

Play for change: The role of sport in preventing homelessness before it starts

Joanne Metcalfe, Beth Isaac and Isabelle Fielding



**Centre for
Homelessness Impact®**

April 2026

Contents

Foreword	3
Findings in Brief	5
Summary	8
1. Introduction and purpose	10
Why this matters	11
2. The challenge and the opportunity	14
Overlapping Priorities	16
Additional Risk Factors	17
3. How sport can help prevent and tackle homelessness	18
Sport as an Employer	20
Case Study: Coach Core	22
Sport Bolstering Protective Factors	24
Case Study: The Brick	26
Case Study: Representation through sport	32
Case Study: Why access to sport matters	33
4. What the evidence shows: strengths, gaps, and promising areas	35
Case Study: Pathfinder	37
Case Study: The Running Charity	39
5. What needs to happen: priorities for policy and practice	41
6. Our role: how CHI can support the shift	43
7. Next Steps	46
Endnotes	47

Foreword

A life in sport has given me more than I could ever have imagined. Playing rugby league at professional level gave me a career, memories, friendships and a sense of identity, but more importantly, it gave me belonging. It placed me in environments where people cared, where standards mattered. On my best days, those same people were there to celebrate with me, and there to pick me up when I fall over.

I have long admired people who are committed to tackling one of society's most complex challenges: homelessness. This paper is not just research; it is a call to think differently. To look beyond systems that react to crisis, and instead recognise the spaces, relationships and communities that quietly prevent it.

There is a powerful quote from Desmond Tutu that I often use to describe what I feel sport did for me: "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

Sport, in many ways, prevented me from falling in. Statistics tell me that, because of the colour of my skin, the postcode I was born in, the time of year I was born, and my diverse family dynamic, I should have ended up embroiled in drugs, prison and knife crime. Sport caught me. It gave me structure, guidance, inspiration and a tribe; protective factors that kept me from ever reaching that water's edge.

Today, I see sport doing the same for so many others, whilst educating, inspiring and entertaining them. I am full of gratitude for everything sport has given me. While it is not the answer to every problem, I see daily, through the work of the Leeds Rhinos Foundation, that sport can be part of the solution. Lives are changed, opportunities are created, and people find their way away from poverty and instability.

There is something powerful about the cohesion, love and camaraderie found in sport. It is a universal language, bringing people together across backgrounds and circumstances. In those shared moments, people find connection, and connection is often the first step away from isolation.

At AMT Headingley Stadium, the home of my club Leeds Rhinos, I describe our environment as a diverse, inclusive, fertile flowerbed of opportunity. It is a place where potential is nurtured and belonging is offered freely. It connects communities in and out of the arena, much like the amphitheatres of the ancient world did throughout history.

This report shines a light on that hidden impact and challenges us to see sport as part of a wider ecosystem of care. If we can better understand and support what is already happening, sport, perhaps, can play a vital role in preventing homelessness before it begins.

Jamie Jones-Buchanan is Chief Executive of Leeds Rhinos rugby league club



Findings in Brief

Sport already contributes to homelessness prevention but its impact is under-recognised, inconsistently measured, and rarely integrated into national strategies.

The groups most at risk of homelessness substantially overlap with those least likely to be physically active, pointing to a significant and largely untapped prevention opportunity.

Where evidence exists, it is promising. But the evidence base is small, fragmented, and dominated by qualitative, football-focused studies. No national framework links sport participation with housing outcomes.

Sport can contribute through multiple pathways: as a gateway to services, a community hub, and a protective factor against crisis - as well as an employer. Wraparound support is essential as sport works best when it is part of a wider offer, not a standalone activity.

Recommendations in Brief

Policy makers

Develop shared data and metrics. For instance, link sport participation data with housing datasets. Establish shared outcome frameworks across sport, housing, and local authorities.

Policy makers and Programme Delivery Organisation

Build the evidence base. Commission more rigorous evaluation of sport-based prevention interventions, including longer-term outcome tracking and a living evidence map.

Clubs, foundations, and sport-for-development organisations

Embed inclusion and trauma-informed practice and co-design sports interventions with communities. Address structural barriers to participation. Train sports workers accordingly.

Local authorities and combined authorities

Integrate sport into prevention systems. Commissioners and local authorities should treat sport as a core component of prevention strategy, not an add-on.

Funders and commissioners

Coordinate investment. Bring together governing bodies, funders, and housing providers to share learning and scale what works.

[← Back to Contents](#)

About the authors

Joanne Metcalfe is an Associate at the Centre for Homelessness Impact and founder of a social change agency specialising in behavioural approaches to strategy and system-wide transformation. Her work focuses on catalysing change that improves the lives of people who are most marginalised. Joanne's career began over 20 years ago in physical activity and health, and she has since built extensive experience in sport for social justice, working both nationally and locally within West Yorkshire.

Beth Isaac is an Evidence and Data Lead at the Centre for Homelessness Impact, harnessing the power of evaluation and use of data, to tackle and prevent homelessness. Prior to this role, as a Research Fellow at the University of the West of England, she managed the local evaluation of the Bristol Fulfilling Lives project to help understand what works to help people with complex support needs and drive systems change across Bristol services.

Isabelle Fielding is a Chartered Psychologist working across health, charity, commercial and social impact sectors. With 25 years experience in applied psychology, she specialises in research and insight projects that translate complex evidence into clear, practical recommendations. Her work spans stakeholder engagement, inclusive study design, and mixed-method research, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand lived experience and inform strategy, service development and innovation. Isabelle has a particular interest in applying research to support more effective, preventative approaches within organisations, systems and communities.

About the Centre for Homelessness Impact

The Centre for Homelessness Impact champions the creation and use of better evidence for a world without homelessness. Our mission is to improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness by ensuring that policy, practice and funding decisions are underpinned by reliable evidence.

Person-first language

This report uses person-first language, putting a person before their circumstances. This is to avoid defining an individual by homelessness, which should be a temporary experience.

Summary

Sport already plays an often-unrecognised role in preventing homelessness – but its impact lacks strong evidence, is inconsistently measured, and is rarely integrated into national prevention strategies. This paper highlights both the **existing contribution** and the **considerable untapped potential** of sport as a lever for preventing homelessness before crisis occurs.

Across the UK, sport reaches tens of millions of people every week and offers trusted, community-rooted environments where individuals feel safe, connected, and motivated. Clubs, foundations, and sport-for-development organisations already support young people and adults at risk through mentoring, employability pathways, structured routines, trauma-informed coaching, mental health programmes, and inclusive community spaces. These activities strengthen protective factors – such as confidence, resilience, belonging, and life skills – that are strongly associated with reducing homelessness risk. Case studies show that sport can act as a hook for engagement, a gateway to services, a supportive employer, and a platform for advocacy that can shift attitudes and reduce stigma.

However, despite this promising practice, **the UK lacks the evidence base and coordinated strategy needed to fully harness sport as part of a homelessness prevention system**. Current interventions appear fragmented, short-term, and rarely evaluated with academic rigour, with an over-reliance on small qualitative studies and football-focused programmes. There is no unified national framework linking sport participation data with housing outcomes, and very few programmes capture longer-term impacts such as tenancy sustainment or reduced crisis demand.

As a result, sport's contribution remains under-recognised by policymakers and funders, and its preventative potential is largely unrealised.

Key opportunities include:

- Building a stronger, more systematic evidence base on what works, for whom, and in which contexts
- Developing shared outcomes, metrics, and data-linkage approaches across sport, housing, and local authorities
- Embedding inclusion and trauma-informed practice across the sport sector to reach those most at risk
- Scaling promising models through coordinated investment, cross-sector partnerships, and community-led design
- Using sport's physical infrastructure and cultural influence to connect people to early help and reduce stigma

The paper concludes that **sport is already part of the solution**, often quietly and without formal recognition. With better data, rigorous evaluation, strategic alignment, and targeted investment, sport could become a powerful and potentially cost-effective component of the UK's prevention system.

1. Introduction and purpose

This is one of a series of papers examining how different sectors can contribute to preventing homelessness before people reach crisis. By broadening the conversation, building data and evidence-led approaches, we can move closer to a future where homelessness is not only rare, brief, and non-recurring, but preventable in the first place.

Homelessness is rising, costly, and deeply damaging to lives and futures. Despite increased spending, £3.1bn in 2023-24, most of it goes to expensive, reactive measures like temporary accommodation, which alone costs £2.8bn a year in England. This leaves little room for prevention, even though evidence shows that preventing homelessness is up to 14 times more cost-effective than responding to it once it occurs.¹

Preventing homelessness remains highly challenging. It is driven by complex social and economic factors, and while evidence shows that early interventions and cross-sector collaboration can make a real difference, systemic barriers persist. Fragmented data, short-term funding, and siloed services undermine prevention efforts, and we still lack clarity on which approaches work best across different contexts.

Sport reaches tens of millions of people across the UK - making it a powerful, underused platform for homelessness prevention:

- **England:** Over 29 million adults are physically active weekly; football alone engages 8 million-plus fans through clubs and community programmes.²
- **Scotland:** Around 60% of adults and 70% of children participate in sport weekly; over 1 million engage with clubs through volunteering and fan networks.³
- **Wales:** 59% of adults and 48% of children are active weekly; 400,000-plus are involved in sport clubs and community engagement.⁴
- **Northern Ireland:** Around 51% of adults and 84–96% of children participate in sport weekly; engagement through clubs and community programmes is significant, with estimated numbers of 300,000-plus.^{5, 6, 7}

These figures show that sport is not just a leisure activity - it's a trusted, community-rooted infrastructure with potential to be harnessed to identify risk early, build resilience, and deliver targeted support homelessness prevention.

Yet, the UK lacks:

- A unified strategy for prevention and response to homelessness through sport
- Better evidence and data to understand what works and demonstrate impact

Why this matters

The homelessness sector cannot prevent homelessness alone. Other parts of society - such as sport, education, and community networks - already influence outcomes, often unaware of their existing impact. This is an untapped and under-researched area with significant potential for prevention. An evidence-led approach can help us understand and harness these existing influences, turning engagement into proactive solutions.

This paper is written at a pivotal moment. It explores the untapped potential of sport as a strategic tool for homelessness prevention - one that can engage individuals early, build protective factors, and create pathways away from housing instability. Sport is deeply embedded in culture, reaches communities traditional services struggle to engage, can bring diverse individuals and groups together, and offers mechanisms that are already contributing to prevention. However, these mechanisms remain under-recognised and under-evaluated, and emerging evidence shows they deserve closer attention.



There is, however, evidence on the role that sport plays across society, and we explore these in more detail throughout the paper:

- Physical wellbeing
- Mental wellbeing
- Individual development
- Social and community development.⁸

These contributions span all levels of prevention:

- **Primary prevention** – Addressing the root causes (structural as well as individual drivers) of homelessness to reduce the risk before a crisis happens.
- **Secondary prevention** – Targeting known cohorts where people at risk are identified and supported to stay in their homes or move quickly into stable accommodation.
- **Tertiary prevention** – Preventing homelessness at the crisis point, or if this is unsuccessful, ensuring the experience is brief and non-recurring.

However, to realise this potential, we must recognise that the same structural inequalities driving poverty and homelessness also shape access to sport. Participation is not equal: it varies significantly by gender, ethnicity, geography, and socioeconomic status. Girls and women, disabled people, and individuals from racially minoritised communities often face barriers such as cost, cultural exclusion, and lack of representation. These challenges are compounded by intersecting factors like age, disability, and income, meaning those with multiple inequality characteristics are least likely to be active. Sport England's Inequalities Metric shows that 75% of adults with no inequality characteristic meet activity guidelines compared to just 44% of those with two or more.⁹

Different types of sport also carry different cultural meanings and levels of accessibility. Football may be widely available in some communities, while dance, martial arts, or swimming may feel more relevant or welcoming in others. These disparities matter because inequalities in access to sport do not just mirror existing social divides - they actively contribute to widening them. According to OHID's Health Inequalities Dashboard (2025), **physical inactivity is 2.3 times higher in the most deprived areas (35%) compared to the least deprived (15%)**, and life expectancy can vary by up to nine years depending on geography.¹⁰

Recognising this, tackling inequalities is now a core priority across all four nations:^{11, 12, 13, 14}

- **England:** The UK Government's Get Active strategy and Sport England's Uniting the Movement place inclusion at the heart of sport policy, prioritising women, disabled people, racially minoritised communities, and those on low incomes.^{15, 16}
- **Wales:** Sport Wales' Strategic Equality Plan 2024–2028 commits to reducing participation gaps and addressing affordability barriers, particularly for women, disabled people, and minority ethnic groups.¹⁷
- **Scotland:** Sport Scotland's Sport for Life strategy embeds equality, diversity, and inclusion into its system design, aiming to create an "inclusive by design" approach for under-represented groups.¹⁸
- **Northern Ireland:** Sport NI's Equality Scheme 2021–2026 and associated action plans (Women in Sport, Disability in Sport, and Racial Inclusion Engagement Plans 2024–2026) set out statutory duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.¹⁹ These plans aim to increase participation among under-represented groups - women and girls, disabled people, ethnically diverse communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those living in areas of high social need - through targeted delivery, equality impact assessments, and community engagement.

This paper advocates for sport-based interventions that are evidence-led, designed with equity in mind, co-created with communities, and responsive to diverse needs and preferences. By embedding inclusion and tackling structural barriers, sport can become a genuine lever for social change - supporting health, confidence, and social connection, while addressing upstream risks that contribute to homelessness.

2. The challenge and the opportunity

Homelessness is rising across the UK, especially in England and Scotland. In England, statutory homelessness increased by just over 3% in 2023–24 and more households were placed in temporary accommodation, while rough sleeping rose 20% year-on-year. Overall, the trend shows growing pressure on temporary housing and increasing risks for families and young people.^{20, 21} As of June 2025, 132,410 households and 151,630 children were in temporary accommodation, which is linked to poorer health, educational, and emotional outcomes for children - especially for longer and unsuitable stays. This increases the likelihood of poverty and homelessness continuing from one generation to the next.^{22, 23}

Research has identified causes of homelessness as involving both individual and structural, with factors interacting in complex ways to produce long term after effects. Common individual factors include: relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, trauma (including trauma through adverse childhood experiences, mental ill health, and substance use. Structural factors include: relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, trauma, mental ill health, and substance use. Structural factors include: experiences of poverty, particularly in childhood, housing supply and affordability, unemployment, and leaving public institutions such as prison or having been in care.^{24, 25}

Additionally, experiences of homelessness are far more likely for particular groups, including: households with low incomes or financial difficulties, working age adults who are sick, have long term illness, disabilities (including mental health conditions), young people, people with criminal records, people with substance misuse issues, lone parent households, private renters in regions with high affordability gaps, some ethnic minorities (e.g. Black, Black British, Caribbean or African ethnicities in statutory support applications), and people excluded from school.²⁶

People experiencing homelessness generally have worse health than the wider population, often facing a combination of mental ill health and chronic physical conditions. Poor living conditions, limited resources, social exclusion, stigma, and barriers to healthcare can both contribute to and worsen these health problems.²⁷ Mental health problems in the UK have risen over the past decade, with younger adults, people with disabilities, and those facing financial difficulties faring worse.^{28, 29}

Despite this growing crisis, investment in upstream prevention remains limited. Most resources are still directed toward crisis response, leaving a gap in early intervention strategies that could prevent homelessness before it begins.

Figure 1: Spending on Prevention across the UK, 2009-24
Local authority spending on children's services, by type 2009-10 - 2023-24
(2025-26 prices)

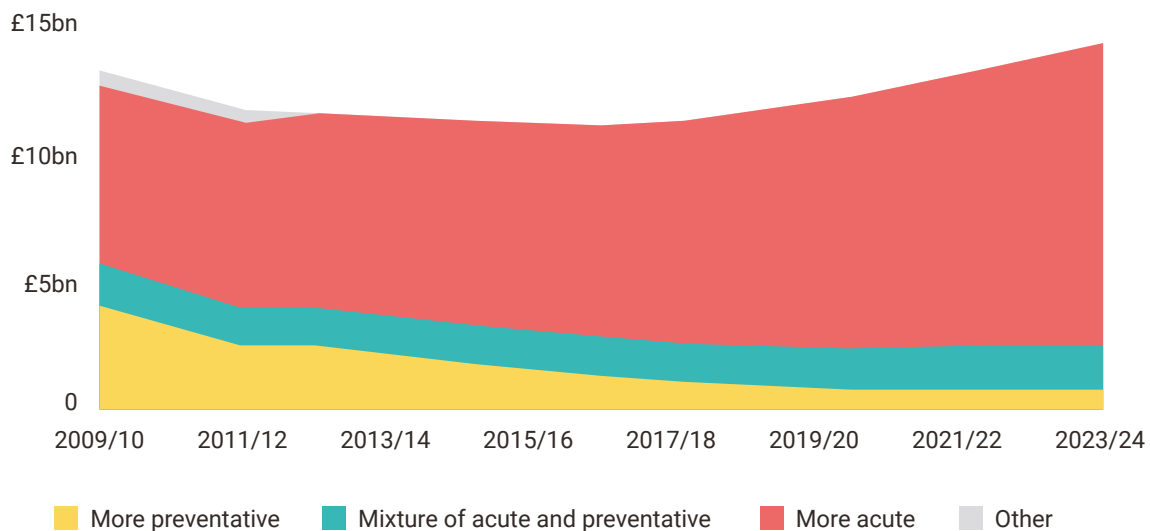
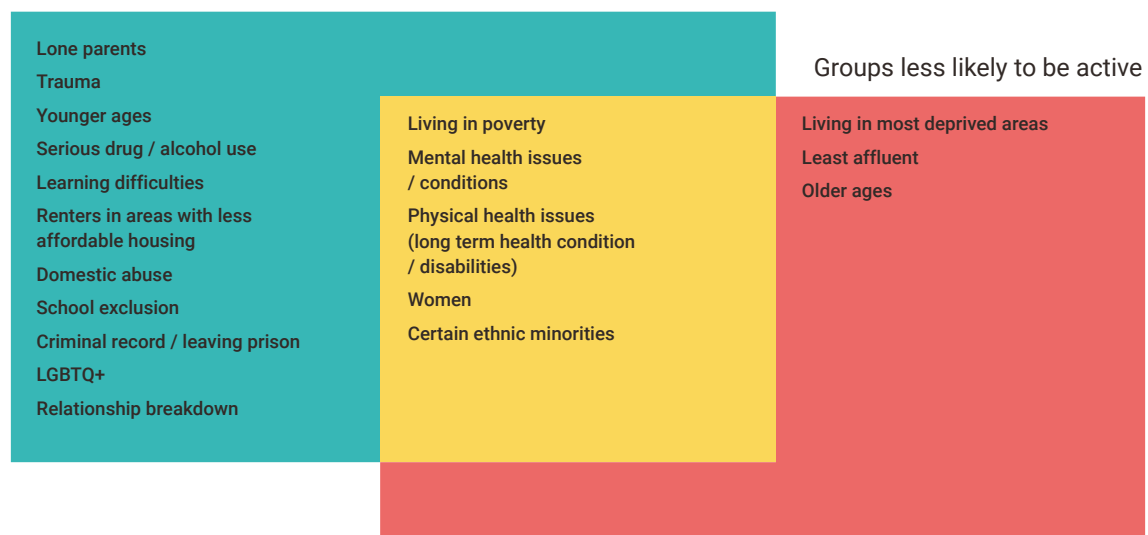


Figure 2, below illustrates the overlap between groups at risk of homelessness and those less likely to be physically active. The central section (highlighted) shows where we've identified the strongest synergies - individuals who face both heightened homelessness risk and are priority groups for reducing inequalities in sport and physical activity. This alignment underscores deep marginalisation and inequity in opportunities, highlighting why targeted, cross-sector approaches are essential.

Figure 2: Homelessness and Inactivity

Homelessness and Inactivity

Groups more at risk of homelessness



Overlapping Priorities

- **Living in poverty:** Poverty is a key driver of both homelessness and physical inactivity. People in the most deprived areas are 2.3 times more likely to be inactive than those in the least deprived areas, and homelessness risk is strongly correlated with low income and housing affordability challenges.³⁰
- **Mental health conditions:** Poor mental health is both a cause and consequence of homelessness. It also acts as a barrier to participation in sport and physical activity, limiting confidence, motivation, and access to inclusive environments.
- **Physical health issues and disabilities:** Long-term health conditions and disabilities increase risks to homelessness and are associated with lower activity levels. Structural barriers - such as inaccessible facilities and lack of adapted programmes - compound these challenges.^{31, 32}
- **Women:** Women are disproportionately affected by certain homelessness pathways, including domestic abuse and relationship breakdown. They also face gender-specific barriers to sport participation, such as safety concerns, cultural norms, and caring responsibilities.³³
- **Certain ethnic minorities:** Black, Mixed, and Other ethnic groups are over-represented among statutory homeless households in England, while Asian and White British groups are generally under-represented (except Asian populations in Yorkshire and Humber). In London, Black African, Caribbean, White Other, Roma and Gypsy Traveller groups are disproportionately represented among people sleeping rough. These same communities often experience cultural and financial barriers to sport participation.³⁴

Additional Risk Factors

- **Learning difficulties and disabilities:** Higher prevalence of dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other learning difficulties among people experiencing homelessness creates additional barriers to engagement in education, employment, and community activities, including sport.³⁵
- **LGBTQ+ identity:** LGBTQ+ people face significantly higher risks of homelessness, often linked to family rejection and discrimination, and may also experience exclusion in sport environments.³⁶
- **Substance use and mental health:** Substance use is disproportionately high among street homeless populations and often co-occurs with poor mental health and offending behaviours, compounding barriers to participation.³⁷
- **Adverse childhood experiences:** Childhood trauma is prevalent among people facing chronic homelessness, with 90% affected and over half experiencing four or more adverse childhood experiences. This early trauma impacts brain development and leads to long-term effects on physical, mental, and social health. It also affects cognitive skills such as executive functioning and emotion regulation, creating cumulative barriers to education, employment, engagement with services, and pathways out of homelessness.³⁸

Defining the Terms³⁹

Physical activity refers to any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure. This includes everyday activities such as walking, gardening, active travel, and structured exercise.

Sport is a subset of physical activity that is organised, competitive, and governed by rules or customs. It typically involves training and skill development, and often includes team or individual competition.

The distinction is important because participation data often combines both categories. For example, Sport England's Active Lives Adult Survey measures overall physical activity (including sport), but trends within sport-specific participation can differ from general activity patterns. Sport tends to have higher barriers - such as cost, cultural norms, and facility access - while physical activity can include informal, low-cost options like walking or cycling.⁴⁰

3. How sport can help prevent and tackle homelessness

Sport is more than recreation - it's a powerful social connector with deep cultural roots and the ability to reach communities that traditional services often struggle to engage. At a time when homelessness is rising and prevention remains underfunded, sport offers unique opportunities to intervene early, build protective factors, and create pathways away from housing instability. This section explores how sport can contribute to homelessness prevention and identifies gaps that must be addressed to unlock its full potential.

While the research in sport and homelessness is limited, we can take learning from all four nations' infrastructure bodies, wider research and case studies to inform the future approach. The research is expanded on throughout the report and highlights the potential role that sports could play across the following:

1. **Sports Role as an employer** - Sport is uniquely positioned to provide this additional support. The sector employs 878,000 people in the UK, representing 3.5% of the workforce and offers diverse roles from coaching and fitness to operations and community development. This scale gives sport a significant role in homelessness prevention.⁴¹
2. **Sport to Strengthen Individual Protective and Psychosocial Factors** - Sport plays a vital role in reducing homelessness risk by strengthening both protective and psychosocial factors. When delivered through trauma-informed practice, sport provides a safe, stigma-free environment where trust develops gradually. Participation builds resilience, confidence, life skills, and positive decision-making, while physical activity helps reduce depressive symptoms and substance use. Structured programmes foster leadership, social connection, and peer support – creating positive ripple effects across communities and complementing wider prevention efforts.
3. **Sport as a Gateway to Services** - Sport provides a non-traditional, stigma-free route to engage people who are poorly served by conventional systems. Acting as a hook, it lowers barriers and creates safe spaces where trust and belonging replace compliance. Sporting programmes can complement existing services, offering emotional relief, social connection, and practical support - particularly for those labelled “hard to reach.” By embedding sport within community infrastructure and ensuring free access in underserved areas, policy could harness sport as a powerful entry point for prevention and inclusion.

4. **Sport as a Hub for Communities and Families** - Sport provides practical infrastructure that can amplify impact. Sporting venues offer trusted, perceived stigma-free spaces and continuity of support, making them ideal for embedding services such as mental health, housing advice, and employability pathways. By leveraging underused community spaces, sport can complement existing programmes and create holistic environments that build trust, resilience, and long-term stability.
5. **Sport as an Advocate and Influencer** - Sport is a powerful cultural force, with elite athletes using their platforms to challenge inequality and influence policy. Athlete advocacy can destigmatise homelessness, raise awareness of structural causes, and mobilise support for preventative interventions. When aligned with community programmes, this influence amplifies local efforts and connects grassroots action to national conversations.
6. **Sport as a Protective Factor Against Anti-Social Behaviour** - Young people experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of involvement in anti-social groups and substance use. Sport offers an inclusive, stigma-free way to engage these young people, acting as a diversionary activity and building trust through relatable mentors. Evidence shows that consistent access to safe, structured sport reduces risky behaviours, promotes social cohesion, and helps address inequities in youth justice - ultimately lowering risks that can lead to housing instability.

Overall, sport creates safe, structured spaces where young people can build relationships with caring adults. These mentors provide guidance, stability, and early intervention when challenges arise. When combined with trauma-informed training and employer support, sport-based programmes show how trusted adults can help young people navigate life and potentially prevent crises.

Sport as an Employer

Employment is a significant protective factor against homelessness, particularly for young people transitioning out of foster care. Research consistently shows that access to full-time, stable work reduces the likelihood of homelessness. However, commentary increasingly suggests that employment-focused social enterprises must adopt a more holistic, person-centred model of support. Jobs alone are not enough; mental health, peer networks, stable housing and personal development are critical for long-term success - especially for individuals with complex needs.⁴²

The **Get Britain Working White Paper (2024–25)** reinforces this principle by emphasising that tackling economic inactivity requires joined-up employment, health and skills support, tailored locally and rooted in prevention. The White Paper highlights that 2.8 million people remain locked out of work due to long-term sickness, and that one in eight young people are not in employment, education or training – clear indicators that an integrated approach is necessary to break cycles of exclusion.⁴³

The number of young people aged 16–24 not in education, employment or training (NEET) reached **948,000 in April–June 2025**, making them a critical priority cohort in any preventative homelessness strategy. The Get Britain Working plan introduces a **Youth Guarantee**, ensuring that every young person aged 18–21 has a route into learning or employment, backed by local trailblazers and £45 million of investment. This aligns strongly with the need to intervene earlier with young people at risk of future homelessness, particularly those with care experience or unstable living arrangements.⁴⁴

Sport is well positioned to contribute meaningfully to this national mission. The UK sports and physical activity sector employs around **878,000 people**, representing 3.5% of the workforce, making it a significant platform for inclusive labour market growth. Its workforce skews younger and includes a higher proportion of individuals from lower socio-economic groups, indicating a sector already serving as an entry point for those facing disadvantage. The sector's diversity, combined with persistent challenges around progression, gender imbalance in leadership, and under-representation of ethnic minorities, means it is well aligned with the White Paper's goals of creating **better quality, more inclusive work** and expanding opportunities for groups historically marginalised from the labour market.⁴⁵

The Get Britain Working agenda also places strong emphasis on locally joined-up delivery, integrating employment support with health services, skills development and targeted employer engagement. Sport organisations - particularly community clubs, leisure trusts, youth sport providers and sport-for-development charities - are uniquely placed to deliver this kind of wraparound offer in partnership with councils, NHS services, and mayoral employment programmes. The White Paper prioritises the expansion of mental health support, including additional staff, Talking Therapies, and greater access to Individual Placement and Support (IPS) for people with severe mental illness - provisions that can be leveraged by sport-based programmes supporting vulnerable young people.

As such, sport has a critical role in homelessness prevention as part of the wider Get Britain Working ambition. By offering apprenticeships, entry-level jobs, volunteering opportunities and progression pathways, the sector can provide structure, identity and purpose for young people most at risk of falling out of education or work. Sport can and should offer higher level roles and progression for the same cohort, too. Crucially, employment in sport often comes with supportive relational environments - coaches, mentors and trusted adults who can identify early signs of crisis and provide consistent encouragement. These relationships mirror the White Paper's call for personalised, high-quality employment support rather than transactional, benefits-focused systems.

However, the following case study illustrates the specific challenges the sector must navigate. Many marginalised young people face barriers that extend far beyond job access - unstable accommodation, poor mental health, trauma histories and limited social networks. The Get Britain Working reforms explicitly recognise these systemic barriers and argue for integrated, place-based support that blends work, health and skills interventions. For sport to contribute effectively, employment pathways must therefore be designed with wraparound support, recognising that sustained engagement in competitive environments requires stability, confidence and holistic care.

Case Study: Coach Core

Provider: Coach Core

Intervention Type: Primary

Description of Intervention: Inclusive sports coaching
apprenticeships for 16–24-year-olds

Location: Nationwide

Coach Core supports young people from underserved backgrounds through sports apprenticeships, focusing on those without qualifications or facing challenging circumstances. A wide range of employers are involved, from Premier League clubs to small community youth organisations across a wide spectrum of sports including football, boxing, dance and even circus skills. Employers also benefit from grants and training to help them support their young people effectively. The programme provides employment, mentorship, and the opportunity to bring lived experience into organisations.

Alongside the apprenticeship itself, young people also receive wraparound pastoral care- including 1-2-1 support from the Coach Core team and training provider, alongside workshops on mental health, life skills and professional development.

Sport provides a unique entry point for engagement, acting as both a hook and a leveller. It creates safe spaces where young people can leave external pressures behind, connect through a shared purpose, and address complex challenges more naturally than in traditional interventions. The longer-term apprenticeship, combined with a supportive environment, helps participants build confidence, leadership skills, and the ability to support their peers.

We spoke with Laura Larsson, Research and Impact Manager at Coach Core, to examine how sports-based employment initiatives can contribute to homelessness prevention.

Laura highlights that one of Coach Core's key opportunities for impact lies in influencing the environment around young people as they undertake their apprenticeship. Initially, participants may say what they think staff want to hear, but as trust builds, deeper challenges emerge. Equipping employers to respond is vital: as Laura notes, 'we've seen our employers go to incredible lengths to support them,' from leaving food in shared fridges to helping find accommodation or signposting to charities. This wraparound care is central to outcomes. As Laura puts it - 'the qualification itself can be taught in lots of different places, but it's the support around it that makes our achievement rate so high.'

While Coach Core is not a homelessness service, an estimated 4-5% of participants are at risk of or experiencing homelessness at any given time. Laura told us about a young man who joined the apprenticeship with a turbulent and precarious home life, and no qualifications. Without support he could well have fallen through the cracks, but the apprenticeship gave him focus and a way out of a difficult situation. His employer provided a consistent adult presence, noticing when he was struggling, for example when he wasn't eating, and quietly supporting him: "just showing up to him when he needed it." With this guidance, he kept his job, moved into shared accommodation, and began to thrive.

Laura highlighted that "success doesn't just look like them staying in sport; success looks like having sport as a foundation for navigating life in lots of different ways." Young people gain resilience, confidence, and a sense of responsibility, amplifying the impact of the programme across peers, workplaces, and local communities.

This case study demonstrates how sport-based employment initiatives can go beyond job creation to provide stability, trusted relationships, and practical support - critical factors in preventing homelessness among young people at risk.

Other initiatives like the West Ham Player's project offer a commitment to supporting local organisations through regeneration.⁴⁶ Through this project, the Club aims to improve living standards, create opportunities, and provide employability and career pathways that help the community thrive.

Sport Bolstering Protective Factors

It is vital that any policy developed to prevent homelessness is safe and does no harm. Many young people at risk of homelessness have often experienced trauma – experiencing high levels of conflict during adolescence, lack of parental emotional and material support, and unstable living arrangements (e.g., foster care or detention).^{47, 48, 49} Sporting interventions, combined with a trauma-informed approach can not only reduce the risk of retraumatising young people through services that are not fit for purpose, but also help young people to heal through sport.

"Coaches, guided by trauma-informed principles, are better equipped to work through distress and gradually build safety and stability. Sport allows trust to develop at the young person's pace, within an activity they enjoy. "We've got kids that have literally been kicked out of clubs because of what's going on in their life. Their behaviour hasn't been acceptable elsewhere. We just pull them closer and say, we'll work with you."

Kathryn Hodgson, Youth Wellbeing Officer, Let's Do More

"I don't think sports are the single magic thing that prevented that situation escalating to a point of that child becoming homeless. But I'd say that sport has a unique potential to almost lay a foundation there because it ticks so many boxes of that child having a lot more protective factors".

Josh Booth, Education Officer, Leeds Youth Justice Service

Psychosocial factors (self-esteem, skills etc)

Psychological factors such as mental health issues, social skills deficits, and substance abuse are associated with homelessness risk. Adolescents at risk often experience high levels of depressive symptoms, problem behaviours, and lower assertiveness.⁵⁰ Mental illness, psychiatric hospitalisation, and drug use are independently related to later homelessness.⁵¹

Interventions using physical activity and sports have shown promise in addressing these factors. Research indicates that physical activity-based treatments for substance use disorders can reduce substance use and depressive symptoms, while sports-based programmes youth development programmes can improve personal and social skills such as confidence, competence, and life skills.^{52, 53, 54}

Beyond the individual, sports-based programmes can create ripple effects that travel through communities. Young people who have received support often use their lived experience to help peers, recognising when others are struggling and offering guidance. The leadership opportunities that sport can provide, such as mentoring or coaching, allow participants to give back while building confidence, responsibility, and transferable skills. This cycle of support strengthens resilience and amplifies impact across peers, organisations, and the wider community (Coach Core).



Case Study: The Brick

Provider: The Brick

Intervention Type: Primary

Description of Intervention: Inclusive multi-sports venue

Location: Wigan

Through a partnership between Sky Sports and The Brick, sport is being used to address upstream drivers of homelessness. In 2024, Sky opened a digital community hub at The Brick Community Stadium to provide digital access and skills training (including free Wi-Fi, podcasting and study space) particularly for young people who are at risk of digital and social exclusion.

By situating the hub within a major sports venue, the initiative combines practical skills development with the motivational environment of a professional sports club.

The Brick is also piloting targeted prevention through Home Team, a programme currently supporting 24 individuals at risk of homelessness. Home Team works with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, connecting them into the community through sport and other activities to build new social connections. Through free rugby and football sessions, group trips to Wigan Warriors and Wigan Athletic matches and other local activities, Home Team is working to tackle the stigma around homelessness in the local community by inviting people into spaces where they felt they didn't belong.

By aligning community influence with front-line homelessness services, Wigan Athletic, Wigan Warriors and The Brick are building a model whereby the power of the team extends far beyond the pitch.

This example shows that sport is already playing a growing role in supporting mental health and social wellbeing. Clubs and foundations across the country are developing programmes that use the power of sport to tackle stigma, build resilience, and strengthen social skills. From purpose-built wellbeing hubs to awareness campaigns and targeted interventions for children and young people, these initiatives demonstrate the breadth of what sport can offer beyond the pitch.

- Everton's The People's Place: A purpose-built mental health and wellbeing hub
- Newcastle United's Be A Game Changer: Mental health awareness campaign
- Sale Sharks Mental Wellbeing Programmes: Including ones to tackle stigma in children and one for additional educational needs students to improve their decision-making within emotional situations
- Rugby League's Offload: Mental fitness and wellbeing programme offered across rugby league clubs

Sport as a Gateway to Services

Sport offers a unique and non-traditional route to engage young people who are at risk of falling through the cracks or who are poorly served by traditional systems. Sporting interventions can reach underserved groups for whom conventional provision may feel intimidating, irrelevant, or inaccessible. Often labelled as “hard to reach,” these young people typically respond better to approaches outside formal structures - where engagement is based on shared activity, trust, and belonging rather than compliance.

“Nobody is hard to reach. We just need to do more.”

Kathryn Hodgson, Let's Do More

Sport acts as a hook - a familiar, enjoyable activity that lowers barriers and creates safe spaces. It enables young people to leave external pressures behind and connect through a shared purpose. This informal, strengths-based approach often succeeds where traditional interventions fail, making sport a potentially powerful entry point for wider support services.

A UK-based example is the work of New Horizon Youth Centre, which uses football and basketball to break down barriers for young asylum seekers.⁵⁵ These programmes focus on integration, confidence-building, and language development, offering a shared language of sport and an accessible entry point for young people who may feel excluded from traditional services – all aiming to support tenancy sustainment and community integration for wider social and emotional benefits.

However, access to sport is not equal. Structural inequalities often prevent marginalised communities from participating. Research by Sport England highlights that cost, location, and cultural barriers disproportionately affect access to sport for people from lower-income backgrounds and ethnic minority groups.⁵⁶ Creating opportunities for free access to sport can help level the playing field and provide these communities with the benefits that sport offers as a tool for prevention. Targeted provision of free sporting activities and support to break down barriers, for example the provision of kit - particularly in underserved areas - could serve as a powerful preventative strategy, enabling early engagement, fostering inclusion, and building protective factors that reduce the risk of homelessness.

Case study: New Horizon Youth Centre supports thousands of young Londoners facing homelessness to find safety, improve wellbeing, develop life skills, and secure a home. Alongside housing, health, and skills support, the centre uses sport, particularly football, basketball, and boxing, as a tool for engagement, reducing isolation and creating positive connections.

For some young people who struggle to engage with traditional support, sport provides a vital bridge. Through sport, what begins as quiet observation can grow into cautious engagement and eventually full participation. This shows how sport can create safety, trust, and pathways to re-engagement for traumatised young people.

Simon Stevens, Sports and Men's Worker believe this is due to the open and welcoming space that sports can provide: "Come on, have a go." As he put it, "the magic that happens at New Horizon, is he's found his place in the world, if only temporarily."

Sport as a 'Hub' for Communities and Families

Beyond engagement, sport offers practical infrastructure that can amplify impact. Larger sporting organisations provide community resources, continuity of support, and trusted environments - enabling smarter, value-for-money policies. Delivering support in sporting venues could also reduce stigma, with the assumption that young people particularly associate these spaces with positive experiences rather than crisis intervention.

Gareth Cook from Leeds Rhinos Foundation highlights the potential to embed sport within family and early years services. Existing "Best Start" programmes, for example, could draw on underused community spaces such as rugby league clubs closed during the day. Sports-based programmes can complement and strengthen existing services, extending both their reach and effectiveness.

By leveraging these assets, sport could become a gateway to holistic support - integrating mental health, housing advice, and employability pathways within environments that feel safe and aspirational, alongside more traditional physical health interventions. This approach could potentially engage young people and families, build trust, resilience, and community connections that underpin long-term change.

Sport as an advocate and influencer

Sport isn't only about what happens on the pitch; it shapes culture, conversation and national mood. Elite athletes, in particular, have a rare ability to cut through the noise. People trust them, listen to them, and often look to them as role models beyond sport.

In recent years, more athletes have used that influence to speak up on social issues. Colin Kaepernick took a stand against racial injustice, Megan Rapinoe has been outspoken on equality, and Marcus Rashford changed a national conversation around child hunger. Their actions show how powerful sport can be in raising awareness and pushing society to confront uncomfortable truths.

This influence matters when it comes to homelessness too. When athletes talk about housing insecurity or support campaigns aimed at prevention, they help remove stigma and make the issue feel like something that affects all of us - not just those experiencing it. They can shine a spotlight on the pressures young people face, including those moving out of care or dealing with unstable home lives.

When this kind of national visibility connects with local sport and community programmes, it creates a strong combination: public attention at the top, and practical support on the ground. It helps local organisations feel backed, seen and part of a wider movement.

Sport also brings people together in a way few other sectors can. Fans feel part of something; clubs feel like community anchors. That sense of belonging can be used to shift how the public thinks about homelessness - towards a shared belief that we all have a role in preventing it.

We've already seen what's possible. Kevin Sinfield's extraordinary efforts to raise awareness and funding for motor neurone disease show how one person from the world of sport can unite the country and inspire action. The same is possible for homelessness prevention: athletes and clubs can use their reach to highlight the issue, champion solutions and support the organisations working to keep young people safe and secure.

Sport doesn't need to shout to make an impact. Its influence comes from authenticity, connection and trust - and that makes it a powerful ally in building a society where fewer people fall through the cracks.

"I think sports generally just... it's like a language. It's got this way of bringing people together."

Gareth Cook, Leeds Rhinos

Reducing anti-social behaviour

There is a well-established correlation between experiences of the criminal justice system and homelessness, with each reinforcing the other in ways that deepen social exclusion. People leaving prison are significantly more likely to face housing instability, and the absence of stable accommodation increases the likelihood of re-offending. At the same time, individuals who become homeless often encounter greater contact with the criminal justice system due to survival behaviours, public space violations, and the challenges of living without stable support.⁵⁷ Recognising this intersection is essential for designing effective prevention strategies – and sport, with its unique capacity to build trust, routine, and community belonging, could play a vital role in breaking this cycle.

This connects to young people who experience homelessness often finding themselves pulled into risky situations, including drug-using or antisocial peer groups. These environments can feel like the only places offering belonging - but they also increase vulnerability. Sport could provide a positive alternative. It creates routines, builds confidence, and offers a safe space away from the pressures that can lead to harmful behaviours. Community programmes and inter-club events can bring people together across neighbourhood and cultural divides, helping to build understanding rather than conflict.

There are practical examples of this already working on the ground. The Kent Cricket Community Trust's No Boundaries programme has shown promise in tackling youth antisocial behaviour in areas identified as hot spots. By giving young people structured activities, role models, and somewhere to go, it could reduce the likelihood of them being drawn into situations that can escalate into police contact.⁵⁸

But when young people do come into contact with the Youth Justice system, the picture is far from equal. Black boys and care-experienced young people are consistently over-represented.⁵⁹ Many arrive with unmet learning needs - some diagnosed, many not - and girls often find that existing provision isn't designed with them in mind.⁶⁰ These gaps make it far harder for young people to stay engaged with support services, increasing the risk that they drift further into exclusion. Over time, this can create a pathway that leads directly toward housing instability or homelessness.

Sport could offer a different way in, yet the evidence remains weak in its effectiveness.⁶¹ It meets young people where they are, in environments that feel familiar and are perceived to be welcoming rather than clinical or punitive. When programmes are led by trusted adults - coaches, mentors, volunteers - who young people relate to, it may become easier for them to show up, open up, and remain engaged. That sense of being seen and supported can be the first step away from antisocial behaviour and towards a more stable future.

Case Study: Representation through sport

Leeds Youth Justice Service uses sport as a way of providing more inclusive, child-led support. Many of the sports provisions used in this way do not perpetuate the same inequalities that can be present in other settings. This is often due to the people delivering the programmes, whose representation and approach help create more inclusive and supportive environments. Sport can be a way of connecting young people with

“People that kids can relate to: look like them, sound like them... sports groups are really positive with that.”

Josh Booth, Education Officer, Youth Justice Service Leeds

It is also vital to consider the built environment and community infrastructure, particularly where it can play a protective role against antisocial activities. Access to safe, structured activities like sport is critical for young people, particularly in areas where resources are scarce. When these opportunities are disrupted, even briefly, the consequences can be significant. A lack of positive spaces leaves young people vulnerable to boredom, disconnection, and risky behaviour. Ensuring consistent access to sport is not just about recreation, it can be a protective factor, keeping young people safe, engaged, and connected, and ultimately reducing risks that contribute to homelessness.

Case Study: Why access to sport matters

Simon Stevens, Sports and Men's Worker at New Horizon Youth Centre in London, recalled a time when the local council had decided to resurface the cage football pitch during the school holidays. To someone sitting in an office far removed from the realities of young people's lives, it might have seemed logical - fix the pitch while the schools are shut

But on the ground, it was a clear sign of disconnect. "That's exactly when the kids would be using it," Simon said.

He explained how something that seems minor, a closed pitch, can have serious consequences. When that structured, safe activity is suddenly gone, young people are left to fill the gap. In an area where money is tight and opportunities are few, those empty hours can quickly lead to trouble. "That's when someone says, 'I can make £20 or £30 doing this,'" Simon said. "And it starts."

In other words, the path from boredom and disconnection to risky behaviour doesn't take long. For Simon, the link to homelessness prevention is clear: sport, and access to positive, consistent spaces, matters. A locked-up cage isn't just an inconvenience. It's a missed opportunity to keep young people safe and engaged in something positive.



The Power of Convening and Collective Action

Feedback from sector leaders highlights both the potential and the growing evidence base behind sport as a tool for supporting people experiencing homelessness. Mel Young MBE - founder of the Homeless World Cup and former Chair of Sport Scotland – draws on more than two decades of practice and research to illustrate how sport can contribute to meaningful personal and social change. Evidence from programmes such as the Homeless World Cup and Street Soccer Scotland shows that structured sport participation can help expand individuals' capabilities, including confidence, motivation, social skills, and the ability to build positive routines, offering a stabilising influence for people navigating homelessness pathways.⁶²

This sits within a wider sport-for-development sector that is increasingly evidence-driven. International networks such as sportanddev.org⁶³ and Beyond Sport⁶⁴ support thousands of programmes globally, many of which are designed to address disadvantage and social exclusion. While the breadth of approaches means the evidence varies in rigour, collective findings consistently show that sport can strengthen social connection, increase engagement, and support individual progression - demonstrating both clear promise and a growing foundation of practice-led learning.

As Mel Young emphasises, collaborative action across government, national agencies, and the voluntary sector is essential: the opportunity is real, the evidence is emerging and continually strengthening, and sustained, strategic investment could unlock far greater national impact.

4. What the evidence shows: strengths, gaps, and promising areas

Sport is well evidenced across the general population to improve physical well-being, mental well-being, and certain aspects of individual development (including self-control, which is associated with reduced alcohol and drug use). There is emerging evidence of the positive impact sport can have on building social connections and communities.

Looking at evidence from sport and physical activities specifically for people experiencing homelessness, the most recent and only systematic review of literature we are aware of found there is some limited evidence that physical activity interventions can improve mental and physical health, with benefits extending into wider life.⁶⁵ However, the evidence isn't yet strong or consistent enough to say exactly which activities, how often, for whom, and under what conditions are best.

The types of interventions in the review included:

- Group training and tournament focused football activities (e.g. Homeless World Cup or Street Soccer USA Cup)
- Group indoor combined fitness activities (e.g. stretching, cardio, strength exercising)
- Group outdoor exercise (i.e. running, outdoor adventure, aerobic circuits, dance)
- Individual combined activities (e.g. pedometer with step goals, cycle training earn-a-bike scheme)

Several interventions also included an educational component or peer support.

The review found qualitative evidence of improved well-being, confidence, motivation and social connection, and some promising quantitative evidence for improved fitness, body composition, and health markers. The limited existing evidence indicated that group exercise was most beneficial for people experiencing homelessness, likely due to facilitating social support and connection, though this was largely informed by football-based studies which dominate the small evidence base. Bearing in mind the quantity and strength of evidence limitations, the review concluded (largely on the basis of qualitative findings) that physical activity contributed positively to:

- **Improved mental health:** enhanced confidence, empowerment and self-esteem; resilience, coping and hope; independence, self-regulation and personal development; stress and anxiety; and mood and state of mind.
- **Improved physical health:** body shape and weight loss; fitness levels; physical skills development and physical activity levels.
- **Other positive outcomes carried into wider life:** positively influencing addictions, development of life and interpersonal skills, improved social connectedness and relationships with others, and physical activity as a catalyst for positive healthy life change.

Qualitative evidence showed that people experiencing homelessness face specific barriers to taking part in physical activity, affecting both participation and retention. Reported challenges included low self-worth after heavy defeats in soccer tournaments, lack of transport or unstable living conditions for women in running groups, fear of losing donated kit or equipment through theft, and inconsistent attendance in activities like dance groups.

More rigorous studies (especially randomised controlled trials), better measurement, and careful design to address participation barriers are needed. Most included small samples of between 10-30 participants and the 17 studies included in the review were biased towards qualitative research (11 studies judged high quality) football (7 studies) and outdoor exercise (5 studies).

Case Study: Pathfinder

Sport Engagement as a Driver of Prevention

Data from the Pathfinder programme shows a strong link between participation in sport and improved housing outcomes.⁶⁶ While the programme's overall homelessness prevention rate is 75%, this rises to 95% for participants engaged in sport or physical activity. Those involved in sport also remained engaged with the programme longer (10 months vs. 7 months), were more likely to achieve all three of their priority goals (73% vs. 49%), and reported significantly higher improvements in wellbeing. Coaches observed that sport helped participants build routine, form social connections, and reduce harmful coping behaviours. Pathfinder's experience demonstrates how incorporating sport into personalised support can act as a protective factor and catalyst for prevention, particularly for people at imminent risk.

The social return on investment

With the lack of evidence available, one growing area is a focus on Social Return on Investment (SROI) to demonstrate the broader societal value of sport and physical activity. Unlike traditional economic metrics, SROI attempts to quantify the social, health, and community benefits generated by sport in monetary terms - providing a case for investment.

At the national level across all four nations, including Sport England has commissioned extensive SROI research through the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University. Their 2024 report estimated that for every £1 invested in sport and physical activity in England, there is a return of approximately £4 in social value, including improvements in health, wellbeing, education, and crime reduction.⁶⁷

At a more granular level, individual clubs and governing bodies have also adopted SROI frameworks. For example: The Football Association (FA) has used SROI to demonstrate the value of grassroots football in improving mental health, reducing social isolation, and increasing employability; and London Sport and Sheffield City Trust have applied SROI models to local sport facilities and programmes, helping to justify funding and shape delivery strategies.^{68, 69, 70} This has been duplicated across the other nations.

However, while SROI is a powerful advocacy tool, it has limitations - particularly when applied to complex social issues like homelessness. The model often relies on assumptions and proxies that may not fully capture the nuanced, long-term impact of sport in preventing homelessness. For example, attributing a reduction in housing instability to a sport intervention is methodologically challenging, especially when multiple services and structural factors are involved.

SROI can struggle to reflect the interconnected nature of complex systems, where outcomes are influenced by social, economic, and policy variables. This creates a gap in demonstrating value for money in preventative work, where benefits may be diffuse, long-term, and difficult to isolate. Despite these challenges, SROI remains a valuable tool for making the case for sport as a preventative investment. To strengthen its application in homelessness prevention, future models could incorporate systems thinking, longitudinal tracking, and qualitative insights from participants and practitioners.

Case Study: The Running Charity

Provider: The Running Charity

Intervention Type: Primary / Secondary / Tertiary

Description of Intervention: Inclusive sports coaching
apprenticeships for 16–24-year-olds

Location: Nationwide

The Running Charity supports young people aged 16–25 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness through a combination of running, trauma-informed coaching and holistic youth work. Running acts as a gateway to engagement, helping young people build trust, relationships and routine while connecting them to wider support including mental health services, housing advice, and pathways into education, training and employment.

Recent programme data shows:

- 92% of young people improved their mental wellbeing, with an average 19.34-point increase in WEMWBS scores
- 80% progressed towards housing stability or moved into improved accommodation, with 0% experiencing deterioration in their housing situation during engagement
- 88% strengthened support networks and reduced isolation, and 89% increased trust in services
- 100% of participants became physically active, compared with 72% being inactive before joining the programme

Independent analysis by Lloyds Bank Foundation and The Social Investment Group also estimated that The Running Charity generates approximately £10 of social value for every £1 invested, reflecting improvements in wellbeing, employment outcomes and reduced pressure on public services.

These outcomes demonstrate how sport can build protective factors such as confidence, connection and resilience, while acting as a gateway into wider support systems that help prevent homelessness.

“Sport is often seen as an add-on in homelessness services, but in practice it’s often the gateway. Through running we build trust, relationships and routine with young people who might not otherwise engage with support. That early connection allows us to address deeper”

Alex Eagle, Co-Founder and CEO The Running Charity

5. What needs to happen: priorities for policy and practice

Effective prevention depends on collaboration across services, with joint working across professional boundaries.⁷¹ There is a need for smarter policy and programmes, which foster cross-sector collaboration and integration. Sport-based partnerships with community organisations can help bridge this gap. For example, the Leeds Youth Justice Case Study highlights that participation in sport could provide an opportunity to sustain progress and belonging. Transferring sport-based support from statutory services to community-based interventions offer the continuity young people need as they move out of the justice system. While exiting the system quickly is a positive goal, it can also risk cutting short effective interventions and breaking trusted relationships. Sport-based community partnerships help sustain these connections, providing routines, belonging, and supportive adult relationships beyond the limits of formal programmes.

Any intervention must also demonstrate Value for Money by maximising the positive impact of resources available. Sport-based approaches meet this need by drawing on existing infrastructure and expertise (e.g., Professional Club Foundations) while also improving access to wider services. Case studies show how sport provides safe environments where trusted adults can build relationships and signpost to support (Coach Core), as well as develop young people's psychosocial skills, such as emotional regulation, resilience, and self-belief, enabling them to re-engage more meaningfully with provision (New Horizons, Let's Do More).

There is huge potential in bringing like-minded organisations together to share best practice, coordinate funding, and collectively measure impact. And sport can play a key role in this:

“In aeroplanes there are three and a half million pieces, but none of them fly. For me, bringing people together to collaborate to try and meet some of these outcomes and these challenges of the city... that's probably the biggest thing at the moment.”

Gareth Cook, Head of Community and Engagement, Leeds Rhino's Foundation

Key actors who play a role in delivering, commissioning and influencing change, include:

- National government
- Local authorities and combined authorities
- Sport sector and governing bodies (e.g. Sports England, Sport Wales, Sport Northern Ireland, Sport Scotland and NGBs)
- Funders and commissioners
- Community-led organisations
- Emphasis on integration with wider systems (e.g. youth services, family hubs, schools)
- People playing sports

The next steps may not be launching new activity, but ensuring that current efforts are aligned with the evidence and that effective practice is embedded and recognised - making clear the contribution sport already makes to preventing homelessness.



6. Our role: how CHI can support the shift

Preventing homelessness before it starts requires a fundamental shift in how we design, deliver, and evaluate interventions. Our new strategy is built on four pillars - Evidence, Data, Collaboration, and Systems Change - and these principles underpin our findings and recommendations for integrating sport into the homelessness prevention agenda.

Homelessness is complex and multi-causal, yet the evidence base for primary prevention remains fragmented and underdeveloped. While sport is widely recognised for its benefits to health and wellbeing, its potential as a strategic lever for homelessness prevention is largely untapped. This paper highlights that sport-based interventions already exist across the UK, many of which show promise in building protective factors, fostering inclusion, and creating pathways to employment. However, these efforts are often isolated, under-evaluated, and disconnected from wider prevention systems.

As the UK's what works centre for homelessness, we support the sport and physical activity sector bring rigour, coordination, and innovation to this emerging field - ensuring that sport is not just an add-on, but a deliberate, evidence-informed component of prevention policy.

Evidence and data

Research on homelessness presents various challenges. There are particular gaps in the existing academic literature in understanding primary prevention, UK-specific contexts, and the mechanisms of what works, for whom, and when.^{72, 73, 74} The complexity of homelessness points to the need for more robust, systems-based approaches. However, this paper highlights that despite methodological challenges, many sports interventions already exist, and these are making, or have the potential to make, a real contribution to homelessness prevention.

This presents an opportunity to create smarter policy and programmes where evidence and data influences, and is designed into decision-making structures and processes. There is clear appetite for this: every provider and infrastructure organisation we've spoken to expressed a desire to share learning across the sector and to access more targeted data. However, significant challenges remain, including the lack of common frameworks, limited resources and expertise, and short funding cycles with inconsistent reporting requirements.

“Understanding what other organisations are experiencing and giving forums to understand what works, like what are people doing, what could really inspire organisations? We’re kind of reinventing the wheel when we probably don’t need to, There’s probably a lot of people that have done a lot of work and experts in this that we could learn from.”

Laura Larsson, Research and Impact Manager, Coach Core

Aligned Strategic Priorities: How can we enable Sport to build better data, and design evidence based activity

1. **Building and Sharing Evidence.** We can support with the synthesis of existing research and map gaps to create a clear picture of what works, for whom, and under what conditions. Also, importantly identify and synthesise all the poor-quality evaluation and impact reports that exist, recognising that Sport does not always focus on academic literature. This includes:
 - Developing a living evidence map on sport and homelessness prevention.
 - Translating insights into practical guidance for commissioners, funders, and delivery partners.
 - Longer-term producing a future framework for rapid reviews and gap analyses to inform investment and policy decisions.
2. **Evidence alone is not enough.** We need to generate new knowledge through action. CHI can work with the physical activity and sports sector to co-design and evaluate sport-based prevention pilots with local authorities, housing providers, and sport organisations. These pilots could for example:
 - Integrate sport into existing housing and family support programmes.
 - Test trauma-informed and inclusive models that address structural barriers.
 - Apply robust evaluation frameworks, including cost-effectiveness analysis and adapted Social Return on Investment (SROI) models.

3. **Connecting and Leveraging Data.** Data is the backbone of prevention. CHI could enable a data led approach in sport and physical activity through:
 - Understanding and linking sport participation data with housing and homelessness datasets.
 - Develop shared metrics for prevention outcomes across sectors.
 - Use predictive analytics to identify at-risk groups and target interventions effectively.
4. **Convening and Driving Collaboration.** No single sector can prevent homelessness alone. CHI could act as a systems connector, bringing together sport governing bodies, local authorities, housing providers, third sector organisations and funders to:
 - Share best practice and scale promising models.
 - Coordinate investment based on deprivation data and priority geographies.
 - Create forums for learning and innovation, reducing duplication and accelerating progress.

“Understanding what other organisations are experiencing and giving forums to understand what works... We’re reinventing the wheel when we probably don’t need to.”

Laura Larsson, Coach Core

This approach reflects CHI’s commitment to evidence-led systems change. By embedding sport within a broader prevention ecosystem, we support unlocking new pathways to sustainable opportunity - helping fewer people fall into homelessness and ensuring that prevention becomes the norm, not the exception.

7. Next Steps

This paper sets out a compelling case for sport as a strategic lever in homelessness prevention. The evidence is clear: while research on sport and homelessness is limited, existing interventions show promise in building protective factors, fostering inclusion, and creating pathways to stability. The challenge now is to move from insight to implementation - unlocking sports potential within a broader prevention ecosystem and ensuring that policy, practice, and investment reflect this opportunity.

Why Now?

Homelessness is rising, and prevention remains underfunded. At the same time, sport is deeply embedded in UK culture, reaching millions of people every week and offering trusted, stigma-free spaces for engagement. Aligning these realities presents a unique opportunity to act. With national strategies across all four nations prioritising inclusion and wellbeing, the timing is right to position sport as part of the solution.

We invite policymakers, funders, and delivery partners to join us in this effort. By working together, we can:

- Harness sport's reach and cultural influence to engage those most at risk.
- Build evidence-led interventions that are inclusive, trauma-informed, and scalable.
- Create a prevention ecosystem where sport is not an afterthought, but a core component of national strategy.
- Sport is already part of the solution - now is the time to make it a strategic lever for prevention.

Endnotes

1. JHFC
https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237022/costsofhomelessness_finalweb.pdf
2. <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives/active-lives-data-tables>

<https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives>
3. <https://sportscotland.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/research-and-data/research/scottish-national-research/scottish-government-publication-summaries/2022-scottish-health-survey-summary>

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2023-volume-1-main-report/pages/12/>
4. <https://www.sport.wales/research-and-insight/sport-active-lifestyles-state-of-the-nation-report/nsw-2022-23/>

<https://www.sport.wales/research-and-insight/school-sport-survey/>
5. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/experience-sport-by-adults-northern-ireland-202324>
6. <https://www.sportni.net/funding/creating-opportunities/>
7. <https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2023-08/CSPPA%202022%20Full%20Report.pdf>
8. <https://www.sportengland.org/guidance-and-support/measuring-impact>
9. <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/research/inequalities-metric>
10. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/health-inequalities-dashboard-september-2025-data-update>
11. Irish sports monitor 2024 / Summary research report and headlines, Sport Ireland, 2024
12. The Scottish Health Survey 2023 - volume 1: main report, Scottish Government, 2024
13. Sport & Active Lifestyles: State of the Nation Report, Sport Wales, and source National Survey for Wales, Welsh Government, 2025.

14. Active Lives Adult Survey November 2023-24 full report and headlines, Sport England, 2025
15. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-active-a-strategy-for-the-future-of-sport-and-physical-activity/get-active-a-strategy-for-the-future-of-sport-and-physical-activity>
16. <https://www.sportengland.org/about-us/uniting-movement>
17. <https://www.sport.wales/policies-and-governance/>
18. <https://sportscotland.org.uk/about-us/sport-for-life-2024>
19. <https://www.sportni.net/about-us/equality/>
20. Official Statistics: Rough sleeping snapshot in England, Autumn 2024, MHCLG
21. Accredited official statistics, Statutory homelessness in England: Infographic 2023-24, MHCLG, 2024
22. Rice, B (2023) The Experiences of Families Living in Temporary Accommodation in Westminster. Published in February 2023; Shelter (2023) Almost half of children who become homeless forced to move schools. Press Release published March 2023; Children's Commissioner (2019) Bleak Houses: Tackling the crisis of family homelessness. Published 21 August 2019; Croft, L.A., Marossy, A., Wilson, T., Atabong, A. A building concern? The health needs of families in temporary accommodation. Published in Journal of Public Health, Volume 43, Issue 3, September 2021, Pages 581–586
23. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-april-to-june-2025/statutory-homelessness-in-england-april-to-june-2025>
24. Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?, Bramely et al., 2016
25. Systems-wide evaluation of homelessness and rough sleeping: preliminary findings, MHCLG/CHI, February 2025
26. Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?, Bramely et al., 2016
27. 'You can change your life through sports'—physical activity interventions to improve the health and wellbeing of adults experiencing homelessness: a mixed methods systematic review, Dawes et al., 2024
28. Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: April 2025, ONS, 2025
29. Suicides in England and Wales: 2023 registrations, ONS 2024

30. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/health-inequalities-dashboard-september-2025-data-update>
31. <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/research/disabled-people>
32. <https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/publication/literacy-numeracy-and-homelessness-what-do-we-know>
33. <https://homeless.org.uk/areas-of-expertise/meeting-diverse-needs/ending-womens-homelessness/>
34. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/59f07e67422cdf0001904c14/63e6476b4d417106be76eae5_CHI.Ethnic.Inequalities.homelessness.pdf
35. <https://www.ndti.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Neurodiversity-and-Homelessness-Executive-Summary-July-2023.pdf>
36. <https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/publication/sexuality-gender-identity-and-homelessness>
37. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/59f07e67422cdf0001904c14/619b5c5c562c877887d91d4e_WWC%20evidence%20notes%20drugs%20and%20alcohol.pdf
38. <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/15/6/e093529>
39. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/physical-activity-guidelines>
40. <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives>
41. <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/leisure-sport-and-tourism/overview-of-the-sport-sector-in-the-uk>
42. Tanekenov, A., Fitzpatrick, S., & Johnsen, S. (2018). Empowerment, Capabilities and Homelessness: The Limitations of Employment-focused Social Enterprises in Addressing Complex Needs. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 35(1), 137–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2017.1290676>
43. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper>
44. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/august2025>
45. <https://www.cimspa.co.uk/workforce-insight-report-2023-now-available/>

46. <https://www.whufc.com/club/community/players-project/local-enterprise>
47. Shelton, K. H., Taylor, P. J., Bonner, A., & Van Den Bree, M. (2009). Risk Factors for Homelessness: Evidence From a Population-Based Study. *Psychiatric Services*, 60(4), 465–472. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2009.60.4.465>
48. Heerde, J. A., Bailey, J. A., Kelly, A. B., McMorris, B. J., Patton, G. C., & Toumbourou, J. W. (2021). Life-course predictors of homelessness from adolescence into adulthood: A population-based cohort study. *Journal of Adolescence*, 91(1), 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.06.007>
49. Tyler, K. A., & Schmitz, R. M. (2013). Family histories and multiple transitions among homeless young adults: Pathways to homelessness. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(10), 1719–1726. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.07.014>
50. Bearsley-Smith, C. A., Bond, L. M., Littlefield, L., & Thomas, L. R. (2008). The psychosocial profile of adolescent risk of homelessness. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 17(4), 226–234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-007-0657-5>
51. Shelton, K. H., Taylor, P. J., Bonner, A., & Van Den Bree, M. (2009). Risk Factors for Homelessness: Evidence From a Population-Based Study. *Psychiatric Services*, 60(4), 465–472. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2009.60.4.465>
52. Astbury, R., Knight, R., & Nichols, G. (2005). The contribution of sport-related interventions to the long-term development of disaffected young people: An evaluation of the Fairbridge program. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 23(3).
53. Bruner, M. W., McLaren, C. D., Sutcliffe, J. T., Gardner, L. A., Lubans, D. R., Smith, J. J., & Vella, S. A. (2023). The effect of sport-based interventions on positive youth development: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 16(1), 368–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2021.1875496>
54. Piché, F., Daneau, C., Plourde, C., Girard, S., & Romain, A. J. (2023). Characteristics and impact of physical activity interventions during substance use disorder treatment excluding tobacco: A systematic review. *PLOS ONE*, 18(4), e0283861. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0283861>
55. <https://nhyouthcentre.org.uk/football-vs-youth-homelessness/>
56. <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/research/inequalities-metric>
<https://www.sportengland.org/funding-and-campaigns/equality-and-diversity>

57. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systems-wide-evaluation-of-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping/criminal-justice-system-and-homelessness-a-rapid-evidence-assessment>
58. <https://www.kentcricket.co.uk/kcct/no-boundaries-programme/>
59. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-evolving-response-to-ethnic-disproportionality-in-youth-justice>
60. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-11-26/HCWS252>
61. <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/sports-programmes/>
62. <https://era.ed.ac.uk/items/bb73638a-702d-4777-bafe-c2f2fa866cae>
63. <https://www.sportanddev.org>
64. <https://beyondsport.org/2021/09/17/homeless-world-cup-foundation-to-hold-inaugural-four-nations-challenge-cup/>
65. 'You can change your life through sports'—physical activity interventions to improve the health and wellbeing of adults experiencing homelessness: a mixed methods systematic review, Dawes et al., 2024
66. <https://bridgesoutcomespartnerships.org/work/adults/health-wellbeing-independence/gm-better-outcomes-partnership/>
67. <http://sports-society.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Social-return-on-investment-of-SAPA-Measuring-Impact.pdf>
68. <https://www.shu.ac.uk/sport-physical-activity-research-centre/sport-industry/projects/social-roi-sport>
69. https://easm.net/download/EASM2017_BookofAbstracts-52-53.pdf
70. <https://londonsport.org/our-research-and-insight/social-return-on-investment/#:~:text=Our%20research%20shows%20that%20for,generated%20for%20individuals%20and%20society>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23750472.2020.1794938>

71. Mackie, P., Fitzpatrick, S., & Morris, N. (2024). Prevention Into Action: Gaps and opportunities for locally-led homelessness prevention in England.
https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Prevention_Into_Action_research_report.pdf
72. Woellenstein, L., Cuthill, F., Manrai, R., & Henderson, D. (2023). Homelessness prevention interventions for single adults at risk of or experiencing MEH: A systematic review on their effectiveness. *International Journal on Homelessness*, 3(2), 1-67.
73. Filges, T., Dalgaard, N. T., & Viinholt, B. C. (2022). Outreach programs to improve life circumstances and prevent further adverse developmental trajectories of at-risk youth in OECD countries: A systematic review. *Campbell systematic reviews*, 18(4), e1282.
74. Munthe-Kaas, H. M., Berg, R. C., & Blaasvær, N. (2018). Effectiveness of interventions to reduce homelessness: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 14(1), 1-281.



Centre for Homelessness Impact
www.homelessnessimpact.org

© 2026 | Centre for Homelessness Impact
ISBN 978-1-914132-60-5
CHI | Registered Charity Number: E&W1183026; SC049501.
Company Number: 11732500