



SHOT RESEARCH · 2026

IMPACT WITHOUT SURVEYS.

Evidence funders can trust. Funded sport programmes are asked to prove they change lives, and the default instrument is a survey most participants never answer. This paper sets out what a development platform observes without asking anyone to fill anything in, maps those measures to the frameworks funders already use, and provides a theory-of-change template any governing body or charity can lift into a funding bid.

FOR GOVERNING BODIES · CHARITIES · FUNDED PROGRAMMES · EVALUATORS · FUNDERS

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1 THE PROBLEM

The sector's default evidence instrument is a survey sent after the programme ends, to people who have already left the room.

Here is how impact evidence works in most funded sport today. A programme runs for a term, a season or a year. At the end, an evaluation form goes out: a link in a message, a paper form at the last session, a follow-up email. Programme evaluators tell us the response rates they see are in the low single digits. That figure is practitioner-reported, drawn from our conversations with evaluators and delivery organisations during 2025-26, not from a measured study, and we flag it as such. But we have yet to meet anyone in the sector who defends the end-of-programme survey as an adequate instrument.

What survives instead is the attendance register. It is reliable, it is auditable, and it counts bodies, not change. A register can tell a funder that forty young people were present on a Tuesday. It cannot say whether any of them grew in confidence, stayed in sport, or got anything from the programme beyond a mark in a column.

The survey problem is worse than low response. It is who responds. The handful who complete the form are the most engaged participants, the ones for whom the programme visibly worked. The young person who drifted out in week six, arguably the most important data point the programme has, never answers a survey. The instrument is pointed at the wrong moment, in the wrong direction, at the people least likely to reply.

MEANWHILE, THE QUESTIONS ARE GETTING HARDER

Funders and trustees are moving the other way. Grant-makers increasingly ask for evidence of change at the level of the individual, not the cohort headcount. School inspection now grades personal development as its own report-card area, which means school-linked programmes are being asked for development evidence per child. Social value methodology approved by HM Treasury puts a wellbeing value on sustained participation, which is only claimable if participation can actually be shown to be sustained. And every UN member state has recognised sport as an enabler of sustainable development, language that funders working to the 2030 Agenda expect grantees to evidence, not just quote.

The frameworks for recognising sport's impact are ready. The collection instrument is not. That is the gap this paper addresses.

The evidence problem in funded sport is not that the change is not happening. It is that the instrument for capturing it asks the wrong people, at the wrong time, to do unpaid paperwork.

2 PASSIVE MEASUREMENT

A development platform generates evidence as a by-product of the programme happening. Nobody fills anything in for the evaluator's benefit; the evidence is the exhaust of the activity itself.

Passive here means the measures come from the ordinary running of the programme: sessions scheduled, attendance marked, development frameworks worked through, ratings given as part of coaching. There is no separate evaluation instrument, so there is no response rate to worry about. Coverage is every participant, every week, including the ones who leave, which is precisely the population a survey never reaches. Five measures do most of the work.

1

ATTENDANCE PATTERNS

Not a headcount. Each person's presence over time: streaks, gaps, and decay. An aggregated register says the programme averaged 85% attendance; a pattern shows which individual slid from weekly to fortnightly to gone, and when the slide began. The pattern is the early warning the register hides.

2

SESSION PARTICIPATION

What happens inside the session, recorded in the normal run of coaching: session plans delivered, preparation and reflection prompts completed, activities taken part in. It separates present from involved. Two young people can share identical attendance and completely different participation.

3

DEVELOPMENT PROGRESSION

Movement through a structured development framework across five pillars: technical, physical, psychological, social and personal. Each pillar is assessed in the ordinary rhythm of coaching, block by block, so a season of development leaves a recorded trail rather than a coach's memory.

4

CONFIDENCE TRAJECTORIES

The direction of a participant's self-rating over time, and the gap between how they rate themselves and how their coach rates them. Both are captured as part of the development conversation, not as an evaluation form. A rising self-rating and a closing gap are observable; a widening gap is a flag worth a conversation.

5

RETENTION

Who is still there next block, next term, next season, at individual and cohort level. Retention is the most honest outcome measure a programme owns, and the one a survey can never capture, because the people who left do not answer surveys about why.

Two boundaries to state plainly. Passive measurement observes behaviour inside the programme; it does not measure outcomes beyond it, such as school behaviour, offending or employment, which need linked studies with proper design. And it describes what happened, not why. What a programme can claim on the back of these measures is governed by the honesty rules in section 5.

3 MAPPING TO WHAT FUNDERS ASK FOR

Funders do not ask for your data. They ask in their own frameworks. The table below maps the observed measures from section 2 to the language of four common funding contexts.

WHAT THE PLATFORM OBSERVES	WHAT THE FUNDER ASKS FOR	THE FRAMEWORK IT MAPS TO
Participation and retention: attendance patterns per person, retention by block, term and season	Regular, sustained participation; evidence of who keeps playing and who drops away	Participation outcomes of the kind measured in Sport England's Active Lives surveys: frequency and consistency of activity, sustained over time, broken down by group.
Personal development: recorded progression across the five pillars, particularly personal and social	Personal development evidence at the level of the individual child	Ofsted's renewed inspection framework (from November 2025) grades personal development and well-being as its own report-card area on a five-point scale; recorded development over time per pupil is the shape of evidence inspectors look for in school-linked programmes.
Wellbeing: confidence trajectories alongside sustained participation	Social value, expressed in money terms a trustee or commissioner can use	WELLBY-style social value logic. Sport England's 2023/24 social value study (with Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester Metropolitan University, using the HM Treasury-approved wellbeing valuation approach) values community sport and physical activity in England at £122.9 billion a year, with an active child aged 11-16 carrying around £4,300 a year in wellbeing value.
SDG alignment: participation, inclusion and development evidence across the pillars	Contribution to the 2030 Agenda, evidenced rather than quoted	Paragraph 37 of the UN's 2030 Agenda recognises sport as "an important enabler of sustainable development", contributing to health, education, the empowerment of women and young people, and social inclusion. The Kazan Action Plan (UNESCO, 2017) identifies 10 SDGs and 36 targets to which sport measurably contributes.
Reduced-risk work: attendance and retention among referred young people	Youth justice and anti-social behaviour outcomes	The Ministry of Justice's £5 million Youth Justice Sport Fund (2023) reached over 7,800 at-risk young people through 220 organisations, 82% from the most deprived 40% of areas, and adopted a shared theory of change. Any claim in this territory must follow the association rule in section 5.

The practical effect: a governing body or charity reporting to a wellbeing funder can present confidence and sustained-participation trajectories in the funder's own WELLBY logic. A programme reporting against the SDGs can cite paragraph 37 and the specific Kazan targets it touches, instead of a general claim that sport does good. The measures do not change; the translation does.

4 A THEORY-OF-CHANGE TEMPLATE

A one-page theory of change built around observed measures rather than promised surveys. Lift it, replace the italic examples with your programme's specifics, and put it in the bid.

INPUTS	Coaching workforce and qualifications. Facility hours per week per site. Grant funding and match funding. A development platform providing the observed measures below at no cost. Safeguarding provision built into the delivery structure. <i>Example: 12 volunteer coaches with introductory qualifications; 6 hours a week across 3 sites; £40,000 grant over one year.</i>
ACTIVITIES	Weekly coached sessions per site. A structured development framework delivered across five pillars (technical, physical, psychological, social, personal). Coach preparation and reflection each session. Guardian visibility of development where age-appropriate. <i>Example: 36-week programme, one session a week per site, framework blocks of four weeks.</i>
OBSERVED MEASURES	From section 2, collected passively: attendance pattern per participant; session participation; pillar progression per block; confidence trajectory (self-rating direction and self-versus-coach gap); retention at block, term and season. <i>These are the measures the platform records in the ordinary course of delivery. Keep this row intact; it is the part that is actually collectable.</i>
OUTCOMES	Short term: regular participation established; confidence direction positive for the majority of the cohort. Medium term: retention sustained across the season; recorded personal development per participant. Long term, framed as contribution and association, never causation: wellbeing value in WELLBY logic, personal development evidence for inspection, contribution to identified SDG targets. <i>Write this row in the funder's own framework using the table in section 3.</i>
EVIDENCE CADENCE	Per session: attendance and participation recorded automatically. Per block: pillar progression and confidence summarised. Per term or season: aggregate anonymised report to the funder, small samples suppressed. Annually: results published against a versioned methodology, flat results included.

Three notes on adapting it. First, keep the observed-measures row as it stands; bids fail when they promise evidence nobody will actually collect. Second, write the outcomes row in your funder's language, not yours; the section 3 table is the translation key. Third, state the honesty rules from section 5 in the bid itself. A funder who reads a theory of change that declares its own limits is reading a rarity, and rarity earns trust.

5 HONESTY RULES

Passive measurement only earns trust if its limits are stated as clearly as its strengths. These rules are non-negotiable in anything we publish, and we recommend writing them into any bid built on this framework.

1

OBSERVATIONAL, NOT EXPERIMENTAL

There is no control group. The data describes what happened to the people in the programme, and nothing about what would have happened to them without it. Say so, in those words, in the report.

2

ASSOCIATION, NOT CAUSATION

A confidence rise alongside sustained participation is an association. The permitted sentence is "confidence rose while participants attended", never "the programme caused confidence to rise". Funders' evaluators know the difference, and claiming causation from observational data discredits the genuine finding underneath it.

3

THE CRIME-REDUCTION RULE

No randomised trial or meta-analysis proves that sport reduces offending; researchers in this field describe the evidence base as problematic. The strongest claim the evidence supports, and the strongest we permit in any material or bid, is this: well-designed, trusted-adult, doorstep sport interventions are associated with reduced anti-social behaviour. Nothing beyond that sentence.

4

SMALL-SAMPLE SUPPRESSION

Any measure covering fewer than a stated minimum of people (we suppress below ten) is not reported. This protects individuals from being identifiable in aggregate data, and stops noise being dressed up as signal.

5

NO CHERRY-PICKING

Report the whole cohort, including flat and negative trajectories. A programme whose report says "confidence fell or stayed flat for a third of participants, and here is what we are changing" is more fundable over time than one that only ever reports good news, because the funder can believe the good news.

6

SURVEYS KEEP A PLACE

Passive measurement replaces the survey as the default evidence base, not as a tool. A short, supported, mid-programme survey on one specific question still has value. What it can no longer be is the load-bearing wall of a programme's entire impact case.

The rules cost something. They forbid the biggest claims. What they buy is a body of evidence a sceptical trustee can lean on, which is worth more than any headline.

6 WHAT SHOT COMMITS TO

This framework is only worth publishing if we hold ourselves to it. Three commitments, in writing.

1

THESE MEASURES, AT NO COST

Any funded programme running on the platform gets the observed measures in section 2, and reporting mapped to the frameworks in section 3, free, permanently, as part of the free club and coach layer. Evidence of impact should never be a premium feature for the organisations doing the work funders most want done.

2

AGGREGATE, ANONYMISED REPORTING

Reports to funders are aggregate and anonymised, with small samples suppressed under the rule in section 5. Individual development records belong to the individual and their family, not to the report. No funder receives data that identifies a child.

3

METHODOLOGY PUBLISHED AND VERSIONED

How each measure is defined, collected and aggregated is published, and every change is versioned, dated and explained. A funder comparing a programme's second year against its first can see exactly what changed in the method, so a change in the numbers is never quietly a change in the ruler.

None of this is specific to us. Any platform serving funded sport should be held to the same bar: measures without surveys, mapped to the funder's frameworks, governed by stated honesty rules, delivered at no cost to the funded programme. Take the template on page 5 and the rules on page 6 into your next bid, whichever platform you build it on. What matters is that funded sport stops evidencing its impact through an instrument nobody answers.

SOURCES

- Sport England / Sheffield Hallam University / Manchester Metropolitan University, Social value of community sport and physical activity in England, 2023/24 (WELLBY wellbeing valuation approach, HM Treasury Green Book approved)
- Sport England, Active Lives surveys (adult, and children and young people)
- Ofsted, renewed inspection framework (from November 2025), personal development and well-being report-card area
- United Nations, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1 (2015), paragraph 37
- UN General Assembly, resolution A/RES/79/8, Sport as an enabler of sustainable development, adopted by consensus 12 November 2024
- UNESCO, Kazan Action Plan, MINEPS VI, 15 July 2017 (10 SDGs, 36 targets)
- Ministry of Justice, Youth Justice Sport Fund, 2023; Loughborough University evaluation and shared theory of change, January 2024
- Loughborough University, 2023, on the limits of the evidence that sport reduces youth offending

The survey response rates described in section 1 are practitioner-reported, drawn from SHOT's conversations with programme evaluators and delivery organisations during 2025-26, and are stated as experience, not as a measured statistic.