



**EVALUATING** the impact of  
**BOXING CLUBS** on their  
host **COMMUNITIES**



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#### SUBMITTED TO:

Ron Tulley  
Head of Development  
England Boxing  
English Institute of Sport  
Coleridge Road  
Sheffield  
S9 5DA

#### SUBMITTED BY:

David Barrett, Lee Edmondson, Robbie Millar and Ryan Storey  
Sport Industry Research Centre  
Sheffield Hallam University  
Sheffield  
S10 2BP

Tel: +44 (0)114 225 2298



# FOREWORD

## “Inspiring and transforming lives through boxing”

Thanks to a grant from Sport England, it has enabled us at England Boxing to truly understand what many people have believed for years, that amateur boxing does a great job in keeping youngsters disciplined, healthy, instils respect and recognises the role boxing clubs play in the communities throughout the country.

The evidence put together by independent researchers from Sheffield Hallam University paints a really motivational picture of what so many clubs do, not only to train excellent boxers, but to help members reach their full potential in life. And all of this done by quite an amazing army of volunteers, frequently working in some of the toughest communities in England.

The publication of this research is only the start of the project. It is now our intention to work with colleagues at Sport England, UK Coaching and CIMSPA to produce a workshop so that we can train new cohorts of coaches on how to make their club more community focussed.

We will be delighted to share this learning with other sports and charities with the aim of further investigating how sport in general and specifically boxing can be used as a tool for personal growth and development.

On behalf of England Boxing, we would like to thank those who have contributed to this report and for the countless unseen hours, goodwill and support that takes place each day throughout the country by our membership to ensure that our vision of inspiring and transforming lives through boxing is not just a marketing strapline but truly delivered.

I hope you enjoy reading this valuable and inspirational research.

### **Ron Tulley**

Head of Development  
England Boxing



### **Gethin Jenkins**

Chief Executive  
England Boxing





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

The popular perception of boxing clubs is that they are an asset to the community because they provide a participation opportunity which “keeps kids off the streets”. As a sport, boxing is generally regarded as being more successful than others in terms of engaging with participants from minority groups, suffering from multiple deprivation, in what are often challenging locations.

The focus of this research is on clubs whose main purpose is to use the sport of boxing to engage with people within the community that suffer from some sort of social exclusion, to understand more clearly why their behaviours, knowledge and expertise are so successful in engaging with participants from deprived areas and under-represented socio-economic and ethnic groups.

## Our Approach

The research team recognised at an early stage that the most valuable data resource was the ability of coaches to tell their stories in an open and honest way. Indeed, this is a valued tradition within boxing, where protagonists routinely share oral histories in the celebration and promotion of the sport.

A semi-structured interviews schedule was designed in collaboration with England Boxing staff, who were trained in the facilitation of focus group interviews. The NGB secured the commitment of coaches from clubs across the country to take part in the research, with 56 coaches participating in a two-day event in October 2019. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed and then coded using software which produced a thematic analysis of the content, and allowed some statistical analysis. In other words, the software enables a systematic analysis of what was said, by whom, and to what extent.

## Findings

While the focus group interviews were structured around a series of questions designed to generate discussion, analysis of the transcripts identified four broad themes of conversation, which form the basis of the findings presented here:

- **Location and Environment**
- **Boxing Coaching and Leadership**
- **Culture and Ethos**
- **Funding and Impact**

## Location and Environment

Sport England’s Club Count mapping exercise, conducted in the summer of 2017, reveals that in the majority of the most popular sports, there is a tendency for clubs to be located in less deprived areas. Boxing is a notable exception, with almost three quarters of affiliated clubs located in the most deprived parts of England, with 25% in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods nationally.

The facilities that traditionally underpin voluntary clubs in many sports are less accessible to marginalised communities, either because of

distance (as the Club Count data demonstrates), or because of the cost of access. Location therefore gives community boxing clubs a head start in reaching marginalised or excluded participants because they are located where demand is highest. Boxing clubs are therefore able to serve a participant market which other sports appear to have abandoned.

Operating in areas of such severe deprivation brings challenges which most clubs in other sports would not have to confront, such as gang-related crime and anti-social behaviour. By taking the initiative ahead of more bureaucratic organisations, boxing clubs, and the volunteers who run them, quickly earn the respect of the community. Crucially, as residents and (in the main) ex-boxers, coaches have the local knowledge and credibility to act as peacemakers, which takes on additional significance when disputes arise in the community.

For boxing clubs the minimum venue and facilities standards allow for a greater amount of flexibility in terms of floor space, surface, lighting requirements and equipment. In simple terms, boxing clubs can adapt to fit almost any available building and are flexible enough to accept that the spaces in which they operate may not originally have been designed with sport in mind. Boxing clubs are adaptable, often because they have had to be in the past. Boxing is in effect a low rent sport in a strictly economic sense.

Boxing clubs may be spartan places, but one of their many strengths is that they provide a welcoming environment, and this is the responsibility of the coaches and volunteers who run the clubs. Coaches are well aware of the importance of making the right first impression in this regard. While improving facilities might be tempting, funding should be directed to coaching and coaches as this generates a more significant and sustainable return on investment.

Boxing clubs are typically led by people from the communities in which they are located, which is critical to their success. They generate pride in the community by engaging with traditionally hard to reach and marginalised participants. Boxing clubs are ideally placed to act as the tip of the spear in terms of engaging with deprived and marginalised communities, though some coaches have reservations.

“ keeps kids off the streets ”

Club leaders are increasingly confident that they are able to deliver solutions for their communities, and vocal in saying so. This confidence stems from the many local partnership arrangements with agencies such as the police, fire service, local authorities, youth service providers and social services.

## Boxing Coaching and Leadership

The bond between boxer and coach is an intense one, and for some participants, it becomes one of the most important personal relationships in their lives. The intensity of this relationship may change over time, as participants engage with or disengage from competitive boxing. The development of long-term friendships and networks through sport is a form of social capital which many protagonists cite as being both a cause and an effect of participation, and boxing is no exception.

The boxing community sees itself as unique, due in large part to the intense physical and confrontational nature of the sport, but also as a result of its position in the community. In fact, many of the characteristics which boxing clubs and coaches feel set them apart, are common to other sports and settings. Nevertheless, the strength and depth of the relationships enjoyed by coaches and boxers (whether recreational or competitive) takes on additional meaning when placed in the context of the environment in which a club operates.



The essential nature of boxing is confrontational, and that engenders a level of respect, bordering on reverence, for skilled practitioners of the Noble Art. At heart, boxing is a sport which generates fear and pride among participants in equal measure, but this leads to a level of mutual respect which is evident at all levels and provides the foundation for the interpersonal relationships that sustain the sport.

The physicality of boxing is attractive to many young people: paradoxically, the physical effort of boxing training can be sufficient to reduce levels of aggression. This gap between the perception of the sport and the reality of training at a boxing club is hard for some to comprehend. Boxing is able to offer an outlet that otherwise would be off-limits to participants in other sporting activities.

Community boxing coaches go above and beyond the call of duty in supporting their athletes, and in doing so, they come to know about almost every aspect of 'their' boxers' lives. For many participants the relationship with their coach is one of the few reliable and dependable things in their lives. Some boxers come to view their coach as a mentor; a role which most are happy to embrace.

A coach may become someone in whom a boxer can confide, though this can present something of a dilemma if the disclosure is particularly sensitive in nature. Some coaches admit to being under-equipped to handle the complex issues which are presented to them.

## Culture and Ethos

As a sport with a global presence, boxing enjoys a popularity which transcends nationalities and builds bridges between cultures. Boxers come from different backgrounds and engage in the sport for all kinds of different reasons. Coaches take great pride in being able to point to the multicultural membership of their clubs, particularly in areas where racial or ethnic tensions are evident. This inclusivity takes on additional significance for participants from groups which, for different reasons, may have been marginalised in the past.

Boxing culture may help to bridge divides, but it is also dependent on the establishment of clearly defined boundaries. Crucially, coaches establish rules and enforce them, understanding that this sends out a message to all participants of what will or will not be tolerated.

Joining a club involves the physical act of entering a gym, but it is also a symbolic act. The gym can be an intimidating environment for the uninitiated, and coaches acknowledge responsibility to help newcomers feel welcome as novices among experts. Other club members also have a part to play, and once a participant engages with the club ethos, they stay fully engaged.

Boxing coaches are direct, honest, and positive. They are able to deliver hard, sometimes difficult truths to participants in a way that coaches in other sports might shy away from. This honesty is seen as one of boxing's unique traits, but it could be argued that all good coaching is based on an ability to deliver feedback effectively and without rancour.

Success in boxing, as with all sports, is dependent on the sustained effort by participants and volunteers. Traditionally boxing is associated with hard work, discipline, commitment and focus. The financial rewards of professional boxing are available only to a select few: coaches accept this readily, understand that their members may not ever box competitively.

## Funding and Impact

The delivery of community boxing programmes, despite being driven mainly by volunteers, requires continuous financial support. Traditional sources of income are under increasing pressure as a result of competition from other activities, and the financial hardships faced by participants and their supporters. In such strained circumstances, clubs must look elsewhere for funding with corporate sponsorship and grant funding common sources of secondary income. The justification for providing money may be to generate secondary impacts which reach beyond the confines of the boxing club.

Boxing clubs are accustomed to operating on a shoestring. With so many clubs located in

deprived neighbourhoods, the ability to generate income from their own delivery of boxing activities is limited by the low incomes of their members. Coaches may therefore frequently overlook payment for individual sessions, choosing instead to retain the participant. In the long run however, this cannot be sustained indefinitely. In the absence of payment there is a possibility that the service provided by a community club may be undervalued: Community clubs are increasingly diversifying their activities, charging fees at a higher level for sessions aimed at the fitness and lifestyle market, retaining surplus funds to subsidise core activities. Given the choice, most clubs would elect to invest in coaching if funds were available.

Investment by public agencies is a powerful vote of confidence in the ability of boxing clubs to make a difference to the lives of their members, and to the wider community at large. Until recently, negative perceptions of the sport among decision makers who do not have boxing backgrounds have limited the amount of funding available. Some clubs have struggled to make the case for investment in the face of this apparent bureaucratic resistance to consider boxing as a valid and worthwhile activity for young people.

One of the most significant barriers to funding is the often complex nature of the application process, which can involve much form filling and sometimes negotiation. The emphasis placed by funders on generating new participants often runs counter to the priorities of community boxing clubs, whose attention is often focused on retaining existing members. Nevertheless, clubs are often able to find creative ways in which to meet the criteria set by funders.

The quid pro quo of external funding is the need to demonstrate impact, but many clubs lack the knowledge and expertise to do so. Quantifying the impacts and benefits of boxing may be the key to further investment, but hard evidence of the measurable benefits of community boxing clubs remains elusive. Nevertheless, the people who run clubs increasingly recognise the need to demonstrate value, and when support is applied successfully, clubs find that themselves empowered: Quantifying the impacts and benefits of boxing is the key to unlock the door to continued funding, but clubs must increasingly demonstrate that

inward investment generates a social as well as a sporting return on investment. Traditionally, social impact measures have focused only on new participants, but the argument made by community club coaches is that some account should also be taken of those who are retained that might otherwise have dropped out. If social impacts are the desired outcome there has to be a way to capture their scope and extent.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Being There

Boxing clubs are located in precisely the kind of deprived neighbourhoods and serve the marginalised and excluded communities which Sport England has identified as the key target groups in increasing participation in sport and physical activity. Boxing clubs therefore have a head start in reaching out to participants from the most deprived neighbourhoods, but this is no guarantee of success. Given the importance of location, it is an ongoing source of frustration that a large proportion of clubs lack control over their facilities.

**RECOMMENDATION 1: Maintain a Presence.** The attention of England Boxing, Sport England and other agencies which support boxing clubs, should be focussed on helping to ensure security of tenure for those clubs which currently have short-term or rolling arrangements for their facilities.

### Honesty, Consistency, Positivity

One of the key strengths of boxing coaches identified through the research is the honesty of their approach to the relationships they form with participants, often delivering hard messages without pulling any punches. This has additional importance when working with participants who come from turbulent backgrounds, where authority figures may be absent. Coaches frequently assume the role of mentor to young people who lack any other positive role model in their lives. Participants feel supported, respected and valued, cementing their engagement with the club and the sport. In return coaches are forced to confront challenging social issues, placing significant expectations on a volunteer workforce which wants to respond appropriately but lacks the formal training necessary to do so.

### Consider Training Needs for Coaches

Coaches identified a number of areas of their delivery in which they felt under-prepared: for example: dealing with participants who may be engaged in gang activity outside of the gym. Examples from this report prove that when structured plans are in place, supported by partnership arrangements with public agencies, volunteers can acquire the necessary skills quickly and effectively, making their clubs more sustainable in the long term.

**RECOMMENDATION 2: Invest in People.** While coaches appreciate the support and guidance available from Club Support Officers, England Boxing should consider extending the level of support made available to clubs in the form of training and development programmes. Specifically, there should be more specialised safeguarding training relating to first aid for mental health, gang activity, social services referrals and preventative police engagement. More broadly, coaches and club volunteers would like training and development support to cover financial management generally, and grant funding applications in particular.

Clubs often rely on estimates when asked to quantify the impact of community boxing. The culture of community boxing clubs needs to evolve, not only to reflect the requirements of funding providers, but also to respond to additional external scrutiny.

**RECOMMENDATION 3: Keep Records.** England Boxing should encourage boxing clubs to maintain accurate records of participation in their gyms, with the same degree of diligence that most would apply to their boxers' competitive records. This represents something of a culture change for some clubs, and would therefore require considerable input from the NGB.

With success comes scrutiny, and clubs are increasingly required to demonstrate a return on investment. Without an effective system for monitoring the number of people who come to a gym, the evidence of the work done by community boxing clubs will only ever be anecdotal at best. In these circumstances, England Boxing must grasp the opportunity to develop a range of templates for compiling effective membership databases.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Provide Templates.** England Boxing should develop template procedures and documentation for use within boxing clubs, for the purposes of simplifying processes such as financial bookkeeping, membership database, management/volunteer recruitment and promotion of club activities.

### Taking the Fight to the Community

Boxing clubs and coaches are acutely aware of how the popularity of their sport has fluctuated over time as a result of factors beyond their immediate control. Boxing remains more vulnerable than most sports to criticism, some of which questions its suitability as an activity for young people. The challenge is to 'sell' boxing's virtues as a means of engaging with marginalised people. Support for this strategy would align well with Sport England's strategic aims and send out a strong message of support to the boxing community.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Stay in the Fight.** Community coaches feel that their sport deserves the support of Sport England and other public agencies in placing boxing at the centre of efforts to engage with vulnerable, marginalised and excluded young people. A first step might be to encourage more schools in deprived neighbourhoods to engage with community clubs, to offer 'boxing fitness' training to their pupils.

### Choose the Right Scoring System

The social value of boxing is as important to many clubs and coaches as the intrinsic benefits of participation in the sport. The emphasis of Social Return On Investment (SROI) on social and environmental benefits may make it appropriate for use in relation to boxing projects, though this would require further investigation.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Investment Returns.** Given the emphasis placed by so many community clubs on social value, there is a strong case for using alternative models to measure return on investment in boxing.

### Lessons for Other Sports

Boxing offers an important lesson to other sports in the way that young participants are able to train alongside and learn from successful adults. Community coaches believe that this tangible form of success within reach provides a significant spur to new boxers, which in their view could and should be replicated in other sports.

**RECOMMENDATION 7: Learn from Boxing, Close Up.** The maintenance of close connections between champion amateur and professional boxers and their community clubs provides an object lesson to all sports, in how to harness the power of success, by maximising the oft-vaunted but hard to capture demonstration effect.



# INTRODUCTION

The Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University is pleased to present this qualitative evaluation of community boxing club coaching activity in England.

The research was commissioned to identify the key themes that have emerged through the work of community clubs. The findings presented here focus on the impact of clubs on their communities, based on insight derived from a methodology developed in partnership with representatives of the National Governing Body (NGB), England Boxing.

The aim of the research is to identify why boxing clubs are effective in delivering sport and physical activity in challenging locations, and to people experiencing deprivation and disadvantage.



“ 39% of all boxing clubs affiliated to England Boxing were located in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods in England...” ”

# 1. RESEARCH CONTEXT

England Boxing set an objective to provide 75% of coaches with a mentor by 2021, in line with Sport England's strategic plan for coaching. In developing its coaching workforce, the NGB is expected to focus its attention on some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. The widely held belief of many sports practitioners is that boxing has a unique role to play, not only as a diversionary activity, but also as a means of creating personal development and employment opportunities. To date however, the evidence to support this view has been largely anecdotal.

The popular perception of boxing clubs is that they are an asset to the community because they provide a participation opportunity which **“keeps kids off the streets”**. While there may be some truth in this maxim, the same could be said for any sport or youth club. Nevertheless, as a sport, boxing is generally regarded as being more successful than others in terms of engaging with participants from minority groups, suffering from multiple deprivation, in what are often challenging locations. Sport England's 'Club Count' report into affiliated sports clubs found that in 2017, 39% of all boxing clubs affiliated to England Boxing were located in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods in England. Location alone cannot account for the success of boxing clubs in this respect however.

England Boxing categorise affiliated clubs into three main groups.

- Clubs whose sole purpose is to train champion boxers who will win regional, national and possibly international championships.
- Clubs who also want to train champions but will engage in some kind of community interventions in order to raise much needed money to help create the champions.
- Clubs whose main purpose is to use the sport of boxing to engage with people within the community that suffer from some sort of social exclusion, but they still engage in training competitive boxers.

The focus of this research is on clubs in the third category, to understand more clearly why their behaviours, knowledge and expertise are so successful in engaging with participants from deprived areas and under-represented socio-economic and ethnic groups. This aligns well with Sport England's desire to investigate “Wider Social Outcomes”, particularly the social and community cohesion benefits which may accrue from boxing.

England Boxing and Sport England are therefore keen to identify the specific skills and abilities present in community boxing coaches which might benefit other clubs and sports, in support of the delivery of *'The Coaching Plan for England'*. Further, there is a need to identify the aspects of coaching in which community boxing clubs require additional support to maintain or potentially increase current levels of output. The evaluation had the following objectives:

1. **Lift the lid on the unique nature of boxing clubs and the interventions they have with their members which is more deep seated than simply keeping them off the streets.**
2. **Understand the challenges and success stories emerging from boxing clubs located in challenging environments. What have they learned from their experiences? What, if anything would they do differently if they were to start from scratch?**
3. **Develop recommendations for the future direction of investment in boxing clubs.**

## 2. OUR APPROACH

The research team recognised at an early stage that the most valuable data resource was the ability of coaches to tell their stories in an open and honest way. Indeed, this is a valued tradition within boxing, where protagonists routinely share oral histories in the celebration and promotion of the sport. The methodology which was subsequently developed reflected both this tradition, and a desire to deliver a research dataset which could be analysed in a coherent and structured way.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were selected as the means of collecting data, enabling high volume data collection on a range of topics. The NGB secured the commitment of coaches from clubs across the country to take part in the research in advance of the start of the project. A total of 56 coaches participated in a two-day event in October 2019, at which they contributed to the conversation in a controlled environment.

The design of the research instrument was a collaborative effort with England Boxing staff, who contributed to the framing of the research questions in exchange for receiving training in the delivery of focus groups. This was considered important for two reasons. First, by participating in the design phase, England Boxing staff were able to take ownership of the process. Second participants would be reassured by the presence of England Boxing staff in their focus groups, encouraging them to speak freely to a sympathetic audience. In the event, SIRC staff were on hand to ensure that the focus groups ran according to agreed principles, to resolve technical issues with the recording equipment in use on the day, and to engage with the conversations, drilling down into specific issues where appropriate.

Focus group participants were organised according to England Boxing administrative region (Figure 1), and generated over 60 hours of recorded conversations over the course of the event. These recordings were transcribed clean verbatim. The transcriptions were then coded using Quirkos software which produced a thematic analysis of the content, and allowed some quantification and statistical analysis. In other words, the coding of the software enables a systematic analysis of what was said, by whom, and to what extent.

The findings presented here are based on this thematic analysis of the interviews recorded at the England Boxing event. They are guided by the interpretation of SIRC researchers present at the event, as well as feedback from England Boxing staff, and a reflective reading of the transcripts after the fact. It should be recognised at the outset that while every effort was made to engage with a cross-section of the boxing community, the sample of clubs which took part was by no means comprehensive.

Notably, some coaches were unable to attend because of work commitments, or more pertinently, commitments to their clubs which took priority. Nevertheless, the range of clubs in attendance, their geographic scope, and the socio-demographic profile of those taking part, offers a rounded and informed view of boxing's current scorecard.

ENGLAND BOXING REGION		Male		Female		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	
East Midlands	n	6	86%	1	14%	7	
	%	15%		13%		15%	
Eastern Counties	n	3	75%	1	25%	4	
	%	8%		13%		8%	
London	n	4	67%	2	33%	6	
	%	10%		25%		13%	
Mersey and North West	n	5	100%	0	0%	5	
	%	13%		0%		10%	
Southern Counties	n	4	100%	0	0%	4	
	%	10%		0%		8%	
Tyne Tees and Wear	n	3	75%	1	25%	4	
	%	8%		13%		8%	
West Midlands	n	6	86%	1	14%	7	
	%	15%		13%		15%	
Western Counties	n	3	100%	0	0%	3	
	%	8%		0%		6%	
Yorkshire	n	6	75%	2	25%	8	
	%	15%		25%		17%	
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>		<b>n</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>48</b>

Figure 1: Focus Group Participants, By England Boxing Administrative Region



### 3. FINDINGS

While the focus group interviews were structured around a series of questions designed to generate discussion, analysis of the transcripts identified four broad themes of conversation, which form the basis of the findings presented here:

- **Location and Environment**
- **Boxing Coaching and Leadership**
- **Culture and Ethos**
- **Funding and Impact**

The discussion which follows examines each of these in turn, though there is necessarily some overlap between the themes. We begin by looking at the influence of club location, and the environment of the typical community boxing club and its surroundings.

SPORT	COUNT	IMD DECILE									
		More Deprived					Less Deprived				
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Football</b>	22,572	1,944	1,786	2,020	1,951	2,220	2,559	2,423	2,469	2,285	1,852
<b>Cricket</b>	5,932	151	205	291	355	494	680	754	710	610	565
<b>Bowls</b>	4,958	345	416	447	536	531	553	522	526	512	364
<b>Tennis</b>	2,715	37	53	84	153	231	292	321	339	420	437
<b>Table Tennis</b>	2,661	213	203	199	227	315	356	344	328	233	208
<b>Netball</b>	2,330	105	201	183	249	257	199	205	284	226	275
<b>Rugby Union</b>	2,206	89	119	157	157	225	187	235	232	264	204
<b>Equestrian</b>	1,827	13	25	51	87	180	217	248	190	175	134
<b>Cycling</b>	1,823	62	115	126	167	166	200	207	252	237	264
<b>Golf</b>	1,822	33	38	75	133	199	235	288	256	276	250
<b>Badminton</b>	1,766	94	118	110	154	170	164	188	240	203	275
<b>Angling</b>	1,712	58	83	74	144	165	186	205	215	243	228
<b>Athletics</b>	1,313	43	65	75	87	114	104	151	142	157	159
<b>Gymnastics</b>	1,161	118	100	105	115	110	133	124	115	123	104
<b>Swimming</b>	1,014	100	104	118	108	112	109	89	89	85	77
<b>Boxing</b>	971	237	132	147	115	76	73	67	54	26	28
<b>Archery</b>	959	18	26	51	65	107	95	107	107	123	98
<b>Rowing</b>	908	38	37	77	41	58	61	104	101	131	50
<b>Hockey</b>	863	46	59	70	68	94	73	102	102	116	120
<b>Karate</b>	822	78	79	78	78	68	72	90	88	75	84
<b>Other sports</b>	12,725	698	721	813	841	924	940	1,117	1,030	1,049	914
<b>Non-funded</b>	14,920	719	843	989	1,203	1,413	1,423	1,607	1,586	1,618	1,504
<b>Funded</b>	58,140	3,801	3,842	4,362	4,628	5,403	6,065	6,284	6,283	5,951	5,186
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>73,060</b>	<b>4,520</b>	<b>4,685</b>	<b>5,351</b>	<b>5,831</b>	<b>6,816</b>	<b>7,488</b>	<b>7,891</b>	<b>7,869</b>	<b>7,569</b>	<b>6,690</b>

Figure 2: Count of Clubs by IMD Decile

### 3.1 LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENT

Before exploring the views of the community boxing coaches who contributed to the focus groups, it is first useful to consider the results of Sport England’s Club Count mapping exercise, conducted in the summer of 2017<sup>1</sup>. This research used postcode data to locate affiliated clubs in over 80 sports, which also permitted an analysis of distribution by deprivation, as clubs can be mapped to ONS Super Output Area Level (LSOAs). As part of the research, clubs were assigned a value according to where they are located, in relation to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), which measure relative levels of development at small area level using a range of economic and social indicators.

This presents an opportunity to consider the impact of deprivation levels on access to sports clubs, and the figures are presented in Figure 2. LSOAs were grouped into deciles (bands of 10%) according to their overall deprivation score, ranging from 1 (the most deprived) to 10 (the least deprived). The green shading indicates a higher proportion of clubs, while the red shaded cells have the fewest clubs in each sport.

In the majority of the most popular sports, there is a tendency for clubs to be located in less deprived areas. Overall, some 37,507 clubs (58% of the total) are located in the 5 least deprived deciles according to the IMD 2015. This pattern generally holds true across the range of sports, although there are some notable variations. Tennis clubs are much more likely to be located in more affluent areas, with more than 76% in less deprived deciles. Similarly, Golf (73%), Equestrian (73%) and Cricket (69%) clubs tend to be located in areas which are less affected by multiple deprivation.

More pertinently to this investigation, there are few sports which run counter to this trend, though boxing is a notable exception, with almost three quarters of affiliated clubs located in the most deprived parts of England. Indeed, a quarter of all boxing clubs are found in the most deprived decile. Other sports with a location bias towards more deprived areas include swimming (55%), and among the ‘other’ sports with fewer clubs overall, snooker (63%), rugby League (61%), volleyball (53%), weightlifting (53%) and

basketball (52%). None of these sports has the same gravitational pull towards deprived neighbourhoods as boxing however.

This distribution of clubs by deprivation has important implications in terms of access to opportunities to participate in club-based sport. One of the domains in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation is that of Access to Services, in which areas that are generally more deprived tend to perform better than average. Club Count’s findings appear to suggest that access to sports clubs is more difficult for those living in more deprived areas, despite higher levels of connectivity through public transport. Boxing is a clear exception to this rule.

Similar research carried out by England Boxing and Sport England in April 2019 reinforced the position above with 39.9% of boxing clubs in the top 20% of IMD.

### Location, Location, Location

The results of Club Count prove that boxing clubs are more likely to be present in deprived areas when other sports are (increasingly) absent. Moreover, boxing clubs are more likely to be located in deprived areas than any other sports. Boxing is one of the few sports maintaining a presence, and therefore one of the few activities available. The unique advantage of the sport is being positioned in areas which are otherwise bereft of facilities, a trend which has accelerated in recent years as cuts to local government budgets have resulted in reduced investment in publicly owned sports halls, swimming pools and outdoor pitches.

The facilities that traditionally underpin voluntary clubs in many sports are less accessible to marginalised communities, either because of distance (as the Club Count data demonstrates), or because of the cost of access. Location therefore gives community boxing clubs a head start in reaching marginalised or excluded participants because they are located where demand is highest. Boxing clubs are therefore able to serve a participant market which other sports appear to have abandoned:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sportengland.org/campaigns-and-our-work/clubs>





*Kings Heath Boxing Club.*

*“In our community which is in the bottom 10% of deprivation, we have got 3 boxing clubs and no football at all. No football, in one of the most deprived areas of the country, yet there are three boxing set ups. So, where boxing is sticking around as a grass-roots sport, football is becoming more of a corporate entity.”*

**Southern Counties**

*“Another part of choosing the right location is that it makes the sport more accessible. If you are kid living in a deprived area then it’s not like you are going to go sailing or horse riding, because you could never afford it.”*

**West Midlands**

Operating in areas of such severe deprivation brings challenges which most clubs in other sports would not have to confront. Most notably, many of the coaches taking part in the focus groups identified gang-related crime and anti-social behaviour as the single most pressing issue facing their communities:

*“The biggest problem in our area though is drugs. Massive drug problems. The old county lines business with gangs from Liverpool or Manchester coming up and grooming kids that are still in school to sell for them.”*

**Southern Counties**

*“It’s in the middle of where there are loads of gangs in [the area]. There is a stabbing or shooting or killing virtually every month. You get one or 2 every month.”*

**London Region**

*“We are in a perfect location really. We have a church on one side, a primary school on the other, we are in the middle of a big housing area, and we are on the cut-through for the three big schools in the area. Kids will come in on their way to school and home from school, often not even to do with boxing.”*

**Western Counties**

Under these circumstances, even some established clubs struggle to make an impact on young people. The temptation to allow agencies such as the police and social services to lead the response would be understandable, but the response of many of the coaches interviewed for this research has been to confront the issue head-on. They, and the boxers they serve, see their clubs as a safe space in the middle of an otherwise dangerous environment, providing an essential service to the local community

*“One of the safest places in the world is a boxing gym and with people that are involved in crime, it is an escape from them and that’s why they keep coming back.”*

**Southern Counties**

*“Having somewhere that they feel safe is really important and is something that works for people who are trying to rehabilitate themselves. You are essentially just creating somewhere that people can come and feel like part of a group and that is all that we are trying to do as coaches, just trying to get everybody to be as welcoming as possible.”*

**Western Counties**

By taking the initiative ahead of more bureaucratic organisations, boxing clubs, and the volunteers who run them, quickly earn the respect of the community. This ability to engage with otherwise hard-to-reach individuals is dependent, at least in part, on maintaining standards of behaviour within the gym:

*“The environment in a boxing gym is a leveller. Everyone is on the same playing field. If a bully came into a boxing gym they would last a matter of seconds, because it would just not be tolerated.”*

**Southern Counties**

In some cases, the status of the club and of boxing comes into play:

*“Put it this way. If you wanted to join the Tennis Club, you wouldn’t necessarily be allowed to walk away from a gang situation, but if you join a boxing club it is more likely to be respected and accepted.”*

**London Region**

*“In the club and in school the kids all get on great, but in the streets between A and B, that is where a lot of the trouble happens. Often one of the kids will say ‘leave off him, I go boxing with him’. They do look after each other but being on late busses and such is still a worry. I always try to make sure that parents can pick them up or I will drop them off, I don’t like any kids leaving on their own.”*

**Western Counties**

Crucially, as residents and (in the main) ex-boxers, coaches have the local knowledge and credibility to act as peacemakers, which takes on additional significance when disputes arise in the community:

*“Where our gym is based, there are lot of gangs there. And there are times, especially when they’re in trouble, that they do come around, especially when they’re in trouble they do confide in us. Especially my colleague. He talks gruff and he knows somebody that knows the gangs, and they respect him a lot because he boxed at the top level. So he’s got that ability to meet up with the gang leaders and try as much as possible [to resolve issues].”*

**London Region**



## Accommodation, and being Accommodating

Location takes precedence over the physical environment of a club for most coaches, who value the substance of what a club does for its members over the appearance of the gym. A boxing club can be established at relatively low cost in a short period of time, in any facility of reasonable size, because the only stipulation in terms of space is that competitive boxing should take place in a ring. Given that most members of community clubs are 'uncarded', and do not actively participate in competitive bouts, this is of less concern than being in the right place for the members.

Unlike other sports which use a standardised field of play, for boxing clubs the minimum venue and facilities standards allow for a greater amount of flexibility in terms of floor space, surface, lighting requirements and equipment. Indeed, in an England Boxing sanctioned gym, the ring itself may be temporary or portable. In simple terms, boxing clubs can adapt to fit almost any available building and are flexible enough to accept that the spaces in which they operate may not originally have been designed with sport in mind. As a result, many boxing clubs share their premises with other groups and societies. Boxing clubs are adaptable, often because they have had to be in the past. Boxing is in effect a low rent sport in a strictly economic sense.

This flexibility can have drawbacks in the sense that clubs may find themselves using spaces which lack physical security measures on the one hand, and on a broader scale, have little or no security of tenure. For many clubs, securing a long-term tenancy or lease agreement for their gym is a significant challenge. Those that are lucky enough to do so are often able to draw down capital grant funding to pay for improvements to the facilities, magnifying their advantage.

*"This agreement from the council is really important for us because it gives us that sense of security, meaning we can apply for grants and things without worrying whether we will still have a gym."*

**Mersey and North West**

Boxing clubs are less concerned with how a gym looks than how it works, and are therefore more likely to tolerate issues such as poor changing facilities or a lack of equipment storage, than clubs in other sports. Nevertheless, the will and desire to increase and improve the space available to community clubs is tangible. The skills and expertise required to do so often come from within the clubs themselves, with members who are tradespeople willing to provide their services as a benefit in kind. This is dependent on having at least some element of control over the management of the building however, which is not always possible. One coach expressed the view that securing the tenure of their premises was one of the most significant steps their clubs had ever taken:

*"Our club is going a lot better now. This time last year we were coming to the end of our lease, didn't know if we would be able to sign a new one, but we have got a five year lease now. This now puts us in a position where we can build and hopefully have a bigger place."*

**Mersey and North West**

His counterpart explained the opportunities which had opened up since his club entered into a similar arrangement.

*"Part of our problem was that we did not have a very good lease with the council. After getting the help though and them seeing our business plan including what we could do with the building, they handed over a full youth club, whereas we used to rent two rooms. The place was virtually empty all of the time but they recognised what we could do with it. We were getting more people in the boxing club on a Monday night than they were getting in their youth club for the other 6 days combined. It was a natural course then for them to hand that over to us, after they made sure that we were strong enough to take it on. We got the building and quickly realised that we*

*would need to put a lot of money in just to make it fit for purpose."*

**Mersey and North West**

Accommodation is people-driven as much as it is related to physical infrastructure. Boxing clubs may be spartan places, but one of their many strengths is that they provide a welcoming environment, and this the responsibility of the coaches and volunteers who run the clubs. Coaches are well aware of the importance of making the right first impression in this regard:

*"A lot of us don't realise how daunting it can be to walk into a boxing gym, because a lot of them are in run down areas in bad parts of town. Managing to walk into and become a part of things and realise that it is actually a welcoming environment, that is a success for that young person."*

**West Midlands**

*"The reality is when these kids realise 98% of boxing coaches have a true passion and a family thing, most clubs say 'welcome to the family' which is important as most could just join a gang because they've got nothing going on at home. If you do it right the bond is there forever."*

**Western Counties**

When investment is made in a boxing club, the temptation may be to use funds to improve the building or upgrade equipment. Community coaches are clear however, that this funding should be directed to coaching and coaches as this generates a more significant return on investment, not least because of the constant need to identify, recruit and develop new coaches to sustain their clubs.

*"We have a massive dropout rate and we are evaluating who we put on our Level Ones now because we have put on quite a lot of coaches and we've had quite a lot of them realise that coaching is not as easy as they think it*

*is. Some of them may just want to have a lanyard and say that they coach but they don't want to put in the grind."*

**East Midlands**

## In the Community. By the Community. For the Community

Boxing clubs are typically led by people from the communities in which they are located, which is critical to their success. They are able to tap into goodwill locally, because they have the respect of the community, and critically, can demonstrate a genuine determination to succeed. Coaches frequently spoke of their own willingness to 'roll their sleeves up' or 'get their hands dirty', in order to complete tasks and this appears to rub off on those around them.

Clubs generate pride in the community by engaging with traditionally hard to reach and marginalised participants. While this may be undervalued by wider society in the opinion of most community coaches, they themselves understand the importance of the pride and recognition derived from success:



*Vulcan ABC, Hull – during the COVID-19 crisis the Boxing Club was used to deliver food to the local community.*

*"If you are a kid who is a pain in the arse of the community and if you gain success in the boxing, it is a massive thing for the community because that one kid did all sorts of work for the community... It is sort of the community recognises them as one of their own and if communities don't come to boxing gyms, they don't hear their names."*

**Yorkshire Region**

Boxing clubs are ideally placed to act as the tip of the spear in terms of engaging with deprived and marginalised communities. Some community club coaches have reservations however. For them experience suggests that regeneration is something which increases the sense of marginalisation in deprived neighbourhoods, particularly when housing estates are redeveloped and replaced. These uplift programmes are seen as being inflicted on communities and as a result there is significant leakage of the investments that are not retained locally.

*"Community work, a lot of times, is done to communities. A lot of times you get people parachuted in and they pay their mortgage off the back of our stats and what happens is they tick a box and then you don't see them again, but the issues stay. What we tend to see is that there will be a new service come to the community and people from the outside are the main workers, and then the local residents are employed as cleaners."*

**Southern Counties**

Club leaders are increasingly confident that they are able to deliver solutions for their communities, and vocal in saying so. This confidence stems from the many local partnership arrangements with agencies such as the police, fire service, local authorities, youth service providers and social services.

*"We have to be known by the local community and importantly partners within the local community because collaboration work with these partners*

*is what keeps us going. We are all volunteers and we want to do our best for local collaborations and community cohesion."*

**Southern Counties**

*"I agree. We need to be in a position where we can help people and usually these people are from the local communities."*

**Southern Counties**

Boxing clubs are able to fulfil this role because they are trusted by partners and participants alike. When partnerships work well, they can help to break down the barriers of suspicion and antagonism, establishing new relationships or repairing old ones. In this sense, people from outside the community are almost as important because of the need to challenge negative perceptions. One club leader based in London explained how significant these impacts can be:

*"I think that it goes both ways, because there's so many kids that come through, and the issues that they're facing on the street are humongous, that the coaches can't deal with it all themselves. One of the things which I do which I'm able to do, because [my coach] manages the boxing side, he'll actually go out and force partners like the police force, and then the council, within social services. People that have got that same empathy and care to genuinely help the young people like myself. It takes a lot of hours of engagement, going to meetings, speaking with individuals, but we've built that system and that rapport where, if something happens, I've got the number of the Superintendent. They will say to us, 'such and such has been seen at such and such a place. Speak to them.' When we go to the individual, and we say, 'well look, this is what's coming to us', it's like they're almost relieved. They're surprised how we get to know, but they're almost relieved*

*that there's another way that they can take. They're not pressured into what's happening, and it's about having key relationships with the social services and also with people in the community."*

**London Region**

## KEY POINTS

- **Location is the unique advantage enjoyed by many boxing clubs.**
- **Boxing clubs are adaptable by necessity.**
- **Boxing clubs are ideally placed to lead efforts to deliver education and employment opportunities.**

## 3.2 BOXING, COACHING AND LEADERSHIP

In this section we examine the role of the coach on the individual and how boxing's impact extends beyond the confines of the gym. The bond between boxer and coach is an intense one, and for some participants, it becomes one of the most important personal relationships in their lives. The intensity of this relationship may change over time, as participants engage with or disengage from competitive boxing.

For the majority of community boxing club members however, this has less direct relevance, with only one in seven members of affiliated clubs being 'carded' or licenced to box competitively. The remaining members are recreational boxers who attend to improve or maintain their fitness, or for a range of other reasons, including some which are unconnected with participation in the sport. Some 'participants' may not be active at all, but merely present at the club so as not to be found elsewhere.

*"I think boxing has a bit of kudos which gets a few people through the door in the first place. Especially in certain areas, to be able to say "I go to a boxing club" holds a lot of weight, whereas if they said that they went to a croquet club or a tennis club it doesn't have that same kudos. Some of the kids who come in aren't even interested in boxing and don't want to compete, but being able to say that they go to the club gives them a bit more of a reputation in the area and starts that initial buy-in. Then once they are in, that is when we can do the work that we do."*

**Southern Counties**

The development of long-term friendships and networks through sport is a form of social capital which many protagonists cite as being both a cause and an effect of participation, and boxing is no exception. Coaches who took part in the focus groups made frequent references to the camaraderie which exists among current and ex-boxers. For many, the nature of the sport itself is at the root of these bonds:

*"Anywhere you go in the world, if you meet somebody who has been involved in boxing, it's a bar room conversation straight away, because of the experience, knowing or understanding that nervous feeling that you get when you go into the ring. Anybody who's boxed, they know that terror and having to overcome it."*

**London Region**

The boxing community sees itself as unique, due in large part to the intense physical and confrontational nature of the sport, but also as a result of its position in the community. In fact, many of the characteristics which boxing clubs and coaches feel set them apart, are common to other sports and settings. Long-term participants in most sports would identify with this form of social capital however, and research exists which suggests that the networks and relationships which support participation in sport are equally strong in other



sports, and in areas where deprivation is not the overriding concern<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, the strength and depth of the relationships enjoyed by coaches and boxers (whether recreational or competitive) takes on additional meaning when placed in the context of the environment in which a club operates. Coaches think of themselves as more than just trainers of athletes, and providers of diversionary activity. In many cases, they become advocates for the boxers in their care, and see their role as a vocational one. In this sense, boxing coaches go beyond the usual boundaries which exist in the relationship between club, coach and participant, and it is this which we now explore in more detail.

## No Hiding Places

The essential nature of boxing is confrontational, and that engenders a level of respect, bordering on reverence, for skilled practitioners of the Noble Art. As an individual sport, boxing requires its competitive participants to face their opponents under the intense scrutiny of peers and supporters, who 'judge' winners and losers. Scoring is subjective, with the result of any bout determined by the accumulated scores of ringside judges. This subjectivity inevitably leads to considerable debate on the merits of individual boxers, and comparisons between athletes fighting at different weights or in different eras are often lengthy and sometimes inconclusive.

The constant discussion of the relative merits of well-known boxers is dependent on an understanding of the courage required to participate at any level of the sport. At heart, boxing is a sport which generates fear and pride among participants in equal measure, but this leads to a level of mutual respect which is evident at all levels, and provides the foundation for the interpersonal relationships that sustain the sport.

The physicality of boxing is attractive to many young people. Whether they are motivated by a desire to become fitter and stronger, to learn a form of self-defence, or to participate in a group activity varies from person to person, but the physical effort

of boxing training can be sufficient to reduce levels of aggression. The effect of releasing this tension on an individual's behaviour can be a revelation:

*"Those kids that have got that aggression, the minute you let it out, before it rots inside, it's going to take the aggression away. It's simple stuff because when it gets bottled up inside you for that long, sometimes the smallest thing can tip it off."*

### London Region

In the context of challenging inner-city neighbourhoods where violence between rival gangs is frequent, the idea that a sport which is aggressive and confrontational could help to relieve tensions would appear to be a paradox. Much of the training which takes place in community clubs is non-contact however, and is designed to improve participants' fitness. Within the gym, technical work and sparring is strictly controlled, and carried out under close supervision. This gap between the perception of the sport and the reality of training at a boxing club is hard for some to comprehend:

*"I had it last week with the social worker, who was trying to block the placement of a child on the grounds that 'he had a problem with aggression and boxing is terribly violent'. We all started laughing, and I think, 'where do these people live?' but there are probably hundreds of thousands of people that have got a very fixed view of it. They tend to be middle class and they tend to have very strong opinions about what children should do."*

### London Region

Nevertheless, the essential nature of the sport, in common with other martial arts, is combative. This means that the sport is able to offer an outlet that would be off-limits to participants in other activities, albeit within prescribed limits, as this exchange between coaches from the North East neatly illustrates:

1 - *"With all these little scraps they have, one of them is going to get the better of the other one, if we can control that so it happens safely then there's that problem solved. There's always going to be fights between young lads, nothing is going to stop that, what we do is make sure it happens in a safe way."*

2 - *"We do the same. If you have two kids that haven't got along in school or something we just tell them to get into the ring and sort it out. By the end of it they have the respect for each other and that's what counts."*

### Tyne Tees and Wear

For a small number of young people who come to boxing clubs, the physical activity is less important than the opportunity to socialise and relax. They are happy to be associated with the club, but not (fully) engaged in the sport. Increasingly, clubs are beginning to recognise that there is value to the wider community in maintaining a connection with these individuals, even if they do not, or cannot participate:

*"We get participants that attend the gym associated with victim support and although we can't teach them boxing specifically due to the regulations in place, we can provide them with a structure and place to ensure they are safe."*

### Southern Counties

## Because they're there

As with almost all individual sports, self-discipline is paramount in boxing, but the input of coaches can be transformative. The boxer-coach relationship is founded on respect, born of honesty, and the starting point is the acceptance that respect between participants and between coaches breeds discipline. There is a perception in some quarters that the primary purpose of a boxing coach is to instil this in participants:

*"Sometimes the parents expect us to discipline them as well because they have done this or they have done that"*

Cain Alexander.



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19406940.2014.915228>

*and they will expect us to do something about it. They will say like they listen to you, they don't listen to me."*

**Yorkshire Region**

The coaches taking part in the focus groups were keen to stress however, that the discipline so inherent in well-run boxing gyms, comes from within. In other words, boxers are intrinsically motivated to apply themselves to a training regime, though the 'bargain' implicit in this contract is that they will receive the full support and application of their coach in return.

Coaches accept that a gym can be an intimidating environment, whether this is because of the often stark surroundings, the harsh nature of a training regime programme, or the fear of failure which may prevent some potential participants from ever crossing the threshold.

The success or otherwise of a club or gym is dependent upon the ability of coaches to generate the welcoming environment for newcomers. Once inside, participation tends to be on the coaches' terms, in the sense that they set and enforce the minimum level of input required to progress as a boxer.

The approach of the coach is therefore key to the recruitment and retention of participants, which in turn supports the viability of the club. The best coaches understand the importance of long-term athlete development, even if they don't adhere to a specific model. In this athlete-centred approach, while coaches retain control over the most significant aspects of development, many decisions are left to the boxer, which empowers the athlete and relieves the burden of the coach (at least to some extent). At its best, the long-term perspective offered by an athlete-centred approach eliminates many of the negative aspects of competition between clubs and coaches.

*"I think that you said an interesting point there that the coaches trust each other, whereas in a lot of sports you are competing against the other teams in every sense and from my experience of boxing, I don't get that.. So when we do some workshops, it is like we will be nice*

*friends because we know everyone and it is fascinating."*

**Yorkshire Region**

*"...we never have a go at each other or the kids. We might have a bit of a moan at the officials when something is wrong but we're never hostile to each other. I think that adds to the sense of community."*

**Mersey and North West Counties**

Most coaches believe that standards are high and improving, but isolated examples of poor coaching still exist. Rather than being focused on the needs of the athlete, this is coach-centred, focused only on the short-term competitive needs of clubs (and coaches). In this respect at least, boxing has something in common with other sports. Coaches in successful community clubs shun this approach however, and put their members' ambitions ahead of their own.

Just as there are no hiding places for boxers, coaches are consistently present and available to participants. The expectation is that coaches will be available every time a gym is open, and coaches take this obligation very seriously. Indeed, in extreme cases, their commitment is such that they prioritise boxing ahead of family, friends and work:

*"I spent more time in the gym with other kids than my own kids. Honestly, my daughter spends more time with the childminders until I get home. If it's not school holidays or weekends, I don't spend much time on a weekday. The only time is when I get up in the morning or at breakfast. When I get back in the evenings, she's asleep. That happens for 5 days a week so I understand where you going with that, 'cause I have to be in the gym. I have to be at the gym to do my job."*

**London Region**

Coaches become a fixture in the lives of boxers at their clubs by virtue of being so reliable and therefore dependable. This consistency helps to

further embed the relationship between boxer and coach, taking on additional significance for those whose lives outside the gym are particularly turbulent:

*"There can be many qualities that come from that, survival for those who come from neglected backgrounds, poverty-stricken families, they develop resilience but they embrace being part of something and may work that bit harder to fit in and feel accepted"*

**Southern Counties**

*"The relationship between the boxing coach and the kids is a thing that would encourage that sort of disclosure. And I don't mean disclosure necessarily in the negative sense of the word but just that sharing what's happening in their lives"*

**London Region**

Coaching offers an obvious way to retain participants in the sport, and many clubs are actively directing their members towards a pathway which offers an opportunity to give something back to boxing. Indeed, some of the coaches interviewed for this research confirmed that they had been recruited by their clubs in this way. This confirms one of the findings of Sport England's investigation into sports clubs, which found that one in three active volunteers were recruited to coach younger participants while they were still playing for their club<sup>3</sup>.

*"Every coach that I have, none of them have come independently. They have either been boxers who have been part of the club, parents who are in there watching every night so decide to put some pads on. It's always people who are coming through the club in some other way."*

**Mersey and North West Counties**

The role of a coach extends beyond teaching good technique and setting fitness targets for boxers, to leadership, mentoring and role-modelling. Coaches support participants to adjust their lifestyle, including diet and nutrition, sleep patterns and social life. This is when coaching begins to cross the line into mentoring, and again, current and past participants can be doubly effective in providing guidance to young boxers in this regard. It is not automatic however, as one leader from the London region explained:

*"I think you'll find that anybody who wants to be a boxer will tell you is about building that relationship. From our point of view because we only work with children, boxers are great role models. They're really, really good and calm. They can control their emotions, most of the children we work with can't so it's about having them emotional intelligence to know how much you can push someone when to challenge when not to challenge right to put an arm around them."*

**London Region**

*"...we never have a go at each other or the kids. We might have a bit of a moan at the officials when something is wrong but we're never hostile to each other. I think that adds to the sense of community."*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sportengland.org/campaigns-and-our-work/clubs>



## More Than Coaching

Community boxing coaches go above and beyond the call of duty in supporting their athletes. In doing so, they come to know about almost every aspect of 'their' boxers' lives: their family situation; their financial circumstances, their cultural heritage. They do so not to form any sort of judgement of their boxers, but to understand what motivates them. In fact, the only judgement made is that of the effort put in at the gym, or in the ring.

For many participants the relationship with their coach is one of the few reliable and dependable things in their lives. This consistency generates a heightened level of trust which encourages some boxers to view their coach as a mentor; a role which most are happy to embrace. In the opinion of one London-based coach, those that fail to see the bigger picture are missing an opportunity:

*“Actually there’s a real opportunity for them to add to what they can do. Even if you just have someone come down and just support someone with their homework just one day a week, you could completely transform what you do now because people already trust you, people are already engaging with you as a youth product. So if an employment advisor came down, just someone to help me fill in the UCAS form, something as small as that can completely transform what you can offer for those young people. If clubs are just so single minded on and focused on one aim they miss out on the rest of the support they can provide.”*

### London Region

Taken on a stage further, a coach may become someone in whom a boxer can confide, and many of those taking part in the focus groups were able to cite examples of this. This can present the coach with something of a dilemma however, if the disclosure is particularly sensitive in nature, or relates to criminal activity.

*“It’s a great thing to do but you also open yourself up to a lot of chances for things to go wrong. We have had scenarios where we are sat in an office with a young girl who wants to kill herself and I am just thinking “I am not prepared or trained to deal with this”*

### Midlands

By extension, some (but not all) boxers expect their coach to keep their confidence, and to be able to advise them on an appropriate course of action in response. Typically, boxing coaches are honest enough to admit that they consider themselves under-equipped to handle the complex issues which are presented to them. Equally, those issues may be out in the open, creating a different kind of dilemma:

*“Another example and it’s about preparing coaches as well; the other day a Transgender person came to use the gym, it’s really inclusive a boxing gym. But the coaches were really confused, which changing room to direct them to - it’s not about them not wanting to be friendly and welcoming to everyone. It’s actually feeling socially awkward and are not familiar with it, how do we deal with that? It’s not part of our coaching education programme.”*

### Eastern Counties

For many young people, the kudos of being involved in boxing has great significance, and while some are drawn in as a result of the efforts of clubs and coaches, the profile which the sport currently enjoys also plays its part. Medal success in consecutive Olympic Games, and the impact of high profile professional bouts contribute to a level of excitement or 'buzz' which many clubs have sought to capitalise upon. Coaches frequently cited Olympic and World champion boxers as inspirational figures capable of changing perceptions of the sport for young people, among others.

*“Boxing was in the wilderness into the late 90s and the early 2000s, and it was actually Audley Harrison who changed the perception a bit, and then Amir Khan, and then Nicola Adams after that. So suddenly, the Olympics, the Olympic programme and women especially, gave it the legitimacy, not just in the eyes of normal people but also in the eyes of councils, government, governments since then. Since the increase in knife crime now it’s seen as a way of improving things, but it was a pariah sport up until 2000.”*

### London Region

The success of elite boxers therefore has an appreciable impact on the perception of boxing among the general public, and in various ways this is passed on to community clubs. From the clubs' perspective, the most significant impact on new and developing boxers comes from proximity to successful athletes in the gym. Training alongside professional and the elite amateur boxers makes success tangible. Opportunities like this foster a club mentality, encourage boxers to see the club as a family, or as a gang, but with positive rather than negative connotations.

*“I’ve never been involved in a sport where people at the top of their game respect people who have just started out. The thing about boxing is that you have situations where you will be training with world, British or regional champions next to amateurs and that doesn’t take place at football. Once someone reaches a certain level they’re gone, they’re not interacting with you anymore. Whereas in boxing, you’ll be able to touch the people like that. That’s a really amazing way of inspiring people”*

### Mersey and North West Counties

## KEY POINTS

- The relationship between boxers and coaches is derived from an understanding of the courage required to cross the threshold of the gym let alone enter the ring.
- Boxing coaches go out of their way to make themselves available to their boxers, sometimes paying a considerable price in terms of both time and money.
- A coach’s influence extends well beyond the gym, but there are signs that some feel under-equipped to deal with the social issues which they are regularly forced to confront.

## 3.3 CULTURE AND ETHOS

As a sport with a global presence, boxing enjoys a popularity which transcends nationalities and builds bridges between cultures. The sport has the advantage of being easily understood with simple but effective rules, and widespread acceptance as a valid form of competition (even if this is challenged from time to time and from place to place). As such, there is a familiarity which leads to a high degree of inclusivity.

First or second generation migrants from countries with a proud tradition in international boxing such as Ireland, Italy or Pakistan can find a common bond with the local population, which hopes to break down barriers<sup>4</sup>. Boxers from minority groups identify with successful athletes from within their communities, which encourages others to consider taking up the sport:

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/boxing/2020/02/20/hero-status-not-glitz-glamour-tyson-fury-has-helped-demystify/>

*"We had a chap who became the first Pakistani fighter to win a national championship and that effect on the community was massive. Even though that was about 10 years ago we still have families coming in and parents bringing their kids because they see him as an inspiration."*

#### **Midlands**

*"If you are a kid who is a pain in the arse of the community and if you gain success in the boxing, it is a massive thing for the community because that one kid did all sorts of work for the community... It is sort of the community recognises them as one of their own and if communities don't come to boxing gyms, they don't hear their names."*

#### **Yorkshire Region**

Boxers may come from different backgrounds and engage in the sport for all kinds of different reasons, but so long as they are willing to attend, they are welcome at the gym. Indeed, coaches take great pride in being able to point to the multicultural membership of their clubs, particularly in areas where racial or ethnic tensions are evident.

*"We always say when you walk into the gym you've got one religion, its boxing. I don't care about your reputation, anything. Gay, straight, whatever you are. You always say that when you walk into the gym. There's a guy, he's a gay guy, he's proud of it and in the class you see him, he makes a lot of noise, takes his shirt off. On his Instagram, he's in drag but there he can be himself. He always says that when you walk into the gym 'we've got one religion here, it's boxing'. Whatever you are, whatever you do, just bring it here, and train. We don't care in this gym. Right now, we're all-inclusive. We've got one religion here. It's just boxing."*

#### **London Region**

This inclusivity is often under-emphasised and underappreciated by people who are not part of the boxing community. It takes on additional significance for participants from groups which, for different reasons, may have been marginalised in the past. Coaches interviewed for this research identified groups such as asylum seekers, the LGBT+ community and ex-offenders among those who have been embraced by their clubs. For some, boxing has a further cultural significance, which may not be present elsewhere, but acts as a spur to joining a gym to begin with. In the Gypsy Traveller community for example, boxing is held in particularly high esteem, being seen as a respectable sport and an honourable means of resolving disputes<sup>5</sup>. Irrespective of what form of marginalisation a boxer may have experienced in the past, boxing coaches understand how much of an impact even the smallest gesture of outreach can have.

*"Although my club is young I've been coaching 20 years and the thing I've seen the most, which is a demographic of this sport, is the kid from 'broken homes' or those who aren't fitting into sports teams etc. so there's a little bit of social exclusion. So just saying "hello" when they come in and you pay them attention that they're not getting anywhere else is massive, they latch onto that, but it's just something you do as a coach."*

#### **Eastern Counties**

## **Crossing the Threshold**

Boxing culture may help to bridge divides, but it is also dependent on the establishment of clearly defined boundaries. Classically, boxing coaches have been described as having a no-nonsense approach, and while they may be more athlete-focused than in the past, and have more of a long-term view, it is still the coaches who set the standards in clubs in terms of attendance, punctuality, behaviour and attitude.

*"I bet everyone here has had times when a parent will come to you and ask you to help sort them out, because the boxing club is the only place they behave. I think that threatening a kid with expulsion from your club, when it's something they love, is far worse than any threat of the police."*

#### **North West Counties**

*"We find out through others what's going and contacts through the school e.g. just so you know so and so excluded for fighting at school, both excluded. We have a policy at the club that says if you get in any bother at school or outside then it could affect your membership because it reflects badly on the club."*

#### **Eastern Counties**

Crucially, coaches establish rules and enforce them, understanding that this sends out a message to all participants of what will or will not be tolerated. This is doubly effective not only because of the respect in which the coaches are held, but also because it reinforces the respect of the coaches for the members of their clubs.

*"We had a kid who was at a party and someone saw them and said "that tee shirt he's wearing is worth £300", so he asked the kid where he got that and it came out that he had been doing a bit of dealing. It seems harsh because we then suspended him but we are only looking out for them."*

#### **North West Counties**

Nevertheless, the deep involvement of coaches in the lives of their athletes gives them an innate understanding of when to apply the boundaries and how rigorously.

*"We have a couple of members who do get a bit more leeway when they are pushing their behaviour a bit, but I know what's going on in their house so I have to give them a bit of leeway as*



**South Wye Fit and Fed – attentive young boxers await instructions from their coach.**

*they don't have anywhere else they can express themselves or vent."*

#### **Western Counties**

*"We see all of our boxers under quite stressful situations all of the time. If one of my boxers comes in and they are looking a bit down I know straight away, just from their body language, their gait, their facial expressions"*

#### **Western Counties**

Joining a club involves the physical act of entering a gym, but it is also a symbolic act. Coaches were quick to acknowledge that the gym can be an intimidating environment for the uninitiated, and that they had a responsibility to help newcomers feel welcome as novices among experts. This responsibility is not solely that of the coach however, and other club members have a part to play. No-one is exempt from this duty, regardless of their position in the club.

*I remember when I started boxing (and I was terrible!), I remember running into a British champion at the time and he would... the respect that he would give me... I remember him always saying "just by stepping into the room you're doing what most people wouldn't do and that shows a huge amount of nerve, bravery". I'm just a kid, but for a British champion to say that to me was amazing"*

#### **Mersey and North West Counties**

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-the-tyson-fury-english-traveller-boxing-style-2019-8?r=US&IR=T>





*Kings Heath Boxing Club – example of Welcome Pack given to each member.*

When a participant makes the decision to join a club, while boxing is the primary focus, there are other subtle ways in which coaches, volunteers and other members make the new member feel welcome and accepted:

*“There’s the social aspect as well, it’s not all about boxing e.g. we go bowling, awards evening, Christmas party - knowing people’s names as well, they could be quite invisible on the street, but in the club and getting to know people - just a few sentences can be quite life changing for a young person who doesn’t feel valued.”*

**Eastern Counties**

Once a participant engages with the club ethos, they stay fully engaged. Nowhere is this more evident than in the loyalty to club and coach displayed by so many experienced and successful boxers:

*“There is no other sport where you get that. You wouldn’t get Wayne Rooney going back to his old club to do that. It doesn’t happen in other sports and I think boxing is unique in that sense. It’s very much the nature of the athletes that make it as boxers where you get successful amateurs to professional,*

*they still very often keep the close ties to their old amateur club and go back to shows and support things.”*

**Mersey and North West Counties**

### Honesty is the Best Policy

Boxing coaches are direct, honest, and positive. They are able to deliver hard, sometimes difficult truths to participants in a way that coaches in other sports might shy away from. This is partly related to the nature of the sport where the line between success and failure is often very thin, but boxing coaches see it as necessary, knowing what the outcome would be of sending an under-prepared fighter into the ring to face a fitter, more naturally gifted or technically superior opponent.

The other side of this equation is that boxing coaches can apply the same level of honesty to their interactions with the most experienced and successful athletes. This honesty is seen as one of boxing’s unique traits, but it could be argued that all good coaching is based on an ability to deliver feedback effectively and without rancour.

The negative impacts of a dishonest approach, which prioritises the coaches’ desires over those of the boxer, are all too apparent, and many

coaches were quick to cite pertinent examples. Nevertheless, there is something visceral about the honesty required in advising new participants that ‘boxing hurts’.

*“Boxing offers these young people that have come from tough backgrounds structure and discipline but the most important thing is the people at the gym and showing that someone actually cares for them without showing disrespect to the families. These young people need support and someone that can look out for them. We will not judge them and tell them exactly how things are.”*

**Southern Counties**

*“If we have 50 kids in the gym, 20 might be boxers and 30 might never box. You would never get that in something like football because if you aren’t good enough for a football team then they send you away. The boxing gym does allow a lot of people to train who might not make it in other sports.”*

**West Midlands**

*Tamworth Boxing Club – clear messages about the clubs ethos for all to read.*



### Work Ethic

Success in boxing, as with all sports, is dependent on the sustained effort by participants and volunteers. Traditionally boxing is associated with hard work, discipline, commitment and focus. The marketing of the sport often refers to ‘blood’ and ‘sweat’, ‘bruises’ and ‘knocks’, but the financial rewards of professional boxing are available only to a select few. For the majority the process of training is more often than not the end in itself.

*“If you look at how many people we get into the club, not many who come through the door will ever compete. You know if you went to football training you can pretty much guarantee that at some point you will get to play a game. Whereas, boxing is more about what you get from the training itself. We also adapt the sport to suit the groups who come in, we wouldn’t force everybody who comes through the door to go and compete because that’s not realistic.”*

**Western Counties**



On the whole, coaches accept this readily, and understand that their members may not ever want to box competitively. For some participants however, this requires a mental adjustment and a lowering of expectations. Conversely, for many young people, becoming part of a boxing club can have a profoundly positive effect on their self-image:

*"It takes away any prejudice and judgement, the thing that they value in the gym is their work ethic. We have all seen bully kids come in who think they are as hard as nails and they end up getting no attention. Then we get quiet kids who might have been bullied and they work hard, they focus, and they train, and they end up becoming the popular kid."*

#### **West Midlands**

Community boxing clubs are conspicuously equitable in the way that participants are treated by coaches. The emphasis is on the discipline and structure of training, rather than the status of the boxer, whether this relates to ethnicity, sexuality, or boxing ability.

*"I was talking to a volunteer and there is a programme he was talking about where there were two 7 year olds, one is arrogant and the other one is soft. You put them in a boxing club and both of them have to display the same level of discipline. You don't have to be hard to be a boxer. You don't have to be soft to be a boxer. You just have to have a way around it, through discipline. Within a year, you don't need to be hard to be a boxer. Skills come in."*

#### **Yorkshire Region**

From a coaching perspective, the proximity of community club boxers to professional and highly-ranked amateur athletes creates an opportunity to sell the benefits of the work ethic which forms the foundation of success. As one coach from the London Region describes it:

*"Boxing is success within reach. For a lot of guys, the only success they see within reach is through crime. They might not know any doctors, lawyers or successful businessmen, but they probably do know someone who knows someone who's a champion boxer, or has made it onto Team GB, or who's won a national title, or is fighting on a Frank Warren show. So I think its success within touching distance. It's visible and it's tangible whereas a lot of alternatives aren't available to them."*

#### **Southern Counties**

### **KEY POINTS**

- **Boxing has international appeal which crosses community boundaries. This inclusivity is often under-played by community boxing clubs.**
- **The threshold of a gym is a psychological barrier which new participants must overcome. Community boxing clubs see it as the role of every member to foster a welcoming environment in support of this aim.**
- **Boxing coaches have a frank and direct approach which garners the respect of participants, and strengthens the bond between them. This honesty supports a work ethic which is the foundation of continuous involvement in the sport.**

## **3.4 FUNDING AND IMPACT**

The delivery of community boxing programmes, despite being driven mainly by volunteers, requires continuous financial support. Expenses may include the purchase of equipment and facilities costs, although these may be relatively low compared to other sports for the reasons outlined earlier in this report. Many clubs operate on minimal budgets, being located in deprived areas where unemployment is higher than average and incomes lower. Traditional sources of income such as session fees and boxing shows are under increasing pressure as a result of competition from other activities, and the financial hardships faced by participants and their supporters.

In such strained circumstances, clubs must look elsewhere for funding with corporate sponsorship and grant funding common sources of secondary income. At the same time, clubs are delivering an increasingly diverse range of activities, though most retain at least some flavour of boxing in their presentation (for example, Pink Gloves, Boxercise, Boxing Fitness). It is important to maintain a delicate balance between activities which generate additional income and the delivery of the core functions of a boxing club however.

Funding from external sources is usually awarded with a purpose in mind, whether this be defined by the club or by the funder. The justification for providing money may be to generate secondary impacts which reach beyond the confines of the boxing club. If it is possible to demonstrate tangible income impacts, it may be said that there is a return on the investment. This is often hard to prove, hard to isolate, and transient. Despite some reservations, clubs are generally receptive to the idea of recording what they do, often using social media, though they may require further support to acquire the necessary skills and expertise and avoid some of the pitfalls.

## **Who Needs Money?**

Boxing clubs are accustomed to operating on a shoestring. Indeed, some see their ability to do so as one of the sport's strengths. With so many clubs located in deprived neighbourhoods, the ability to generate income from their own delivery of boxing activities is limited by the low incomes of their members. Clubs and coaches understand that making even a small contribution to costs is a stretch for some participants:

*"My point of view is that kids who live in our community are paying a massive price for their start in life, so the last thing that I want to do is to take another pound off it. What I don't want is for a kid to have to walk past our gym because they don't have £3. Boxing is the sport that takes kids in so I don't think many gyms would turn people down, but that is just how we have run for the last 20 years."*

#### **Southern Counties**

When members struggle to find the money to pay their fees, clubs and coaches often find creative ways for them to make a contribution which benefits the club. Payment in kind is a common way of recouping costs, albeit indirectly:

*"When I was a kid I had no money, so the coach said "that's alright, you just come along and help me to train the beginners". I do that with my kids now, just with that element of I'll help you train if you help me to train."*

#### **Southern Counties**

*"A lot of our members will come from relatively poor communities and there is an awareness that they might not be able to give tons of money, but they can give back in their own way"*

#### **North West Counties**

Coaches may therefore frequently overlook payment for individual sessions, choosing instead to retain the participant. In the long run however,



this cannot be sustained indefinitely. Costs may be minimal, and setting the appropriate level of fees is a delicate issue, but in the absence of payment there is a possibility that the service provided by a community club may be undervalued:

*“I think it’s quite good to have a sub, even if it’s a small one, because in my experience the young people don’t necessarily appreciate something that’s free. It doesn’t mean they can’t come in if they haven’t got it, because you can make that decision. You can allow the child to train when they don’t have it, if it is a paid service, even if it’s a pound or if it’s free.”*

#### **London Region**

In some cases, the value of the service itself may be undermined:

*“For us, the times when we have run the sessions for free have not been as successful as those where we have had the kids pay, even if it was just a pay what you can type of scenario. Those who haven’t paid and we have sort of let them do what they like just ended up messing around and haven’t got the success that we wanted them to.”*

#### **Southern Counties**

Community clubs are increasingly diversifying their activities, delivering boxing fitness or boxercise sessions for participants who would never consider stepping into the ring, to subsidise their pure boxing activities. Charges for these sessions are set at a higher level, with surplus funds retained to suppress fees for the club’s core activities:

*“Our keep fit classes are £8, but the kids classes it’s £3. It is the keep fitters that sustain the club, even the boxers. If they don’t have their subs, they say ‘I don’t have it’, I say come in. because we’ve got classes for keep fit, after their boxing is finished. Without those classes, we wouldn’t get funding from anywhere else. They sustain the club,*

*but if you’re talking about boxers that fight, the kids, the youths, we draw a line between the youths and the working class. The working class do pay more, and the youths, sometimes they pay £3. If they don’t have it, they just come on in.”*

#### **London Region**

Paradoxically, in these circumstances, a challenging or deprived location can be a deterrent for people with a greater ability to pay for the coaching that they receive. Competition in the fitness sector is fierce, with larger corporate operations such as David Lloyd and Virgin offering boxing fitness classes in modern purpose-built facilities. Boxing clubs, as well as being able to compete on price, have the advantage of authenticity however:

*We get people coming from all over to attend our sessions and it’s not just the local kids who have fallen into the gym. Our clubs is not the easiest to get to, but we still have over 100 people in there every night. So a lot of people are there because they see value in what you are actually delivering, and your reputation will entice other people to come in. If it was just geography then it would be easy, but I think that if you are doing something well then people will travel to your club.*

#### **Southern Counties**

The delivery of community boxing programmes requires financial support to pay for facilities, equipment, coaching and training. The battle to generate sponsorship and investment is constant, but can be a lucrative source of income for some clubs. Third parties who invest in boxing clubs rarely do so for altruistic reasons however. Sponsorship is often linked to brand visibility, and some clubs and coaches feel pressured to direct this funding to the competitive end of the sport, which effectively acts as a shop window for their club.

While competitive boxing is a priority for some clubs, and others are concerned about the fabric of their facilities, most would elect to invest in coaching if funds were available. Again, this is

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sportengland.org/campaigns-and-our-work/clubs>

consistent with Sport England’s research into club volunteers, which found that given the option of taking on additional volunteers, clubs would probably choose to appoint a coach<sup>6</sup>. When the money is available, it can make a significant difference. One coach from the East Midlands summarised the situation neatly:

*“Coaching 3 or 4 nights a week isn’t the problem. The problem is that participants still expect it to be 50p or a pound for a session like it was 20 or 30 years ago. But the reality is it does cost a lot more to run the clubs. Not just financially but in terms of how much of an investment we need to give of our time to sort all of this stuff out. So if we had more support as boxing coaches I think we’d probably enjoy it even more. I think in terms of standards, boxing has gone up massively. I think we’ve got the best coaches that we’ve probably ever had. Certainly the best I’ve ever had whilst being involved in boxing.”*

#### **East Midlands**

## **Not Spending. Investment.**

Investment by public agencies is a powerful vote of confidence in the ability of boxing clubs to make a difference to the lives of their members, and to the wider community at large. Grant funding is often justified on the grounds of the levels of deprivation in the area surrounding a club, and in this sense at least, the majority of boxing clubs are well placed:

*“We’re in quite an affluent area, and that makes it difficult to get funding because despite all of the good work we are doing in schools they just say ‘you’re in a nice area’. A lot of our regular kids are from decent backgrounds, but in the schools the majority of them probably aren’t, but funders don’t see it that way.”*

#### **Western Counties**

<sup>7</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/733184/a-sporting-chance-an-independent-review-sport-in-justice.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/733184/a-sporting-chance-an-independent-review-sport-in-justice.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/despite-popular-belief-boxing-has-never-actually-been-banned-in-schools/>

Until recently, negative perceptions of the sport among decision makers who do not have boxing backgrounds have limited the amount of funding available. The commonly held view among coaches is that decisions about boxing clubs are generally made by people who do not understand what boxing clubs do, the challenges they face or the issues they tackle. Funding is often sought by and provided to clubs to support the delivery not only of boxing-related activities, but also a broader range of diversionary interventions which aim to generate secondary impacts. These may include: reduced crime and anti-social behaviour; improved educational outcomes, and; increased training and employment opportunities.

In this context, it is surprising that the Home Office has refused for several years to allow prisons and young offenders institute to include boxing or indeed any martial art on its curriculum of activities available to prisoners and detainees<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, organisations and agencies with responsibility for education have resisted calls to include boxing in the national curriculum for P.E., although contrary to popular belief, it has never been explicitly banned in schools<sup>8</sup>.

It is less surprising, therefore, to note that some clubs have struggled to make the case for investment in the face of this apparent bureaucratic resistance to consider boxing as a valid and worthwhile activity for young people. On its own merits, let alone in the context of claimed benefits to the wider community, the tide does appear to be turning, however, with the number of clubs able to point to their work with pupil referral units as a sign of a more enlightened and nuanced view emerging among decision makers and policymakers.

*“I have noticed a change it recent years, as it always used to be that you had to report on a certain number of people. Whereas, because of some of our work in PRU’s they are starting to look at smaller groups of people which is better. If you take one kid and help that one kid, they might then stop being a bully in school which might help 5 kids around them.”*

#### **West Midlands**



One of the most significant barriers to funding is the often complex nature of the application process, which can involve much form filling and sometimes negotiation. Coaches prefer to concentrate on delivery, relegating the administrative processes to the backburner. Failure with one funder can discourage clubs from applying to others, particularly if an injustice is perceived.

*“The application process is a real problem too. To get a grant from Herefordshire Sports Partnership, you had to do a full application, go to a meeting, watch instructional videos, run a trial session, then fill in about 30 attachments, and that’s all for around £1500, so sometimes the money is not even worth the work.”*

*“It can vary massively too, in Coventry for example it is just a quick conversation where you let them know what you want to do then they decide whether to fund it or not.”*

**West Midlands**

Competition between boxing clubs and this context may be especially damaging.

*“Another frustrating thing there is that you can get a new person come into the sport, and funders will overlook the work you have been doing for the past 30 years and fund a new guy because it’s a bit fresher or he might be better at writing the bids. That’s really disheartening.”*

**West Midlands**

The emphasis placed by funders on generating new participants often runs counter to the priorities of community boxing clubs, whose attention is often focused on retaining existing members. Here too, there are signs that the most significant agencies are coming round to the perspective of boxing clubs:

*There are some funds that are starting to recognise that, there was one last year by Comic Relief that was just to keep doing what you’re doing. Most though just want to show some impact of their investment so they want some numbers to put down.*

**West Midlands**

Nevertheless, clubs are often able to find creative ways in which to meet the criteria set by funders.

*I think that it is really important to reiterate that we don’t get any funding to carry on the work that we do. You have got to constantly keep either reinventing the wheel or lying on applications. Let’s be honest, we can all lie on paper, but it’s still really wrong that we are forced to.*

**West Midlands**

## Proof of the Pudding

The quid pro quo of external funding is the need to demonstrate impact, but many clubs lack the knowledge and expertise to do so. At the most basic level, this may be related to the way in which services are delivered as payments in kind. For example, members might deliver coaching or carry out repairs to the fabric of the building in exchange for tickets to a club show. This interferes with a conventional audit trail, which creates a challenge in providing evidence to funders that money allocated to clubs has been spent appropriately. Clubs are aware of this issue, but somewhat reluctant to change working practices as a result:

*“Another problem is the requirement needed to meet the funding. I understand their need to have KPI’s and such, but if you start trying to change your club’s direction with each lot of funding then you create yourself all sorts of problems.”*

**West Midlands**



*An England Boxing Club Support Officer assists with a funding application.*

Quantifying the impacts and benefits of boxing may be the key to further investment, but hard evidence of the measurable benefits of community boxing clubs remains elusive. Coaches often prefer to focus on quality of output and delivery rather than quantity:

*“Your better programmes are the ones that impact on fewer people but the individual results and outcomes are much greater.”*

**West Midlands**

Nevertheless, the people who run clubs increasingly recognise the need to demonstrate value though some lack the skills and expertise to do so. Support is available however, and when applied successfully, clubs find that themselves empowered:

*“Understanding your demographics is really important when it comes to getting funding. Knowing your insight and data can help you to become sustainable because it helps you with market segmentation and insight to who your members are. There are tools which can show you the deprivation status of the area that your club is in, which you can then use to justify a lot of funding applications.”*

**Western Counties**

It is typical of boxing coaches’ honesty to point out what they see as the shortcomings of the grant funding regimes. While they understand the importance of engaging with new participants to ensure the sustainability of their clubs, the



greater value is often found in retaining existing participants. Coaches believe that it is a mistake to ask clubs to place their emphasis on generating new participants, when success for them is defined as retaining their existing membership long enough to produce new volunteers ensuring the sustainability of the club.

Quantifying the impacts and benefits of boxing is the key to unlock the door to continued funding, but clubs must increasingly demonstrate that inward investment generates a social as well as a sporting return on investment. If the aim of investing in a boxing club is to reduce or prevent crime, the impact of that investment is to be demonstrated by showing that something has not happened which might otherwise have taken place. This runs counter to most other ways of measuring the impact of sport and physical activity.

*I really hope that Sport England or England boxing don't follow the approach that the police are doing. We were being funded before to do preventative work with kids who were at risk of offending but we would try and work with them before that happened. They have pulled all of the funding from that because it is difficult to show and evidence that that kid would have gone to prison without your work. Whereas if you work with people who have already been to prison then it's easier to show you are having an impact.*

**West Midlands**

In the view of most boxing clubs, the focus of impact measurement should therefore be on what clubs deliver on behalf of their members: the number of sessions, participants, coaches and volunteers engaged as a direct result of external funding gives a simple but effective

means of recording the output of a club, which can be compared with the level of financial input. Traditionally, these measures have focused only on new participants, but the argument made by community club coaches is that some account should also be taken of those who are retained that might otherwise have dropped out.

The added value that boxing clubs are able to generate lies in the ability of those who deliver the sport to make the link between this, and stories of positive outcomes for the individuals involved. If social impacts are the desired outcome there has to be a way to capture their scope and extent.

*"Relationships are key there. Parents and schools are obviously very important because that is where they are going to spend most of their time. In terms of how their behaviour change manifests itself we look at how their relationships have changed and how they have changed in school. If you can see a marked improvement there then the boxing club must be having some positive impact."*

**West Midlands**

*"One lad's dad came to see us, his mum had been dropping off every night, been in about 6 months. His dad came one night to see what it's all about and at the end of the night, he said "so you're [Coach], all I hear is [Coach] says this, [Coach]'s done that, [Coach] is brilliant" – he almost resented me for it, but it's nice to know the kids are going away and you're leaving an impression on them, it's something you don't always consider."*

**Eastern Counties**

*"Used to have a young lad in the prisons, and a couple of years ago I got a phone call saying '[Coach], I've got 5 kids living in New Zealand, work as a tree surgeon and I'm doing ok, I just want to say thank you' – we don't always know how much we affect that side of it, our role is huge; that's why we can't just say, as much as we want to promote the sport "you can be a coach, you can be a coach – L1, L2 etc. Let's just get the right people."*

**Eastern Counties**

*"About 5-6 years ago I had therapy, I was at a really bad point in my life, but a couple of years ago I txt her to say thank you and to let her know how I'm doing and where I am now. I just wonder how much impact boxing would have had if I'd found it before therapy."*

**Eastern Counties**

## KEY POINTS

- The management structure of community boxing clubs is shifting gradually from one of low costs dictated by low incomes, to a more generous financial model, thanks to continued success in attracting grant funding.
- There has been a shift in attitudes on the part of funding providers, as a result of clubs making a strong narrative case for the sporting and social benefits that they provide.
- It remains the case that community boxing clubs find it difficult to provide hard statistical proof of the outputs which they generate, though there is ample qualitative evidence of the outcomes.

“ Used to have a young lad in the prisons, and a couple of years ago I got a phone call saying ‘[Coach], I’ve got 5 kids living in New Zealand, work as a tree surgeon and I’m doing ok,

I just want to say thank you’

**Eastern Counties**

## 4. SUMMARY

### Location and environment

Boxing's single biggest advantage as a sport is that so many of its clubs, and the people who support them, are located in communities which have effectively been abandoned by other sports. Boxing clubs supply something of an underserved market, but just as importantly, they are run by people who know and understand the issues and challenges being faced by their members every day.

The physical environment of the typical boxing club is far less important to the majority of participants than the sporting environment they find on crossing the threshold. Clubs are adaptable and resourceful in responding to the challenge of improving their surroundings, not least by finding the necessary skills and expertise from among their membership. It is important to remember however, that neither can be ignored at the expense of the other.

As a focal point of the communities in which they sit, boxing clubs are often a source of significant local pride. Though hard to value financially, this pride is worth something to those who sustain the sport in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. It acts as the spur, which drives them to continued engagement and provides the motivation to carry on when other clubs in other sports may choose to throw in the towel.

### Boxing, Coaching and Leadership

The bond between boxers and their coaches is unique and for some boxers this relationship can become one of the most important in their lives. Coaches appreciate that a boxing gym can be perceived as an intimidating place and therefore want to create a welcoming atmosphere. Importantly, they appreciate the courage it takes for a new-comer to step into a boxing gym, regardless of whether they ever enter the ring to spar or take part in a competitive bout. The combative nature of the sport is attractive to young people, who respond to the mantra that everyone is welcome, but egos are to be left at the door. This culture is driven by coaches' insistence on respect and commitment, as there are no hiding places in a boxing gym.

The reciprocal respect shown by coaches towards the boxers resonates. For some, the gym could be the first place in their lives where someone has shown them such respect and showed a genuine interest in them. This creates an environment of trust, which may result in boxers confiding in their coach with troubles or problems they are having outside of the gym, demonstrating the influence a coach has on all aspects of a boxer's life. These situations can be delicate however, as the information being shared may be sensitive, either for personal reasons or (commonly) because of a boxer's involvement in criminal activity.

Some coaches feel under-equipped to deal with their boxers' personal issues. Nevertheless, the strength of the bond between boxer and coach often results in coaches going above and beyond to make themselves available to their boxer, which can come at a considerable cost of their time, and occasionally at some risk to their own personal safety. Significantly, time spent at the boxing gym in support of boxers results in some coaches neglecting other aspects of their lives, typically work and family.

### Culture and Ethos

Boxing has the power to bring communities together; with its uniquely powerful ability to connect people from different backgrounds and engage them in sport. This high degree of inclusivity, particularly for marginalised groups, is often under-played by community boxing clubs, but is clearly one of the most positive aspects of the sport. The environment of the gym can be an intimidating one however and acts a psychological barrier which new participants must overcome as the first step in becoming a boxer. It is the role of every member, led by coaches and successful, experienced boxers, to help newcomers feel welcome.

The boxing culture which helps to bridge divides is based on the establishment of clearly defined boundaries. It is the coaches who set standards within clubs; they establish and enforce rules of acceptable behaviour. This creates mutual respect between coaches and their members, which is further enhanced by the honesty of their approach. This honesty produces a work ethic that is the foundation of continuous involvement in the sport and is equally important for those who wish to box competitively, as well as those who do not.

### Funding and impact

Boxing has traditionally been proud to operate as a low cost sport with few, if any, potential participants excluded on the grounds of ability to pay. In this sense, every penny has been made to count and clubs have habitually achieved as much as possible despite a lack of funding. Indeed, some clubs would argue that the shortage of direct income is the key driver behind their resourcefulness.

There is little doubt that boxing clubs are increasingly making an effective case to funding providers that any investment in their activities will generate a return. Some clubs have been particularly successful in attracting or securing funding from national and local sources, whether this be to extend and improve their physical infrastructure or to recruit, retain and develop a volunteer and coaching workforce which will underpin the sport and ensure its long term sustainability. The debate over whether funding should be aimed primarily at developing new provision, or sustaining existing activity is complex and wide ranging.

The desire to retain existing participants is fundamental to what boxing clubs aim to achieve every day. For the majority of coaches, it is far more important to stay engaged with their current crop of boxers and give them a high quality experience to keep them boxing. In certain circumstances, and particularly in the most challenging neighbourhoods, the failure to do so might result in consequences which are disastrous, not just for the boxer, but for the club and for the wider community.

While it is possible to explain the potential income impacts of community boxing clubs, they are much harder to quantify effectively, which presents a challenge to clubs and funders alike in demonstrating the return on their collective investment. It may therefore be necessary to consider an alternative model.



## FIVE OUTSTANDING EXAMPLES OF BOXING CLUBS TARGETING SPECIFIC GROUPS

WITH THANKS TO:



### ANFIELD AND NORTH LIVERPOOL ABC



*View – Anfield and North Liverpool ABC: Tackling Knife Crime*  
<https://youtu.be/YhVEtyYqVH8>

### PAT BENSON BOXING ACADEMY



*View – Pat Benson Boxing Academy: Tackling Mental Health*  
<https://youtu.be/i5svGpJn0o0>

NOTE: If reading the printed copy of this document, type in the URL into your web browser to view the films.

### BROADPLAIN POLICE ABC



*View – Broadplain Police ABC: Supporting Members with Parkinson's Disease*  
[https://youtu.be/SV4Yb\\_G0t-8](https://youtu.be/SV4Yb_G0t-8)

### SOUTH WYE POLICE ABC



*View – South Wye Police ABC: Intergrating Immigrant Members*  
<https://youtu.be/tRq14hrFV2Y>

### POOLE ABC



*View – Poole ABC: Including Members with a Disability*  
[https://youtu.be/\\_m7gcutp56w](https://youtu.be/_m7gcutp56w)



## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the interviews which inform this research, coaches were keen to stress that, in their opinion, 'boxing is different'. When pressed, some found it hard to articulate how and why boxing stood out from other sports in what it does for its participants. As other investigations of the social and community impacts of sport have found, there is no magic formula which can be applied to every club.

Boxing clubs are as individual as the volunteers who sustain them, and their character often reflects the neighbourhoods in which they are based. Identifying the common factors which make for successful and sustainable clubs might be considered challenging under these circumstances. Nevertheless, the themes which emerged from the focus groups were remarkably consistent and might perhaps be summarised in three words: Location, Coaching and Culture.

### Being There

Boxing clubs are located in precisely the kind of deprived neighbourhoods and serve the marginalised and excluded communities which Sport England has identified as the key target groups in increasing participation in sport and physical activity. For people on low incomes, cost remains one of the most significant barriers to participation in any sport, and boxing has two advantages in this regard.

First, boxing is a low rent, low cost sport, in part because it often takes place in locations which other sports have left behind. Clubs are adaptable enough to make use of almost any kind of usable space and are therefore able to exploit opportunities which other clubs would be forced to refuse. Second, because boxing clubs are (almost uniquely) present in deprived neighbourhoods, the hidden costs of distance and time are taken out of the equation.

Boxing clubs therefore have a head start in reaching out to participants from the most deprived neighbourhoods, but this is no guarantee of success. It is also essential to generate a welcoming environment within the gym, and this is dependent on the input of volunteers who sustain community boxing clubs. They recognise that as representatives of their clubs, they have to compensate (at least to some extent) for the often spartan surroundings in which they operate.

Given the importance of location, it is an ongoing source of frustration that a large proportion of clubs lack control over their facilities. While the flexibility to deliver boxing wherever and whenever possible is laudable, it is often borne of necessity, with short-term and rolling arrangements still commonplace.

**RECOMMENDATION 1: Maintain a Presence.** The attention of England Boxing, Sport England and other agencies which support boxing clubs, should be focussed on helping to ensure security of tenure for those clubs which currently have short-term or rolling arrangements for their facilities.

### Honesty, Consistency, Positivity

Community boxing coaches take significant pride in their work, and in particular how they handle 'their' boxers. One of the key strengths of boxing coaches identified through the focus group interviews is the honesty of their approach to the relationships they form with participants, often delivering hard messages without pulling any punches. The most obvious example is the need to persuade a potential participant not to box competitively for their own safety, when the need arises, as it often does. They believe that they are able to do so because they are consistently available, fair in their delivery, and positive with their feedback and encouragement.

This takes on additional importance when establishing and maintaining enduring relationships with participants who come from turbulent backgrounds, where authority figures may be absent. Coaches frequently assume the role of mentor to young people who lack any other positive role model in their lives. In this context, participants feel supported respected and valued, cementing their engagement with the club and the sport. This may come at a personal cost to coaches however, many of whom sacrifice their own time to go the extra mile.

Community boxing clubs do outstanding work in engaging with participants from groups which have traditionally been among the hardest to reach, including those from black and minority ethnic groups, and from deprived neighbourhoods, among others. Consequently, coaches and club officials are forced to confront some of the most challenging social issues, which have direct and indirect impacts on them and their participants. This places significant expectations on a volunteer workforce which wants to respond appropriately but lacks the formal training necessary to do so. Almost every coach can tell the story of a boxer whose life has been turned around thanks to the structure and discipline offered by a boxing training regime. In fact, this verbal history is part of boxing culture, and is a significant way in which the sport is promoted. It is also indicative of an aversion to keeping and maintaining effective records of what goes on in the gym, though there are signs of change, however small and slow.

### Consider Training Needs for Coaches

Boxing culture has depended traditionally on a no questions asked approach. The sole requirements for acceptance at a gym is turning up, and being willing to work, with external issues left at the door. This has served the sport well to date, but the increasing willingness of community boxing coaches to involve themselves in aspects of their participants' lives beyond the gym, demonstrates that it is no longer possible, nor appropriate to ignore the impact of the wider environment.

Accordingly, coaches identified a number of areas of their delivery in which they felt under-prepared and were concerned that they were not able to respond fully to the demands placed upon them. For example, participants who may be engaged in gang activity in their lives outside of the gym may well see their boxing club as a safe haven, but if external conflicts are brought into a club, the capacity to manage a potentially risky situation will be limited by the experience and training of the volunteers.

Examples from this report prove that when structured plans are in place, supported by partnership arrangements with public agencies (such as the police and fire services), volunteers can acquire the necessary skills quickly and effectively. Such an outcome is not only desirable from a pragmatic point of view, but also makes clubs more sustainable in the long term. Further, the same principle can be applied to other aspects of club development, such as financial management and making applications for grant funding, which many clubs identified as an area in which they would like to improve.

**RECOMMENDATION 2: Invest in People.** While coaches appreciate the support and guidance available from Club Support Officers, England Boxing should consider extending the level of support made available to clubs in the form of training and development programmes. Specifically, there should be more specialised safeguarding training relating to first aid for mental health, gang activity, social services referrals and preventative police engagement. More broadly, coaches and club volunteers would like training and development support to cover financial management generally, and grant funding applications in particular.





Afewee Boxing Club, London – coaches gather for an England Boxing Training Course.

The definition of success in community boxing varies from club to club. Encouragingly the evidence gathered here shows that many clubs have already adjusted to the need to develop a better understanding of their members and the impact of their delivery upon them. This recognition has not necessarily translated into hard data, however.

There is still a tendency for clubs to rely on broad brush estimates when asked to quantify the number of participants from Sport England's target groups, which undermines efforts to measure the impact of community boxing clubs at local and national level. Indeed, some clubs continue to shy away from asking their members the very questions which would reveal so much about them. This is based partly on a reluctance to diverge from

the traditional boxing club approach, but more significantly. (and of more interest to England Boxing and Sport England), community boxing coaches feel that they lack the skills and resources to collect, store and maintain the data to begin with.

What is required is an evolution of the culture of community boxing clubs, not only to reflect the requirements of funding providers, but also to respond to the additional scrutiny which has accompanied continuous success since the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. As a sport, boxing is forced to justify its continued existence more than most, but tends to make its case using individual stories, rather than pointing to the volume of work delivered by its community clubs.

**RECOMMENDATION 3: Keep Records.** England Boxing should encourage boxing clubs to maintain accurate records of participation in their gyms, with the same degree of diligence that most would apply to their boxers' competitive records. This represents something of a culture change for some clubs, and would therefore require considerable input from the NGB

As clubs have become more successful in attracting external funding, so the need to track how it is spent and what is achieved as a result has increased. With success comes scrutiny, and clubs are increasingly required to demonstrate a return on investment. Without an effective system for monitoring the number of people who come to a gym, the evidence of the work done by community boxing clubs will only ever be anecdotal at best. Successful clubs in all sports understand the value of constant and consistent record keeping.

In these circumstances, the opportunity to develop a range of simple, scalable and crucially low-cost templates for compiling effective membership databases must be grasped. At the basic level, being able to demonstrate how many participants come to a gym has intrinsic value, but knowing how often they visit, where they live, and which communities they represent would empower a club to develop and refine its strategies, as well as supporting bids for revenue grant funding from third party organisations. At the macro level, England Boxing would benefit from knowing its clubs better and understanding their outputs, while Sport England would have a clear picture of participation patterns.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Provide Templates.** England Boxing should develop template procedures and documentation for use within boxing clubs, for the purposes of simplifying processes such as financial bookkeeping, membership database, management/volunteer recruitment and promotion of club activities.

## Taking the Fight to the Community

Boxing clubs and coaches are acutely aware of how the popularity of their sport has fluctuated over time as a result of factors beyond their immediate control. High profile incidents and internal politics within the sport are often cited in the media as evidence that boxing faces an uncertain future. Nevertheless, as a sport boxing has enjoyed something of a renaissance, which some coaches interviewed for this study traced back to Audley Harrison's success at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Medals at subsequent Olympics, followed by success in the professional ranks provide a useful shop window for boxing, which clubs have done well to exploit.

Boxing remains more vulnerable than most sports to criticism however, some of which questions its right to exist as a sport, let alone feature as a suitable activity for young people. These conversations inevitably focus on the risk of injury in the ring, without acknowledging that this represents only a small minority of what community boxing clubs deliver. Irrespective of any concerns regarding how participation is tracked in clubs, coaches can justifiably point to their successes with vulnerable young people as justification for their continued intervention.

The challenge for community boxing clubs is to persuade third party organisations that for the majority of young people attending a gym, the attraction is not so much boxing *per se* as being an active member of a club which accepts them. In these circumstances, the activities delivered by a club are less important than its continued existence, although the club must retain boxing as part of that identity. In promoting itself to organisations which might be willing to engage with the sport, boxing needs to demonstrate that while competitive boxing may be the 'hook' which pulls young people through the door, the value of what clubs do is in the breadth and depth of activities they provide.

There is still significant reluctance in many parts of many public sectors to allow boxing clubs to engage directly with schools, despite clear guidance from the head of OFSTED as long ago as 2016 that the sport has never been banned from

educational settings. The sport rarely features on the PE curriculum, and few if any clubs make regular use of school facilities. Any attempt to reverse this trend through the establishment of formal links between schools and community boxing clubs would align well with Sport England's strategic aims, as well as sending out a strong message of support to the boxing community.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Stay in the Fight.** Community coaches feel that their sport deserves the support of Sport England and other public agencies in placing boxing at the centre of efforts to engage with vulnerable, marginalised and excluded young people. A first step might be to encourage more schools in deprived neighbourhoods to engage with community clubs, to offer 'boxing fitness' training to their pupils onsite, as a prelude to a broader conversation about how the sport itself could be presented in schools.

## Choose the Right Scoring System

One of boxing's many strengths is its ability to serve the communities in which it takes place. Boxing clubs are predominantly run by the community and for the community, locally owned and led. They are thus uniquely placed to act as the locus of broader community development and regeneration activity, which often happens **to** a neighbourhood rather than being led **by** it.

Any measure of the effectiveness of such a strategy demands a broader definition of the work delivered by community boxing clubs, and the benefits generated as a result. The social value of boxing is as important to many clubs and coaches as the intrinsic benefits of participation in the sport. As this report has demonstrated, there are numerous examples which illustrate why this is so, but evaluation of investment in the sport still tends to focus on economic models of return.

One evaluation method in widespread use in other sporting contexts, and which merits further consideration, is the Social Return On Investment (SROI) model. The emphasis of SROI on social and

environmental benefits may make it appropriate for use in relation to boxing projects, though this would require further investigation. Irrespective of the eventual choice of evaluation model, it would be wrong to ignore the broader contribution of boxing to the social fabric of its host communities.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Investment Returns.** Given the emphasis placed by so many community clubs on social value, there is a strong case for using alternative models to measure return on investment in boxing.

## Lessons for Other Sports

The volunteers who run community boxing clubs are firm in their belief that proximity is key to maximising the demonstration effect, often cited by promoters as one of the benefits of staging large scale events. New participants may find themselves training alongside successful amateur and professional boxers, many of whom happily recognise and understand their status as mentors.

Boxing offers an important lesson to other sports in the way that young participants are able to train alongside and learn from successful adults. Community coaches believe that this tangible form of success within reach provides a significant spur to new boxers, which in their view could and should be replicated in other sports.

**RECOMMENDATION 7: Learn from Boxing, Close Up.** The maintenance of close connections between champion amateur and professional boxers and their community clubs provides an object lesson to all sports, in how to harness the power of success, by maximising the oft-vaunted but hard to capture demonstration effect.

*Sport Industry Research Centre,  
March, 2020*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is based on interviews with community boxing coaches representing over 60 clubs in England. We would like to thank all the coaches that engaged in this research for their time and their honest views on how boxing as a sport impacts on specific aspects of participants' lives.

In addition, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of Rosie Meek, from Royal Holloway University who shared her findings into the provision of sport and physical activity for young offenders.

We would also thank the staff of England Boxing for their collaboration in developing the interview schedule, and their subsequent involvement in conducting the focus groups with the boxing coaches. Finally, we would like to thank Ron Tulley of England Boxing for his consistent support in the research phase, and for his feedback on the drafts of this report.

“ One of boxing's many strengths is its ability to serve the communities in which it takes place. Boxing clubs are predominantly run by the community and for the community, locally owned and led. They are thus uniquely placed to act as the locus of broader community development and regeneration activity... ”



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## APPENDIX 1 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (CSP COACHING LEADS)

### OPENING (ICE-BREAKER) QUESTION

To get the conversation going, we would like to know something about your club.

**QUESTION 1**  
**What is the most positive thing that has happened at your club in the last 12 months?**

**PROMPT:** Club boxer achieved individual success, recruited of new members, opened new/improved facilities, promoted the club to the local community.

### THEME 1

Our research indicates that the relationship between boxer and coach is crucial to continued participation.

**QUESTION 1**  
**What attributes help to foster a strong bond between boxer and coach?**

**PROMPT:** Loyalty/trust; dependability; provision of a (male) role model; mentoring relationship; counsellor/psychologist; unconditionality.

**FOLLOW ON:** Why are these important?

**PROMPT:** Replacing elements missing from home life?

### THEME 2

Traditionally, Boxing has been regarded as a sport that engages well with people from marginalised groups (e.g. young people at risk of offending, ex-offenders, the long-term unemployed, the travelling community, asylum seekers).

**QUESTION 1**  
**Why does boxing reach marginalised groups when other sports struggle to do so?**

**PROMPT:** Accessibility; affordability; geography (club location); social acceptability; outlet for aggression; sense of belonging; (imposition of) boundaries of behaviour; hospitality.

**QUESTION 2**  
**What do you do at your club to facilitate this?**

**PROMPT:** Subsidised membership fees, 'no questions asked' policy,

### THEME 3

Boxing has, in the past, been cited as a sport which helps to reduce the incidence of crime, and the risk of reoffending among participants.

**QUESTION 1**  
**Why, in your view, does boxing work well in crime reduction/rehabilitation of offenders?**

**PROMPT:**

### THEME 4

One of the ways in which Boxing clubs establish and maintain their credentials with the local community is through networking with important individuals and organisations.

**QUESTION 1**  
**Why is it important for your club to be prominent in your local community?**

**PROMPT: Who?** Police, press, fire service, local authority, elected officials, schools/colleges, trades.

**PROMPT: Why?** Trusted partner, reliable, safe, dependable, relatable, appreciated, voluntary.

**FOLLOW ON:** How do you go about achieving this?

**PROMPT:** What do you do to extend your club's network of useful contacts?

### THEME 5

Many people who are involved in Boxing find that they have an instant affinity with fellow participants, even if they come from very different backgrounds.

**QUESTION 1**  
**What role do members play in supporting each other both inside the club and the boxing community?**

**PROMPT:** Camaraderie, recognition, diversity, family, shared experience, army - oppressive situations (shared), non-judgmental, respect that a successful athlete commands.

### THEME 6

Boxing clubs have different aims and objectives, and are structured to serve those needs. For example, a performance club may have a very different volunteer structure compared to a community-facing club.

**QUESTION 1**  
**What do you do in order to make your club worth investing in?**

**PROMPT:** Sustainability, succession planning (training new volunteers), coach accreditations, volunteer numbers (not a one-man band), good governance, status - CASC/CIC/charity, Insight - data collection.

### THEME 7

One of Sport England's major successes in recent years has been to encourage National Governing Bodies and voluntary sports clubs to develop detailed information about their participants' behaviour and motivations.

**QUESTION 1**  
**How well do you know your members and their behaviours inside and outside of the gym?**

**PROMPT:** Health; wealth; location; experience of crime.

**FOLLOW ON:** How well do your members represent the make-up of the community in which your gym is located?

**PROMPT:** What do you know about the local community? Where do you get your data from?

### THEME 8

In any boxing gym, a raw beginner may find themselves training alongside a national champion, or learning from a volunteer with more than 40 years' experience on the pads. This is seen by many in the boxing fraternity as one of the sport's key strengths.

**QUESTION 1**  
**What role can successful athlete/member have to a club and community (at all age levels)?**

**PROMPT:** Inspiration/aspiration; Hope-Aspiration-Choice-Chance-Opportunity.



## APPENDIX 2 LIST OF CLUBS REPRESENTED AT NATIONAL COACHING EVENT

ORGANISATION	REGION
Atlas Boxing and Fitness Club	East Midlands
Cleethorpes Trinity ABC	East Midlands
Fusion Boxing	East Midlands
Heart of England Community Boxing Club	East Midlands
Nottingham School of Boxing	East Midlands
Strelley Community ABC	East Midlands
Waterfront Boxing Academy	East Midlands
Rayne Boxing	Eastern Counties
Attleborough Boxing Club	Eastern Counties
Halsted and Essex Uni	Eastern Counties
New Saints	Eastern Counties
Norwich City	Eastern Counties
Double Jab	London
Dwaynamics	London
Fight For Peace	London
The Boxing Academy	London
Limehouse ABC	London
London Community Boxing	London
Stonebridge Boxing	London
Carlisle Villa ABC	Mersey And North West
Hamer ABC	Mersey And North West
New Era ABC	Mersey And North West
Rotunda ABC	Mersey And North West
Wildcard ABC	Mersey And North West
Anfield and North Liverpool ABC	Mersey And North West
Phoenix Fire ABC	Mersey And North West
East Brighton ABC	Southern Counties
Heart of Portsmouth ABC	Southern Counties
Poseidon ABC	Southern Counties
Surbiton ABC	Southern Counties
Billingham Boxing	Tyne Tees And Wear
Brandon Boxing	Tyne Tees And Wear
East Middlesbrough ABC	Tyne Tees And Wear
Redcar ABC	Tyne Tees And Wear
Aston ABC	West Midlands
Brightstar Boxing Academy	West Midlands
Jewellery Quarter Boxing	West Midlands
Leamington Community Boxing	West Midlands
Queensbury ABC	West Midlands
Redditch Boxing	West Midlands
Pat Benson Boxing Academy	West Midlands
South Wye Boxing	West Midlands
Tamworth Boxing	West Midlands
Broadplain Police ABC	Western Counties
Devizes Boxing	Western Counties
Newquay Boxing Academy	Western Counties
Poole ABC	Western Counties
Scrappers ABC	Western Counties
Wimborne ABC	Western Counties
Aspire ABC	Yorkshire
Hunslet Club	Yorkshire
Ingle ABC	Yorkshire
Rawthorpe ABC	Yorkshire
Sheffield City ABC	Yorkshire
Unorthobox	Yorkshire
Vulcan Boxing Club	Yorkshire

*Of all that attended the conference and contributed to the consultation, 75% were male and 25% female.*







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