

# Sporting Capital – transforming sport development policy and practice

## Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

### The public policy challenge

For over 40 years public policy in the UK has sought to influence and increase participation rates in sport while reducing the social and economic inequities associated with participation. The levels of investment have been substantial - in the billions rather than millions of pounds. There have been multiple government programmes – and considerable commitment to the cause – not least from those who operate at the sharp end of delivery in our local communities and neighbourhoods. Yet even the most optimistic observer would have to conclude that the results – when viewed in aggregate at least - have been disappointing.

Participation rates in sport have remained broadly static over this period and the inequalities in participation between for example men and women, people with and without a disability and the highest and lowest socio-economic groups have remained stubbornly difficult to narrow. All of these considerable efforts at public policy intervention can be distilled into one simple but incredibly challenging question - **why is it that some people become committed lifelong sport participants while others drop out from sport in their teens never to return to an active lifestyle?**

It is the contention of this paper that the roadmap to better public policy is through better insight and understanding of the phenomenon that is ‘sport participation’. Sport development - and within this term is included all those with a remit for national or local policy making, local delivery or outreach - has lacked a coherent theoretical foundation for what it does. Having a more coherent and robust theoretical foundation to underpin sports

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<sup>1</sup> This research was carried out and written by Nick Rowe who devised the theory of Sporting Capital. It was commissioned by StreetGames. Nick was assisted by Oliver Norden at TNS-BMRB who carried out the statistical modelling and without whose support this research would not have been possible. Support was also provided by Sport England in making available data from the Active People Survey. For a more detailed analysis and reporting of the results refer to the pack of eleven ‘Sporting Capital Resource Sheets’ available at [www.streetgames.org](http://www.streetgames.org) (also see the end of this Summary for more details).

development policy and practice is not just a nice to have discourse for academic debate but a fundamental pre-requisite for effective public policy.

## **Sporting Capital – a new theoretical framework to guide sports policy and practice**

Sporting Capital provides the missing framework of understanding that can create a new impetus for sustained growth in community sport in England. In its component parts there is little that is new about Sporting Capital. But in its totality it opens the door to a completely new and exciting perspective that can create a shared sense of purpose for public policy in sport. Sporting Capital provides the ‘big picture’ that sets the guiding principles and agendas for joined up action for those addressing the multiple layers of complexity that make up community sport. The application of the innovative principles of Sporting Capital within programme design provides the prospect of a powerful intervention agenda that can transform the sporting landscape of this country.

### **What is Sporting Capital?**

Sporting Capital is analogous to the theory of human capital and may be defined as:

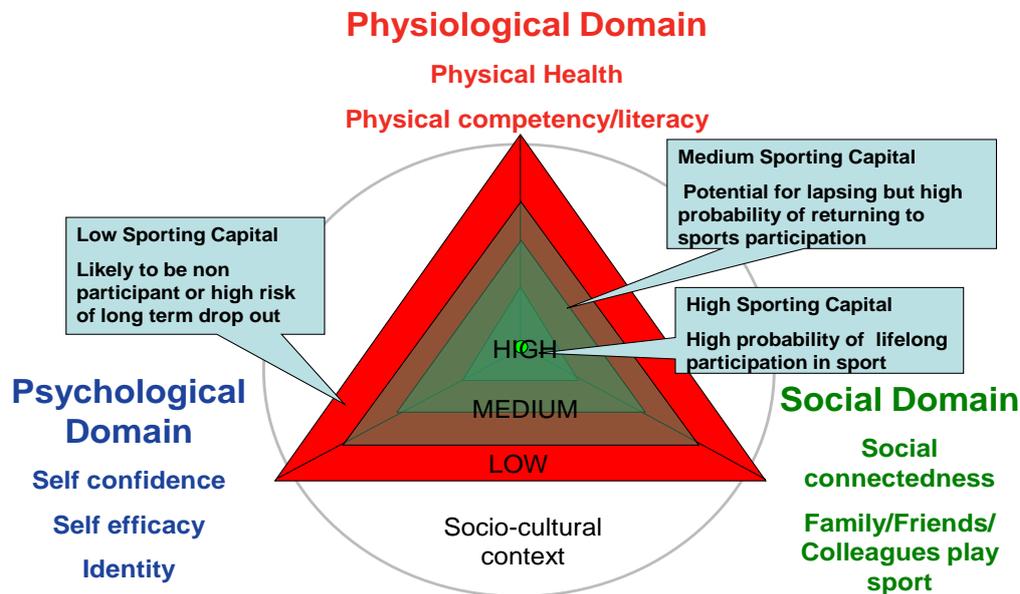
**“The stock of physical, social and psychological attributes and competencies that support and motivate an individual to participate in sport and to sustain that participation over time”.**

The underlying factors that determine the likelihood of people participating in sport may be classified into three domains: Social, Psychological and Physiological (physical health and physical competency). Brought together these three domains interact and combine to create an individual’s level of ‘Sporting Capital’.

Profiling an individual’s Sporting Capital is likely to provide a much better predictor of sustained participation in sport than measuring current prevalence of behaviour alone. The model (see Figure 1) suggests a dynamic interaction between physiological, psychological and social factors, all of which play a significant role in determining current and likely future sports participation. It predicts that an individual with positive scores on the three domains will have a high probability of current and future sustained participation while someone with scores that locate them at the outer edges of the triangle will have a very low

probability of current or future participation in sport.

**Figure 1: theoretical model of ‘Sporting Capital’**



Just like human capital, Sporting Capital is acquired by education and experience. It is influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms set by the family, peers, teachers, coaches, leaders (influential others) the media, marketing and promotion and through consumption. It is proposed that levels of ‘Sporting Capital’ **not only determine the likelihood of current participation but also impact on the probability that it will be sustained into later life.** It is this durability and links to sustained participation that makes Sporting Capital such an attractive theoretical proposition for public policy.

### **What is it about Sporting Capital theory that can make a real difference to public policy and practice in sports development?**

There are a number of important characteristics that we would expect to be associated with Sporting Capital that could transform the way we look at and implement public policy for sport:

- Although Sporting Capital can appreciate and depreciate – it is by its nature more durable than participation which is characterised by high levels of flux.

- People with high levels of Sporting Capital are more resilient to the potential negative impact on participation of external barriers associated with changes in life circumstances and, should they drop out, are more likely to return to sport at a later date when better opportunities arise.
- Increased Sporting Capital leads to more frequent and diverse participation in sport and, in turn, more frequent and sustained participation impacts positively to build and reinforce Sporting Capital – a virtuous feedback loop.
- High quality sporting experiences are likely to have a more positive impact on Sporting Capital than mediocre ones while poor quality experiences can have a negative impact leading to depreciation in the levels of Sporting Capital and, over time, to drop out and sedentary behaviours.
- Significant aspects of Sporting Capital (such as physical competency and self-efficacy) are developed at a very young age, involve a socialisation process (with boys much more likely to build Sporting Capital than girls and the more socio-economically advantaged having higher levels than those from lower socio-economic groups) and can depreciate (or less likely build) over time and with age.

### **Testing the theory – developing an empirical model of Sporting Capital and its relationship to sports participation**

The theory of Sporting Capital has been empirically tested using population level data collected through the Active People Survey (APS)<sup>2</sup>. The Sporting Capital Index (SCI) is a composite measure of an individual's Sporting Capital based on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being low and 10 being high. The Index is constructed from answers to question items across three domains, the Physical, Psychological and Social Domains. The modelling underpinning the creation of the Index is complex but put simply it seeks to optimise the combined power of the 'basket' of measures to explain variations in the probability of someone participating in sport at threshold levels of at least once a week for 30 minutes moderate intensity.

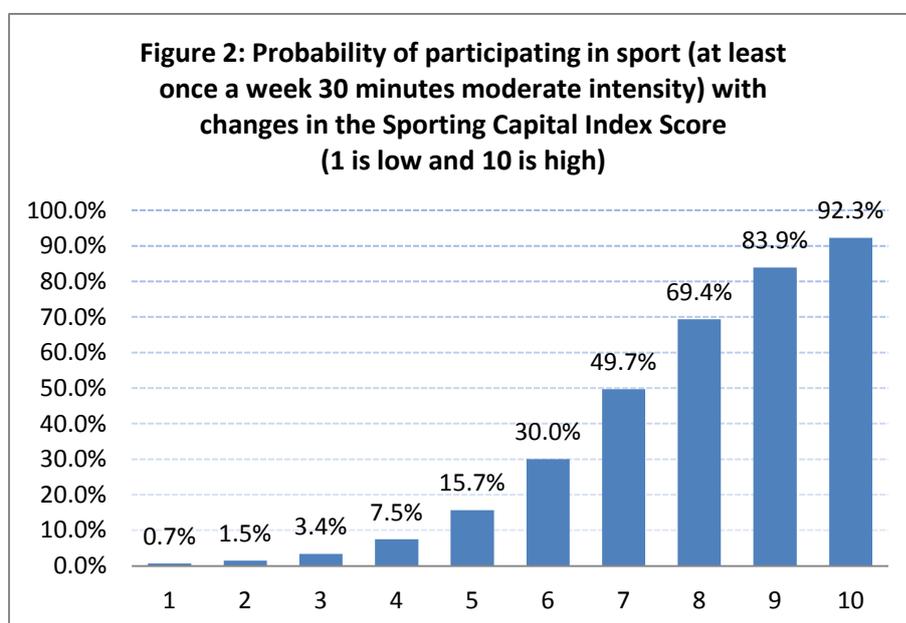
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<sup>2</sup> Data was used from Sport England's Active People Survey. The analysis in this report is carried out on the household survey sample collected in APS6 (October 2011 to October 2012) of the APS6 survey period. The sample size used in this analysis was 4,527 cases. For more information about the Active People Survey see:

[http://www.sportengland.org/research/active\\_people\\_survey.aspx](http://www.sportengland.org/research/active_people_survey.aspx)

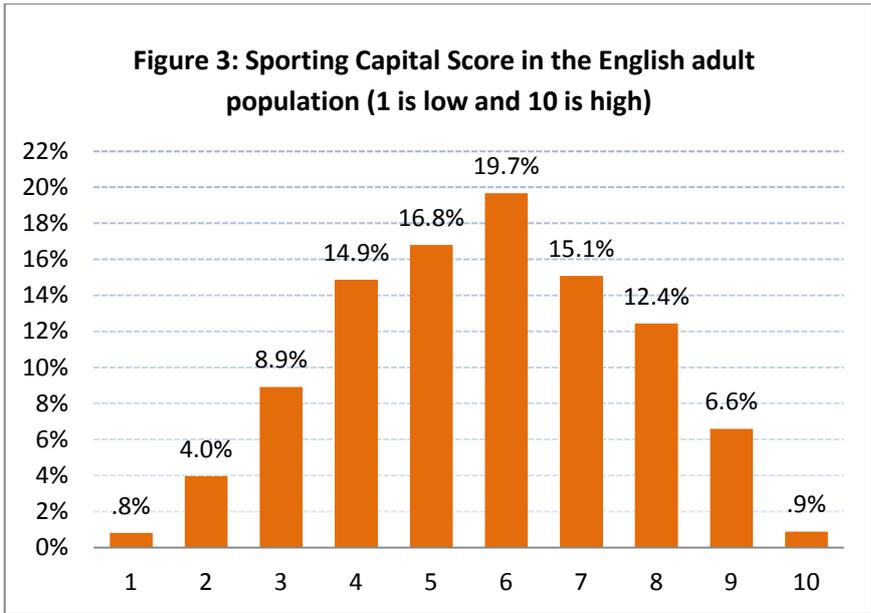
## Results

The evidence from the Active People Survey provides empirical support for the relationship between levels of Sporting Capital and rates of participation in sport. The higher the level of Sporting Capital the higher the probability that someone will participate regularly in sport and the lower the level the higher the probability of sedentary behaviours and drop out. Figure 2 shows changes in the probability of participating in sport with changes in the Sporting Capital Index score. The relationship is not a linear one with the probability of participating increasing more steeply in the middle range of Sporting Capital levels and flattening at the top end of scores. The most significant change is between a SCI score of 6 and 7 where the probability of participating jumps from 30% to 50%.



## What are the levels of Sporting Capital in England?

Figure 3 shows the current (data from October 2011 to October 2012) distribution of Sporting Capital Index scores across the English adult population (16 plus years). The mean score for Sporting Capital in the adult population in England is 5.7. The pattern takes the form of a normal distribution curve but is slightly skewed towards a more positive profile with the proportions of the population scoring 7, 8 and 9 higher respectively than those scoring 4, 3 and 2.



**Sporting Capital – a socially structured phenomenon**

Measurement of sports participation behaviours over many years has demonstrated that it is highly socially structured. We would expect the same to apply, therefore, to Sporting Capital levels across different sub-groups in the population. Figure 4 shows that unlike participation rates in sport the mean Sporting Capital scores do not decline with age until we reach the 55 plus age group when the drop is significant. This demonstrates the durability of Sporting Capital over the life course and the ‘locked in potential’ for participating in sport.

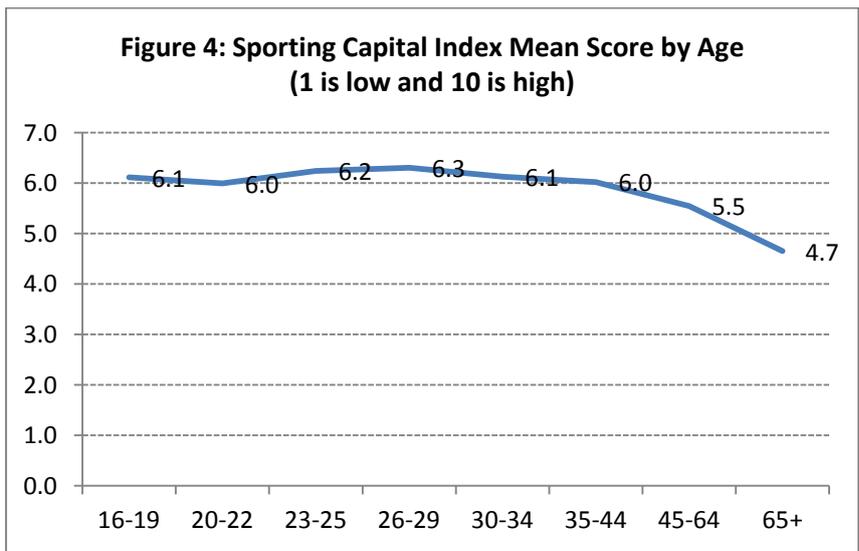
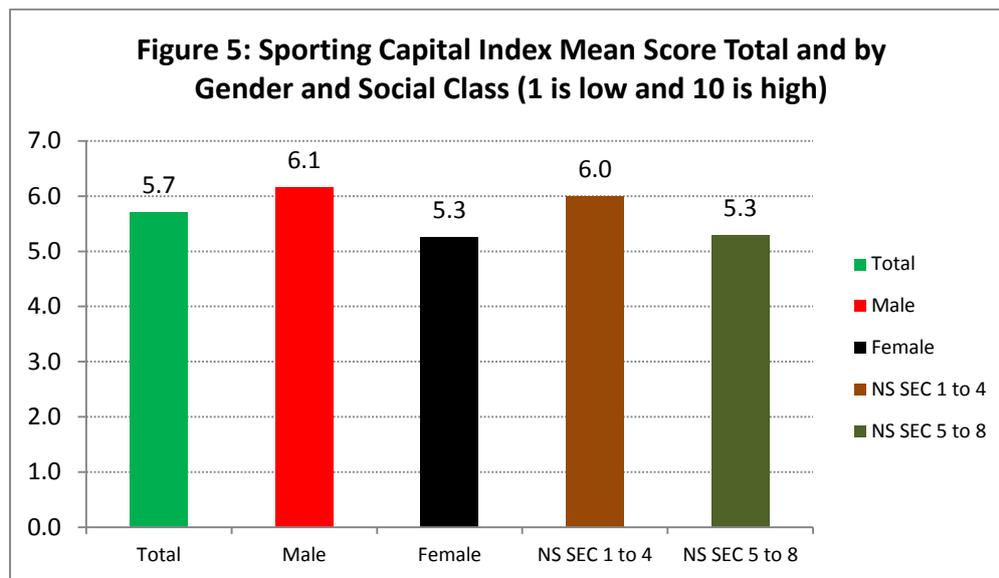


Figure 5 shows how mean levels of Sporting Capital vary by gender and by social class. On average men have a Sporting Capital level that is almost one point higher than that found for women. Similar differences are found between the upper and lower social class groups. These differences may not seem to be significant – but as we have seen earlier the difference in the probability of participating between those on a score of 5 and those on a score of 6 is considerable – from 15.7% to 30% respectively.



## Sporting Capital – making a difference - applying the theory to practice

Public policy intervention can build Sporting Capital if delivered in the right way to the right people at the right time. **A focus on building Sporting Capital is more likely to be effective in achieving public policy goals of increased sustained participation in sport than a focus on participation per se.** To be effective, however, those designing and implementing interventions need greater empathy and understanding of what it is like to have low levels of Sporting Capital and of the processes by which it is acquired.

Doorstep Sport provides an excellent example – from which the learning could be applied more widely - of the potential benefits that may be derived from applying and testing the theory of Sporting Capital in programme design and application. The objective of working with and attracting young people to sport in challenging socio-economic contexts lends itself to the particular insight and understanding that Sporting Capital theory can bring.

There are a number of areas where viewing the Doorstep Sport Club programme and its development through the Sporting Capital lens will potentially pay dividends (with the same principles applying to other programmes) as follows:

- In the targeting and recruitment process it is important to identify and understand the differences between young people who come to Doorstep Sport with very low levels of Sporting Capital, those who come with modest levels and those who come with high levels as the intervention approach will need to be very different for each of these groups.
- Young People with **low Sporting Capital (1 to 3)** – *will need a focus that promotes and builds self-efficacy, self confidence and potentially improves basic movement skills.*
- For those recruits on **low levels of Sporting Capital** *the emphasis will need to be on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivational factors and on reinforcing social networks. Psychological factors related to lack of confidence, self-efficacy and negative body image will feature prominently in this group.*
- The need for an empathetic environment and leadership style will be critical in addressing Psychological factors. Building Sporting Capital in this **low Sporting Capital group** will be a slow process and they will be at high risk of an early drop out from the programme. *Ideally they would receive one-to-one support and attention in the early stages – and would benefit from mentoring from people who they see as like themselves.*
- Young People who come to the programme with **moderate levels of Sporting Capital (4 to 7)** may be participating at low levels because of negative external factors such as a lack of opportunity with few facilities or accessible clubs in their neighbourhood. They may face barriers relating to finance and cost – and this will be the case for many living in areas of multiple deprivation.
- These young people on **moderate levels of Sporting Capital** *will benefit from the opportunity being made available to take part at a price they can afford.* This group may include young people who have problems with authority and have had (are

having) difficulties at school. *They may welcome more structured environments – but ones that they are empowered to influence – and that look different from the more authoritarian social contexts which make them feel uncomfortable and where they find it difficult to conform to expected behaviours.*

- For this **moderate Sporting Capital group** *competitive opportunities and the camaraderie of playing in teams can help to sustain and further build their Sporting Capital.* These young people bring with them an aptitude for sport and may respond positively to the increased status that participation in sport can confer. They are candidates for using sport as the hook to engage them in more pro-social and educational activity and to develop their human capital through the transferable skills associated with voluntary involvement in sport.
- Young girls with **moderate levels of Sporting Capital** are likely to come from families where at least some members are sporty and the value systems associated with sport are seen as positive. This will help in recruiting them to Doorstep Sport but keeping them engaged through their teenage years will be difficult as they will be particularly susceptible to peer group influence not to take part in sport. *Building an alternative ‘sport friendly’ social network will be important for the retention and continued building of Sporting Capital amongst this group.*
- Individuals with **high levels of Sporting Capital (8-10)** are already very sporty. They have a high probability of participating regularly in sport and to come back to sport following a short term drop out. The focus for this group is on ‘participation maintenance’. Continued quality experiences will help reinforce their already positive attitudes towards sport. *They will respond positively to barrier reduction such as low cost opportunities and increased access or improved quality of facilities. They are often looking for improved opportunities to take part in competitive sport and in leagues and tournaments.* If they are not already members of clubs they will be potential recruits.

- Young people with **high levels of Sporting Capital** are potential volunteers and should be targeted for volunteer recruitment. And it is amongst this group that Olympic champions of the future are most likely to be identified.
- Some projects may go for a mix of recruits with varying levels of Sporting Capital – but in so doing they need to take great care on how these groups interact and are provided for – *the wrong mix can be counterproductive – the right mix can create empowered and positively reinforcing environments.*
- Participation is invariably temporary while Sporting Capital is durable and associated with longer term engagement in sport (*'participation in sport is temporary while Sporting Capital is for life'*). The focus of Doorstep Sport needs to be on building Sporting Capital and not on increasing participation per se. This shifts the emphasis from judging success purely by attendance (which is a necessary condition) to *judging success by the quality of the experience and the increase in Sporting Capital that accompanies it* (i.e. sufficient conditions).
- Many young people in disadvantaged areas do not get the positive socialisation process that builds Sporting Capital in their early formative years. They may come to Doorstep Sport with what might be considered a 'Sporting Capital deficit'. *The training and quality of sports leaders, mentors and coaches will be vital to the success of the programme to help overcome this deficit.*
- Some leaders and coaches may be better suited to work with young people with high levels of Sporting Capital while others may be better suited to engaging with young people with low levels – *it is important not to assume that one type of leader or coach fits all.*

## Conclusion

The practical benefits to public policy and practice flowing from Sporting Capital theory are significant and include providing:

- An holistic and integrated view of the determinants of participation that span the psychological, social and physical characteristics of a persons' identity, lifestyle and relationship to others;
- A common ground and a common language for all sports development establishing the 'big picture' that sets the guiding principles and agendas for joined up action - whether in schools, colleges, local outreach, local authorities, national governing bodies of sport, national sport development agencies or government departments.
- The potential to better understand the key influences that shape an individual's relationship to sport, when and how they occur and in what context. In particular it emphasises the early formative years in a young persons' life when Sporting Capital is most likely to be built, the factors that lead to its growth and, for many, what causes depreciation in Sporting Capital and associated drop out through the life course.
- A better understanding of how the external barriers and constraints that impact on participation and the personal factors that combine to determine an individual's level of Sporting Capital interact to determine the likelihood of participating in sport.
- The potential to customise interventions to the Sporting Capital profile of an individual – to build those aspects of Capital that are weak, to avoid offering sport in ways that could be counter-productive turning people off rather than on to sport - and to focus on barrier reduction only where appropriate and likely to be effective.

Sporting Capital as a theory is in its infancy. The research carried out so far using empirical data from the Active people Survey provides promising results – but it is very early days. If Sporting Capital is to fulfil its potential as a guiding and influential framework for public policy and sport development further research is required. Much of this research could be incorporated into existing commitments for programme evaluations. However, other major new areas of research are needed that reach outside the existing frameworks for programme evaluations to include for example large scale survey methods with longitudinal panels and experimental research designs. These come at some cost – but the potential prize of a sound well tested theory that can underpin public policy to 'shift the curve' of participation in sport is a big one that could more than justify the significant investment required.

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See Below for the Resource Sheets available in the series. Each individual Sheet has been designed to be freestanding and to make sense in its own right – the series of Sheets has been designed to provide a logical progression that builds knowledge and understanding about Sporting Capital, its characteristics, the relationship it has to participation in sport, its distribution in the population, its variation across different social groups and its potential to influence and shape future sports policy and practice.

The Sheets have been purposefully designed to be succinct and selective rather than long and comprehensive. Each should leave the reader with an interest to think further about Sporting Capital as an idea and what it may mean for their work in sports development whether at the higher strategic levels of policy making or delivering localised programmes on the ground.

The following Sheets are available from StreetGames:

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 1: Sporting Capital – what is it and why is it important to sports policy and practice?**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 2: What is the relationship between Sporting Capital and participation in sport and why does it matter?**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 3: Are we a sporting nation – what are the levels of Sporting Capital in England?**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 4: Sporting capital and gender – mind the gap**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 5: Sporting capital and inequality – does social class make a difference?**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 6: To what extent do levels of Sporting Capital impact on the frequency of participation and vary by the type of sport people play?**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 7: Sporting Capital and ethnicity**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 8: Sporting Capital amongst the young – a focus on 16 to 25 year olds**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 9: Sporting Capital - why it is important to public policy – a strategic perspective**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 10: Doorstep Sport - building Sporting Capital to increase participation in sport – applying the theory to practice**

**Sporting Capital Resource Sheet 11: Sporting Capital – testing and applying the theory - future research requirements.**

These Sheets build on earlier thinking and analysis in work carried out for StreetGames and available in the following publications:

Sporting Capital – a new theory of sport participation determinants and its application to ‘Doorstep Sport’ Nick Rowe, Sport Research Consultant, September 2012, A report commissioned by StreetGames

Part 1. What is Sporting Capital and how can its principles be applied to create a new generation of sustained sports participants?

Part 2. The Sporting Capital Index – exploring the levels of Sporting Capital in the English population and its variation across different social groups.