



CASE STUDY · SPORT & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Finding the hidden potential in community

How London Sport used the Relational Mapping Toolkit to reveal invisible networks, overlooked organisations, and untapped leadership across two London boroughs.

| CLIENT | PROGRAMME | PARTNER | SCOPE |
|--|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| London Sport + two London Borough Councils | Sport England Place Investment Programme | Community Regen | 2 boroughs · 4-phase engagement |
| 2 | 4 | <1hr | 6+ |
| London boroughs mapped | Network clusters identified | Live map built in real time | Distinct map views created |

PROJECT CONTEXT

Why London Sport commissioned stakeholder mapping

As part of their work in Sport England’s Place Investment Programme, London Sport — together with two London borough councils — wanted to understand the community of stakeholders involved in providing sport and physical activity across the two boroughs. They issued a tender for stakeholder mapping.

Free Ice Cream and Community Regen collaborated to bid for the work. The proposition: Free Ice Cream’s Relational Mapping Toolkit would be combined with Community Regen’s deep community engagement expertise to deliver the insight the project needed.

“Deeper local insight and community engagement that will place communities at the heart of designing the change needed to create the conditions for people to move more.”

— Sport England Place Investment Programme Guidance

There was a shared ethos from the start. Sport England’s Place Investment Programme looks to put communities at the heart of systems change, recognising community assets as the starting point. The Relational Mapping Toolkit maps the strong relationships and activities already in place — revealing how the relational network holds the current system together, and where it is fragile.

The project's ultimate aim: understand which stakeholders have influence, find opportunities for building agency and distributed leadership, and generally strengthen relationships across the whole stakeholder community.

HOW WE WORKED

A four-phase engagement

Each phase built on the last — from crowdsourced data collection, through structured analysis, into facilitated community conversations and longer-term systems change planning.

01

Community mapping workshops

Participants gathered — in person and on video — to collaboratively answer a short question set. As they did, a live network map built itself in real time. Less than an hour per session.

02

Analysis & views

With the full relational map built, we created multiple filtered “Views” — slices of the network tailored to specific questions: influence, untapped leadership, weak ties, shared provision.

03

Data dives with clients

We gathered with Community Regen and London Sport to explore the Views together — identifying patterns, naming questions, and deciding which findings warranted deeper investigation.

04

Community conversations

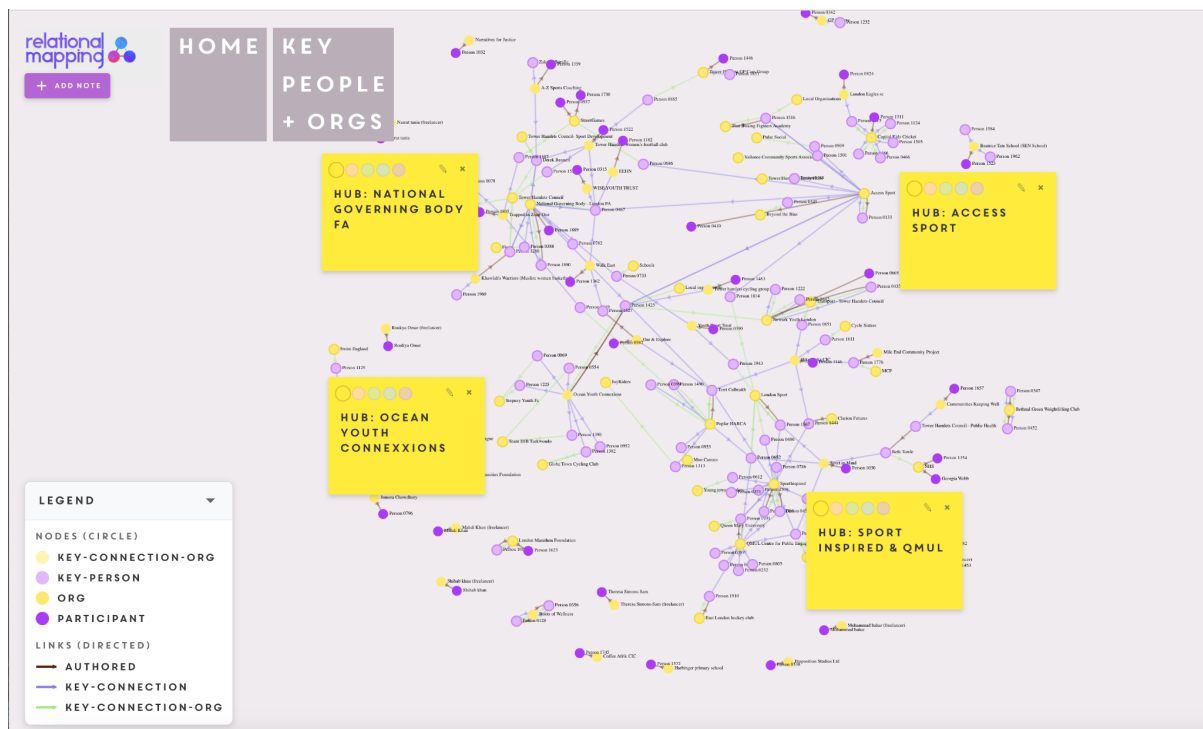
Community Regen led 1:1 conversations across both boroughs — targeting a spread from central to marginal organisations — to validate map patterns with lived experience and story.

The mapping workshops did more than generate data. With everyone watching the map build in real time — seeing themselves connected into it — the sessions had an immediate community-building effect. Participants left with the URL and login to explore the map themselves. The insight wasn't extracted from the community: it was handed back to it.

MAP INSIGHTS

What the maps revealed that nothing else could

The maps surfaced findings that no survey, database, or stakeholder register could have produced — because they captured relationships, trust, and positionality, not just lists of organisations.



The ‘closed club’ borough

In one borough, six organisations showed dense reciprocal ties — but were operating as a closed cluster. The map indicated this was due to limited capacity rather than exclusion, meaning the solution was resourcing, not relationship-building alone.

Invisible grassroots leaders

The maps revealed organisations doing long-term, stable community work with little or no resourcing. Some had been operating quietly for years — essential to the network, but overlooked because they weren’t visible through conventional channels.

Council dependency patterns

In both boroughs, the council was holding a disproportionate proportion of the network together. The map made visible a structural dependency that communities themselves recognised — and could now begin to address.

The fragmented borough

In the other borough, the network was loosely held with weak ties and no dense centre. Many organisations on the periphery held only a single connection into the main network. Grassroots organisations were isolated — even from others doing identical work.

Provision silos by demographic

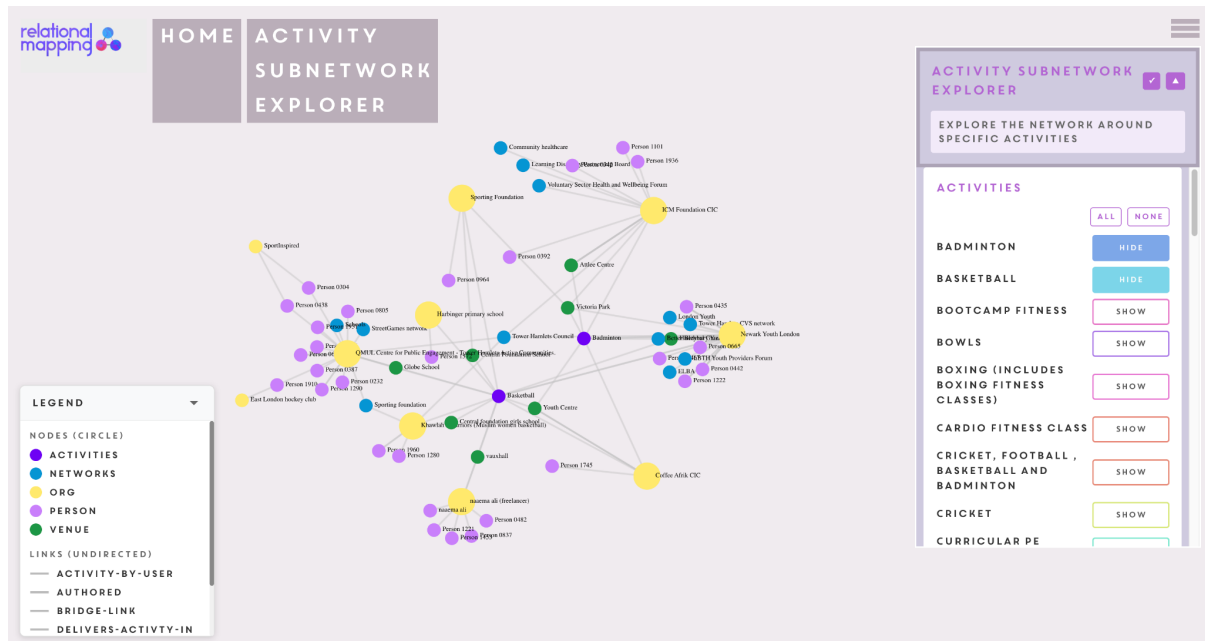
Groups delivering to the same communities — such as Muslim Women’s Basketball — were completely isolated from each other in the network, despite shared purpose. The map named the introductions that needed to happen.

Key bridges under pressure

A small number of individuals and organisations were doing the work of connecting multiple clusters. These bridging actors were identifiable — making it possible to support them before they burned out or moved on.

ANALYSIS PROCESS

The questions a relational map makes it possible to ask



During the Data Dives, the team explored the Views by asking questions that traditional evaluation methods simply cannot answer:

- Who is acting as a bridge to connect the work of key organisations — and how sustainable is that role?
- Who is on the margins even though they are delivering priority activities to priority demographics?
- Where are the weak ties, and where are the closely bonded groups that may have become closed?
- What collaboration networks already exist, and how can they be strengthened?
- Who is doing stable, long-term grassroots work that warrants further resourcing?
- How connected are organisations delivering the same activities — and do they even know about each other?

The map views we built included a *Purpose Explorer* (filtering the network by community purpose), a *Demographic Explorer* (showing which organisations work with which populations), a *Venue Network Explorer* (revealing which venues are overused or underused), and an *Activity Subnetwork Explorer* (showing who delivers what, to whom, with whose support). Each view offered a different lens on the same underlying data.

Built on consent — not surveillance

A core principle of the Relational Mapping Toolkit:

Any data we collect must always be of use to the communities themselves. Anyone who inputs data gets value from that data.

Every participant in a mapping workshop leaves with the URL and login to explore the map themselves — not as passive subjects of an evaluation, but as active members of a community that now has a shared, visual understanding of how it works.

The Relational Mapping Toolkit is fully GDPR-compliant. All clients sign a Joint Controllers Agreement. Participants control their own data.

LONGER-TERM IMPACT

What one mapping project makes possible

A single three-month stakeholder mapping project does not shift a system. But it builds the foundation for that work — and crucially, it creates a baseline that can be re-measured.

| TIMEFRAME | WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE |
|--------------------|---|
| Immediately | Specific introductions between organisations who should know each other but don't. Targeted resourcing for overlooked grassroots organisations. Evidence base for commissioning decisions. |
| 3–6 months | Connect key stakeholders around shared purpose, provision type, and demographic focus. Build peer support networks. Surface shared stories about what the place does well and where the gaps are. |
| 12 months+ | Re-map to track change over time. Open conversations between community leaders and policy decision makers. Begin to include local private sector stakeholders as the community names them. |

REFLECTIONS & LEARNINGS

“We loved working with Community Regen, Free Ice Cream and the Relational Mapping Toolkit: they brought energy, professionalism, and strategic thinking to the work. Their creative, interactive, and personable methodology to collect data and information from individuals and organisations enabled the place partnerships to gain a strong understanding of the strengths of relationships and the people of influence within the place. They were able to engage a diverse range of partners from multiple sectors as well as at all levels of the system from local community groups through to statutory organisations. They highlighted opportunities for development which will be critical for each place to take forward and action as the work progresses.”

— Megan Bevis & Fraser Allan, Senior Development Manager, London Sport

Learnings

This was a well-received and successful project — and we have a lot to build on. We're committed to sharing what we learn as honestly as what we deliver.

A short timeline meant we couldn't build in enough structured time for the community to engage with the map insights before the 1:1 conversations began. Next time, we want to create dedicated Deep Dive sessions where the community can explore the maps together before the programme of individual conversations, so they can help identify who to prioritise and what questions to ask.

We're also exploring how these maps can support systems change at the level of residents moving through a system. One approach we want to test is paper-based Ripple Effects Mapping in Phase 1, to ensure actors from all layers of the system are invited to participate before the relational mapping begins.

FOR CONSULTANCY PARTNERS

Working alongside community engagement specialists

In projects like this one, working alongside partners who have deep community engagement expertise — in this case, Community Regen — is invaluable.

The Relational Mapping Toolkit rapidly produces a data-rich network map that surfaces patterns no qualitative method could identify alone. But the map is not the territory. The patterns it reveals are signals and signposts — to be validated, given depth, and made sense of in conversation with the community themselves.

If you're a consultancy working in systems change, place-based programmes, community development, or organisational culture — and you're looking for a participatory, consent-based tool to complement your engagement work — we'd welcome a conversation.

See what a relational map reveals about your community

We offer a free 20-minute demo and are happy to explore whether the toolkit is a good fit for your brief.

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