

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Sexism and inequalities in sport, HC 130

Wednesday 22 November 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 22 November 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Dame Caroline Dinanage; Jackie Doyle-Price; Kim Johnson; Caroline Nokes; Kate Osborne; Kirsten Oswald.

Questions 104-160

Witnesses

I: Emily Handyside, Coach Programme and Pathway Manager, UK Coaching; Dr Craig Ranson, Director of Athlete Health and Performance Data, UK Sports Institute; Jeanette Bain-Burnett, Executive Director of Policy and Integrity, Sport England; and Dame Katherine Grainger DBE, Chair, UK Sport.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Emily Handyside, Coach Programme and Pathway Manager, UK Coaching; Dr Craig Ranson, Director of Athlete Health and Performance Data, UK Sports Institute; Jeanette Bain-Burnett, Executive Director of Policy and Integrity, Sport England; and Dame Katherine Grainger DBE, Chair, UK Sport.

Chair: Good morning. Welcome to this morning's Women and Equalities Select Committee and the continuation of our inquiry into sexism and inequality in sport. I thank all our witnesses for being here this morning. We have Jeanette Bain-Burnett, executive director of policy and integrity at Sport England; Emily Handyside, coach programme and pathway manager at UK Coaching; Dame Katherine Grainger, chair of UK Sport; and Dr Craig Ranson, director of athlete health and performance data at the UK Sports Institute. Before we start, are you content that we use your first names?

All Witnesses indicated assent.

Q104 **Chair:** Thank you very much. As is usual in Select Committees, members of the Committee will ask you questions in turn. They will usually indicate who they wish to answer first, but if at any point any of you wish to come in, please just put your hand up or otherwise indicate, and I will try to bring you in at an appropriate moment.

I will start with a question to you, Kath, about participation in sport and whether dropout rates for girls are still higher than for boys. What is being done about it, and what should be being done about it?

Dame Katherine Grainger: First, thank you for pulling this Committee together. It is obviously a really important subject for all of us on the Committee, so thank you for allowing us to give evidence today.

It is a great opening question. To be fair, I am probably not the most knowledgeable person on the panel on participation numbers. Speaking for myself—I think the same is true for all of us—I have experienced the most incredible benefits from sport in my life as an athlete and since then while working in this area. I have been to a lot of events, whether big internationals or local school or club events, and seen the benefits that women and girls can get from sport. I think we are all in agreement that, whether it is physical, mental or social, the benefits are enormous.

The frustration exists that we still have girls and women dropping out, especially in the teenage years. There are very complex reasons behind that. There is lots of work being done about why. I think some things have been changed and improved to make sport feel more accessible, more friendly and more open to more people, but we still see these numbers in terms of dropout. It is multifactorial; it is not as simple as one answer is going to fix this. That is why everyone here feels—I am sure a lot of the answers will be similar—that it is a group effort. It is back to us all needing



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to play our part in stopping these things happening and stopping us losing these numbers, because the benefits are so huge.

- Q105 **Chair:** How much does role modelling play a part in this? Does it make a difference that we have seen the brilliant triumphs of the Lionesses? That inspires a new generation of girls, but how can we maintain that momentum?

Dame Katherine Grainger: One thing I am really proud of, working with UK Sport, is the money we invest in hosting major events, especially in this country. We host some of the big sporting events. We have had over 125 since 2012—obviously, 2012 was such a big showpiece—and over 90% of them will involve male and female events, so you can see both.

There is something incredible about being in a stadium live, rather than streaming or watching on television. I was at the final of the women's Euros. They sold out Wembley and broke attendance records. When you have those platforms, it does make a difference. We have loads of stats, which we can send on to you. Whether it is the women's Netball World Cup, the Euros or other amazing Lionesses' performances, people are really inspired and engaged. A sense of community, inspiration and aspiration comes from that. We have the evidence that proves that.

Usually, the question then is, what next? To your point, role modelling is really important. We were just saying outside that the numbers of fathers, mothers, boys and girls who now wear Lionesses' shirts with the women's names on the back have become normal. That is a big shift. That role modelling has changed attitudes and social behaviours, which is really important.

But there is still work to do. What if every girl now wants to go out and play football? Does she have that opportunity? Can she go to her local club? Can she play it at her local school? Inspiration and role modelling are huge, but it is the detail that sits underneath that we need to keep working on to give those opportunities to everyone.

- Q106 **Chair:** Thank you. Jeanette, may I turn to you and ask about Sport England's view on the Government's "School Sport and Activity Action Plan"? Is it enough, and is it working? How can we ensure that there is crossover from what happens in schools to what happens in clubs to how young girls see those inspirational role models and think, "Okay. Well, I can do that, but what is my path?"

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: Thanks so much for the opportunity to talk about some of the work we are doing, but also about the work we are doing in partnership on this issue. We welcome the refresh of the school sports strategy. We know that, in the last iteration, we at Sport England were asked to spend about £1 million on improving opportunities for women and girls—for girls, in particular. We decided that we wanted to invest in a programme that was going to address the needs of girls in schools. What we are seeing in schools is that girls are reluctant to take part in PE. They are dropping out quite early. We are even seeing from



HOUSE OF COMMONS

some of the research that parents are making excuses for girls because they are really not enjoying the experience of PE.

As part of our “This Girl Can” campaign, which is probably the flagship campaign addressing the needs of women and girls around physical activity, we created something called Studio You. It is a whole set of resources that have gone into 50% of schools in England and reached 100,000 girls. One of the key things about that was that we were asking, “What is it that girls are not enjoying?” Essentially, the way that activities are introduced just made girls feel like they did not belong. There are lots of questions around body confidence and transitions in different life stages. We spoke to girls and co-designed activities with them. That was our initial response to the school sports strategy.

With this refresh, we are seeing lots more opportunity for us to work in schools to continue to roll out programmes such as Studio You. For me, the key point is that we tap into what girls are saying and respond to what girls are saying, rather than assuming that those of us who are policymakers know what is happening. The lived experience of girls is central to making sure that strategy is successful.

Q107 **Chair:** How do you get that?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: We do not do it alone. We make sure we put tools into the hands of teachers and other people within the education sector. Everything that we create is actually done in partnership with schools, it places resources in the hands of schools, and it encourages girls, teachers and educators to be focused on being child-centred.

For example, coming out of the context of schools and looking into the context of coaching—I am sure Emily can speak to that much more strongly than me—we have a programme called “Play Their Way”. That is a coalition of organisations working with children and young people that is about being child-centred. The campaign is all about saying, “What is it that children want to do? What is it that they are interested in? What is going to keep them engaged?” That is one of the key drivers for making sure that we are successful both in schools and out of schools in terms of engagement. Also, having a specific focus on what girls are saying is really important.

Q108 **Chair:** Apologies, but I am going to chuck this one out to anyone on the panel, because I cannot work out which one of you might have the best answer. Do any of you feel that the sport and activity strategy in schools is effectively linking up with women’s health journey through life in the different stages? Is what we are doing in schools helping girls to then understand the impact and importance of living a healthier life and being physically active later on? Jeanette was nodding to that. Do you have an opinion?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: I am nodding because I wish that Ali Oliver was here.

Chair: We are very sorry. She has covid and so could not be here today.



Jeanette Bain-Burnett: You have the work of the Youth Sport Trust, which is one of our system partners. We fund the Youth Sport Trust significantly to do this work directly in schools and with schools. We know that they are really committed to working with the girls. They have a number of programmes that are specifically focused on girls getting active, and that includes an offer in schools, but also in after-school clubs. I am not the right person to speak to that, but I do know there is quite a lot of really great work happening that the Youth Sport Trust is leading. That is the reason we are investing in them.

Chair: Yes. I think we are going to have to follow up with Ali Oliver in writing on all the specific questions around that.

Q109 **Kim Johnson:** I just want to pick up on the work you do with schools. We know that 40,000 teachers are leaving the sector every year at the moment, and we know from previous evidence sessions that there are not enough skilled sports teachers in schools to develop and deliver a lot of the work that you do. I was just curious about the level of monitoring and review of what actual work goes on in schools. We hear about the proposals to do it, but I would be really interested in what actually happens in the light of the issues I have just raised.

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: It is a really challenging question because of the context of the wider education sector, which is a bit out of scope for us. However, we recognise that schools are the place where most children and young people will be, and where we can influence their journey.

We have just done a piece of work around something called physical literacy, which is about the relationship that people have throughout their life course with physical activity. Essentially, it says that there are a whole lot of influences on people's experience of physical activity. Particularly for children, if they can have an early positive experience, that sets them up for life. We are thinking about girls in school who are really struggling to engage with being well and moving their bodies. We have done work on "This Girl Can", and we have had a really great partnership with Bodyform, the sanitary products company. We have created resources for teachers and coaches that really support them to have conversations with girls. When girls are on their period, they really struggle with confidence.

We have done that, and we also have a history of doing teacher training around PE in schools. It is about upskilling teachers in schools and giving them what they need to serve the young people in front of them. Of course, I am sure you can talk to Play Their Way, but we think the key is to be child-centred.

Dame Katherine Grainger: It is a really crucial time. As you say, if they have a positive influence at that age, it generally influences their relationship with sport over the rest of their life, but if they have a negative experience or a bad developmental time, it is very hard to get women, especially, back into sport.

Q110 **Dame Caroline Dinenage:** I am not showing favouritism, but I am going



to stick with you, Jeanette, if that is all right, because I want to talk a bit more about “This Girl Can”. I remember that when those TV adverts first came out—I think it was the beginning of 2015—they were really different, inspiring and empowering. It has been a phenomenal campaign. I am interested in how you measure the impact of a campaign like that. What impact do you think it has had on women’s and girls’ participation in sport over the last seven or eight years?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: It is notoriously difficult to measure a campaign at that scale. What we know about “This Girl Can” is that, when we speak to women and girls, 47% are aware of the campaign. They have seen something in it. We know that 3.9 million women have been persuaded to act at a high level and get more information, and 2.9 million were persuaded to get active. Some responded by getting more information, and some responded by getting active. Really strong online communities have formed around “This Girl Can”, which we have facilitated. Women are sharing their own stories. Whether it is women who have just come back from being pregnant and having a child, or women who are in menopause, they share stories about how they are facing some challenging barriers but winning.

We recently launched a new wave of the campaign called “Lift the Curfew”, which taps into some of the listening we have been doing to women about how safe they feel when they are participating in sport and physical activity after dark—in the winter months. We are already getting really great responses to that on social media.

In a way, a campaign is a bit of a conversation, but we are seeing responses to that. On a personal level, “This Girl Can” is probably the reason I am at Sport England, because it reached me.

Q111 **Dame Caroline Dinanage:** It is properly inspiring in that case. You spoke to Kim a moment ago about the way it can help tackle some of the barriers for girls around puberty, periods and body image issues. Are you detecting that it is making any kind of breakthroughs on those issues, which are significant? When we were at school, so many of our colleagues loathed any form of sporting activity. It was deeply difficult for them to engage, and they tried to drop out whenever they had the opportunity.

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: In terms of body image specifically? Is that what you are asking about?

Dame Caroline Dinanage: In terms of what you were talking to Kim about—how it is tackling the barriers for girls around puberty, periods and body image. What impact is “This Girl Can” having on that?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: I think I would probably go back to Studio You, which is the tool that we use in schools. We know that it is increasing activity in schools, and it is something that we want to do more of. With all of these things, for Sport England as a sports council, we recognise that we cannot do this ourselves. There is something about creating a ripple across not just the sport and physical activities sectors but also other sectors—what is happening in health and what is happening in built



environment and natural environment. We have done some really interesting work in Yorkshire, where we have looked at how we make spaces more comfortable for girls and women. What makes a park feel safe for a woman? It is all work in progress. It is work that we do not do by ourselves, but we are seeing some semblance of hope.

Q112 Dame Caroline Dineneage: The campaign started on TV adverts and billboards, and it was really powerful. How do you manage to continue to have those conversations in a world where—I mean, I just do not watch TV any more. I am quite elderly, but people under the age of 40 these days pretty much never watch any kind of linear television; they watch everything on streaming services, and my kids seem to watch everything via the likes of TikTok and YouTube. When we were young, there were just a handful of TV shows, and we all had the same cultural influences. How on earth do you get those messages across these days when there is such a digital landscape?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: I think there are two things. One is that we are fully engaged on social media. We have a number of social media channels that are branded “This Girl Can”, and we have really good uptake on those.

One of the big parts of our strategy is that we work in places with local organisations and with local providers. During covid, we invested through “This Girl Can” into Core Cities—so a number of cities across England—and encouraged local activity. We were investing particularly in local female leaders to lead work in their communities.

I think there are two ways that people really engage nowadays: through social media, but also actually on their doorstep. Those are the two things that we are really investing in to make sure that this has reach and impact.

Q113 Dame Caroline Dineneage: I am not stalking you, but I have been having a quick look back through some of the parts and facets of the campaign. It started in the way we all know, and then you had the one that was expanded to include women between the ages of 40 and 60. Then you had the really nice campaign about diversity of body shape, age, ethnicity and so on. Do you have any specific health and physiology targets and campaigns in mind that you would look at in the future?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: I do not know, but we have learned over the time that we have delivered “This Girl Can” that there are different needs at different stages of girls’ and women’s lives. We have been tapping into what girls and women experience at those different stages and trying to respond to that. Specifically, we have noticed that perimenopausal and menopausal women are attracted to this campaign. They are particularly attracted because they see images of women who look like them and not the typical image you would see in an exercise and movement campaign. They are normal women. They are sweaty. They are tired. That is the reality of doing physical activity, and that is okay. That thing of being unashamed about those parts of being physical that might somehow have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

some taboo attached to them is really important. There is definitely some insight emerging about the connection that women in their 40s and above feel to this campaign.

Q114 **Dame Caroline Dinanage:** That is really important because they are a cohort that you really need to keep engaged in physical exercise—it is so good for every other aspect of wellbeing.

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: In that phase, you see a drop-off of activity. But when you look at opinions about the desire to be active, it is really high. I am not going to get these percentages right: it is in the 20s or 30s in terms of activity, but in the 80s in terms of desire, which means that there are definitely barriers that need to be worked on across the sector.

Q115 **Dame Caroline Dinanage:** Do you think there's any opportunity for this sort of campaign to address other wider issues, such as social isolation and marginalised communities? Do you think it has the potential to have a nuanced target?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: All of our work at Sport England recognises that physical activity can have a profound impact, and that if you get out and get active, there are multiple benefits. There are lots of programmes that are seeing benefits in social connection and mental health. That could be a whole essay. So absolutely, yes.

Q116 **Dame Caroline Dinanage:** I have totally focused on Jeanette—does anyone have anything to add? Katherine?

Dame Katherine Grainger: No, I agree. We are a biased panel—we are all here because we love sport and we have seen the brilliant things it can do. There are still ongoing frustrations about where those barriers are to the person who wants to be part of it and yet feels they can't, for whatever reason. There is so much work being done. As Jeanette said, there are lots of essays being written on that already. We know some of those barriers and still need to do more to address them. The benefits are so enormous in this area. Again, physical health, mental health, connection with people, community, sense of belonging—there are so many things that just spill out and put good back into the community. The ongoing work to make sure we try to remove any barriers, first of all, is finding out what the barriers are—we are better at knowing that—and then, in our different roles, removing them as we can.

Q117 **Chair:** This is not a question for Katherine or Jeanette, please. Is the word "sport" a barrier? I did a brilliant event for "This Girl Can" a couple of weeks ago, where a colleague, Kim Leadbeater, made the point that there is a difference between sport, exercise and movement. Is there a role to play for coaches or other organisations to work out how they can make us all move a bit more, without necessarily making it sport?

Emily Handyside: Thank you, first of all, for inviting us to contribute to this conversation. We are here for the 3 million coaches in the UK. We know from our population survey of those 3 million that very few are actually qualified or call themselves a coach—they might be volunteers or instructors who work in the exercise and fitness profession rather than the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

traditional core sports industry. There is a lot to do in terms of understanding what a coach is, and we can then go and support all the different forms of coaches who exist out there.

With regard to participants, we are hearing that it is not necessarily the name of the coach or instructor that is off-putting; what we have found from our research is that women, particularly those who are trying to get back into exercise, prefer to have a coach of the same gender. That is why we are really passionate about making sure that coaching, instructing or whatever the coaching role is that they are doing is equally accessible to men and women, and that we increase the diversity in that workforce. We believe, and we are being told, that that is linked, certainly, to reintroducing women back into exercise.

Q118 Chair: Do you know what the gender balance is in what I will refer to as the profession?

Emily Handyside: In the coaching workforce? Our survey found that 44% were female, although there are some real discrepancies or disparities there. For example, when we look at coaches from ethnically diverse backgrounds, those disparities are even greater—for example, about 10% of those are from non-white backgrounds. We also find through the data that the majority of women coaches—that 44%—tend to work with children and in school environments, while the male coaches will typically work with adults or in competitive club environments. There is a possible link there in terms of women being deterred from traditional sports, competitive sports and certainly team sports. We see that girls and women are far less likely to do those kind of core, traditional sports and team sports, and that may or may not be linked to the environments that women are coaching in.

Q119 Chair: Thank you. Craig, did you have anything you wished to add on participation?

Dr Ranson: No. I am representing the UK Sports Institute, and our remit is with the World Class performance programme. I have a 14-year-old daughter who is athletic, but I would very much bow to the expertise next to me on that topic.

Q120 Kim Johnson: I just wanted to ask a question—I don't know whether you will be able to answer this, Craig. The dropout rate for girls and young women is very high. A lot of young people live a more sedentary lifestyle now than I did when I was younger. I was always out on my bike or roller skates and doing that sort of thing, which a lot of young people do not. A lot of young people are indoors on machines messaging. Did the institute look at the long-term effects on health and wellbeing of this sedentary lifestyle?

Dr Ranson: Thank you for the question and thanks again for the opportunity to give evidence. As I said before, at the institute we are positioned to provide the science and medicine services to elite athletes, especially Olympic and Paralympic athletes, over 40 sports and encompassing around 1,500 athletes.



Within those science and medicine services, we do see that with the athletes who are transitioning from the pathway programmes on to the World Class programmes. It is in general, not just female athletes. In terms of their training and activity history, that does manifest when they come on to the World Class Programme, especially with the girls and women who now have more opportunities to come on to World Class programmes.

Their training history might be quite short, so they are not used to going to the gym and doing strength or even endurance training, and running so much as they were, as you mentioned. We are recognising that and having that preparation phase when they come on to the World Class Programme, with specialised strength and conditioning, nutrition, biomechanics, physiotherapy support programmes. That is almost to fast-track that activity level that they might not have had as much nowadays as they might have had in the past. So, they are prepared for the rigours of international sport, and we can recognise that and address it.

Q121 Kim Johnson: Thanks. My questions are about puberty dropout rates and kit. Katherine, you touched on some of those issues in your opening remarks. How can the sector better ensure that girls and women are not dropping out of sport because of kit that makes them feel self-conscious, anxious or sexualised? Again, during previous sessions we have had some of those discussions and debates about how that does impact on girls and women.

Dame Katherine Grainger: That is a really great question. What is good from my point of view—and I have been in sport as an athlete for a long time—is that those are not conversations that we had. A lot of the topics we will cover today still feel quite new; it is quite a new area. Girls and women, especially at high-performance level, can challenge and question.

It used to be, “This is the kit you’ve got, now off you go. Go and enjoy it. You’re lucky to have it.” Whereas now the right question is, “Is it appropriate? Is it right? Is it fit for purpose from a performance point of view?” But not just that. So much of performance at a high level is how you feel as much as what you are doing. The really great shift is the conversation we have seen among our national teams. Women’s football and rugby have had it. The netball players have done it as well. The idea that the kit is what we’ve always had and therefore we will always have it can now be questioned. You can say, “But should we have it?”

The discussion about white shorts is really important. A huge number of high-performance women have said, “I do not feel comfortable or confident wearing that outfit.” Then there is a great discussion. A lot of kit is designed because it is performance level, but should the colour be relevant? Could there be a different colour kit, still representative of national colours, but in a different way?

What is great is that athletes are now much more involved and invested in those conversations. It is not a conversation being had in a separate room, and therefore there is the answer. Some of the women’s teams



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have come back and said, "We're really happy in these outfits." Some have come back and said, "No we're not, and we would like to get options."

I want to give a real shout-out to Tess Howard, one of the amazing hockey players we have, linked with England hockey. She did a big dissertation on exactly that, and gave the question back, "Should hockey skirts be the only option for girls on the field of play?" If that is the reason they are dropping out of sport, that should be a quick and easy fix.

Part of it is the low-hanging fruit, and part of it is really obvious and in front of us. We have just never thought, "Could there be a different way?" I think there is huge evidence of progress. Why does it need to be the way it has been done, if it is not fit for purpose or comfortable for women to participate? The kit thing has really shifted and there is huge progress in that area. It is great that you can now sit and say, "I don't want to wear that; I don't feel comfortable in that. And if that is the reason I'm not doing it, can it be different?" We are hearing those voices now.

Q122 Kim Johnson: Has that been incorporated in the code of sports governance, in terms of what girls can wear?

Dame Katherine Grainger: I do not think it is covered by the governance code, to be honest, but in a way I do not think that it should be or needs to be. It is almost more intrinsic than that. As an athlete, you have so many areas that you try to get right to make the ultimate performance, and this should be one of the natural things you discuss. Like I said, in performance, kit will be important. We talk about breathability, and Craig will talk a lot more about specifics, but within that, the comfort and confidence should be equally important.

Kim Johnson: I am not sure whether you, or anyone on the panel, can answer this question, because Ali is not here, but it is about whether there is adequate guidance for schools on avoiding PE kit-related anxieties for girls. I don't know whether you, Jeanette, can answer that question.

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: I do not know, sorry.

Q123 Kirsten Oswald: Craig, may I pose this question to you? Sports research is overwhelmingly conducted by men and done mostly using male participants. What is the UK Sports Institute doing to address that gender gap?

Dr Ranson: That is something that we recognise as well, and it is something we depend on: 50% of the athletes that we provide services to are female. As you mentioned, a low percentage of research is specifically focused on female athletes, particularly elite female athletes. We are not a research institute; our job is to provide world-leading science and sports medicine services. However, we need that insight, so we partner, when required, with academic partners to gain insight and research into particular areas.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

One example that is relevant to apparel and sportswear, and which we did in the lead-up to the Tokyo games, was an initial survey of female athletes about their bras and whether there were any health or performance aspects that were compromised by the bras that they were wearing. It was an overwhelming yes, so we partnered with the University of Portsmouth to do a research project. That was then developed into a project in which almost half—120—of the female athletes who went to the summer Olympic games in Tokyo had a bespoke bra fitting and were able to take that with them.

That has carried on into a partnership between the institute and a bra-making company. Now, not only can elite athletes access bras that are really good for sport, but everyone can buy those off the shelf, when they were not even available a year, two years or even a few months ago. That is a good example of that research partnership resulting in some tangible changes for elite athletes, and then working its way into the general community, so that everyone has access.

Another example, which was in the press last week, was a partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University. We have a long-term research partnership with the university, which has an institute in Manchester that focuses on female athlete physiology. The story was about rowing, and one particular athlete was profiled. They had multiple rib stress fractures, which is relatively common in female rowers. That research is having an immediate impact—it has only been going for a couple of months. It looked at that athlete's workload, physiology, reproductive hormone levels and readiness for training, and it was then able to identify their energy intake and how that might influence their rib stress fractures. They were able to change their programme almost immediately, resulting in a lower incidence of rib fractures and less time away from the sport because of them.

The third one, which was showcased at UK Sport Institute's conference yesterday in Birmingham, was about the environment. You can focus on the female athlete, but is the environment that they are training and competing in optimal for their health and performance? There are a couple of really good research projects. This one is partnering with the University of Nottingham, and looks at allowing coaches, support staff and athletes to look at any barriers or opportunities within their environment, to promote optimal health and performance for female athletes.

Q124 **Kirsten Oswald:** That is really interesting. Is the wider sector doing enough to encourage more women to enter the field and increase the focus on issues that affect women in sport?

Dr Ranson: At our conference yesterday, I said that 50% of our staff are female. A lot of them are sports scientists; they come from a sports science background. They are now young practitioners who regularly lecture; they are involved as alumni and as researchers. We have these partnerships. I think we are almost at a watershed moment. You mentioned the research paper that provided an insight into the low percentage of female first authors of research papers and the low



HOUSE OF COMMONS

percentage of female cohorts that are participating in that research. I think we are at a watershed moment where that shift is taking place.

Part of that is sports engagement, and rowing is doing a brilliant job of engaging with access. That is part of the challenge. I come from a university background, and getting access to elite athletes to study is a challenge for universities. The challenge that the sports have is not having the insight on their elite athletes. There is a real opportunity for partnership between elite sport and the research opportunities that are now starting to grow. I think it will shift fairly quickly in the next few years.

Q125 Kirsten Oswald: Thanks for that. I have a particular interest in football, and especially women's football. We are seeing a lot more coverage of the risks to men from repeated heading of the ball—particularly things like dementia. Obviously, the research into women is not there at all in the same quantities. I wonder if you have any thoughts on these gaps, where we can see the problems that arise from them coming down the road towards us.

Dr Ranson: I can't speak for all. We do not provide direct services to women's football, although we do collaborate very closely with the FA on several programmes, including the female athlete programmes. As an advantage of a high-performance system, where we have those 40-odd sports—Paralympic and Olympic sports—and 1,500 athletes, we have one medical records and health surveillance system for that whole system. That allows us to very quickly identify trends in injury and illness rates and types. For example, we can monitor all the concussions that happen within that system and see whether there are particular populations—Paralympic athletes, female athletes or those in particular types of sports—who have a higher prevalence or slower return rate for things like concussion. Their athlete health team is then able to be deployed very quickly to support sports in managing it if any of those trends or priority injury or illness problems pop up. We have looked at our concussion rates, but we do not see any difference in our system in terms of either rates of concussion in female athletes or the time it takes to return from sport. But it is something that we are able to monitor very closely, and we do so.

Q126 Kirsten Oswald: I think that will be particularly interesting as time passes. Of course, we do not know now what the impact is going to be. Although I appreciate that you are saying these things are monitored, they cannot be monitored into the future, so it is a challenge.

Dr Ranson: No, and that is why we do not have a concussion workstream; we have a brain health workstream. That has two focuses. One is looking after sports concussion as well as we can now. The second is having a view to ensuring long-term brain health, and partnering with other research projects. There is one with UCL looking at long-term brain health in athletes, which is something we are joining in with as well.

Q127 Kirsten Oswald: Thank you very much for that. Emily, let me ask you about Karen Carney's review of women's football, which found poor



HOUSE OF COMMONS

sharing of best practice across sport on health issues that affected sportswomen. What mechanisms do you think could be put in place to improve knowledge sharing across sport?

Emily Handyside: Currently, within qualifications there is no requirement to look at specific characteristics, protected characteristics or female-specific issues. I think that could be mandated to become part of the qualifications. At the moment, we are relying on coaches wanting to seek out that information. There is some good information out there, but I don't know if they know where to go for it. We obviously have our own platform. There are companies such as The Well HQ doing great work in partnering and working with NGBs, but that is very much relying on NGBs and individual coaches seeking that information, rather than it being there from the outset.

Q128 **Kirsten Oswald:** Thank you. Craig, would you answer that same question?

Dr Ranson: There are three workstreams to the female athlete health and performance dedicated workstream that we have at the institute. One of those is direct support to individual athletes, which is primarily through a clinic that we run. The second one is supporting sports projects, such as the rowing one that I mentioned before. The third one is about increasing awareness and knowledge around female athlete health and performance. One of the things we do is hold a quarterly meeting of all stakeholders. That includes the coaching lead at UK Sport. We help to disseminate information, which is the key. There is lots of information being produced now; it is about getting it out there to the people who need it, whether it is within the pathway or with coaches or into the general community.

One of those initiatives—which is absolutely brilliant and I encourage everyone to listen to it—is a series of podcasts on the things that we have been talking about today: perimenopause and menopause; pregnancy and return from pregnancy with activity in sport; and the female athlete menstrual cycle and how to manage that when you are exercising or doing elite sport. The brilliant thing about these is that they are produced by experts in elite sport, but they are accessible and brilliant for anyone to listen to. They are hosted by Goldie Sayers, who is an ex-javelin Olympic medallist. They are free; anyone can listen to them. I am recommending listening to them to all my friends and family, male or female, because I certainly learned a lot from listening to them. That is the type of thing where the institute can partner with pathway organisations such as Sport England to produce those types of things.

Q129 **Kirsten Oswald:** Thanks for that. This is a final question to all or any of the panel. Should the Government have a role in convening and funding a cross-sports approach to female health? I will go back to you, Craig, and then move along the table.

Dr Ranson: We are funded to do that as part of the funding grant we receive from UK Sport. We have a dedicated workstream in female athlete health and performance, with two doctors, two sports medicine consultants and two physiologists, who are experts. They then work with



the rest of our expert teams to do dedicated work in the three areas I mentioned.

As I say, at least half our income is spent on female athletes, because 50% of the athletes in the system are female. Fifty per cent of the medals that are now won at games are for female—and male—athletes, so at least 50% of our income is spent on female athletes. However, we could always do more. We could always do with more investment—like every organisation, I imagine—but a significant body of work is being undertaken, and it will remain a priority for us. We are doing our next cycle funding for LA at the moment, and it will remain a priority in our funding submission.

Q130 Kirsten Oswald: Thanks for that. Katherine, do you want to add anything to that?

Dame Katherine Grainger: Yes, I agree. To your point, I think we are coming into a really interesting time, where there is so much more awareness and interest. I hope that we see a huge increase in the work done in this area. It is slightly crazy that we are discussing this in the 21st century and just getting to the point where it is being seen as such a priority.

To Craig's point, UKSI and UK Sport very much work in the Olympic and Paralympic world, but we have very close relationships with the professional sports as well, whether it is for investment or through a convening power to ensure that everyone is really speaking to each other. To your point, it is frustrating to still hear that maybe not enough conversations are happening in collaboration, because everyone has the same intention. Everyone wants the same benefits and everyone can see the good that can be done; it just should not be happening in siloes. We work together as a group, and that is really positive. We have done amazing things in this country by learning from and sharing with each other, especially through sport, so the more we can do that, the better.

Q131 Kirsten Oswald: The same question to you, Jeanette.

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: Within our strategy, "Uniting the Movement", health and wellbeing are a big theme. A lot of the work led out of the department I lead is focused on our relationship with the NHS. How can we make it everybody's business to talk about the benefits of physical activity? One of the small examples I have is that there has been a programme about women who have just had children, and training midwives and health visitors to talk to them about the benefits of physical activity. That is just one example. We had a whole programme called "Moving Healthcare Professionals", which was about ensuring that we had clinical champions for moving your body, because it is beneficial for prevention, during treatment, for recovery and for general health. It is definitely something that we have prioritised, and it is something that we are building through our relationship with OHID. It is a really important area, and we are focusing on it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dame Katherine Grainger: Sorry to jump in before Emily comes in, but the Government can do really influential things. I have been in this role for six years. Sport can do brilliant things, and I would be the first to advocate for it, but it cannot do it alone. To Jeanette's point about bringing in the Department of Health and Social Care, DCMS convened the first taskforce looking at bringing together health, sport and active travel. There is also the Department for Education. Everyone is a player in this game, and I think that the power of our Government is to bring together the people who can make the decisions and see what we can do collectively. I do not think that anyone on their own can do it, especially when we are talking about the challenges of people not having enough activity and of dropout. Everyone needs to come forward and help in this area, and one of the real strengths of the Government is they could pull together the different partners. Sorry, Emily.

Emily Handyside: No problem at all. What we are hearing from coaches on the ground is that they lack the confidence, knowledge and skills to support women and girls as participants. I absolutely hear that there is a need for greater insight. I think we need to go one step further, though. Once we have that insight, the question is about the interventions and action that come out of that—how we get that information to the workforce on the ground who are working with the participants, whether that is performance coaches in the pathway or the World Class Programme space. Among teachers in schools and coaches at community level, the understanding is increasing, but the confidence to use it is a different thing, so we need investment in supporting coaches and teachers to build awareness, but then we also need to understand how to action that in practice.

I also want to draw attention to the mental health and wellbeing side. There is a lot of attention on the physical side of things, but we know, from a whole range of research, that stereotypes, misogyny, sexism and all those kinds of things are at play here and really affecting how women as participants and leaders in sport feel. We need more insight that shines a light on that and how we can help them to feel more included and welcome, because it is really affecting their confidence and wellbeing.

Q132 **Chair:** Can I go back to Craig for a moment? We previously were talking to female footballers, in particular, about ACL injuries. There is a real challenge among young athletes on pathways with pars fractures, particularly in women, and we just heard Emily talking about the mental health of women athletes. Fifty per cent of the research funding is going on female athletes and issues affecting female athletes. Is that adequate, and are we doing anything to look particularly at those pathways where young people are being plucked out of relative obscurity, being pressured for the entirety of their teenage years and burning out, either physically or mentally, at 20?

Dr Ranson: There is definitely a link. We have recently done a bit of research with Bath University to look at the link between mental and physical health. It's a two-way interaction: those athletes who have a history of mental health challenges have a higher rate of injury, and those



HOUSE OF COMMONS

who have a higher rate of injury then have a higher incidence of mental health problems. So you cannot look at the two things in isolation.

I think, with female athlete health and performance, we are almost at that watershed I talked about—the one we were at with mental health when I started with the institute in 2016-17 and people started talking about mental health. That was when we started having a mental health strategy and a mental health team. We're sort of at the same period now with female athlete health and performance. As I mentioned, we are well placed within our system to be able to identify things like a change in the rate of injury of a particular type, whether it's ankle injuries—we have done some work on sportswear. I'm talking about where female athletes are landing and finding that they have higher rates of ankle injuries. We can then immediately action initiatives designed to tackle those things, alongside the sports or the research or other partners.

Raising awareness, having the knowledge, gaining insight, having data about where the challenges are, where the priority problems are, and then having the resource to be able to deploy to tackle them, is really important, whether on mental or physical health. We are reasonably well placed to do that. We have a dedicated female athlete health and performance workstream. Again, there is plenty of potential to do more in that, but there is a significant volume of work that is building and we will continue to build on.

Q133 Chair: I was really impressed to hear about the work you have done with Portsmouth University—you would expect that; it's fairly local to me—around sports bras, which has now seen top-of-the-range equipment available on the open market to everyday participants. Why haven't we—the royal “we”, there. Why hasn't the market seen this level of progress on female football boots?

Dr Ranson: Initially, I was working in cricket in this country—I was working in cricket for a long time before I came into this job. Something we saw, not just with female athletes but with athletes in general, was the importance of having a market where specific footwear is made. For example, there was a big shift in cricket to indoor training and there were no indoor cricket training boots. It's similar with female athletes. We're still looking—the market is changing; I think it's picking it up quite quickly. We were involved with some research into headguards, for example, and designing them so that they can fit in long hair. I'm talking about ponytails and buns on top of women's heads and women having space in their headguards to fit those in.

Whether it is protective equipment in boxing—gloves that fit a female hand rather than a male hand—or taekwondo, we are able to do that and to action that through, for example, our performance innovation team, which was funded to produce that bespoke apparel in consultation with the sports and with the athlete health team when there is a need for protective equipment. With bras, for example, we are seeing that then trickling down to the open market.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It does need to move faster. My wife and daughter, for example, are netballers, and up until recently, there was only one brand that made a bespoke netball shoe—one footwear brand out of all the brands. We are now starting to see some of the big brands—two or three of them—making bespoke netball shoes, so there is some choice and they are being made for female feet. That is something that needs to move quickly.

Q134 **Kate Osborne:** Good morning, everyone. I will start with a question directed to you, Emily, because I think you touched on this area before. We have heard that understanding of women's health varies greatly between coaches and across sports. How can the sector ensure that all coaches and instructors have an adequate understanding of health issues for girls and women?

Emily Handyside: To the point I made earlier, we need to make it a compulsory part of the training and qualifications of coaches, rather than an opt-in.

Q135 **Kate Osborne:** How do you think it could be mandated?

Emily Handyside: Obviously, we have a large workforce, and a huge amount of those are volunteers. What we need to do is increase the number of people taking on those qualifications and ensuring that, within those qualifications, there are modules and content that educate and build coaches' awareness of these topics.

Q136 **Kate Osborne:** Why do you think it has not been included before?

Emily Handyside: I think because sport has been designed by men for men, so it has been overlooked. It is conversations like this one that are helping people to understand that it just cannot be overlooked any longer.

Q137 **Kate Osborne:** Before I move on to Craig, does anybody else want to come in on that specific question? No? Craig, can you describe the performance data management system and the benefits for monitoring menstrual health and risk factors for relative energy deficiency in sport? We heard evidence that said it was being used in netball. How widely is it being used?

Dr Ranson: The performance data management system is the wider data system that we have across the 40-odd sports and 1,500 athletes within our system, and we are very lucky to have that. It encompasses medical records and the health surveillance system. One of its features is what we call our AER app—AER stands for availability, effort and recovery. That is a customisable app, which a high proportion of those 40 sports use on a daily basis with their athletes, and they can tailor that. The questions are asked daily. In the previous evidence I saw, one of the great uses was within covid in monitoring symptoms, so athletes could log whether they had any symptoms to gain access to training facilities.

Actually, it is designed to identify priority opportunities for performance in health within sports and then to monitor that. The athlete reports on a daily basis how they are feeling, whether they feel they are ready for training and whether they feel they are injured or ill. That can then be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

acted on by the support staff. Athletes can put in how much workload they have done, so if I have done a swimming session, I can put in that I have done 2 km and it was this level of effort. I can also put in how I am feeling about recovery—what my sleep was like and how I am feeling the next day. That has been tailored by some sports.

An example is the rowing project that was featured on the BBC last week. The app is being used as part of that project to gather data from the athlete about their menstrual cycle, so they log the first and last day of their period and then the cycles can be monitored to see whether they are in the normal ranges or not. There is a number of ways that those apps could be used. Eboni, who gave evidence from netball, described very well how it is used appropriately within sports to gain health and performance advantages for the athletes who use it.

Q138 Kate Osborne: How widely do you think it is being used? Do you think it should be mandatory?

Dr Ranson: No, I don't think it should be mandatory. Any time you use a tool like that, there should be a clear performance or health rationale for using it. When sports do identify those clear performance or health rationales, the questions that are asked of those athletes can be tailored to do that. It is really important that it is consensual, so that the athletes understand why they are giving this information. When we first started using it five or six years ago, athletes were asked to fill in this information and did not feel they were getting the value from it, so when we set it up nowadays, we set a clear health and/or performance rationale for using it.

The athletes are involved in when they fill it in. For example, if you are at the rowing centre having breakfast, that is a great time, because everyone can agree in the 10-minute window after breakfast before they go training to fill it in. The athletes buy into that, and then it is much more effective.

The most important thing is that they get feedback from it. If you are asked about your menstrual cycle and how it is affecting your performance, and you are recording that on an app, it is really important to feed that back to the athletes, and then it is built into their individual training plan.

Q139 Kate Osborne: Last year, England rugby player Rachael Burford wrote and spoke about the menstrual cycle being the sportswoman's "superpower". Do you agree that a well-monitored and understood menstrual cycle can be a superpower?

Dr Ranson: I think there is great opportunity there. The menstrual cycle is basically a fluctuation in hormones, and there is a lot of talk at the moment about how that might be harnessed. There might be times of the month when your hormone levels are right for strength training, for example. There might be times of the month when your hormonal profile is really good for endurance training.

We have been working with some companies on technology we have now that enables daily non-invasive measuring of hormonal profile. It is a



saliva sample, and it can tell what your levels of oestrogen, progesterone and so on are. At the moment, we are using it to ensure that the hormonal cycle is appropriate and that there are no barriers to participation, or to limit those barriers to participation due to the menstrual cycle. The next stage—again, this is part of the rowing project—will be looking at whether there are opportunities to tailor the training programme to take advantage of those hormonal profiles. We are not quite there yet, but there is a great opportunity for it to be a superpower.

Q140 Kate Osborne: How can we increase awareness of the relationship between the menstrual cycle and sports performance, particularly for grassroots athletes?

Dr Ranson: It is important. Professor Kirsty Elliott-Sale, who we partner with at Manchester Metropolitan University, was tweeting over the weekend about this, because there was some hype on social media about different phases of the menstrual cycle and how it might affect athletes. She was really good and pragmatic in saying, "Look, if you're in an Olympic final and you've got your period, you can't say, 'Hang on—let's delay the final by two days so I can perform.'"

World records are broken by female athletes who have their period every day of the week—world championship performances, winning gold medals—so it is important to say that it is not a barrier to performance all the time. There are symptoms that are associated with it that can be managed, and they can sometimes compromise performance, but female athletes can still perform if they are well supported. That was a really good message to get out there. Fifty per cent of the population have periods most months; it happens all the time. It is not about it being normalised—if there are challenges with it, there needs to be support—but it is something that you can definitely perform with and that people are performing with every day.

Q141 Chair: That is a really interesting point. In 2023, we are still talking about it and working out how we can harness it and what the science around it is, but there is not yet enough real data that would inform athletes, coaches and the entire sector.

I am going to move on to some of the more difficult, unpleasant issues, and specifically I am going to hone in on swimming and gymnastics and cultures of bullying, body shaming and weighing young athletes, in some instances publicly. What is Sport England's assessment of the effectiveness of Swim England's response to those issues?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: First of all, I should say that some of the stuff we have seen has been really shocking, and those practices are unacceptable. The way that we at Sport England have dealt with this has been to first of all listen, to understand what has happened. We commissioned a report—the Weston review—and we are working really closely with Swim England to make sure that practices are improved.

More broadly, the approach that we take is that we are absolutely committed to improving welfare and safeguarding practices across sport.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kim mentioned the code for sports governance earlier, which is one of the tools we use with all our funded organisations to hold them to a really high standard and to review their practices.

Specifically with Swim England, we are really close to the case. We also have very strong conditions on their funding. What we are not going to do is continue to just observe. Most of our funded organisations will have multiple-year funding, but I think it is well known that Swim England is currently on one-year conditional funding and if they live up to the standards that are set out in our conditions, that will be extended. We take this very seriously. Across sport, it is something that is front and centre on our agenda and we are taking really robust action.

Q142 Chair: Is that the big sanction: taking away funding, or the threat of taking away funding and putting you on a one-year deal if you behave?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: It is not as simple as that because we know that any national governing body in sport will be serving a very wide population through a network of provision. To simply remove funding is not always the best answer. We want to see stronger leadership, tighter governance and better-quality experiences for participants. The best thing to do is to work with the organisations that we fund to see that improvement. Sometimes that takes a closer working relationship, and sometimes it is making sure we have a set of really clear standards that we consistently monitor.

Q143 Chair: I am glad you touched on wider sport, because we know that challenges like this are not exclusive to swimming or gymnastics. I am going to do something very unfair: I am going to hit you with a comment from a constituent of mine, who is very much involved in athletics. He said to me that he had gone to the governing body because he was concerned that what he was seeing from coaches was not sexual harassment and was not physical abuse, but was, in his words, "just bullying", but bullying to an unacceptable level. When he went to the governing body, he said they were not interested. If it did not cross a criminal threshold, they were not interested. What I want to know is how individuals like him can best feed into the wider sport network when they are thinking, "I am worried about this, and I have had no satisfaction from my governing body, so who do I go to next without splashing it all over the media?"

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: For us at Sport England, we recognise that this is a huge issue. It is something that comes across our desks all the time. We have a limited remit as a sports council, but one of the things we really welcome is that, in the recent sports strategy, there is a call for evidence around integrity in sport. We have fed into that quite a lot. We have had discussions with officials at DCMS, sharing with them what we are seeing. We really cannot wait to see the outcome of that. We think that that call for evidence should result in something. At the moment, we have individuals who may or may not have a good experience on the ground. We have actually spoken to quite a lot of people to hear their experiences and to understand what it is they are looking for. Ultimately, the decision



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about whether there is a further place to go when you have exhausted all your options is one for Government that we want to be really involved in, advising on that and sharing what we know. We are waiting for that process to be completed.

Q144 **Chair:** I get that you have to wait for that process, but what does perfect look like in your book?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: Does perfect exist? I do think that whatever comes out the other end needs to look at the journey of the people involved. For us, what is important is the best-quality experience on the ground. So we start with good practice. That is the bit that we actually contribute to quite a lot through the code for sports governance and through all the work that we do. We have the Sports Governance Academy, which is all about national governing bodies and wider sport improving their practice. The first thing is that we want to improve the levels of practice, but when things go wrong, we want to know that people are satisfied that their case was heard and has been resolved in the way that has respected what they have experienced. We do that as far as we can within our remit. We do have limitations as to what we can do, but ultimately we really look forward to what is going to happen across the sector in response to the DCMS call for evidence. It is an important area of work, and it is one we all have to contribute to making better.

Q145 **Chair:** Thank you. Can I turn to you, Emily, and ask how the Government can make sure that the culture of coaching is supportive, inclusive and constructive, and that we see progress being made—I would like to say an end to this—so that fewer athletes experience this sort of behaviour?

Emily Handyside: We would like to see an independent body where complaints can be raised by participants or coaches. We are hearing on the ground from coaches who are observing practices that they may be a little bit uncomfortable about, or where things are a little bit grey, that they do not know where to go or perhaps do not feel comfortable going and reporting to their sport, for fear of not being believed or it being detrimental to their position or progression within the sport. We would like to see somewhere independent where concerns can be raised and that can help to respond to them so that there is a safe place for those concerns to be shared.

Q146 **Chair:** Katherine, do you have any thoughts on that?

Dame Katherine Grainger: Yes. I am interested in what Emily is suggesting. In May 2022, UK Sport set up Sport Integrity, which is a pilot for three years. UK Sport was looking to see if an independent body could sit that any complaints of bullying and harassment could go to. There would be case managers and investigative powers, and NGBs—national governing bodies—of all the sports could sign up for it out of choice. It is very much expected that every single NGB will have signed up by the end of next month, so that they all have access to this independent body. It does casework and makes recommendations independently. It sits separately to all of us. So far—this is really hard—it has been successful, because it has been hearing cases. I would love to sit here and say, “It



HOUSE OF COMMONS

has not had any interest, because there is nothing going on,” but then we’d know that it was not working. It is being successful. Independent people or people in the system or the sport itself can refer cases to this independent body, and it is hearing those cases.

Sometimes things can get stuck in the system for a long time. Sports get really bogged down with how long some of these investigations can take. Obviously, it is really important that they are done thoroughly, but the positive thing about having a completely independent system is that everyone can step back, it is dealt with independently, and then the recommendation comes through independently. At the moment—as I said, we are halfway through the pilot—it is a really positive step, and I think it is something that, I hope, when it rolls out, will be better for the whole system.

Q147 **Chair:** You said by the end of next month—

Dame Katherine Grainger: End of December.

Chair: By the end of December all governing bodies will have signed up. What if they haven’t?

Dame Katherine Grainger: Then there will be quite deep conversations being held. A bit like we are discussing, the levers you can pull are the governance code, and there are obviously always funding levers. The most important thing in this area is that it is about the right thing to do. If sports are not signing up to it, you would be questioning why. A lot of it is an education piece as well. Sports could be nervous about what it might mean for them—the cost and putting everything in place. The amazing thing is that UK Sport put a lot of money into it—that is why it is a pilot—to see if it works and so that it takes some of the financial pressures off people bringing a case forward, whether it is a sport or an individual. So, yes, everything is on track for every single sport to be signed up. If they do not, there will be a serious conversation as to why they wouldn’t be signing up. But they will all be signed up in due course.

Q148 **Chair:** You sound very confident about that.

Dame Katherine Grainger: I am very confident about it.

Chair: I am very pleased you sound that confident.

Dame Katherine Grainger: Going back to your original question about role modelling in different ways, the sports that are signed up are having positive experiences with it. In a way, yes, we can try to impose it and insist, but actually the most valuable thing is when sports share with each other that it is the right thing to do and a good thing to do.

Q149 **Chair:** There is the reverse of naming and shaming, isn’t there? There is highlighting those that have done it and what they have benefitted from as a result.

I am going to ask a bit of a pokey question: is it just girls and women who are suffering harassment and bullying through the coaching system,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

or is it young men as well? Does anyone want to tackle that?

Dame Katherine Grainger: I think the obvious answer is that everyone has the potential to be at risk. I would not say that it is only women and girls who experience it.

Q150 **Chair:** Presumably all your systems are designed to support male and female athletes. Should there be any particular focus on female athletes? Has any of you done any quantitative analysis of the gender split in complaints that your body is dealing with? Have you looked at the gender split?

Dame Katherine Grainger: I am sure there will be details that we can forward to the Committee on the numbers that we are seeing come through so far.

Chair: Do the rest of you have anything to add?

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: We have not seen a specific focus on negative experiences. In the context of this Committee, I think we are aware of the environmental issue of misogyny and sexism and how that would compound the experience of girls and women, but there is nothing specific.

Q151 **Chair:** If you have not looked at the gender split, have any of you considered ethnicity? Katherine, could you also consider it as part of that? I think that would be interesting.

Q152 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** My questions are about pregnancy and maternity. I will start with you, Craig. We have seen some recent examples of elite athletes going through pregnancy and then returning and being very successful. Is there any particular driver for that? Are there improvements in sports science or coaching methods, or is it just getting better?

Dr Ranson: I think it is a really good indicator of the confidence that female athletes now have that they can stay in sport. We are seeing more and more of them. We used to see one or two athletes per year in the World Class Programme, even four or five years ago, who were having kids and coming back to sport. In the last two or three years, we have seen 12, 10, eight female athletes in the high-performance system who are doing that.

There are some really notable examples—Helen Glover in rowing and many others—who are doing that now. The world trampoline championships are on, and there was a story last week about a trampoline athlete who came back 10 months after having a baby to compete, not in Olympic sport but in the world championships.

There is much more support within the sports. Also, for example, a proportion of athletes who access the female athlete clinic that we have are athletes who are either contemplating pregnancy, pregnant or returning from a pregnancy to their sport. The support mechanism is there both in UK Sport, with its pregnancy guidelines that enable the sport to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

support the athlete, and in the support services, whether physiotherapy, sports medicine or strength and conditioning, which enables athletes to return safely and in a timely manner.

Q153 Jackie Doyle-Price: Emily, do you think it is something about women today feeling more empowered about being able to go back to sport? I seem to remember reading somewhere that women have better performance after having their first child than prior to pregnancy. Is there any evidence of that?

Emily Handyside: I am probably not best placed to comment on that. Craig might be better positioned to comment from a physical point of view.

Dr Ranson: I am not an expert in post-pregnancy physiology. However, there is some thought that, as with the menstrual cycle, there are changes in hormonal fluctuations and physiology that could be harnessed. There are obviously some challenges as well in returning from pregnancy to sport. I can certainly ask my learned colleagues and write to you with any information about the advantages of returning to sport after a first pregnancy.

It goes back to removing the barriers to returning to sport. It is about whether we can support female athletes so that they can return safely and in a timely manner, if they wish to return to high-level sport, and give them the best chance to do that.

Q154 Jackie Doyle-Price: I suppose it is not a case of one size fits all. Every woman has a different reaction to pregnancy, let's be brutally frank.

Katherine, what steps is UK Sport taking to monitor implementation of the maternity guidance that you have issued?

Dame Katherine Grainger: We put out the first pregnancy guidelines in 2021. There was an 18-month consultation period that was really in-depth, with coaches, athletes and performance directors—there was a lot of input from the system. This is the slightly crazy thing: it is the 21st century, and this is the first time that we have had this within sport.

It was received really well. That very much goes to Craig's point that this is a very big statement, saying that if any female athlete wants to become a mother, that should not be a barrier to still being able to perform; it should be part of your life and career as an athlete. It was advice both to the individual and to the sports about how to have the early conversations: when to raise it, from a welfare point of view, how to come back and how to bridge those things.

That has been rolled out since 2021. We have recently done a review of it, because it is happening relatively fast. I take Craig's point that more and more brilliant women in the system are becoming mothers and are still wanting to compete. There is a real pride in it, there is real success and it is really good news, but because the guidelines were so new and it still feels that this is quite new to the system, there was a sense of "What are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the learnings from the first iteration? What we can do to add what is missing? Where is further help needed?"

The second version has more about fertility options and more about how, if a mother wants to bring a baby into the sporting arena, you can look after the health and safety from everyone's point of view. There is a lot more detail, which has all been coming from the feedback that we have had on the initial guidelines and what it takes. There is an expectation now that every sport will have its own pregnancy policy alongside its selection policy.

That is really good progress. Considering how long women have had children, it still feels slightly mad that this feels quite new. I was an athlete for 20 years in the rowing team, and not one person was a mother during that time. It was never said—it was never encouraged or otherwise—but there was just this assumption that if that is the choice you want to make, you will retire gracefully and go and have your family.

I think it is just brilliant that this enormous shift has happened. Of course it is not the end point; of course, as you say, you can come back and be as physically good as you were. A lot of the mothers I have spoken to in sport have really different motivations now. There is an incredible pride in doing this with a family and doing it for your family. They are sensational role models, and these are brilliant messages that our female athletes are sending.

From UK Sport's point of view, the policy guidelines are a framework. We have seen how important it is that every sport takes that framework, but there will be nuances. You were saying that every woman will experience it differently; every sport will also have slightly different timings or physical attributes that will play into it, so I think that it is really for the sports to mould that framework into what really works for them.

Q155 Jackie Doyle-Price: You have just articulated that in a reassuring way, so I am feeling more confident about it, but I would like to get a feel from you for where we are in the journey to making sure that women genuinely feel empowered to have a child and continue their sport. Are we a good way down that track? How far away are we from really embedding that within culture? Is that too simple a question, because different sports are at different parts of the journey?

Dame Katherine Grainger: That is a great question, and it will be the same question whether it is women in coaching, women's representation or funding. With everything, we are so much better than we have ever been, but we can never feel that it is enough. I think there is this real desire to ask, "Is it enough?"

When these areas are still bedding in, the feedback is enormously helpful, so we really want to hear from athletes who have gone through this themselves. All the intentions are to make this positive and very open. You don't want any athletes having to hide personal news, whether that is about menstrual cycles, pregnancy or anything else. You want to feel that

you can be open and that this is something that will be supported and encouraged, not a barrier in any sense. For any athlete experiencing anything other than that, we need to hear about it. We are all still learning in this area. Every time we hear a bit more, we can adapt and improve the guidelines and keep moving forward.

In answer to your question, I think we are definitely further down the road. A lot of this is about behaviours and attitude, so it really matters that the coaches, performance directors and medical support see this as something that we can work with, help with and support. It does not need to be seen as a problem, a setback or a barrier. It's like, "This is great. This is a wonderful part of your life. We still really value you as an athlete. Now, what can we do together to make this work?" I increasingly hear that those are the conversations that people are having. Certainly, speaking for myself, if those conversations are not feeling positive for athletes, we would want to know that as well.

Emily Handyside: May I offer a view from my experience? I should add that I am also head coach for the Welsh Feathers netball team, and have previously worked with the England Roses team. From my experience, there are differences between Olympic and non-Olympic sports in terms of that information, insight and policy trickling down to non-Olympic sports.

There is also a disparity between the home nations. When I was with England, it certainly felt that the link through to what was then EIS, but is now UKSI, was far stronger and more coherent. Having been in various roles on the ground, I feel that everything you are saying is certainly true in Olympic sports, probably in England set-ups, but less so in the home nations or professional and non-Olympic sports.

Q156 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** That is a useful message for us to hear.

We heard from a rower that nine months might not be sufficient for a successful return to elite rowing. Where are you, in your review, on the length of maternity leave?

Dame Katherine Grainger: Again, the decision on nine months was a big discussion point through the consultation. It involved athletes as well, so it includes their feedback. Six months is the time when you would get a steer from athletes on whether they are thinking they would want to come back. Everyone felt that that would be comfortable: to say, at about six months post-birth, whether instinctively they wanted to come back or not. Another three-month period is then given, so that at that point you can start to look at the potential.

It is not about asking, "Nine months post-birth, what is the level of performance from that athlete?" It is working with the coaching, medical and support teams to assess the potential for that athlete. If they want to come back and are up for this, and the potential looks good, that is when a decision can be made around the investment. It is not a hard and fast "Nine months, boom, you're done." It is "Where are we now? Can we look at potential?" Nine months also represents the coverage for maternity leave.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q157 Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes, of course. From that perspective, the six-month point is really where you are asking people to make that choice, and that works.

Dame Katherine Grainger: It is getting a steer from the athlete about how they are feeling. A lot of this will be instinctive: "Does this feel right for me or not? Am I up for it or not?" As I said, this big consultation was quite widespread, to hear from everyone, and athletes themselves were saying that that is when it felt about right—that is when they think they would know. Then there is work to be done over the next few months on what the potential is and what needs to be put in place to ensure that they can come back to the standards they would want to be at.

Q158 Jackie Doyle-Price: I invite all your observations on my final question. Football, one of the richest sports, manages to pay women athletes only 14 weeks' maternity pay. What are your reflections on that, particularly given the guidance you have?

Dame Katherine Grainger: We are always very aware of not stepping on toes across different sports. I would not even begin to think I knew all the nuances between each sport. Especially in professional sports, there has been such an imbalance of salaries or prize money over a long period of time. That is always being adjusted, and the financials behind it are very complex. That is being looked at all the time. Increasing the prize money for the FA Cup is really positive for the women's side.

When it comes to pregnancy and women's health issues, it is like we talked about: the really important thing is that we are sharing knowledge across all the spheres. We in the Olympic and Paralympic world find it really helpful to know what the non-Olympic sports are doing, what the home countries are doing and what the professional sports are doing. We hope it goes both ways. I would not want to comment on specifics.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is very diplomatic, Katherine. Does anybody want to be a bit more provocative?

Dame Katherine Grainger: I am happy to sit back and watch that!

Jeanette Bain-Burnett: No, I don't think I'm going to comment on that particular question, if that is all right.

Q159 Jackie Doyle-Price: Going back to the point that you made earlier, Emily, about the difference in the four nations: do you have any reflections on why you think England is doing better, just from your own practice? Is it just that it is bigger, or is it something else?

Emily Handyside: From my limited understanding, I believe that there are differences in funding, and infrastructure is certainly different. What was the EIS was heavily linked to netball, so I am only talking from my personal experiences here. The EIS was a bigger organisation, with more money, than the equivalents in Wales. In my view, a big reason for it is funding and infrastructure.

Q160 Jackie Doyle-Price: That makes sense. Presumably, in terms of sources



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of funding, the UK is the piper who calls the tune. If the funders are making these policies a condition of funding, obviously there is an incentive to do something about this.

Emily Handyside: Yes. I cannot really comment on how Sport Wales works and the funding of the governing bodies. We have heard from Jeanette about how they pull those funding levers with organisations and NGBs in England, but I could not comment for Wales.

Caroline Nokes: I thank all the witnesses for your evidence today. If anything crops up as you walk out the door that you wish to let us have in writing, please do so; we would certainly be very interested to receive it. This has been a very interesting session. Thank you.