



THE SHOT PAPERS · 2026

CONCRETE AND CULTURE.

What cities buy when they build courts. A city can spend tens of millions a year keeping its courts and pitches in perfect condition and still not be able to say who played on any of them. This paper is about the cheap half of a city's sport budget, the programmes, the coaching and the community, and why it decides whether the expensive half was worth pouring.

FOR COUNCILS · CITY SPORT DEPARTMENTS · LEISURE TRUSTS

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1 THE MOMENT

Earlier this year I sat with someone who runs sport for a major European city. What they told me about their own budget is the reason this paper exists.

I am not going to name the city or the person, and I have deliberately rounded every figure so that neither can be worked out. What matters is the shape of the thing, and the shape is not unique to them.

They walked me through the numbers. Tens of millions a year goes on maintaining the city's sporting estate: hundreds of courts, pitches and halls on a rolling cycle of resurfacing, line-marking, floodlights, fencing and drainage. It is careful, professional work, it is committed years ahead under contract, and it never stops.

Then the programme budget. The coaching, the community sessions, the club support, the money that pays for the things that actually fill those facilities. A fraction of the maintenance figure. Not half. Not a quarter. A fraction.

Then I asked the question I ask everyone: who uses it all? And the honest answer was that nobody knows. There is booking data for some of the indoor halls. For the open courts, the ones the city is proudest of, there is nothing at all. Not ages, not neighbourhoods, not whether anyone comes back, not whether a court serves five hundred residents or the same eleven players every Tuesday night. The city repaints the lines every spring for people it cannot describe.

"The lights are on. Nobody knows who came."

THE LINE I WROTE DOWN ON THE WAY HOME

What stayed with me was not the ratio, it was the resignation. This is somebody good at their job, running one of the better resourced sport departments in Europe, telling me that the largest line in their budget has no evidence attached to it at all, and that nothing in the machinery of the city gives them a way to change that.

I recognised the other side of the story, because I have lived it. The grassroots football setup I ran grew from five girls to hundreds of children a week, and most of it was delivered on council-owned pitches. In all those years, nobody from the council ever asked who those children were, where they came from, or what changed for them. We were the return on the city's concrete, and the city had no way of seeing us.

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

Community sport in England generates £122.9 billion of social value a year. Read the methodology behind that figure and one thing is obvious: none of it is generated by concrete. All of it is generated by people taking part.



THE VALUE FOLLOWS PARTICIPATION, NOT ASSETS

The £122.9 billion figure comes from Sport England with Sheffield Hallam and Manchester Metropolitan universities, using a Treasury-approved wellbeing methodology. It is built up from individuals: an active adult generates around £2,600 of wellbeing and health value a year, an active child aged 11 to 16 around £4,300. The asset appears nowhere in that arithmetic. A resurfaced court that nobody plays on generates nothing.

INEQUALITY IS A PROGRAMME PROBLEM

The same research estimates that unequal participation costs England £19.6 billion a year in lost social value. Here is the uncomfortable part for a facilities-led strategy: for most inactive adults, and for most of the children who never join in, the nearest court is already within walking distance. What is missing is the session, the coach, the invitation, and the sense that the place is for them. You cannot build your way out of a belonging gap.

SAFETY, FRAMED HONESTLY

The Ministry of Justice's £5 million Youth Justice Sport Fund reached more than 7,800 at-risk young people through 220 community organisations, 82% of them from the most deprived 40% of areas. I will give you the honest version of this evidence, because cities are routinely sold the dishonest one: no trial proves that sport reduces offending, and Loughborough University, which evaluated the fund, has itself said the "what works" evidence base is problematic. What the evidence does support is that well-designed doorstep sport, run by trusted adults, is associated with reduced anti-social behaviour. Association, not causation. And every unit of that reach came through programmes and people, not through asphalt on its own.

LONELINESS, AND WHO CARRIES IT

Around 3.1 million adults in England, 7%, feel lonely often or always, and 16 to 24 year olds are the loneliest group in the country, roughly one in ten against about 3% of over-65s, a pattern first measured by the ONS in

2018 and reconfirmed since. A floodlit court does not answer loneliness. The five-a-side group that meets on it every Thursday does.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

Cities are not careless. The pattern of spending big on facilities and small on programmes is produced by how public money works, and it fails in three specific ways.

CAPITAL BUILDS, REVENUE STARVES

Capital is politically easy. A new pitch is a ribbon to cut, a photograph, a durable thing residents can see; external grant funding skews the same way, because funders also like durable things with plaques on them. And once an asset exists, its maintenance becomes contractual and non-negotiable. Programmes live on the other side of the ledger: annual, discretionary revenue spend with no plaque and no contract. So every budget round quietly moves the city further towards a perfectly maintained estate with nothing organised to happen on it. Nobody chose that outcome. The accounting chose it.

BOOKINGS ARE NOT BELONGING

Where usage is measured at all, it is measured by bookings and turnstiles. A booking records that an hour was sold. It does not record who came, whether they came back, or whether anything changed for them. Open-access facilities, the courts and pitches without gates, are invisible entirely. Leisure-centre entry counts tally bodies through a door, not the difference the building made. So the budget holder cannot answer the only questions that connect the estate to the value evidence in Part Two: who is this serving, is it the people we built it for, and is it working? The largest line in the budget runs on faith.

THE CHEAP HALF DECIDES THE EXPENSIVE HALF

Coaching, culture and connection are treated as the soft half of the budget. They are also the half that determines whether the hard half gets used. A court with a trusted coach, a recurring session and a club attached to it is full on a Tuesday night in November. The identical asphalt without them is a wind trap. Yet when savings are needed, the programme layer is cut first, precisely because it has no evidence with which to defend itself. The facilities then perform worse, participation sags, and the conclusion drawn is that sport "does not work here", which is answered, at the next capital round, with more concrete.

Cities do not have a facilities problem. The estate is already built. What is missing is the operating layer that makes it matter, and the data that would prove it.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

A court without a community is concrete. If I could put one sentence on the wall of every city sport department, it would be that one. Here is what it means in practice, and none of it requires our platform to exist.

1

FUND THE OPERATING LAYER LIKE INFRASTRUCTURE

Programmes, coaching and community development carry a protected budget line alongside the maintenance cycle, not a discretionary remainder. If the court is committed for twenty years, so is the reason anyone will be standing on it.

2

EVERY FACILITY GETS A COMMUNITY ATTACHED

A club, a coach, a recurring session, a named group whose home it is. An asset with nobody responsible for its culture is not infrastructure; it is expenditure that happens to be flat.

3

MEASURE BELONGING, NOT BOOKINGS

Who came, who came back, who stayed for a season. Return rate is the facility metric that matters. A court that a hundred people try once is failing; a court that forty people treat as theirs is working.

4

DATA FLOWS BACK TO THE FUNDER, AGGREGATED AND ANONYMISED

A budget holder should be able to say who a facility serves by age band and by area, with no individual identifiable, and defend the estate with evidence instead of faith.

5

PROGRAMMES EVIDENCE THEMSELVES LIKE CAPITAL DOES

Every programme pound reports its participation and its reach, so that in the next savings round the cheap half of the budget can finally defend itself, instead of being the first thing cut and the last thing missed.

A city could adopt every one of these with paper registers and patience. The reason to do it digitally is cost and honesty at scale: registers get abandoned by February, surveys of participants get single-digit response rates, and self-reported numbers get shaped by whoever needs them to look good. The useful version is passive, verified and aggregated, collected as a by-product of people simply turning up. Which is where we come in.

5 THE BUILD

SHOT is a digital clubhouse for the people whose lives are shaped by sport. Underneath it sits a verified sporting identity, the Sport Head ID. Together they give a city the operating layer described in Part Four. Specifically:

ACCESS UNLOCKED BY A VERIFIED IDENTITY

A Sport Head ID is a free, verified sporting identity that belongs to the person for life, not to a club, a vendor or a council. Facility access, court booking, session sign-in and programme registration can all be unlocked with it. Each tap answers the question the city currently cannot: a real person was here, they belong to this age band and this area, and this is their fourth visit this month. Data capture is deliberately minimal, and what exists is owned by the person it describes.

WHAT THE FUNDER SEES

The city receives the pattern, never the person: usage by facility, by age band, by area and by return rate, aggregated and anonymised. That boundary is deliberate. A city should be able to prove that a court in a priority neighbourhood is reaching the children it was built for without holding a database of those children. The reporting arrives in the shape budget holders already answer for, reach, inequality of access and repeat engagement, and maps onto the same social value framework the £122.9 billion figure is built on. For the first time, the maintenance line and the programme line can be judged on the same evidence.

THE CLUBHOUSE LAYER

Identity answers who came; the clubhouse answers why they come back. Every club, group and facility community on SHOT gets a digital clubhouse: the conversation, the fixtures, the development record, the culture between sessions. It is the digital version of the room sport used to have, and it is what turns a bookable asset into a place people belong to. The belonging that the loneliness numbers in Part Two ask about is a product decision, and this is ours.

FREE FOR THE PROGRAMME LAYER

The club, team and coach tools are free, permanently. That is a structural point, not a promotion. It means the programme layer, the clubs and volunteer coaches who actually fill a city's facilities, costs the city nothing to equip. A council can put the tools into the hands of every community club it works with, without a procurement exercise, and the coaching frameworks that come with them (PERFORM, covering 47 sports and aligned to governing-body pathways) mean the sessions on the city's courts run to structure rather than luck.



6 TAKE YOUR SHOT

If you hold a city's sport budget, the question this paper leaves you with is a simple one: what did the concrete do last year, and how would you know?

If you run sport for a city or a council: pick one cluster of facilities and run the experiment for a season. Put verified access and the clubhouse layer on them, and see, for the first time, who actually uses what you maintain. Then put that evidence next to the maintenance line and let the two halves of the budget argue on equal terms.

If you run a leisure trust: put belonging metrics next to your throughput numbers. Entries through the gate tell you the building was open. Return rates tell you it was working.

If you fund facilities: make the operating layer a condition of the capital, and participation evidence a condition of both. You would not fund a school building without teachers. Stop funding courts without communities.

And if you do none of it with us, do it anyway. The principle stands without the platform: fund the operating layer, attach a community to every asset, and measure belonging, not bookings. Cities deserve to make these decisions with evidence, and so do the people the courts were poured for.

Take your SHOT. Own it. Make impact. · shotclubhouse.com

SOURCES

- Sport England / Sheffield Hallam University / Manchester Metropolitan University, Social value of community sport and physical activity in England, 2023/24 (£122.9 billion total social value; £19.6 billion estimated annual cost of participation inequality; per-person wellbeing values of ~£2,600 per active adult and ~£4,300 per active child aged 11-16; WELLBY methodology, HM Treasury approved)
- Ministry of Justice / StreetGames / Alliance of Sport, Youth Justice Sport Fund, 2023 (£5 million; 220 organisations; 7,800+ at-risk young people reached; 82% from the most deprived 40% of areas)
- Loughborough University, Getting On Track evaluation of the Youth Justice Sport Fund, January 2024; and Loughborough University statement, 2023, on the limits of the "what works" evidence for sport and offending
- DCMS, Community Life Survey 2023/24 (7% of adults in England, around 3.1 million, lonely often or always)
- ONS, analysis of loneliness by age (2018; the age pattern has been reconfirmed in later releases)

The account in Part One is reported as it was told to me by a serving official who runs sport for a major European city, during 2026. The city, the person and the exact figures are deliberately withheld, and every figure in that section has been rounded; read it as scale, not as an audited budget line. Statements about what clubs and councils tell us are drawn from SHOT's own conversations during 2025-26 and are reported as experience, not measured statistics.