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***Executive Summary***

*Sports & Physical Activity Participation Dallow, Saints & Biscot Wards in Luton*

Sporting Equals/DICE, University of Leicester

Sporting Equals were commissioned by Luton Council in partnership with Sport England to provide research, intelligence and customer insight into sport and leisure opportunities for black and minority ethnic (BME) communities with a specific focus on the South Asian communities in the Luton Dallow, Saints and Biscot Wards. The review consisted of a desktop study supported by qualitative research through face to face/telephone interviews and focus groups with local organisations/community groups and key stakeholders.

***Background***

Luton is a multicultural urban town and is one of the three areas outside London where the number of White British is less than half of all residents. In general, Luton’s population is younger than that in the East of England and England and over one-quarter (25.9%) of Luton residents are in the worst national quintile of deprivation, and 58.6% are in the worst two quintiles.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The three key wards, Biscot, Dallow and Saints have a greater than average proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities and a sizeable Black, African/Caribbean community, alongside growing pockets of ‘other’ White communities. By faith, Muslims form the largest group although Luton has sizeable pockets of Hindu and Sikh communities.

***Key findings***

Information from the 2014 Residents Survey suggest that people in the Biscot, Dallow and Saints wards have a higher level of inactivity and are less likely to access a sports club or Active Luton leisure facility. Health inequalities exist within the area and health benefits of sport and physical exercise have either not been mobilised sufficiently in these areas, or have had relatively little impact on parents and young people.

Sport is still a relatively low priority among many people in Luton’s South Asian BME communities. However, younger people today are more interested and more flexible in their sporting ambitions and things are changing. There is, however, a particular problem in supporting acceptable access and opportunities for younger *female* players in a range of sports including swimming, cricket and football. Faith and cultural requirements often require offering separate sports provision. Female coaches and female support workers, including drivers, are not always easily available.

*‘Female coaches are like gold dust*.’

Some facilities on educational sites are good drivers of activity as these places are seen as safe spaces particularly for women and girls. Denbigh High School, Lewsey Sports Park, Lea Manor Leisure Centre, Inspire Sports Village and other venues all offer women’s only sessions but still face particular challenges in respect of their capacity (e.g. the need for upskilling enough women to become lifeguards) to meet the needs of women and girls and specific religious and cultural groups. This policy is being extended to some men only sessions as demand has been identified within specific community groups.

Dallow, Biscot and Saints wards have a relative lack of open spaces suitable for sport and physical exercise which adds to the pressures on indoor spaces. The principle leisure *facilities* are located further afield and accentuate the perceived pattern of *disinvestment* locally. They are not attracting relative-to-population levels of BME communities because of cost, transport and some concerns about cultural sensitivities. By comparison, many existing local public facilities are old, small & inadequate, with local people competing for the same limited resources. Overall there is a clear appetite for sport in the key wards; however this is constrained by economic, financial and cultural challenges. Some trust issues are apparent between local people and sports/physical activities’ providers.

Many local organisations such as Luton Town FC and Bedfordshire Cricket have done a considerable amount of work to enable inroads into the community. Concerns were raised here about the short term nature of projects which are susceptible to funding cuts of the loss of key supporters. However many existing projects in Luton have scalable potential and more needs to be done to coordinate resources to meet local demand and coordinate agendas to enable sport to meet broader social outcomes. Opportunities also exist to help engage faith centres to help widen sporting offers linked to the broader sport and health agenda.

Given the fragmented nature of management arrangements for local sports halls, no single organisation seems to be taking a strong lead on programming and co-ordinating activity (including ensuring equitable access for the BME community and for people with disabilities) across the Borough, although Active Luton does have a good understanding of current activity. Some people struggle to find information and identify suitable locations to get involved in sport/physical activity and communications are often not reaching the most disengaged.

***Sporting Equals has identified the following recommendations as a way forward.***

**Policy & Practice**

* Develop a strategy to focus on the creative use of open spaces which are multifunctional and provide more inventively for the formal and informal recreational needs of the whole community.
* A review is required of local policy and more collaborative work on promoting physical activity and school sport, especially for Muslim girls to aid the transition from school to mainstream.
* There is a need to re-examine access to leisure centres (e.g. Inspire) in light of communication, transport, cost and offers for BME communities.
* Co-ordinate sports investment plans & examine ways of establishing more effective and more supportive local networks by building capacity within communities.
* Share learning from projects like KITS (Community Integration Through Sport), LTFC or Bedfordshire Cricket to engage sport through the wider social agenda around crime and antisocial behaviour and radicalisation.
* Create a broader offer with some concrete incentives – certificates, credentials, and potential pathways – to help attract young South Asian people and the support of their parents, with links to schools/college.
* Keep sporting and physical activity projects more sustainable through strategies which focus on upskilling teachers, developing coaches, and putting sustainable programmes in place to help support volunteers.
* Devise a strategy for the routine provision of female volunteers and coaches for female sport and of ‘safe’ indoor spaces for Muslim and other women to use as part of mainstream local planning and provision and work generally on recruiting more people from South Asian backgrounds as a key part of mainstream support for the promotion of sport and physical activity.

**Workforce Development**

* Make sporting and physical activity projects more sustainable through strategies which focus on upskilling teachers, developing coaches, and putting sustainable programmes in place to help support volunteers.
* Devise a strategy for the routine provision of female coaches for female sport and of ‘safe’ indoor spaces for Muslim and other women to use as part of mainstream local planning and provision.
* Focus on supporting and upskill clubs and physical activity centres to make the sporting and physical exercise offer more appealing to BME women and girls.
* More training is necessary to enable current service providers to be more receptive to the cultural needs of the community, particularly Muslim women.
* More attention must be afforded to ways in which physical activity ‘products‘ and ‘offers’ might be extended to involve more BME families, such as cheaper activities, more ‘Mummy and Me’ sessions, etc., in suitable local venues.

**Community Empowerment**

* More engagement of South Asian parents is urgently needed as volunteers and active supporters of sports clubs and venues offering physical activity involving their children.
* A platform needs to be created for wider consultation and more networking and information exchange to bring service providers and local practitioners and volunteers together to improve provision and empower communities at a local level.
* More multi-sport offers need to be developed involving local people – including women – driven by the Local Authority, and engaging governing bodies and partners so that learning can be shared and new links and relationships developed.
* It is important that local voluntary projects are empowered through local networking and knowledge sharing e.g. Denbigh’s model and resources could help to provide the skills and internal links/contacts to support other voluntary projects that seem ‘out of the loop’.
* More support is needed for progressive local mosques in offering selective sporting and physical activity provision for young people, including non-Muslims, in order to create a sense of local ownership and engagement*.*

**Marketing & Communication**

* The marketing and promotion of physical activity and sport aimed at communities in these wards needs much more invention and focus, including the promotion of more BME - ideally Muslim – local and national role models.
* Communication approaches need to be tailored to attract different audiences; younger people are more likely to engage with social media and are likely to be more receptive to Twitter, Instagram, website, poster campaigns, whilst older people are more likely to respond to word of mouth, posters, and information through faith centres.
* Focus sport and physical activity messaging more on the fitness and health benefits in order to resonate more effectively with BME communities and also emphasise the interrelationship between education, sport, physical activity, health and diet.

**Summary**

Luton faces a number of challenges to help engage its BME communities more routinely in sport & physical activity. Some bridges need to be built and recruitment needs to extend into people from these communities. These recommendations form the basis of a new, fresh approach to relationships between the local authority, current providers and local BME communities. They offer the potential to increase engagement with local people who are relatively inactive. But it will require a concerted effort from all partners and agencies – including local communities themselves – to help develop a feasible and effective strategy for greater inclusion and improved access in these wards in Luton.

**December 2015**

1. The health of Luton’s ethnic and migrant communities, Annual Public Health Report, Director of Public Health, NHS Luton and Luton Borough Council, 30th June 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)