

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Women's sport, HC 1205

Tuesday 24 October 2023

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Members present: Julie Elliott (in the Chair); Clive Efford; Dr Rupa Huq; Jane Stevenson.

Questions 91 – 149

Witnesses

I: Huw Edwards, Chief Executive, ukactive; Councillor Liz Green, Chair of Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, Local Government Association; and Ali Oliver MBE, Chief Executive, Youth Sport Trust.

II: Linda Fox, Chair, Actonians LFC; Jane Nickerson, Chief Executive, Swim England; and Julie Porter, Chief Operating Officer, Lawn Tennis Association.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Huw Edwards, Councillor Green and Ali Oliver.

Q91 **Chair:** Welcome to this meeting of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, which I am chairing this morning. The Chair is not here today. This morning we continue our inquiry into women's sport and are examining the role played by local and national sports bodies in encouraging grassroots sport participation by women and girls.

Welcome to our first panel. We have Huw Edwards, chief executive of ukactive; Councillor Liz Green, chair of the Local Government Association's culture, tourism and sport board; and Ali Oliver, who is the chief executive at Youth Sport Trust. You have quite long titles.

First of all, is everybody happy to be addressed by their first names? Thank you. Do any Members have any interests they want to declare before we start? No, okay; we shall start our questions.

Huw and Ali, I will address the first question to you. Is the growth in popularity of women's sports at elite level reflected in grassroots-level sports?

Huw Edwards: We recently did some polling for National Fitness Day that showed that the most inspirational sporting event in the last 12 months was the women's World Cup. It surpassed the men's World Cup in terms of inspiration.

Ultimately, there are different motivations for driving physical activity. For my members—broadly, we cover gyms, pools and leisure centres—usage is probably, combined with swimming, around 17.1 million adults on a regular basis. The motivations for women and girls can be around understanding and addressing issues such as anxiety, the familiarity of facilities and so on.

There is a role for the inspiration of games; however, driving physical activity levels at a population level requires a lot more sector development to ensure that the facilities are as inclusive as they can be, and that the operating landscape and the support that Government can provide are fully there to support the resilience and growth of the sector as well.

Ali Oliver: Thank you for inviting me to be part of this morning's panel. My answer to the question is that it can help, definitely. The Youth Support Trust has been delivering a programme called Girls Active for the best part of 20 years. From successive major events, particularly major domestic events, we know there is a profile that shows a spike in interest around the major event. Whether we are talking about the women's football World Cup and the Euros or successively the World Cups for cricket, hockey and netball, which were back to back, there is a spike in interest.



Where organisations, particularly the national governing bodies of sport, with us working alongside them, have been able to develop lead-up activity and legacy programmes, it can translate to the grassroots. As an example, the Barclays Girls' Football in Schools programme has been designed to try to promote equal access to football for girls within and beyond the curriculum. Around the Euros, we saw a real spike in interest from girls wanting to play and, equally, a real interest from teachers wanting help to improve their skills to deliver football.

It can help. Notwithstanding that, there are many more and bigger barriers that exist and that we need to understand. It is certainly not a simple and quick solution to many of the challenges around the gaps in participation.

Q92 **Chair:** What would you say the barriers are?

Ali Oliver: I am going to answer this in two ways again; sorry about that. I would not be doing my job if I did not reflect on the demise of physical education and sport in our schools generally for boys and girls. It disproportionately impacts girls because of the difference in their motivations around participation outside school.

We know that 40,000 hours of physical education have been lost from the school curriculum since we hosted the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Because of the squeeze on subjects in the curriculum and the value placed on physical education, its time gets lost, particularly in the latter stages of primary and secondary school.

If you take that down a level and you ask about girls in particular, two weeks ago we published our latest annual Girls Active survey. The participation gap between girls and boys is about 5%, against the chief medical officer's guidance of 60 active minutes a day, but the enjoyment gap is around 20%. Girls are not enjoying it. That can be about anything from the resurrection of issues around periods, with young women and girls feeling very self-conscious and not confident, around their periods, to take part in PE and sport, to a general lack of body confidence, body image, concerns about exposure in physical education or not feeling comfortable in their bodies and their bodies moving.

There is also a big evidence base around doing it with other people and feeling that they are being watched, observed or judged by others. Those come out as our top three barriers specifically for girls. I would not be doing my job if I did not talk about the wider barriers to physical education and sport.

Q93 **Chair:** Are there any sports that are particularly inaccessible for girls and women?

Ali Oliver: I can tell you which sports come up most highly when we ask girls and young women what they would like to do. In schools, the number one is trampolining; number two is swimming—I know you will hear from Jane later; and number three is netball. Coming back to



women and girls' football, which sits at about number 12 in the list of things that girls want to play, that has shot up from being almost nowhere in the league tables. That comes back to your earlier question about visibility, the massive success of the Lionesses and the work being done to profile girls' football.

Q94 Chair: Liz, what are you doing to empower local authorities to provide opportunities for girls and women to play a whole range of sports?

Councillor Green: Thank you very much for inviting the LGA along today. As you will be aware, local government is one of the biggest investors, and 75% of grassroots sports across the board use public facilities. They are vital to get people, particularly women and girls, involved.

It is a very mixed bag across the country. One of the reasons for that is the funding that is available. You will be aware that over the next two years there is an estimated shortfall of about £4 billion across local government. As it is a non-statutory service, we have lost a lot of our sports development and inclusion teams. We have lost about 900,000 employees over the last 10 years, which is about a third of our workforce. In those areas, people tend to be moved and then not replaced. That is a barrier to making sure that specific facilities are open to women and girls.

I can give you some excellent examples of what various people are doing. In Birmingham, for example, they are providing screens for park activities in order to allow women to avoid the embarrassment that Ali talked about in terms of the public watching while they partake in exercise. That is a very simple thing to do. There was also personalised support to women's community groups, which led to women who were previously inactive running the marathon for the first time. It was about moving them along. Others have women-only couch to 5K programmes. They are being specifically supported.

We have some very good examples across local government. Across the board, the problem is that too many roles in this area have been lost.

Q95 Chair: Is it roles? Or do facilities matter as well?

Councillor Green: Yes, we absolutely need to have the right facilities. We need safe facilities. Something like 60% of our leisure facilities across local government are now 20-odd years old. That leads to two problems. They are not suited to what people now require of a leisure facility: accessibility, safety and security in terms of how you use it. There is an ageing facilities problem. We welcome the Government's £63 million swimming pool support fund, but only half of those that applied to it received any money. So there is an issue around the facilities that local government can provide, which are needed by a lot of the population.

Q96 Chair: What impact do visible female role models in sport have on the participation of girls and women in sport?



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Huw Edwards: This is very important. I also think about the ambassadors and champions—people already within these facilities—who can demystify the experience. Ukactive has done work with Sport England and This Girl Can to better understand and address the inhibitions that women have around utilising facilities in gyms, pools and leisure centres.

Using female role models who are already customers, alongside the workforce, has been really important in demystifying what the right exercises are for individuals to do, how they use equipment and how they have their very first positive experience of being in the facility.

We have also done a huge amount of work with This Girl Can on safer spaces, looking both at the environment within the facility and the accessibility of the facility. Those first experiences and the retention of individuals is super important.

Ali Oliver: It is really significant. Particularly for young women and girls, we know that role models are very important. For primary-age girls, it is still mum, as well as dad, who is the dominant role model. As young people get older, their peers become the biggest role models for them.

Our Girls Active programme is totally based on that. It is about finding the young women who are least engaged in physical education and sport, listening to them and developing their skills as young leaders. They will be the most powerful influence in the classroom. As a former PE teacher, I know that all too well. I was not the best role model for every young woman and girl. They are vitally important.

As Huw says, it is at both ends. There is no point in us having amazing performance role models. As we have seen, the Lionesses particularly have chosen to use their success as an amazing platform to change policy and to show young women and girls that there is a brighter future for them, and they stand together in a sort of sisterhood on that. There is no point in having that if the teacher in front of you is not empathetic, compassionate and oriented towards helping you have the very best experience, whether it is PE and school sport or, as Huw says, your experience of going to the gym. It is really important to take that multilayered approach to role models and who is the influencer.

Councillor Green: It is not just the role models we see on television, but also the local role models. It is about not just the advertising for the gym or the facility, but also working in partnership with some of our local clubs. I am a councillor in Kingston upon Thames. Surbiton Hockey Club is just down the road, which I know is a particularly successful hockey club in the country. Getting these local people into schools is really important.

Ali Oliver: I want to bring up one statistic that is quite relevant here: 75% of the teaching workforce are female. In some cases they are brilliant advocates and ambassadors who are very active and inspiring. In



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many cases, particularly in our primary schools, one of the biggest barriers to primary school girls having a quality experience is that the class teacher teaches physical education on four to six hours of training. Sometimes they have not necessarily had the best physical education experiences themselves. We have a system that perpetuates that.

Of those 75% of teachers who are female, 95% are white. We do not have a diverse teaching workforce that can act as a role model and inspirer for every young woman—there is not someone who looks like them.

Q97 Chair: That is an interesting point. In the last couple of years, particularly with football and, to a lesser extent, rugby, women's sport has been very much on mainstream TV. It is there and in your face in a way it was not before. What would you like to see done to improve the visibility of women's sport more broadly in the broadcast media? Would that have an impact?

Huw Edwards: From my perspective—I will defer to Liz and Ali on this—I am really interested in those pathways and how you support pathways for young girls and women to get into the activity that they wish to do. There is a real opportunity, given the size and scale of my part of the ecosystem of sport, recreation and physical activity, to work more closely with the industry on tailoring the campaigns that look at stimulating demand and demystification, at the same time as we look at the supply side and improve the offer and the proposition.

We have a programme that we have run historically alongside National Fitness Day called Fitness2Me, which focuses on an individual's personal story about why they are being physically active and the physical, mental or emotional wellbeing reasons they have. There is a real opportunity to look at the profile of elite sport and then think about how that translates to the reality of the local area, the local individual, the local family, the local community, and what they need from their facilities in terms of support. Working with the industry, which is very good at attracting and retaining individuals, is a real opportunity for Government agencies and broadcasters.

Ali Oliver: I believe it is the Women's Sport Trust, from which I can provide further information if it is helpful, that reminds us that still only something like 13% to 15% of media coverage goes to women's sport. Although the Lionesses have been amazing and this summer's Rugby League World Cup, with an equal footing for all three sports, gave good visibility for women's sport, it is still quite a long way down the pecking order. On many days you can open the papers or look online and see no women's sport. It still peaks around these major events and major successes, rather than there having been a transformation and an equal balance of women's sport in the media.

Coming back to my earlier answer, there is no doubt that, by not having those visible role models, it sends a message of gender stereotyping.



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Sport is portrayed in the media as a male domain. Those messages are there for young people and older people alike. From the Girls Active study that we did recently, we know that 71% of girls say gender stereotyping holds them back. They do not see sport as an environment where young women should be, where they are welcome or where they are visible.

Councillor Green: It sometimes comes down to football, rugby and netball. It is those big sports. Actually, we have heard that girls in schools want to do trampolining and other sports, so there can be a risk in focusing on those successes.

In local government, we want to work with the communities. We understand the communities. We can and do talk to the communities. It might be that that the young or older woman who wants to get back into activity does not want to get back into the activity being portrayed on the television. We need to have the facilities and to be able to say to women, "It's great that you are watching the Lionesses and the success they have had is brilliant, but you actually want to do a different type of physical activity and sport. That is fine. We can provide you with the facilities and help to guide you through that with the right resources to enable it."

Q98 **Clive Efford:** Thanks for coming in today; it is good to see you again. Can I ask you about leisure facilities and the challenges they are currently facing? What are the challenges?

Councillor Green: As I said before, over 60% are over 20 years old. The challenge they face is that what was designed and built 20-odd years ago is not what people expect today in terms of the facilities that are provided. Accessibility is not always great at those facilities. The swimming or other activity that people want to do is not always as good as it would be in a modern or refitted building.

The other aspect that has been hitting those facilities, which is particularly relevant for women and girls, arises from the lack of funding. Each leisure facility, whether run by the council directly, through a trust or through a contractor, needs to maximise its income. If they are to maximise their income, gyms are what bring in the money, so they are converting more and more of the facility rooms into gyms because they bring in an income to the leisure centre.

We know that women are more likely to want to do group activities, but we are losing those facilities. The room that was used for a group activity may well, to maximise income, be converted into a gym, which is not where a lot of women want to go and do their activity. There is an issue around that as well. Other than by having more funding, obviously, I do not know how that can be resolved. There is both a capital and a revenue side to the problem.

Q99 **Clive Efford:** To push you on that a little bit, do you have the statistics to show that women would rather do group classes than individual exercise? The figures we have say that women depend heavily on



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exercise classes in leisure centres for their activity. Sport England data shows that in 2021 over 4 million women took exercise classes, compared with fewer than 1.5 million men. Is that individual exercise on exercise machines or is that the sort of class you are talking about in rooms?

Councillor Green: I can get you the absolute data.

Clive Efford: Yes, please do provide us with it.

Councillor Green: It backs what I am saying. I am trying to think of one of the exercise groups. There is group yoga or bums, tums and whatever it is called. It is group exercise in a room where you just need a physical space. It is given over to exercise machines, running machines and the like.

Q100 **Clive Efford:** The figures show that more women go swimming than men. What this is pointing to is that the dilemma that our local leisure centres are in is disproportionately hitting women. Would you see it that way?

Councillor Green: Yes, that is the way we see it. Women do like to go swimming. It is a very common activity for women. More women than men go swimming, as you say. Let me get back to you with some more detailed figures.

Q101 **Clive Efford:** What can we do? What should we be doing, Huw?

Huw Edwards: Can I just come back to the first point before I come in on that? I agree with Liz. Part of the interesting trends that gyms, pools and leisure centres are seeing is a recalibration of the gym floor and a demand from women to spend more time in the weights areas than doing cardio workout. That is a trend we are seeing across public and private operators. That is part of the wider piece on sector development.

This comes down to the resilience of the sector. You know the sector has been through a huge amount in the last two or three years, with the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. We know from our own statistics that the cost of living is a major barrier for women. For 37% of women, the cost of living crisis has a negative impact on their ability to be active. That is reflected in ukactive members as well.

There is a huge challenge. We are about to produce the latest data on public, private and independent operators, which will show, especially on the public side, that a third of facilities are still looking at restricting services before the end of March 2024. We know there remain pockets of conversations, which Liz will allude to, between operators and local authorities on maintaining services.

We can look at the challenges that private operators are facing. There is going to be a recalibration of business rates coming up in April 2024. That could be a bombshell tax for private operators. What are they are



going to do? They are likely to try to push some of that pressure back on to the customer, which will have a negative impact on demand.

What can happen? There are two fiscal events coming up. The autumn statement is coming up in the next month, and then there is the Budget. We can look at the support that is being provided to public and private operators in that space. We can see what support is there for maintaining these essential services from the public side. On the private and independent side, it is about making sure that business rate exemption is rolled over for another 12 months and that the discount for leisure and the private side is included in that exemption as well.

The Chancellor and the Government can do a lot to take away some of the cost pressures that facilities are facing, which they are desperately trying not to pass on to their customers.

Q102 Clive Efford: Is there a specific problem for those facilities that include a swimming pool?

Huw Edwards: Yes, absolutely. As Liz has alluded to, across both public and privately operated facilities, it is the nature of their carbon footprint. A lot of these facilities are also of a certain age. Working with local authorities and our members, we are looking at how we can bring in the energy sector to work with our operators on trying to minimise the short-term costs and to look at the decarbonisation and net zero ambitions of our sector as well, which is a commitment we are making. Having fiscal support for the sector to increase its resilience and getting these facilities through to next spring is a priority for ukactive and its members.

Q103 Clive Efford: Is there more that we could do to open up school facilities?

Ali Oliver: Yes, certainly. The Committee is probably aware that about 70% of sports halls are on school sites. We know that very few of those—sadly it is a decreasing number—are open to the community after the end of the school day. There are a number of reasons for that, but the prime reason is that schools are under so much pressure now. Without somebody whose responsibility it is to run the school site out of hours—without funding and support to do that—it detracts from what are often deficit budgets and other pressures schools are facing around their core education service to young people.

There is currently an opening schools facilities fund, which this Government are supporting with £57 million over three years. One of the things we should learn from that is that it is a targeted investment fund specifically to open up school facilities for disabled children, young women and girls, and those from the most socioeconomically deprived communities. Roughly a third of each of the projects touches on each of those three issues.

Many of them are looking at simple things like access. How do you access the school sports facility? If it has to be accessed through the main entrance of the school, that is a nightmare for the school out of hours. If



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a separate entrance can be provided that is accessible but is not part of the main school, that is really important. Sometimes it is about making the environment accessible to young disabled people. Often the facility is fine, but the equipment within it is limited to those without disabilities.

For young women and girls, when schools have been opened up in the past that has been done as a revenue generator for the school. As Liz said earlier, what happens is that who pays most gets in. That can lead to the domination of astroturf by things like five-a-side football, wall to wall, from the minute the school day ends. Again, I do not have the statistic to hand, but those are predominantly male leagues. Children are not getting in and very few women and girls are.

Targeted investment to address some of the barriers can help. Policy thinking needs to look directly at facility development and redevelopment with a gendered lens, as does programming. When people bid to Football Foundation funds to support facility improvement, their plan has to include how that facility will provide equal access. There are things that can be done.

Q104 **Clive Efford:** Is that the Premier League's development fund?

Ali Oliver: It might be. This is not my expert area, but I know the Football Foundation has supported quite a lot of community facility developments where that is now a requirement.

Q105 **Clive Efford:** Is it part of the problem that facilities, particularly for sports like football, are designed around men? They do not encourage women to participate in the sport. It is not the pitch or anything: it is the facilities around that—the changing facilities and everything else.

Ali Oliver: Yes, absolutely. Just as an anecdotal example, my chair is also chairman of the cricket club in Loughborough town, which was looking to increase the opportunities for young women and girls to play, but the changing rooms are not appropriate. The club is really committed to it and there is a lot of interest from women and girls, but at the moment it cannot provide them with a suitable changing facility. That is a barrier to those who turn up.

Q106 **Clive Efford:** I find some of these answers like *déjà vu*. When I was doing the shadow sports job, which was many years ago, all of these issues were being raised about facilities, teacher training, surveys of young women, body image and not feeling like the facilities were what they needed, which discouraged them from going along and participating in sport. Why has this not changed?

Ali Oliver: Nothing systemic has happened. There has been lots of programme intervention and short-term funding, but nothing systemic. Baroness Campbell mentioned this in an earlier evidence session. When it comes to schools, in the States they have something called Title IX. Any publicly funded education activity, institution or facility has to be 50:50 beneficial in terms of men, women, boys and girls. We do not have



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anything enshrined like that to drive the change. The primary PE and sport premium, with £320 million a year going into primary physical education and school sport, does not have any stipulation around gender or, indeed, any other under-represented group.

Q107 Clive Efford: I take it from that that you all think we should put that fundamental requirement on investment.

Ali Oliver: Without systemic change—laws and policies that endure—what we get is good practice, but when times are tough for whatever reason, whether it is ageing facilities or a school deficit budget, that good practice goes away because it is not required.

Councillor Green: The problem is that Government can, for all the right reasons, introduce a programme or an intervention, but it is seen as quite top-down. All of our communities are different across the country, whether they are in rural or urban areas, with different deprivation levels and demographics in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. All of those will be different in different areas.

We need a long-term funding solution so that the interventions Ali is talking about do not come and then go in bad times. We need a solid foundation that gives the money to the community—I would say local government is the most logical place to do that—so that they can build on these, instead of doing one intervention after another, with none of them having the lasting effect we all want.

Huw Edwards: All three of the organisations here are part of the National Sector Partners Group, which is the umbrella for sport, recreation and physical activity. There is a collective determination to ensure the sector plays its fullest role in society. We have accountabilities for how we ensure that our offer and proposition is as high as it can be.

The reason why nothing has changed is that there has not been the political will. Political will at a national level to drive that is super-important. Two of the Prime Minister's five pledges, one on economic growth and one on waiting lists, directly link to this sector. How do you build the play? How do you build the programme? I believe the Chancellor is going to be announcing changes on tax concessions for SMEs next month, looking at occupational health and health MOTs, which will impact this agenda very much. Make that link directly to the sector, so that we can play our fullest role to try to support the health of young women and female adults across the country. The political will at the centre is super important for driving this. If you have that, things will move.

Q108 Clive Efford: The link between health and physical activity has not been made at decision-making level in Government.

Huw Edwards: It was Andy Burnham, many moons ago, who said that physical activity is the orphan child of Westminster. We have a new Government strategy. The intent and the sentiment is right. Let us see



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what the plan is. We are conscious that time is ticking on this parliamentary year. We need to see the level of urgency that we want to have in order to ensure that the members of ukactive and the wider sector here can play their fullest role. Part of that is about resilience and getting the sector through the winter and the next six months, but then allowing it to grow and play its fullest role. You will transform the communities you represent because of the greater role this sector can play, especially on this agenda of women and girls.

Q109 Clive Efford: Does enough of the money that goes into sport go into grassroots sport?

Huw Edwards: This is my perspective, but it depends on what the driver is. If you are looking to drive physical activity in this country, what are the biggest drivers of that? It is walking, cycling, swimming, fitness and running. To the credit of DCMS, it does not have a lot of control over many direct levers in those five areas, so this has to be driven by a cross-Government operation.

Sport is super important in terms of recreation, the fabric of community, the pathways into elite sport, spectators and the UK feeling really good and proud about where it is going. Those are all part of it. If the question is, "What is going to drive physical activity levels in this country?", you have to back the big five in order to make the population changes we need right now.

Ali Oliver: Huw has made a very compelling case for this sector to play its role in health and economic development. I also want to make a point about education.

Q110 Clive Efford: Before you do, can I ask you one further question? How much further down the road towards tackling the issues we have been talking about this morning would we be had Gove not taken £166 million out of school sport partnerships?

Ali Oliver: That is the \$60 million question. I believe we would be well on the way.

Clive Efford: I would not want to ask you a leading question.

Ali Oliver: We are spending more today on physical education and school sport than we were then, unbelievably. There is just no strategic investment. Coming back to that point about changing the system, under the previous Labour Government there was a system for school sport. There was a school sport partnership network embracing every single primary, secondary and special school in the country in a collective, locally driven sports development plan with a specialist sports college at the hub that was exploring, experimenting and doing innovation on everything from women and girls' participation to disability and the engagement of other under-represented groups.



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We had a system. Over 10 years, that system proved not only to provide the fastest improving schools in the English education system, including GCSE English and maths, but also shifted the proportion of children doing two hours of sport a week from 25% to 91%. We knew how to do it and were visited by many countries around the world, which have stolen the ideas and taken them on.

A different philosophical approach is required. It is an approach that says that schools should be active because young people who are active are better learners. Schools also help the wider personal development of young people. We want young people with healthy habits for life, who know how to maintain their participation in sport.

Those really important parts of education are never, or very rarely, talked about within education circles. We talk about English, maths and science, the EBacc and Progress 8. We talk about all these things, which have squeezed the wider education and development of young people. Today, with the crisis of mental health, childhood obesity and county lines, young people are seeking to belong to something, but they are finding it in all the wrong places. Sport can be a home, if it is done well and inclusively for every child.

Councillor Green: The partnerships we have at the moment, across these organisations and others you are hearing from, are really well placed to help Government deliver these things on the ground through local partnerships. It is a really good opportunity.

I was not doing this role back then; in fact, I have been in the role less than two months. What I am seeing now is that we are all in the right place. With the right information coming down and targeted long-term funding support, in 20 years' time we should not be back here talking about the same issues. They will have moved forward and other issues will have come up. These issues might not necessarily have been fully dealt with, but we will be well on the way to having established routes that can deal with them.

Q111 **Dr Huq:** I want to carry on with barriers—not so much financial, but social class and mobility. Do you see class barriers to participation in sport for girls who cannot afford the costs involved?

Ali Oliver: We have evidence to indicate that extracurricular activity such as sport, given the cost of sports clothing and kit, has become one of the top things that parents have had to cut back on during the economic crisis. We knew anyway that activities beyond the school site were often inaccessible to those from the lower socioeconomic groups, but the economic crisis has further deepened those inequalities. This is why getting PE and sport in schools free to access for every child universally, every day of every week, is so important. It may be the only chance we have to develop their physical literacy and find a sport they love.



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Huw Edwards: Just to reinforce what Ali said, I agree with that 100%. We opened up four schools last summer with Nike as part of our Open Doors programme. We had 2,000 participants over the four-week programme; 61% of those participants were girls and 82% were eligible for free school meals. It is a really important part of utilising the full estate to make sure that, when there are pressures, when you are looking at half terms and holidays, there are accessible, affordable, high-quality and safe programmes available for children and young people.

Councillor Green: The leisure centres run by councils are not commercial operations. They have an income, but they are not for profit, so councils are often best placed to be able to provide that subsidised service to those who need it most.

Taking an interesting example, Tameside Council did lots of small investments to under-represented communities. This included things like trainers, boots and walking poles, but it also included, interestingly, sports bras, culturally appropriate swimwear, chest binders and then other things like skateboards and kneepads that would be across the board. It was specifically looking at under-represented groups, where the cost of the equipment might be a barrier to people entering.

A simple thing like a sports bra can really make a difference to whether a woman feels confident enough to be able to access the facilities. Lots of councils also offer subsidised swimming or gym membership to those for whom the cost is the barrier.

Q112 **Dr Huq:** We know that half of unplayable venues are in the most socially deprived areas. You are still a serving councillor, Liz; local government finances are pretty much on their knees after 13 years of austerity. You mentioned the scheme with Nike, Huw; are there other things like that? Is that a corporate social thing that it is doing to assuage its conscience?

Huw Edwards: The Opening Schools Facilities project that we are working on with YST and StreetGames is being expanded over the next couple of years, is it not, Ali?

Ali Oliver: Yes. The holiday activities and food programme is £200 million a year distributed through local government. Again, it is particularly the holiday hunger issue that has driven that one. Children who are on free school meals are not being fed in holidays. Brilliantly, an intervention has been put in that gives them positive activities, including physical activity and sport, along with other cultural activities, as well as the food. That is being run over the summer holidays, Easter and Christmas. It is two weeks in the summer and one week at Easter and Christmas.

Huw Edwards: Just to reinforce that, there is an interesting debate to be had around the VAT on physical activity goods and services. We know from our research that four of the six countries in the world with the highest levels of membership of gym facilities have a lower or non-



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existent VAT on physical activity compared to other goods and services. Reducing the cost pressures on physical activity services, equipment and clothing is an interesting area to explore. That might be one for the Committee. We would be very happy to support that. We are having discussions right now with the Government on VAT levels for our members' services. Our closest trading partner in the EU, Ireland, has a VAT of 9% on physical activity. We are at 20%. That is one to explore.

Dr Huq: We were thinking about possible future inquiries.

Huw Edwards: There we go.

Q113 **Dr Huq:** You have said that there is a difference between what you see on TV with the Lionesses and the grassroots stuff you deal with. I went to see hockey recently in Ealing. Do you think some of these sports have an elitist image? We know there is a women's Ashes and an all-female F1. Some sports are sometimes seen as snooty and elitist anyway, and then you add the women's dimension. Is that another barrier?

Huw Edwards: Should I take that one? I will take a hit for the team.

Councillor Green: I will come in. There can be that image, but you need to take those local clubs and put them into the schools. We have had Surbiton Hockey Club going into local schools. In my borough, we have the Chelsea women's team inviting schools in to talk to them. You can remove some of those barriers. It is possibly true in lots of areas, but it is not a big barrier particularly for women and girls any more than the generic barrier that "I am not going to take part in Formula 1".

Huw Edwards: Just to reinforce that, we have a responsibility to make sure that our members' facilities connect with schools in the right way, so there is a pathway and a seamless engagement with what schools are doing and how that translates into the wider recreational community.

While my core membership is gyms, pools and leisure centres, there are probably 15 to 20 national governing bodies and sports that overlap with our members' facilities. How do we make sure that there is adaptability? The majority of recreational football takes place in public sector leisure facilities. We have to think about how to make that transition and do enough outreach to ensure that there is a seamless pathway from schools into the community.

Ali Oliver: I would like to do a shoutout for the national governing bodies of sport. There is currently a national programme called the School Games. Coming back to Clive Efford's point, this was the backfill when school sport partnerships were disappearing. At the time, Jeremy Hunt as Culture Secretary felt that the infrastructure was something to be protected at least to some degree. He invested in each of the 450 school sport partnership hubs to have a three-day-a-week School Games organiser, who was effectively a competition manager, to keep competitive school sport alive.



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There are now over 40 national governing bodies that have developed inclusive formats that are age and stage appropriate for children. We have seen national governing bodies working in partnership with us and others, innovating and making sure that all of their sports are seen as accessible and inclusive.

Coming back to the earlier point, without the school sport partnership infrastructure you can have that format in school, but how do you help young people to transition from the School Games and school sport into the club pathway? That is really hard. One of the best ways to do that is to create satellite clubs on school sites, which is the first step between physical education and school sport and the club. You become familiar with the club environment and the club personnel, and then you make the step into the community club.

Again, I would like to think that the concerns you have are not real. I am a trustee of Chance to Shine, which is an amazing charity doing incredible work with cricket, particularly through street cricket and primary cricket, and is anything but snooty. It is very inclusive and very accessible. The challenge is how we help those young people who have experienced some cricket in the school into a junior club and then on to the main community club.

Q114 Dr Huq: Yes, and Ealing Hockey Club is distinctly un-snooty. It has lots of boys in it too. It is not just a “jolly hockey sticks” thing for girls. You need central Government, the national governing bodies and local government. Sometimes it can feel a little bit like low-hanging fruit to get rid of youth clubs and sports facilities.

I have two more questions on two doubly or triply discriminated groups. All the evidence shows that BAME communities are less physically active than non-BAME communities. What barriers are there to encouraging them to play in grassroots sport? Again, even with the Lionesses, it was a minority of the team. We have quotes here from the Chelsea manager saying that football is middle class. Could you comment on BAME plus class?

Huw Edwards: I am happy to kick that off. It is a really important area for our partnership with Sport England in terms of being a systems partner and the work we are doing around particular cohorts. Interestingly, going into the pandemic the statistic was that one in four members of a leisure facility were from an ethnically diverse community. There is an opportunity there to work with ukactive and our members to understand the data and to see what we need to be doing in order to provide that inclusive proposition. It is an interesting point, which was relatively surprising to us, but how can we build on that?

It is about the inclusivity of the offer. Many of our members are very supportive of different cultures and religious festivals, and of ensuring that physical activity is accessible when required. We are on a journey there. We are going to do a lot more work in the coming year with Sport



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England and our members to understand the motivations and how our membership can provide a more inclusive service.

Councillor Green: It also varies across the country. I am going to come back to the point about local government knowing its communities a lot better and reaching out to those communities. Clearly, in different parts of the country the demographics are different, so the response of the sports industry and local government leisure centres needs to be different in different areas.

I was trying to find a really good example that I have been given, which is Cherwell's FAST—Families Active, Sporting Together—scheme. It has worked with one of its local mosques to deliver private female-only swimming lessons for mothers and children. That is an example of how councils can reach out. Where they recognise from their own data that their facilities are not being accessed by certain elements of the community, they can then go and speak to those communities through their mosque or religious organisation or the cultural groups that exist in the area.

All councils will have good relationships with the local voluntary and community sector. They can find out what those barriers are and look at how they can remove those barriers to participation. This is where local government shines. Different approaches fit different areas, but we also need to share best practice across local government. If it works in Cherwell, will it work over there? You can steal ideas from each other in different ways.

Ali Oliver: Can I build on that list? You mentioned earlier the loss of sports development capacity in local councils and local government. Sport needs to go where people are, rather than expecting people somehow to gravitate towards it. It takes someone to do that. It takes someone to go out and engage with those community leaders and give the opportunity, whether it is sport in a mosque or whatever it happens to be. There needs to be someone to do that.

As we all know, sport clubs are largely voluntary entities. People do this in their free time and spare time after work, as do the leaders of religious, cultural and ethnic communities. There is some brokering that needs to be done. From a school sport perspective, that was done by partnership development managers, but it was also done by sports development managers in the local council.

We hosted a youth summit in the summer. About 150 young people—they were not all from sports; some were from housing associations, uniformed youth groups and a variety of organisations—came together in Loughborough for three days to explore what the next generation would like to say to those of us in positions where we can create the change. They came forward with really two strong calls for action. The first was, "Make sport have someone like me in it." They do not see enough people like them. To come back to your point, Dr Huq, this is about the



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workforce, targeting different communities and giving people the opportunity to explore a profession they perhaps thought was not for them, such as teaching. How do we diversify the teaching profession, the coaching profession and so on?

The second one was about training for those who deliver youth sport to understand inclusion generally. They made such a good point. They made the point that coaches have training on safeguarding, disability awareness and inclusive practice, but there is no professional development on inclusive practice that people can go through to understand the intersectionality that exists in our society and to understand how to include. When it comes to young women from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, understanding the cultural norms and expectations of that community is the foundation. Whether you get that from talking to the young people themselves or whether that is something you are trained in, once you have that awareness you can include. Without that awareness, you risk putting up more barriers.

Q115 Dr Huq: What facilities and initiatives are there for disabled women and girls who want to succeed in sport? We mentioned the equipment problem; there is also equipment like a sports prosthetic limb, which is very costly. There do not seem to be schemes for those, or if there are, it is for when they are little. Once they are 18, that does not continue. We have had evidence from Tanni Grey-Thompson on this as well.

Ali Oliver: Tanni gave evidence around how there are opportunities for younger children, but when they become adults that all disappears. There are things that can be done though, to be positive about it. Take sports wheelchairs: not every school can afford a set of sports wheelchairs, but a family of schools can own a set of wheelchairs and share them around the schools to give young people the chance to play, or spread those out where young people are in need.

There are things that can be done, but it is an inevitability that if you are a young disabled person, whether you have a sensory impairment, physical impairment or another impairment, there is an additional cost to have the specific adaptations or equipment you need to participate. Hence there are a number of charities raising funds and supporting young people with disabilities to access that equipment.

Huw Edwards: For the sake of transparency, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson is a former chair of ukactive.

On our side, we are working with Sport England and our operators on a programme called Everyone Can, which is looking at this, first on the supply side. How do we make sure that our facilities are as inclusive as they can be from an equipment perspective and an infrastructure perspective? How can we make sure that the workforce is confident in engaging disabled people with the range of disabilities that people have? That is an ongoing piece of work. We will soon be bringing out a self-



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assessment tool for our members so that they can benchmark where they are against other parts of the sector.

The key part we want to drive forward in the next 12 to 18 months is around stimulating demand and making sure that we find those individuals—those ambassadors or exemplars—who are in our facilities right now, so that they can tell their story and help to demystify the journey and the experience that disabled people can have in gyms, pools and leisure centres.

Councillor Green: From the facilities perspective, it is probably mostly around the facilities being suitable. As I say, too many of our facilities are out of date and therefore do not have accessibility built into them in the way any new facility would.

It is about looking at the modifications that can be made to improve access for those with a disability. I would include those who are neurodiverse, who may need a quiet space because of sensory issues to do with noise levels. We need to adapt these facilities as best we can. Each council will look at doing that.

I would join Huw in saying that it is about trying to find role models locally so that young people and those with a disability or who are older feel happy to come into the facility and use it correctly.

Q116 **Jane Stevenson:** I am going to go back to primary school participation. We touched on it a tiny bit. How do we ensure that the drop-out rate is reduced when we do get children active? Where are we missing a trick?

Ali Oliver: It is our belief at the Youth Sport Trust that children are born moving. We do not need to get them active; we need to stop stopping them from being active. Often, the school environment is an environment where we tell children to sit down, be quiet and stop moving.

We have to make school an active environment where being active is the norm. That does not just mean having physical education on the curriculum and sport after school: it also means active playgrounds. Playgrounds need to be modified so that everybody is welcome and it is not just a football flying around with those who do not want to play football on the fringes feeling intimidated by it. It means zoning the playground, doing things like the daily mile and acknowledging that we need to get children up and moving during the school day to improve their concentration and focus, and all those sorts of things.

We want to give young people what we call physical literacy, which is a positive relationship with movement. That should be the purpose of primary physical education: to turn those natural instincts to move in whatever way into a positive relationship with other forms of movement, which are the ones you are going to take part in for the rest of your life.

We do need to think about who teaches our primary children. There are some amazing classroom teachers teaching physical education. I want



that to be very strongly said on the record. Many of those teachers will say, "If I did not teach physical education, I would not understand that child. Seeing them in the physical domain aids my development of them as an individual." However, if they have had only four to six hours of initial teacher training, or have had a bad personal experience, we are putting children, at the age and stage when their social, emotional and physical development is ripe for setting on the right course, with the people who are least confident to do that.

The primary PE and sport premium—this £320 million a year—should be being spent on the professional development of the workforce rather than on displacing teachers with coaches, who may come in and give a better experience, but when that money runs out they will be gone and we will have a generation of teachers who are unskilled.

Q117 Jane Stevenson: Are sporting bodies doing enough to make resources available? Are there online resources? "This is what skills you need for this sport. This is how we start training people"—is that material available to teachers?

Ali Oliver: Yes, there is absolutely tons of it. One of the challenges is quality assurance. You have governing bodies producing it, which will quality assure it. You also now have a cottage industry that has developed in response to this £320 million being devolved locally. There are lots of businesses that will now help primary schools to spend that money. If you are the headteacher of a primary school, it is very difficult—you do not necessarily have a PE specialist—to know how to differentiate what you should spend your money on. Again, it is not the lack of resources, materials or exemplification: it is the people on the ground to help schools to make use of those resources, to translate it into training and so on.

Q118 Jane Stevenson: Where can teachers go to find out that quality assurance? Is there nowhere that can help?

Ali Oliver: At the moment we would recommend going to the national governing body's website. The FA has done a brilliant example of girls' football in school. There is a platform there with all of its stuff on it. It is exceptional and very easy to access, but you have to have the time, the energy and the wherewithal to even want to go there.

For other sports, the national governing bodies do a very similar job. In the school sport and activity action plan, there was reference to a digital portal being developed to make it easier for schools to have a one-stop shop. We are hopeful that the School Games platform, which is currently used by about 21,000 schools, would be the right place to extend that provision, but at the moment it is a minefield for primary schools to try to make the best use of that money that they have been given.

Q119 Jane Stevenson: Before I bring the other two panellists in—I would like you to consider this point as well in your answers— is there an issue with



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male primary teachers being trained to be more sensitive to the issues girls specifically face? Do they need any extra support that they are not getting at the moment?

Ali Oliver: That is a very good question. We do not have any evidence that would substantiate that assumption about male teachers. Teachers are trained very well to understand gender, and when we have male teachers working with young females they do understand these things, notwithstanding that they can always be better.

Sometimes when we have male coaches from a male sport environment going in, if they have not had the requisite training, they find it very difficult in a school not just for gender, but for disability and behaviour management. It is a very different environment when working in a school where not everybody has rocked up to your session because they want to play. They are there because it is on the curriculum and they should be there, and for coaches that can be a huge challenge.

Councillor Green: I want to take it out of the school environment, because children are in school for six or seven hours a day for so many weeks, then they are at home and around the area. From a local council perspective, councils across the country run about 27,000 parks and open spaces. That is where a lot of young people will have their physical activity. We are looking at everything from the old-fashioned “No ball games” signs that used to go up all over the place, which I know councils are stopping because we want to encourage that movement, to the equipment that can go into parks.

A lot of parks will now have gym equipment, but a lot of women are not happy using that gym equipment—I did have the statistics somewhere; it was about 90%—because they feel embarrassed by that. Maybe what we need to be looking at is outdoor gym equipment for children and young people in those teenage years.

Finding activities for young girls in parks is particularly difficult, and we need to find what they are. I am not sure I have seen evidence of what it is. Councils will quite happily help to put that into the public spaces, where young people will often go, but at the moment I do not have any evidence on what it is that would particularly help to reduce the drop-out rate of young girls.

Q120 **Jane Stevenson:** Are we doing enough to work with parents, if we are talking out of school? Wolverhampton, which I represent and where I am from, is one of the least active cities in the country, which is obviously not a good place to be, but if my parents are not especially active, how are we changing?

Councillor Green: Councils are doing different targeted activities. Some councils have mother, child and baby groups to get the mothers moving soon after birth, as is suitable for them, but to get them into that idea of still continuing to move, and then they can press it through. A lot of



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these things, like the Tameside one I mentioned, are about families together. There are a lot of sporting activities based on getting the whole family active so that you set in place the right path for the young person, for the child, but you also encourage the parent.

I am hoping that the Government's Get Active strategy, with the 3.5 million more people moving from inactive into active, will look at families. We are yet have more than the first taskforce meeting, but that is a really serious way of doing it. Parks need to play their part as more and more families grow up in flats without external accommodation, particularly across our cities. We need to have those parks available with the right kind of equipment in them so that the families can use it.

Huw Edwards: Just to reinforce what Ali and Liz have said, at ukactive a number of our members, which are children's activity providers, work very closely alongside schools on providing that complementary additional expertise in breakfast clubs or afterschool clubs. How do we make sure that there is the capacity and resource for these schools to continue to utilise this expertise, which takes pressure off the school?

When it comes to out of school hours, a number of our core members will be running junior gyms and junior activities in their facilities for both primary and secondary-aged kids. It is going back to the point we have made previously around utilising the full estate and the school facilities, and making sure that that is as robust in scale as it can be in constituencies across the country.

Ali Oliver: On the parents point, we have surveyed parents for a few years now through YouGov around awareness of the chief medical officer's guidance that children from five to 16 should do 60 active minutes a day and the under-fives should be doing more. Unlike five a day, which is very universally understood—whether it is delivered on is another question—only 35% of parents know about 60 active minutes. I think 42% guessed it, but 42% was the 35% plus those who guessed more than that.

We have 47% of children doing 60 active minutes a day and we have between 35% and 42% of parents who know that children should do it. I am not saying there is a direct correlation, but we would dearly love at the Youth Sport Trust to see a campaign similar to This Girl Can around the importance of children moving. We have a crisis of childhood at the moment, many symptoms of which can be tackled or even prevented by children being active. Parents are often at their wits' end, particularly with mental health, to know what to do. Simply moving improves mood, as well as providing wider mental and physical health benefits.

If we are looking for solutions, parents still either do not know how to play with their child—which is an issue, as Liz has already touched on, that we can help with—or just do not know that sport and physical activity is part of their wellbeing, education, development and a healthy and successful life. They think it is about Lionesses, Olympic podiums and



Premier League footballers. There is a need for re-education. We have to re-imagine the role of physical activity in young people's lives, because we are never going to afford enough counsellors and this is a demand that will be placed on the NHS in the long run.

Councillor Green: We keep sparking off each other. Going back to your question about drop-off rates, when children are very little there are a lot of national bodies and local organisations that offer taster days. "Come and try this sport. Come and try that sport." I looked for my teenage daughters. It is really hard to find taster sessions. You can sign up to things, but they have no idea whether they are going to enjoy that sporting activity unless it is one that was offered in school. There are a lot more activities out there than schools can ever possibly offer. There is something around that.

Jane Stevenson: I quite like that—sporting open days. I am going to go back to my council and suggest it.

Councillor Green: It is a way. As a parent you are not going to invest in equipment or sign up for a term's worth of an hour a week on an activity if they turn up at the first one and go, "God, that was awful." Trying those different elements works really well at the younger age, and then it is lost a bit further up the ladder.

Ali Oliver: You are right: £320 million in primary schools, while we think it could be better spent, is making a difference. At the same time, in secondary schools we are losing PE from the curriculum and we have very little after-school-hours sports. Just at the point when you have hopefully started to embed some values and relationship with movement, we take it away.

I will not go through them all, but we have statistics from our recent Girls Active Survey around what girls' attitudes are at key stage 2 and how they change to key stage 4. I will share just two. "Schools encourage me to be active"—at key stage 2, 78% of girls say schools encourage them to be active, but that drops to 51% at secondary. "The skills I learn in sport are valuable for me in life"—at key stage 2, 71% believe in that statement, but by the time they get to secondary school and key stage 4 it is 29%. That is because our schools are demonstrating to young women and girls that sport is not important: "We will get rid of it."

Councillor Green: Unless you are going on that elite path.

Q121 **Jane Stevenson:** Is some of that not other things taking off? Self-awareness of body image and all of those issues start to kick in a little bit later.

Ali Oliver: I completely agree with you, but that is then where we need more effort. This stuff is important for life, and for our wider success and economy. You are right that the barriers intensify, and at the moment that is when we are removing all the support and eroding the services.



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Q122 Jane Stevenson: I met some Girl Guides recently after their attitudes survey, and a lot of it fed into that. I am very thankful that very few photos exist of me when I was a teenager. Girls nowadays know that every day their image could be published online, forever. This is a pressure that I am sure is felt extremely by so many people.

I just want to come back and talk about whether women's sport and sport in general is a victim of siloing. Huw, you mentioned that Nike has gone to work. In Wolverhampton, we have the Wolves Foundation and Premier League Kicks. We recently had Speedo sponsoring pop-up pools in schools. Do you think we are missing that link up, and with local sports clubs, because everything gets siloed, whether intentional or not? Should our education providers be doing more work with local clubs, with industry and with companies to try to come to a more sensible and cost-effective solution?

Huw Edwards: In the last few years I have been in this role, there has been a greater co-ordination across the sector, and that is a good starting point. How the broad representative bodies across sport, recreation and physical activity are working has significantly improved in the last four or five years.

To connect this agenda to other parts of a local authority, devolved government or central Government agenda is the ultimate goal and the ultimate opportunity. How do you connect this directly with 2.7 million people on long-term sick from work, or 7.7 million people on waiting lists? That is the opportunity in terms of joining up the dots. It is to see that you have a sector here that can play a much fuller role in health, which is the physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing of communities.

At the moment, we are nowhere near to fulfilling our potential. The return on investment from £1 spent in this sector to £4 return is there to be seen. There is a real opportunity for the sector to be playing a fuller role, connecting up with education, with health, with safety and antisocial behaviour, in such a way that you can get a massive return. Elevating the debate as a priority is a key requirement of central Government.

Q123 Jane Stevenson: Should private sector do more? In theory, Nike is making customers for life from these young people.

Huw Edwards: Yes, absolutely. From my core membership—gyms, pools and leisure centres—two-thirds of that is private sector, and this is a big driver of physical activity in the country. How can we look at connectivity with the business community, with corporates and with major brands? We held our health roundtable with the senior leadership of the NHS last week. Around the table were the Federation of Small Businesses and the CBI. That shows the agenda here and the fact that big business is very concerned on issues of economic growth, productivity and absence in work right now. Let us join the dots up.

Jane Stevenson: It is everything together.



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Councillor Green: Councils are looking to organisations in their area that can help to sponsor things, because we are trying to do more with less as the funding reduces.

One thing I just want to mention is that we have seen some major councils, the latest one being Birmingham, go with a section 114 notice—effective bankruptcy. At the LGA, we know that there are several others teetering on the edge, and some have made announcements that they are on the verge of potentially issuing section 114s. We need to look even more at how we do more with less, because those councils will go to statutory-only services. Birmingham is doing some brilliant work in this area. Bringing in partners to be able to continue that work will be really important for it as the commissioners come in to look at what it is spending its money on. That link-up with sports clubs and with the commercial sector does happen. Councils do good linkups with the commercial sector. It is about keeping it in check and making sure that it is still open to all.

Just so that you are aware as a Committee, I wanted to mention that at the LGA we are going to make a call for effective practice for women and girls, because we know there is more good practice out there that we can share, which will include case studies. We want to be able to do that call from our councils and from our members, so that we can present that information as well.

Ali Oliver: I want to echo Huw's point about the sector coming together. Sport England's Uniting the Movement strategy has really helped that. System partners are now much more cohesive and collaborative, and we know our lane that we are in. Those clearer roles and responsibilities really help.

In terms of Government and business, I just wanted to share with you—again, I am sounding slightly like a stuck record—that when school sport partnerships existed, and we could boil down what is effectively 24,000 or 25,000 schools to 450 partnerships and 450 partnership managers you could talk to, there was sponsorship of school sport from Lloyds, from Sky, from Matalan and from Sainsbury's, with significant six or seven-figure sums going in. Now that infrastructure has disappeared, it is very difficult for commercial businesses, unless they are working in a particular local area, to support the national push here. How can they work with all of those schools?

A really useful example is Barclays, with the Barclays Girls' Football School Partnerships, where it is buying into those 450 School Games organisers that I mentioned earlier. It invests £6,000 in each one so that those people can deliver women and girls' football on the ground into schools and communities. There is something about the need for infrastructure here to help to connect business and the mass of schools out there, and it will probably be the same with communities.



We as the Youth Sport Trust have one significant commercial partner at the moment, with Sports Direct around our National School Sports Week, but it is very hard to bring them in and demonstrate how they can achieve brand awareness and, more importantly, feel that they are making a social difference when you do not have a structure to work to and work through.

Councillor Green: The problem is the different parts of the country. If you are in a major city and you have an HQ of a large corporation, you will have that working relationship, but if you are in a small, rural district that does not have a large major employer with that kind of money to deliver, you are going to have fewer of those relationships. Maybe it is an evening out of those elements.

Chair: Can I thank all of the witnesses for your evidence this morning? It has gone very wide ranging and been very in depth, so I am not going to ask for any additional comments, but thank you very much for being here this morning and giving your evidence. We will now move on to the second panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Linda Fox, Jane Nickerson and Julie Porter.

Q124 **Chair:** Can I welcome the second panel? I am sorry that we ran over time. We are going to have to finish this session at around 12 because of quorum issues, so can we have short, concise answers? I do not want to cut off what you say, but if we can try to have concise answers that would be wonderful.

I welcome Jane Nickerson, chief exec at Swim England; Julie Porter, chief operating officer at the Lawn Tennis Association; and Linda Fox, chair of Actonians LFC. Are you all happy if we use first names in this session? Lovely, thank you very much.

First, I want to ask a very broad question: are you seeing the growth in popularity of elite women's sport reflected in grassroots sport?

Linda Fox: Yes, we are. Our participation levels and interest in general has grown a lot over the last couple of years, really, especially since the Euros last summer. We have seen that across all age groups, from the youngest girls up to adult women, and especially women who have not played football before. That has been our biggest area of growth. Women in their 30s who had never played before and did not have a chance to play at school suddenly now feel empowered and inspired to start.

Q125 **Chair:** Is it seeing people on TV that is bringing them in?

Linda Fox: Yes.

Q126 **Chair:** Are there enough opportunities being provided to girls and women



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at local levels to play all of your sports?

Jane Nickerson: In swimming terms there is not visibility on TV, particularly at the elite level, outside of the Olympics, Paralympics and Commonwealth Games. You see very little swimming on TV, but swimming is very gender balanced. We have slightly more females in our sport than we have males: at 55% women, it just tips the balance over. More women swim than men. I do not think that TV visibility necessarily spills over into the general activity of swimming and going swimming in elite, but it would be great if we had more visibility and more showcasing of it on TV.

Julie Porter: From a tennis perspective, it comes from a very different place to football, for example. There is a long history of gender equality in tennis at the elite level and the grassroots level. The first female Grand Slam was in 1884. The professional tour has been available since 1973. Of course, there have been lots of female trailblazers in tennis, such as Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, Sue Barker and recently Emma Raducanu. The visibility has been there for females at the elite level in the sport.

In terms of opportunities at the grassroots level, in 2019 we launched our current business plan with a vision of opening tennis up. From 2008 to 2019, participation had been declining year on year. It was quite a stark drop in participation. I am pleased to report that, since launching our vision and trying to grow tennis by making it more relevant, more accessible, more welcoming and more enjoyable, we have now grown participation to 5.6 million annual players. When we launched that plan, it was around the 4 million mark.

Chair: That was in four years.

Julie Porter: Yes.

Chair: Wow.

Julie Porter: We were hoping to achieve 4.45 million by the end of 2023. As I said, we are currently at 5.6 million. Participation is at its highest since we started tracking it, in 2017, and since Sport England started, in 2015. Female participation is 42% of that. Female participation with children is 49%, and female participation in schools within tennis is 50.4%. The visibility is good and has always been good. There has always been elite female performance. We have not always seen that reflected at grassroots level, but we are currently seeing it reflected.

Q127 **Chair:** Jane and Linda, we have moved on to participation and promoting awareness of your sport at grassroots level. Could you say what your experience is in your sports?

Jane Nickerson: Sorry, I did not catch the first bit.



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Chair: On promoting awareness of and participation in your sports at grassroots level, how are you progressing?

Jane Nickerson: It all starts for us with learning to swim, because if you do not learn to swim then you cannot progress through. That is part of the curriculum in primary schools, but we know that that is still not having a 100% success rate. We know that it differs depending on your socioeconomic background—which it should not do, in a school, but it does—and ethnicity. Ethnically diverse communities are less likely to leave school able to swim.

On our club offer, coming through to participation, we have 1,000 clubs and 170,000 members, but millions of people swim, so it is a broader church than just what we offer as a national governing body.

Chair: It is quite expensive to take part in swimming clubs.

Jane Nickerson: It can be. That means that most of our members are from the most affluent parts of society, and that is something we want to move against. It sounds like it is reasonably cheap to go swimming, but by the time you have paid all your training fees and things obviously it is not. Just going for a swim can be expensive, and what is happening with facilities and accessibility to pools is the biggest barrier.

One of my volunteer roles is as a Samaritan. I hear people who go swimming for their mental health, because it is absolutely amazing for your mental health. We know that women in particular find that it benefits their mental health. We have that statistically proved. I have heard people say, “I have to choose between eating lunch or going for a swim.” We have to find a way through that and make swimming much more accessible across the entire country.

Linda Fox: Awareness has increased a lot, obviously, with the TV visibility of the Lionesses. There is still some way to go, because even though our club is almost at capacity now, there is still room for growth. There is more interest. We almost have to start turning players away now because we just cannot fit everyone in.

Q128 **Chair:** Is that down to you being able to manage the numbers, or is it down to the facilities that are available?

Linda Fox: Yes, mostly the facilities and the funding. We just cannot cater for everyone in the way that we would like to. For the people we do take on, we want to be able to offer them a valuable experience. There is room for growth, with more clubs and more teams getting involved locally to us.

Q129 **Chair:** Is there anything that local government or national Government could do to help with the various initiatives you have?

Julie Porter: I want to highlight a current facility investment programme that the LTA is delivering with national Government funding and the LTA



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Tennis Foundation funding. It is a £30 million programme being invested in park tennis.

Chair: You have invested quite a lot in parks in my city.

Julie Porter: Good, I hope you are enjoying that. It is a £30 million programme to be delivered over two years. There are 1,723 locations with tennis in parks. We found 45% of those were unplayable or in very poor condition. We are halfway through the programme: we are a year in, with a year to go. We have renovated 1,600 courts. In total we are renovating about 3,000 courts.

On top of the importance of having good-quality facilities where women can feel safe and secure as they play, an additional barrier for women is where to play. Having a good-quality local provision in your community that you can find and book online is really important.

Another issue is not having anybody to play with. We need to provide programmed activity to go along with the investment, delivered by local authorities or local coaching operators. One programme that we have is delivered by volunteers. For example, in tennis's version of Parkrun, there is free park tennis delivered every Saturday at 10 o'clock. You can go down with family or friends, or by yourself. Equipment will be provided.

The investment in the facilities is really important. We can make an impact at scale quickly, but equally important is being able to access those facilities, having a way to join in, and making that as seamless and easy as possible. Facilities in parks is the most important location for females outside of education, and 58% of that investment is going into the most socially deprived areas. Having those good-quality facilities in your community is hugely important for driving participation.

Q130 **Chair:** In terms of swimming and football, what local or national support or initiative could help?

Jane Nickerson: For us, access to facilities is absolutely key. Outdoor swimming has obviously grown in importance, but even that needs the right environment, the right cleanliness of water, safe bathing areas and things. We have 1,200 pools in this country that are over 40 years old. That is just crazy. They are just not sustainable. They are not energy efficient. We have lost 450 public pools since 2010; 450 have disappeared. We know that most local authorities are short of at least one swimming pool in their area, and that just makes it harder and harder for people to access it. It makes it harder for programming.

Pools do cost money to run. We know they are not energy efficient at the moment and we need help to get them more sustainable, but because of that it means that the operators have to work hard to make that pool make money. Learning to swim is a bit of a cash cow. They will put loads of learn-to-swim programmes in, but what happens then? What is the



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next pathway? How do you stop that drop-out and have programmes that people can go into throughout their entire pathway? Swimming is something you do cradle to grave, but you need access.

Linda Fox: Facilities is our biggest challenge as well.

Q131 **Chair:** Is that access to them? Or are the facilities not available?

Linda Fox: It is having good-quality, affordable facilities, with easy access in terms of public transport and so on.

Q132 **Chair:** I was thinking more about what we heard before—for instance, school facilities are mainly booked out, if they are open, by men's five-a-side. Do you have problems getting into facilities that are there, or is it more that the facilities are not there?

Linda Fox: It is a bit of both, I suppose. The cost of them is prohibitive as well. We can only afford x amount of hours, for example, which means that we can only offer x amount of training space for the girls. For example, on a Monday night we have 100 girls on one pitch, so there is a limit to the quality of the session that we can deliver. It is a big challenge for the coaches. It is the same for our women's team. We can have 70 players on one pitch and we just cannot afford to hire another evening, or, even if we could afford it, it is not available because it is already booked out.

In the last three years, a new facility has come into our local area, which is a great facility, but before then there was nothing. We trained on a hockey pitch, because that was the only floodlit facility in the local area. That is really not ideal. Even though there is now this facility that we are using, there are just so many sports clubs and everyone wants to use it, so it is really difficult to get your foot in the door and then keep that slot.

Julie Porter: We are very grateful for the park investment programme, but parks are good for the summer; what we need more of are indoor facilities or covered facilities, which are particularly important for women to feel safe over the winter months. Our data shows that there are 96 locations across England, Scotland and Wales that are not served with any indoor facilities for tennis. While the parks investment can make an impact—and it is making an impact: we are forecasting at least an additional 500,000 players—we know that during the winter months that is at risk. Additional funding in covered facilities is hugely important for tennis.

Q133 **Clive Efford:** Linda, you talked about not being able to afford extra nights and extra training facilities, which is limiting the number of young women you can cater for in your club. What is the cost of running your club?

Linda Fox: Our senior section, three teams, is about £40,000 a season, and the junior is about £25,000.



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Q134 **Clive Efford:** Where does the income for running that come from? Do they pay subscriptions?

Linda Fox: Yes, parents pay subscriptions, as do some of our senior players. There are some sponsorships, but they are very hard to come by. There are grants, when we can get them but, again, they are more and more difficult to access. Yes, it is tight.

Q135 **Clive Efford:** Are the subscriptions high? Does that exclude any young women because they cannot afford them?

Linda Fox: We are trying to keep them as low as we can. We have not increased them for a number of years now, even though all our costs have gone up. Again, like somebody was saying earlier, we are trying to do more with less. We are mindful of not wanting to exclude anyone. Our ethos is to be a club for everyone and to welcome everybody. We do try to help people where we can, and offer lower fees or no fees in some circumstances.

Q136 **Clive Efford:** Do you get access to grants? We hear a lot about money going to grassroots sports, but do you see it?

Linda Fox: Most of the grants available are to run new projects. We are at the stage where we are all volunteers with full-time jobs.

Clive Efford: You want funding for core costs.

Linda Fox: Exactly, we do not have time to run any new projects, basically, or the space.

Q137 **Clive Efford:** Jane and Julie, do you ringfence funding for women's sport or disability sport?

Jane Nickerson: We do not ringfence in that way. When you get to the elite levels, para-swimming does have its own funding from UK Sport and things, but within the work we do with our clubs we do not directly fund anybody. We do not ringfence anything in that way. Our clubs are all individual models and pay. We provide programmes, training, expertise and things, but we do not have any pots of money that we allocate or grant out.

Julie Porter: Our approach is very inclusive. All our funding goes into the sport equally for male and female. Thinking about our schools programme, we invest in the schools programme but it is equal for girls and boys. In terms of our performance programme, we invest £14.3 million a year. It is the same programme for male and female. The access to the facilities, the access to the coaches and the competition calendar are the same. In actual fact, in terms of top, tournament-level competition, we invest more heavily in the female tournaments. Within the LTA and tennis, we do not have a separate department just for women and girls. It is integrated into everything that we do.

Q138 **Clive Efford:** Do you have difficulties finding facilities that are adapted



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for people with disabilities, to encourage more women with disabilities into your sports?

Jane Nickerson: For swimming, it is about getting access into the swimming pool. We have a large para-swimming and disability swimming section. Providing we can help them get into the pool, there are not really those access issues that other sports may have, because once you are in the water you are very supported and you do not have the same ability issues. In fact, swimming is brilliant if you have a disability.

Q139 **Clive Efford:** You said many of the buildings are about 40 years old. Are they adapted for people with disabilities to even get to poolside?

Jane Nickerson: A small number of them are. Thanks to the London Marathon Trust, there is a big pool pod project that has run out over the last few years, which provided a really good way of changing a pool so you have a little lift access into the pool. A pool pod gives you independent use because you can manage it yourself. You can press the buttons and go in. Pregnant women find it really useful, rather than struggling down the steps or trying to lower in. We need far more pool pods, but they are a really good access solution to get people into the pool instead of the old-fashioned hoist, which takes a lot of people and is very undignified.

Julie Porter: It is probably more straightforward for tennis. The natural specification of a tennis court lends itself to disability. Where we invest quite a lot of our time is teaching and training the workforce to deliver disability programmes, and investing in disability programmes. Whether it is wheelchair programmes or visually impaired programmes, our investment will go into developing that programme and educating our coaches, but in terms of facilities they are naturally very accessible.

Q140 **Clive Efford:** Surely there are difficulties with tennis in the winter months, being primarily an outdoor sport. You have talked about the shortages of indoor spaces. Many people with disabilities suffer in the cold, so there must be an issue about accessing the sport during those winter months for people with many forms of disability.

Julie Porter: I agree. We definitely need more indoor tennis facilities or multi-sport facilities that accommodate tennis. To have 96 locations where there is not an indoor facility within a 20-minute drive time means you are limited in the winter months. We would definitely lobby and be grateful for additional support for more indoor facilities.

Q141 **Clive Efford:** I have been in indoor tennis facilities. They are huge. Are there sites being identified in those areas that do not have an indoor facility? Are there grants available if somebody wanted to build an indoor tennis facility? Where does the money come from? Just to add, I cannot see them being able to generate the sorts of income that an all-weather football pitch with floodlights can, because of the few people who actually participate at any one time in a very large space.



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Julie Porter: We have pinpointed the locations, which are available on the LTA website. The analysis that we did to pinpoint locations is to look at the model for the current indoor facilities, look at what makes a commercially viable one, and then literally map it against the country to say whether there is a gap in provision.

You are absolutely right: a tennis court is a big space. It is played with two people or four people. The operators of those facilities have to work very hard in terms of utilisation and think flexibly about how you get more people on a court—for example, with programmes like cardio tennis, which is not for four people: it is group exercise, similar to what we were hearing about before.

Operators have to think very flexibly to make it commercially viable. We will support them to do that, understanding what makes them commercially viable, providing that insight and providing that learning. We are looking at flexible ways to reduce the cost of a new location, moving away from traditional build.

For three indoor courts of a traditional build, you are probably talking £45 million. We do not have £45 million. We think that is a difficult ask of Government. There are no grants available. We definitely need to look at where we can find funding. We are speaking to Government to see what funding might be available. We would have to look to third parties to come together as a triumvirate to have more covered courts.

What is important is being more flexible on what an indoor structure could look like. Does it need to be a traditional build? Could it just be covered? Could it be a bubble court? How do we keep the running costs low? It is probably the fastest route to getting the 96 locations up and running.

Q142 **Jane Stevenson:** What are your organisations doing currently with schools? Would you like to have more access? Are there barriers you would like to see broken down? If I think about spaces for all three of your sports—a few schools near me do have swimming pools but not many—is an answer to this potentially that we break the silos down and link up with school sports facilities more?

Linda Fox: Yes, it could be, in terms of training facilities particularly, if they have floodlights, because that is the key to being able to train through the winter and midweek evenings. Yes, that could be a big help, especially if they are not too expensive, which is the problem with most of the other facilities.

Q143 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you get involved with the catchment area for the Actonians? Do you go into schools and talk to the girls?

Linda Fox: We do not really, simply because we do not have the workday time, but we would really like to. If you are talking about schools, and, like the lady was saying earlier, if they have the people on the ground to run the school sports provision, that should include a link



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to make partnerships with the local club. If it comes from the school, at least they have paid people to do that work. For us, it is very difficult as volunteers.

Jane Nickerson: Not many schools have pools. Those that do, we try to make the most of, but it is the linkages that are really important, because school swimming does take place and has to take place in primary, very often in the local leisure centre. Very often now the classes are run by the local authority. We then create the links. Once those children are coming out of learn to swim, we want to signpost them into our clubs, into development pathways and into all our disciplines, because we offer diving, artistic swimming, water polo, team sports and things like that. It is the link with the school to then signpost into our clubs, into our activity, that is really important.

We work hard with the operators and try linkages, but sometimes the pools in these schools, if they are there, are quite small. They are probably better for learn to swim than they are for training. If the local authority could access it and do the learn to swim in that pool, that would release some water time for training in the local authority pool. It is about creating partnerships in areas to maximise the use of the facilities we have.

Q144 **Jane Stevenson:** Can I come back on swimming specifically? I visited a pop-up pool that the teachers loved, because it was less time in the day to get on a bus and go. The cost was kept down for the school. Is this going to create a problem for council-owned schools with their income from school use, or do you think there is a mixture of pop-up pools and council? Where is the answer?

Jane Nickerson: It is a mixture. The pop-up pools can work really well. We want to be absolutely sure that they are fit for purpose, filtration is safe, they are hygienic and all the rest of it. They certainly have a place. They have a place for the schools that want to do some really intensive learn to swim, rather than just once a week for one term, or something like that, and want to keep it going. They have a place. We are working with some pools that offer this solution, to make sure that the filtration is correct and that they are safe and healthy environments.

Julie Porter: From a tennis perspective, back in 2021 we launched a new schools programme, designed by teachers for teachers, but importantly breaking down the traditional view of tennis that it is technical and has to be played on a tennis court. With that vision of tennis opened up, we wanted to look at how we can use tennis, developing a multi-skill programme aligned to the curriculum, focused on physical literacy. We use tennis as the theme, but really we are delivering multi-skill physical literacy, developing an association, an awareness and a passion for tennis.

We have been successful in the sense that we have 23,000 teachers registered for the training. The LTA has developed the training and



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provides the training online. We provide the resources online. We also provide, with the help of the LTA Tennis Foundation, a £250 voucher that can be used with a local coach, to make that link, or with equipment buying, if that is preferable for the school, in terms of nets, rackets and balls.

We have 23,000 teachers registered. We have trained 17,200 teachers in the past couple of years. I support and reiterate every point that Ali made about the importance of PE in schools, but we know that where the teachers get trained, the quality of the provision and experience is improving. In primary schools, they touch 157 pupils with that tennis experience. That is a real focus within this strategic cycle that I was mentioning in terms of breaking tennis down, playing it in a more relevant and accessible way—letting people play it how they want, whether it is in the school, in the classroom or in the playground, but trying to start to make the links as well.

Q145 Jane Stevenson: I want some final comments around barriers to participation and class barriers. I perceive tennis as a slightly elite sport, and swimming, with the costs. Of course, with football I have grown up in Wolverhampton, so to me it is part of our lifeblood. What more can we do to break down barriers? How do we make sure that we are not missing if a child is really talented? Where should we be feeding? What gaps are there that you think could be improved on?

Linda Fox: The partnership with schools is a big thing, because they are the ones that have access to all the children and contact with the parents. Reaching the parents is the most important thing, because without the parents' support they are not going to get to the sessions. If something can be developed between the schools and clubs to a greater extent, then they can then feed the talent, and the ones who just want to play as well, through to clubs.

Jane Nickerson: The biggest cost is because of facility hire, which is really expensive because of how much it costs a pool to run. Our clubs run to the wire. They only charge what they need to charge in order to pay the facility costs. There are some professional coaches. The majority of people in our clubs are volunteers. It is about how we make that more accessible, with affordable access to a swimming pool. That is key, because if we could turn that dial down on the cost of the swimming pool, it would reduce all the costs to everybody coming through.

There is a lot we have done in swimming to make sure that, although we are gender balanced, women feel really comfortable swimming. We allow period swimwear in all our competitions. We have worked really hard so our officials do not have to wear white anymore on poolside; they can choose what they wear. We have tried really hard to reduce those barriers to female participation. By our numbers, that shows that does help. Also, within all our qualifications, there are differences training women to men, girls to boys. There are and we pull into all our coaching



and teaching qualifications a difference in that style of coaching and teaching. It is really important.

Julie Porter: Lots of the barriers to participation were mentioned this morning. The biggest barrier actually to all participants, females especially, is having somewhere local to play, making sure that is accessible and having someone to play with. Our focus, which is gaining traction, is on schools, because that is where the majority of kids are, and on parks, because they are in most communities. They can be very accessible, especially with the digital platform we are putting in. They can be at low access—some of them are completely free; some of them are not free, but they are very low-cost. Our focus really is on making sure that places are accessible and providing the programming where people are, like schools and parks.

Q146 **Jane Stevenson:** Taster days were raised in the last session. Does your club do taster sessions?

Linda Fox: Yes, there are open sessions, open days, and they are usually quite popular. Yes, we have recruited through them.

Q147 **Jane Stevenson:** For swimming, people just rock up. Tennis, what are you doing?

Julie Porter: Coming back to the indoor point, there are a couple of things that we do in encouraging tennis. One is something that we will support as a national governing body to get all our registered venues involved, which is to have big tennis weekends. Everybody across the country is opening up their doors on a particular weekend, which we will promote and let people just try tennis, the free park tennis that I mentioned earlier, so that is available in every community.

Again, going back to the commerciality of the indoor centres, we have school roadshows to get more children into tennis programmes in indoor centres, because you can get way more kids on a court than you can adults. From a revenue generation point of view, that is good for the commerciality of indoor centres.

Q148 **Jane Stevenson:** Do we need more swimming pool open days?

Jane Nickerson: Outside our swimming clubs, millions of people swim. How we continue to keep promoting that is through working with the local authorities on campaigns like Love Swimming, the reasons to go swimming, the benefits of swimming and the health benefits. I could sit here for two hours and give you the health benefits and the self-confidence benefits of it. They are the messages that we impart: "Family swimming—get your family time back. Take your children swimming and have that quiet time in the pool with them, without distraction from electronic gadgets and things." We just keep up the awareness, profile and campaigning on all the good reasons why you should swim. Once you are there, you want to do more of it—80% of girls say they want to swim more.



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Jane Stevenson: That is a good point to finish on.

Q149 **Chair:** I have to say, in some of the swimming baths around where I live they have really strict ratios on adults to children, even if the children can swim, which actually prohibits bigger families. That is a problem.

Jane Nickerson: Yes, some people take guidelines as regulation and our advice is that you risk assess. If you have a pool that is really deep and really big, you do need more adult supervision. If you have shallow areas, risk assess it. We try to work with them on that.

Chair: I do not have time to ask my final questions and get responses. I am going to ask the questions and ask if you would write in with the answers, because they are quite important. What are you doing to tackle sexism in sport? What more can governing bodies be doing to help with that? What are the barriers to more women reaching leadership positions in sport? We would really like to know your answers for that, but for quorum reasons we do not have time to hear your evidence.

I thank you all for coming today. I am sorry it has been a bit concertinaed, but you have given some very valuable information. If there is anything else you want to add when you respond to those questions, please feel free to do that. Thank you very much.