

# The Birmingham Community Paddle Sport Project

## Community Hubs 2024



## INTRODUCTION

The Birmingham Community Paddle Sport hubs are an innovation driven by Olympic canoeist Andy Train and supported by Paddle UK in collaboration with StreetGames and the Canal & River Trust. The project attempts to reach into the most underserved communities, increase access and encourage participation in paddle sport across Birmingham's canal network.

There is limited access and an underrepresentation from local communities in paddle sport across the city. Amongst the 1.1 million population of Birmingham, only a small proportion of residents have historically taken part in paddle sport activities based on the city's extensive canal network. The reasons are complex but include concerns for personal safety and fear of criminal activity in the inner city. But more significantly, there is a lack of role models, ownership and sense of belonging that local people are entitled to use those green and blue spaces.

This collaboration, or systems change approach, has begun to address inequity of access to the sport. Over the last three years, funding, training and provision of equipment has led to a rapid development of eight locally trusted organisations (LTO's) enabling them to build their capacity and add a paddle sport offer to their communities on their doorstep. By responding to local needs, paddle sport is now reaching deep into local communities through youth, community and family provision across a wide range of ethnic and socially diverse groups.

More young people are taking part, more LTO's are delivering paddle sport and more local leaders representative of their community are emerging. People who otherwise would not be accessing the water are now taking up paddling for the first time and continuing with hubs, being coached, helmed and organised by people from within their own community. A truly place-based approach.

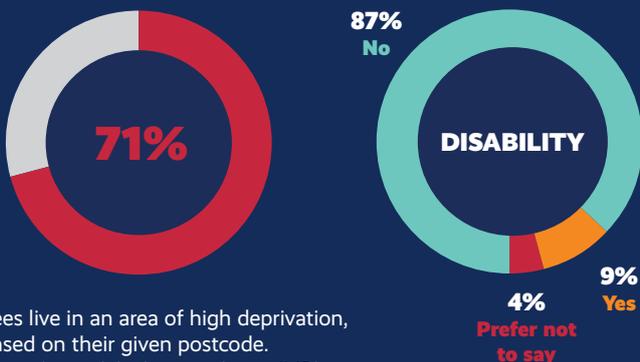
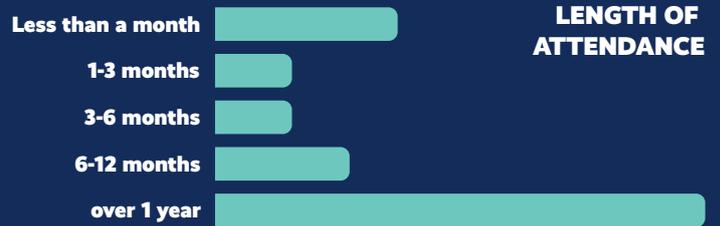
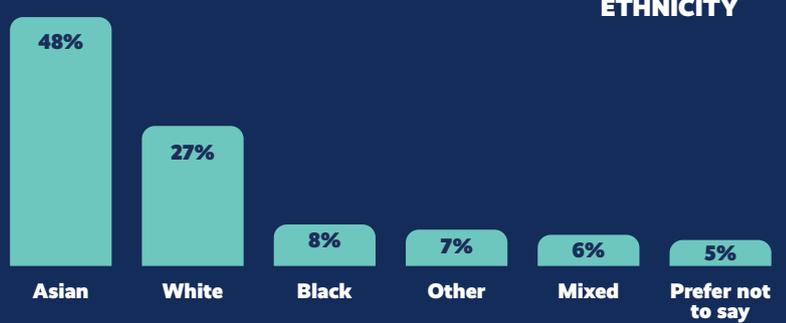
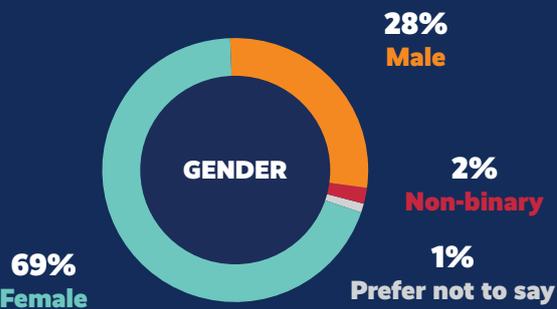
Paddle UK recognise the organic growth taking place and wish to evaluate the impact this doorstep sport approach is having on local communities and the potential this approach may have for growing paddle sport more widely. To this end Paddle UK have commissioned StreetGames to carry out further research and insight. The findings are revealed in the infographic below.

# THE PADDLE SPORT HUBS

The findings focus on eight community paddle sport hubs, where surveys were conducted with both new and regular participants on a designated day. This report provides a comprehensive overview across all hubs, while individual hub infographics and reports are being produced separately. Each infographic includes an attendee profile and an impact report based on participants' experiences, particularly in relation to their wellbeing. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data has been used to compile these reports, with key words from qualitative responses grouped to identify emerging themes. Wellbeing scores have been analysed and compared against national benchmarks from the ONS to highlight the relative impact of this initiative.



## ATTENDEE PROFILE



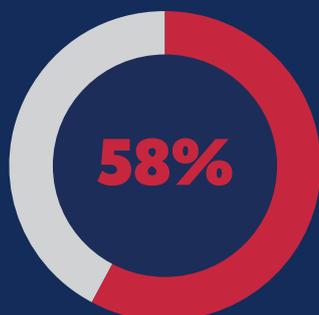
Of attendees live in an area of high deprivation, based on their given postcode.  
(Top 3 most deprived deciles according to IMD)



## IMPACT

After attending their paddle sports sessions, the attendees were asked to complete a short survey which explored their experience of being on the water, and what the impact of this experience had been.

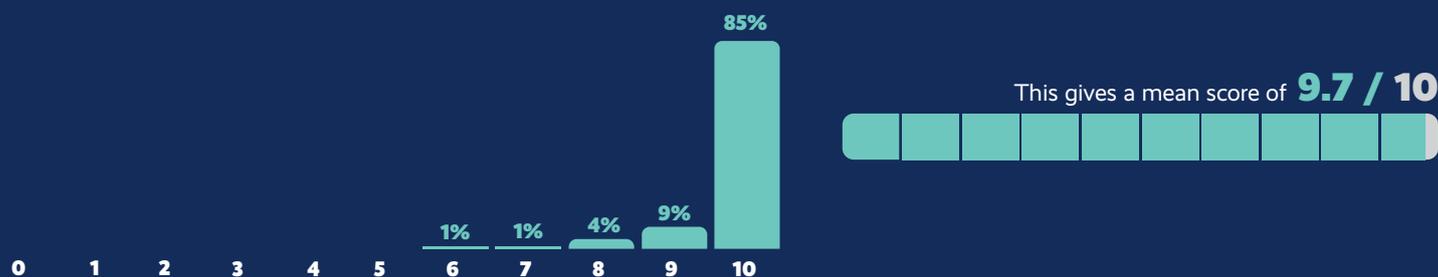
In total, 186 participants completed the survey, a summary of the responses is shown below.



58% of respondents had **never taken part** in paddle sports before and these sessions were their first experience of taking part in paddle sports.

*(Paddle sport includes bell boating, kayaking, canoeing and stand up paddle boarding)*

We asked participants, how much they enjoyed taking part in the session, on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being 'A lot' and 0 is 'not at all'...



The results above showcase the overwhelmingly positive response from the attendees with regards to their paddle sports experience, reflected in the average score of 9.7 / 10 reported by respondents.

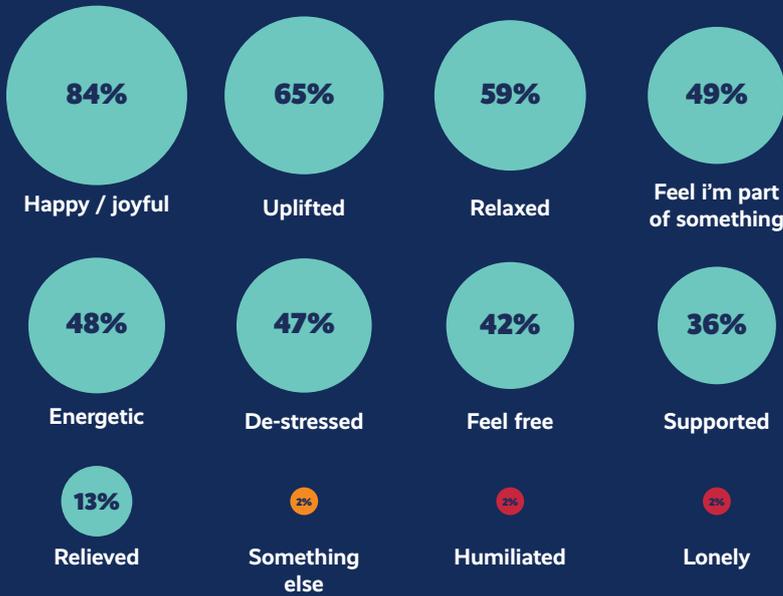
Attendees were also asked to reflect on their experience at sessions and feedback on how much they felt they had developed across a range of aspects:



The results above demonstrate that the respondents felt they developed 'A lot' as the majority response across all of the aspects. This shows that participants really took a lot from their time on the water and is testament to the enriching environment that was fostered by instructors as part of the sessions.

Attendees were invited to share what they enjoyed most about the sessions and to identify the emotions they experienced after participating. They were also given the opportunity to explain the reasons behind their selected emotions. This approach facilitated the collection of valuable, detailed feedback from respondents. The responses have been analysed and categorised into common themes, as outlined below.

What emotions do you feel after taking part in this activity?



## THEME - ACCESS & INCLUSION

The responses highlight that local hubs, managed by dedicated volunteers, play a vital role in making paddle sports accessible and inclusive through their operational practices.

Feedback underscores the significance of free, regular local sessions provided by well-trained, well-equipped and locally trusted organisations. These organisations possess deep connections within their communities, enabling them to reach and engage a diverse range of participants effectively.

Participants appreciate initiatives that ensure access for women, female-led sessions, inclusion of different ethnic groups, and support for individuals with special needs or those experiencing social isolation.

Regular paddlers did also identify challenges in relation to access, including insufficient storage facilities for equipment at some locations, as well as a broader need for adequate washing and toilet facilities to enhance the overall experience.

“ Accessible, operated frequently by reliable and friendly volunteers. Cost, especially as these sessions have been FREE! Most importantly, I have enjoyed a new activity that was previously inaccessible to me. ”

“ The leaders are very accepting of special needs, they go above and beyond to make sure everyone is catered for and encourage even the parents to join in the fun! ”

“ Feeling comfortable with other Muslim women. ”

“ All equipment is provided. ”

“ As there is no storage here, it makes it difficult to hold regular sessions and time is wasted ferrying boats and equipment to and from cars and trailers to load and unload it. ”

“ Encouraged to participate, acceptance of everyone's capabilities and included everyone! I'm so grateful for all the sessions. ”

## THEME - NATURE & WELLBEING

Feedback from participants consistently highlights significant improvements in physical and mental wellbeing.

Immersion in the natural environment provides paddlers with a deeper sense of purpose and motivation, not only to participate but also for volunteers to lead sessions.

Respondents noted that, despite living in densely populated urban areas, exploring the local canal network fosters a stronger sense of place and belonging.

For some, the experience is about uncovering local history. For many, it centres around connecting with nature, observing the changing seasons, encountering wildlife, and enjoying fresh air. For most, it is the shared experience with others from their local community that resonates the most.

Multiple comments from participants highlight the soothing effects of water and the natural environment, describing it as a remedy for the stresses and monotony of urban life.

However, a number of participants also expressed concerns about canal pollution, calling for more effective clean-up efforts and better management to preserve the environment.

Respondents were also asked personal wellbeing questions based on the Office for National Statistics markers: "How happy did you feel yesterday?", "To what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?", and "How satisfied are you with life nowadays?". The recorded data reinforces the positive sentiments highlighted above, with respondents scoring above the national average on all three measures.

*How happy did you feel yesterday?*



*Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?*



*Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?*



“  
The sessions have been transformative, they've helped me overcome generalised anxiety and enabled me to get on with my life.  
”

“  
It's easy to stay home and do nothing. But it feels sooo good after a session on the water, even if the weather was wet and cold.  
”

“  
I thoroughly enjoy my time on the water, it helps me to unwind from the challenges of the working week  
”

“  
Paddling is the new anti-depressant - great if you've got worries to shed and even better if you haven't.  
”

“  
travelling on the canal seeing the bird life enjoying the tranquillity... especially in the summer evenings  
”

“  
... and after being on the water, for however short a time, I feel on top of the world and able to handle anything.  
”



## THEME - SOCIALISING

Socialising emerges as a cornerstone of the paddle sport experience. The communal nature of group activities not only sparks initial interest but also encourages long-term engagement. Highlights include the joy of spending time with friends and family, meeting new people, becoming part of a welcoming community, and the friendliness of organisers and other participants. Learning new skills and sharing a coffee afterwards further enhance the experience.

Notably, some individuals specifically emphasised the value of being able to join in, feel accepted, and socialise – a highly valued aspect of the activity for those who may otherwise lead isolated lives.

The emotional responses in this area underscore the profound and positive impact that the social dimension of this community-based activity has on participants' overall wellbeing. As part of the survey, participants were also asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood':

*I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood...*



83% of respondents felt they belonged 'very strongly' or 'fairly strongly' to their immediate neighbourhood, this is a significantly higher score than the national average of 61% (Community Life Survey 2023/24) and goes to demonstrate the positive sense of community and belonging that has been fostered within participants attending these sessions.

“ I like the fact that there are often community events here and feel like I'm really part of it. ”

“ Enjoying, meeting people, doing something that I would not think of doing if I was on my own. ”

“ Meeting new people and being part of a new community. ”

“ Being part of a community group, taking part in new activities ”

“ It has felt like an accomplishment as having two young children it's been difficult to get out and exercise let alone meet new people ”

“ Meeting other people, usually I am on my own. ”

## THEME - SKILLED VOLUNTEERS

The positive culture fostered by a well-trained and knowledgeable volunteer workforce stands out as a key theme. Participants consistently highlight the welcoming, safe, positive, and friendly atmosphere that defines the community paddle sport hubs. The volunteers are highly respected as role models, mentors, coaches, and teachers. Their support, encouragement, and inspiration empower participants to learn, grow, and develop their skills with confidence.

“  
*This activity was new to me and I felt scared and anxious before taking part. But because of the professionalism of everyone involved i now feel energised and feel like I have succeeded in something that i would not have had the courage to try before.*  
”

“  
*Kindness, safety, teaching quality, very friendly staff, very encouraging, amazing and informative staff and fellow paddlers that make the sessions really fun*  
”

“  
*The group leaders made me feel that way. Especially when you're trying something new that support and encouragement makes you feel that you're a part of a team.*  
”

“  
*Honestly lovely activity and well organised. I would come and bring my kids anytime I could.*  
”

“  
*I really enjoyed myself, the instructors made us feel welcomed and ensured we had a good time!*  
”

“  
*The group is well supported by the leads. It's great when we laugh and sing.*  
”

“  
*The support and environment is amazing*  
”

“  
*Friendly mentors that encourage you to try new things and relax*  
”



## THEME - PADDLE SPORT

The findings highlight progression as a central theme, encompassing both personal development and growth within the sport. Key aspects such as competence, confidence, and teamwork stand out as significant outcomes.

Bell boating, as an entry-level activity, appeals to both new and those who may have participated in paddle sports in the past. Sessions that incorporate enrichment opportunities, explore local waterways, and include family events, festivals, and competitions provide variety and have proven highly engaging.

Regular training and ongoing skill development in paddling techniques are greatly valued and form the foundation of all bell boating and kayak sessions.

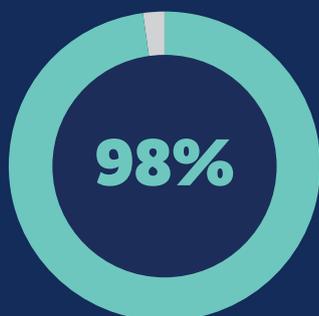
The overarching critique is a clear demand for more opportunities to participate.

Additionally, some paddlers have expressed an interest in giving back to their community, suggesting potential for the hubs to "grow their own" by developing volunteers from within. This approach could expand the volunteer workforce while deepening community connections. As part of the survey, participants were also asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I find sport/exercise enjoyable and satisfying':

*I find sport/exercise enjoyable and satisfying...*



63% of respondents strongly agreed that they find sport and exercise enjoyable and satisfying, this is a significantly higher score than the national average of 32% (Active Lives Adult Survey November 2022-23) and again reflects how well received these sessions have been for participants.



This is further demonstrated by data showing that **98% of respondents would like to continue taking part in paddling in the future**

“  
*Because I look forward to the session every week learn improve every time pick up easier ways to paddle and meet other ladies, we encourage each other chat as we paddle its way of relaxing, I've moved boats now use a lighter boat which I wouldn't have thought possible before*  
”

“  
*I've become more fitter, stronger and agile. My paddling skills have improved. I've upgraded my kayak. Entered several 5k and times are getting better. I also Bell boat and have entered numerous competitions. Made many friends from other hubs and paddle at other hubs.*  
”

“  
*I enjoy great activities with great people. It makes me feel good and makes me want to put something back in to help others achieve this same feeling. I am going to be helping in a few weeks to cover staff absence.*  
”

“  
*I feel very happy and elated at having achieved something that I wouldn't previously have had an opportunity to do*  
”

## IMPROVEMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS

Participants have shared a range of suggestions to enhance the paddle sport experience, addressing themes such as time and scheduling, access, variety and progression, resources, and facilities. Below is a summary of the key themes and their associated recommendations:



### Time / Timing

**Participants emphasised the need for more opportunities to attend.**

- Increase slots for more people to attend.
- Provide more regular sessions.
- Offer a wider range of session times and availability.



### Access

**Improving accessibility is a key priority, particularly for schools, families, and local communities.**

- Facilitate access for schools.
- Introduce family-oriented sessions.
- Focus on providing local sessions.
- Offer appropriate clothing available to borrow.



### Variety & Progression

**Participants expressed a desire for more challenges, diverse activities, and progression opportunities.**

- Incorporate challenging activities.
- Explore more places and routes to paddle, including rivers and varied start points.
- Organise days out and introduce a variety of boats.
- Dedicate more time to kayaking.
- Offer single-gender and family-focused sessions.
- Introduce fun activities like AquaPaddle



### Resources

**Ensuring adequate and up-to-date equipment is a recurring concern.**

- Improve access to essential kit.
- Secure additional funding.
- Renew and maintain equipment.



### Environment

**Participants identified the need to improve environmental conditions.**

- Clean the water to enhance the paddling experience.



### Facilities

**Improved facilities are considered vital to supporting participation.**

- Provide better storage options.
- Introduce boat covers.
- Ensure availability of toilets, changing areas, and shelters.
- Offer washing facilities for participants and equipment.

## CONCLUSION

The findings in this evaluation report provide an evidence base for the impact of the approach taken by the Birmingham Community Paddle Sport Project to reach into the most underserved communities, increase access and encourage participation in paddle sport across the canal network citywide.

Overall, the evidence suggests the approach is highly effective in terms of promoting a sense of wellbeing, generating belonging and heightening enjoyment in sport and physical activity.

The questions in this qualitative survey are based on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) markers. This means the impact of this approach can be assessed against nationally recognised benchmarks. It is significant that the findings for wellbeing are all above the national average. The results for the sense of neighbourhood and belonging generated through the activity score a remarkable 83% against the national average of 61%. Equally noteworthy, the levels of enjoyment and satisfaction gained through sport and physical activity score 63% - double the 32% national average.

The findings also reflect that the approach is showing healthy signs of addressing inequity in paddle sport in the most underserved communities by providing easily accessible and inclusive activity.

The profile of the 186 respondents demonstrates the capabilities of the eight paddle sport hubs to reach deep into local underserved communities. 71% live in the highest areas of multiple deprivation with 48% Asian, 27% White, 8% Black and 6% mixed race. 69% are female, there is strong intergenerational and family participation which includes 11% of respondents between the ages of 17 and 25. 9% of all respondents also identify a disability.

It goes deeper still, the friendly welcoming approach of well-trained volunteers from within the local community is a key finding. The social aspects created through these regular sessions, fostered by the skilled volunteers is key to generating a sense of neighbourhood and belonging. This simple team-based activity also underpins this and, combined with the natural environment in which the sport takes place, the overall effect on participants is one of fostering a very real sense of wellbeing. Added to this, the variety of regular activity ranging from having a go, basic skill learning, exploration of waterways, fun events, training opportunities, festivals and competitions has created a growing platform of interested paddlers, some of whom have also begun to kayak and develop further in the sport. Some competing, others volunteering, becoming helms and some now training as coaches. Put together this is creating high levels of satisfaction.

Significantly, respondents indicate an overwhelmingly positive paddle sport experience, with an overall score for enjoyment of 9.7 out of 10. This reflects an enriching environment as a central part of the sessions that are provided in a safe and supported way. This is further demonstrated by the exceptional finding showing 98% of respondents would like to continue taking part in paddle sports in the future. This is leading to greater retention and points towards continual growth in the number of paddlers.

The survey results indicate a well-established participant base with 51% of respondents attending the paddle sport sessions for over a year. Additionally, 14% have been involved for 6-12 months, suggesting a strong level of retention beyond the initial months of engagement. Meanwhile, 16% of participants have attended for between 1-6 months, highlighting a steady influx of new paddlers. Notably, 19% have been involved for less than a month, demonstrating ongoing interest and recruitment into the programme. Together, these figures suggest a mix of long-term engagement and new participation, contributing to both sustainability and growth.

The respondents' feedback in terms of improvements and suggestions provides a useful list of practical considerations for Paddle UK, CRT and StreetGames to consider in order to enhance the current offer and support future development.

The well run, safe and inclusive approach of the community water sport hubs attracts regular participants and a steady influx of new ones. The inherently stable bell boats provide a safe and easy way to access water sport. Canals are accessible and on the doorstep of those living in the most underserved communities. The sheltered, flat water in them offers limited hazards and makes it easier to concentrate on grasping basic paddling techniques. The opportunity for year-round provision is growing. Whilst the main paddling season for bell boats is April to October, events, festivals and holiday provision have extended the period from March to December in places. The events have also brought together other water sports providing even more opportunities for children, young people and families in the most underserved communities across the city.

The aspirations expressed by the paddlers in this survey for more diverse paddling activities and progression in and through the sport lay down the challenge for the next stage of this project.