

By Dila Tumer

As the sun shines over the city on a warm summer evening, sounds of trainers squeaking and laughter can be heard from the Copper Box Arena, where a group of residents get together for a weekly football session.

The match, at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, is organised by Salaam Peace, a sports-based programme based in Hackney and Waltham Forest, which works to deliver a range of projects for residents to engage them in healthy and positive activities.

The programme has its roots in the aftermath of the 7/7 London bombings. Founder Sabir Bham put the project together following discussions with various organisations to support efforts to curb extremism in East London.

Sabir, who grew up in Hackney and now lives in Waltham Forest, was rewarded for his efforts with a regional Unsung Heroes award at the BBC Sports Personality of the Year awards in 2012.

Fast forward six years and the project has an extensive reach and programme. It runs events for boys and girls from the ages of two and up.

And it welcomes those who are newly out of prison to join, to help them to assimilate back into society, as well as build stable relationships with people.

Walking into the Copper Box Arena on 16 July to watch one of the groups playing football, I am amazed by how much fun the teams were having.

The happiness in the room is contagious – a stark contrast to many of the experiences and circumstances of those involved in the game.



Shared goals

A project to help residents lead healthy and positive lives is also giving people leaving prison the confidence to assimilate back into society



“A few people who come here have been having a hard time, this allows them to feel positive you can see the change”

KW* joined the project three years ago. He says: “I wanted to join because you’re not judged by anyone, everyone gets on here, everyone understands that each person has different circumstances. “We all get together and play

football, we don’t always play with the same people, so you get to meet new people. We have some new players today and they fit right in. That’s part of the appeal, nobody feels judged.”

He adds: “For most people it’s an escape. I know where most people

end up going, I think the rate of re-offending is quite high. I am not tempted to go back down that path.

“Prison was just sitting around all day doing nothing, so for the first couple of weeks after coming out my head was spinning because I’m not used to this place. This project helps us adjust and get back into the normal world. I’m very grateful.”

Back on the pitch, it’s hard to keep track of the score, but it seems here, at least, winning is not the aim of the game – enjoying

yourself is.

BL, another player, says: “There are a few people who come who have been having a hard time, this allows them to feel positive, you can see the change in their behaviour.

“It’s a really mixed group. When we come together to play football the age range is from 16 to 60, and there’s a variety of things we can do. It’s not just football – for example

Photos: Adam Holt

Salaam Peace was set up in the aftermath of the 7/7 attacks in London

DID YOU KNOW?



The views of the players

Participants in the Salaam Peace football match share their views of the project:

JW: "I come from an extremely educated background, some of these guys don't. Like with me and my circumstances, my path was supposed to be, you know, the guy that was a banker. Life throws some obstacles in the way, not everything goes to plan. Things like this keep me sane; the free gym, the access to football. It helps most guys, it gives a little bit of freedom, a little hope. The project definitely empowered me, without a doubt."

BL: "I joined Salaam Peace around the time when it first started. I was at school, we played a lot of football in Hackney in Mabley Green, ever since then I've been involved. We've done a lot of work with disabled people, younger people, older people... I myself went to prison for four years, came back out and was trying to get back on my feet, so I contacted the programme again and started playing some football and doing some coaching. I think it's a good way to keep people out of trouble, a lot of our events are accessible because they are free."

MK: "I've been in the project for about 10 months now. This project has helped me a lot, it's kept me out of trouble. It's nice, it takes you back to when you were a kid. We're having fun – that's what it's all about, having fun and helping people."

* The initials of the people interviewed in this feature have been changed

Salaam Peace: building a relationship

BASED in Hackney and Waltham Forest, Salaam Peace delivers a range of sports and education-based projects:

- It caters for everybody from ages two and up
- It runs cycling, walking and football projects to engage people in healthy and positive activities
- It welcomes people from all backgrounds,



including those out of prison.

- The Copper Box Arena provides use of the stadium for football and access to gym for members
- The heart of the project is to engage people in what they enjoy and build a relationship. Some people who take part today started at age nine. They gain skills which they can transfer into their working lives.

The project has a three-tier referral system:

1. **Self-referral:** anyone that wants to join can turn up
2. **Informal referral:** eg, if a police officer sees kids kicking a ball around the streets, they can contact the project and find out about how to get them involved
3. **Higher end:** eg, someone from probation, school or social services, who is reported to the project as having issues, or wants to engage in the activities.

we go cycling on the weekends or have group gym sessions."

MK, who has been in the project for 10 months, says: "It helps with stress because it keeps me busy and occupied. It's pulling me away from the old me, it's changed me.

"Everyone can see it's changed me. It's made me realise that everything's not out there on the roads. I feel more positive. I would tell anyone who wants to join to not be doubtful and just take the opportunity and go for it."

Members of Salaam Peace take part in a football match at the Copper Box Arena on 16 July. The project welcomes those who are newly out of prison to join, to help them to assimilate back into society

MORE INFO

The project runs all year long and welcomes anyone who wants to join or volunteer. Participants get free gym access at the Copper Box Arena. For more information, or to join, visit: www.salaampeace.org; or email: contact@salaampeace.org