

Sport and youth crime prevention project

A sports early intervention programme to engage young people who are either at risk or involved in exploitation and criminality.

First published

11 February 2026

Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Public Protection, Safeguarding & Vulnerability Anti-social behaviour Community engagement
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Region	Eastern

Key details

Partners	Police Community safety partnership Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Health services Local authority Private sector Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	June 2022
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people

Aim

The aim of the project is to:

- engage with vulnerable and at-risk young people through sport to provide them with opportunities for education, qualifications, volunteering and employment
- prevent youth crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) by offering alternatives structured pathways
- provide safe and inclusive environments for young people
- support young people with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- provide multi-agency collaborations between statutory services, community organisations, and sport-for-development partners
- enhance the capacity of sports providers, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to work with vulnerable young people.
- grow and professionalise the sector, to ensure that sports providers are qualified with safeguarding, trauma-informed practice, and youth development

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the project are to:

- reduce the number of youth-related crime and ASB incidents
- reduce the number of first-time entrants into the criminal justice system
- reduce reoffending rates the young people
- improve intelligence sharing and safeguarding referrals from sport providers
- improve young peoples' wellbeing, confidence, and sense of safety
- increase the number of young people completing life skills, training, or education modules
- increase the number of trained and qualified sports providers working with vulnerable young people
- increase stakeholders' confidence in sport-based interventions as a credible early intervention tool

Description

In 2019, Essex Violence and Vulnerability Unit (VVU) identified the county as an area requiring attention to serious youth violence. The VVU created a strategic needs assessment and outlined areas where violence was prevalent and would benefit from early intervention projects. Sporting activities had been deemed by the Youth Endowment Fund to be a promising initiative that could positively young people's lives. The VVU conducted a review to determine young people's attitudes towards their locality, how safe they feel and whether they would be interested in participating in activities. The review revealed that young people wanted more sport activities. In response, the Active Essex Foundation (AEF) created the sport and youth crime prevention project.

Planning process

The purpose of the project is to use sport and physical activity, to engage and build trust with young people who are either at risk or involved in exploitation and criminality. The young people involved are identified through being referred by the Youth Justice Service, the Risk in the Community team (RIC), Essex Police and children in care. The AEF also works with young people who are on free school meals and holiday activities and food (HAF) secondary projects.

The project was planned over a three year period, with support from:

- VVU

- National Lottery
- Essex Police
- local sport and activity providers

The planning process involved:

- youth-centred design, which recognised the complex needs of many of the participants
- multi-agency collaboration to ensure that sports providers were not working in isolation
- due diligence and safeguarding, with a focus on safe, qualified, and trauma-informed delivery

Roles and teams

The following roles and teams are involved in the delivery of the project:

- two project managers – responsible for overseeing the strategy, partnerships, and reporting
- three self-employed contractors – who communicate with the referral sources

AEF team – who provide support with:

- monitoring performance and evaluation
- communications
- training and building partner agency relationships

Implementation

The implementation of sport and youth crime prevention project required:

- Mapping local delivery partners and conducting due diligence such as Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), insurance, safeguarding policies, and qualifications.
- Delivering in-person training to providers on trauma-informed practice, safeguarding, and youth development.
- Establishing referral pathways from statutory agencies, schools, and community groups.
- Delivering sport and activity sessions, alongside mentoring, life skills, and trusted adult support.
- Monitoring outcomes using a mix of quantitative data such as crime reduction rates and attendance and qualitative stories.

AEF receive referrals of young people who are at risk of exploitation or involved in criminality. Each young person is referred for 12 to 24 weeks depending on their needs and requirements. AEF links the young person with their partner organisations. The project has activities tailored to their needs such as gendered activities, BoxSmart (boxing mentoring programme), sport, mentoring and activity for resilience training or sport makes a real transformation (SMART) courses, stand alone and group activities.

The project is flexible with some young people engaging weekly, while others participate more sporadically.

Funding and resources

The sport and youth crime prevention project initially received £550,000 from the National Lottery Community Fund. The funding was used to cover staffing and delivery costs.

Since the implementation of the project has received ongoing funding from:

- Sport England
- local authorities
- community safety partnerships
- EssexPolice, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC)
- Safer Streets Fund
- Youth Justice Service
- Amazon
- DP World

Senior management support

AEF is the senior management body who provide governance, oversight, and strategic direction. In addition, the project has secured buy-in from senior leaders across statutory agencies, including:

- youth offending teams
- Essex Police
- local authority safeguarding leads
- community safety partnerships

Evaluation

An evaluation commenced in August 2022 and is being led by AEF and Loughborough University. The purpose of the evaluation to assess the impact of the project on the young people.

The evaluation is looking at:

- whether there has been improved wellbeing, resilience, and sense of safety among participants
- how many young people have progressed into education, employment or training
- the attendance of sessions
- whether sport providers have increased capacity and confidence
- evidence of system change, including improved cross-sector working and policy influence

The evaluation is using a mixed-method approach

quantitative:

- session attendance and engagement tracking
- number of referrals and their sources
- crime and safeguarding data (where available)
- progression metrics such as school attendance, employment and training

qualitative:

- case studies and personal narratives
- interviews with young people, delivery staff, and referrers
- feedback forms and reflective exercises
- observational notes from Connectors and providers
- videos and audio capture

Overall impact

Findings and observations

- To date the project has engaged over 6,000 young people, many of whom were previously disconnected from services or considered high risk.
- There have been significant reductions in ASB and missing episodes, particularly among young people with repeated safeguarding concerns.

- Young people have returned to education, entered employment, and reconnected with family and community.
- Sporting activities have proven to be a credible and consistent engagement tool, especially when paired with mentoring, life skills, and trusted adult relationships.

Feedback

- Police officers have reported improved engagement with young people and reduced call-outs in hotspot areas.
- Youth workers and statutory staff describe the programme as “a game-changer” for reaching young people who don’t respond to traditional services.
- Young people themselves speak of feeling “safe,” “valued,” and “finally listened to” — with some of the individuals progressing to mentoring others or volunteering in their communities.
- One practitioner described the transformation of a young person who had been involved in drug dealing: “He’s now a disciplined martial artist, training three times a week, mentoring younger lads, and talking about opening his own gym. That’s what sport can do when it’s backed by trust and consistency.”

Learning

- The implementation of the project across Essex has prompted a geographical challenge, in finding sports providers across the county. AEF have split the county into their unitary authorities, with varying levels of success.
- Mapping the provisions is difficult, as activities are regularly launched and disbanded. It is essential to identify reliable organisations who can deliver large scale or niche activities.
- It has been a challenge to convey the benefits of the project to statutory organisations such as Essex Police. By involving the force in the delivery of the project, they have been able to see the benefits first-hand.

Best available evidence

See the [Crime reduction toolkit](#) for more information on [Sports programmes designed to prevent crime and reduce reoffending](#).

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