

PROJECT EVALUATION REPORT: BARNWELL SPORTS PROGRAMME



THE
YOUTHSCAPE
CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH

The Youthscape Centre for Research

October 2025





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Executive Summary

The Barnwell Sports Programme (2021–2024) set out to explore how sport could become a space where young people encounter God and grow in faith. Working in one of Cambridge's most disadvantaged areas, the project aimed to combine sport, community, and discipleship *“to see young people transformed by the power of sport and the gospel”*. Funded through the Church Commissioners' Innovation Fund, the work was based at Christ the Redeemer Church following a church graft from St Barnabas and was led by a small team of staff.

Although some of the numerical targets were difficult to measure, the evidence gathered through conversations, observations, and feedback displays the project's impact. Young people have grown in confidence, leadership, and faith. Families who had little or no previous contact with the church are now known and supported. The church itself has made youth and children's work central to its strategy. The project's success rested on a number of factors: a committed and skilled staff team, deep roots in the local church, a culture of learning and flexibility, and the stability provided through the Innovation Fund, which ultimately allowed the team to focus on people and presence rather than programmes.

The project was based on the idea that together, sport and the gospel can transform young people's lives and this has proven true. Sport created an open, non-threatening way for young people from different backgrounds to build relationships, develop confidence, and encounter faith. Sessions often became places of trust, where young people could talk about their lives, reflect on what faith might mean to them, and see it modelled by adults who kept showing up. Over time, the project also showed that sport itself could be a form of worship and that being present and consistent often has a bigger impact than the content of programmes.

Alongside the planned outcomes, there were several unexpected but significant results. Friendships developed across social and cultural divides; new partnerships were formed with other local charities; staff and volunteers went on significant personal journeys in their leadership and significant relationships were built with parents and carers as well as with young people. These ripple effects demonstrate that relational youth ministry doesn't only change individual young people's lives but has further-reaching effects into their wider worlds.

The project's learning has been rich and is shaping diocesan thinking. It has highlighted the importance of partnership, long-term staffing, and training for those leading relational ministry, as well as the need for flexibility and resilience when working in complex contexts. It has also shown that faithfulness and consistency often matter more than numbers or quick results.

The legacy of the work is clear. Relationships between the church, schools, and families are stronger. There is a visible posture of love, care, and hospitality that has become part of the church's culture. The challenge now is to ensure this continues beyond individual staff members so that the church itself remains a consistent presence in the community.

Although it is difficult to express the project's value in financial terms, the evidence suggests the investment has been

worthwhile. The grant from the Innovation Fund enabled staff to give time, consistency, and attention to young people and families who might otherwise have been overlooked.

Significant outcomes from the project include: around 120 young people were engaged through the life of the project, that's around 15% of those aged 5–18 in the parish. The depth of impact was notable, with 68% of these 120 young people exploring faith, reflecting the strong focus on discipleship rather than purely social engagement. By the end of the project there were 22 new disciples, 24 young people sharing their faith regularly and church attendance rose to 63, an increase of 43%.

It was clear that the most significant factor in the success of this project was the vision, leadership and love for the Barnwell Community in Rev. Danny Driver, the Project Lead. His commitment, determination and unwavering belief that transformation was possible were a driving force, underpinned by prayer and persistence.

Looking ahead, the experience at Barnwell provides a strong foundation for future sports and wellbeing work across the Diocese. The learning from this project points to the importance of early diocesan involvement, realistic planning for sustainability, and ongoing pastoral and practical support for those leading. Knowing local context, having a clear vision and working relationally all contributed to the success of this project. Barnwell can offer a model for developing future projects that are rooted in local context, shaped by relationships, and sustained by a faithful and consistent presence.

Comments on the Project

"I would like to give thanks to God for the way this all came about as we came through the pandemic in 20/21. Danny had past experience of the beneficial impact Sports linked with Christian faith could have among communities with young people, the Innovation fund were looking for projects that were genuinely innovative to work with disadvantaged young people and encouraged the vision Danny was developing to make an application. The timing of this coincided with the grafting team being sent out. Thus there was the beautiful combination of the Diocese generously supporting the graft, the Central national funding of the local vision, St Barnabas giving the team with no strings attached and the wonderful, faithful willingness of Christ the Redeemer to welcome the grafting team. It was a brilliant coming together of all those parties at just the right time for the benefit of the people of Barnwell in terms of wellbeing, sports investment and faith."

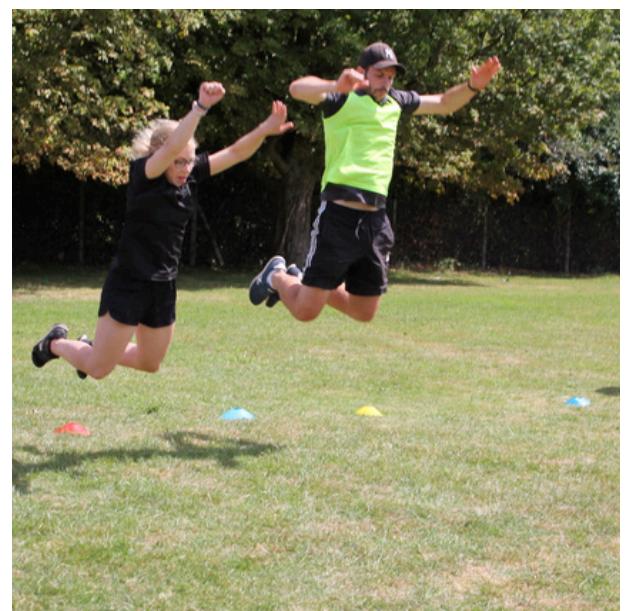
A Project Trustee

"Thank you for these insights into the Barnwell Project. As you say, it has been outstandingly led by Danny. I will never forget my visit to the sports day and seeing the way the young people - many of them, all very different - worked together, responding to Danny's wonderful team who led the sports, reflection, singing and prayer events with them. There was a lovely buzz of energy and kindness, and I really felt God at work there. As you say, an innovation project is about providing learning for us all. When the evaluation is agreed and signed off, a version that the Diocese agrees, will go onto our Church Support Hub website which is a resource for people to learn about what is going on. It is relatively new but well used."

NCI Senior Vision and Strategy Consultant



CHRIST THE
REDEEMER



Project Description

The aim was to see young people's lives transformed through the power of sport and the gospel in Barnwell. It ran from 2021-2024.

Barnwell sits within the Abbey ward of Cambridge. Abbey ward, in 2019, was named as the most disadvantaged ward in the city and is within the top 13% most deprived nationally. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ward had seen an increase of 327% in benefit claimants. Local community groups had noticed an increase in the struggles teenagers have with mental and physical well-being, as well as a significant increase in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities provision.

The project, initiated and led by Rev. Danny Driver, Vicar of Christ the Redeemer Church, and supported by the Ven. Dr. Alex Hughes, Archdeacon and Chair of the Project Board, was based on the belief that the best way to engage young people in Barnwell is through sport. Also, as young people engage in sports ministry, two things can happen.

- (1) They experience greater physical and mental well-being, including greater overall confidence and
- (2) They engage with the gospel message for the first time.

The project brief stated that they understood the need to be intentional about how engagement in sport leads to engagement with the gospel.

The form this took was to employ two Sport and Faith ministers, a Youth and Children's Worker and an Office Administrator.

The project was overseen by a Project Board; including the Archdeacon, Project lead, a Vicar of neighbouring parish who was also the rural dean, The Vicar of St Barnabas, the CofE national sport and wellbeing project lead, a neighbouring Deanery Treasurer, NCI Consultant, plus two diocesan staff as secretary/clerk and operations support to the board, and more latterly the Diocese Director of Ministry and Mission.

Vision & Objectives

Vision:

Young people's lives are transformed through the power of sport and the gospel in Barnwell.

Outcomes:

1. 30 new young disciples of Jesus.
2. 30 young people sharing their faith regularly
3. 450 young people in Barnwell (and their families) positively impacted through sport

Enablers:

1. 100 young people exploring faith
2. 40 strengthened discipleship among young people

Scope of the Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is primarily to learn what has worked well (and conversely, less well), and the overall effectiveness of the use of resources in achieving the desired outcomes.

The specific purposes of the evaluation are to:

1. Analyse the extent to which the outcomes/impact have been achieved and understand the contributing factors.
2. Identify what other, unplanned, outcomes there have been – such as lasting friendships, mingling across different parishes and areas of affluence. Stories from individuals.
3. Test the theory of change and the assumptions underpinning the approach.
4. Record and share lessons learned, including how this learning will adapt future diocesan strategies or work.
5. Determine whether the outcomes/changes are likely to be sustained.
6. Make a judgement on value for money, in terms of the impact/outcomes achieved.
7. How could this be adjusted for future sports or wellbeing work in Ely?

In addition to the standard evaluative criteria in understanding the project's achievements and learning, Ely diocese is also particularly interested in understanding:

How could this be a model to use across the diocese?

The evaluation has three key stakeholders: The National Church (as a co-funder of the project), Ely (in whose jurisdiction the project resides), and the Project Board (who has managed the project).

Evaluation Methodology

The Youthscape Centre for Research was commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the project. The evaluation included:

1. A desk-based review of the available project documentation and progress reports (as provided by the Diocesan Office and the Project Lead).
2. Eight semi-structured interviews with all four project staff, two Diocesan staff (including the Chair of the Project Steering Board) and two young people who had been involved with the project from its beginnings.

Ethics approval was given by the Centre for Research's Advisory Board, and information and consent forms were sent to all interviewees to ensure that they all understood the nature of the research and how their data would be used.

Interviewees were identified by purposive sampling and opportunistic sampling, selecting those who were both able to contribute relevant learning and reflection to the evaluation and those who were available to be interviewed.

The limitations of this evaluation are that we were relying on interviewees' retrospective reflections, and although the project reports did provide data that was collected as the project progressed, we weren't able to speak to people as they were actively involved. Another limitation is that because this evaluation took place so long after the project's completion, we were unable to speak to community leaders that the project had engaged with or gather wide feedback from young people and their parents/carers. Therefore, the voice of those that the project was intended to benefit is only represented through the two young people we interviewed, who both grew up in Barnwell, and the stories shared with us by the staff.

The project reports were analysed to identify learning that occurred during the project, progress towards outcomes, factors that supported that progress and challenges that hindered it, impact stories and key risks that recurred throughout the project.

The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, between 30-75 minutes long and were semi-structured. Questions were asked to understand how the interviewees understood the mission of the project, what they felt worked well or didn't work so well, the project targets and how realistic these were and the benefits and challenges of having such targets, their perspectives on the outcomes and impacts of the project, how they saw the legacy and sustained impact of the project and any advice they would give to another church or Diocese looking to start a similar project. There was also open space for interviewees to share anything they felt was relevant or helpful to the evaluation.

We present the main findings of the evaluation in three sections.

1. Themes identified from interviewee reflections on the project
2. A review of the outcomes and impact, including case studies
3. Addressing the evaluation criteria identified in the Terms of Reference

Understanding the Project Mission

Interviewees had a common understanding of the project's vision and mission, described by the theory of change as '*transforming the lives of young people through the power of sport and the gospel*'. They understood this to start with outreach

"reaching the people of Barnwell"

"reaching people who had been hard to reach"

"begin to make a connection with people in the parish community"

But they were also clear that the end goal wasn't just connection but transformation. The project was designed to draw people into exploring faith and being part of a church community with the hope that this would both change the narrative for Barnwell, transform the lives of those involved and change the shape of the local church. Sports ministry was the tool chosen to deliver this vision because of the past experience of the project lead and the perceived fit with the needs of the local community. This perception was informed by consultation with professionals already working in the area and local knowledge, as well as the project lead's skills and experience.

What Worked Well?

The People

It was clear that the skills and capacities of the staff were a key factor in the success of the project. There was a sense that they were "*the right people at the right time*", that they worked well together and were equally committed to the vision "*it did take people to be quite committed*." The board and the leadership seemed to "*mesh well*", and there was unanimous appreciation for the quality of leadership from the project lead: "*Danny's leadership and actually the way he's brought the church on a journey of change and transformation*." "*A lot of respect for Danny because he took on a young team and had to try and form a way that it worked, you know, and I think a lot of it was his leadership.*"

There seemed to be some benefit realised from the existing relationships between appointed staff and volunteers. The model of a church graft enabled the project lead to bring across a staff member and volunteers to connect with an existing staff member already working within Christ the Redeemer and the Barnwell community. The encouragement for those committed to the vision to also live within the community also helped the project take root and meant the people involved had a chance to develop a deeper knowledge of how the community lived. "*One of the things Danny wanted us to do was live in the area and I think what really helped with that is that we kind of got to know as time went on where the different spaces are that the Community or people are using...where people are living and where people are willing to go.*"

The Focus on Relationships

There was a common emphasis in interviewees' reflections on the relational aspect of how the team worked both with each other and with the community they were trying to reach. There was a focus on people over process, the project lead described it as a "*Ministry of presence*", ultimately this was a deep and patient work, willing to engage with messy and non-linear faith journeys, trusting God was at work even if the fruit wasn't visible. This approach built trust within the community and with schools. Over and over again, references were made to the positive nature of the relationships with local schools, other churches and charities, and the families and young people that the project was connecting with. The partnerships with other churches were facilitated by this relational approach and enabled by a common commitment to

“love this area” and to “seeing it changed and transformed”. Being able to get to know young people well enough to “call out something in them”

One staff member referred to the value in the opportunity to be “playful” with young people, that smaller numbers meant you could build relationships and provide meaningful space for young people who are often excluded from other clubs. One person reflected that more spiritual growth was seen in the small, intimate spaces rather than large-scale events. Two interviewees specifically mentioned the value of just showing up and the messaging that sends to a community or individual that is used to having services withdrawn and/or cut.

One of the young people who was interviewed valued the time given to talk each week before the Bible study or sports, meaning they got to know each other better, and there was a social aspect to meeting up. For the older young leader, the relationship they had with the staff meant they were confident in their role despite some challenging behaviour from young people attending. One interviewee reflected on how well the team had built relationships with parents and families in a community where adults or institutional and authority figures are not traditionally welcomed or trusted. Another described how a role they had created for one of the team to stop young people from running out of the session at the end also turned into a listening ear for parents as they stopped for a chat and shared their struggles and questions about faith.

Being Rooted in Local Church

Thirdly, it was clear from all the interviews that this was a project embedded within the existing local church, and for that to be possible, the local church had also been open to the journey to accommodate the project, buying into the vision. References were made to the vision being about “*helping the local church engage in mission*” and “*Danny managed to really connect into what they were doing as a local church.*” Even the language used to describe the project as a church graft recognises the value of the rootedness of what was already there and the connecting in of a new branch rather than planting something new and separate.

The success of this was probably helped by the fact that of the three staff on the project, one had come from St Barnabas with the project lead, and another was already working at Christ the Redeemer and those who moved across were encouraged to do so wholeheartedly by moving into the area. The approach to Sports Ministry meant that this wasn’t just about putting on sports sessions with an evangelistic slant, but that sports were often integrated into groups and activities that were primarily about discipleship.

One of the young interviewees commented that the link between the workers in the community activities with the workers in the church made it easier for young people to transition into the church community. Rather than being simply an outreach activity, Barnwell’s Sports Ministry was like a golden thread running throughout different activities within the church, keeping everything connected to the core vision and mission.

Financial Security of Grant Funding

There was no doubt that the provision of 3 years of funding allowed the project to establish itself without the pressure of needing to charge schools or parents for individual activities or to have to fundraise for core costs. It meant that the project could develop in response to local need and helped build trust between the staff and the schools and parents because they could see the motivation of the team was love and care for the young people, rather than a need to generate income. It also allowed the project to acquire a broader range of equipment and make use of a wider variety of sports in their sessions, and for young people to feel invested in. One staff member commented that “*the ability to be able to buy sports equipment and things like that opened up a lot of capacity to make teenagers feel like they belonged.*” For an area that will struggle to resource its own funding, the grant was a gift, and it is unlikely that anything near the scale the project reached would have been achieved without it.

Permission to Try

The culture set by the leadership encouraged experimentation. “*The way we kind of approached it was just to not worry about things failing and just trying them. I think that was really great because you were able to come up with ideas and*

then, you know, get to put them into practice." This approach was no doubt enabled by the funding but was also fostered by the project leadership. Regular reflection in the quarterly reports, as well as project monitoring and risk reporting, meant that activities were regularly reviewed and either adapted or paused in response to the team's learning.

What Were The Challenges?

Lack of a Clear Plan for Long-Term Sustainability

While the 3-year grant enabled the project to do what it did so well, and generated valuable learning for future mission strategy, as is rightly the purpose of an innovation fund, the short-term nature of the funding does leave a challenge for projects like this to transition into other funding sources. Particularly for projects that are working in areas of socio-economic deprivation, such as Barnwell, where external funding will always need to be sought and where communities are used to short-lived interventions and support. Short-term funding doesn't encourage long-term staffing and is something to consider in areas where continuity of relationships is key. A comment was made that the fund's purpose was to allow for experimentation and the capture of learning rather than building in sustainability, however, in communities like Barnwell perhaps additional provision needs to be built into the fund's scope for earlier consideration to be given to the longer-term strategy and the life of the project beyond the initial funding.

Complexity of Life Within the Community

There were several challenges associated with the context of the community of Barnwell, including cultural challenges in getting parents to sign children up for activities, encouraging young people in discipleship when parents were not supportive of personal faith, staff learning how to manage the dysregulated behaviour of young people and how best to work with young people who had a range of special educational needs. The young leaders commented on the behaviour of some young people and the challenge this presented to staff, but felt that "*overall the leaders dealt with it quite well.*" One shared that they felt "*sport was a good medium for different backgrounds to come together.*"

Tied to these challenges were the difficulties in communication with one of the schools, likely due to teacher workload and internal school pressures rather than a disinterest in what was being offered. Despite an initial positive response to the team running Active RE sessions in the school, no one ever confirmed a start date, and eventually a different approach was taken by the team that was easier for the school to implement. It may have simply been that allowing the team to run some sports sessions during a lunch break required less from the school's administration than running active RE sessions during lesson time. The team demonstrated their flexibility and 'people over programmes' ethos by pivoting here, although one felt perhaps with hindsight they could have pivoted earlier. The quarterly project reports shared the regular twists and turns throughout the three years and how the team were learning and adapting as they went along the journey, while one interviewee commented that when you are working in an area like Barnwell, "*you never get to the point where things run smoothly.*"

Lack of Connection with the Wider Diocese

Some work has been going on since the project ended to discuss the place of the project within the Diocese going forward, described by one interviewee as "*retrofitting*" – trying to find the best fit after the project had been established, rather than designing it with this fit in mind. The short turnaround from the inception of the project idea to its beginning may have impacted the capacity within the Diocese to consider the strategic value of this project and how it could be better connected to the Diocese without losing the value of being embedded within the local church prior to its start. Although it was clear from the project lead and the Diocesan staff that there could have been a clearer understanding at the start about how the project was connected to the Diocese and the intended significance of it for other areas within the Diocese.

That said, it didn't seem to impact significantly on operational matters, other than initial challenges for the project lead in understanding responsibilities for setting up employment policies and payroll. From what we heard, the relationship between the board and the project staff, although distant, did seem to function well. None of the youth work staff or young people referred to the Diocese either positively or negatively in their interviews, suggesting it wasn't a significant factor for them either way. It should be noted that the project lead (with other project staff) did represent the Ely Diocese at the National Sport and Wellbeing Learning Community, and they felt this was a helpful regular space to reflect on what they were doing. There was also research undertaken alongside this that was presented at General Synod.

Recurring Risks

The project reports identified current risks every quarter and a review of these identified several recurring themes:

- **Staff recruitment or capacity** – there were several references to the need to recruit new staff or staff capacity being taken up either by personal circumstances or broader leadership responsibilities. However, the size (having 3 core staff) and quality of the team did seem to provide a buffer to these challenges. That said, the short-term funding inevitably has an impact on setting the longevity expectations of those applying for the roles, meaning that mass recruitment would likely always have been necessary as the three years came to an end.
- **Communication with partners** – as described above, there were some challenges with communication from one particular school, but there were also some issues with another charity partner and the timing of an after-school club clashing with an existing project club.
- **Behaviour management** –some specific challenging behaviour incidents were referred to in the highlighted risks. A response to this was that one of the team created a handbook for staff and volunteers to help them work with young people with SEND.

Reflections on the Project Targets

In general, the numerical targets were seen positively, as something to keep the project on track with its mission and as aspirational but not unachievable numbers. One interviewee felt that they helped get the team to think outside of the box, and they provided accountability and focus. It was also widely recognised though, that faith journeys are not linear, lives are messy, and that fruit is often unseen. Measuring discipleship and faith development is particularly difficult, and we will likely never know the full impact of a project like this on all those who were part of it. One remarked that the local context also makes collecting numerical data like attendance or engagement difficult, as they are not always consistent in areas of deprivation. Forecasting targets for these kinds of funding bids is not easy; it's about showing something to be *"plausible, not too ambitious that it's not believable and not too conservative that it's not worth funding."* In other words, not over-inflating what might be achieved but equally not undervaluing the potential so that it doesn't appear to funders as good value for money.

The targets were also impacted by factors outside of the team's control, e.g. the school not engaging with Active RE reduced the number of young people who were able to be impacted by Sports Ministry through the project. That said, no one felt negatively about the numbers that were achieved; there was a sense that the project was about depth as well as breadth, that stories were just as important as statistics, and they held the targets lightly, committed to progress but not disheartened if numbers didn't match initial expectations. One interviewee was very clear that *"at the end of the day if it was just one person that gave their life to Jesus as a result of this, the whole project, that's worth it in my eyes."*

Advice for Similar Projects

When asked what advice they would give to someone thinking about starting a similar project, the key themes that emerged were the importance of local understanding, relational depth, and long-term sustainability, alongside the practical realities of delivering mission-focused youth ministry in complex communities.

1. Understand your context - Take time to understand the local culture and what will resonate – for example, rugby may connect better than cricket in some areas. When you've identified what connects, then start small, focus on doing one thing really well, and build from there. Manage expectations both locally and with funders or strategic partners—deep and lasting change rarely happens quickly.

2. Build strong foundations - Secure early buy-in from church leaders, PCCs, schools, and community partners. Clarify administrative and employment responsibilities with the Diocese before starting. Ensure the project's fit within the Diocesan strategy is clear from the outset to support long-term sustainability. Form a diverse local steering group with practical, pastoral, and strategic expertise. Include external voices to strengthen governance, reflection, and learning.

3. Prioritise relationships and prayer - Be relational and prayerful – focus on people, not just programmes. Ask young people regularly for their feedback and adapt accordingly. Keep the work rooted in prayer, faith, and genuine care for the community.

4. Keep it simple and flexible - Make activities accessible and easy to adapt as things develop. Focus on responsiveness rather than sticking rigidly to your strategy. Create a culture where it's safe to try, evaluate, and stop things when they're not working.

5. Recruit and support the right people - Recruit local, passionate leaders who are ideally committed to staying for the long haul. Offer support, supervision, and training to build both professional and spiritual capacity. Consider what training may be helpful at the start of the project; this links to knowing your context and who you are trying to reach. Involve young people in leadership to help them develop skills and confidence and potentially grow into key leadership roles.

6. Plan for Sustainability - Build in long-term planning and financial continuity from the start. Be realistic about the challenges of self-sustainability, particularly in deprived areas. When working with funders, seek clear assurances about future or follow-on funding opportunities. If you aren't sure whether you will be able to continue with the project beyond any grant, think carefully about what you propose to start and the impact on the community if you end up withdrawing what you've started.

The overall message was that successful community-rooted ministry relies on patient, relational work that balances vision with realism. Ideally, projects need to be contextually grounded, prayerfully sustained, and supported by committed local leaders, a strong team and strong administrative foundations.



Overall, while numbers do matter, and the project did perform well against its numerical targets, the most profound outcomes were found in individual stories of transformation and relationship, depth over scale (see some of the case studies for examples). The project demonstrated the value of being embedded in the community—impacting not only young people but also their families, the church, and the team itself. Even in difficult contexts, the consistent, relational, and gospel-centred “*Ministry of Presence*” bore fruit over time in changed lives and renewed community trust.

Numerical Targets

The progress against the numerical targets, while good, reflects the challenges of both estimating and measuring numerical outcomes in a project like this. It is also likely in a project with such a focus on relationships that depth would naturally (and rightly) be prioritised over scale. The figures in the tables below are cumulative.

Outcomes:

30 New Disciples

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Target	4	12	30
Actual	6	18	22

30 Young People Sharing Their Faith Regularly

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Target	4	12	30
Actual	10	22	24

450 Young People (and their families) positively impacted by Sport

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Target	120	250	450
Actual	87	114	115*

*A significant factor in this target not being reached was due to active RE sessions not starting in schools as originally planned - see p10 Complexity of life within the community.

Enablers:

Young People Exploring Faith

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Target	20	55	100
Actual	65	78	61

Young People Strengthened Discipleship

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Target	14	26	40
Actual	24	32	26*

*The drop off in the Enablers numbers between years 2 and 3 is due to various factors including: some young people having turned 18 between years 2 and 3 so no longer part of the 'young people' category at the end of year 3, some young people began to disconnect when they heard some of the staff team were moving on and some of the behavioural challenges meant that some families withdrew their children from sessions.

For Young People

Several young people experienced significant emotional and behavioural growth, showing evidence of **personal transformation**. For example, one staff member shared about a young person who was previously getting in trouble at school improved their behaviour at school after attending the half-term sports club as a young leader. Another spoke about a young person, initially withdrawn and angry, who eventually opened up to their mentor, discovered a sense of worth in God's love, and went on to study law at university because he wanted to "*make a change in the system.*" Staff reported that young people began sharing faith with peers even before making personal commitments themselves, showing a growing confidence in discussing spiritual matters and clear **spiritual growth**, even if they wouldn't yet consider themselves Christians. One young interviewee said that attending the Pray Play and Say Sports Discipleship group "*made me more aware of God*".

There was **increased participation** by young people as youth group numbers grew over the period. One of the young people we interviewed reminded us that it isn't always easy for young people to attend groups even if they enjoy being there, and that he had to overcome a mental barrier to get there on a Friday night, even though "*when I did it was really good*". Both young interviewees reported a **growth in confidence and leadership** skills. The opportunity to lead games at camp, participate in church services, had led to transferable skills and a growth in social confidence, as well as given one a chance to try out the idea of being a teacher. They felt they had **developed new and stronger friendships**, and one said that when he got home after attending activities, he was more inclined to do something positive.

For Families

Parents began **engaging with the church** through their children's involvement—some families now regularly attend church services. The project's visible presence and **relational consistency built trust with families** who might otherwise avoid church or community initiatives. Parents sought **pastoral support** from project staff, widening the ministry's reach beyond young people to whole households.

For The Church

Work with young people became a key part of the church's new five-year strategy, **embedding youth ministry at the heart of its mission**. The church community went on the journey with the project, and as a result, **the church grew** in number, more members were attending home groups, and **more began giving financially** to the work. One interviewee reflected that the church was "*quite alienated when I first moved there, people were like 'why would we step into church'*". But the church "*shifted things around*" and was "*very much focused on getting to know the people that came along....it was like you're being invited into everything we're doing. So if you're here for more than a couple of weeks, can you come and help us with the coffee?*"

There was an increase in people in the worshipping community which demonstrates the impact on the wider life of the church:

	June 2021 Before church graft	July 2021 After church graft	July 2024 After end of Project
No. adults	10	22	37
No. young people	15	22	26

This represents a 43% increase in church attendance from the graft in July 21 to project end July 24.

For The Staff and Volunteers

Staff reported **personal and professional development**, growing in resilience, patience, and confidence in navigating complex community contexts. They reflected on how challenging but **faith-deepening** the experience was. As well as developing their own faith journeys, **young leaders gained valuable experience** working with children, exploring vocations in teaching or ministry, and developing mentoring and discipleship skills. As one staff member reflected, "*seeing them develop over the years in their leadership and then their faith as well.*"

The Project's Legacy

The project has seeded a significant legacy across the church, community, and diocese. It strengthened and built new partnerships with local schools and community organisations, building trust through consistent presence and care. The partnership approach to Friday Night Youth has drawn in new young people and is more sustainable than when it was run solely by Christ the Redeemer. The church itself has grown with increased engagement in home groups (85% of the church) and regular giving by 74% of the church, and a renewed sense of mission centred on young people. Families who might not previously have engaged with church life have become connected through youth activities, and the project has demonstrated the potential for sustained, relational ministry in transforming not only individual lives but the wider community atmosphere. Young people have grown in confidence, leadership, and faith—some making commitments, others discovering that they are valued and capable. For many, the experience of being known and cared for by adults who kept showing up was profoundly formative, whether or not it leads to ongoing church involvement here or elsewhere.

Theologically and strategically, the project has reshaped thinking about how faith can be expressed in everyday contexts such as sport, modelling an understanding of sport as worship. One young person described them playing sport as a way to give God thanks for the gifts He had given them. For the Diocese, there is the opportunity to see sports-based outreach as an effective tool for mission in diverse and often challenging communities and to use this experience as something on which other mission projects can be modelled. Though some impacts may never be seen directly—young people who reconnect with faith years later, or families quietly changed—the project's legacy lies in the relationships it built, the hope it instilled, and the belief it has nurtured that God can do “immeasurably more” in places where hope can feel scarce.



Alongside stories of families connecting with church through their children attending summer camp or youth groups, successful partnerships with other local charities or churches, a deepened relationship with local schools and a transformed relationship with the local council, there are also some significant individual stories that we have included below to illustrate the transformative impact of the project on individual lives.

A Young Leader: Growing Confidence & Faith Through Leadership

This young leader first became involved in the project when he and his mum moved from St Barnabas to Christ the Redeemer, following Danny's transition between churches. Having familiar faces alongside him made the move easier, and over time, he found himself fully integrated into the new community—so much so that he now describes everyone as *“all the same.”* He particularly values the smaller, close-knit feel of Christ the Redeemer, where *“you know everyone and feel comfortable speaking with everyone.”*

He became actively involved in the youth and sports activities, enjoying the social aspect and the opportunity to spend time with friends during the week. Sessions provided space for conversation, reflection, and shared faith through both Bible study and sport. As part of the Young Leaders group, he began to take on more responsibility, helping to lead games and encourage younger children. Not everything came easily—Friday Night Youth (FNY) sessions were sometimes a challenge after a long week, with a *“mental barrier”* to getting out again. However, whenever he did attend, he found the sessions *“really good”*.

Through his involvement, he describes becoming *“more aware of God,”* feeling more active and motivated, and being *“more inclined to do something positive”* after sessions. His friendships deepened, and he grew more comfortable around new people. Danny and other leaders observed a noticeable growth in his confidence, particularly in his leadership of games at the summer holiday camp. Other leaders also commented on how well he led the younger children.

This leadership experience gave him the courage to take further steps—leading action songs in Sunday worship and becoming more confident in front of people. He also joined a small discipleship group. He now carries that confidence into new environments and recognises how the link between community projects and church life can help other young people feel they belong. He has developed a theology of sport as worship—seeing physical activity as a way of giving thanks for the gifts God has given him.

Reflecting on his journey, he encouraged future project leaders to *“keep it accessible and don’t overcomplicate it.”* He advises being flexible and listening closely to young people’s feedback, making sure leaders are welcoming and skilled at building relationships: *“We all got quite close as a group – you need leaders who can do that.”*

His story is an example of how the project helped young people discover confidence, faith, and belonging through community, discipleship, and shared activity.

A Young Person: From Disengaged to Determined

One staff member shared about this young person’s story in their interview: This young person began attending the youth sessions regularly but suddenly dropped off for a couple of months before returning, visibly angry and withdrawn. A youth worker began meeting with him one-to-one, but for several weeks, he barely spoke. Then, during one session, he asked

quietly, “*Why are you still here? I don’t understand why you keep showing up. I’ve not given you any reason to hang out with me.*”

That moment became a turning point. The worker shared honestly that he kept showing up because he cared about the young person—and because he knew that God cared about him and believed there was more to his life than he could see. The young person broke down and admitted that he didn’t feel he was worth much.

Change didn’t happen overnight. He continued to struggle at school and to make unwise decisions. But as he approached his A levels, something shifted. He began to believe that God was calling him to something bigger and started working hard toward that goal. His perseverance paid off: he achieved strong A-level results and went on to university to study law, motivated by a desire to make a positive change in the system.

His story shows how the ‘ministry of presence’ the team displayed, initially by just showing up, communicates God’s love and opens up new possibilities for young people who may have lost hope.

A Young Person: Responsibility Encourages Responsible Behaviour

Another story shared by a staff member: one young person who joined the project was struggling at school, finding it hard to manage his behaviour and emotions. He began attending Friday Night Youth sessions but initially found some of the social elements difficult. When the team ran a half-term sports club, he surprised everyone by asking if he could help with the younger children’s session as well as take part in his own age group.

Against expectations, he turned up and thrived in the helper role, showing patience, maturity, and leadership that hadn’t been seen in him before. A while after, his dad shared that something had shifted after that half-term club, his son had “turned a corner” at school and was managing much better in class.

A few months later, the relationship deepened further when the young person’s dad contacted Danny directly for support with a personal issue. Danny was able to listen, help, and signpost him to further assistance, extending the project’s impact beyond the young person to the wider family.

This example illustrates how giving young people responsibility can help them behave more responsibly, have impacts that we may not know about at the time and help the church to build trust with parents and carers.

Relevance and Context

The project was deeply embedded within the life of the local church and reached into the wider community. Staff lived locally, enabling them to build authentic relationships and gain a genuine understanding of where people naturally gather and how community life is shaped. The active listening and responsiveness to the needs of young people and their families, combined with the “let’s try it” approach, meant that the project ably supported both the spiritual and physical health needs of people living in the parish, offering spaces for belonging, faith exploration and wellbeing. There wasn’t an “us and them” culture, one young leader reflected on how he recognised himself in a young person attending, and identifying that similarity enabled him to engage with them in an activity. The vision imagery of a church ‘graft’ rather than a ‘plant’ ensured that the project’s approach, priorities and impact remained contextually rooted and relevant to the people it served.

Effectiveness of Missional Design

The project showed clear evidence of effectiveness. Over time, the number of young people involved grew steadily, supported by successful partnerships with local organisations and churches. Because the ministry was embedded within Christ the Redeemer, it created natural pathways for young people and families to move from community-based activities into wider church life, strengthened further by the consistency of staff and volunteers building ongoing relationships across church and community. The focus remained firmly on discipleship rather than just community connection; there were possibly more inter-connections in the theory of change than initially included – rather than sport ministry running as a separate stream alongside Christian teaching in church services and groups as outlined in the Theory of Change, both sport and Christian teaching acted as a golden thread throughout community based sports activity and the church groups, creating space for spiritual exploration even among those not yet identifying as Christian.

Individual stories illustrated real transformation: young people grew in faith, confidence, and leadership, developing skills such as leading Bible studies, mentoring others, and contributing to worship. The team maintained a reflective and adaptive approach throughout, regularly reviewing what was helping or hindering relationships and being willing to adjust activities accordingly – again holding “*people over programmes*”. While the tension between meeting numerical targets and recognising unseen spiritual growth was acknowledged, the project and the team held this balance well—valuing both data and the personal stories that revealed lasting change. Overall, the shared sense of mission, commitment to relational discipleship, and continual learning culture ensured the project was both effective in delivery and authentically missional in design.

Learning

This evaluation has enabled us to highlight both practical and strategic lessons for future initiatives. One of the clearest findings was the power of partnerships—capable of greatly multiplying impact when strong, but equally able to limit it when not fully developed early on. Establishing a consistent rhythm of activity was helpful, providing stability and a platform from which new opportunities could grow. The team learned the importance of flexibility—adapting to the realities of school engagement, community culture, and local feedback while keeping the core vision and objectives in focus rather

than rigidly following a set programme – “*People over programmes*” and being “*a church in the community and for the community*.”

Sustainability is a key area for reflection. The need to plan for long-term staffing and leadership continuity from the outset was emphasised, alongside the value of developing local leaders. The culture of experimentation and review allowed activities to be reshaped or paused; staff were encouraged to honestly reflect on whether an activity was truly serving the mission of the project or whether it needed to be refocused or laid down. The evaluation also highlighted the value in appropriate training and support for youth ministers, particularly around behaviour management, SEND awareness, and the relational dimensions of sports ministry (both with young people and their families).

On a wider level, the team reflected on the challenge of working in communities where trust in institutions, authority figures and interventions is low. The trust that they were able to build during their time there was significant, but was also created a risk for the project when they all moved on. There was some evidence that a level of trust was also built in the church itself, not only through individual relationships, but for future projects, how to minimise the loss of relational capital when individuals move on may be worth more reflection. Learning also included recognising the tension between idealism and realism—holding onto passion and faith while navigating the slow, often messy realities of community transformation. Finally, we noted the need for clearer frameworks for measuring impact, acknowledging that some outcomes—particularly those of faith and relationship—are often unseen and may be realised long after participation.

Efficiency

It's difficult to quantify the value for money of this project; however, we can consider the scale, depth and inclusivity of the observed impact in relation to the resources invested. Qualitative evidence suggests that the funding was used effectively. The financial freedom provided by the grant was a major strength, most notably enabling staff to “*keep showing up*” without relying on contributions from schools or parents, to experiment and learn from mistakes, and to commit fully to relational and missional work rather than transactional activities that were financially viable. Having three team members was also important within this context, given the challenging environment, safeguarding considerations and the buffer this can provide against individuals having capacity issues or moving on. One interviewee did suggest a fourth team member would have been better because of the breadth of work one Children's and Youth Worker had to cover. The sustained presence of the team within the community was central to the project's success and could not realistically have been achieved with fewer resources.

It is possible that greater change might be achieved in future projects using similar resources by building on the learning gained—such as adapting more quickly to school contexts, prioritising early staff training in behaviour management and SEND, and establishing stronger diocesan connections to amplify impact and share learning more widely.

In terms of outcomes, the scale of impact reached around 120 young people—approximately 15% of 5–18-year-olds in the parish. The depth of impact was notable, with 68% of young people exploring faith, reflecting the strong focus on discipleship rather than purely social engagement. The inclusivity of the project was also significant, reaching into some of the most marginalised groups within a community ranked in the top 13% most deprived nationally. Many participants faced challenges such as school exclusion, parental financial hardship, and high levels of SEND, yet the project provided them with consistent, compassionate engagement.

Overall, while the project's efficiency cannot be measured solely in numerical terms, the combination of relational depth, inclusion of marginalised young people, and lasting spiritual and social outcomes indicates that the resources were well used to achieve meaningful and transformative impact.

Sustainability

The project has laid strong foundations for long-term sustainability through a posture of love, consistency, and relational presence within the community. Its legacy is seen not only in the increased number of families now connected to or attending church, but in the trust and goodwill established with local schools, charities, and residents. The team's approach—seeking genuine relationships rather than quick outcomes—has demonstrated a sustainable model of mission rooted in care and presence.

However, one of the key ongoing challenges is ensuring that trust in the church endures beyond individual staff members. For long-term sustainability, the church itself must continue to “show up,” maintaining the same relational commitment even as personnel change. Current discussions between Diocesan leaders are exploring how the learning and impact of this work can be embedded more widely and how insights can be shared with other parishes.

From a wider perspective, the project points towards a Kingdom-building understanding of sustainability: one that values unseen or gradual faith journeys as much as measurable outcomes. It also highlights the importance of rebalancing diocesan resources, in this case, enabling well-resourced churches to support those in more deprived areas. By empowering local churches to respond contextually to their communities—rather than replicating models suited to wealthier contexts—the Diocese can build on this project's learning to nurture sustainable, locally-owned expressions of mission across diverse settings.

This project arose from a local initiative outwith existing strategy - in effect it was a pilot of the Central Innovation fund. The project achieved its aims, and its learnings are now informing future diocesan strategy. With the National and Diocesan strategy of becoming younger and growing the church, that poses the question - is there a place within national or diocesan strategies for this type of innovation & creativity - a fund that supports, in a fully accountable way, new ideas initiated locally to learn from and share for the future?

Further to this, Danny commented: *“We are a low-income community in the most socio-economically divided city in the UK. We are in one of the wealthier dioceses - had it not been for the Innovation Fund we would not have attracted national funding. Clearly the national church should continue commit to supporting innovation in all low-income communities. My reflection is in wealthier dioceses - where we know for certain there are low-income communities - what resources can be afforded for local contexts to enable innovation to take place, mindful the way the national church seeks to support low-income communities is calculated or weighted on a particular sort of metric. An additional reflection is that in low-income communities funding is needed for five (or more years) rather than three to ensure that relational consistency and ongoing trust is built over a longer period of time.”*



Conclusion

The Barnwell Sports Project has made a lasting difference in the life of the church and community. Although some numerical targets were difficult to measure, the evidence gathered from young people, families, and staff shows clear evidence of growth and change. Through the combination of sport and faith, lives have been transformed, and discipleship has deepened. Young people have grown in confidence, leadership and faith; families who previously had little or no contact with church are now connected and supported; and youth ministry is becoming an integral part of the church's life. This has been made possible through the quality and commitment of the staff team, the project's rootedness within the local church, its flexible and relational approach, and the financial capacity provided through the Innovation Fund.

Alongside its intended outcomes, the project also produced several unexpected benefits. Friendships and connections have been formed across social and economic divides, and partnerships with other churches and local charities have extended the project's reach. These ripple effects highlight how relational ministry does not just change individual lives but also impacts community networks.

The project's theory of change - that sport and the gospel together can transform young people's lives - has proved well-founded. Sport created an open, non-threatening way for young people from different backgrounds to build relationships, develop confidence, and encounter faith. The project also demonstrated that worship and discipleship can take place through sport itself, and that consistency and presence speak more powerfully than programmes.

Learning from the project has been rich and is already influencing diocesan thinking. It has shown the power of partnership, the importance of long-term staffing and leadership development, and the need to remain adaptable to local realities. It has also reminded those involved of the balance needed between vision and realism—holding hope and faith alongside the practical challenges of working in communities facing multiple forms of deprivation.

The legacy of the project is clear. Relationships between the church, school and community are stronger, and the church's posture of love, faithfulness and care towards young people is now firmly embedded in its ongoing ministry. The challenge ahead is to ensure that this trust is sustained beyond individual staff members, and that the same commitment to presence and relationship continues in the years to come.

In terms of value for money, the evidence suggests that the investment has achieved significant and lasting impact. The grant from the Innovation Fund enabled staff to give time, consistency, and attention to young people and families who might otherwise have been overlooked and has laid firm foundations for long-term transformation.

Looking ahead, the learning from Barnwell offers a strong foundation for future sports and wellbeing work across the Diocese. Early alignment with Diocesan structures, realistic planning for sustainability, and continued investment in training and pastoral support for youth and sports ministers will help similar initiatives grow with even greater reach and resilience.

Recommendations

Learning from this evaluation has enabled us to set out the following steps that may help future projects in their planning and set up:

Pray. Listen. Start small. Build relationships. Reflect often. Celebrate success. Plan for the future.

1. Pray: Be inspired by God and regularly contend for your vision

- Is your vision grounded in prayer and a sense of God's leading?
- What excites or stirs your passion about using sport to build community and share faith?
- Who else shares that vision — can you gather a few others to pray, dream, and plan with you?
- Keep your focus on people and God's purpose, not just on running activities or hitting targets.

2. Listen: To God, to the community and to your experience

- What is God saying, what is the community saying, and what do you notice about your context? How well do you know your context?
- What sports or activities already connect with people locally? (e.g. football, netball, running, walking groups, dance)
- Who are the young people or communities you hope to reach, and what matters most to them?
- Spend time listening to schools, clubs, parents, and local organisations before deciding what to offer.
- Ask: where is God already at work in this community — and how can we join in? What model or structure is the best fit? A ministry plant, graft or is this a natural extension of work your church or organisation is already doing?
- Keep listening as you go; communities change, and so should your understanding.

3. Start Small: Invest your resources wisely and be selective about what you take on

- Consider starting by doing one thing really well and building from there.
- Be realistic about your time, energy, and resources; don't stretch the project too thinly or try to grow too rapidly without the roots to sustain growth.
- Try to recruit local, passionate people who can commit to the long term.
- Offer regular support, training, and prayer for those involved & identify skills gaps early on so these can be supported.
- Form a small steering or support group with practical, pastoral, and strategic experience.
- Make sure your plans fit within your church or diocesan vision so the work can grow with support and accountability.

4. Reflect Often: Make reflection and review part of your culture

- How often will you pause to check that your activities still serve your vision and values?
- Are you creating space to reflect prayerfully as a team and listen for God's guidance?
- Ask young people and community members for regular feedback — what's connecting, what's not?
- Don't be afraid to adapt, try something new, or stop what isn't working.
- Create a culture where learning and honest reflection are valued.

5. Celebrate Success: Value the project and where it's working

- Foster a culture of celebration and positivity, and celebrate when things go well
- Notice where God is working, look for this beyond the obvious places
- Share successes with partners and stakeholders, value their support by allowing them to share in this with you

6. Plan for the Future: Don't get stuck in the present; look ahead at where you're going

- What will help this work last beyond the first burst of enthusiasm or initial funding?
- Who else could share resources — schools, clubs, councils, or other churches?
- Have you thought about future funding, staffing, and leadership succession?
- Keep clear communication with your Diocese and funders about long-term plans.
- Be mindful of the community impact if you ever have to stop a project — plan how to exit well or consider doing something else.