

1. Cricket Arena CIC: Empowering Youth through Sports and Education

Cricket Arena



260 young people engaged



Young people diverted from violence/ASB through sports



Improved confidence, social skills and aspirations



Cricket Arena delivers sport and activities to young people in Sheffield, with a focus on cricket practice, coaching and tournaments



Other activities include educational fitness workshops, weekend hikes, summer careers fairs and youth clubs

Working well

- ✓ Effective engagement through social media
- ✓ Positive reputation and word-of-mouth recruitment
- ✓ Supportive local community

Challenges

- Funding core costs
- Booking activity venues

Recommendations

- ⊕ Continue and expand referrals from other services
- ⊕ Funders to support with evidencing impacts
- ⊕ Funders to support with strategy to secure core costs resourcing

3.1 Project overview

Cricket Arena is a social enterprise based in Sheffield, providing sport and community activities for young people in and beyond Sheffield. Starting in 2017 with an indoor cricket league, Cricket Arena's staff and volunteers identified a gap in activities for young people in the area. What started as an informal project has since grown into a social enterprise providing young people with free cricket practice, coaching and tournaments, other sporting and social activities.

The organisation was funded by the VRU from the 1st of July 2024 until the 28th of February 2025. Staff described how the VRU grant has been used to continue and grow the work of cricket arena including:

- Funding premises, coaching and volunteer expenses
- Funding new programmes such as educational fitness workshops, weekend hikes, and summer careers fairs and youth clubs

"It's [VRU funding] been massive. It's allowed us to continue our programmes and start new programmes and to grow them."

– Staff member

3.2 Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through a mixture of online and in-person engagement. This included a visit to a cricket evening training session in November 2024 during which a Rocket Science researcher interviewed staff, volunteers, family members and children and young people participating. Online interviews were subsequently arranged with a staff member and a stakeholder, and an online survey distributed to children and young people. Table 8 below outlines the range of qualitative and quantitative evaluation activities undertaken with Cricket Arena.

Table 8 – Cricket Arena evaluation methods

Research method	Number of participants
Interviews with staff	2
Interviews with volunteers	3 (2x individuals were both a parent and a volunteer)
Interviews with family members	4 (2x individuals were both a parent and a volunteer)
Interview with a stakeholder	1
Interviews with children and young people	7
Online survey with children and young people	4
Total number of individuals engaged	19
Monitoring data received from the service for the funding period	

3.3. Key findings

3.3.1 Access

Target group and fit with wider services in the area

As described above, the organisation responds to the needs of young people in Sheffield for access to sport activities. Staff, volunteers and participants emphasised that, while funded work particularly targets boys, it is an open welcoming community. This is reflected in the project's 100% male participation rate throughout the VRU-funded period, with an age range of 13 to 25. Cricket Arena report that young people participating experience vulnerabilities such as exposure to violence, social isolation, and economic disadvantage from under-served communities. Additionally, a staff member described how young people taking part in Cricket Arena activities may have previously been involved in behaviours associated with increased risk of participation in antisocial behaviour or youth violence:

"I know we've got a few people - I won't mention who. I can probably say if he wasn't here, he'll be on the streets, going [out] on Friday nights."

– Staff member

One stakeholder described how Cricket Arena provides an important service in the context of a lack of services and facilities available to ethnically minoritised communities in the area:

“When there isn’t as many facilities that young people can go to with confidence...If they find a community with Cricket Arena, they will then have a community that they can reach out to and play different sports. They give a lot of opportunities for Asian minorities.”

– Stakeholder

Referrals and recruitment

Young people were engaged with by Cricket Arena primarily through social media and word of mouth. Several young people spoke about being brought along to watch their relatives play in tournaments and being *“inspired to play”* or being encouraged to join by their friends. The openness of the organisation to sharing positive experiences and involving new participants has facilitated engagement.

“I always played cricket with my friends, they invited me.”

– Young person

“For a long time, he’s been saying to me ‘Look, I want to play cricket. I wanna get involved.’”

– Family member

Social media provides a platform for wider engagement beyond word of mouth, particularly as Cricket Arena’s following has grown. The social enterprise has 57,000 and 13,300 followers respectively on TikTok and Instagram at the time of writing. Two of the seven young people interviewed said that they had first encountered the organisation on TikTok or Instagram. Staff and volunteers told Rocket Science that frequently posting on social media was an important engagement strategy and that *“once you’ve got that platform, it [engagement from potential participants] kind of brings it itself.”* The use of social media also provides an *“opportunity for growth”* within and beyond Sheffield and South Yorkshire.

“I’ve seen it on Instagram. They have a lot of tournaments and I said I wanted to put a team in.”

– Young person

Additionally, Cricket Arena reported that they received four young people referred by local South Yorkshire Police Constables. This highlights an opportunity to continue and expand engagement with public services, including and beyond police. Other potential sources of referrals include employability services, social prescribers, social services and youth justice.

Young people participating in the programme reported no barriers to accessing the activities and said that they found the organisation and welcoming. The friendly and sociable community was as important an appeal to young people as the activities themselves:

“I thought it would be a tight community.”

– Young person

3.3.2 Impact

Aims of the organisation and model of operation

Cricket Arena has evolved from informally providing cricket tournaments to a more formal programme of activities. The organisational aim that staff and volunteers described throughout is to respond to the needs of children and young people, providing them with opportunities to play cricket and access other activities, and thereby cultivate positive community. One volunteer/parent said that Cricket Arena offered young people *“that opportunity that we never had”*.

“The main thing is its, the kids were telling us “We’ve got nothing to do.””

– Staff member

“Fun, enjoyable social events that brings people together playing sports.”

– Young person

Staff, volunteers and a stakeholder linked the aim of providing young people with positive opportunities to the additional aim of diverting them from involvement in youth violence and antisocial behaviour.

“They basically help kids off the streets and give them something they can do and be passionate about. It’s very much a community that they are building.”

– Stakeholder

Cricket Arena’s model of operation centres on providing weekly cricket sessions leading up to tournaments. These are provided throughout the year, at indoor venues during the winter and outdoor venues during the summer. The VRU grant has enabled Cricket Arena to run these sessions as well as weekly activities such as educational fitness workshops and youth clubs. Additional one-off activities were offered including weekend hikes and summer careers fair.

Preventing violence

Young people, family members, staff and volunteers reported a range of positive impacts on participants. These included reducing the risk of participation in antisocial behaviour and violence; cultivating friendships and a wider sense of community; improving access to activities; increasing confidence and wellbeing; and developing future aspirations.

A few young people talked about how taking part in Cricket Arena had reduced their likelihood of making risky decisions and becoming involved in youth violence or antisocial behaviour. Cricket training and tournaments, youth clubs, and fitness sessions provide young people with positive activities to take part in on weekday evenings instead of *“messaging around”*. One young person specifically linked spending time playing cricket to not being in *“the wrong area”* and *“messaging about with knife crime.”* Another described how, since being involved in Cricket Areana, their aspirations for a professional cricket career had influenced their decision-making:

“It saved me. It’s like a shield for me. It stops me doing something bad because it would affect my cricket career.”

- Young Person

“The friends I had, they were going down the wrong path and I saw these lot playing cricket, it put me off, that helped me move away from the bad energy.”

-Young Person

Family members, staff, volunteers, and a stakeholder echoed these findings, with one volunteer describing reduced risk of violence as *“the main impact”* for young people. Adults involved saw the preventative benefits of keeping young people *“off the streets”*. It was also perceived that families benefit from knowing that their children are in a *“good environment”* and are *“safe because they’re with the Cricket guys”*.

“So, in a way, we’re kind of doing a bit of police work as well, like keeping these guys off the streets on Friday.”

- Parent/volunteer

“There’s a few select people named that used to- I used to see hanging around on the streets and now they’re coming every Friday.”

- Volunteer

Personal and social impacts

Young people involved gained positive new friendships and a wider sense of community, reducing isolation and loneliness. One young person who had recently moved from another country to the UK described how *“I didn’t know many people here”* before joining Cricket Arena and that joining had provided him with a community and helped him *“feel opened up”* to others. He linked this to his reduced risk of involvement in *“messaging around”* in the street.

The mixed age group of participants, staff and volunteers also gave young people access to older role models with whom they could share problems and ask advice – for example, regarding which courses to take at college.

“You need an older role model. You can find an older brother here. You can speak to them about your problems. It’s a really good space for everyone.”

– Young person

“Before, I was a lonely guy. It’s a really great thing. It allows your people to come together.”

- Young person

Young people formed friendships with people from different areas of Sheffield and beyond, which one volunteer theorised would reduce the risks of violence between individuals from in different postcodes.

“There’s been plenty of new friendships here for a lot of these kids from different areas.”

- Volunteer

“I’ve made a lot of friends. Like from Nether Edge, I’ve made very close friends.”

– Young person

Improved confidence was a benefit often linked to time spent socialising and building friendships with Cricket Arena. Parents described how important it was for young people to be encouraged to *“come out of their shell”*. They had observed their sons develop the confidence to talk to a range of different people and perceived that these social skills would help them in their future aspirations, education and employability. Young people also observed these changes in themselves.

“He was always very shy, he wouldn’t express himself the way he wanted to before for coming here and opening up that shell [...] Now we constantly speak about his performances after the game, what he can do better and how we can improve ourselves.”

- Parent/Volunteer

"I'm more confident. It's a friendly environment where you can make a lot of new friends. It's helped me build up skills."

- Young person

Participants spoke enthusiastically their aspirations to win tournaments and to pursue careers in cricket or volunteer for Cricket Arena in future. One young person had described how they had previously thought of cricket as a hobby, but since becoming involved in had *"realised it could be a career"* and had recently been to county-level cricket trials.

"I've got a team in this league. I want to win. I want to in the future help Cricket Arena expand."

- Young person

The mental wellbeing benefits of taking part in a regular sport were described by a couple of young people, particularly those who were experiencing stress due to pressure at school.

"We've got GCSEs and it gets out the stress. It makes a big difference."

- Young person

"When I finish college in the afternoon, it takes all that pressure and stress and you focus on the cricket."

- Young person

The Summer Careers Fair was attended by 40 young people and 10 local business leaders and reportedly had direct impacts on employment outcomes for the young people who took part. These included:

- 2 young people securing part-time jobs
- 3 young people starting their own businesses
- 5 young people gaining work experience and mentorship
- 12 young people receiving CV support

The following enablers to impact were identified by young people, staff, volunteers, family members and the stakeholder interviewed:

Table 9 – Enablers to Cricket Arena’s impact

Enablers to impact	Example
Effective communication and engagement via social media	<i>“I would say they have been very effective in their strategies about bringing people in, creating a good communication platform though WhatsApp. They have social media which allows them to connect with people all over world.”</i> - Stakeholder
Building positive reputation and gaining participants via word of mouth	<i>“My uncle plays for adults and used to tell me about the sessions.”</i> - Young person
Positive and supportive attitude of the Cricket Arena community	<i>“On the way to the trial I checked the group chat and everyone was saying good luck. It made me feel good.”</i> - Young person

Source: Rocket Science interviews with staff, volunteers, a stakeholder, parents and young people

Some challenges and barriers were also identified:

Table 10 – Challenges/barriers to Cricket Arena’s impact

Challenges/barriers	Example
Difficulties funding core costs	<i>“We need the core funding for the project...a lot of businesses don’t want to pay our rent.”</i> - Staff member
Difficulties with booking venues	<i>“I do think one of our main problems is having a space to run the programmes, leisure centres over-booked.”</i> - Staff member

Source: Rocket Science interviews with staff, volunteers, a stakeholder, parents and young people

3.3.3 Theory of Change

While Cricket Arena has no formal Theory of Change, staff and volunteers confidently described the mechanism of change through the organisation impacts the lives of young people. The organisation provides young people with a positive community as an alternative to other activities which may put them at risk of youth violence and antisocial behaviour. Young people’s reduced risks as a result of this model are clearly evidenced in the section above, described both by young people themselves and the adults around them.

“Cricket is an excuse to bring community together, giving the youth a network, a sound group of lads. The main thing is when you’re sixteen/seventeen, who you’re around is who you become.”

– Staff member

Additional to VRU monitoring data, Cricket Arena collects data on its impacts on young people using surveys covering, for example, the impact of participation on feelings of community connection. However, it was not possible to share these with the evaluation team for data protection reasons.

3.3.4 Participant experience

Additional to cricket practice, coaching and tournaments, young people described attending a range of activities through Cricket Arena. These included gym, football, badminton, snooker and table tennis sessions, as well as a youth club at a local mosque and weekend hiking trips. Young people found activities engaging and enjoyable, saying that they liked the competitive yet supportive atmosphere and the opportunity to meet different people. This was reflected in Cricket Arena’s VRU monitoring form, which reported a *“strong rate”* of repeat attendance. No barriers to access were reported by young people, or any other interviewees. Participants found the main form of communication via WhatsApp groups to be effective and user-friendly.

Young people were very positive about their overall experiences with Cricket Arena. They enjoyed being part of a supportive community and having an opportunity to develop their sporting abilities. One young person stated that the main aim of Cricket Arena *“is to be together”*, while others described the atmosphere as *“very supportive”* and *“nurturing”*.

“I come to enjoy myself, it’s a laugh, you see yourself advance, it gives you motivation.”

– Young person

The positive atmosphere at Cricket Arena owed in part to the relationships that young people had with staff and volunteers. The adults involved in the project were described as *“very friendly and supportive”* and made young people feel heard and understood. Young people said that they could share things with the staff and volunteers with whom they had a close relationship, providing a trusted adult outside of the family.

“I’ve got a bond with [staff member], he’s more like a brother. I can ring him and tell him if anything has happened.”

– Young person

“You can go to them and talk about your home life.”

– Young person

Young people were very happy with the offer of the project and had no suggested improvements, other than to secure more funding for Cricket Arena.

“Nothing to change, everything is perfect.”

- Young person

3.4 Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Cricket Arena engaged 260 young people throughout the funding period, all male and aged between 13 to 25, reflecting the target group. The project appears to be directly reducing young people’s risk of exposure to and involvement in violence. This is achieved through providing opportunities for young people to access a range of activities, with a particular focus on cricket, and a positive, supportive community of young men and boys. Young people enjoyed opportunities for self-development and socialisation, experiencing benefits such as:

- New friendships, role models and aspirations
- Improved confidence and social skills
- Positive education and employment outcomes
- Reduced stress in relation to school exams

Recommendations

- **Continue and expand referrals from other services:** the four referrals received from South Yorkshire Police Constables open an opportunity to build on relationships developed during the funded period. Engaging with other services (such as employability services, social prescribers, social services and youth justice services) will provide opportunities for more individuals exposed to vulnerabilities to access and ultimately benefit from the project.
- **Funders to support with evidencing impacts:** developing a Theory of Change and linked data collection to evidence impacts would support future funding applications by providing a formal basis for understanding how Cricket Arena impacts young people’s lives and demonstrating an

evidence-based approach. Consistent data collection on impacts linked to the ToC would allow the continued testing and refinement of the mechanisms of impact.

- **Funders to support with strategy to secure core costs funding:** covering core costs such as venue hire have been an ongoing challenge. The VRU could support Cricket Arena to develop a long-term funding strategy and signpost them to additional funding support.