



# Opening School Facilities Programme: Learning Phase Report

December 2020



*Insight produced by*

**Active  
Black Country**

Creating a healthy, active region

## Contents

Introduction.....	2
Approach.....	2
OSF Survey and Focus Groups.....	2
One-to-One Consultations.....	3
Community Mapping.....	4
Pilot Projects.....	5
Leisure Facilities Consultation.....	7
Reflections on the Approach.....	7
Impact upon Schools and Communities.....	8
Key Learning.....	9
Driving Change.....	10
Responding to Local Need.....	10
Our Role in Developing a Strong and Varied Offer.....	11
Developing a High-Quality and Sustainable Offer.....	12
Trends Affecting Community Provision.....	13
Added Value from Partnership Working.....	13
The Impact of Covid-19.....	14
Summary of Findings.....	14
Next Steps.....	15

## Introduction

As part of the Government School Sport Action Plan, Active Black Country was one of 19 Active Partnerships who were successful in securing funding from Sport England to deliver the Opening School Facilities Programme. The aim of the Programme is to widen access to physical activity opportunities for pupils and local communities by supporting schools to open their facilities outside of the school day.

## Approach

The initial phase of the OSF Programme has been focussed upon learning. Building a picture of the landscape in the Black Country, identifying barriers and challenges to opening school facilities, learning about motivations to open school facilities and, identifying examples of good practice to build expertise.

## OSF Survey and Focus Groups

In December 2019, we undertook a survey of community use school facilities to understand the general picture in the Black Country. We engaged with 131 schools through the survey; 65% of Black Country secondary schools and 21% of Primary schools completed the survey along with 4 Special Schools. This provided an excellent foundation to build upon. It gave us a clear overview of school facilities being used by the community in the region. It helped us to understand what the barriers to opening facilities are, and ambitions of schools to develop or begin a community programme. This also acted as a promotional tool informing school of the OSF programme itself. Figure 1 below shows a selection of headline results from the survey. More detailed results can be found in the Opening School Facilities School Survey Report (Feb 2020):



Figure 1: Headline Survey Results (Dec 2019)

We then set up three focus groups in February 2020, covering Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton (the Sandwell group was postponed and schools were contacted individually) which enabled us to further investigate the findings of the survey, connect with schools, and discuss their approaches to community provision, the challenges they had faced and the hurdles they would need to overcome to open their facilities or develop their programme. The Focus Groups were attended by schools with established programmes, and those who had not yet made their first steps in to community provision. 14 schools in total attended the focus groups (7 Primary, 7 Secondary) plus 3 other education related agencies.

These discussions further confirmed the findings of the survey results and enabled us to move forward confident that our initial findings were an accurate cross-section of the picture across the region.

## One-to-One Consultations

Additionally, as part of the learning process to further develop our knowledge base and understanding of good practice, find solutions to challenges, and support required by schools; our next steps were to further engage with schools on a one-to-one basis. We focussed on secondary schools with established community provision, but to differing levels of success and size of programme. Each of the schools chosen, had different characteristics in terms of the success of their programme and income levels, the quality of the facilities, the starting point to develop, and differing demographics. We also re-engaged with some of the more established programmes to discuss their experiences and challenges faced when re-opening during COVID-19. Through these consultations which have taken place throughout the course of the OSF programme delivery; we built upon the knowledge gained through the OSF survey and focus groups, as it provided us with a more detailed understanding of the background to school-based community provision, the different approaches schools take both operationally and in terms of the deeper purpose of the community programme, as well as the challenges and barriers faced:

- **The Royal Wolverhampton:** We have engaged with this school via the Principle and the Leisure Manager to explore it as an example of good practice. They have a very strong community use programme and it is adjacent to an area of high deprivation (10% IMD). They have plans for a new sports hall and 4G pitch which will allow ABC to be involved to support and influence decisions on design at an early stage, rather than retrospectively. We have plans to re-engage with them early in the New Year to discuss the impact of COVID-19 as our plans to consult with them on this were hampered by the second round of national restrictions.
- **Ormiston NEWA:** We identified this school as an example of good practice from the results of the OSF Survey (Dec 19), their subsequent attendance at the Wolverhampton OSF Focus Group and from prior knowledge of their successful community usage operations. We engaged with the facilities manager following their attendance at the Wolverhampton OSF Focus Group.
- **Leasowes High:** Following their attendance at the Dudley OSF Focus Group, the school highlighted the fact that they felt they had not reached their full potential but already operate a strong community offer with relatively tired facilities in need of a refresh. Again, we felt that this would provide insight from the perspective of a school who are ambitious even in light of their facility issues, and consulted with the Community Director. We also performed an in-depth consultation with them to discuss their experiences of re-opening during COVID-19 restrictions.
- **Ellowes Hall School:** We engaged with the new Head of Physical Education, to discuss their ambitions regarding their widely underused and impressive facility stock. Their community programme has been depleted and they are keen to re-establish their prominence as a community hub.
- **RSA Tipton:** This is the only school in the Black Country to be formerly operated by School Letting Solutions prior to them going into administration. Our engagement to date has focussed on them utilising a nationally recognised facility operator, and we plan to re-engage with them to discuss the transition from SLS management and also COVID-19 reopening, which has been delayed until the new year, due to the second round of facility closures.
- **West Walsall E-Act and Willenhall E-Act:** Our engagement with the E-Act Academy's has been through their Regional Community Manager who oversees the community delivery for both schools. The aim was to learn how their long-standing community offer had been affected by the transition to a Multi Academy Trust and to discuss their experiences of re-opening during COVID-19 restrictions. We are planning further engagement in the new year to discuss how we can best support them to develop their programme as recent consultation plans were delayed.
- **Streetly Academy:** We engaged with the Operations Manager at Streetly Academy to build our knowledge base of how an established programme operates and has stood the test of time; and as part of our in-depth consultation into re-opening facilities during COVID-19 after national lockdowns. We also were interested in finding out what levels and type of support an established programme would require. This consultation forms one of our OSF Case Studies.

We selected these schools as they display differing properties in terms of location and demographic makeup and it was thought could offer differing perspectives to opening school facilities. A number of these schools are within or close to Active Black Country Priority Wards, and we wanted to highlight areas of support we could offer in the future for these schools in particular. ABC have adopted an asset-based approach across 8 priority wards. The priority ward areas are selected using a matrix of national data that highlights high levels of deprivation, high inactivity and prevalence of children and young people and lower socio-economic groups within the resident population. Additionally, these geographies align with the Black Country's economic regeneration corridors.

In different circumstances, we would have liked to have engaged with more schools in this phase of learning to build a broader picture of provision in the Black Country, and we would have ideally liked to have been able to visit many more schools in-person rather than via video conference. On the occasions we were able to visit school sites, it was beneficial because it further enabled a first-hand understanding of the bigger picture of how schools operate their facilities, and also the challenges they have to overcome, such as facility maintenance, site layout, and demographic makeup of the catchment area.

### Community Mapping

Our approach to community mapping of school-based community provision in the Black Country was further enhanced by our interactive mapping tool. This resource is continually updated with all key pieces of research and insight carried out in the Black Country and with locally focussed national research to help develop our understanding of the landscape in the Black Country across our thematic areas of work. We utilised this tool to map key indicators of need and key community assets in the locality to our identified schools; this can be seen in the two case studies provided as part of this reporting process. Figure 2 below is an example of how we have been able to use the mapping tool to support our OSF programme:

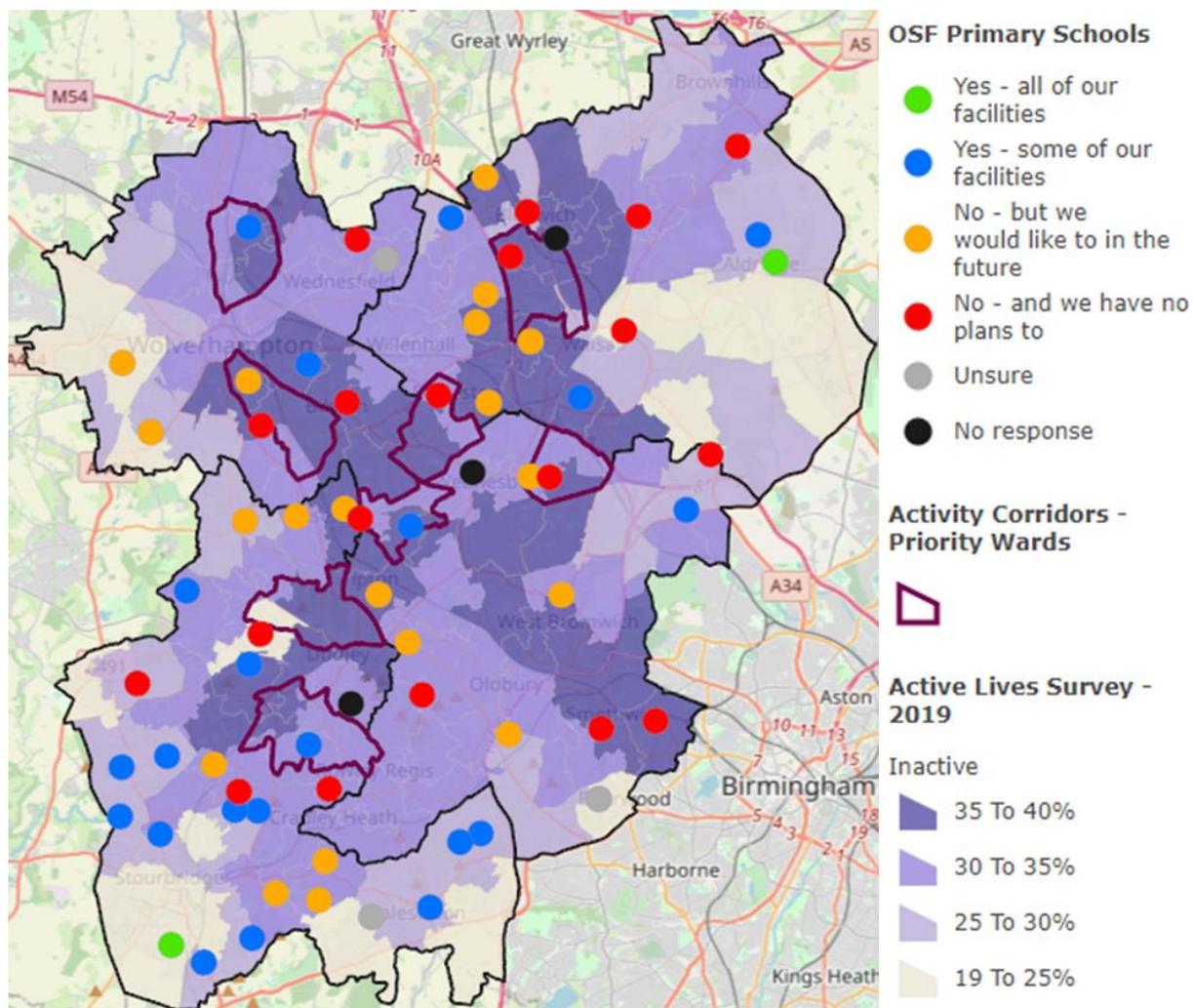


Figure 2a: OSF Survey Primary Schools against Active Lives 2019

These examples highlight all Primary Schools (2a) who completed the OSF survey and their activity levels against Active Lives 2019, and respondent Secondary Schools (2b) and their level of community provision against the indices of multiple deprivation and our Active Black Country Priority Wards.

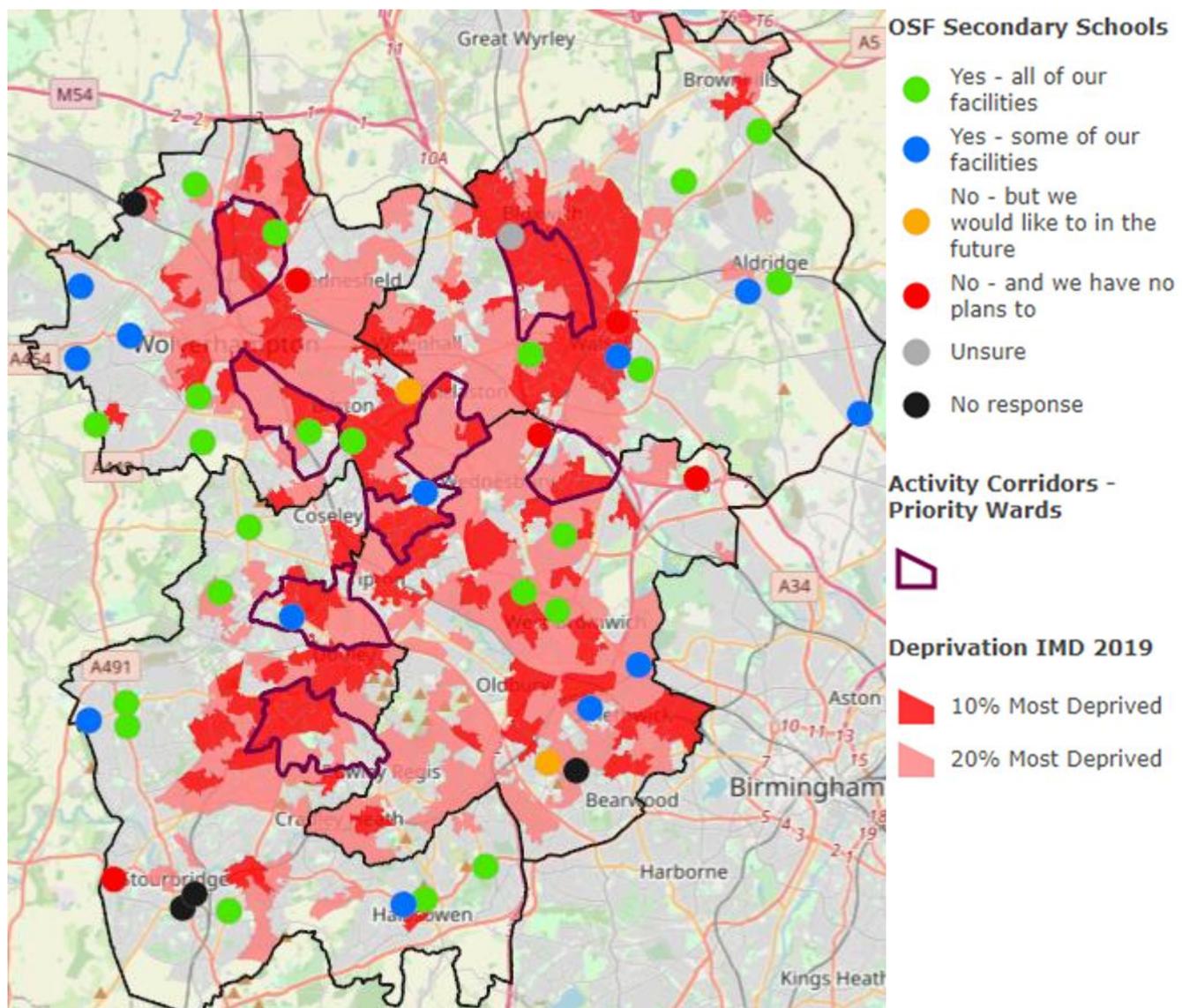


Figure 2b: OSF Survey Secondary Schools against IMD 2019

### Pilot Projects

The key element for the learning phase of our Programme has been to deliver a series of pilot projects to test a variety of approaches to opening school facilities in the Black Country. Our intention was to deliver five pilot projects as follows:

- 1) **Faith Centre Referral Pilot;** with the intention of successfully connecting a faith centre to participate in regular and sustainable activity within a school setting.
- 2) **PCN Referral Pilot;** with the aim of offering Primary Care Networks and their GP Surgeries and Health Centres a community-based outlet for physical activity referrals.
- 3) **Deprived Area Pilot;** to widen the access to sport and physical activity opportunities in a deprived area of the Black Country utilising school sites to increase opportunity to participate.
- 4) **CSHO Led Initiative;** with the aim of utilising Level 3 Community Sport and Health Officers (an apprentice workforce that ABC have been instrumental in recruiting, training and deploying) and extend their responsibilities to be activity coordinators within an after-hours school setting, thereby testing the wider potential of these important roles as conduits between school and community activity.
- 5) **Swimming Focussed Pilot;** an additional pilot project included in the programme due to the potential of it to impact a particular local community. The aim is to utilise a recently refurbished swimming pool at a primary school in an area of high deprivation in Walsall to improve the perception of the school as a community hub and to improve community cohesiveness.

We have supported four schools to date, who were handpicked based on the results of the OSF survey, previous work through the ABC Education Theme and due to their demographic make-up and locality to ABC Priority Wards, and general suitability. Three of the four schools moved forward to the pilot project implementation phase. These are highlighted below. The fourth school Tameside Primary in Sandwell, originally earmarked to be the host of a Deprived Area pilot is now part of our future work planned for our OSF Programme.

Due to the COVID-19 situation, we have moved forward with three of the five pilot projects and have worked extensively with the chosen schools, partly to develop ideas, policies, procedures and planning for the pilot projects, but also importantly to continue to build and maintain relationships and manage expectations during the long periods where beginning a community project has looked far-fetched. It was key during this process to show empathy towards each school and work at their pace, which was slower than we would have liked, due to the unprecedented pressure they have been under to deliver their core purpose. Because of this prolonged relationship building process, we are still very much in a position where each school is keen and, in some cases, very excited to deliver their pilot OSF project:

### *Swimming Pilot*

**St. James Primary, Brownhills, Walsall (Swimming focussed pilot):** The school was identified for an additional pilot project to our planned four approaches following contact from the Head Teacher who was extremely keen to open up their small but recently refurbished swimming pool to the local community in an area of high deprivation. We met with the Head Teacher prior to identified national COVID-19 restrictions and discussed his intentions which were to change the outward perception of the school and make it much more of a community hub for the local community. This included a desire to make the most of their newly refurbished pool. The Head Teacher also cited the lack of swimming provision in the area, and the poor KS2 swimming achievements of the children at the school. As such we felt that this would be an ideal concept for our OSF Pilot Projects. We have maintained contact throughout the year to ensure that the opportunity remained at the forefront of the school's objectives. Work to plan the delivery of the pilot project resumed when the schools returned in September. Since then, we have identified an activity provider, worked through policies and procedures required for delivery, and identified physical improvements needed to the pool area before the start of the programme. Significant research instigated by the OSF Programme Manager, which involved liaising with Swim England and the Swimming Teachers Association went into sourcing a suitable partner for the school, due to the scarcity of local swimming providers in the area. Without this added capacity provided by the OSF programme, the school would not have not been able to progress. The most recent delay to the start date of the programme, which had been planned for October half term, and then early December, was from the activity providers perspective, who wanted to wait until he had re-started his existing swim schools before starting this new one. The school were happy to wait, as they deemed it inappropriate to start up a community programme at this time, based on the challenges that are facing with their core purpose. We are hopeful that delivery will begin as early as permissible in the new year.

### *GP Referral Pilot*

**Netherton C of E Primary School, Netherton Dudley (GP Referral pilot):** We identified this school as the host for our GP Referral based pilot, due to its location in an area of high deprivation, within one of our priority wards. The school is also in close proximity to number of GP surgeries as well as the largest hospital in the area - Russell's Hall. Since the formation of Primary Care Networks, Active Black Country have sought to develop relationships with Clinical Directors to better understand how we can embed clear pathways to physical activity into frontline healthcare. This has involved in depth consultation with GPs, social prescribers and health coaches to generate insight around the barriers to health professionals signposting to activity. As a result of this work through our Health and Wellbeing Theme at ABC, we identified and engaged with the Dudley and Netherton Primary Care Network (PCN) Director who was keen to explore community solutions to local health inequalities and has agreed to coordinate physical activity referrals from all surgeries in the network to weekly activity sessions at the School; who in turn are keen to open their facilities and ultimately develop a community hub for the local community, and see this as an excellent starting point which aligns with their ambitions. This pilot is the subject of one of our case studies, however to date we have worked with the school to ensure that all operational aspects of the programme are in place, including policies, procedures and the customer journey through the school, and have identified and worked with an activity provider to develop a bespoke exercise programme for this project. A cohort of referrals from GP surgeries in the locality are ready and once COVID-19 restrictions are eased, subject to the school feeling delivery is appropriate, we will begin to deliver the activity sessions. Similarly, to the above, delivery will begin as soon as permissible.

### *Community Sport and Health Officer Led Pilot*

**Grove Primary School, Wolverhampton (Community Sport and Health Officer Led pilot):** The aim of this pilot is to utilise Level 3 Community Sport and Health Officers (an apprentice workforce that ABC have been instrumental in recruiting, training and deploying) to extend their responsibilities as activity coordinators within an afterhours school setting, thereby testing the wider

potential of these important roles as conduits between school and community activity. We identified Grove Primary for participation in the CSHO Led initiative ahead of other schools in Wolverhampton with CSHO Apprentices in place, following consultation through our OSF Survey (Dec 19), Aspire Sports who manage the CSHO apprenticeship programme, and based on its location just on the outskirts of the City Centre, with consideration into the good quality and size of facilities available at the school as well as the perceived capability of the resident CSHO Apprentice to drive this work forward. This school is also situated within one of the ABC Priority Wards. We have worked with the PE Coordinator at the school to develop policies and procedures and ensure that risk assessments are fit for purpose, and work through the operational elements of the community provision, such as deciding upon the customer journey through the school building. We have also identified an activity provider (Urban Trix) alongside the school, who will deliver a parkour and free-running club out of school hours for the benefit of the wider community, with the support of the CSHO who will be tasked with driving participation in community settings, marketing the activity provision, acting as the liaison between the provider and the school, and to support the provider where required. The roles and responsibilities were developed collectively with the school, Aspire Training and Active Black Country. As part of our work with Aspire going forward, we will be working to assist them in the development of a specific module on community use school facilities forming part of the CSHO Apprenticeship standard. When the school feels it appropriate, and restrictions permitting in the new year, we will be in a position to roll out delivery.

### Leisure Facilities Consultation

Alongside the OSF programme, we undertook a consultation with Black Country Leisure Facilities during September and October 2020, to assess the effect of COVID-19 upon the leisure sector in the Black Country to understand the current impact, and the challenges around re-opening and returning to facilities for users; likely future impact; and to identify any key areas requiring support from Active Black Country. Our intention was to build a clear picture of the impact of COVID-19 and social distancing measures upon the leisure sector in the Black Country, in order to understand how we can best support the sector going forward, to safeguard, maintain and where possible influence improvements on opportunities for physical activity participation in our region. Due to the clear operational similarities, we were also able to use this exercise to inform our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 upon out of hours physical activity provision on school sites in the region.

### Reflections on the Approach

In terms of our approach to school engagement, in an ideal world we would have liked to have physically visited a wider selection of schools to witness their community programme in action and to assess the condition and breadth of facility stock; but considering the restrictions this year, we have consulted with a wide selection of both secondary and primary schools with different demographic properties from across the Black Country, in all four local authority areas, with varying levels of community engagement and operational aims and objectives. Firstly, via the OSF School Survey, the Focus Group sessions held before COVID-19 restrictions took hold, and then via video conferences and the occasional school visit to build upon our knowledge and understanding of the remit of OSF, and also for the planning phase of each of the three pilot programmes which have been developed 'from scratch' ready for delivery when the situation allows.

The learning phase of the OSF programme has enabled ABC to continue and to re-establish relationships with schools built through its wider Education theme of work, but also referrals to the OSF Programme have come as a result of ABC's work with educational institutions across the Black Country, directly linking the OSF Programme Manager to key contacts and decision makers. Going forward, we expect this to be a key part of the development of our OSF programme (explained later) to build new working relationships with schools across the region.

This learning phase has also enabled us to engage and re-engage with key partners across the region, such as those who could potentially make important contributions to the programme not only in the short term with the development of the pilot projects (such as Aspire Training who have supported the CSHO Led pilot through their management of the CSHO Apprenticeship programme), but also activity providers who were consulted with as part of this process, who are keen to be involved going forward as potential suppliers to schools. The development of our Suppliers Hub is ongoing and will be integral in terms of linking schools to a variety of suppliers and activity providers who will be best placed to support their community provision development.

Particularly with the PCN Referral Pilot (Case Study 2); our Health and Wellbeing thematic area of work at ABC, contributed hugely to the success of this pilot project. Our work with the Dudley and Netherton Primary Care Network, and our knowledge of their motivation to be involved with community focussed solutions to social prescribing for patients to access physical activity opportunities, was key to their involvement, and more so, the strong relationship ABC has developed with the decision makers from this PCN.

Similarly, through our Communities Theme at ABC we were able to quickly identify a selection of activity providers who we deemed suitable, and potentially beneficial to the delivery of all three pilot programmes. For example, the activity provider for the CSHO Led Pilot, Urban Trix, were known to us through their work to deliver community satellite clubs in the Wolverhampton area.

Despite our approach to the OSF Programme learning phase being adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; we would not have approached this any differently in terms of our strategic aims and objectives for this phase of the programme, however a larger sample base would have allowed us to build our knowledge of good practice and operational solutions much faster than we have been able to.

Our overall approach under the circumstances has worked well. It has provided an accurate cross section of understanding of the situation regarding physical activity provision from a school setting across the Black Country; it has enabled us to utilise the wider expertise and networks of our Active Partnership; and has allowed us to identify schools to consult with for learning purposes, and schools that are best placed to achieve our pilot-based approach to this phase of the programme. Although we are very pleased with what we have learnt and achieved so far with the schools that we have worked with, we will continue to research, listen and learn as our programme builds into 2021.

Our main achievement so far is that we have built a solid foundation on which to build an effective Opening School Facilities Programme going forward. Additionally, the approach that ABC have taken by appointing focussed capacity to drive this programme forward in the form of the OSF Programme Manager role, has been the main advantage when compared to other Active Partnerships. It is clear that a long-term approach such as this is an absolute necessity if we are to really impact school-based community provision within the Black Country.

### Impact upon Schools and Communities

The impact upon schools and communities has not been what it might have been in a normal situation; however even under normal circumstances, the timescales of this project in terms of making a marked impact upon schools and particularly communities would have been limited. In order to have a significant impact, as mentioned earlier, a longer-term approach is required.

In terms of the schools we have worked with, the key impact was having a resource schools can access to support them to deliver their community provision. Schools with established programmes felt very much alone. Prior to the inception of this project, they had very few outlets for advice or support for any aspect of their programme delivery, whether development ambitions, challenges such as facility refurbishment requirements or links to innovative community focussed programmes to assist schools to be a more integral part of their community. Schools themselves lack the capacity in most cases to be able to act upon their issues or ambitions.

With reference to the new community programmes in our pilot project approach, none of the schools involved would have been able to get their programmes started without the support of the OSF programme. In all cases, there had been an ambition to develop a community programme for a period of years, and the key driver for all of these schools was to work towards becoming a community hub for the pupils and their families but also to people in their local area. However due to the pressure's schools are under to deliver their core purpose, in each case they could not get their ideas off the ground. The key motivation for each Headteacher involved was that they saw an opportunity to get things moving with the OSF Programme and did not want to miss this opportunity.

As well as capacity problems for schools, the element of funding is a key one. In the majority of cases, schools with established programmes required funds to develop their programme; either for maintenance or facility improvements, or for staffing and operational purposes. However, in order to generate additional funds, their programmes needed development.

In terms of the new programmes in development as part of the pilot projects for this learning phase, two of the three schools required an injection of finance in order to get things moving, as they could not justify spending investment intended for the development of the core purpose of community focussed projects. This injection of funds in both cases did not need to be substantial, however it was required as a catalyst.

With the external organisations we have worked for the pilot project approach, two out of the three key partners would not have known about the opportunity to become involved with their respective host school if it was not for the intervention of the OSF Programme. As part of our Health and Wellbeing directive at Active Black Country, our work with the Dudley and Netherton Primary Care Network, and their motivation to be involved with community focussed solutions to social prescribing for patients to access physical activity opportunities, contributed to their involvement. The key element to this has been the strong relationship Active Black Country has developed with the decision makers from this PCN, and we were able to suggest this opportunity to them and enthuse them about the potential impact upon their patients.

Similarly, with the Swimming focussed pilot the activity provider would not have been aware of the opportunity to develop a new branch of their swim school. There was significant research carried out, which involved liaising with Swim England and the Swimming Teachers Association to source a suitable partner for the school, due to the scarcity of local swimming providers in the area. Without this added capacity provided by the OSF programme, the school would not have had the time or the expertise to arrange this in this particular case.

Urban Trix were already known to Grove Primary School, however preliminary conversations between the two parties about potentially working together did not bear fruit and both parties were under the impression that the opportunity had fallen through. Support was provided to re-establish this relationship and start work towards a community programme at the school.

In all aspects of our approach the capacity to link organisations, research potential partners and help to develop policies and procedures and share good practice was integral.

Below are examples of testimonials from partners involved in the OSF Programme:

*“We were keen to work with Active Black Country and to be involved in the Opening School Facilities Programme, as there is a clear need for schools including ourselves to be able to access a resource such as this, offering support to schools to maximise the potential of their community programme; but we were also keen to share our knowledge and expertise to help develop the programme for the benefit of other schools in the Black Country” (Matt Marson, Operations Manager, The Streetly Academy).*

*“Active Black Country have been fundamental in initiating this programme. Without their insight and ability to facilitate the opportunity, we would not have had the capacity to identify and then liaise with the school to get the project moving.*

*The locality of this programme to our Medical Practice is key to enabling these patients to access the opportunity, and I think some of them will feel more comfortable taking their first steps back into physical activity in this more intimate setting than if it was being held at a large leisure centre; because of this we expect the patients to commit to the programme, and hopefully we can explore future opportunities to extend the project”. (Dr Richard Bramble, Dudley and Netherton PCN Clinical Director).*

## Key Learning

There is a real need particularly in the Black Country, for there to be a point of contact for schools when it comes to their community provision, whether that be an organisation who are best placed to provide that support such as the local Active Partnership, a Local Authority department, or even a neighbouring Leisure Operator. Better still, a dedicated role within an organisation with specific expertise to provide the required level of support to schools.

Our consultations and subsequent learnings from this process show that schools have felt very alone for a very long time in this area of their community responsibility, and there is a clear need and appetite amongst schools for there to be a long-term focus on supporting schools to develop community programmes and to become integral to their local communities out of school hours. This not only benefits the local community in terms of widening access to amenities, but also very much benefits the school with regards to the delivery of their core purpose.

There is evidence from our findings that community programmes are being neglected or even wound-down in some cases. This is due to the perception that they are a burden in terms management requirements, and a drain on resources and school finances. The need to have staffing capacity; the additional wear and tear and associated refurbishment costs; the added security concerns and liability issues are all too much for some schools to deal with. For example, of those schools that responded to our OSF Survey, 53% tasked the Head of PE with the day-to-day management of the school facilities, which is clearly a huge responsibility on top of delivering their core role.

A contact point for support may not completely change the perception of these schools, but they will be able to guide schools through the exploration of potential solutions and provide access to innovative ideas. It could encourage them to reconsider their options, and better understand the integral part that they can play within their local communities out of school hours, and ultimately influence change in their approach.

For the schools that do happily operate established and sustainable programmes, there is a real need for support to help them to develop and in some cases to re-address the needs of their local communities. There is also a keen appetite amongst these schools to improve what they do. Often these schools have been offering the same community provision for very long periods of time; with little or no capacity to consider how they can better meet the requirements of their local communities, maximise their income potential, or diversify their offer. For example, the findings of our OSF survey suggest that school sports facilities are utilised in the most part

by traditional community sports clubs (46%). Although certainly not a bad thing, there are other community organisations delivering forms of physical activity for a wider demographic that would potentially help to diversify community programmes and widen the appeal of school facilities use in the community.

There is also a clear desire within Black Country schools to develop new programmes where they do not yet exist. From our experiences so far, these schools often have long-standing ambitions but require a catalyst to get things off the ground. Often this is a combined financial and capacity related issue; financially in terms of the perceived requirement to improve existing facilities; and, capacity related in terms of the ability to plan and develop an idea, liaise with and forge links with local organisations, and get up to speed operationally and legally in order to initiate a community programme. Again, a contact point able to offer a level of support would go a long way to overcoming these initial barriers to opening school facilities.

To summarise, the key learning point from our work in the Black Country is that there is a requirement for a long-term approach to the opening school facilities programme, that enables schools to access support and expertise, in order for them to meet the needs of the community, enshrined in local strategy.

### Driving Change

As summarised above, ABC's approach is very much a longer-term one; and based on our learnings so far, in order to drive change and enable schools to open their doors for community use, this is the correct approach to take.

The Opening School Facilities agenda has the foundations to become a long-term strategic aim nationally, driven forward by Sport England and associated stakeholders. Taking our findings as a sample of what is likely to be seen nationally following this learning phase; there is a clear requirement to offer support to schools to maintain and develop their programmes, meet community need and an appetite from schools to develop into community hubs. There is also a clear requirement to widen access to community physical activity opportunities, and the facility stock within school facilities could offer real positive impact with some investment; taking the pressure off local authority leisure facility stock, in terms of facility development, catchment areas and transport links.

The potential to positively affect community activity levels through the development of school community programmes is evident, however for the most part, this is not a short-term objective.

### Responding to Local Need

As discussed in earlier sections of this report, time (capacity and resource) is of the essence for schools. In the majority of cases, this was a real issue in terms of getting a community programme from the point of ambition to the point of action. Considering this, in terms of opening school facilities in way that responds to local need; schools will require support that addresses the following key areas:

1. **The basics:** Schools need to be able to access a point of contact for support and a library of template resources and guidance providing details on where to begin, what is required of them, and advice and solutions to problems; ultimately helping them to develop the foundations of a community programme with minimal hassle and maximum efficiency.
2. **Developing the offer:** In addition to a library of resources which include case studies highlighting the development of community programmes in other schools of a similar type with similar ambitions; schools will need the capacity and local insight to thoroughly research the needs of their local community. As part of this they will need to consider what they want to achieve from their community programme. For example, is their key focus income generation or to become a focal point for the local community? They will want to consider how the community programme contributes to the lives of the pupils at the school and their families, and may want to consider how the programme will align with, and contribute to their school values, as a starting point. They will need to understand the demographic make-up of the locality of their school and consider this against the types of activity that may be successful. Market segmentation research offering insight in to the types of activity needed would be beneficial, and additionally exploring the opinions of the pupils of the school as to what types of after school and after-hours activities they would like to see. Then, links to individuals, community groups and other organisations through locally focussed partners and networks, who may be able to offer activity delivery matching their community needs will offer a robust starting point for the development of the programme. These things will need to be considered in relation to the current facility stock at the school in order to maximise the potential of the programme in the long term.
3. **Delivering the offer:** Schools will also require support to guide them through the implementation of an operational model based upon the approach that they decide to take, and offered advice on management solutions. This support will need to be offered through a combination of resources and guidance, and also preferably a point of contact that can offer detailed

expertise on developing a sustainable operational model with efficient management processes alongside knowledge and good practice sharing from other schools.

During the next phase of our OSF Programme delivery at Active Black Country, we will aim to support schools in each of these three areas to develop the best possible community model for their school.

### Our Role in Developing a Strong and Varied Offer

Active Partnerships have a key role to play when targeting the least active and less affluent members of the community, and this requirement is heightened when it comes to children and young people. The findings of our research show that the majority of users of school facilities outside of school hours are traditional community sports organisations, such as hockey, netball or football clubs. These are often long-standing bookings which are a reliable income source for the school and often low maintenance in terms of management.

As a result, for established community programmes, this makes it more of a challenge to accommodate new organisations who are potentially in the early stages of development and offering more varied activity, and more of a challenge to be part of innovative physical activity initiatives targeting specific groups working with local agencies. From the consultations we have carried out as part of this project, there is however a real appetite to welcome more non-traditional physical activity solutions, and to be part of physical activity interventions as schools realise that they need to in some cases modernise their offer and service their local community need.

Similarly, with those schools who have the ambition to implement a community programme from scratch, there is a genuine desire to offer something that meets the needs of their local community, rather than to be completely income focussed. From the sample of schools that we consulted with, they were keen to offer something that benefitted the pupils and their families of the school first and foremost because they were seeing a clear need for this. They felt it would help them in the delivery of their core purpose if they could improve the wellbeing of families associated with their school. Additionally, a large proportion of the schools we consulted with on a one-to-one basis were from areas of deprivation in the Black Country, and as is common knowledge, this goes hand in hand with lower activity levels amongst children and young people.

In terms of the support and resource schools require to provide a varied offer of sport and physical activity out of school hours that appeals to CYP who are the least active and potentially from less affluent backgrounds; firstly, in our case we will utilise the networks, knowledge and expertise we hold within our five thematic areas of work in our portfolio at Active Black Country, to exploit opportunities for schools to become more innovative in their community programming. We are able to call on expertise from our Communities, Education, Active Environments, Workforce, Health and Wellbeing and Insight themes of work which cover all aspects of physical activity promotion in our region. The OSF Programme Manager will be able to work closely with all of the Thematic Leads in order to support schools to meet the needs of the local community. This resource is something that will not be available to schools through any other means and will be pivotal in terms of supporting schools to target CYP from less affluent backgrounds in their locality.

Furthermore, from a school's perspective, as part of our approach we will encourage schools to focus on the following as part of the delivery of our OSF Programme:

- **Programme relevance:** Building upon the approach to “Developing the Offer” described above; schools will need the capacity and resource to spend time learning about what children and young people want and need in their local community, and the types of activity provision that would encourage them to return to their school setting after hours; which is a challenge in itself. Whatever approach schools decide to take, the activity provision needs to be relevant and appropriate to the target audience; “for people like me”. This may involve identifying organisations to work with that are non-traditional in terms of their delivery approach, who focus their delivery to target physical activity inequalities for example. In our case, through our Communities theme we are in contact with a host of organisations that offer physical activity provision for a variety of purposes such as mental wellbeing, health inequalities or as diversionary activity.
- **Programme environment:** The environment needs to be fit for purpose. A number of the schools we have consulted with as part of this process, have professed to needing facility refurbishment in order to deliver a high-quality community offer. We found that there was a real need for schools to be able to access investment to refresh their facility stock in order for them to develop their community programme. Schools are understandably reluctant to utilise their budgets for anything other than the enhancement of their core purpose. Particularly when targeting inactive people whether CYP or not, an environment that is welcoming in its appearance with welcoming members of staff, that is clean and well-maintained and terms of the communal areas, sports facilities and changing facilities, and where individuals feel safe and secure is

absolutely crucial to encouraging customers to return, but also venture outside of their comfort zone to take part in physical activity in the first place.

- **Programme appropriateness:** Where the ambition is for a community programme to be sustainable and varied in the long term; it is vital that any activity provision is appropriate and exactly meets the needs of the community. This is in terms of programme content and scheduling; it needs to be developed with the community in mind and delivered at a time to suit the participants rather than the school. It also needs to be flexible enough to adapt to changing community need. Looking at this from the perspective of a longer-term block booking approach; schools will need to be mindful that even though the development of long-term relationships with community organisations is a good way to ensure sustainable community provision, it will ultimately limit the opportunity to move with the times and keep up with changing community need, particularly when considering CYP. Schools will need to develop their offer in a way that offers variety from the outset with this approach, and bear in mind that they may need to make difficult decisions and displace community groups if they want to keep their offer focussed around their local community.
- **Programme visibility:** As an additional point but equally important, the visibility of the community programme within the local community is vital to its success. Our OSF Survey found that 53% of those schools who opened their facilities in the Black Country did not do any form of external promotion, and only 22% advertised their facility on their own school website. Clearly if you are going to operate a successful business model, marketing and promotion and the resulting visibility of what's on offer is a significant part of the process. Schools need to make use of all available promotional channels that are available to them and ensure that it reflects the target audience; from websites, to every social media channel, to other community venues, and any other wall space available to them. However, in order for a community programme to be visible it also needs to be relevant and so this ties the visibility of the programme in with all of the other points raised so far. Visibility alone will not ensure that inactive CYP make use of the community programme at a school. All other aspects of this approach will need to be considered also.

### Developing a High-Quality and Sustainable Offer

Developing a community offer that is relevant and appropriate and therefore meets the needs of the local community is paramount to its success. Through our OSF Programme going forward we will be encouraging schools to consider this above all else. This approach will have the greatest impact upon widening community access to school facilities, and the most impact on improving physical activity levels within the Black Country, because it will provide the most appealing physical activity opportunities for members of the local community. A programme that addresses community need and therefore widens access to opportunities is an excellent starting point. Where Active Partnerships support schools to develop a relevant programme meeting community need, that is also delivered in a welcoming environment in an appropriate format, and that is visible to the local community, are the foundations of a high-quality programme.

A high-quality programme does not mean that it will be automatically sustainable however, and this is where there may need to be some compromise in terms of community need versus management and operational efficiencies. From our consultations as part of this learning process, sustainable community programmes, were also efficient. Unfortunately, in most cases they had been made efficient as a result of cost saving measures. Therefore, when developing a community programme, or improving an established one, there needs to be real focus on the efficiency of management and operations to ensure financial viability. For example; a low maintenance or efficient booking system would reduce paperwork and improve the capacity of facility staff to be deployed elsewhere. A multi-skilled workforce who can be deployed in multiple roles would also benefit efficiency through reduced staff numbers. Considering "low impact" community organisations above those who would not cause heavy wear and tear on facilities may be favourable but may not completely be ideal in terms of meeting community need. For example, netball clubs are notoriously low maintenance in terms of the impact they have on the facility itself. Or, in the case of Streetly Academy in Walsall (one of the schools we consulted with extensively for this programme); the long-standing relationships and trust that had been built over time through effective management of community organisations hiring their facilities, resulted in many of their community users being extremely low maintenance in terms of impact on their facility staff. They felt that if absolutely necessary they could give a key to a number of these organisations and not be present on site at all.

A high-quality programme as defined above that meets community need, and an efficient approach to management and operation of the programme would in our opinion offer the best possible solution to community provision. These success factors would remain the same no matter of the size of the school or variety of facilities. The premise remains the same.

### Trends Affecting Community Provision

From our research, there are a number of trends that form characteristics of schools that open their facilities, or do not open their facilities; but less so in terms of trends that correspond to the likelihood that schools will open, or profess to having an appetite to open.

However, one trend that is clear which affects likelihood of schools opening to the community, regards the senior leadership team at the school and, specifically the Head Teacher. If the benefits of opening to the community are valued and understood fully by senior school leaders then there is a real likelihood in our experience that schools will either have a community programme in place already, or have ambitions to develop one in some form. One caveat to this however is that we have found, including in one of our pilot projects, that for Academy's and Multi-Academy Trusts in particular, if there is a reluctance among Trustees and/or Board Members, then even if the School Senior Team are in favour and want to work towards the development of a community programme, then this presents a serious obstacle to overcome.

Similarly, if Senior School Leaders have inherited a programme of community provision and do not fully understand or see value in the benefits of it to the school or their local community, then there is a real chance that community programmes will be neglected and fall by the wayside. There are examples of this in the Black Country at the moment.

On a completely different note, a trend has emerged in one particular local authority area in the Black Country which has contributed to a series of established community programmes across the borough. In Walsall, a local authority driven strategy was implemented for building schools with sports and community facilities and adult education programmes in the 1970's into the early 1980's with the aim of improving accessibility to amenities for the local community. These schools were developed with excellent sports facilities and nearly all were built with swimming pools. They were run by community associations set up specifically to run the out of hours community programmes and were initially staffed by council employees, which then later became the responsibility of the schools, meaning that schools were tasked with delivering these community programmes. This strategic approach continued into the early 1980's, and older school sites were upgraded with the addition of sports and community facilities. The majority of the established community programmes in Walsall are in place as a result of this.

We also found that schools that feature in either local authority Playing Pitch and / or Built Facilities Strategies are far more likely to have established and evolving community programmes. Schools that are not fortunate enough to be part of these strategic approaches find it much more difficult to attract or source capital investment to enable them to achieve their ambitions. Part of the OSF role in the Black Country will be to champion the inclusion of such schools based on their potential to make significant impact upon community activity levels.

### Added Value from Partnership Working

A variety of partners have been involved with the OSF agenda in the Black Country. This, like many other aspects of the programme was hindered by COVID-19 however; for example, many regional National Governing Body contacts were furloughed for much of the year which made it challenging to involve them in the programme as much as we would have under normal circumstances.

The Black Country Local Authority partners have undoubtedly added the most value to our OSF programme by enabling a longer-term approach when compared to other Active Partnerships nationally. Each of the four LA's have invested into the programme which has facilitated a dedicated resource in the form of the Opening School Facilities Programme Manager for the Black Country. This also shows the level of support for the programme regionally. The result of this investment has been the backbone of our approach, and will allow us to make a real impact upon the physical activity levels in the Black Country by widening access to quality opportunities to participate within more localised school settings out of hours.

Additionally, we have been able to consult with local authorities regarding their Playing Pitch and Built Facilities Strategies to ascertain how the OSF Programme can support the delivery of those strategies but also how the OSF Programme can influence the development of the strategies going forward. Building upon this will be a key element of the next phase of our work on the OSF agenda.

Clearly, key to the learning phase has been the involvement of those schools that we have worked with to date; through the OSF Survey, follow-up Focus Groups and One to One Consultations. This work has enabled us to absorb knowledge, expertise and experience in order for us to be able to share good practice to enable other schools to deliver new and improved community programmes in the future. We have educated ourselves on the intricacies of the OSF agenda by consulting with schools with established programmes, successful programmes, those with ambitions to build a programme, and those desperate for support, in both secondary and primary school settings; and all have made worthwhile contributions to our understanding of the situation in the

Black Country. A key part of our programme going forward will be to maintain momentum in terms of learning, in order to enable to the sharing of good practice and solutions to challenges.

Specifically, the work we have carried out with schools who are primed to be the hosts for our series of pilot projects, has helped us to better understand the motivations and barriers for schools when considering opening their doors to the community. This has been extremely valuable so far, and we expect once delivery gets underway when the situation allows, to continue to learn a great deal about how to approach opening schools to the community.

Our work with Dudley and Netherton Primary Care Network has proven to be extremely valuable firstly to better understand how we can support them to offer community-based solutions to health issues in the community that are associated with inactivity; but also, they have provided us with an innovative solution to pilot for school-based community provision. This particular pilot project has by far been generated the most interest by other partners in the Black Country and further afield.

We have engaged with a number of other partners through the course of the programme so far, such as private activity providers such as Premier Education, Sports Plus Scheme and Aspire Sport and Training, who have all been extremely keen to offer their support and services to the OSF programme in the Black Country.

Additionally, moving forward a number of other partners will be key to the development of the OSF programme. For example, we have had limited contact with national governing bodies of sport due to the COVID-19 situation. We expect them to be a key partner going forward. We have not yet undertaken a widespread consultation with community organisations in the Black Country specifically regarding the use of school facilities. Their views on community provision in school settings may prove valuable to the enhancement of the OSF programme.

### The Impact of Covid-19

From the research and consultations carried out regarding the Opening School Facilities programme and the unprecedented situation caused by COVID-19, the most significant learning points are as follows:

- Many schools in the Black Country did not re-open their facilities to the community in the Autumn term amid the COVID-19 situation. Firstly, this was due to the overwhelming pressure schools found themselves under to get pupils back into the classroom and deliver their core purpose. Secondly, schools were concerned about welcoming additional community members on to school sites potentially increasing the likelihood of infection. Thirdly, schools did not see it as an appropriate course of action to allow external members of the community to access their facilities, when the pupils themselves were being sent home as part of COVID-19 protocols. This failure to reopen in certain cases has displaced a large number of community organisations.
- Of those schools that did reopen their doors to the community, they opened in line with the beginning of the Autumn term in September rather than during the school holidays.
- Of those that did reopen, a phased return to activity was implemented for community users. Commonly, this began with outdoor provision first, with the majority of schools hoping to accommodate all of their community users to some extent eventually despite social distancing restrictions.
- Schools that had designated staff to oversee their community programme were more likely to reopen.
- These schools worked extremely hard to ensure that their community programme could operate in a COVID-19 secure manner. They collectively found it a real challenge to firstly digest all of the industry and governing body guidance, and then to put it in to practice, with little to no support from outside agencies. There was added pressure as governing body guidance changed, and schools were concerned that they were not keeping up with developments due to capacity issues. Additionally, facility staff found it a challenge to ensure that community groups adhered to the relevant guidance.
- National Governing Bodies of Sport who were slow to release COVID-19 safe delivery guidance, also jeopardised the return to play of their sports in terms of school facility provision. Schools that we consulted with very much focussed on those sports that had clear and concise guidance in the first instance.
- There have been anecdotal reports that some schools who have not yet reopened, are using the opportunity to re-assess whether their community programme is a priority for them at all, threatening their community provision as a whole.

Schools with open community facilities were inundated with requests for facility space from community organisations who had been displaced from other venues including other schools. Open schools tried to capitalise on this where possible to help out community organisations but also to develop their own community programmes.

### Summary of Findings

In summary, the some of the key learning points from the Active Black Country Opening School Facilities Programme so far are as follows:

- The Opening School Facilities agenda requires a long-term approach if we are to meaningfully impact school-based community sport and physical activity provision within the Black Country.
- Schools have an appetite to become a more prominent part of their local community and to become a community hub.
- Schools require support, capacity and resource in order to realise ambitions of offering community provision as well as to maintain an existing community programme.
- Investment is a key element to enable schools to initiate, develop and maintain community programmes.
- There is a requirement for community programmes to be high quality, efficiently managed and to meet community need in order to be sustainable.
- Community programmes need to be enshrined in local strategy, in order to meet the needs of the community.
- Active Partnerships are in prime position to be able to provide support, capacity, expertise, and access to networks and partnership working to enable schools to maximise the use of their school facilities out of school hours.

### Next Steps

At Active Black Country we are in a strong position to take the learning from this phase of the Opening School Facilities Programme and build upon them to deliver impact within our region. This is largely due to the fact that our overall approach was a long term one. It was felt that there was a real need for this area of work in the Black Country and this has been reiterated by the insight gathered, and learning developed from this phase of the programme.

Our approach included the recruitment of a full-time role dedicated to the delivery of this area of work in the form of the OSF Programme Manager; which offers ABC the capacity to further develop the programme into 2021. Again, this emphasises the fact that there is a real need in the region to widen the accessibility of school facilities, and boost opportunities for the local population to access varied and appropriate physical activity and community focussed programmes.

Following the completion of this learning phase our next steps will be:

- To develop overarching strategic aims and objectives for our OSF programme in January, in line with our new ABC strategy due for development in the early part of 2021.
- Also, considering the aims and objectives set out in local authority playing pitch and built facilities strategies.
- From this, we will develop and implement a programme of work targeting the achievement of those aims and objectives based upon the insight gathered and learning collated from this phase of the OSF Programme.

The Active Black Country OSF work plan will therefore cover and include;

- A targeted approach across the Black Country, considering the level of investment into the programme from each of the four Local Authorities.
- A selection of “quick-wins” considering school motivation and perceived ease of implementation based upon our findings, to quicken the impact of the OSF programme and develop learning further regarding community engagement.
- A focus on level of impact in terms of longer-term projects with schools who have the potential to make large scale impact on the activity levels of their local communities based upon our findings and consultations so far and going forward.
- Utilising the learnings of this pilot phase to replicate these programmes in other areas of the Black Country, where demand is shown and/or as a result of similar circumstances. Particularly in relation to the PCN Referral CSHO pilot projects. (There has already been significant interest in replicating the PCN Referral project in Sandwell and Walsall, and to widen its reach in Dudley).
- Implementing the delayed Faith Centre and Deprived Area pilot projects, originally intended as part of this learning phase, and aligning these learnings with future Active Black Country GOGA projects.
- A continual learning-based approach enabling the ongoing capture of knowledge to develop understanding and enable good practice sharing.
- The continuation of the ongoing development of a localised toolkit specific to the Black Country to build upon the content of the Sport England Use our School resource.

## Opening School Facilities Programme – Learning Phase Overview

- The ongoing development of a localised Suppliers Hub for schools which will be integral in terms of linking schools to a variety of suppliers and activity providers who will be best placed to support the development of community provision.
- Continued support to schools around the interpretation of COVID-19 national guidance for physical activity for operational purposes.
- Further involvement in networking opportunities with schools and community organisations via the wider work at ABC.
- Acting as a point of contact and support for all schools in the Black Country with an active community programme or an ambition to develop one.