

Fair, Green & Active

Tackling inequalities through environmental sustainability
in sport and physical activity

BASIS
British Association for Sustainable Sport

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Introduction:

Sport and physical activity depend on healthy people, healthy places and a stable climate – but access to these foundations are not equal.

Many people face persistent barriers to being active. Cost, disability, health, discrimination, caring responsibilities, transport, safety, confidence and lack of opportunity can all affect whether someone is able to take part. These barriers often overlap and reinforce one another.

Environmental conditions create another layer of inequality.

- Some communities have fewer safe and welcoming places to be active.
- Some experience poorer air quality, greater flood risk, more extreme heat and less access to nature.
- Some depend on community facilities that are under severe pressure from energy costs and ageing infrastructure.
- Some cannot reach activities without an expensive or difficult journey.

These are both environmental issues and participation issues.

At the same time, environmental action can create practical solutions. It can protect community facilities, reduce running costs, improve parks and neighbourhoods, make journeys safer, lower the cost of kit, build resilience to extreme weather and create healthier places in which to live and move.

This guide tried to bring those threads together.

The central point is simple:

Environmental sustainability, designed around fairness and community need, can help remove barriers to physical activity and deliver the greatest benefits to the people and places facing the greatest disadvantage.

This does not happen automatically. Environmental action can reinforce inequalities if it raises costs, removes essential transport choices, displaces communities or is designed without the people affected.

Simply making sport greener is important, but not enough. The task is to make environmental action fairer, more inclusive and more useful – and to use it deliberately to help more people be active.



This Guide:

Sport and physical activity can improve physical health, mental wellbeing, confidence, social connection, educational outcomes and quality of life. They can bring people together, strengthen communities and create considerable social value.

However, activity levels vary significantly according to income, disability, age, health, ethnicity, gender and place. People facing several forms of inequality are particularly likely to be inactive.

Environmental injustice contributes to this gap. Communities experiencing deprivation are often more exposed to poor air quality, flooding, extreme heat, traffic and environmental degradation. They may have less access to good-quality green and blue space, fewer safe routes for walking, wheeling and cycling, and less resilient community infrastructure.

Those same communities are likely to have contributed least to climate change through their own consumption and lifestyles.

Climate change threatens to deepen these existing inequalities. Heat can make activity unsafe, especially for people with complex health conditions. Flooding can close pitches, paths and buildings.

Drought can damage playing surfaces.

Poor air quality can discourage outdoor activity.

Rising energy costs can increase prices or threaten facility closure.

Where communities have fewer facilities, less disposable income and poorer transport connections, disruption is harder to absorb.

A closed pitch may be inconvenient in one neighbourhood and the loss of the only affordable local activity space in another. A cancelled session may be easily rearranged for one participant and the end of participation for someone who has limited transport, confidence or alternative opportunities. This is why environmental sustainability must be part of the work to tackle inequalities in sport and physical activity.

Joining the dots

Three propositions underpin this guide.



Inequality is a barrier to physical activity



Sport and physical activity can help tackle inequality



Environmental injustice is part of social inequality

1. Inequality is a barrier to physical activity

People's opportunities to be active are shaped by the conditions in which they live.

Common barriers include:

- > the cost of sessions, membership, travel, clothing and equipment;
- > poor health or disability;
- > inaccessible facilities and programmes;
- > lack of time or inflexible scheduling;
- > caring and work responsibilities;
- > discrimination or lack of belonging;
- > fear of harassment or personal safety concerns;
- > limited transport;
- > a shortage of suitable local opportunities;
- > poor-quality public space;
- > lack of information, confidence or social support.



These barriers are rarely experienced in isolation. They combine differently in different people and places.

2. Sport and physical activity can help tackle inequality

Being active can deliver benefits far beyond sport.

It can:

- improve physical and mental health;
- prevent or manage long-term health conditions;
- reduce loneliness and isolation;
- build confidence and belonging;
- support learning and development;
- create volunteering, training and employment opportunities;
- strengthen relationships between people and communities;
- improve quality of life;
- reduce pressure on health and public services.

Closing participation gaps therefore matters both because everyone should have a fair opportunity to be active and because the greatest potential benefits often exist where participation is lowest.



3. Environmental injustice is part of social inequality

Environmental quality affects health, opportunity and participation. Poor air quality, flood risk, excessive heat, traffic danger, lack of nature and poorly maintained public space are not distributed evenly. Nor is access to the money, information, insurance, transport or political influence needed to adapt.

This means environmental harm can compound existing disadvantage. It also means environmental improvement can help address it.

- > A cooler, greener neighbourhood can support walking and play.
- > A resilient pitch can protect grassroots activity.
- > An energy-efficient leisure centre can remain affordable and open.
- > A kit library can reduce waste and enable participation.
- > A safer walking route can reduce emissions while improving access.



The connection can be expressed as a simple pathway:



What environmental sustainability means in this guide

Environmental sustainability in sport is often discussed in terms of carbon emissions, energy, waste, water, procurement, travel and biodiversity.

All these areas matter, but this guide asks organisations to consider an additional question:

How can action in each of these areas improve people's opportunities to be active?

That shifts the focus from environmental performance alone to environmental and social value together.

For example:

- > An energy project should not only reduce consumption. It should help protect an affordable, comfortable and viable community facility.
- > A biodiversity project should not only count plants or habitats. It should help create a welcoming local place in which people can move, play, meet and connect with nature.

- > An active travel plan should not only reduce car mileage. It should address the safety, cost, accessibility and reliability of people's journeys.
- > A circular economy scheme should not only divert kit from waste. It should reduce the financial barriers that prevent people from participating.
- > A climate adaptation plan should not only protect assets. It should protect access, particularly where communities have few alternatives.

This is sometimes described as delivering co-benefits: one intervention creates environmental, social, health and economic value at the same time. This guide tries to go a step further, towards reducing inequality becoming an explicit objective of environmental action in sport.



The principles of fair environmental action

The following principles can help to guide decisions throughout the organisation.



Principle 1:

Start with inequality, not just environmental impact

Environmental data can tell you where emissions, waste or climate risks are highest. It cannot, on its own, tell you who is most affected, who has the fewest alternatives or where intervention will create the greatest social benefit.

Organisations can deepen the sustainability work by combining environmental evidence with participation data, deprivation data, local knowledge and lived experience. The largest environmental impact will not always be the most important place to begin. A relatively small facility may be socially vital if it serves a community with few other opportunities.



Principle 2:

Prioritise the people and places facing the greatest barriers

Universal improvements are valuable, and the broadest possible benefits of sport and physical activity should always be sought, but often it is better-resourced people who are better able to take advantage of new opportunities, causing gaps to widen. A proportionate approach can make sure that support or provision is available to everyone, but with scale and design that reflects the level of need.

This may mean investing more time, money and partnership capacity in places where barriers are greatest.



Principle 3:

Work with communities, not simply for them

Communities understand the realities of their own lives, places and priorities. They should be involved early enough to shape the problem being addressed, the action selected and the way success is measured. Consultation after a decision has effectively been made is not co-design.

Meaningful involvement may require:

- > using trusted community partners;
- > meeting in accessible local spaces;
- > offering different ways to participate;
- > using plain language;
- > explaining how feedback influenced the decision;
- > maintaining the relationship after the project is completed.



Principle 4:

Reduce barriers rather than transferring them

An action can reduce environmental impact while making participation harder. For example:

- > removing parking without providing safe and realistic alternatives;
- > increasing prices to cover the cost of environmental improvements;
- > moving activities online and excluding people without digital access;
- > introducing equipment-sharing systems that are difficult to book;
- > creating green space improvements that contribute to displacement or rising local costs.

Proposals should be tested for unintended consequences.



Principle 5:

Improve everyday opportunities to move

Not everyone wants to join a club, enter a competition or identify as “sporty”. Walking, wheeling, cycling, play, gardening, dancing and informal recreation are important parts of an active life.

Environmental action should support everyday movement as well as organised sport. Parks, streets, paths, housing estates, waterways and civic spaces are all part of the physical activity system.



Principle 6:

Share the benefits of investment

Environmental investment can create cost savings, healthier spaces, new skills, employment, volunteering and community assets. Organisations should consider who receives these benefits.

Where possible:

- > reinvest energy savings in affordable access;
- > use local and responsible suppliers;
- > create training or employment pathways;
- > support community ownership;
- > make facilities and spaces available for wider community use;
- > ensure sponsorship and funding create lasting local value.

Principle 7:

Join up sustainability, equality, health and participation

Separate teams and plans can lead to fragmented decisions.

Environmental sustainability should inform:

- equality, diversity and inclusion;
- facility and asset management;
- participation and development;
- health and wellbeing;
- safeguarding;
- procurement;
- transport;
- workforce planning;
- community engagement;
- investment and funding.

Likewise, equality and participation expertise should shape environmental decisions.



Principle 8:

Measure what changes for people

Environmental metrics remain important. Organisations should track energy, emissions, waste, water, travel and biodiversity. They can also measure whether action made participation:

- > more affordable;
- > more accessible;
- > safer;
- > more comfortable;
- > more resilient;
- > more welcoming;
- > more locally available.

Numbers alone will not tell the full story. Participant experience and community insight are also essential.



A five-step framework for action

Organisations do not need perfect data or specialist expertise to begin. The following process can be adapted for a club, governing body, Active Partnership, leisure operator, event, facility, local authority or community organisation.

Step 1: Understand who faces the greatest barriers

Start with what is already known. Review participation and demographic data, local needs assessments, equality information, programme feedback, complaints and community insight.

Consider:

- > Who is currently active?
- > Who is missing or underrepresented?
- > Which groups experience the lowest participation?
- > Where are inactivity, deprivation and health inequality concentrated?
- > Which barriers are experienced by more than one group?
- > Which people are likely to be missing from existing data?
- > Which local organisations have trusted relationships with them?

Avoid treating broad groups as uniform. Disabled people, older people, women, young people or people from a particular ethnic background will have different experiences according to income, place, health, identity and circumstance.

A useful starting exercise

Create a simple profile for each priority community:

Question	What to explore
Who?	The people or communities currently least well served
Where?	The neighbourhoods, facilities and spaces involved
What?	The main barriers to being active
Why?	The conditions creating or reinforcing those barriers
Who knows?	Community organisations and people with relevant experience
What is already working?	Existing assets, networks, activities and trusted places

Begin with assets as well as needs. Communities are not problems to be fixed. They possess knowledge, relationships, creativity and leadership that should inform the work.

Step 2:

Map environmental barriers and opportunities

Examine how environmental conditions affect participation.

Consider:

- > extreme heat;
- > flooding and waterlogging;
- > drought and water scarcity;
- > poor air quality;
- > cold or uncomfortable facilities;
- > high energy costs;
- > unsafe or inaccessible travel;
- > lack of green or blue space;
- > poor-quality parks and paths;
- > inadequate shade, seating, toilets or lighting;
- > kit and equipment costs;
- > wasteful procurement or short product life;
- > pollution, litter or degraded natural environments;
- > lack of community control over local assets.

For each issue, identify:

1. what is happening;
2. who is affected;
3. how it affects participation;
4. whether some groups are affected more than others;
5. what assets or opportunities already exist;
6. what action could address both the environmental and participation issue.



Environmental barrier map



Environmental condition

Participation effect

People most affected

Existing assets

Possible response

Repeated pitch flooding

Cancellations and loss of confidence

Junior teams and households without transport to alternatives

Club volunteers and local parks partnership

Drainage, soil improvement, contingency access and flood plan

High facility energy costs

Increased prices and reduced opening

Low-income residents and community groups

Energy data and potential capital funding

Energy efficiency with savings linked to affordable sessions

Unsafe walking route

Car dependence or non-attendance

Young people, women, disabled people and non-drivers

School and local authority partnerships

Route audit, lighting, crossings, wayfinding and group travel

Lack of shade

Heat exposure and reduced summer activity

Children, older people and people with health conditions

Available planting areas

Trees, covered rest points, water and scheduling changes

Step 3: Listen and co-design

Use the initial mapping as the basis for conversation, not as a final diagnosis.

Speak with people who take part, people who have stopped and people who have never engaged.

Useful questions include:

- > What helps you to be active?
- > What gets in the way?
- > Which local places feel safe and welcoming?
- > Which places do not, and why?
- > How does weather affect what you do?
- > Is heat, cold, flooding or poor air quality a concern?
- > What does it cost you to participate?
- > How easy is the journey?
- > What would make the greatest practical difference?
- > What would make an environmental initiative inconvenient or exclusionary?
- > What would success look like to you?

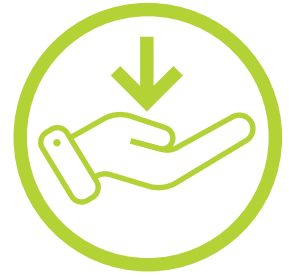
Do not assume that environmental language will resonate with everyone.

People may be more concerned about comfort, bills, transport, safety, family time or the condition of their neighbourhood. These are legitimate entry points. The work does not need to be labelled “climate action” to deliver environmental benefits.



Step 4: Prioritise actions with dual benefits

Not every possible action can happen at once. Assess options against a small set of criteria:



Need

Will the action benefit people or places facing significant barriers?



Environmental impact

Will it reduce emissions, pollution, waste, resource use or climate risk, or restore nature?



Participation impact

Will it make being active easier, safer, more affordable or more appealing?



Community support

Does the action reflect community priorities and insight?



Feasibility

Is it realistic given available time, skills, funding and control?



Longevity

Will it create a lasting improvement rather than a one-off intervention?



Risk

Could it exclude, stigmatise, displace or disadvantage anyone?

An organisation might select:

- > one immediate, low-cost action;
- > one partnership-based community action;
- > one longer-term investment or system change.

Step 5: Deliver, measure and improve

Assign responsibility, timescales and resources. For each action, try to record:

- > the problem being addressed;
- > the people or places prioritised;
- > the environmental outcome;
- > the participation or equality outcome;
- > the partners involved;
- > the lead person;
- > the resources required;
- > the measures of progress;
- > how community feedback will be gathered;
- > the date for review.

Ask:

- > Did the action reach the intended people?
- > Did it reduce a real barrier?
- > Were there unintended consequences?
- > What did participants and partners experience?
- > What should change?
- > Can the work be sustained or expanded?

Treat implementation as a learning process.



Conclusion: the opportunity for sport

Environmental sustainability and social equality are sometimes treated as separate responsibilities competing for attention and resources. They are not.

Both are concerned with the conditions people need to live healthy and fulfilling lives. Both are shaped by decisions about money, power, infrastructure and place. Both require organisations to think beyond their immediate operations and understand their wider impact.

Sport and physical activity are uniquely placed to connect them.

The sector reaches into communities, schools, workplaces, parks, leisure centres, clubs and public spaces. It brings together local authorities, health partners, businesses, volunteers, governing bodies and millions of participants.

That reach can be used to:

- > protect essential community assets;
- > make local environments healthier;
- > reduce the cost of participation;
- > create safer and more accessible journeys;
- > improve access to nature;
- > build resilience to extreme weather;
- > create skills and employment;
- > strengthen community voice;
- > enable more people to experience the benefits of movement.

But good intentions are not enough. Environmental action must be designed around need. Done well, it involves those most affected, it protects affordability and access, it measures who benefits, and it is flexible enough to change when evidence shows that an approach is not working.

If the goal is for sport to embrace environmental action in a way that genuinely improves peoples lives, these agendas must be brought together.

A sustainable future for sport must be an inclusive future — and a fairer, greener environment can help make activity possible for everyone.

Key Resources

[Access for All: accessible places and spaces](#)

[Canal & River Trust Accessibility Map](#)

[Sport England Inequalities Metric](#)

Case Studies

[Forestry England](#)





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