

## Project helping more girls to play football in Ealing wins prestigious sports award



A project which is helping more girls in London to start playing football has won an award for its work supporting young Londoners.

The Featherstone School Sport Partnership, which is a Barclays Girls Football School Partnership, is based in Southall and works with dozens of local schools with the aim of increasing equal access to the sport for girls in Ealing.

Earlier this week it won the Supporting Young Londoners Award at the prestigious London Sport Award, supported by the City of London Corporation, receiving widespread praise from the judges.

The Supporting Young Londoners category, in association with Play Innovation, celebrates the work of people and organisations in the capital who are helping people under the age of 25 to get active and enjoy sport.

The Featherstone School Sport Partnership was an obvious choice for the expert judging panel, who were impressed not only by its efforts to encourage more girls to play football, but by a string of initiatives aimed at increasing participation from girls from traditionally underrepresented groups.

Particular praise was given to the partnership's commitment to engaging girls with special educational needs and disabilities, work to remove the financial barriers to participation for families struggling in the cost-of-living crisis, and the launch of a leadership programme for girls from minority ethnic groups in primary and secondary education.

Juma Abdullahi, the partnership's head of community sport, explained: "We work with local schools and our role is to improve the PE and sport provision in those schools, while also giving children opportunities outside of school – especially those targeted groups who may not normally get those opportunities."

The partnership doesn't just focus on football – it provides access to pretty much any sport young people want to play – but its success at the London Sport Awards was in recognition of its

pioneering work in helping girls play football, something all the more important given the drop in physical activity levels experienced by young people during the pandemic.

Juma continued: "It is important that we give girls the opportunity to play the game and to know that the game is for them – that sport is for all, not just the privileged.

"We run workshops to help change mindsets and stress that girls have the right to play any sport they want.

"Those gender stereotypes are still there, but they are changing. And that's obviously where we come in to. To explain to them that sport is for all."

The Featherstone School Sport Partnership is also tackling cultural barriers which have traditionally prevented some girls from playing sport – an area of its work which is producing some of the most rewarding successes.

Juma explained: "We ran a leadership programme in an Asian-dominated school with 16 Asian girls who didn't know anything about football and were not very confident. We trained them up and they ran a festival for 10 schools. To see the growth in those girls was amazing, and so rewarding. Those girls developed a love of the game they previously knew nothing about, which is great."

The partnership's successes are backed up by data. Of 100 sporting events it ran last year, 52% of all participants were female. Previously that number would have been as low as 30%.

Five years ago, around 2,000 young people took part in the partnership's programmes – with just a handful of girls playing football. Now that number is 15,000, with more than half being girls – including many playing football for the first time thanks to the partnership's work.

But what does it mean to win the Supporting Young Londoners Award?

Juma revealed: "We're obviously over the moon. It is great to be nominated for awards and it is good to share the work we're doing outside of the group. But we are in this for the impact we have with the girls.

"Just to be nominated is an achievement, but to celebrate everyone in London is also a great thing - to celebrate the success that young Londoners are having. And, and you know, it's only going to grow."