



## **Diocesan Approaches to Faith, Sport and Wellbeing**

A research report prepared on behalf of the Church of England  
National Sport and Wellbeing Project

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a piece of independent research into the Church of England's National Sport and Wellbeing Project (NSWP) which ran between June 2020-June 2023, and which was funded by the Laing Trust and the Church of England (CoE).<sup>1</sup> Drawing on primary and secondary data sources, it provides an analysis of the work of the Project and its contribution to sport and wellbeing ministry in eight 'pilot' dioceses in England. A central aim of the report is to map the development of these dioceses with regard to sport and wellbeing ministry in line with the objectives of the NSWP, and to inform direction of travel beyond its duration. In turn, the report presents the views and experiences of key stakeholders involved in the Project, whilst at the same time considering the social, cultural and institutional landscape across which its related activities took place. Building upon previous research (see, for example, Balcar and Parker, 2022), the report seeks to shed light on the role of faith-based (Christian) organisations in contemporary social life and their potential contribution to broader sport and wellbeing agendas. In this sense, it aims to add to the increasing momentum around sport/faith initiatives in the UK, and to create a stronger evidence base and rationale for work in this area.

Developing an evidence base of this nature is critical to the establishment of such initiatives and for building strategic partnerships, securing funding, and influencing the future success of sport and wellbeing ministry across the Church of England. It also serves to provide insight about how best to embed sport and wellbeing ministry into diocesan culture. The report highlights some of the challenges faced by individuals and organisations wishing to promote sport and wellbeing ministry in faith-based contexts, in particular, the lack of coherence around sport and wellbeing ministry at the national church and diocesan level, the lack of funding to support related ventures, and the competing demands which both church and parachurch organisations face amid the vagaries of contemporary social life.

As a frontline missional venture, sports ministry has significant reach across the UK and beyond. Indeed, at the global level, the sports ministry sector (including sports chaplaincy) has witnessed exponential growth over the past four decades. Whilst some of this work continues

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to take place amid traditional sporting locales (i.e., grassroots, amateur, and elite sport), a major part of this growth has seen the emergence of sports ministry organisations which focus their attention on wider notions of relationship building where, in returning to their roots as a bridge-builder to the unchurched, these organisations intentionally use sport as a vehicle for mission and outreach, and as an opportunity for connection across communities. As a consequence, historical pre-occupations with the promotion of traditional sporting pastimes have been superseded by a much broader approach which has seen notions of physical activity and wellbeing come to the fore. This has allowed many sports ministry organisations to re-position themselves in terms of the range of activities they offer, the demographic groups which they serve, and the wider agendas which they are able to tap into (i.e., government agendas around mental health and wellbeing). The NSWMP was the first initiative of its kind to integrate sport and wellbeing into the life of dioceses and at a strategic level, to move beyond one-off stand-alone local parish approaches. This report seeks to show how the Project served to promote broader sport and wellbeing agendas via formal links with the eight pilot dioceses and informal connections with a variety of church and parachurch organisations. Featuring empirical data from sources both within and outside of the Anglican church, the report presents findings on the extent to which the NSWMP impacted the profile of sport and wellbeing ministry within the church and beyond, whilst at the same time investigating the perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders towards the overall effectiveness of its various outputs.

## **Methodology**

The research sought to collate information from a broad range of sources both from within the Church of England and from parachurch sports ministry organisations. These sources provided insight into the extent to which the main objectives of the NSWMP had been understood and adopted by those with decision-making responsibilities in this area. The research commenced in November 2022 and ran until May 2023 and was funded by the Church of England. Comprising a mixed methods research design, the central aim of the research was to investigate the scope and reach of the NSWMP and its longer-term legacy. The desk-based element of the research comprised a mixture of policy and secondary-source analysis, whilst the empirical element focused on qualitative one-to-one, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire surveys. Empirical data was collected with four ‘stakeholder’ groups: (i) Sport and Wellbeing (diocesan) Leads (n=8), (ii) senior diocesan staff (n=14), (iii) strategic stakeholders (n=6), and (iv) parachurch leaders (n=6). The empirical data collection process was selective in order to provide a cross-sectional analysis of current activity in the pilot dioceses. Utilising this data,

the report provides a snapshot of the overall impact of the NSWP alongside key learning and insights.

### **Headline findings**

There is a strong sense that the NSWP has been successful in stimulating sport and wellbeing ministry (SWM). All eight pilot dioceses appear to have the longer-term backing of senior diocesan staff with regard to the promotion of SWM, and all regard SWM as an important missional tool to engage unchurched and/or disengaged audiences and communities. There are clear differences in the extent to which SWM has been embedded and developed within the pilot dioceses, with three in particular (Ely, Gloucester, and Norwich) providing examples of what might be achieved when a more strategic approach is adopted to work in this area (especially in relation to resourcing). There is a collective desire across all eight pilot dioceses to grow SWM and to continue to share learning, via the NSWP Learning Community forum, increasing both the number of participants (i.e., including Bishops and senior diocesan staff), and the number of dioceses involved:

- The research findings indicate that SWM can successfully serve as an effective tool for mission and ministry within local parishes. Over the three years of the NSWP (and amid significant social disruption), the majority of the eight pilot dioceses have created a strong foundation on which future CoE SWM can build and expand;
- Findings concur with Crabbe et al., (2015) that not only does SWM often remain an ‘invisible ministry’ in the CoE (in its many forms from chaplaincy and grassroots sport and physical activity participation to community sport and leisure and school provision), but that enthusiasm for its adoption is high;
- Stakeholders agree that CoE institutions, dioceses and parishes should take SWM seriously, not only because sport and wellbeing are a significant part of the social fabric, but because it can help the CoE to be ‘younger and more diverse’ and could, in future, enable the growth of a ‘mixed ecology’;
- The report shows that SWM is best coordinated and lead strategically at the diocesan level rather than in the form of traditional stand-alone ‘SWM projects’ which are highly

susceptible to failure because leaders move on and funding is insecure. Strategic coordination and leadership at diocesan level also safeguards (and provides oversight for) sound theological groundings for SWM which, in turn, serves to underpin faith pathways including the creation of new worshipping communities, ‘fresh expressions’ or pioneer ministries;

- The work of NSWP has facilitated an emerging set of principles to help dioceses successfully embed SWM into their diocesan strategies including investing in funded roles within diocesan structures and supporting well-trained Sport and Wellbeing Ministers capable of appropriate levels of leadership, project management (i.e., the creation of faith pathways and new worshipping communities), and the delivery of fun and inclusive sport and wellbeing provision for all ages in local parishes;
- There are several cross-diocesan challenges that must be addressed to help SWM grow and flourish. These should be addressed at local and national level:
  - (i) A more missional outlook across various church traditions which utilise, facilitate and align with existing theologies of sport;
  - (ii) The adoption of coordinated and robust monitoring and evaluation practices including standardised systems and processes around data collection to refine SWM models and approaches;
  - (iii) An appropriately trained SWM workforce including volunteers;
  - (iv) The development of more robust and sustainable business development, marketing and fundraising support;
  - (v) The creation of partnerships with other missional outreach activities, government (and local authority) policies, and wider grassroots, community and sport for development sectors;
  - (vi) The creation of innovative and entrepreneurial cultures within dioceses;
- SWM should be embedded and joined-up across diocesan and CoE approaches to mission and ministry including: children and young people, schools, community outreach (especially into disadvantaged communities including urban and rural), and emerging forms of church such as new worshipping communities, ‘fresh expressions’ and pioneering.

- In order for SWM to flourish, strategic leadership is needed at both diocesan and ‘national’ levels to drive innovation, cross-diocesan solutions, evidence-based models, approaches and principles, and financial and workforce sustainability, over the next 10 years.

## **Conclusions**

The NSWP and the eight pilot dioceses have created a significant catalyst for change, this despite the significant social challenges presented by the COVID pandemic. In turn, they have established an exciting new foundation and platform from which to grow and develop SWM in the CoE beyond more traditional approaches. The pilot dioceses have made good progress thereby justifying a second phase of the NSWP, which should look to address the challenges and barriers outlined in this report. A diocesan approach to SWM has created enthusiasm, support, and buy-in across the various stakeholder groups featured here who collectively believe that the Project should continue for the foreseeable future in order to consolidate, innovate and accelerate progress and learning to date. The findings of this report also underline that SWM is a clear and obvious solution to helping the CoE and dioceses achieve their strategic aims to make the Church ‘younger and more diverse’ and to enable the growth of a ‘mixed ecology’.

## **Recommendations**

The report highlights a number of issues that the CoE institutions, dioceses and the wider sport and wellbeing ministry sector should consider to successfully move forward. These include:

### ***Dioceses***

We suggest that where dioceses wish to successfully commit, develop and implement SWM strategically, they should:

1. Identify (annually) a series of specific priorities in terms of next steps, directly related to their key learning to date or current SWM already being delivered locally;
2. Consider diocesan funding over at least six (ideally 10) years to make a significant impact on developing SWM;



3. Create a funded SWM Lead post (fractional or full-time) to ensure that SWM is structurally incorporated into the diocesan organisational structure to strategically deliver, oversee and monitor related activities and create good partnerships;
4. Support and fund paid and trained SWM ministers to deliver local activities;
5. Explore public or other funding for SWM activities to provide additional revenue to support delivery and reach;
6. Commit to map the supply, and if possible, demand for sport and wellbeing activity and ministry locally, and establish partnerships with other sport and wellbeing providers and local/regional sporting, third-sector organisations (both faith-based and secular) to build trust and to develop stronger, more successful delivery approaches including critical partnership working with schools.

### ***How is this taken further forward***

We suggest the need to urgently consider how this SWM work can be further developed in a coordinated manner nationally and through what means this can be done most effectively in order to:

7. Prioritise strategic leadership thereby providing relevant and appropriate leadership expertise across dioceses and CoE support organisations to curate the strategic development of SWM in the UK and beyond (i.e., set objectives and agree implementation plans), to tackle common interests and challenges, undertake stakeholder management (i.e., develop connections and influence) with organisations (including CoE bodies, public bodies, funders, government, parachurch organisations, training and theological colleges, and the community sport and physical activity sector) to shape the SWM offer and develop this through a place-based approach;
8. Consider how the work both within and outside of CoE institutions and organisations, and with (and across) committed SWM dioceses, alongside relevant experts can be coordinated and further developed;
9. Consider the development of an action plan for supporting and developing Phase Two of the Learning Community;
10. Consider the benefits of strategic cooperation and collaboration across SWM dioceses and the wider landscape (including Ridley Hall and other training colleges and academic institutions). Key areas for strategic collaboration include:

- (i) the establishment of strategic partnerships with parachurch and secular sporting agencies and organisations;
- (ii) the development of the theological basis upon which SWM operates (particularly in relation to missional approach, theories of change, SWM in society and church growth) alongside sector experts (both practitioner and academic) and national and international theological and ordination training colleges;
- (iii) the explicit articulation of faith journeys and pathways (especially the connection between SWM programme delivery and church engagement);
- (iv) the broader (and longer-term) transitional processes surrounding SWM and the establishment of new worshipping communities.
- (v) the development of thinking around the education and training of SWM staff (including volunteers); relationship building with local communities and community organisations, the local church, parachurch organisations and secular sports agencies.

11. Consider creating or facilitating diocesan and sector-wide solutions and practical support for dioceses, deaneries and parishes to galvanise SWM in the CoE and beyond.

Key areas to include:

- (i) developing and communicating a clear, strong and united SWM narrative based on the growing evidence base, research and stories to SWM dioceses, both within the CoE (and all its institutions) and externally including funders and policy makers;
- (ii) addressing workforce expansion and further professional development (and professionalization) for SWM nationally and beyond by working with theological and ordination training colleges, to equip and train SWM leaders and other diocesan staff (including project managers) around issues such as: monitoring and evaluation (both internal and external), partnership working, business development, marketing, and fundraising/grant bidding;
- (iii) exploring viable funding options, creating funding expertise (including training/equipping in and the adoption of a focused approach to grant bidding especially in relation to resource and facility development), and multi-level frameworks to support fundraising from Trusts and Foundations, public and

CoE diocesan funds, and creating social enterprise models at parish, diocesan and national level;

- (iv) creating standardized monitoring and evaluation frameworks and developing data collection methods and tools;
- (v) developing marketing, advertising and broader communications strategies around SWM;
- (vi) identifying key partners and stakeholders at local and regional levels to drive collaboration and support dioceses to build relationships;
- (vii) developing and creating sustainable diocesan and parish frameworks with replicable SWM models, at different levels and with different approaches, which include faith pathways, new worshipping communities and ‘fresh expressions’.

12. Host an annual national conference to capacity build across all dioceses, share best practice, network and inspire through a shared strategic vision for SWM across the CoE and beyond;

#### ***National Sport and Wellbeing Project Learning Community (Phase Two)***

13. We suggest that there should be a programme of continued shared learning and knowledge exchange via the NSWP Learning Community forum, widening both the level of participants to include Bishops and senior diocesan staff, and the number of dioceses involved;

14. We suggest that the NSWP Learning Community should continue to explore a clear framework and programme of professional development for the cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge exchange and peer learning across the pilot dioceses and other dioceses both within and outside of the Learning Community. Following on from its work during Phase One, the Learning Community should have three broad aims:

- (i) the continuation and/or development of SWM programme delivery to meet demand and/or attract new participant groups aligned to the CoE Vision and Strategy and Diocesan Strategic Plans;
- (ii) expanding vision casting and increasing the profile of SWM in order to persuade both diocesan staff and parishioners of SWM’s missional and material benefits;

- (iii) the development of a common understanding of the key ingredients required (set out above) for the successful development of SWM in a diocese through sharing experiences, agreed frameworks and outside expert advice:

#### ***Archbishops' Council***

- 15. We suggest that Archbishops' Council considers this report and the ongoing progress of dioceses strategically developing SWM. That it notes the current impact SWM has and its potential in the future to help deliver the CoE Vision and Strategy and its own objectives;
- 16. We suggest that the Council ensures that SWM is actively supported and is included in continued conversations with other areas of ministry and mission including children and young people, underrepresented groups in the church, and its role as route to the development of a 'mixed ecology';
- 17. We also suggest that the Council considers the urgent need to enhance and promote workforce development across the sports ministry sector and within the youth worker sector, with the aim of contributing to the growth of a 'younger and more diverse' church.

#### ***House of Bishops/General Synod***

- 18. We suggest that the House of Bishops/General Synod consider this report and the ongoing progress of dioceses in strategically developing SWM, in order to learn, understand and actively support how SWM might help dioceses and parishes to be 'younger and more diverse' and to develop a 'mixed ecology' through diocesan strategic plans.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a piece of independent research into the Church of England's National Sport and Wellbeing Project (NSWP) which ran between June 2020-June 2023, and which was funded by the Laing Trust and the Church of England (CoE).<sup>2</sup> Drawing on primary and secondary data sources, it provides an analysis of the work of the Project and its contribution to sport and wellbeing ministry in eight 'pilot' dioceses in England. A central aim of the report is to map the development of these dioceses with regard to sport and wellbeing ministry in line with the objectives of the NSWP, and to inform direction of travel beyond its duration. In turn, the report presents the views and experiences of key stakeholders involved in the Project, whilst at the same time considering the social, cultural and institutional landscape across which its related activities took place. Building upon previous research (see, for example, Balcar and Parker, 2022), the report seeks to shed light on the role of faith-based (Christian) organisations in contemporary social life and their potential contribution to broader sport and wellbeing agendas. In this sense, it aims to add to the increasing momentum around sport/faith initiatives in the UK, and to create a stronger evidence base and rationale for work in this area.

Developing an evidence base of this nature is critical to the establishment of such initiatives and for building strategic partnerships, securing funding, and influencing the future success of sport and wellbeing ministry across the Church of England. It also serves to provide insight about how best to embed sport and wellbeing ministry into diocesan culture. The report highlights some of the challenges faced by individuals and organisations wishing to promote sport and wellbeing ministry in faith-based contexts, in particular, the lack of coherence around sport and wellbeing ministry at the national church and diocesan level, the lack of funding to support related ventures, and the competing demands which both church and parachurch organisations face amid the vagaries of contemporary social life.

As a frontline missional venture, sports ministry has significant reach across the UK and beyond. Indeed, at the global level, the sports ministry sector (including sports chaplaincy) has witnessed exponential growth over the past four decades (see Watson and Parker, 2014). Whilst

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some of this work continues to take place amid traditional sporting locales (i.e., grassroots, amateur, and elite sport), a major part of this growth has seen the emergence of sports ministry organisations which focus their attention on wider notions of relationship building where, in returning to their roots as a bridge-builder to the unchurched, these organisations intentionally use sport as a vehicle for mission and outreach, and as an opportunity for connection across communities (see McLeod, 2022). As a consequence, historical pre-occupations with the promotion of traditional sporting pastimes have been superseded by a much broader approach which has seen notions of physical activity and wellbeing come to the fore. This has allowed many sports ministry organisations to re-position themselves in terms of the range of activities they offer, the demographic groups which they serve, and the wider agendas which they are able to tap into (i.e., government agendas around mental health and wellbeing). The NSWP was the first initiative of its kind to integrate sport and wellbeing into the life of dioceses and at a strategic level, to move beyond one-off stand-alone local parish approaches. This report seeks to show how the Project served to promote broader sport and wellbeing agendas via formal links with the eight pilot dioceses and informal connections with a variety of church and parachurch organisations. Featuring empirical data from sources both within and outside of the Anglican church, the report presents findings on the extent to which the NSWP impacted the profile of sport and wellbeing ministry within the church and beyond, whilst at the same time investigating the perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders towards the overall effectiveness of its various outputs.

As an industry, sport has grown exponentially in recent years becoming a major economic force in the UK, yet it has not always served as a source of economic gain, neither has it flourished in solely secular environments. It has been well documented, for example, that sporting pastimes were a staple of Victorian society especially in churches and their schools, and in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century youth work (see, for example, Mangan, 1981; Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002; Parry et al., 2007; Parker and Weir, 2012). A key aspect of the early development of modern sport in Britain was the way in which its newly codified forms served an integrative role amidst the social tensions of industrialization (Holt, 1991). Since that time assumptions surrounding the integrative value of sport have often featured as a central facet of state policy where issues of religious difference have been prevalent (see, for example, Kuper, 1994; Sugden and Bairner, 1993). The subsequent growth of public, voluntary and commercial sport in an increasingly secular(ized) society has been accompanied by a decline and aging among church congregations, many of which see relatively little value in sport and physical activity.

This would seem to represent something of a missed opportunity given that 46.8% (3.3 million) of children and young people and 63.3% (28.6 million) of adults are meeting the current Chief Medical Officer guidelines for taking part in sport and physical activity (see Sport England, 2019, 2020). In contrast, estimates suggest that only around 1.7% of the population of England attend a Church of England Worshipping Community once per month.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1997 government has sought to use sport to service a variety of wider social outcomes, i.e., to aid regeneration, facilitate lifelong learning, improve health, reduce violent crime, and, perhaps most significantly, to facilitate social cohesion (see, for example, HM Government, 2015). Whilst faith groups have not played a major role in such schemes to date, more recently a number of UK-based church organisations have attested that churches are showing renewed interest in sport as a vehicle for involving and socialising both young and old, all of which sits comfortably with contemporary government objectives relating to the relationship between sport, wellbeing and public health. In turn para-church organisations have worked with local authorities and/or other partners to convert premises for sport and physical activity has been increasingly promoted by church-based outreach workers (i.e. volunteers and full-time youth/community personnel).

Further evidence of the growing momentum around sport as a form of outreach and ministry is the Church of England's NSWP initiative. Viewing sport and wellbeing as central to its wider missional strategy (i.e., previous vision to be a church for 'all people in every place'), this venture aimed to locate the Church as a legitimate contributor to wider debates (faith-based and secular) in this area whilst, at the same time, endorsing sport as a key component of diocesan plans for mission, evangelism and church planting. This began under the Church of England's 'Evangelism and Discipleship' Team but then worked with the Vision and Strategy Team. The central aim of the NSWP was to embed and use sport and wellbeing ministry as a significant evangelistic tool/mechanism (at national, diocesan and parish level), so that sport and wellbeing is not seen as a marginal activity but key to the development of diocesan mission strategies.

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<sup>3</sup> The total Worshipping Community in 2022 was 984,000 (which is still recovering post-pandemic. This includes 806,000 adults and 177,00 children and young people. For further insight see: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/statisticsformission2022.pdf>

The Project set up and development was guided by an informal Advisory Board made up of people with varying expertise in this area. <sup>4</sup> The role of this group was to advise, support and offer expertise on how sport and wellbeing might be developed as a serious area for the Church's mission – both evangelism and community engagement. It set out a seven point plan from 2020-2023 which included: advising and supporting the National Sport and Wellbeing Project Lead (Rev. Natalie Andrews) in her role driving the initial seven, then eight, pilot dioceses programme in embedding and delivering a measured sports and wellbeing ministry (SWM) in a coherent and resourced diocesan mission strategy; creating successful models of engagement based on evidence from the dioceses that could be replicated across the whole church; and developing suitable sports and wellbeing ministry training and leadership pathways for both ordained and lay sports ministry leaders, working with Ridley Hall, Cambridge and other Christian sports organisations. More broadly, it was intended that the Project would also expand the outward-facing profile of the Church, develop 'younger' congregations, develop links with schools through outreach activities, and stimulate innovative ways of mission and evangelism in local communities. The appointment of the National Sport and Wellbeing Project Lead, to take on day to day management and leadership of the project, from within the CoE, was seen as key to moving the SWM vision forward.

These kinds of initiatives provide evidence of the use of sport as a vehicle through which religious values and practices might be promoted and resulting discussions have brought to the surface the amount of sport and wellbeing ministry and outreach that is on-going in the UK. However, there is little available evidence of the extent, strength, demographics, meaning, or social value of sporting activities in faith-based organisations. Likewise, faith agencies and forums in various geographical regions cover all kinds of social welfare and arts work, but often make little, if any, mention of sport, health, wellbeing and/or physical activity, save occasional references to their role in youth work, this despite government encouragements regarding school sport and community clubs and the establishment of links to promote the multiple benefits of such initiatives. This scenario is of both theological and theoretical interest given current government attempts to involve faith movements in social inclusion, cohesion and the regeneration of communities, and evidence is required to assess which networks and

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<sup>4</sup> The Advisory Group was: Dave Male (CoE), Daphne Clifton, Simon Martle (Laing Foundation), Guy Price, Hil Sewell, Mark Balcar, Prof. Andrew Parker (Assoc. Ridley Hall), Fiona Green (Ridley Hall) and Robin Barden (Ridley Hall).



methods of sport and wellbeing ministry are effective in achieving their desired outcomes. By presenting an overview of the activities of the Church of England NSW this report aims to contribute to this evidence base.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The research sought to bring together information from a broad range of sources both from within the Church of England and from parachurch sports ministry organisations. These sources provided insight into the extent to which the main objectives of the NSWP had been understood and adopted by those with decision-making responsibilities in this area.

The research commenced in November 2022 and ran until May 2023 and was funded by the Church of England. Comprising a mixed methods research design, the central aim of the research was to investigate the scope and reach of the NSWP and its longer-term legacy. The desk-based element of the research comprised a mixture of policy and secondary-source analysis, whilst the empirical element focused on qualitative one-to-one, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire surveys. Empirical data was collected with four ‘stakeholder’ groups, (i) Sport and Wellbeing (diocesan) Leads (n=8), (ii) senior diocesan staff (n=14), (iii) strategic stakeholders (n=6), and (iv) parachurch leaders (n=6). In terms of the data collection timeline, a questionnaire survey was initially sent to Sport and Wellbeing Leads and this was accompanied by follow up interviews. In turn, interviews were conducted with senior diocesan staff and strategic stakeholders. The former were all in full-time employment with their respective dioceses. The strategic stakeholder cohort was drawn from a sample of church and non-church leaders from across the UK. Some had connections to local and national sports ministry organisations and/or had experience of working with these organisations. Our fourth stakeholder group comprised representatives from UK parachurch organisations. Data collection with this group took place via a questionnaire survey which was sent to the leaders of six nationally recognised parachurch organisations, all of which have a track record and presence in sport and/or wellbeing (Ambassadors Football GB, Christians in Sport, KICK, Salvation Army, Scripture Union, Sports Chaplaincy UK). Our aim was to gain feedback on the perceived impact of the NSWP on each of these organisations.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the distribution of questionnaires and the carrying out of interviews, an information sheet about the nature of the research was sent to all respondents and consents were obtained either in written and/or oral form. Interview discussions with Sport and Wellbeing Leads were based upon the information which they submitted in response to the previously distributed

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<sup>5</sup> In the interests of transparency, the authors wish to declare their involvement in initial discussions concerning the inception of the NSWP and in the Project’s Advisory Board.

questionnaire survey which was used as a basis for more in-depth discussion about their host diocese/organisation. A total of 28 interviews were carried out via telephone or virtually (Zoom or Microsoft Teams) and these lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, during which time space was provided for respondents to share any supplementary information. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed.

Qualitative data was analysed using a grounded theory approach whereby respondent interpretations of their organisational experiences were explored in detail as were the meanings which they attached to these experiences (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Bryman, 2016). Questioning style during interview was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2011; Robson and McCarten, 2016). Grounded theory methodology allows for the systematic analysis of data through a process of open, axial, and selective coding, and the formation of a conceptual narrative that explains the experiences of participants from their perspective (Charmaz, 2014). Data were coded, managed, and organised manually and were subsequently analysed in four stages (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). First, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was individually coded and indexed allowing the different aspects of respondent experience to be captured. Third, these experiences were clustered and inductively rationalized into several over-arching topics which broadly aligned with the structure of the initial questionnaire. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into generic themes according to which the qualitative data are presented. The empirical data collection process was selective in order to provide a cross-sectional analysis of current activity in the pilot dioceses. In turn, the research provides a snapshot of the overall impact of the NSWP alongside key learning and insights. The findings are located and contextualized against existing literature in the field, and it is to this that we now turn.

### 3. THE SPORT AND WELLBEING MINISTRY CONTEXT

#### 3.1 Sports and wellbeing ministry in the UK

Connections between the sacred and sport have long since been acknowledged and recent years have witnessed an increasing amount of discussion and debate around the sport-religion interface.<sup>6</sup> In turn, a significant body of related scholarly work has emerged mapping these connections across a range of geographical and religious landscapes (see, for example, Watson and Parker, 2013, 2014; Parker et al., 2016; Adogame et al., 2017; Hemmings et al., 2019; Hoven et al, 2019).<sup>7</sup> These accounts provide useful insight into the different ways in which sport (and physical activity) has been appropriated by specific belief systems and the challenges and responses that such practices have encountered both in sporting and religious locales.

During the same period, the UK Government has sought to promote sport as a central means by which to aid regeneration, facilitate lifelong learning, improve health, reduce violent crime, and, perhaps most significantly, to facilitate social cohesion (see, for example, HM Government, 2015). To date, faith groups have played a relatively minor role in such schemes. More recently, however, a number of church-based organisations have attested that churches are demonstrating renewed interest in sport as a vehicle for involving and socialising people of varying ages, all of which sits comfortably with long-standing Government objectives around sport, physical activity and public health. For example, in the case of Christian organisations such as KICK (formerly Kick London), Ambassadors Football GB, Scripture Union, and Sportily,<sup>8</sup> sport is used as an evangelistic tool.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, for organisations such as Christians in Sport, it can be viewed as equipping people for ministry and mission, with Christian sports players encouraged to ‘pray’ for their team-mates, ‘play’ in ways that honour God, and ‘say’ something of the good news of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> In turn, Sports Chaplaincy UK utilise a Christian faith platform to provide spiritual and pastoral care across a range of sports from

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<sup>6</sup> The word ‘sport’ is used here in its widest sense in accordance with the definition provided by The Council of Europe Charter on Sport: “Sport means all forms of physical activity, which through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels” (see: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/european-sports-charter>).

<sup>7</sup> For further insight see: Parker et al. (2019), Watson and Parker (2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2022), Twietmeyer et al. (2018), Watson et al. (2020), Parker and Watson (2022).

<sup>8</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the work of Sportily, see Balcar and Parker (2022).

<sup>9</sup> Alongside these larger organisations are a number of smaller providers many of which identify with the UK Sports Ministries Network (see: <http://uksportsministries.org/>). For a recent example of how sports ministry can impact secular institutions see The Unity of Faiths Foundation (2019).

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.christiansinsport.org.uk/>

grass roots to elite level (see Chawner, 2009; Boyers, 2016).<sup>11</sup> Between them, these organisations cover a plethora of ministerial and missional objectives and serve a wide range of sporting personnel (i.e., participants, spectators/fans, officials, and coaches) of all ages. A number of churches have worked with local authorities and/or other partners to convert some of their premises for sport. Such initiatives have allowed key agencies to come together to discuss the potential opportunities in the area of sport and faith. Resulting discussions have also brought to the surface the amount of sports ministry and outreach that is on-going in the UK. However, information concerning the extent, strength, demographics, meaning, or social value of sporting activities in churches of any denomination is sparse. Likewise, knowledge of the role of sport in faith-based initiatives is even less well documented (Balcar and Parker, 2022).

Despite this absence, sports ministry has continued to evolve, and the last decade has witnessed several significant developments which have begun to influence conventional working practices in the sector. A key part of this has been the way in which traditional conceptions of ‘sports ministry’ have been replaced by wider notions of ‘sport and wellbeing ministry’ which incorporates a much broader base of community intervention. This altogether more inclusive vision for sports ministry - encompassing sporting activity for all with fun at its core - has created a new foundation from which to develop and recalibrate the scope and remit of sports ministry per se. This has coincided with national policymakers piloting appropriately designed community sporting activity provision as an effective solution to help increase the nation’s activity levels and to tackle a wide range of social issues including loneliness, mental health, holiday hunger, community integration and more general levels of health and wellbeing. In turn, this has highlighted a potentially significant, theologically based, mission field for the church and created an exciting new drive to further develop and refresh sports and wellbeing ministry nationally (see, for example, Cameron and Balcar, 2018).

### **3.2 The Church of England National Sport and Wellbeing Project (NSWP)<sup>12</sup>**

Further evidence of the growing momentum around sport and wellbeing ministry was provided by the establishment of the Church of England’s National Sport and Wellbeing Project

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<sup>11</sup> For specific examples of how chaplaincy takes place in elite sports settings see: Gamble et al. (2013), Roe and Parker (2016), King et al. (2020), Fleming and Parker (2022), Daniels and Parker (2023) and Whitmore and Parker (2020, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> This section derives from the earlier work of Parker et al. (2021).

(NSWP). Viewing sport and wellbeing as central to its wider missional strategy (i.e., to be a church for ‘all people in every place’), this venture aimed to locate the Church as a legitimate contributor to wider debates (faith-based and secular) in this area whilst, at the same time, promoting sport as a key component of diocesan plans for mission, evangelism and church planting. Launched in February 2020, alongside the appointment of a designated Bishop for Sport, a National Sport and Wellbeing Project Lead, and the selection of seven dioceses as ‘pilot’ implementation sites, the initiative operated under the auspices of the Church of England’s broader Vision and Strategy<sup>13</sup> in line with the following key objectives: (i) Diocesan – the 7 Pilot Dioceses to embed a developed sport and wellbeing strategy within their diocesan strategy to engage the church, reach communities and transform the nation - by June 2023 (*Lag Measure*); and (ii) National – to be able to offer other dioceses interested in developing sport and wellbeing ministry learning from the pilot dioceses to enable them to engage the church, reach communities and transform the nation – by June 2023 (*Lag Measure*).

Alongside these key objectives, the Advisory Board’s ambition was to: (i) to expand the outward facing profile of the Church by connecting with individuals and communities which prove hard to reach (with the potential of long-term growth for existing and new congregations); (ii) to see the growth and development of younger congregations (given that sport offers the potential to bring churches into contact with more young people); (iii) to develop an integrated schools outreach programme through Physical Education (PE) and Religious Education (RE) via primary schools as part of the Church of England’s *Growing Faith* initiative;<sup>14</sup> (iv) to create innovative ways of mission and evangelism by meeting the needs of local communities (e.g., mental health, physical health, loneliness, youth violence, etc.) through sport and physical activity; and (v) to create a pipeline of trained leaders in sport/wellbeing to ensure the long-term sustainability of work in this area.<sup>15</sup> In terms of society

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<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>

<sup>14</sup> For further information see: ‘Growing Faith’ in young people (<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/general-synod-commends-resources-help-families-pray-home>). The ‘Sport and Wellbeing’ National Project Officer role is a three-year, full-time position (2020-2023) funded by the Laing Trust (<https://www.laingfamilytrusts.org.uk/>). The Bishop of Derby, the Rt Revd Libby Lane, was announced as the newly designated lead Bishop for Sport in February 2020 taking over from the previous incumbent Bishop Tony Porter (Bishop of Sherwood, Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham).

<sup>15</sup> The initiative was originally conceived in September 2019 alongside the establishment of a project Advisory Group. The membership of this group was formalised in February 2020 and Chaired by Revd Canon Dave Male, then Director of the Church of England’s Evangelism and Discipleship Team. The Advisory Board was disbanded in April 2023 when the NSWP was transitioned (and formally incorporated) into the work of the Diocese of Gloucester under the auspices of Sportily. The training and equipping of sports ministry leaders is serviced via a suite of courses at Ridley Hall theological college, Cambridge, UK. The eight ‘pilot’ dioceses are:

at large, it is widely accepted that sport can serve as a transformational tool with the potential to change individual lives and communities (see Morgan and Parker, 2017, 2022, 2023; Morgan et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Parker et al., 2019). By the same token, the Church of England recognises that these transformational processes can be harnessed and mobilised within the context of the sport/faith relationship.

With funding from The Laing Trust and the Archbishops Council, Rev Natalie Andrews was appointed as the Sport and Wellbeing Project Officer for three years from June 2020. This role fell under the auspices of the Evangelism and Discipleship Team, supported by its shared resources, and reporting to the Director. The appointment was important for several reasons including providing a central point of contact for SWM within the CoE, having a sole resource to deliver the Eight Pilot Diocese Project and to do this within the context of the team's wider work by understanding and creating vital links with other CoE funded ministry and mission approaches, and their links to dioceses. It was also critical to recruit to this post for at least three years to provide stability to the project and to build the necessary relationships and approach to create a firm foundation for SWM.

Of course, at one level, connections between sport and the Church are nothing new. It is widely acknowledged, for example, that Britain was a central player in the establishment of the sport/Christianity relationship during the Victorian era via the 'muscular Christian' ethos (see, for example, Collins and Parker, 2010; Lupson, 2006; Parker and Weir, 2012; Parker et al., 2019). How then, we might ask, do more recent developments compare? One of the ways in which the work currently being undertaken by the Church of England differs from that of the nineteenth century muscular Christians is that it comprises a national strategy intentionally aimed at all ages and all socio-economic groups whilst recognising that sport is an effective way of engaging young people with wider faith narratives (see Graveling, Collins and Parker, 2014). To this end, although part of the Church of England's work for the common good, sports ministers are primarily seen as a way of reaching out to those who have never before attended church through a shared passion and interest. In contrast, much of the work of the Victorians around sport had its roots in the English public schools and was part of wider debates around social stability (Erdozain, 2010; Parker and Watson, 2013, 2017b).

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Gloucester, Norwich, Birmingham, London (Kensington Area), Blackburn, Guilford, Ely and Rochester (see: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/church-england-backs-sports-ministry>)

In terms of co-ordinated scope and reach, it would be fair to say that sports ministry has made considerable progress since these pioneering years. Yet, vestiges of this era remain and present-day initiatives face enduring barriers. An on-going challenge is the way which a focus on sport is often perceived as being in opposition to the church diverting people away from Sunday morning services.<sup>16</sup> This has certainly become more of an issue since the transition of youth sport away from Saturday to Sunday competition in the 1990s. Indeed, integral to any such discussion is the decline in church attendance in post-war Britain. Common estimates suggest that in the England only around 3% of the population attend a church service each month, this against an overall drop of 6% in UK church membership between 2005 and 2010 (Davie, 2013; Graham, 2013). However, more recent evidence indicates that levels of church attendance and participation are increasing (see, for example, Church of England, 2022) and that churchgoing has stabilized of late, this despite the disruption of the COVID pandemic. Research conducted by the Bible Society in 2018 and 2022 found that around 10% of the population of England and Wales attend church at least monthly, with 7% attending weekly.<sup>17</sup>

Amidst these figures, youth engagement is often seen as particularly difficult to maintain. Hence, ministry-based organisations routinely attempt to find new ways to attract young people (Smith and Walton, 2012; Goodhew, Roberts and Vollard, 2012; Male and Weston, 2019; Diocese of London, 2020). The facilitation or provision of sport and physical activity is one way in which the Church may be proactively involved in the lives of a significant proportion of the population. Such activity will lead some people to their local parish church however for the Church of England initiative to be successful new and creative forms of worship will need to be developed.

Another explicit difference between historic and present day collaborations between sport and the church is the popularity of sport as a social past-time. Wider statistics on sporting

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<sup>16</sup> In addition, it is acknowledged that in more recent times there has been suspicion of the ‘body’ in Christian circles and that the integrative nature of sport and wellbeing as an embodied spirituality may raise questions for some (see, for example, Gooder, 2016 and Bingham, 2021). It is also acknowledged that, in the UK at least, there have long been questions over the relevance of sport and physical activity in churches given the alleged potential of sport-based activities to ‘detract’ from the spiritual focus and development of those following the Christian life (see Erdozain, 2010; McLeod, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> In association with YouGov, the Bible Society conducted an online survey of 19,101 adults in England and Wales in October and November 2018. The same online survey was administered in May 2022 with a sample of 3,845 adults in England and Wales, and in October 2022 with a sample of 3,035 adults in England and Wales. For further information on these research findings see: <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/census-results-religion-is-still-mainstream/>



participation bear testament to this. In June 2017, Sport England reported that 16 million adults in the UK were playing sport weekly in comparison to fewer than one million attending Anglican churches weekly. Recent figures from Sport England's (2020) *Active Lives Adult Survey* show that six in 10 adults (28.6 million people – 63.3% of the 16+ population in England) are 'active'. This means that they meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines by undertaking at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity each week. Those regularly playing sport are also the groups which the Church in general has struggled to meaningfully engage with: 37.5% of the BAME community are playing sport weekly, 55% of 16-25-year olds take part in one sports session weekly (compared to 32% of older adults 26+), 1.6 million disabled people play sport weekly, 46.8% (3.3 million) of children and young people (aged 5-16) are meeting the new Chief Medical Officer guidelines of taking part in sport and physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more every day (Sport England, 2019).<sup>18 19</sup>

How then does the Church of England intend to embrace sport as a modern-day mission field? Certainly, models of good practice already exist. Dioceses such as London, Norwich and Gloucester have developed work in this area in recent years and several national parachurch organisations with an interest in sports ministry (including Christians in Sport, Sports Chaplaincy UK, Kick, Ambassadors Football GB and Scripture Union) have expressed a desire to partner with dioceses in order to share expertise and experience. As noted above, these parachurch organisations already oversee numerous sports-based programmes that allow the wider church community to connect with different parts of society through, for example: (i) schools (via PE and 'Active' RE lessons, delivered through cross-curricular and extra-curricular experiences); (ii) communities (by providing opportunities for sport through one-off/regular

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<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the UK Chief Medical Officers' current guidelines see: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/832868/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832868/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> These figures should be viewed in context. On average, all BAME groups have lower participation rates than the national average. In some communities, ethnicity, religion and gender combine to have an even greater impact upon participation (i.e., 92% of South Asian women do not meet recommended levels of physical activity compared to 55% of all women). In addition, disabled adults are twice as likely as non-disabled adults to be physically inactive (42% vs 21%). Meanwhile, 29.0% (2.1 million) children and young people aged 5-16 do less than an average of 30 minutes per day. A report by Sport England and the Outdoor Industries Association (OIA) in 2015 demonstrated that of the 43.7 million adult population in England, 18.2 million (who were not currently active outdoors) expressed a desire to re-engage in outdoor activity. Age is a key factor in activity levels with longitudinal data showing that as people get older they become less active. However, recent figures from Sport England (2020) suggest that activity levels amongst those in the 75+ age group have increased of late. Physical inactivity remains one of the main causes of disease and disability in England and costs the UK over £7 billion per year. It is estimated that almost 25% of children in England are obese or overweight by the time they start primary school at age five, and this rises to one third by the time they enter secondary schooling at age 11. More recent evidence indicates a more general increase in sedentary behaviour in the UK (see López-Valenciano et al., 2020).

events or summer clubs, through local leagues and competitions and/or by linking with secular sports agencies and providers (sports centres, gyms) in shared space/third space locations such as the village greens, local parks and recreation areas; (iii) churches (by being more explicitly linked to the life of the church including sports activities, non-residential clubs and holiday clubs,<sup>20</sup> and by supporting and enabling people involved in local sport to share their faith (church buildings constitute a significant resource by providing a place for sport and well-being); and (iv) new worshipping communities (i.e., there are several fresh expressions and other forms of church beginning to operate around sport such as ‘Sweaty Church’.<sup>21</sup>

By working in close collaboration with others, the NSWP aimed to bring together the resources of dioceses and the expertise of sporting organisations (faith-based and secular). This required: (i) the mainstreaming of sport in diocesan and local church strategies (i.e., moving from one-off or stand-alone sports projects, pockets of enthusiasm and/or individual agendas to sport as an important strategic component of diocesan mission thereby facilitating reach and Kingdom impact; (ii) modelling and evaluating good strategy and practice (i.e., dioceses, churches and sports organisations working in close cooperation to share learning, good practice and adoptable and adaptable methods and models through a system of ‘learning communities’; (iii) multiplication of best practice (thereby extending the reach of the church into secular sporting communities; and (iv) the effective resourcing of this work to ensure growth, development and future sustainability.

Of course, all of this aligns well with the Church of England’s wider vision and strategy which was launched in 2020 and which encapsulates the calling to be a Christ-centred and Jesus-shaped church that is simpler, humbler, and bolder. This vision identifies three strategic priorities for the Church around being a church of: (i) missionary disciples, (ii) where the mixed ecology of many forms of church are the norm, and (iii) which is younger and more diverse. How this is lived out, through mission and ministry, is up to local churches and dioceses to develop as they engage with the vision and strategy work.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that a well-developed sport and wellbeing ministry has the potential to offer the church a strong

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<sup>20</sup> See for example: the Sports Factory, St Thomas, Norwich, <http://www.stn.org.uk/sport/> or Balanced Life in London <http://www.stjohnshoxton.org.uk/transform-hoxton/balancedlife/> or PSALMS in Gloucestershire <https://psalms.uk.net/>

<sup>21</sup> For more on the potential contribution of faith-based organisations to wider community life, see: November (2014). See also: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2018).

<sup>22</sup> See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>

pathway to help attain its strategic aims especially in a more diverse expression of church life, (i.e., a ‘mixed ecology’ including new worshipping communities and fresh expressions working alongside the parish system) and to be ‘younger and more diverse’.

### **3.3 Research into sport and wellbeing ministry**

The launch of the NSWP was encouraging not least because it appeared to mark something of a sea-change in the Church of England’s commitment to the sport and wellbeing agenda. In turn, it marked a clear intention to bring greater transparency to the way in which sports ministry processes and practices were monitored and evaluated both at the local and national level, an area that remains under-developed. To date, there has been relatively little empirical research carried out into the effectiveness of sports ministry (including sports chaplaincy) organisations in the UK and this is one way in which the sector has differed markedly from wider secular work around sport for development. That said, three reports have been produced in recent years which provide insight into the sport/Christianity interface in the UK.

The first of these was commissioned by the Diocese of London (DoL) in 2015 as part of their Capital Vision 2020 initiative (see Crabbe et al., 2015). Framed around the Church in London’s commitment to better meet the needs of local communities in relation to poverty, disadvantage, health, wellbeing and integration, a key priority for the Capital Vision initiative was to “engage more deeply with sport and the creative arts to reach new people and places by opening up church buildings, strengthening the links between schools and their local community and getting more young people involved in the local Christian community” (Crabbe et al., 2015: 3). Commissioned by the DoL in collaboration with Sport England, the overall aim of the report was to “enhance understandings of the potential assets of the Church for sport in terms of places, opportunities and community reach” (Sport England, 2015). The central objectives were three-fold: (i) to conduct an audit of the stock of places and opportunities for sport provided by churches in London; (ii) to review the reach of churches within their local communities to identify which audiences they were engaged with; and (iii) to assess the potential for delivering more sport through Diocese of London premises and activity.

Based on a mixed methods design, the resulting research was carried out via a parish survey of all known contacts responsible for church facilities and sporting provision across the Diocese. All church schools were also surveyed. In addition, field visits and interviews were conducted

at 10 geographical locations.<sup>23</sup> From the quantitative and qualitative data gleaned, key findings suggested that across DoL: 40,000-50,000 individuals attended church or church school hosted/led sports sessions each week (average attendance 45,805); that people from age groups across the life spectrum (especially older people) took part in related activities, and that groups who had traditionally proved difficult to reach felt comfortable being active in church environments. At a more detailed level, findings revealed that: (i) there was considerable potential and enthusiasm from churches for the expansion of the dioceses' sporting offer and a new community based sports ministry; (ii) 46% of schools indicated that they would be interested in working with a local church to strengthen the links between schools and churches; (iii) a wide range of community engagement strategies (including a high proportion of third party deliverers) were good at attracting diverse and non-traditional groups, but the church did little to engage these users; and (iv) there was a positive understanding of the potential benefits of sporting outreach approaches, partnership working and involvement of church volunteers in growing participation. More specifically: 365 church-based facilities were being utilised for sport and physical activity (with provision consisting largely of indoor, hard floor spaces suitable for hall and gym based activities as well as table sports and gentle exercise); 299 churches and church buildings had the potential for use for sport and physical activity; 371 church school based facilities were being utilised for sport and physical activity; and that 640 distinct, regular church-based organised sport and physical activity sessions, 885 church-hosted or church-led sport and physical activity sessions, 245 distinct regular out of church organised sport and physical activity sessions, and 507 distinct regular school-based 'out of school' organised sport and physical activity sessions were currently taking place.

Findings also demonstrated that activity sessions featured above average engagement by girls and women and that intergenerational engagement was commonplace. The research also revealed that there was significant spare capacity at both church and school sites evidencing potential for the future expansion of provision as well as shared use of facilities, and that there was widespread engagement of non-congregational and multi faith groups at church facilities. In terms of how respondents viewed sports ministry per se, only 10% reported that they had any direct experience of running a sports ministry with 22% having used sport as part of any of community engagement activities. Of those that had, 69% reported that it had been

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<sup>23</sup> The church survey generated a 54% response rate (n=347) and the school survey a 29% response rate (n=136).

successful with 13% indicating that they were ‘definitely interested’ in the idea of engaging in such activity in the future, 28% that they were ‘potentially interested’ and 19% that they were ‘mildly interested’. Interestingly, there was a perception amongst respondents of lower than average engagement of black and minority ethnic groups in sporting activities, and findings also suggested that less than 6% of identified church-based or organised sports activities incorporated specific Christian messages. In turn, only a relatively small number of respondents (n=11) were aware of the work of the ‘best known’ UK sports ministry (para-church) organisations (Crabbe et al., 2015: 27). The research concluded by suggesting that there were clear synergies between the DoL and the objectives of Sport England especially given that: (i) the church is physically present in every community through its buildings and volunteers who care and are committed to building community; (ii) has reach and authority enabling it to speak to not only its own people and those in its immediate care but the local community more widely; and (iii) that current activity reached groups who the church want to target, i.e., women and girls, elderly and families. What these findings highlight is that as a pre-cursor to the NSWP, the work undertaken by the Diocese of London through the Capital Vision 2020 initiative can be seen as one of the most significant developments in sport and wellbeing ministry in recent years, clearly demonstrating what might be achieved on relatively limited funding via the adoption of a more strategic and informed approach to sport-faith ventures in supporting diocesan staff, networks and partnerships, and new pilot models.

Following on from this ground-breaking research, Cameron and Balcar (2018) critiqued the reluctance of the church in the UK to champion issues relating to physical activity, health and wellbeing, arguing that a passion and appreciation for physical health should be “a central concern of Christian mission at [a] personal, parish and local community and diocesan level” (p.6). Framed as a development of the findings of Crabbe et al. (2015), the objectives of this work were similarly three-fold: (i) to explore the theological, societal and wider public policy context of physical activity, health and wellbeing; (ii) to begin to scope how the Diocese of London might further engage with physical activity; and (iii) to reflect on how the Diocese might seek to integrate physical activity health and wellbeing into the broader Capital Vision 2020 initiative. By commissioning this second report, the aim of the DoL was “to explore to a unique opportunity to be at the forefront of designing new and desperately needed ways to promote life giving habits of mind, body and spirit”. In turn, by prioritising the sport and physical activity agenda, the Diocese sought to send out “a powerful message that care of the

body is an integral part of Christian living.” (p.7), in the hope that sport and wellbeing ministry would be more readily embraced.

Focusing primarily on secondary source materials, Cameron and Balcar (2018) adopt an altogether more dialogical frame of reference bringing together broader societal issues (i.e., the health implications of physical inactivity), government policy agendas, and theological reflection, to propose what they see as a ‘new approach’ to the relationship between faith, health and wellbeing whereby the church serves as “a significant force for promoting physical, emotional and spiritual health and healing whilst fulfilling the churches traditional enthusiasm and action to tackle social justice and inequalities.” (p.9). Such engagement, they argue, has benefits both for Christians themselves (in relation to their own lives and ministries) and for their communities (both inside and outside of the church). In addition, the authors offer case study examples of best practice highlighting ways in which parishes might engage with broader health and wellbeing agendas. Addressing the role of the DoL in tackling the issues under consideration, Cameron and Balcar (2018) conclude that in order to facilitate the potential of sport as an effective tool of community engagement and mission, the church must embrace more intentionally the broader physical activity agenda at a personal, parish/community and diocesan/regional level. In turn, they suggest that in order to embed this work across the entirety of its audiences, the church must: (i) raise awareness, knowledge and debate about the body and the creative Christian responses to physical, emotional and social well-being needs; (ii) create a framework for parish and school engagement with relevant models, resources and support; (iii) work with parachurch, government and secular organisations to help us focus more on physical activity health and wellbeing in a broad range of contexts, and (iv) support clergy and laity in pursuing health and wellbeing.

The final piece of research in this empirical trilogy is that of Balcar and Parker (2022) which sought to investigate the role of faith-based (Christian) organisations in contemporary social life and their potential contribution to wider sport and wellbeing agendas. Combining an overview of policy debates around faith and civil society and mainstream sport and wellbeing with a critical analysis of contemporary sports ministry provision by church and para-church organisations, a central aim of this research was to provide an overview of the contemporary landscape within UK sports ministry, and to consider the way in which sports ministry organisations might gain insight from mainstream sport policy and service providers which may, in turn, lead to more strategic thinking across the sector. Moreover, the research sought

to locate sports ministry within wider social and political debates and to consider ways in which work in this area might lead to the establishment of new worshipping communities. Though primarily focused on the development of sport and wellbeing ministry within the Diocese of Gloucester, the wider remit of this work was to explore and collate evidence from relevant best practice in sports ministry to create a stronger evidence-based narrative and rationale for innovative approaches in this area. Funded by Sportily and undertaken between October 2020 – May 2021, the research was again based on a mixed methods design, and carried out via questionnaire survey and follow-up semi-structured interviews with the leaders of a purposive sample of six UK parachurch, sports ministry organisations. Findings present a cross-sectional mapping of existing provision within the sector via case study analysis, and identify the following insights.

First off, Balcar and Parker (2022) note that in recent years all of the respondent organisations had adopted a more ‘inclusive’ vision for sports ministry which encompassed sporting activity for all, and which had created a new foundation from which to develop and re-calibrate the scope and remit of sports ministry per se. This shift had coincided with national policy makers piloting appropriately designed community sporting activity provision as an effective solution to help increase the UK’s activity levels and tackle a wide range of social issues including loneliness, mental health, holiday hunger, community integration, and an overall improvement in the nation’s health and wellbeing. In turn, this appeared to highlight a potentially significant (and theologically based) mission field for the church whilst creating an exciting new drive to further develop and refresh sports and wellbeing ministry at the national level (see also Cameron and Balcar, 2018).

Second, Balcar and Parker (2022) found that whilst the majority of the parachurch organisations which they surveyed had a well-developed ethos and overall approach, monitoring and evaluation was still not seen as a priority and there remained little (other than anecdotal) evidence to support the claims made by some of these organisations in relation to impact, especially the establishment and effectiveness of faith pathways.<sup>24</sup> Balcar and Parker (2022) argue that without such evidence, sports ministry runs the risk of being viewed as

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, such shortfalls in robust ‘evidence’ and evidence-gathering processes are not unusual within faith-based contexts. One of the aims of the NSWP was to heighten awareness and model ‘best practice’ in this area.

lacking in robustness and has little chance of influencing the wider Church of England and mainstream sporting debate despite its contribution to physical activity, health and wellbeing.

Third, findings suggested that sports ministry organisations were largely operating in silos without an overall strategy or framework, that the limitations of this approach were clear, and that with more ‘joined-up thinking’, more could be achieved. In conclusion, Balcar and Parker (2022) argue that whilst sports ministry programmes and initiatives have the potential to make a valuable contribution to the personal and social development of those with whom they engage, the nuances and complexities of contemporary social life require a re-thinking and re-calibration of the way in which this work is designed, implemented and developed. In turn, they argue that whilst there is evidence to support the church’s engagement in the community via sport, there is lack of in-depth theological thinking and insight into the practical application and ground-level development of related initiatives, to ensure participant progression into faith pathways, new worshipping communities and/or traditional church. In summary, Balcar and Parker (2022) argue that although there is much to build upon in terms of existing practice in UK sports ministry, a number of key factors need to be addressed in order to take things forward. These comprise:

- Strategic thinking and planning of the development of sport ministry over the next 10-20 years;
- The successful monitoring and evaluation of sports and wellbeing projects and campaigns;
- The need for evidence-based frameworks for different types of sport and wellbeing ministry models, including the production of organisational theories of change;
- Better understandings of the social outcomes through community sport and partnerships with public bodies to embed this thinking into sport and wellbeing ministry;
- New models of delivery that are sustainable longer term;
- The need for evidence-based frameworks for faith pathways, the role of the local church, and church schools and new worshipping communities;
- Appropriate education, training and continuing professional development for sports ministers and volunteers;
- A framework for using major sports events and other sporting events as a means for initial (marketing) community engagement and mission.



Collectively, the findings of these three reports provide evidence to suggest that not only is there demand and enthusiasm from churches in the UK for the products and services that the sport and wellbeing ministry sector provides, but that at its most basic level, sport and wellbeing ministry is effective. Building upon this body of work, the research findings presented in the present report offer further baseline data on the complexion of sport and wellbeing ministry across the Anglican church. More specifically, they seek to reveal the way in which sport and wellbeing agendas might be developed in and through faith-based locations and activities at the national and diocesan level. The remaining sections of the report are structured around these findings, and we begin with case study analyses of the eight pilot dioceses.

## **4. DIOCESAN CASE STUDIES**

This section presents the findings of our empirical research into the eight dioceses which made up the NSWP pilot cohort: Birmingham, Blackburn, Ely, Gloucester, Guildford, London (Kensington), Norwich and Rochester.<sup>25</sup> We present the detailed profiles of these dioceses in tabulated ‘case study’ form in Appendix A in order to highlight the key aspects of their structure, the content and format of their work, and their developmental journey. These profiles are structured around the nine key themes embedded in the questionnaire survey (and follow up one-to-one interviews) completed by Sport and Wellbeing Leads and, where necessary, these data are supplemented with information from our interview conversations with senior diocesan staff. The majority of the Sport and Wellbeing Leads were in either full-time or part-time employment with their respective dioceses, with the remainder undertaking this role in a voluntary capacity alongside other full-time or part-time work. The nine questionnaire themes comprised: (i) overview of the organisation; (ii) staffing, qualifications and training; (iii) funding revenue and partnerships; (iv) projects and programmes; (v) missional approach; (vi) monitoring and evaluation; (vii) current data/demand; (viii) key learning and insights; and (ix) next steps. In order to contextualise the empirical data on offer in Appendix A, in this section we present a general discussion of the main issues arising under each of the aforementioned headings.

### **4.1. Diocesan overview**

A common theme amongst the featured dioceses was that their motivations for joining the NSWP aligned with a senior diocesan member of staff (usually a Bishop or Archdeacon) who had a passion for, or keen interest in, sport and/or wellbeing ministry (SWM), and were grounded in a more general desire (i.e., amongst one or more clergy) to explore the potential of SWM as a missional activity. In terms of strategic objectives and structures, only one of the eight had a specific strategy for sport (Gloucester), but all were able to make a connection between SWM-related objectives and their wider diocesan strategy and/or vision. Moreover, all had an interest in utilizing SWM in order to (further) engage youth and young adults either through schools work or church-based recreational provision, and this was directly related to the wider Church of England (CoE) strategic objective to make the church ‘younger and more

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<sup>25</sup> The NSWP began with seven pilot dioceses in February 2020. Having secured Church of England Innovation Funding to develop a sport and wellbeing pilot initiative in a local parish, Ely Diocese joined the Project in 2021.

diverse'. At the same time, a number of the pilot dioceses also had a clear sense of the need to engage with and provide for older age groups (London, Rochester and Birmingham) on account of the particular demographic (and geographic) circumstances in which they found themselves. This multi-generational outlook was something that all dioceses alluded to and this was accompanied by an express need to move away from traditional (and often highly restrictive) articulations of 'sports' ministry to wider notions of 'sport and wellbeing' ministry, the former having the potential to be off-putting to those who did not see themselves as 'sporty' or active participants (past, present or future) in traditional sporting pastimes. Indeed, some interviewees reported that in certain circumstances they had begun to remove the word 'sport' from their discussions of SWM (both with colleagues and parishioners) in order to safeguard against such misconceptions. In turn, all dioceses demonstrated the presence of SWM activity at some level in local churches and an understanding of the connection between sport, physical activity and emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Five of the dioceses already offered a broad portfolio of sport and wellbeing activity across a range of age groups (Blackburn Ely, Norwich, London and Gloucester) whilst the other three (Birmingham, Guildford and Rochester) had foundational work in place and aspired to be in this position in the coming years.

#### **4.2 Staffing, qualifications and training**

The vision and development for SWM was evident in all of the pilot dioceses, although this was more evident in some than others. Likewise, each had a designated and identifiable 'Lead' person, five of whom had previous experience of SWM delivery (Blackburn, Ely, Gloucester, London and Norwich). The majority of these individuals fulfilled their SWM Lead role alongside (and in addition to) wider, full-time diocesan duties. Only one SWM Lead was in a full-time, remunerated SWM position (Gloucester). Similarly, in only two of the pilot dioceses was SWM structurally incorporated where related roles and line management arrangements were an integral part of diocesan organisational structure (both of which appeared more corporate in their overall approach), though all eight had ambitions to develop in this area. Hence, six dioceses had no formal posts for SWM, i.e., there were no directly remunerated staff, but a small team of individuals (often including volunteers) delivering, overseeing and monitoring related activity. Where SWM was integrated at the structural level (Ely and Gloucester), qualifications and training took place by way of continuing professional development and this included the engagement of on-the-ground 'sports ministers' on educational courses at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. In addition, at least two of the featured dioceses provided some form of 'in-house' and/or externally validated training/professional

development for full and/or part-time staff and volunteers (Gloucester and Norwich), and between April 2021 and June 2023, all SWM Leads were exposed to a range of informal ‘training and development’ conversations via the NSWLP Learning Community gatherings (at Ridley Hall). A noticeable feature of a number of the pilot dioceses was the absence of bespoke training and/or development around the relationship between spiritual formation, theology and SWM.

#### **4.3 Funding revenue and partnerships**

The activities of the eight pilot dioceses were funded in multiple complex ways. Three had been successful in attracting funding from central CoE funds (Norwich, Ely and Birmingham), including from the Strategic Development Fund (SDF) and the Innovation Fund. One used SDF to expand SWM activities into new areas which have become mostly self-funding (Norwich) and the current SWM work of Birmingham diocese builds on a previous funding award from the Church Commissioners which provided capacity funding to start a Fresh Expression which was earmarked towards sporting activity. Funding for Ely enabled the development of a significant and growing parish based SWM. Some of the pilot dioceses had funded the development of SWM themselves including Gloucester, who prioritised SWM in their diocesan strategy and supported this with a 5-year initial investment of £3m to develop and grow SWM. London diocese provided initial seed-corn funding for their charitable initiative ‘Activate’ (c£20,000 plus team resources) from its Capital Vision 2020 budget and remuneration for a stipendiary vicar, and Blackburn Diocese had provided a small amount (less than £10,000) of funding to support Ambassadors Football GB to develop 10 local football projects.

As noted above, in the other five dioceses, SWM activity and oversight was facilitated by individuals who fulfilled this work alongside and in addition to their wider, diocesan duties. Four dioceses demonstrated an income generation element to SWM as a result of fee charging for programme provision and delivery (Blackburn, Ely, Gloucester and Norwich). There is evidence to suggest that all four adopted ‘discounted’ or ‘below market’ rates in order to attract business and/or to make their services accessible to a wider audience. Several dioceses were benefactors of the School Sport Premium funding provided by the Department of Education having sports ministers employed by local church schools. Two dioceses had successfully attracted other public funding for their activities (London and Gloucester) indicating that this was an under-developed opportunity for SWM and dioceses. Likewise, partnership working appeared relatively under-developed across all dioceses, although five had established links

with schools (Blackburn, Ely, Gloucester, London and Norwich). Three dioceses had experience of working with parachurch organisations in the delivery of SWM (Blackburn, Ely, and Gloucester), and two others made explicit reference to the possibility of doing so in the future (Guildford and London). A number of pilot dioceses had begun to create useful partnerships with local and regional sporting, third-sector and other organisations and most acknowledged that this was an area which they wished to further develop when resources allowed. In the case of London, the reporting of SWM activity was based solely on the work of Activate. One diocese had begun to pro-actively build a relationship with Sport England (Rochester), but none had established relationships with secular sport-for-development organisations (see Balcar and Parker, 2022).

#### **4.4 Projects and programmes**

The case study dioceses covered a plethora of activities for churched and unchurched audiences and communities, all of which contributed in some way to the physical, emotional and/or spiritual health and wellbeing of participants. Blackburn, Ely, Gloucester, Norwich and London were all involved in programming which routinely featured: seasonal holiday clubs/camps, tournaments, community events, social sport, detached sports outreach, 1-1 mentoring, and work with marginalised and/or disengaged groups and regular weekly events are commonplace. As we have seen, some focused their efforts on specific age groups and/or contexts such as young people/schools (i.e., Gloucester), whilst others took a multigenerational approach (i.e., the provision of activities for more than one generation). At present, none appeared to have an intentional strategy around intergenerational work (i.e., activities which would engage more than one generation at the same time) although several dioceses indicated that this was an important aspect of their thinking. This range of programming is typical of organisations across the broader sport-for-development landscape (see Balcar and Parker, 2022; Morgan and Parker, 2023). Despite being under-developed, notions of diversity and inclusivity were well embedded in those dioceses where SWM was integral to everyday operations. However, what appeared to be something of a shortfall in the majority of the featured case studies, was a clear offer around disability sport (cf. Gloucester), and this continues to be the case across the UK sports ministry sector as a whole (save one or two specific examples).

#### 4.5 Missional/Theological approach

All eight dioceses adopted a ‘missional’ outlook to SWM activity, viewing it as a tool to engage unchurched and/or disengaged audiences and communities. However, there were differences in the ways in which this aspect of their work was expressed and none of the pilot dioceses appeared to adopt a specific approach to SWM which aligns with existing theologies of sport (see Ellis, 2014). Rather, broader theological frameworks were used as a backdrop to SWM discussions. For example, Rochester diocese mapped SWM onto a ‘Five Marks of Mission’ framework comprising ‘five Es’: evangelism, everyday faith, engaging communities, equity, and environment, with SWM fitting into the first three of these. Gloucester, on the other hand, used the ‘Seven Sacred Spaces’ framework (see Lings, 2020) as the underpinnings for their missional approach. This provides seven key principles for developing a new worshipping community around sporting and wellbeing: Connect, Eat, Serve, Explore, Encounter, Contribute, Grow, which also helped the diocese to re-envision what a worshipping community might look like beyond a traditional church offer.

Meanwhile, London diocese promoted the theological view that God is as interested in our physical selves as he is our spiritual selves (see Cameron and Balcar, 2018), with the work of Activate being guided by a ministry of presence, and pastoral and spiritual care for the vulnerable in the community. Birmingham diocese adopted a less formal approach where the hope was that SWM would simply provide a space/place where people might encounter God, whilst at the same time facilitating the building of relationships through fun activities with the intention of being open about sharing the good news of Jesus and its impact on everyday life. In terms of how these approaches played out in practice, some dioceses ran explicitly evangelistic events (Ely, Gloucester), whilst others opted for a more incarnational approach<sup>26</sup> (London). As is common across the UK sports ministry sector, the overall aim for all eight dioceses was to build safe, trusting relationships via the various aspects of programme delivery, thereby creating the conditions for on-going engagement and the establishment of faith pathways. Two dioceses demonstrated a heightened level of intentionality around faith journeys and pathways, and the development of new worshipping communities (Ely and

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<sup>26</sup> This approach considers the theology of the incarnation to expand the churches’ capacity and scope for pastoral care and creative ministry beyond simply the spiritual benefits of Jesus’ life and ministry. It asks about the deep and broad implications of Jesus’ physicality and how that affected his earthly life and ministry, and how these may relate to our own experience of physicality and how that shapes our identity, our spiritual life and our ministries.

Gloucester) and this is an area that would appear to necessitate a greater level of strategic investment across the board. Gloucester diocese demonstrated a more explicit approach to faith development which mapped a clear pathway between sports ministry activity and church formation.

#### **4.6 Monitoring and evaluation**

As we have argued elsewhere, UK sports ministry is decidedly under-developed in its monitoring and evaluation practices in comparison to the wider sport-for-development sector, and the eight pilot dioceses were no exception in this respect (see Balcar and Parker, 2022). Because the majority were in the early stages of developing their work in SWM, systems and processes around data collection were few and far between, and where such systems were in place, quality was inconsistent. The upshot of this was that relatively little robust evidence existed in relation to the impact of the work being undertaken. What is clear from these findings and observations is that with increasing resource challenges for dioceses and competing demands between missional activities, there is an urgent need for SWM to better articulate and create a stronger argument for its approaches, outcomes and successes.

SWM Leads are aware of the need to collect demographic data (i.e., age, gender, religion, economic status, etc.) and some had begun to implement formal and/or informal evaluation mechanisms. For example, Gloucester had used an external consultant<sup>27</sup> to help them embed monitoring and evaluation into programme delivery, mapping this against their impact statements and objectives. They had also implemented a strategic data collection plan which included monitoring all SWM activities, collecting demographic data at all sessions, and the production of an Annual Impact Survey with participants and observers where other data, such as that relating to ‘wellbeing’, was collected. Likewise, Activate (London) periodically utilised qualitative and quantitative questionnaires to collect data on impact measurement. In addition, Activate used basic objective recording/reporting measures in relation to participants, age, gender, and ethnicity. Generally speaking, however, there was a lack of strategic thinking on these issues across the pilot sites with little, if any, collection or evaluation of data concerning levels of participant wellbeing (e.g., mental health, loneliness, isolation, character development, leadership ability or educational potential) or the impact of projects and/or programmes on local communities, (e.g., the enhancement of community cohesion). At present,

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<sup>27</sup> The impact strategy in place at Sportily (Gloucester diocese) was developed by Eido Research.

only one of the pilot dioceses is able to articulate a clear theory of change in relation to SWM provision (Gloucester).

#### **4.7 Current data/demand**

The lack of empirical data surrounding the current state of play with regards to the featured dioceses reflects the fact that monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are under-developed both in the sports ministry sector and across faith-based contexts in the UK. These findings also indicate that limited diocesan coordination and limited mechanisms to collect data are also important reasons for the lack of empirical data, even where this data may exist. In turn, there is evidence to suggest that deliverers lack the necessary resources, skills and, in particular, the confidence, to collect more than basic demographic information. There are some indications that this is a cultural barrier within churches. Furthermore, it is clear that the COVID pandemic had a significant impact on almost all dioceses, delaying for some SWM delivery and therefore data collection, and for others the instigation and development of their initial deliberations about their SWM approach and turning this into delivery. Despite these barriers, some dioceses had clearly made progress.

As reported above, dioceses offered many different SWM activities. Looking across all of the data, one-off events such as the screening of major sports events/gatherings, staffing Parkruns, or hosting sport quizzes often attracted the most people. While there is limited data to evidence this, the general feeling amongst respondents was that these kinds of activities often provided a useful first point of contact and had the potential to lead to more in depth or meaningful relationships when followed up with other church or SWM invitations. Several dioceses used SWM in schools as a key approach. The data suggests that this presented a significant opportunity to reach large numbers of children and young people (from 50-150 per week) through a range of activity types. Similarly, holiday camps, while also one-off events provided significant opportunities to engage relatively large numbers of young people (up to 50) and facilitated the development of deeper relationships with both children and parents. Several dioceses reported that ‘Active RE’ was growing in schools and becoming an increasingly productive way to reach children and young people whilst also providing a source of income generation. Alongside schools work, the data suggests that SWM is also able to attract healthy numbers of young people through out-of-school clubs. Blackburn diocese, for example, through multiple weekly football outreach sessions, attracted on average between 40-50 young people via such activities and events.



Wellbeing activities and exercise and fitness classes, while often attracting less participants (10-30), can be put on more frequently often alongside other church-based activities such as services, Cafes and Parent/Carer/Mother and Toddler groups, which over a week can engage a significant number of people. This also provides some flexibility to deliver different types of activities such as Pilates, stretch or fitness classes, to attract different audiences. These sessions may run alongside worship services and the inclusion of Christian content is commonplace. Overall, even with limited initial engagement, by creating a multiple local demand-led offer, SWM projects within a diocese can attract, on a regular basis, 150-200 people a week. For example, data from Gloucester in 2022, highlights that through 23 weekly sessions, SWM teams delivered, on average, to 400 participants per week, with a total of 23,400 participations over the year. Excluding school-based activities, Sportily (Gloucester) currently facilitate formal connections with over 1,200 individuals. This supports previous evidence from London diocese (see Crabbe et al, 2015). In addition to this participation data, several dioceses have undertaken surveys of their participants. In Gloucester's first annual survey in 2022, 81% of participants said that Sportily had 'helped them enjoy more exercise and sport', 70% suggested this that participation had 'helped them enjoy life more', and 30% 'wanted to learn more about God' because of their engagement in SWM. Similarly, the Barnwell Project (Ely Diocese), recorded similar statistics in relation to enjoyment and a significant with 77% saying that SWM sessions had 'helped them think about the Christian faith'. Anecdotally, several dioceses reported individuals and families starting to attend church, and getting involved/attending church activities and events. This is a critical area for understanding and requires significantly more focus by SWM Leads. Several dioceses also attracted local authority funding to deliver the UK government's 'Holiday Activities and Food Programme' (HAF) during the school holidays.<sup>28</sup>

This highlights the potential for partnerships with local authorities within the local community. Data obtained from the Barnwell Project (Ely), for example, indicated that 1 in 3 children attending its holiday programme, had on several days, arrived not having eaten or drunk anything beforehand. Data from their SWM questionnaire survey also highlighted that 100%

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<sup>28</sup> HAF funding is provided by the UK government's Department for Education and is aimed at areas of social deprivation. HAF allows children to access 24 activity sessions per year which are divided over the main school holiday periods (Easter 4, Summer 16, and Winter 4). Each session lasts a minimum of four hours during which time a meal is provided (hot or packed lunch). Sessions are designed to develop life skills, self-confidence and resilience. For further information see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2023>

of participants said the programme had ‘made them think more about the Christian faith’ and this had led to two families exploring joining the church.

#### **4.8 Key learning and insights**

Key learning from this research has largely arisen organically and experientially across the eight diocesan contexts with the exception of Gloucester which has also benefitted from the commissioning of independent external research and evaluation around SWM provision in recent years (see, for example, Parker et al, 2021; Balcar and Parker, 2022). Overall, data findings from across the case study sites confirm that dioceses are unequivocal in their endorsement of sport and wellbeing activity as an important area of ministry and one which should be promoted widely across the CoE. Moreover, SWM is seen as an effective vehicle through which to engage both churched and unchurched groups and to share the Gospel. A central factor in the successful implementation of SWM is the support of senior diocesan staff who understand its potential and who proactively promote strategic planning and resourcing in this area, the critical issue being the appropriation of adequate funding (either internal or external). With funding in place, the appointment of a designated ‘Lead’ for SWM (and ideally a suitably equipped/trained team of workers - volunteer or otherwise) is vital to the embedding and successful outworking of related activity. Indeed, data strongly indicates that the presence of such infrastructural support is the central determinant of programme success. SWM Leads who were not remunerated for their role and/or who were expected to fulfil related duties alongside other (often full-time) workplace commitments, routinely alluded to the difficulties they faced in progressing the SWM agenda within their diocesan contexts.

Other inhibiting factors include traditional perceptions of ‘sports’ ministry and the importance of adopting more nuanced terminology such as ‘sport and wellbeing ministry’ or simply ‘wellbeing’ ministry, thereby portraying an altogether more inclusive portfolio of activities especially for elderly populations. In turn, some diocesan staff felt that there was a lack of clarity around the expectations of ‘pilot dioceses’ within the NSWP, and the appropriateness of a ‘top down’ (centralised) approach to the embedding of SWM in diocesan settings. A further challenge was that of raising the profile of SWM amidst an existing array of outreach activities commonly referred to as ‘competing demands’. It is clear that SWM Leads often find themselves having to continually justify investment in SWM against a backdrop of other ‘worthy’ causes, projects and initiatives. The mapping of demand for SWM activity, and the establishment of partnerships with SWM providers and allied agencies (both faith-based and

secular) were also raised as important factors in success. The employment of qualified sports ministers (through validated courses) appears especially important for some. Evidence also indicates that further strategic planning (and equipping/training) is needed for SWM Leads and other diocesan staff around issues such as: monitoring and evaluation (both internal and external), partnership working, business development, marketing, and fundraising/grant bidding. Though there is some evidence of collaborations with parachurch organisations, to date none of the featured dioceses appear to have developed a recognised formula for strategic partnerships that has led to significant success in developing a consistent SWM offer within a diocese which has also had an impact on that community's faith journey.

In terms of specific insight into Project deliverables, a key objective of the NSWP was knowledge exchange and peer learning and this was facilitated by the establishment of a Learning Community to support the SWM Leads in the eight pilot dioceses. The Learning Community was initiated online in 2020 (due to the restrictions of the COVID pandemic) and between April 2022 and November 2023 seven (in-person) day-long gatherings were held (broadly speaking, one every 3-4 months), six of which were hosted at Ridley Hall, Cambridge (April 2022-June 2023), and one in Birmingham Diocese (November 2023). All Learning Community events were led by Natalie Andrews and were structured around a mixture of prayer, networking, external speakers, individual/team reflection and planning, and group discussion. Content was structured to support the Project's main objectives and to provide understanding of the wider context of SWM (and the mainstream sport sector). While the eight dioceses demonstrated a clear commitment to these gatherings, not all attended every session primarily as a consequence of other commitments and/or geographical distance. Key discussion topics included: the SWM and Community Sport landscape, the evidence based for community sport, monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning and influencing, and shaping pioneering and entrepreneurial initiatives. The Rt. Rev. Libby Lane, Bishop of Derby, Lord Spiritual, and Church of England Lead Bishop for Sport was the invited speaker at the April 2023 Learning Community event.

The data suggest that the Learning Community provided an important forum for peer learning, and networking with participants expressing significant benefit from being a part of a broader movement. This proved crucial in giving participants confidence (and 'permission') to explore, consider and build SWM foundations in their respective diocesan contexts. Participants also

appreciated the input from external experts which provided important stimulation to develop new approaches both in terms of strategic planning and implementation. Being with 'liked minded' people and having space outside of their 'day jobs' to think specifically about SWM proved particularly stimulating. In turn, the Learning Community was seen as an important aspect of the wider NSW for developing SWM within the wider context of CoE. While SWM Leads benefitted from Learning Community discussions in different ways (reflecting their roles and levels of diocesan influence), aspects which the group as a whole found most useful were: peer support (both within and outside of gatherings), the sharing of 'best practise', discussing new ideas, and formal expert input around project management. There was a strong view amongst participants that irrespective of what the future of the NSW looked like, the Learning Community should continue for the original cohort and that it should be extended to include a new cohort of dioceses, to continue the momentum that had been created.

#### **4.9 Next steps**

There is a collective desire across the eight pilot dioceses to grow SWM and to share learning. There is also a strong sense that the NSW has been successful in stimulating SWM activity. Each of the eight dioceses identifies a series of specific priorities in terms of next steps, many of which are directly related to their key learning to date. Common issues arising in this respect are: the search for sources of funding to either instigate or maintain SWM programme provision; training/equipping in (and the adoption of a focused approach to) grant bidding especially in relation to resource and facility development, and longer term business expansion; workforce expansion and further professional development (and professionalization) for SWM nationally; the continuation and/or development of SWM programme delivery to meet demand and/or attract new participant groups; the adoption of a more strategic mind-set around detailed monitoring and evaluation (both internal and external) and business analytics; more in-depth thinking around the education and training of SWM staff (including volunteers); relationship building with local communities and community organisations, the local church, parachurch organisations and secular sports agencies; vision casting and increasing the profile of SWM in order to persuade both diocesan staff and parishioners of its material and missional benefits; knowledge exchange and peer learning across the pilot dioceses both within and outside of the NSW Learning Community; and the development of marketing and advertising. These issues provide a clear framework for the continued funding of the NSW, and a programme of professional development.

#### **4.10. Summary**

The case study data demonstrates a strong sense of commonality across the featured dioceses in that, although they differ in profile and complexion, all eight appear to have the longer term backing of senior staff with regard to the promotion of SWM, and all regard SWM as an important missional tool to engage unchurched and/or disengaged audiences and communities. That said, there are clear differences in the extent to which SWM has been embedded and developed with three dioceses in particular (Ely, Gloucester, and Norwich) providing examples of what might be achieved when a more strategic approach is adopted in this area (especially in relation to resourcing). In terms of the dissemination of the data findings, there are opportunities here for the continued cross-fertilization of ideas, knowledge exchange, and peer learning in relation to how success has and can be achieved, and the NSWP Learning Community is a key forum via which this could take place. However, irrespective of developmental status, data also reveal that further thinking is necessary for all pilots around the following issues: (i) the establishment of strategic partnerships with parachurch and secular sporting agencies and organisations; (ii) the theological and theoretical basis upon which SWM operates (particularly in relation to missional approach and theories of change); (iii) the explicit articulation of faith journeys and pathways (especially the connection between SWM programme delivery and church engagement); (iv) and the broader (and longer-term) transitional processes surrounding SWM and the establishment of new worshipping communities. These issues are beyond the scope of this report however, our analysis provides evidence to suggest that further research is needed across a greater number of diocesan contexts in order to uncover both ‘best practice’ and persistent challenges in these areas.

## **5. WIDER STAKEHOLDER VIEWS**

This section of the report presents the findings of our in-depth research with the three remaining stakeholder groups, senior diocesan staff, strategic stakeholders, and parachurch leaders. By way of reminder, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were conducted with senior diocesan staff and strategic stakeholders. The former were all in full-time employment with their respective dioceses, while the strategic stakeholder cohort was drawn from a purposive sample of church and non-church leaders from across the UK. Some members of this latter group had connections to local and national sports ministry organisations and/or had experience of working with these organisations. Our final stakeholder group comprised leaders from UK parachurch organisations. Data collection with this group took place via a questionnaire survey which was sent to the leaders of six of these organisations, all of which currently hold a national profile (Ambassadors Football GB, Christians in Sport, KICK, Salvation Army, Scripture Union, Sports Chaplaincy UK). Our aim was to gain feedback on the perceived impact of the NSWP on each of these organisations. The following narrative is structured around the key themes arising from the resulting interview and questionnaire data.

### **5.1 Senior diocesan staff**

As has been highlighted in the case study analysis in Section 4, senior diocesan staff were unanimous in their enthusiasm for SWM, and in their opinion that throughout its three-year duration the NSWP had provided important and necessary leadership and given dioceses the confidence to explore SWM and to learn, be exposed to, and/or co-create ‘best practice’ and network alongside like-minded individuals, despite being launched at a time of unprecedented social upheaval (the COVID pandemic). In turn, this group highlighted a number of key issues which they saw as constituting the central needs of dioceses when developing work in this area. The majority of respondents recognised the significant needs of their respective dioceses to establish SWM, and a number advocated for a national space to consider and develop approaches, and to network beyond SWM Leads.<sup>29</sup> A national gathering of Bishops, senior diocesan staff members, and SWM Leads appeared desirable in this respect. In addition, there was a feeling that there needed to be a strong centralized SWM vision, closely aligned with the overarching CoE Vision and Strategy, so that individual dioceses could develop their own

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<sup>29</sup> Prior to the launch of the NSWP, a number of national SWM conferences were held on behalf of the CoE in relation to the work of the previous ‘Bishop for Sport’, the Rt Revd Tony Porter.

SWM vision and strategy. In addition, strong arguments were made for the development of enterprising and sustainable models of SWM that could be replicated at scale with accessibility to templates such as strategy/business and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plans, and other resources including a national framework/mechanism to help get activity ‘off the ground’. A number of respondents reported difficulties in communicating and engaging with clergy around SWM given the pressures that they were under in terms of wider commitments, and there were specific calls for support for clergy especially in relation to SWM-related professional development and education. Relatedly, there were calls for the further development of SWM theologically and how this might help deliver other church agendas and priorities whilst supporting SWM against the backdrop of wider diocesan financial and resourcing challenges. A number of respondents acknowledged the contribution of Ridley Hall in facilitating educational courses as part of the NSWP, and the networking opportunities provided by the NSWP’s Learning Community by way of its online and in-person gatherings. It was also recognised that the maintenance of clear lines of communication were needed at the national level in order for the above issues to be managed and sustained.

Whilst identifying the factors required for the facilitation and flourishing of SWM, senior diocesan staff also appeared realistic in their assessment of the extent to which this was likely to happen. They were clear, for example, that implementation in this area would require culture change within diocese and the CoE both locally and centrally, and that such change had a greater chance of success if driven from the ‘bottom up’, i.e., organically in and through the local church and dioceses, rather than via a national, ‘top down’ directive. Indeed, several respondents articulated the reluctance of dioceses (both their own and others) to respond positively to ‘top down’ approaches. Respondents were equally clear of the need for SWM to operate on an integrative basis. There were various facets to these arguments. First, that SWM should explicitly align with the CoE Vision and Strategy, and that SWM be integrated into strategic planning at the diocesan level (in one way or another) in order to avoid being perceived as a stand-alone area of ministry. Examples included Children, Young People and Families ministry, Estates ministries, and Older Persons ministries. Second, that SWM should have a defined role within wider agendas such as social justice, prisons, reaching people in disadvantaged communities, building community cohesion, and the like, and contributing to prevention narratives. Building on this view, some respondents suggested that there was a need to explore and develop national Government policy synergies with social outcomes.

Third, that SWM should strategically align with CoE ‘younger and more diverse’ and ‘mixed ecology’ agendas, and explicitly engage with the development of new worshipping communities. Fourth, and relatedly, there were calls for SWM to be alive to other missional activities, to be prepared to make a strong business case for itself, and to seek to work in partnership with wider initiatives and ventures, i.e., the development of a cross-cutting approach towards: children, young people and families, and between church schools, local communities and local churches. Further investment in chaplaincy was cited as one possible way to achieve such aims and this would appear to sit well with the ‘mixed ecology’ model currently being put forward at the national level.

Fifth, there was also a feeling amongst a number of senior diocesan staff that SWM should be considered as something much more than simply a missional and/or evangelistic tool or activity, with a sense that it should be framed instead as having a broader remit within the church around local community need and engagement in relation, for example, to issues surrounding healthcare (i.e., as per the social prescribing work carried out by Activate in London Diocese), housing and housing development, and the fostering of greater connections with secular sport/wellbeing agencies and providers. In order to do this, it was believed that dioceses should provide a clear leadership function for SWM and this was unanimously seen as best facilitated through the employment of a senior ‘SWM Diocesan Lead’ to coordinate, drive and embed SWM into diocesan agendas and mission/ministry approaches. This suggestion is supported by evidence presented in Section 4 where dioceses that had appointed such a person, had been able to develop and embed SWM much more successfully, and ensure that SWM was taken seriously because it was able to present itself in a more ‘professional’ and coherent manner. In contrast, and despite the goodwill and passion of volunteers, those dioceses without such roles faced a greater number of barriers and challenges and less forward movement. A critical function of these SWM Lead roles was to identify (i.e., audit/map) and building upon (any) existing work in SWM within their respective diocesan context to ensure that all related activity was well-planned, well-managed and professional in nature (as per secular sport/wellbeing provision), and that the use of church facilities was maximised (especially in terms of income generation potential) (see Crabbe et al, 2015). Creating a strong SWM narrative and embedding this into other diocesan ministry thinking was also seen as critical. The majority of respondents were aware of the role of Ridley Hall in the training and equipping of people in this area and emphasised the need for this provision to be driven by the needs of the Church and parishes.



Given all of the above, what lessons might we take from senior diocesan staff? In short, this respondent group were highly supportive of the development of SWM and recognised the importance of the NSWP in providing leadership to facilitate national discussion in this area. However, challenges clearly lay ahead both in terms of strategic planning and implementation, and there was an express understanding that whilst investment in SWM had the potential to bring with it a whole range of benefits, it was not seen as a ‘one size fits all’ means of meeting community need, nor was it seen as a ‘silver bullet’ to the current crisis of church engagement. In terms of key insights, a critical contributor here is the Diocese of Gloucester especially given the investment it has made in SWM in recent years. Of course, the more recent establishment of Sportily did not take place in a social vacuum. On the contrary, Gloucester Diocese has long since demonstrated a commitment to (and success in) this area of ministry under the auspices of PSALMS (see, for example, Parker et al, 2021; Balcar and Parker, 2022). This highlights the time often necessary to develop a comprehensive and funded diocesan approach to SWM. That said, the Diocese is now a frontrunner in the sector, and it is important to consider the principles and practices which drive its missional approach.

Our discussion of ‘missional approaches’ in the case study analysis in Section 4, highlights Sportily’s adoption of the ‘Seven Sacred Spaces Framework’ as the underpinning to their operations. This provides seven key principles for developing new worshipping communities around sport and wellbeing (Connect, Eat, Serve, Explore, Encounter, Contribute, Grow), which also helps the Diocese re-imagine what such a community might look like beyond a ‘traditional church’ offer. In this sense, sport and wellbeing provision is first and foremost about building relationships and takes place within the context of creation and stewardship. Such activity is related to our bodies as a temple for the Holy Spirit and how we care for our bodies both as individuals and within the community. Having this strong theological/missional underpinning is important since it provides a point of reference in relation to spiritual development and a guide for the establishment of new worshipping communities. At a more practical level, Sportily recognize the importance of having robust processes in place in order to bring the diocese and its structures along and to help form a durable vision supported by consultation, research, and external advice. In their view, a diocese should not start with a formalised SWM agenda but instead it should work backwards by asking key questions such as why young people and families are not engaging with church, and what would encourage them to do so. There is also a strong sense within Sportily that SWM should not be focused on Christian audiences but on non-Christians and specifically on creating new models of church

that support the wider diocesan vision to bring new people into contact with church, faith and God. Just as important are social outcomes since these give SWM a wider impact and a ‘community good’ alongside mission and discipleship. Establishing SWM at the local level increases the possibility of achieving these outcomes although there may also be work to do in terms of aligning SWM activity and overall approach with diocesan existing structures and (sub)cultures. This has the potential to create tensions around what SWM looks like. However, so long as SWM has certain characteristics and is co-created and co-designed with and by local communities, a healthy balance can be achieved between delivering social outcomes and developing faith through discipleship.

How then has Sportily operationalised this missional approach? In line with its wider vision, Gloucester Diocese has integrated clergy and laity in leadership, the latter being key to the implementation of the diocesan vision at the community level, and this has required role clarification and investment in relation to training needs. Moreover, in order to support this vision, the Diocese has had to work hard to reduce any tensions with the local church (e.g., a diocesan mission advocate can play a powerful role in influencing clergy here). This has required careful analysis and people management and long term-investment including ring-fenced funding to allow the Diocese to take risks with SWM. Such a strategy also requires a diocese to prioritise investment into SWM over an initial five-year period, with the expectation that it will be at least ten years before it is fully functioning successfully.

In terms of strategic planning and business modelling, Sportily provides an example of how a diocesan owned separate entity for SWM might operate and the benefits this may bring, such as drive and focus around income generation and the agility to pivot and respond to ‘customer demand’ outside of the normal structures and process of diocesan life. This kind of structure also facilitates a mixed investment model incorporating diocese, income, and public funding thereby ensuring that it can recruit the right people and provide local support directly. This approach has also been taken in the London Diocese with the Activate initiative but with less effect. That is not to say that recruitment to SWM positions is straightforward and Sportily report challenges in employing staff and achieving the balance between seniority and expertise. In their experience, driving SWM forward within the context of a broader diocesan vision and strategy initially requires a ‘top heavy’ and robust staffing structure that can lay the foundations for future delivery. In their case, this has comprised: CEO, Operations Director (COO), Sport and Faith Director, and integration with wider diocesan roles such as Mission Director/Advisor,

Pioneer Ministry Director/Advisor, and Communications Director. Sportily have experienced particular challenges in recruiting the right people to lead new worshipping communities aimed at non-Christians, and this work is ongoing. Sustainability is also a challenge amid competition from other sport and wellbeing ministries. However, there is an increasingly strong argument (and evidence base) that a single clergy post can equate to as many as four SWM ministers who can cover more ground across schools, church and community and have a much stronger connection with local young people and families. Furthermore, alongside attracting other income mainly through schools work, what is emerging is that Sport and Wellbeing Ministers can generate a large proportion of the income required to fund their posts, subject, of course, to public funding streams being maintained. While still developing a long-term sustainable business model, the emerging reality is that despite this mixed funding approach, it is likely that a host diocese will always have to provide an element of central funding to coordinate and support SWM projects and programmes of this nature.

## **5.2 Strategic stakeholders**

None of the members of the strategic stakeholder group had an operational background in sports ministry, nor were they necessarily familiar with the intricacies and nuances of the sector. However, all were involved in wider CoE agendas and initiatives including centralised operational functions such as vision and strategy.<sup>30</sup> This sense of oversight was the primary reason why the group was chosen as an avenue of data gathering. Similarly, all had influence at senior level in terms of CoE structures, and all six held (or had previously held) senior, strategic roles within the broader organisation with access and influence at the decision-making level. They also represented potentially important partners and collaborators for SWM. In turn, all were aware that the NSWP had sought to provide much needed strategic leadership to the sector amidst a fragmented and fast-changing landscape, to instigate much needed change in approach especially around faith pathways, to create a sense of coherence around SWM provision so it was not simply perceived as a series of single/bespoke projects, to replicate best practice and increase engagement, and to and better align with the grass roots and community sports sector. The following narrative is structured around the key themes arising from the one-to-one interviews carried out with this group and comprises three main themes: (i) NSWP

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<sup>30</sup> This small group included: the Lead Bishop for Sport, and representatives from the CoE Evangelism and Discipleship team, the CoE Diocesan Consultant Team, Fresh Expressions, New Worshipping Communities, and Ridley Hall, Cambridge.

perceptions and impact, (ii) NSWP insights and positioning within the CoE, and (iii) ways forward for SWM.

Several overarching themes can be delineated from discussions with the Strategic Stakeholder group. Like senior diocesan staff, the majority regarded SWM as a key mechanism to help the CoE deliver its current vision and strategy, especially around the ‘younger and more diverse’ agenda. It was felt that the NSWP had provided a new sense of ‘focus’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘partnership’ around SWM and a genuine desire to ‘capture’ and ‘roll out’ key learning. In turn, there was broad agreement that the Project had raised the profile of SWM nationally (especially among senior diocesan staff) and that the pilot phase had been successful. At the same time, there was a clear recognition that SWM remained challenging as a concept in the higher echelons of the CoE (both Bishops and formal leadership structures), simply because of its diverse and complex nature, and because traditional CoE cultures and structures do not easily accommodate its specific approaches and methods.

In the case of the overall climate within which the NSWP had been operating, it was acknowledged that there now appeared to be a more general aversion to ‘national strategies’ within the CoE and that, as a result, dioceses tended to formulate their own (local) approaches and initiatives. There was also a sense across this respondent group that as a missional initiative, SWM was not alone in its struggles to establish itself as a legitimate area of ministry inside of CoE institutions. For example, one respondent suggested that generally within the Church of England and among formal leadership structures and Bishops, there remained an element of ‘confusion’ and/or ‘scepticism’ about SWM and that stronger communication (both within the church and beyond) was needed around how it might help deliver strategic objectives. Some respondents were concerned about the possibility of there being a relatively ‘limited’ and ‘inconsistent’ understanding of the NSWP across the CoE, and what it had set out to achieve. Some members of the group articulated the potentially constraining effect that such perceptions may have on the future of SWM more generally. Others expressed concern over the more recent decision to re-house the Project within a single diocese, and the extent to which this supported the notion of a ‘broad church’.

The timing of the launch of the NWSP amidst the impact of the COVID pandemic was acknowledged by all respondents and there was also recognition of the fact that the CoE had undergone a significant restructure during the timeline of the Project with changes to the

organisation of missional activities centrally (among other things). It was also acknowledged that the NSWP was an innovative project that needed time to ‘find its feet’. Notwithstanding these challenges, several respondents, who had a greater degree of familiarity with NSWP activity, questioned the rate of progress made as a whole over the three-year duration of the pilot phase. Issues here surrounded the extent to which SWM could now be evidenced in diocesan vision and strategy documents, and the time it had taken to establish a sense of focus and direction around the NSWP Learning Community. Others raised questions as to why the pilot dioceses that did not have links with schools had not managed to establish a strong and consistent working model of SWM linking schools, community and church, given that this was a well understood theory within SWM and was already being deployed by several dioceses. This was important because it was felt by these respondents that the Project could have better supported the ‘Growing Faith’ agenda. There was also a consistent view from respondents in this group that project communication needed to improve since it was felt that it had not sufficiently ‘cut through’ to the expected levels.

Five key areas for improvement were identified in this area: communications needed to (i) more effectively ‘tell the story’ about how SWM was critical in enabling the Church to grow younger and more diverse: to meet its fundamental aims and objectives, (ii) reflect how SWM could and would do this, considering that not everyone ‘thinks or hears’ the extolling of SWM as exciting, encouraging, or interesting, (iii) be framed so as to address real, tangible problems (such as ‘growing younger’), in order to avoid coming across simply as another area for a diocese or parish to consider amongst a growing list of approaches and priorities: ‘one voice amongst many’, (iv) clearly portray how people have found sport to be the solution to missional engagement or the ‘pivot’ to engage with someone's understanding of their own wellbeing, spirituality, and (v) undertake intentional storytelling, aligned with how SWM might begin to build relationships with people and readily progress them in their faith journey.

Like senior diocesan staff, members of the Strategic Stakeholder group were clear that the new CoE vision and strategy aligned well with the broad aims of SWM at diocesan and church level, but that SWM as a sector must better articulate how it might help achieve these outcomes, i.e., for the church to become ‘younger and more diverse’ and to encourage and facilitate a ‘mixed ecology’. It is worth noting at this stage that there was strong encouragement from members of this group for SWM to focus on the importance of ‘chaplaincy’ within its portfolio, to avoid criticism that it too often prioritised community sport activity and participation.

Pertinent here was the common view amongst respondents that chaplaincy had a significant role to play withing the new CoE vision and strategy especially in relation to growing the mixed ecology. However, some respondents highlighted that working with the chaplaincy sector could be challenging because of a perceived (dominant) view within that particular sector that it was about ‘special people, doing special things, in special places.’ It was felt that this view needed to be revisited to allow a more open position and defining what a ‘chaplain’ is in SWM contexts: for example, whether a person is a ‘chaplain’ *within* their running group or whether they are simply a Christian *in* a running group? More broadly, it was felt that this issue needed to be interrogated further including an exploration of what was missing logistically and ecclesiastically: to start thinking more collectively through strategic partnerships and how chaplaincy might be defined and communicated beyond it being a separate category of Christian activity (i.e., the foundational ecclesiology of all Christians as chaplains because of the ‘priesthood of all believers’). Some respondents believed that there was a strong synergy between sport and chaplaincy but that this relationship needed more consideration with the development of stronger faith pathways from this work. One respondent highlighted that some would see their role as being a chaplain but would never consider forming a new worshipping community from that, others are very keen to explore developing a new worshipping community out of their chaplaincy.<sup>31</sup>

At the structural level, it was agreed that the NSWPC had exposed the key challenge for the SWM sector in its relationship with dioceses, i.e., how it creates the opportunity for a discipleship pathway, whether by way of fresh expressions, new worshipping communities or engagement with traditional parish churches. This is clearly evident in the different diocesan approaches in the eight case study profiles (see Appendix A). That said, SWM was also seen as having particular potential around the notion of ‘discipleship’ and the dual function as an environment in which Christians might engage as disciples, but also as a ‘fresh expression’ and gateway for initial engagement. It was noted that the recent CoE restructure had seen a shift into more strategic support for dioceses to support bishops and senior staff in their prioritisation of strategic mission plans. Hence, respondents articulated the need for SWM to (re)position itself as a coherent approach within diocesan strategic priorities and as a potential avenue of engagement alongside other priority areas.

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<sup>31</sup> For further discussion and insight see: Parker et al (2016) and Daniels and Parker (2023).

In terms of the specific work of the NSWP Learning Community, this was seen as crucial in moving the Project forward and in maintaining momentum given that it provided an important space for SWM Leads to glean a sense of what was happening nationally, share experiences and best practice, and to build partnerships with other institutions and organisations. For a small number of respondents in this group, there was some confusion as to the purpose of the Learning Community: whether it was to share knowledge and experience between pilot dioceses, whether it was simply a gathering of SWM people, or whether it existed to provide input for dioceses starting to develop SWM and to ensure that best practice was embedded into vision and strategy. Some pointed out that more should have been done to include other interested dioceses and to translate the content into a resource for those who had not entirely bought into the Project. Others said that they would like to have seen the Learning Community membership expanded beyond the original pilot dioceses within the three-year period.<sup>32</sup> The overall view was that going forward, the role and function of the Learning Community should be clarified and developed, and that it should seek to include new dioceses.

Notwithstanding all of the above, with the Learning Community now well established, it was felt that dioceses were more confident in their approaches and plans in relation to SWM, and keen to engage with this area of ministry more closely so that they might better understand related training needs. While most members of the group agreed that the Learning Community should continue, there were mixed views on what form this might take. Some were keen for gatherings to move around different hosting dioceses to give a stronger sense of shared ownership, whilst others thought that having an ‘institutional home’ (for example, at Ridley Hall) was important to build better links with Ridley’s existing training pathway and current students (the ‘new workforce’). One view was that it was especially important that the Learning Community did not align to one SWM approach to ensure dioceses and others were free to ‘grapple with and understand’ their own approach to SWM (and to ensure a mixed ecology be that fresh expressions, planting, pioneering and a more traditional approach to growing church). In terms of its original remit to support to NSWP, the view of the Strategic Stakeholder group was that Ridley had: succeeded in developing a SWM training pathway, created a number of useful partnerships with pilot dioceses (i.e., Norwich, Ely and Gloucester) around student recruitment and resourcing, and demonstrated a willingness to develop and invest in SWM

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<sup>32</sup> The Learning Community in fact added one diocese (Ely) to the initial seven pilots after the project began. However, the decision was broadly that this was a pilot and needed testing before new diocese, with less developed SWM plans joined. This was for phase two of the Learning Community.

training. There was a general feeling amongst members of the group that the CoE will likely see a significant expansion in lay training over the next five years. One of the challenges for the Church will be to create a ‘workforce pipeline’ and a sense of career progression within the context of SWM, the foundations of which are now in place. It was suggested that training needed to release a level of creativity and understanding of local context to raise up new and effective lay leaders who could grow faith pathways.

Given all of the above, what then did the Strategic Stakeholder group see as potential next steps for the NSWP? The majority thought that there was significant potential for development and growth for SWM at the national level. Amidst wider changes within the CoE, it was felt that SWM needed to work closely with diocesan strategy consultants as they supported dioceses to develop their own vision and strategies to underline what role SWM could play within a diocese, and to demonstrate with discipleship, mixed ecology, and younger and more diverse, and especially with the Growing Faith agenda.

### **5.3 Parachurch leaders**

Our questionnaire responses from parachurch leaders were broadly positive and brought to the surface several common issues and observations.<sup>33</sup> All of the members of this respondent cohort were aware of the work of the NSWP, all but one had engaged with it to one degree or another, and several had developed some form of informal partnership with the Project. The majority had held meetings with Natalie Andrews and/or with individuals from the Project Advisory Group and, as a result, had developed a mutually supportive relationship with the work of the NSWP.

The majority of parachurch representatives believed that the Project had had a positive impact on their organisation and on the sector as a whole, and that it had given them more access to people who might be interested in SWM, including facilitating new relationships with and within dioceses and parishes. A number of respondents had also witnessed a positive impact on their business-related activities, including: increased interest and delivery of community

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<sup>33</sup> This section provides further outside stakeholder feedback on the NSWP. In turn, it provides an indication of the level of engagement and understanding that the selected parachurch organisations had about the Project, identifies from their perspective any links or connections which they had made with pilot dioceses, and explores some of the challenges that parachurch sports ministry organisations and the CoE may experience in working in partnership to drive SWM forward in the future.



based SWM, increased interest and delivery in schools, increased profile both regionally and nationally especially around working with wider events and collectives (i.e., the Commonwealth Games), and an increased profile of workforce opportunities across the sector.

In this sense, respondents felt that the NSWP had enhanced the profile of SWM within the church in general and there was a firm belief amongst members of this group that, as a consequence, the Project had increased the profile of SWM in the CoE and had opened up new conversations which were already leading to increased activity on the ground. In turn, there was a strong view that the Project should not end. It was acknowledged that while indications were positive, it was too early to discern the longer-term impact and legacy of the NSWP, yet one issue that had become clear was that workforce development issues were critical to the sector and that these needed urgent attention. In terms of overall sustainability, there was a general view that the Project had been open to the creation of a wide range of partnerships and partnership working including inter-denominational/ecumenical links, and in so doing, had helped to engender a healthy ‘culture of engagement’ which had served to ‘galvanize’ people within the sector around notions of ‘shared/best practice’. One respondent noted that the Project had ‘unlocked and realised the impact [that] parachurches could make’.

Respondents were asked specifically about what their engagement/partnership with the Project would have ideally looked like in practical terms. Several issues were articulated individually including how the Project might have more readily drawn upon and developed previous work undertaken by Bishop Tony Porter as CoE ‘Sports Ambassador’. There was also a feeling that more commitment to partnership might have been shown by dioceses and the CoE that, at least, matched that of the parachurch organisations. The facilitation of stronger links with wider missional ventures such as Messy Church, HTB church plants, youth ministries, and national networks and gatherings (i.e., New Wine), was also mentioned. The Project was seen by some as an ideal opportunity to bring together a strategic group of parachurch ministries to develop the delivery of contextual sports mission training to each diocese. Perhaps somewhat inevitably, the facilitation of funding for parachurch partnerships to start new SWM initiatives and to initiate capacity building was also identified as an unmet and ongoing need. These latter comments would appear to reflect a misunderstanding about the original remit of the NSWP, alongside the different engagement levels that individual parachurches had with the project and the pilot dioceses.

When asked for their views on the value of what the CoE is doing in the area of sport and wellbeing, responses were less positive. There was a general feeling that the Project had not achieved its potential in this respect and that instead of trying to ‘re-invent the wheel’ the CoE should look to partner more effectively with parachurch organisations. That said, it was evident that respondents felt that the Project had started to make dioceses, parishes and the wider sector believe that the CoE was ‘taking sports ministry seriously’ and that it had encouraged both discussion and delivery around grassroots SWM provision, i.e., helping people consider SWM pathways and missional sustainability ‘beyond a project’. Moreover, there was a belief that the Project had allowed the CoE to highlight how sport not only has the potential to contribute to wellbeing, but to bring people and communities together, and deliver social outcomes, in-line with Government policy. However, in agreement with the Strategic Stakeholder group, parachurch leaders believed that there was a need to communicate more readily the impact of the Project on the work of the pilot dioceses given the critical need to assess whether there is scope to replicate such work in other areas.

The more negative views offered here, perhaps reflect a wider frustration amongst this group of stakeholders that they face a significant challenge in moving CoE clergy and parishes beyond enthusiasm and aspiration for SWM, into consistent, sustainable SWM delivery, supported by parish volunteers. The Blackburn Diocese case study data presented in Section 4 highlights this disconnect in its partnership with Ambassadors Football GB. In other case studies, dioceses highlighted the challenges of working in partnership with parachurch organisations and these partnerships predominately pivoted around building meaningful, long-term relationships and creating successful pathways into local parishes. As we have seen, a number of senior diocesan staff suggested that there was a significant need to work on these partnerships and that this could be an area of priority for the NSWP moving forward.

How then would parachurch leaders advise the CoE in terms of what they might be doing differently in the area of SWM? All but one of the respondent organisations endorsed the continuation of the NSWP in line with an assessment of the learnings from the pilot phase and critical reflections on what could be improved. There was a general view that a longer-term (10-20 year) strategic approach should be adopted by the CoE around SWM, and that this should be appropriately communicated and resourced. Respondents were clear that the Project needed more time and more funding, and that the latter should come from within the CoE. In turn, it was felt that the CoE should be increasing its strategic planning in this area, and not

moving from 'specialisation to generalization'. By not committing to longer term goals, it was felt that the CoE ran the risk of communicating a negative message in terms of its engagement with sport and wellbeing at a time when it would appear pertinent to invest in this area especially given the nature of its wider vision and strategy. Part of this commitment was the need to continue to support, develop and nurture Project progress to date and the relationships and partnerships that had already been established. In turn, it was felt that much more could be achieved via a cohesive national programme (across all dioceses) to help create effective change in local communities and significant social, physical, and spiritual impact across all age groups through new worshipping communities. In line with the views of the senior diocesan staff and Strategic Stakeholder groups, parachurch leaders believed that SWM should be incorporated into other aspects of the Church and ministries so that it is not seen as a separate or isolated venture. Finally, at a time when central government is open to exploring the contribution of faith-based initiatives and communities to broader civic life, respondents were of the opinion that there was much more that the CoE and dioceses could do to highlight and engage with national/secular sporting initiatives with bodies such as Sport England, and the national governing bodies of sport, and that there was a need for dedicated resource to facilitate work on these relationships.

In terms of the way in which the NSWP had provided support around education and training, all of the parachurch organisations had an awareness of the SWM education and training pathways at Ridley Hall (one respondent/organisation - not CoE affiliated - was aware but not about the details of Ridley's links to the Project and to the sector). The majority of the group also recognised Ridley's work as being valuable and necessary to ground SWM in solid theology and missiology (something which the sector has been criticised for in previous years). Furthermore, they saw Ridley as playing an important strategic leadership role in SWM which had also helped to ground the pilot Project and having a pivotal role in the future of SWM in terms of professionalising the sports ministry workforce and providing high quality theological and practical training for sports ministry practitioners. Creating leaders to shape the direction of the future of SWM in the UK alongside the establishment of legitimate career pathways and trajectories was also seen as an important function of these pathways. While not all of the parachurch organisations had utilised this training to date, some were in discussion about future partnership arrangements to accommodate their training needs in SWM. A key challenge within all of this is for parachurch organisations to create space in their schedules for staff members (i.e., coaches) to attend/engage with such training, and generating the funding for

those staff to undertake training. Of course, an ongoing challenge for Ridley is to design relevant, market-led courses which are accessible and cost effective. Indeed, one respondent expressed the view that Ridley was not reflecting nor responding to the needs of their particular marketplace and that there needed to be a greater level of awareness of the opportunities that sport and wellbeing offer for expressing and engaging with faith.

Considering the above, a number of challenges were identified by some parachurch leaders in relation to the future development of SWM in the CoE. The first of these was culture change and how best to convince the CoE, dioceses and parishes to accept SWM as a credible and effective form of mission and one worth investing in. Second, there is a need to help those within the church who consider themselves to be ‘non-sporty’ develop a basic understanding of (and enthusiasm for) how to incorporate sport/physical activity into other missional activities (i.e., youth work). Third, there is a need to ensure that SWM has a strong Christian/gospel element given that deficiencies in this area have created a negative perception over the years to the extent that some church leaders still do not see the value or legitimacy of SWM. Fourth, there is a need to persuade churches that they can undertake SWM ministry relatively easily, with minimal funding support, and encourage them to start with low level activity in order to bring people together through sport and wellbeing using well established best practice models and frameworks. Fifth, unlike the majority of secular sport and wellbeing settings, there remains a dearth of strategic planning in many SWM organisations around missional approach, sustainability, and evidence gathering (i.e., monitoring and evaluation) and this continues to hinder impact not least in relation to funding. In addition, parachurch leaders also identified a series of wider challenges facing the sector as a whole. These included: the need to ensure that the church does not re-focus away from parachurch organisations to set up sports ministry projects and activities of their own, thereby ignoring the significant amount of expertise in the sector; encouraging parachurch ministries to complement each other and work towards a greater sense of collaboration and partnerships across the sector; encouraging the sector to work collaboratively to promote SWM to churches; to break down barriers to ministry by helping church leaders understand and establish SWM delivery; ensuring the sector’s vision, values and culture are/remain Christ-centred thereby differentiating SWM from secular sports providers; creating and maintaining a sector strategic plan with key SWM leaders; supporting SWM engagement in established sports clubs and teams in their local communities; collaborating on funding for SWM initiatives in order to increase opportunities for people to engage; professionalising SWM and creating credible career pathways; and developing a clear

social action agenda by making a practical and spiritual difference in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and serving the most marginalised communities through sport.

#### **5.4 Summary**

In sum, the findings presented in this section from the three remaining stakeholder groups further highlight that, in the present climate, the positioning of any ministry within the context of the CoE is inevitably both nuanced and complex. There are contradictory theologies, approaches and views not only between layers of leadership within the church (whether parish, diocesan or within the CoE institutions) but also amidst the same layers of leadership, making it challenging to advise or guide an emerging ministry with regard to best position or fit. There are also a number of challenges and barriers facing the development of SWM more broadly and within the CoE, alongside strategic thinking and planning across the wider sector. The recent restructure of the Archbishops' Council staff teams has had an impact on the initial direction of travel to embed SWM more strongly within the CoE and dioceses. At the time of writing, the NSWP and dioceses are still considering how best to work amidst the new CoE vision and strategy and the support in place to drive this. Nevertheless, something new is emerging and while a number of respondents were not entirely supportive of recent decisions around CoE structures, there were clear ideas of how SWM might proceed.

## **6. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

Alongside the case study data in Appendix A, the previous two sections have presented interview and survey data from the various stakeholder (respondent) groups. In this section, we pull together the main findings evident across this cumulative data set in order to discuss and analyse them further.

### **6.1 Overview**

It is important to note that the report is not an evaluation of the NSW. Rather its focus has been on the progress and learning to date from the eight pilot dioceses who agreed to take part in the pilot including to invest in SWM for the duration of the Project, with a desire to continue this beyond this point. Nevertheless, the research has inevitably touched upon various aspects of NSW activity and, in so doing, has sought to help provide a stronger evidence-base for SWM by collating information about diocesan delivery and evidencing ‘best practice’. The available data suggest that the Project has made good progress to date, although progress has been slower than expected for several important reasons. Firstly, the NSW went live as the COVID 19 pandemic struck and the most important phase, initial set-up, was undertaken during lockdown restrictions, significantly impairing co-ordination and relationship building. Secondly, the impact of the pandemic on dioceses was severe. Having to turn their attention and energies to more urgent matters, including increased financial pressures. This directly impacted the progress of the pilot dioceses to develop SWM models especially those with limited resource and capacity. Thirdly, restructuring in the Archbishops’ Council’s Discipleship and Evangelism team as a result of the CoE’s new Vision and Strategy created a period of instability internally and resulted in a degree of uncertainty about strategic alignment and the transition into the next phase of the NSW. Despite these challenges and limitations, both the NSW and the eight pilot dioceses have remained committed to the Project when it could have been easier for many of them to step away. This highlights the strong commitment that all of these stakeholders have to the systematic development of SWM in the CoE.

This sense of commitment is evidenced in the research by the high degree of enthusiasm and drive for developing SWM across all of the pilot dioceses, including expanding its reach into new dioceses, and within the CoE and its partners. This is supported by previous research in the Diocese of London which suggested that not only is there demand and enthusiasm from churches for the products and services that the sport and wellbeing ministry sector provides,

but that, at its most basic level, sport and wellbeing ministry does work (see Crabbe et al, 2015). The almost universal view from respondent cohorts in the present study was that throughout its duration, the NSWP gave dioceses the confidence to further explore SWM and to learn, be exposed to/co-create 'best practice' and network alongside like-minded individuals, despite being launched at a time of unprecedented social upheaval.

The key aim of the NSWP was to embed SWM in pilot diocese vision and strategies. Here the Project has been less successful with only two dioceses (25%) (Gloucester, Blackburn) currently having SWM in their diocesan strategies. Two others are actively considering this kind of approach (Ely, Norwich), while two others (Rochester and Birmingham) have it on their agenda. In the case of the two remaining two dioceses (London, Guildford), SWM does not appear high on their list of strategic considerations. This somewhat one-dimensional assessment raises a number of issues in relation to diocesan time scales and priorities. For example, London published its new diocesan strategy in 2020, which includes taking a high-level approach that is not prescriptive. This is also the case in other dioceses where SWM is more likely to sit within a children, young peoples and families priority (Norwich). Furthermore, a change in leadership can also impede progress, i.e., a newly installed Bishop may wish to spend time understanding and/or reconfiguring priorities. SWM is especially vulnerable to such changes when it does not have a firmly developed (local) evidence-base or strategic position and is seen as 'innovative'. Embedding SWM into diocesan strategies should remain an important aim for the Project moving forward. While it does not guarantee funding nor a flourishing local SWM offering, it is an important aspect of a diocese considering and developing work in this area, including engaging with the CoE Vision and Strategy Diocesan Consultants.

In terms of the varying levels of progress demonstrated by dioceses towards developing and embedding SWM into their wider strategies, the research findings indicate an acknowledgement that this will take time. Many respondents highlighted the critical need for cultural change within dioceses, which is well documented in the long process that Diocese of Gloucester has undertaken to put SWM at the heart of their strategic objectives and successfully embed their approach across diocesan institutions. Furthermore, the CoE Vision and Strategy provides an important strategic opportunity for dioceses to reconsider their strategic approaches as the Church moves away from centrally developed objectives, to encouraging dioceses to develop their own, supported by the new Vision and Strategy Diocesan Consultants.

At a general level, respondents were clear, that the new Vision and Strategy to be a church which is younger, more diverse, full of missionary disciples with a developing mixed ecology, was strongly aligned to the vision of the NSWP and, indeed, SWM per se. In fact, some respondents argued that the CoE and dioceses could learn much from SWM, given its established track record in successfully engaging children and young people from diverse backgrounds. These new CoE priorities, to be delivered at diocesan level, registered well with all the pilot dioceses given that they had already embraced a wider, more inclusive ‘sport and wellbeing ministry’ approach, with many seeing the increasing value in considering ‘wellbeing’ as a key aspect of their offering. The start of the second phase of the NSWP appears timely for the existing pilot dioceses, and any new dioceses, to work with the Vision and Strategy Diocesan Consultants to develop SWM within their long-term strategic plans, and as part of their on-going discussions about funding from the Strategic Mission and Ministry Board (SMMIB).

The research clearly highlights the need for the NSWP to continue. There is a need for cross diocese coordination, to support a ‘national’ evidence-base, and ‘national’ practical support to develop SWM at both parish and diocesan level. While the NSWP, including through the Learning Community, has started to do this, more work is required to ensure that the momentum generated to date is not lost. Case study data from the pilot dioceses provides early insight about how to instigate and drive SWM, and the types of approaches and models that might be considered. It also highlights the main challenges that dioceses are likely to face in developing SWM and offers some solutions.

## **6.2 Diocesan insight**

While the case study data provides a series of complimentary insights, an overarching impression is the different focus and content of each diocese. This is, in part, a consequence of each diocese not having the same level of available data, their varied approaches to SWM, and their unique starting points. However, broadly speaking, the following observations can be made in relation to the original aims of the NSWP:

- Birmingham and Rochester have undertaken a period of consideration, developing their understanding of SWM while not delivering much beyond what already existed. They remain committed to developing a diocesan approach to SWM;



- London, Guildford and Blackburn have been involved with SWM for many years and feature a variety of more traditional parish-based engagement, often supported by parachurch organisations. London has attempted an innovative Deanery approach to SWM within the Kensington Area and despite good progress, this has faltered of late. Blackburn's strategic approach has not matched expectations as a 'parish-up' venture, and maintaining consistency in SWM continues to prove difficult. Guildford's 'parish-up' approach appears to lack strategic diocesan support;
- Ely is developing a diocesan approach but, in the first instance, have supported a strong parish-based model which has recently expanded;
- As the NSWP launched, Norwich attempted to embed SWM at diocesan level by co-ordinating the replication of an established and successful parish-based SWM model across other parishes in the diocese. While this has been broadly successful, the alignment between these parish-based projects and the diocese has not come to fruition and they are in period of transition and repositioning, with a view to reset;
- Gloucester has the only distinctive diocesan SWM vision and approach which is embedded, well-funded, and which demonstrates strong links between strategy and delivery.

The research findings provide useful insight into how to successfully develop and embed SWM with a diocese. Those dioceses with senior leaders able to drive SWM forward have been the most successful. It appears that ideally a diocese needs: (i) a supportive (championing) Bishop and/or Diocesan Secretary; (ii) a Diocesan Mission Leader/Advocate with SWM in their portfolio to work alongside local clergy and parishes, Bishop's Council, and diocesan education, children and young people and mission and ministry teams; (iii) a SWM Leader who is based in the diocese and who is able to drive delivery on the ground (operationally), support parishes wishing to explore and develop SWM, and provide strategic direction and coordination. In addition, dioceses require Sport and Wellbeing Ministers who have good project management, team management, and leadership skills. Such skills are even more important in the absence of a well-resourced central team. This role can be effectively provided

by a range of people including clergy, but where it is absent or not operating effectively, SWM projects are at high risk of failing.

Where Sport and Wellbeing Ministers create and develop strong models connecting participants into the local church, and/or develop their own ministry/new worshipping communities, the SWM is likely to flourish to a greater degree. During interview, senior leaders made it clear, that moving forwards, SWM must be able to contribute to the wider objectives of the diocese beyond simply 'playing sport in a Christian context'. Case study data highlight that where a diocese resources central support in this ministerial area, they are more likely to succeed using SWM effectively. Likewise, where SWM leaders have had formal training, they are more likely to succeed in using SWM effectively. There are also fundamental questions about the role of volunteers in SWM, and further consideration is required to better understand the role which they might play in order to allow SWM to thrive.

Case study data also highlights the importance of central funding in establishing SWM, which has predominately been through two sources, Strategic Development Funding and/or direct Diocesan funding. Funding needs to be long term to embed SWM approaches, and evidence suggests that a three-year period is not long enough. Initially at least, five or six years is required, with a view to supporting SWM for at least ten years. Funding appears to operate in two specific ways: (i) to facilitate central resource within the diocese; and (ii) to initially support Sport and Wellbeing Ministers in a parish/location until they have developed alternative income streams to fund their posts. New projects often need start-up funding for equipment and marketing, to create strong administrative processes (Gloucester and London), and to successfully embed activity within diocesan culture. Case study findings suggest that where this is significant, SWM is more likely to be successful and have greater impact and reach (Gloucester). Dioceses should also set aside funding for training and development. Case study data also highlights that dioceses and SWM projects need to have strong project management, governance, and accountability and when this happens, the initiative is likely to be more successful (Gloucester, Ely and London). This should include regular progress reporting (towards set/agreed objectives), the setting up of a separate project Advisory Board or Steering Group (or equivalent), and consultation with diocesan experts to resolve issues as appropriate. In most cases, these processes have the potential to elicit significantly stronger monitoring and evaluation processes.

Where a diocese or project receives funding, there is a tendency to adopt a mixed-revenue approach, where central church funding is supplemented by a range of other sources including Trusts and Foundations, charity giving for specific individuals, and/or revenue from delivery within the community. Evidence from the case studies indicates that when led by well-trained Sports Ministers, SWM can generate income and attract funding. The most important income source is schools, where Sport and Wellbeing Ministers can deliver, for example, school sport, afterschool clubs, holiday clubs, Active RE and mentoring. Other community sport provision, however, is not a large revenue generator. It is often delivered for free (or a nominal fee) to increase accessibility. All dioceses favour charging at low-cost or donation but there are opportunities to charge low-end commercial rates for specialist activities or services such as gyms. More could be done to explore these activities including, as Gloucester Diocese intend, running community facilities as a business, to generate income. There are also opportunities for SWM to work in partnership with other areas, such as children and young people and families, to attract other funding sources.

Further work is required to develop this mixed-revenue approach and SWM business models. This should include assessing the risk of such a high reliance on funding from schools. The potential for widening funding sources across SWM should also be explored to include public funding (both local authorities and national government) sources, and Trusts and Foundations (both local and national) based on the limited examples from the pilot dioceses to date (Gloucester, London, Ely, and Norwich). Partnership development should also include local businesses where sponsorship for community SWM might be possible (Gloucester, London, and Ely). Dioceses expressed the need for support in this area and there is a strong argument that this should be undertaken centrally to best utilize a collective approach. An important emerging assessment from Sportily (Gloucester) is that to develop and embed SWM at scale, central funding is needed to support a diocesan role to coordinate and drive related activity – a point broadly supported in other case studies where central funding is absent. This is a key insight and should be considered further by the NSWP.

Each of the pilot dioceses diocese had created their own local partnerships to help develop SWM. These were mixed and varied; however, many were underdeveloped. This was a largely a consequence of limited resourcing and many dioceses were still developing their approach and offer. That said, there is evidence to suggest that dioceses have made good progress in this area since the start of the NSWP, widening their network locally including with secular

institutions, bodies, and organisations. Furthermore, all eight dioceses expressed a desire to deepen their partnerships with church schools and links between school, community, and parish churches, aligning with developing stronger faith/church pathways. In turn, all dioceses expressed a desire to develop their partnerships in the coming years, with the majority articulating the need for central support to help them focus on key organisations, and to do this effectively and successfully.

The research also highlighted complex and challenging relationships with the parachurch organisations. One of the strengths of the NSWPC has been that it has attempted to build capacity within dioceses to develop and undertake SWM. However, several dioceses have historical partnerships with sports ministry parachurch organisations (mainly Kick, Scripture Union and Ambassadors Football GB). While these dioceses are attracted to the support provided by these organisations, there is general agreement that many of these relationships need further development to ensure a stronger understanding between partners. This predominately focuses on a diocese's need for faith pathways, links into church and/or new worshipping communities, and better solutions to entrenched issues such as the use of volunteers. This is especially important since most dioceses expressed a desire to work with parachurch organisations which had good levels of expertise, could help support and train parishes, and could strengthen the cohesion between school, community, and church (Kick and Ambassadors Football GB), as part of a mixed approach delivery. Within a sporting context, chaplaincy was clearly seen as an area ripe for growth by many stakeholders and Sport Ministers on the ground, including within schools and sports clubs, and was often viewed as an emerging priority under the new CoE Vision and Strategy (mixed ecology). However, a revised approach is required to develop well-defined and reformed partnerships that create a new culture with chaplaincy organisations such as Sports Chaplaincy UK and Christians in Sport.

Case study data highlighted a plethora of activities for churched and unchurched audiences and communities, all of which contribute in some way to the physical, emotional and/or spiritual health and wellbeing of participants. The best-formed of these are the long-established activities in and around schools, one-off events like football tournaments and sport quiz evenings, and traditional weekend sporting activity. Nevertheless, many innovations are occurring as Sport Ministers develop the confidence (and obtain the longer-term support) to

adapt to local demand through a place-based approach within local parishes.<sup>34</sup> This should be further supported, utilizing approaches by community sport and sport for development organisations learning and insight to successfully deliver sporting activity in local communities. All eight pilot dioceses accept that SWM should be fun, inclusive and demand lead.

At one level, wellbeing activities are well-established in some parishes (such as walking, Pilates or fitness groups), however these are often detached from intentional mission and diocesan networks or knowledge. Many SWM Leads and Bishops highlighted that activity was happening quietly, as a part of regular parish activity, expressing that they would welcome a stronger mapping of activity to enhance their understanding and the impact. It is acknowledged, that this will require a significant cultural shift within dioceses and parishes. At another level, more innovative approaches to wellbeing such as social prescribing or wellbeing courses are still being tested by dioceses and are less well-formulated or developed. A view held by many, especially senior diocesan staff, is that in some dioceses there is also demand and need to support and develop older people in and around churches and the community. Wellbeing activities are seen as a successful way to do this and coupled with innovation, wellbeing is also ripe for expansion and development especially given its broader cultural profile.

These cases studies (alongside those presented elsewhere – see Balcar and Parker, 2022) provide the initial foundations to establish more robust models for SWM. The main challenge here is the quality of data that dioceses have for each project or programme at this stage of the NSWP. This remains a cultural issue within parishes and dioceses and unless funding requires the collection of data, it appears that it is rarely forthcoming in these contexts. Indeed, given the underdeveloped nature of reporting on SWM activities and models, this research is unable to comment more specifically, at this time, about what successful SWM models looks like. Nevertheless, even with limited data, a broad picture is emerging to help position SWM within the CoE and within dioceses.

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<sup>34</sup> Place-based approaches are collaborative, long-term approaches to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared agenda, shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts. See: <https://www.local.gov.uk/place-based-partnership-working>

Although limited, these research findings do provide evidence of a positive direction of travel. In time, projects and programmes in Gloucester, Norwich, Ely and Blackburn will likely form the foundation of successful SWM models, if they undertake robust monitoring and evaluation (and systematic and consistent reporting). With the exception of Gloucester Diocese, there was a significant desire for cross-diocesan support to develop SWM activities into a suite of models that could be successfully deployed by a diocese and even a parish. This is a core piece of work which needs to be undertaken beyond this report, ideally involving several dioceses establishing core reporting measures about activities on a regular (i.e., quarterly) basis, followed by the identification of the key elements of success.

Missionally (and theologically) speaking, the research shows that dioceses are actively considering how SWM relates to church and faith pathways. This reflects a clear view from respondent senior diocesan staff and Bishops that SWM must be integrated into diocesan mission planning and that if it is to be taken seriously at diocesan or national level, SWM can no longer be made up of stand-alone projects that may or may not have any intentional impact on mission or discipleship. It is perhaps not surprising that most diocesan thinking around SWM is in its infancy, with Gloucester Diocese being the exception. Case study data highlights that there are many different approaches taken by (and within) individual dioceses towards SWM, especially where those dioceses take a ‘parish-led’ approach in contrast with a more coordinated plan. While accurate and reliable data is limited in some cases, diocesan approaches to mission can be broadly described by way of three main categories: (i) Targeting the unchurched and creating new worshipping communities or fresh expressions (Gloucester), (ii) Targeting the local parish community, with a preference for and/or emphasis on the unchurched, and slowly embedding them in church life to grow parishes numbers (Norwich, Ely), and (iii) Targeting the local community and engaging them with elements of chaplaincy, sharing the gospel, pastoral care, and invitations to church (Birmingham, Blackburn, Rochester, London, Guildford). Of course, some dioceses feature elements of all three.

The most advanced of these is Gloucester Diocese, who take an overarching diocesan approach to SWM that adopts a placed-based perspective on the creation of new worshipping communities (as an antidote to traditional churches which may struggle to attract younger people) through an adapted Seven Sacred Spaces framework. In order to embed this, they use this framework of mission to measure success, i.e., what new worshipping communities look

like. This approach remains in its infancy as Gloucester continue to develop their evolving model of mission.

Both Ely and Norwich are developing a different missional approach. Based on the work of The Sports Factory, SWM looks to engage the wider community, especially the unchurched, and as well as providing gospel content within some activities, they broadly look to attract people into the orbit of local churches. This is achieved through a series of invitations to events which are designed to gradually bring people closer to traditional models of church. This approach is underpinned by pastoral support from SWM personnel and by encouraging unchurched people to volunteer and lead.

Finally, the missional approaches of Birmingham, Blackburn, Rochester, London and Guildford are more traditional. While operating at different levels of sophistication, these five dioceses encourage parishes to decide their own missional approach. This broadly relies on the individuals leading or organising SWM activity. While most will invite participants to a church-related event or service, it is often only when a parachurch organization is acting in support that a gospel message is given. In London, this is more developed, as Activate has used a wide range of methods to develop its missional approach, for example, hosting short easily accessible services closely aligned to wellbeing activity, and piloting a Sunday ‘Sports Church’ (aimed at families) as a form of a new worshipping community.

While all these approaches are valid, going forward SWM will need to consider and embed wider church approaches to mission and ministry. Most of the pilot dioceses are already thinking about this, and all are convinced that SWM has a place in helping to develop such approaches. The key question for the NSWPP is how to develop and support this work in the next three to five years. A key component of this will be the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of these different missional approaches to help measure success, impact and to create the necessary insight to refine the SWM offer or provision. This would appear crucial to the future of SWM in the pilot dioceses and beyond. Moreover, further work is required to ensure that SWM does not simply become a perceived tool of evangelical engagement for churches, and that SWM does not enter into purely transactional relationships with churches in terms of its missional value. Sport has a more important, fundamental and a wider value in the community and nation and must be seen in this context.

Dioceses should continue to develop their missional thinking and embed this in well-thought out theories of change.<sup>35</sup> While each missional approach has its own challenges, the findings of this research indicate that the relationship between SWM, the local church or new worshipping community, communities, and schools is universally endorsed. It is clear that dioceses need support to build such relationships (i.e., in line with the ‘Growing Faith’ agenda), and there is evidence that some SWM parachurch organisations are beginning to explore possibilities in this area.

Dioceses will also need to consider which of the three missional approaches might best help them achieve their strategic aims. It is acknowledged that any such considerations are often predicated on the resources available. Where a diocese is able to fund SWM sufficiently, it may be in a position to create a coordinated mission plan for the whole diocese and invest in the development of delivery of the approach. Dioceses with limited resources may decide to take a parish-based (and perhaps more ‘relaxed’) approach to mission. Those dioceses with a measure of available resource may create a mix of both. It is too early to say which approach is likely to be most successful; this will become evident over time if monitoring and evaluation processes continue to improve. However, it is highly likely that this mixed approach to mission will remain as a result of funding.

Diocesan culture and appetite for innovation also play an important role in influencing and developing SWM. The effective implementation of SWM will require culture change across the CoE both within central institutions and in dioceses, and such change would appear to be more likely if driven from the ‘bottom up’, i.e., organically and locally, rather than ‘top down’, i.e., nationally. The research broadly highlights that those with a higher appetite for innovation, have taken the vestiges of SWM (if it existed) in their diocesan context, built on this, and recast the vision for what a diocesan SWM can achieve. This recasting or integrating of SWM into high-level objectives has been undertaken by some of the pilot dioceses to varying degrees, including the complete re-setting of SWM to help create new worshipping communities, and the transformation of traditional stand-alone SWM projects by coordinating and organising these into a specific SWM approach/model with strong parish-based engagement. On a lesser

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<sup>35</sup> Theory of Change is a comprehensive description of how and why an activity is expected to lead to the desired changes or outcomes. It provides a roadmap for how it is intended to achieve its long-term goals and create meaningful impact.



scale, other dioceses have worked with traditional SWM approaches and sought to amplify these by encouraging parish engagement. Key factor that appears to influence overall approach, alongside funding and culture, are: (i) the role of the local parish in terms of the active promotion of SWM as a genuine means of community engagement, and mission and discipleship, and (ii) the role of the diocese in setting a clear vision and objectives around SWM for parishes to buy into.

The research also highlights that more work is required to improve the monitoring and evaluation of SWM projects both in the pilot dioceses and across the sector. There is lack of strategic thinking on monitoring and evaluation issues across the pilot sites and dioceses require cross-diocese 'national' support to develop frameworks and processes for data collection. The Gloucester Diocese have created a broad template for SWM, albeit highly focused on their specific outcomes to create new worshipping communities. Work is required to adapt this model and to create a broader, flexible and holistic framework that other dioceses, whatever their approach, can use, even at the most basic level of data collection. This should be a clear priority for the next phase of the NSWP.

While data collection is under-developed, the case studies of diocesan activity have yielded important trends in the use of SWM, demonstrating that well-organised, regular SWM can attract significant numbers of people from a local community especially young people (see also Crabbe et al, 2015). Examples from across the pilot dioceses show that local parishes, employing a single SWM Lead, can reach up to 150-200 people per week. Parishes undertaking a single SWM weekly activity reach between 10-40 people per week. In Gloucester, where SWM is well supported by the Diocese, across multiple sites, in year one, SWM reaches up to 400 people per week. This is also seen in Norwich where a similar model is used in several parishes. The main conclusion to be drawn from this is that there is demand for sport and wellbeing activities and parish-based SWM by local people. In addition, there is a strong correlation between resourcing, coordination/support, a skilled workforce and participant numbers.

The data about faith pathways and church attendance is less robust, yet indications show that SWM does have an impact. Alongside anecdotal evidence from the pilot dioceses of people and families joining churches through SWM, two surveys undertaken in Gloucester and Ely highlight that SWM does make people think more about faith. Again, further work is needed

to understand exactly what kind of Christian input is provided by those involved in SWM and the mission models used. This data is not sufficiently robust to make a case about the value of SWM against other forms of mission/ministry (which often also have little evidence to support investment), there are signs that it is as successful as other forms. In fact, several senior diocesan staff highlighted that a diocese could employ several Sport and Wellbeing Ministers for the same cost of a clergy post, and such individuals could engage communities across a wider geographical area and in a less restricted manner. Wider research strongly supports the impact that community sport provision can create in terms of social outcomes and that public funders are increasingly investing in local organisations to do this (see, for example, Morgan and Parker, 2023).

A number of the pilot dioceses reported how important these wider outcomes were to them as part of their approach to social justice and especially poverty. Some had specific touchpoints including via the Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF). This had created a significant cohort of young people that parishes continued to engage, in one example, long after the HAF programme ceased to operate. More broadly, dioceses saw SWM as something which should be framed as having a broader remit within the church, i.e., engaging and supporting local community needs and issues, for example, reducing crime and Anti-Social Behaviour, creating new activities for young people to participate in, volunteer and lead, and tackling health inequalities, many of which the Government is attempting to address increasingly through community and grass roots sport. Needless to say, better alignment with the grass roots and community sports sector would help develop this.

### **6.3 Training and Education Pathways**

One of the most significant developments of the NSWP has been Ridley Hall's contribution in facilitating educational courses, and as a conduit for national SWM leadership. The research findings highlight, especially from within diocesan senior teams, the strong desire to 'professionalise' SWM: to combine spirit-led mission, good project management, and leadership and accountability through appropriately trained and supported staff. This would appear especially important as dioceses begin to work with Vision and Strategy Diocesan Consultants in order to make a well-balanced, argued and evidenced case for SWM including future funding.

There is evidence that pilot dioceses are beginning to use Ridley Hall's courses. In total, 12 of the 15 people who have finished or are undertaking Ridley SWM degree courses, are linked to pilot dioceses. In addition, some parachurch organisations are increasingly enthusiastic about working with Ridley to develop tailored content relevant to their SWM models and theology. The online Ridley Award also appears to provide a sound introduction and firm foundation to SWM from which laity can grow their engagement. 30 people (dioceses unknown) have completed or are currently completing the Award and a number of parachurch organisations (national and international) are exploring this as a training route for their staff. With the initial phase of the NSWPP completed, it would appear pertinent for Ridley Hall, the pilot dioceses and the featured parachurch organisations to strategically consider how to attract more people (including volunteers) into the SWM training funnel, and to review (and monitor) the relevance of course content. Ridley may also wish to consider some form of alumni programme to ensure that past students remain connected and are aware of SWM employment opportunities (both in the UK and beyond).

Relatedly, the issue of sector-wide workforce is one of the main challenges to developing SWM within the CoE in the future. This is a common theme across the research findings and the case study data highlights that workforce issues, especially in relation to the development of fresh expressions, new worshipping communities, and volunteer engagement are ongoing. If, for example, Sport and Wellbeing Ministers can be trained to lead new worshipping communities, this has the potential to open up a whole series of opportunities for churches and dioceses in terms of how SWM might be mobilised in a locality. As the case studies show, where a diocese invests in well-trained Sport and Wellbeing Ministers, SWM develops more quickly, comprehensively, and professionally, and has greater reach and impact. More widely the evidence from the case studies highlights that a well-trained Sport and Wellbeing Minister is much more than a community sports coach. Evidence from Sportily, The Sports Factory and Activate shows that these roles demand a wide range of experience and skills, currently not readily available to a diocese.

The NSWPP and dioceses, alongside representatives from the SWM sector, should address these issues and agree a 10-year strategic plan for workforce development, including sector-wide career pathways for Sport and Wellbeing Ministers in mission, ministry, and community sport and wellbeing. Such planning should also include youth workers, many of whom may wish to contribute to or re-train in SWM. More work should be undertaken to ensure youth work and

SWM are closely aligned and mutually support each other. Alongside the Ridley Hall's suite of courses and training, this could provide the drive required to continue the professionalisation of the SWM workforce and to help meet the CoE's ambitious vision to recruit more people into the youth work sector. The CoE 'Catalyst 30K' framework (currently delivered by Ridley Hall) may be one possible way to achieve these ends.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See: <https://catalyst30K.org>

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This report presents the findings of a piece of independent research into aspects the Church of England's National Sport and Wellbeing Project (NSWP) which ran between June 2020-June 2023, and which was funded by the Laing Trust and the Church of England. A central aim of the report has been to present the views and experiences of key stakeholders involved in the Project, whilst at the same time considering the social, cultural and institutional landscape across which related work took place. The report seeks to shed further light on the role of faith-based (Christian) organisations in contemporary social life, and aims to add to the increasing momentum around sport/faith initiatives in the UK and to create a stronger evidence-based narrative and rationale for work in this area.

The research findings demonstrate that there is a strong commonality across the pilot dioceses and a firm belief among the respondent stakeholder groups that SWM has a future role in the church. However, this work is in its infancy and more consideration is needed of the wider context of sport and wellbeing in society and how SWM contributes to this. In turn, further consideration should be given to the following:

- (i) Support, investment and funding for SWM. Without this a diocesan strategy highlighting SWM is unlikely to be driven forward successfully;
- (ii) Support and investment for SWM diocesan strategies/planning over time – at least 10 years;
- (iii) The development of an innovative culture. Without this SWM will struggle to be driven forward;
- (iv) The utilisation of previous SWM activity/ventures as a platform for the development of future activity. This can make a significant difference in helping to establish SWM in a diocese;
- (v) Integration of SWM into other diocesan priorities such as Children and Youth or Estates work, with SWM as a cross cutting theme;
- (vi) The employment of paid staff to lead and coordinate SWM within a diocese and deliver activity and create faith pathways (avoiding a reliance on volunteers);
- (vii) Training and development of SWM workers in multiple skills beyond coaching qualifications including project management and mission, to be increasingly professional in their approach;

- (viii) The development of partnerships between schools, community and local churches with a clear faith and church pathway, or new worshipping community.

The research highlights several vital principles that will support the development and growth of SWM in dioceses. These include:

- (i) A strong articulation and argument for SWM approaches, outcomes and successes to help address increasing resource challenges for dioceses and competing demands between missional activities, and achieve a the key aim to embed SWM in diocesan strategies and missional priorities;
- (ii) Consideration of the inhibiting factors including traditional perceptions of ‘sports’ ministry and the importance of adopting more nuanced terminology such as ‘sport and wellbeing ministry’ or simply ‘wellbeing’ ministry, thereby portraying an altogether more inclusive portfolio of activities especially for elderly populations;
- (iii) Design activities for churched and unchurched audiences and communities, which are fun, easily accessible for all, low-cost, and demand-led. Activities should focus on specific age groups and/or contexts such as young people/schools/ multigenerational (i.e., the provision of activities for more than one generation), and intergenerational approaches (i.e., activities which would engage more than one generation at the same time) should be explored further.
- (iv) Assess, consider and create multiple local demand-led SWM. While well-developed models are yet to be fully evaluated, there are several well established approaches that can be used locally which attract, on a regular basis, at least 150-200 people per week. These include:
  - a. Weekly SWM in schools providing a significant opportunity to reach large numbers of children and young people (from 50-150 per week) through a range of activity types;
  - b. Regular and frequent seasonal holiday clubs/camps, providing significant opportunities to engage good numbers of young people (up to 50) and to facilitate the development of deeper relationships with both children and parents as a pathway into other SWM, church activities or services;
  - c. ‘Active RE’ to reach children and young people, whilst also providing a source of income generation for SWM;

- d. Out-of-school clubs to attract young people, with weekly football outreach sessions, in particular, potentially attracting on average between 40-50 young people.
  - e. Regular and frequent tournaments, community events, social sport and one-off events such as the screening of major sports gatherings, staffing Parkruns, or hosting sport quizzes, providing a useful first point of contact and ‘feeder’ to more regular SWM activity and other church invitations, potentially leading to the construction of more in-depth and/or meaningful relationships;
  - f. Wellbeing activities and exercise and fitness classes alongside other church-based activities such as services, Cafes and Mother and Toddler groups, and potentially attracting different audiences.
- (v) Adopt a ‘missional’ outlook to SWM activity, viewing it as a tool to engage unchurched and/or disengaged audiences and communities. There is no specific approach to SWM which aligns with existing theologies of sport, but broader theological and frameworks can be used as a backdrop to SWM discussions;
  - (vi) Adopt strong monitoring and evaluation practices including standardised systems and processes around data collection given that these are decidedly under-developed and relatively little evidence exists. Where it does exist it is inconsistent in relation to the impact of the work being undertaken. Tackling diocesan coordination and the limited mechanisms to collect data is an important place to start. This is not to count numbers but to inform SWM approaches and to understand outcomes to ensure good decision making;
  - (vii) Create and develop an appropriately trained delivery workforce including the role of and training of volunteers and the employment of qualified Sports Ministers (through validated courses);
  - (viii) Amidst an existing array of outreach activities commonly referred to as ‘competing demands’, SWM should look to develop significant partnerships with other relevant outreach activities such as new worshipping communities and pioneer ministry to develop joint approaches to investment.

The findings of this research also highlight that dioceses face many similar challenges and issues in developing SWM. Most of these require overarching and coordinated cross-diocesan ‘national’ or ‘central’ support and input that may more broadly provide both church and SWM

sector strategic thinking (and equipping/training). Findings offer some guidance as to the solutions for the NSWHP moving forward which include:

- (i) The development and establishment of strategic partnerships with parachurch and secular sporting agencies and organisations at both diocesan and national level;
- (ii) The development of the theological basis upon which SWM operates (particularly in relation to missional approach and theories of change);
- (iii) The explicit articulation of faith journeys and pathways into church (especially the connection between SWM programme delivery and church engagement), and the broader (and longer-term) transitional processes surrounding SWM and the establishment of new worshipping communities;
- (iv) The development of SWM beyond its strong links with the evangelical tradition;
- (v) The development of a ‘fit for purpose’ workforce that can operate in transitioning church culture, including entrepreneurship and pioneering approaches, and undertake project management;
- (vi) The development of more robust monitoring and evaluation processes/mechanisms (both internal and external);
- (vii) The development of business modelling, marketing, and fundraising/grant bidding.

The research also provides insight for the CoE, the NSWHP and the SWM sector about how to drive entrepreneurial and pioneering SWM within the CoE. It was widely agreed amongst respondents that the NSWHP should continue to provide important and necessary leadership for developing SWM in the CoE, and that in doing so it would continue to provide a national space to consider and develop SWM approaches, and to network beyond diocesan contexts. A national gathering of Bishops, senior diocesan staff members, and SWM Leads, alongside other dioceses, appears desirable to maintain and expand the confidence required to explore, collaborate, and learn together. Furthermore, the NSWHP could be expanded to support the central needs of dioceses when considering the subsequent phases of project development as highlighted above. There was also a view across respondent groups that there needed to be a coordinated, cross-diocesan SWM vision, closely aligned with the overarching CoE Vision and Strategy, so that individual dioceses could develop their own vision and strategy in this area of ministry.



This picture is complex not least because each pilot diocese has progressed differently. However, this kind of activity broadly falls into two areas: (i) the cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge exchange (i.e., peer learning) in relation to how success has been achieved, and the NSW Learning Community may be one forum where this can take place. (ii) practical models, case studies, and frameworks that all dioceses can consider and adapt to develop their SWM more quickly, professionally, and successfully. While this research helps to kick-start that process, unfortunately progress by the eight pilot dioceses has not quite been enough to achieve this to date. However, the research provides a significant direction of travel and some key insights.

There was a general sense that the NSW had enhanced the profile of SWM in the CoE and the church more broadly, and that it had opened up new conversations which were already leading to increased activity on the ground. Nevertheless, the wider SWM sector has long-since wanted greater partnership working with dioceses and this will come as parachurch organisations and to a lesser extent, the dioceses, better understand each other and align objectives and tackle challenges together.

There was universal agreement that SWM and dioceses should explicitly align with the CoE Vision and Strategy especially to be a church that is ‘younger and more diverse’ alongside where ‘mixed ecology’ is the norm. Furthermore, SWM must be integrated within diocesan strategic planning in order to avoid being perceived as a stand-alone area of ministry. It was widely acknowledged by respondents that SWM needed to be aware and align to other missional activities and to be prepared to make a strong business case for itself, and to seek to work in partnership with other initiatives and ventures, i.e., the development of a cross-cutting approach towards: children, young people and families, and between church schools, local communities and local churches. It was also articulated by a number of respondents that SWM has a clear role to play within wider agendas such as: social justice, disadvantaged communities, community cohesion, and prevention narratives. Chaplaincy was cited as an area that warranted further consideration and alignment as it would appear to sit well with a mixed ecology model being put forward at the national level.

Creating a strong SWM narrative and embedding this into other diocesan ministry thinking was also seen as critical. Many thought SWM as a sector must better articulate how it can help achieve the Vision and Strategy. There was also a consistent view that NSW communication

needed to improve since it was felt that it had not sufficiently ‘cut through’ more broadly, within the CoE and other dioceses. Going forward, the NSWP needs to enhance and develop new partnerships including with other developing missional approaches around the CoE.

The Learning Community was seen as crucial in moving the NSWP forward and in maintaining momentum given that it provided an important space for SWM Leads to: (i) glean a sense of what was happening within the CoE, the sports and wellbeing sectors and the SWM sector, (ii) share experiences and ‘best practice’, and to build partnerships with other institutions and organisations. As the NSWP prepares to enter a second phase, expansion (including to diocese and senior staff and Bishops) was seen as important, as was re-defining the purpose of the Learning Community.

Taking the NSWP forwards and growing SWM, however remains challenging at this juncture because of some uncertainty about how the Archbishops’ Council will operate through the new CoE Vision and Strategy; once the changes to CoE culture and structures settle this should make this clearer. This research however, highlights that positioning any mission and ministry approach nationally can be complex and confusing. There are contradictory theologies, approaches, and views not only between layers of leadership within the church (whether that is parish, diocesan or the centre), but within the same layers of leadership, making it extremely challenging to advise or guide an emerging ministry through to the best position. The anchoring of the NSWP within a single diocese may also bring challenges in terms of how this might effectively support the multifaceted approach taken by the pilot dioceses to date, and draw in new dioceses which are not as advanced in their thinking.

There are many clear indications for how SWM might proceed within the CoE structures. These will challenge both dioceses with all their layers of leadership, and projects on the ground. The restructure has seen the focus shift to strategic support of dioceses more broadly as they discern, consult and create mission plans that support the CoE to become younger, more diverse, where a mixed ecology is the norm and a church of missionary disciples. The Archbishops’ Council will support Bishops and senior diocesan senior staff to prioritise their mission plan approach and the implementation of that plan and therefore, SWM needs to position itself as a coherent approach within diocesan strategic priorities. It needs to do so in both the short and long term, and against other missional approaches, working hard to align to diocesan vision and approaches to mission and in collaboration with other missions which SWM can work so

successfully. This changing environment has not only constrained SWM growth since the NSWP began but has the potential to undermine progress to date, if dioceses and the NSWP are unable to instil confidence in SWM, and secure future space within diocesan vision, strategy and missionally approaches in the near future.

This research highlights that the challenge is for dioceses to balance developing enough in-house understanding, expertise, and confidence to develop and run SWM, whilst not becoming solely focused on any type of mission. The key to the development of SWM is therefore successfully bridging the gap between delivery expertise on the ground and, in parishes, creating a ‘middle management’ who understand SWM, and can coordinate and help support its professional and accountable growth thereby giving senior leaders faith and trust to ensure that they provide the necessary strategic and structural support to ensure this innovative flourishing to happen.

The NSWP was widely seen by respondents as having had a positive impact even though it had not made as much progress as expected by the pilot dioceses and stakeholders. It is widely recognised that it has only just begun, and that its long-term impact and legacy is yet to be seen. Ridley Hall’s involvement was well received by the pilot dioceses and the majority of stakeholders and indications are that this will continue to grow, especially with more parachurch and diocesan engagement. Most stakeholders believed the NSWP had had a positive impact not only by lifting the profile of SWM within the pilot dioceses but by opening up new conversations that had led to increased activity. The majority believed that the Project had provided crucial national leadership with cross-diocesan coordination and a focus that had given the pilot dioceses ‘permission’ to explore and develop SWM within their local context.

The desire and enthusiasm by most respondents to see SWM succeed, meant that most wanted the NSWP to do much more. The overwhelming view was that the Project should not end and there was a degree of disappointment amongst all respondent groups, that after considerable investment and good progress, the NSWP’s future remains in transition. Strategic leadership within the SWM sector and across the pilot dioceses was recognised as a key need. There were many other challenges that required coordinated cross-diocesan attention and drive including a stronger narrative for SWM, workforce issues, partnerships, successful sustainable and replicable models. This includes the current mechanism to take the NSWP forward, by a single diocese. There was a generic view that the ‘Church of England’ should take on this

responsibility, however, not all respondents were specific about which part of the 'Church of England' they referred to in this respect. There was a counter view out forward by some respondents, that a new strategic organisation vehicle for the NSWP should be created outside of CoE institutions to provide strategic leadership and coordination in those areas that dioceses required support, and to influence key stakeholders. While there was no consensus here, there was a sense that this should be considered and debated further.

This research offers Bishops, senior diocesan staff, the central CoE institutions, parishes, funders and those involved in SWM much to consider and reflect upon. The NSWP and the pilot dioceses have made good progress and while this has been slower than expected, the evidence broadly supports the notion that SWM can and should play a significant role in the mission and ministry of the CoE, or at least should be given more time to establish and build on the firm foundations that the Project has established. Despite some sizable challenges, there is little to suggest at this point that the Project should cease and that SWM should be abandoned within the CoE. The findings presented here clearly highlight the emerging direction of travel dioceses and parishes need to take in order to embed, develop and sustain successful SWM. In turn, findings clearly highlight the areas that need more consideration and work for SWM to develop and flourish. While dioceses and parishes must lead the way in their geographical areas, there is also real need for a supportive cross-diocesan approach to tackling key challenges and developing areas of mutual need. Crucially, the NSWP must now find the right platform or vehicle from which it can develop without losing the hard-fought progress that it has made.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has highlighted a number of issues that the CoE institutions, dioceses and the wider SWM sector need to consider to successfully move forwards. Further consideration is required to assess the response and next steps to the NSWP to date, which needs to balance the tension and appropriateness of a ‘top down’ (centralised) approach to the embedding of SWM in diocesan settings and dioceses developing this themselves.

### *Dioceses*

We suggest that where dioceses wish to successfully commit, develop and implement SWM strategically, they should:

1. Identify (annually) a series of specific priorities in terms of next steps, directly related to their key learning to date or current SWM already being delivered locally;
2. Consider diocesan funding over at least six (ideally 10) years to make a significant impact on developing SWM;
3. Create a funded SWM Lead post (fractional or full-time) to ensure that SWM is structurally incorporated into the diocesan organisational structure to strategically deliver, oversee and monitor related activities and create good partnerships;
4. Support and fund paid and trained SWM ministers to deliver local activities;
5. Explore public or other funding for SWM activities to provide additional revenue to support delivery and reach;
6. Commit to map the supply, and if possible, demand for sport and wellbeing activity and ministry locally, and establish partnerships with other sport and wellbeing providers and local/regional sporting, third-sector organisations (both faith-based and secular) to build trust and to develop stronger, more successful delivery approaches including critical partnership working with schools.

### *How is this taken further forward*

We suggest the need to urgently consider how this SWM work can be further developed in a coordinated manner nationally and through what means this can be done most effectively in order to:

7. Prioritise strategic leadership thereby providing relevant and appropriate leadership expertise across dioceses and CoE support organisations to curate the strategic development of SWM in the UK and beyond (i.e., set objectives and agree implementation plans), to tackle common interests and challenges, undertake stakeholder management (i.e., develop connections and influence) with organisations (including CoE bodies, public bodies, funders, government, parachurch organisations, training and theological colleges, and the community sport and physical activity sector) to shape the SWM offer and develop this through a place-based approach;
8. Consider how the work both within and outside of CoE institutions and organisations, and with (and across) committed SWM dioceses, alongside relevant experts can be coordinated and further developed;
9. Consider the development of an action plan for supporting and developing Phase Two of the Learning Community;
10. Consider the benefits of strategic cooperation and collaboration across SWM dioceses and the wider landscape (including Ridley Hall and other training colleges and academic institutions). Key areas for strategic collaboration include:
  - (vi) the establishment of strategic partnerships with parachurch and secular sporting agencies and organisations;
  - (vii) the development of the theological basis upon which SWM operates (particularly in relation to missional approach, theories of change, SWM in society and church growth) alongside sector experts (both practitioner and academic) and national and international theological and ordination training colleges;
  - (viii) the explicit articulation of faith journeys and pathways (especially the connection between SWM programme delivery and church engagement);
  - (ix) the broader (and longer-term) transitional processes surrounding SWM and the establishment of new worshipping communities.
  - (x) the development of thinking around the education and training of SWM staff (including volunteers); relationship building with local communities and community organisations, the local church, parachurch organisations and secular sports agencies.

11. Consider creating or facilitating diocesan and sector-wide solutions and practical support for dioceses, deaneries and parishes to galvanise SWM in the CoE and beyond.

Key areas to include:

- (viii) developing and communicating a clear, strong and united SWM narrative based on the growing evidence base, research and stories to SWM dioceses, both within the CoE (and all its institutions) and externally including funders and policy makers;
- (ix) addressing workforce expansion and further professional development (and professionalization) for SWM nationally and beyond by working with theological and ordination training colleges, to equip and train SWM leaders and other diocesan staff (including project managers) around issues such as: monitoring and evaluation (both internal and external), partnership working, business development, marketing, and fundraising/grant bidding;
- (x) exploring viable funding options, creating funding expertise (including training/equipping in and the adoption of a focused approach to grant bidding especially in relation to resource and facility development), and multi-level frameworks to support fundraising from Trusts and Foundations, public and CoE diocesan funds, and creating social enterprise models at parish, diocesan and national level;
- (xi) creating standardized monitoring and evaluation frameworks and developing data collection methods and tools;
- (xii) developing marketing, advertising and broader communications strategies around SWM;
- (xiii) identifying key partners and stakeholders at local and regional levels to drive collaboration and support dioceses to build relationships;
- (xiv) developing and creating sustainable diocesan and parish frameworks with replicable SWM models, at different levels and with different approaches, which include faith pathways, new worshipping communities and ‘fresh expressions’.

12. Host an annual national conference to capacity build across all dioceses, share best practice, network and inspire through a shared strategic vision for SWM across the CoE and beyond;

### ***National Sport and Wellbeing Project Learning Community (Phase Two)***

13. We suggest that there should be a programme of continued shared learning and knowledge exchange via the NSWLP Learning Community forum, widening both the level of participants to include Bishops and senior diocesan staff, and the number of dioceses involved;
14. We suggest that the NSWLP Learning Community should continue to explore a clear framework and programme of professional development for the cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge exchange and peer learning across the pilot dioceses and other dioceses both within and outside of the Learning Community. Following on from its work during Phase One, the Learning Community should have three broad aims:
  - (iv) the continuation and/or development of SWM programme delivery to meet demand and/or attract new participant groups aligned to the CoE Vision and Strategy and Diocesan Strategic Plans;
  - (v) expanding vision casting and increasing the profile of SWM in order to persuade both diocesan staff and parishioners of SWM's missional and material benefits;
  - (vi) the development of a common understanding of the key ingredients required (set out above) for the successful development of SWM in a diocese through sharing experiences, agreed frameworks and outside expert advice:

### ***Archbishops' Council***

15. We suggest that Archbishops' Council considers this report and the ongoing progress of dioceses strategically developing SWM. That it notes the current impact SWM has and its potential in the future to help deliver the CoE Vision and Strategy and its own objectives;
16. We suggest that the Council ensures that SWM is actively supported and is included in continued conversations with other areas of ministry and mission including children and young people, underrepresented groups in the church, and its role as route to the development of a 'mixed ecology';
17. We also suggest that the Council considers the urgent need to enhance and promote workforce development across the sports ministry sector and within the youth worker sector, with the aim of contributing to the growth of a 'younger and more diverse' church.



***House of Bishops/General Synod***

18. We suggest that the House of Bishops/General Synod consider this report and the ongoing progress of dioceses in strategically developing SWM, in order to learn, understand and actively support how SWM might help dioceses and parishes to be ‘younger and more diverse’ and to develop a ‘mixed ecology’ through diocesan strategic plans.

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