

Learning about what works in Phase Two of the Mayor of London's Sport Unites Programme

Spotlight: Model City London (Laureus Sport for Good Foundation)



“Through MCL, I have become a role model and learnt how to support the community. We help set up for local events unless it clashes with my school times. We help out, play with the kids, encourage them to join in.....It's an easy and fun atmosphere and if it's not competitive then we can get them to participate more in Sport.”

(MCL participant from Barking Sport for Change)



Background

Model City London (MCL) was launched in 2018 by Laureus Sport for Good Foundation in partnership with the Mayor of London and Nike, with the aim of boosting sports participation, reducing social isolation, and improving mental wellbeing in three selected boroughs. Also a focus was to ensure that each of the coalitions had a legal status and were financially sustainable by the end of the programme. London was the first UK city to join Laureus's growing, global network of [sport for good cities](#). MCL was designed to improve social integration through sport by empowering local people in three London boroughs to drive the change they want to see in their community.

Over the last 6 years, MCL has been building and delivering a wide range of opportunities for sport and physical activity in Barking, Haringey, and Hounslow. Each of these boroughs has an active Coalition of local people and organisations working together, initially with the support of a Community Coordinator employed by Laureus, to deliver change through sport and physical activity in their respective locations. Since 2019, these three Coalitions have been coproducing local strategies, visions and outcomes based on the priority issues that local communities have identified. Coalition members then worked together to apply for grants that they believed would help them to use the power of sport to address these issues, and delivered these programmes through a diverse range of community based sport for good projects, whilst also being supported by a framework of capacity building and support.

“We wanted to get involved to make sure the local history of using sport for good was more far reaching and had a legacy beyond project funding, built on strong partnerships and bringing people together from diverse communities.”

(Barking Sport For Change Coalition Chair)



The experiences and impacts of the first 3 years of MCL were evaluated and reported on [here](#). This initial pilot period was followed by a consolidation and capacity building year (2021/2-2022/3), following which a two year period followed through investment from Laureus, Nike and the Mayor of London.

What happened - summary of developments during 2022-2024

The focus of years 5 and 6 (2022-2024) within and across the 3 Coalition areas was on increasing the engagement and participation of more young people, including those from specific target groups; and building economically viable, independent Coalitions led by local partners and communities.

“Our focus has changed over time to what helps young people transition to extra curricula sport and physical activity? What helps young people get involved and stay involved? We’ve learned to really listen to what young people tell us will help and make a difference to them. It’s been a steep learning curve – to not assume but to ask and listen. We asked young girls what will help and their big question was, “what should I wear?” We didn’t think of that. We needed to know this to help young girls, listen to their voice and priorities.” (Barking Sport for Change Coalition Lead)

Other key aims of this period included: reducing social isolation and improving the mental health and wellbeing of young people from Barking, Hounslow and Haringey; strengthening community level leadership and ownership; establishing community hubs; and growing young people's voice and influence through youth panels.

Over the last two years, MCL has made substantial progress in increasing children and young people's engagement in sports and physical activities, and enabled those diverse young people to sustain their participation over time:

- A total of **802 young participants** have engaged in a wide variety of different opportunities (against a target of 633 participants)
- **Over half of this total were girls and young women** reflecting the success of targeted approaches and support in all three boroughs
- **147 of this total were disabled young people**, highlighting an area for further development, especially as the majority of these young people were based in one borough, Hounslow, indicating the potential to learn from what works in this area that can be adopted in other boroughs

“MCL was successful in attracting participants from the targeted age group, incrementally increasing participation numbers over time and providing an inclusive atmosphere that welcomed participants from across the gender spectrum. The coalitions were particularly successfully in engaging young women and girls to partake in sport (a group that is statistically at risk of lower participation numbers when it comes to sporting activities).” (MCL Final Evaluation Report, 2024)

- In terms of strategic developments and goals, **all three Coalitions are now registered, independent bodies** with their own independent funding secured via grants, which are being used to invest in ongoing delivery of effective sports programmes. Barking Sport for Change and Generations Active have a legal status of CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) and Active Change Haringey has become a CIC (Community Interest Company).
- Systems for **increasing youth voice and decision making** have been effectively set up in each coalition area. Youth panel members are keen to develop new skills and see their involvement as “a vital opportunity for personal growth”.

What have been the impacts?

Increased participation

As well as reaching and engaging impressive numbers of young people, including girls and young women, in a variety of sport and physical activity, more young people reported **an increased likelihood of engaging in other sports and physical activities** on an ongoing basis:

- **81%** of all participants reported that they are more likely to engage in sports post-programme (a substantial increase from 35% at the beginning of this period).

“An 11-year-old participant from Barking, shared how the programme had broadened her horizons: “Before MCL I didn’t really do much outside of school. But now, I’ve tried things like basketball and dance. I actually want to keep doing these things because they’re fun, and I’ve made new friends too.” (MCL Final Evaluation Report, Impactscape Ltd, October 2024)

Improved wellbeing

As well as increasing and sustaining young people’s participation in sport, local opportunities provided through MCL have had **a positive impact on young people’s wellbeing**, in different ways:

- **90%** of participants reported that they had made **new friends** through engaging in local opportunities for sport and physical activity.
- Evidence reveals that young people engaged through MCL opportunities feel **less isolated** as a result of supportive relationships forged through their participation
- This evidence also highlighted **improvements in self-esteem, resilience and overall happiness**.

“A 13-year-old participant from Haringey described why she initially joined the programme: “To dance to feel less stress and to clear my mind but then I started having fun. I wanted to help others understand that sport can be fun...and encourage them to participate.” (MCL Final Evaluation Report, Impactscape Ltd, October 2024)

New and transferable skills

A central feature of MCL’s success over the last two years has been the different ways in which **young people’s sports, leadership and life skills** have been developed or enhanced. In addition to formal, structured skills development programmes (65% of all participants took on leadership roles as a result of these more formal projects), young people involved in MCL across the three areas broadened their horizons and developed a wide variety of transferable skills. As the final evaluation report says, this was not an explicit aim for this era of the programme, but these experiences and impacts have proved to be a core element of MCL, and importantly, seem to offer something that many participants stated they do not get from school or college:

“One participant in Barking specifically joined the programme because of the attraction of knowing they would gain practical skills for the future: ‘I wanted a deeper understanding of how these things work and I wanted to be part of something. It’s quite hard to get work experience in years 10/11, so I thought I’d get in early and start with this. You know, get some transferable skills.’ (Participant from Barking, quoted in MCL Final Evaluation Report, October 2024)

Young people’s **positive experiences of MCL coaches and mentors** have been highlighted in all Spotlight studies as it has for MCL. In addition, the experience of developing and using skills as coaches and mentors has been an important outcome for some young people, including those who have previously been participants in local MCL projects/opportunities:

“Through being a mentor and coach, I have gathered a better understanding of what people go through. It’s taught me not to have all the answers but a calm presence. For this group of people and young kids from inner city locations, a mentor or coach with a calm head makes such a difference: some of them have situations at school and home that need that calm to counterbalance stuff.” (Coach/mentor from Haringey, quoted in MCL Final Evaluation Report, October 2024)

How changes have come about

- These experiences show that skilled, trained and locally recruited **coaches and mentors** have both enabled engagement and helped young people to maintain their involvement in sport over time. In particular, 68% of participants said they felt connected to their mentors and enjoyed positive relationships with them.

“I had a problem at home recently, and I told [my mentor] about it. [They] were very understanding and made me feel supported and heard.” (Participant from Barking, quoted in MCL Final Evaluation Report, October 2024)

- **Progression pathways at a local level** have given young people the chance to engage, to participate and to develop enhanced sport and leadership skills as well as the confidence to take up both leadership roles and eventually paid employment. This includes young people who would otherwise struggle to access such opportunities, such as James, a recent arrival in the UK who became involved as a mentor in the Youth Sports Bar project, part of the MCL opportunities for young girls in Barking.

“My confidence was at 3 before joining the programme’, James reflects. ‘Now it is at 9.9’.....From an isolated newcomer struggling with language and cultural barriers, James has grown into a confidence young man with a clear vision for his future. The programme has not only helped him integrate socially but has also enhanced his employability by equipping him with practical skills and the courage to take on leadership roles.” (James, a mentor quoted in MCL Final Evaluation Report, October 2024)

- 72% of participants said that having a **variety of different sports on offer** was a key factor in their continued involvement. In addition, they shared that flexibility of this diverse provision as well as the support from coaches and mentors helped keep their involvement going. This combination rather than one of these ingredients on its own is key.
- The slow but steady growth of **youth panels** is referred to as an important element by Coalition members and leaders, whilst recognising this remains a major development priority in all three areas.
- A skilful **combination of targeted approaches and informal engagement methods** have also helped to achieve the high rates of participation and sustained involvement across Coalition areas.

Challenges

- MCL’s **transition** from a formal, time limited programme hosted by Laureus in partnership with the Mayor of London and Nike to self-sustaining, community led partnerships has taken time, investment and commitment from many different sources and perspectives. It is still very early days, but the dominant theme from these new look Coalitions is “optimism and hope”
- Young people and those closest to them continually draw attention to the need to design and deliver opportunities for sport and physical activity in **safe places and in safe ways**, including the ways in which they move about their neighbourhoods and London more widely. As one Coalition Chair shares, this need to always focus on the personal safety of young people is “powerful and very sad” but has to be a central feature for how MCL is designed and delivered in the future. “It always has to be about what makes young people feel safe and delivery that happens where young people can get there safely, easily and on their own”.
- At the same time, there is a simultaneous need to provide **free and/or low cost opportunities** in a network of safe areas at a very local level. This balance between quality provision, safety, and low or no cost opportunities is a major challenge and design feature for the future
- Section 1 of the main report draws attention to the need to understand the **changing contexts** for Sport Unites. The Barking Sport for Change Chair illustrates this in one MCL area:

“Barking as a borough is changing – we have a very high population of 5-15 year olds and we’re very diverse, and that diversity is changing. The profile is changing. We need a mapping exercise to capture needs, aspirations, priorities and opportunities across all areas of the borough and in a joined up way, driven by communities.”

Lessons

- The **place-based model**, where local communities are supported to work alongside local organisations to identify and then address local issues through sport, works. It particularly works when there is genuine commitment to coproducing locally determined outcomes based on the most pressing issues facing young people, collaborating to secure grants/funding to address these needs and learning about what works in engaging young people in sport and physical activity
- Participants expressed **greater commitment to physical activity** and discovering new interests in sports thanks to:
 - friendships, relationships, connection and fun
 - availability of a diverse offer
 - positive relationships with coaches/mentors.
- Partners and partnerships underpin everything, are based on mutual understanding and trust, and take time to develop:

“We’re blessed with our partners and our community hubs, all members of the Coalition are leaders - in their own products/offers, in their sport, in their neighbourhood, in their organisations.” (BS4C Chair)

- Informal engagement methods combined with targeted approaches enable the full participation of individuals and groups who are most often excluded from opportunities for sport and physical activity
- Young people are altruistic and determined – they want to develop their own skills, grow as rounded citizens, gain paid and meaningful employment, and those who have benefited from MCL want to see the programme extend and expand in order to reach and benefit more, other young people.

What next?

As part of the process of becoming independent, registered organisations, each Coalition has its own local strategy and action plans for moving ahead with locally identified priorities and desired outcomes. The Final Evaluation Report also makes a number of recommendations for sustaining what works, building on success and addressing some of the inherent challenges associated with sport for good developments in the current context.

This Spotlight also draws attention to the following opportunities and potential areas for not only sustaining what works but sharing these lessons with the wider Sport Unites community (and vice versa):

- Build on young people's enthusiasm and commitment for MCL to reach more of the community and a wide, diverse network of young people
- Better local advertising, promotion and communication about MCL opportunities and less reliance on word of mouth
- A greater focus on what makes young people say makes them feel and be safe
- Develop ways of inviting and legitimising the voice and influence of diverse young people – through youth panels in each area and also by amplifying the stories and experiences of young people who make MCL what it is
- Build on the success in enabling the participation of girls and young women, learning from what works and sharing this with other Sport for Good cities and Sport Unites as a whole.

