football sessions. The one-hour sessions are free, open-access and delivered

at trusted community venues across the borough. Officers attend the sessions in a non-enforcement role, taking part in activities, building rapport and offering informal mentoring.

The united in football and basketball initiative has been expanded during the school holidays, to provide daily or enhanced sessions to reduce peak ASB activity. Larger community tournaments are held to bring together young people from different neighbourhoods, promoting cohesion and reducing tension.

Over time, young people have begun actively seeking out officers for advice, leading to increased trust and better early intervention opportunities. Attendance is recorded at each event to monitor the reach and impact of the initiative. Officers also complete vulnerability assessments or referrals where concerns are identified.

Funding

The initial basketball project received £900 from the MPS Engagement Fund. This covered the cost of five basketball sessions, the equipment (balls and bibs) and the coaches.

When the initiative expanded to include football sessions, Havering Council applied for funding from Sports England's The Movement Fund. The initiative received £6,000 to fund the sessions during school holiday periods.

Senior management approval

The initiative has been approved and supported by the senior leadership team within the East Area Basic Command Unit, as part of the CHB strategy. Ongoing support from senior management has enabled officers to commit time to delivery, secure partnership agreements and expand the project borough-wide.

Evaluation

The Metropolitan Police Service and Havering Council are leading an ongoing evaluation to measure the number of young people attending the sessions.

A head count of the attendees is conducted and lists them into two age groups:

- primary school age

- secondary school age

The evaluation is also investigating the impact the initiative is having on crime and ASB in hot spot areas. Initial findings have seen a notable drop in youth-related ASB and youth-related crimes such as robbery, criminal damage, and drug or weapon possession.

Surveys are being used to gather feedback from young people and attendees' parents or carers. The initial feedback has revealed several improvements are needed, such as appropriate refreshments and considering a change to the toilet facilities.

Overall impact

The united in football and basketball initiative has had a significant and sustained positive impact on both young people and the wider community. By November 2025, the sessions have been attended by approximately 3,500 young people. Officers have observed noticeable reductions in youth groups congregating in hot spot areas during session times, coinciding with a visible decrease in youth-related ASB in targeted locations.

The success of the programme has resulted in a wider roll-out across the borough, expanding from a small pilot format into a full multi-venue youth sport offer. The partnership with the West Ham United Foundation, Bad Thunder and First Touch Sport has strengthened capacity and added professional credibility, encouraging further investment and long-term support.

Feedback from young people has been consistently positive, with many expressing that they feel safer, more confident and comfortable engaging with police officers. Parents, carers and schools have reported improvements in behaviour, routine and social interaction among attendees. Officers have also described the initiative as one of the most effective ways of building rapport with young people, noting increased willingness from participants to seek advice, disclose concerns and accept support.

Learning

What went well

It is essential to have a strong partnership approach to ensure the programme feels credible, safe and attractive to young people. This was achieved by working with:

- Havering Council
- West Ham United Foundation
- Bad Thunder and First Touch Sport
- schools and youth services

The consistent presence of neighbourhood officers has enabled young people to respond positively to the police. In areas where continuity is reduced, it has been slower to build relationship with young people. Using sport as an engagement method has been highly effective in breaking down barriers and creating natural opportunities for mentoring as well as early intervention.

Challenges and barriers

The main challenge has been officer availability, with operational demands sometimes conflicting with the sessions. To ensure officer availability, the force regularly review scheduling and receiving ongoing support from senior management. Securing suitable venues at peak times, particularly in school holidays has been difficult and required a strong relationship with schools and leisure providers. Initial promotion relied heavily on officers, and early sessions had to be actively publicised to build momentum.

Areas for improvement

The initiative's rapid growth created pressure on recording and evaluation systems, highlighting the need for a more formalised monitoring framework. Some areas of the borough still have limited provision because of venue constraints. A continuing aim is to expand to cover all areas of the borough.

Recommendations

- Build strong partnerships with schools and established sports organisations at the earliest opportunity. This will significantly increase reach and credibility of the initiative.
- Secure senior leadership backing to ensure officers' time is protected to regularly attend sessions and build relationships with young people.
- The sessions should be free and accessible to remove any barriers around participation.
- Implement a simple but effective data capture from the outset to evidence impact and support future funding bids.

- Prioritise officer continuity, as sustained relationships are central to building trust and delivering early intervention.

Best available evidence

The [Crime reduction toolkit](#) contains best available evidence on [Sports programmes designed to prevent crime and reduce reoffending](#).

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