



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Elite Deaf Athletes and the Deaflympics, HC 845

Tuesday 14 October 2025

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Members present: Dame Caroline Dinenage (Chair); Mr Bayo Alaba; Damian Hinds; Dr Rupa Huq; Natasha Irons.

Questions 1-27

Witnesses

I: Chris Ratcliffe, Chief Executive, UK Deaf Sport; Henry Hughes, Deaflympic swimmer; Nathan Young, Deaflympic swimmer.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Chris Ratcliffe, Henry Hughes and Nathan Young.

Q1 **Chair:** *[In British Sign Language]* Welcome to our Committee, and thank you for being here today.

[The Chair continued in English] The Culture, Media and Sport Committee is looking today at the issue of funding for elite Deaf athletes and the Deaflympics, which will take place on 15 November in Tokyo. This is part of our “State of Play” inquiry, in which we have invited individuals, groups and organisations within our DCMS remit, who do not get the attention from Government that they deserve or need, to propose evidence session ideas.

Some of today’s evidence will be given in British Sign Language via the brilliant interpreter here, Matthew Banks. There will also be two interpreters signing the session for a livestream, which people watching at home can access through parliamentlive.tv.

For our panel today, we are delighted to be joined by two Deaflympians—Nathan Young and Henry Hughes, both Deaflympics swimmers—and the CEO of UK Deaf Sport, Chris Ratcliffe. Welcome to you all; thank you for coming. I remind Committee members to declare any interests when they ask their questions.

I will start with you, Chris. What effect does deafness and hearing loss have on sport and physical activity?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* Deaf people face a wide range of barriers in everyday life. As a result, they tend to become a less active population, compared with the wider population. The barriers are multiple, for example in relation to communication and social isolation. They also tend to be delayed in education. Limited access to language can affect all those issues, and then you end up with psychological barriers. A high percentage of individuals have instances of negative mental health. A number of people in the community are either unemployed or in low-paid or low-salary jobs.

Deaf children are half as likely to be active in sport as their hearing counterparts. If you are Deaf, you are challenged in every part of your life, not just sport, but obviously we are here to focus on sport. Sport tends to be an afterthought when it comes to Deaf children.

Q2 **Chair:** How many people in the UK are affected by hearing loss or deafness?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* In the UK, we know that one in six are affected by hearing loss. That is approximately 12 million people. There are 900,000 who are profoundly deaf, and 87,000 who are British Sign Language users as a first language. One in every 1,000 are diagnosed as deaf or with hearing loss at birth, and a further one in every 1,000 are diagnosed as deaf prior to the age of three, so it is actually



quite a big population. That is a lot of people who are being left behind in sport.

- Q3 **Chair:** That is a lot of people. The Committee was surprised to learn that the Deaflympics is separate from the Olympics and Paralympics. What is the history? Why did that happen?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* The first thing to say is that the Deaflympics was founded 101 years ago, in 1924. The UK was one of the nine founders of the Deaflympics, which was established well before the Paralympics.

The second thing to say, bringing it into the modern sphere, is that there is no classification for Deaf athletes within the Paralympics. The Paralympics in and of itself, in its architecture, is exclusive of Deaf athletes. The Deaflympics was recognised and acknowledged by the International Olympic Committee in 1955 and has been a member of the Olympic movement from that time. The Paralympics was acknowledged in the '60s but was formally brought into the IOC family in 1988.

As I say, the Deaflympics has been around for a very long time. It is a very big international event. There are over 3,000 athletes from 80 different countries competing in Tokyo next month. That accounts for some of the differences.

- Q4 **Chair:** Can Deaf athletes compete in the Olympic games? What are the less understood disadvantages that might prevent a Deaf athlete from taking part?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* In theory, yes. In theory, there is nothing to stop a Deaf athlete from competing in the Olympics, but in Team GB history there have been two Deaf athletes who have ever taken part in the Olympics, and that was back in 1908.

What are the lesser-known issues? If you are in the Olympics, there are everyday barriers in the Olympic village, for example, and there are barriers in the sport itself. To hear the gun or hear the whistle, you need some kind of modification. The speed of sound versus the speed of light for the alternative triggers can affect competitive advantages in elite sport.

Deaf people have all those barriers to competing at elite levels. I have mentioned the everyday disadvantages, but there are elite sports disadvantages that mean that Deaf people struggle in comparison with their hearing counterparts.

- Q5 **Dr Huq:** My questions are for Nathan and Henry. Can you tell us about your lived experience of being elite Deaf athletes?

Nathan Young: When I was two, I was diagnosed as deaf, and from that point I had progressive hearing loss. By the time I was 15, I had no hearing at all. During that time, I had no Deaf identity. I lost my hearing with such a rapid decline, and I had no role models in the sporting world at all. Growing up, I was subjected to daily discrimination, from teachers



having a lack of awareness to being isolated, targeted or bullied just for being different. Due to that progressive hearing loss, my main communication was lip reading. When you cannot hear things, you cannot be involved in team sports like football, so I was left out.

But when I was 15, I found out about Deaf swimming. It was just me on my own in the pool, not having to worry about anything other than swimming up and down. For me, that was a safe place. From that point, I found a place of identity and was able to excel, but I did not realise how much I was going to be discriminated against. In the Deaf world, the Deaflympics is not funded at all. I spent my whole career being discriminated against, and when I found a safe place, even then I was not accepted, even in a sporting aspect.

Henry Hughes: Thank you for having us. What is my lived experience of being a Deaf athlete? Funnily enough, I was born in New Zealand and have lived in Australia for most of my life. I have represented Australia, so I have seen the parallel of the two countries, whereby one is a bit more advanced with its Deaf athletes and the other is lagging behind. When I came here, I could not believe just how differently Deaf people are treated in society. That is why I set out to try and change it, and that is why I am here today.

In my lived experience as a Deaf person, I have had to go through many different clubs, because people could not accept me for who I am. Coaches could not coach me, because they did not see the incentive to coach me, and programmes could not take me on, because they did not see the incentive to support me. I was seen as someone who would never get to the top, but I have represented Australia at the Deaflympics and I am going to represent Great Britain at the Deaflympics, so it is funny how life works out. It shows the commitment that I had. I did not want to give up on my own Olympic dream.

I hear so many Olympians and Paralympians talking about that Olympic spark that they had when they were a little child. I had that. I had it for London 2012. It was always my dream to represent Britain, following my mother's lineage. When people told me that I could not do it, I did not take no for an answer. That is why it is really important that when I am talking today, I am not just talking about myself or Nathan; I am talking about so many generations of Deaf people and Deaf athletes whose dream was never realised, because of ignorance and because of a lack of understanding. If I am going to have Deaf children and grandchildren, and they want to go and play sport, I want to be sure that I have done what I can to make sure that they have a better chance than I do and can have a more illustrious career.

Q6 Dr Huq: Thank you so much. Are there other examples of countries that do it well? It is interesting to hear the Australia example.

Henry Hughes: Yes, Australia is one example. While funding is a global issue, there are many countries that have Deaf athletes integrated in their sport. In swimming, Deaf athletes can compete at state and national



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championships alongside their para-athlete counterparts. That is not the case here. It was only this year that Nathan and I fought and worked with Swim England to allow Deaf athletes to compete at its most recent national championship, but we are still in a struggle to compete at the Aquatics GB championships with the other para-athletes.

You can already see that there is a disadvantage for British athletes compared with other countries around the world where Deaf athletes—swimmers, in this case—have a better standing. It is unique, because you would never get that situation in the final of an Olympic swimming competition, where everyone is funded and supported and has the best racing suits, the best goggles and the best team. The Deaflympic final is completely different: some swimmers are funded, some swimmers are sponsored and some do not have anything at all. Some swimmers will have had to sacrifice their whole life just to get there. That is all on top of the dynamics of being Deaf and the social integration issues of being Deaf. It is unique in that aspect.

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* I might just piggyback on that point. You have mentioned other countries. Governments in other countries in Europe and in Asia recognise Deaf sports with the same standing as the Olympics and the Paralympics. With funding, they treat their Olympians, Paralympians and Deaflympians according to the same standard.

Q7 **Chair:** Australia has a fantastic reputation for elite swimming, so we are very pleased to have stolen you from the Australians, Henry. Let me ask you and Nathan the same question that I asked Chris: what are the obstacles that elite Deaf athletes and swimmers experience in the Olympics that we might not expect or understand?

Nathan Young: The first one is that when you start a race, you need some form of start signal. In the Olympics, you have the starting gun. In the Deaflympics, we have a traffic light system: red means "Get on the block," amber means "Take your marks," and green means "Go." In this country, we do not have that system. I have campaigned since I was 15 to get a light system going, but we only have that in level 1 and 2 competitions, which are at a higher level. It is not happening down at the grassroots of swimming.

There is one light that tells me when to go. I have worked with Swim England, and they say they cannot make that more accessible. This means there is no red to tell me to get on the block or amber to take my mark. Again, that puts us at a disadvantage. I said, "Why don't we try to integrate it? If we start now, in 10 years' time every pool will have it." But there is no incentive for them to make that change. It always comes back to money. How can we make them make that change? It is ultimately about funding.

Henry Hughes: Yes, I am glad to represent Great Britain. Australia is a bit annoyed that I am coming over here—there is always great banter when it comes to big rivalries.



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As Nathan said, people do not recognise that it is about quality of life as a Deaf person. It is not just what happens in the pool; it is the social dynamic. Sport is all about politics, at the end of the day. People favour other people; people want to make sure that you never succeed and that their favourite succeeds. It does not help when you have a disability that can be undermined in that sense.

I go to Loughborough University. They love to say that we have been the No. 1 university team for the last 47 years, but even at the top level here in the UK, they struggle to support me in the way they support my Olympic and Paralympic counterparts, because it is all about the direction that the Government is heading in.

There is a cycle—a roundabout. Nathan knows this as well: if you go to a university or a world-class programme, they say that you have to go to an NGB. An NGB will say that you have to go to the Government. The Government then say, “No, we don’t know what to do.” It is a continuous merry-go-round: it goes round like clockwork.

Frankly, I think a lot of Deaf people are tired of seeing ourselves being passed around as if we are not recognised or seen. I know this because my mum was also Deaf. Growing up in London in the 1960s, she was the only person of colour in her area and the only Deaf person in her area. She wanted to go on to do many great things, but she was never allowed to, because the path was never there for her. She faced a lot of ableism in that sense, and now she is seeing her son go through it.

I have my mother’s spirit in me. I want to make sure that other Deaf children and young people have the access to sport that previous generations did not have. I do not want to finish my sporting career not knowing whether I have made a change to make sure that the next Deaflympic team is even more successful than the current one, because that is what Britain should be doing as a founding member of the Deaflympics. As we have always done with our soft power, we make the world gravitate around us. Why can’t we do it here in the UK, and then other countries around the world will support the Deaflympic movement? It can all start from this table, right now.

Chair: Excellent. That is very inspiring.

Q8 Mr Alaba: Welcome. I really appreciate the commitment and the drive—I can hear it from both of you, and that has come from you, from within.

What support do you get to compete and to train?

Nathan Young: Again, I think the ultimate answer is zero support—absolutely zero. To give you a bit of an insight, I am from the Wirral, near Liverpool, and I train at my local club. I swim with 14 to 18-year-olds, and I am 26, so a bit older, but I am not like Henry—I am not part of Loughborough University; I have done my university, and I now work in the NHS, alongside my swimming career.



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About four months ago, my coach told me that he can no longer support me to train towards Tokyo. That is four months out from the biggest competition of my life. Again, up until that point, I was training there for about nine years, so I had to make a big decision about where I was going to train for the next four months. I had to find a new club, so I looked around, and thankfully a club in Manchester, in Stockport, said they would take me on. Thankfully, it is a great club for me to go to, but that means that I now have to drive 100 miles there and back every day, training on my lunch break, paying over £100 a week for petrol and sometimes staying in a hotel, at my own expense. So basically the answer is that I get no support from anyone. It is all off my own back.

Going back to how I raise money for competitions, we have to have GoFundMe pages—Henry and I have had to do that over the years. To give a total across all my competitions, since 2015 I have had to raise over £26,500, and that could be given to an athlete in one year to fund their training. In the past four years, which is sort of an Olympic cycle, it has been £11,000. Training fees are £1,800 per year, with over £400 a week on petrol, and that does not include our kit or our food, which we have to pay for when we are out there, or physios and stuff like that. We have no access to training camps, and no sponsorships.

Going back to sponsorships, we go to, say, the National Lottery or somewhere and we say, "Can we get some money?", because obviously they give money to the Government to help with this. But they say, "No, sorry, we only give it to UK Sport." They don't have anything to do with where the money goes. The money goes to UK Sport and then it is separated between Olympic and Paralympic, and we receive no access to that money. I am sure that Henry would like to add to that.

Henry Hughes: We get no support. It is reaching a breaking point for me personally, and for many Deaf athletes, because we can train for the games—I have seen this before—and we can go to the Deaflympics, but we come back and it is the biggest depression, because you go to the Deaflympics, you are surrounded by other Deaf athletes, you feel like you are on the biggest high possible, you are finally surrounded by athletes who actually understand how long it took to get you to this point, and then you come back to society and no one even says hello to you. I know that: when I was 13 and I went to Deaflympics in 2017, I came back and there was no recognition—absolute silence, which I am always used to. Eight years later, going to the Deaflympics again, I am worried that that is going to happen again. I do not know if I can handle it again, even as a 21-year-old.

I get absolutely no support. The only support I get is people's sympathy—people going, "Oh, that should change", "Oh, that's really unfair", "How can they do that to you?", "They should definitely change that." But I am at the point where I do not want people's sympathy any more; I want action. I want decisions, so that in the future, people like me, Nathan and so many other Deaf athletes, and not just those going to Tokyo, do not have to have that feeling again and the meaning of being a Deaflympian



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holds a status in society. When I go around talking to people about giving me support, sponsorships or even just little grants, they say, "Sorry, you don't fit the criteria; you're not an Olympic or Paralympic athlete." But I'm like, "But I am an Olympian: I am a Deaflympian."

There is no support whatsoever. My family supports me in that sense—going to university, on top of funding me for the Deaflympics—so I am very grateful for that, but that cannot be sustainable, and we are at breaking point now.

Q9 Mr Alaba: In your opinion, why is there a disparity?

Nathan Young: Why is there a disparity between the Olympics, Paralympics and Deaflympics?

Mr Alaba: Yes, or certainly with regard to the Deaflympics and the Paralympics and Olympics—there is a difference in support.

Nathan Young: Ultimately, it is discrimination. You are completely isolating a disability, based on the fact that it is part of a different games.

As Chris was saying, the Deaflympics is 100 years old—it is nothing new, it was created 100 years ago. Great Britain was one of the founder members of the Deaflympics. When Henry and I go out, we compete, but in my experience, with eight swimmers, when I stand on the block, although I am lucky enough to be ranked fourth in the world, I would like to know the next step, as with the first, second and third-funded countries. When I stand on the block and look to the left and right of me, something like six out of those eight swimmers are funded. They can train all year around and have the best of everything, but I have to raise the funding myself.

To be honest, as the week goes on—the competition is over six days—my motivation slowly deteriorates. In Argentina, Henry watched me when he was swimming for Australia. He was trying to get me up, but I was broken, witnessing me having to be on my own—I was our only athlete at that time. We went from having 14 swimmers in 2015 and then 19 swimmers down to one swimmer in the following year—then one, one, one. In every competition since 2018 or 2019, we have had one swimmer.

Luckily, for the next Deaflympics we have a new influx of young swimmers coming in, and Henry is joining me. I look at them and say, "If things don't change now, I know what their future will be. They will have to go through discrimination after discrimination and will not have a future. Probably they would eventually have to quit, at 18 or 19." You should not have to say that for the Deaflympics.

In terms of the disparity, the journey we face of roadblock after roadblock is compared with the Paralympics, which gets funding, funding, funding, is put on national TV and is celebrated. Deaflympic athletes barely get a mention.

Q10 Mr Alaba: My next question is to Chris. Can you quickly summarise the history of Government funding of elite Deaf athletes?



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Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* Yes. It is quite a short story: no elite Deaf athletes are funded by central Government for the Deaflympics, full stop, nor have they ever been. The UK Government have supported games before. In 2005, the Deaflympics was held in Melbourne. There was some funding—it was £75,000—which contributed to the cost of travel and accommodation in Melbourne, but it was not funding directly for any of the athletes for their sports programmes.

The current sports policy of the Government is clear: they support the Olympics and the Paralympics, and anything out of that remit is not funded. Until now, we have been told that that cannot and will not change. Elite sport is focused on the Olympics and Paralympics, to the exclusion of the Deaflympics. As you have heard in powerful testimony from our Deaflympians here today, they do not get anything.

Q11 **Mr Alaba:** What progress have you made since the last Deaflympics in 2022?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* I should point out that I started last year, so I have been in post for one year. Within the first month, I met DCMS and asked how we might be able to support our athletes leading up to Tokyo. We exchanged some warm emails, but that culminated in the outcome that we would not be supported for Tokyo, and the intention is for no funding pathway either moving forward.

In November 2023, we launched our Fair Play campaign for Deaf athletes. Nathan was involved in that. The campaign is about trying to get the Government to recognise and acknowledge Deaf sportspeople, and to understand what they are going through and the lack of funding. We have had no Government response at all to our Fair Play campaign. We have obviously been through a general election since then. We hoped for some positive momentum as a result of that, but to be honest, as we have got closer to Tokyo, all our efforts have been in fundraising, fundraising, fundraising to be able to get a team to even compete at all.

Q12 **Mr Alaba:** What would be needed to support the Tokyo operation, and annually to support your programme of athletes?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* For Tokyo, the overall budget is about £450,000. We have raised a third of that through sponsorships. For example, we have a sponsorship from SignVideo, which is a video interpreting relay service. The other two thirds have had to come from the athletes themselves. That equates to about £250,000. After Tokyo, we think we will need about £3 million to prepare a team through the next full cycle, ready for 2029. That £3 million is less than 1% of what UK Sport has awarded for the Olympics and Paralympics in one Olympic cycle.

Q13 **Mr Alaba:** Why do you think there is a reluctance to fund Deaflympians?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* It is a good question. I genuinely do not know the answer; if I did, we would zero in on it. The only thing I can think of is that there has been a policy from 2005 to focus on the Olympics and the Paralympics. That was a train set in motion with



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London 2012 very firmly in mind. It was a no-compromise policy to ensure the best possible sporting outcome for London 2012. London 2012 has been and gone. I do not think that the justification for that sort of policy still exists, but there has been no change to it.

Q14 Mr Alaba: Do you see any other communities experiencing the same issues as Deaflympians?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* When it comes to elite sport, no. We are the only disabled elite sports group that has no access to funding whatsoever. I think that is shameful, speaking forthrightly. We know that the Paralympics does not have a classification for Deaf athletes. We were one of the founding members of the Deaflympics when it was established 101 years ago, and we just find it very shameful that we can get no state help for our athletes.

Q15 Natasha Irons: Thank you for coming today. Henry and Nathan, what challenges have you faced when approaching national organisations and companies for sponsorships, grants and funding?

Henry Hughes: First, corporate sponsors want a return, and frankly, right now, Deaflympians cannot give that return. It needs investment for it to be a return. I look back to London 2012, when the Paralympics was nothing. Back then, the Paralympic movement was really struggling. It was London 2012 that saved it, and look at it 10, 15 years on from that. Why can't we look at hosting a Deaflympics in the future? I am not saying now, but I am looking at the impact it has. Britain has only ever hosted one Deaflympics back in 1935; being a founding member, you would think that we would be proud to host a Deaflympics again.

Sponsors would jump on that; they would want to be part of it. I have spoken to many people who have said, "We would love to support you, but there is just not enough for us, because there is not enough framework; there is not enough infrastructure from the Government and from the national governing bodies for us to support you." Funding and supporting athletes is a complicated operation in general, so if Deaf athletes do not even have the infrastructure to be funded through an innate talent pathway system, how can people understand our role? How can people understand the status of the Deaflympics in a global context? It is a real struggle, and the answer to that is always one that we will keep trying to fish out. As you say, maybe it just goes back to disparity, and society not understanding deafness; it is an invisible disability.

Deafness is a very complex disability because, in sport, we are considered able-bodied, in that sense, with an impairment—but, in society, we are disabled. It is a unique circumstance that requires a lot of understanding and awareness to actually understand, "These things are what Deaf people are like." Not every Deaf person is the same; as you can see today, some people use sign language interpreters and some speak orally; some wear hearing aids, some wear cochlears, and some do not use anything at all. There is a unique dynamic behind that, which corporate sponsors cannot wrap their heads around without awareness and Government support.



Natasha Irons: Nathan, do you want to add anything?

Nathan Young: Henry has pretty much said most of it, but I just think that Deaf athletes are excluded not by chance but by design. It is not a case of, "Oh, sorry, we've forgotten about you." It has happened because someone has allowed it to happen.

I just think about the future of Deaf children. If either Henry or I have a Deaf child, I want this to be sorted. I want to know that every Deaf child has a future in sport that they can excel in. Looking at Paralympic counterparts, it is all about identity. This is about having a Deaf identity. I probably did not know any other Deaf person until I was 15. When I found Deaf sport—Deaf swimming—my life changed, and I have been happy. I met Henry through it and I have met people around the world who I would call my best friends.

Q16 **Natasha Irons:** Henry, you said something about sponsors wanting to fund you but not being able to. Can we pick that apart a bit more? What are the barriers to that? It seems a crying shame to have money left on the table.

Henry Hughes: If you approach any official Olympic or Paralympic partner of Team GB—NatWest or one of the other sponsors—they will say they cannot give any funding because their funding is committed to the Olympics and Paralympics, because of the direction of the Government and of Team GB. I am not going to lie: I would not be surprised if people in Paralympics GB wanted to make sure that the Deaflympics does not succeed as well. Their fear may be that their funding might get cut. Maybe there needs to be a reassurance from Government to say that giving funding to Deaf athletes will not be at a cost to anyone else; it will only build on our sporting success.

As Nathan said, with Deaf young people coming forward, we want to make sure that they are set up for life. I know that, for example, the national youth strategy is due very soon, and there will probably be a lot about inequalities in sport, as we see in many strategies. Could we put in there that funding for Deaflympians, elite Deaf athletes and the whole Deaf sporting continuum will not be at the expense of anyone else, to calm those fears about people's funding being removed? If that is the case, sponsors will start thinking, "Okay, we are now as responsible for the Deaflympics as well, and this is a great chance, a year after the Olympics and Paralympics, for us to spotlight our elite athletes more." I hope that answers your question.

Q17 **Mr Alaba:** Can I come in quickly with a question for Chris? The last time your organisation approached an equipment sponsor regarding supporting Deaf athletes, what was the response?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* Before I joined UK Deaf Sport, we were already working with a commercial company that, on our behalf, was approaching corporate sponsors. The feedback that we had from that intermediary was that it had approached 250 commercial sponsors, including, for example, contextual companies like hearing aid

manufacturers, and not a single offer was taken up to invest in sponsorship. We spend more looking for sponsorship than we get from sponsorship in return.

We now have some corporate sponsorship that has come on board. We have managed to raise a third of what our costs are for Tokyo, which has pretty much come from corporate sponsorship. That has been very hard work. But that has not been through commercial connections that we have had; it has ultimately been about individual sports sponsors and Deaf-related sponsors that we have been able to find.

To come back more directly to the question you asked, the number of companies we have approached is into the hundreds, and the answer is typically, "No, because you do not meet the criteria we have for our funding." The main issue that we have, I think, is profile. Because we have such a limited profile, a lot of companies think, first, "What is the return?" and, secondly, "Is this actually a genuine thing? We have not seen it before. Is this a fraudulent application? We're not aware of these kinds of sports."

Henry Hughes: It is also about differentiating between individual sponsorship and team sponsorship. Nathan and I, doing swimming, might require sponsorship like a racing suit sponsor, compared to football, which requires a team sponsor for equipment. There are different levels of sponsorship and, on top of that, the Deaflympic GB sponsors. There is not one sponsor—there are different levels of sponsor. Nathan and I, individually, go to companies and say, "We have the Deaflympics coming up and we want to represent your brand on the global stage." In any other aspect of life, companies would go, "Yes, absolutely, put our products in front of the world," so why can they not trust us with that? That question goes back to profile.

Q18 Damian Hinds: Good morning. What would be the long-term benefits from stronger funding of elite Deaf athletes?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* If you look back across disability sports more generally—pan-disability sport and the Paralympics—we have seen that, with the increased investment into the Paralympics, there is a more positive reflection of disabled people in society more generally, and disabled people feel that they are given a higher platform and have a greater sense of self and identity.

Answering your question directly, more funding into Deaf sports would do an awful lot for Deaf people across the board in terms of identity and acceptance, and for children coming through there would be the sense of positive role models, as opposed to negative ones, with them seeing themselves in successful people. It would really improve the awareness among the general populace of the sort of challenges and barriers that Deaf people can face on a day-to-day level, never mind specifically in sport. Investment into sport unlocks far more than just access to professional and elite sport.



Q19 Damian Hinds: Obviously we are talking about elite athletes. Sometimes in the branding world, you talk about a halo effect. With investment in elite athletes, and with other Deaf people seeing role models—but also, crucially, everybody else in society seeing those elite sports performances—I wonder if a sales pitch could be made to Government and others saying that there could be an employment and economic benefit that comes indirectly from this.

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* I think you could definitely make that case. When we look at the impact of the Paralympics on the wider economy, there are reports showing tangible impacts from investing in disabled people in elite sport with the Paralympics, not least what that says about us and our values as a country. So there are definitely benefits across the board.

When you consider that Deaf people and the spectrum of Deaf people are one of the largest disabled groups in this country, and if we think that there is always going to be this pathway of Deaf children coming through, these are opportunities that could be provided to a really large subsection of society, but also to mainstream society, in understanding that Deaf people exist and in giving access.

Let me give you an example. I am 58 years old and I still use my wife to call my doctor for an appointment. I am 58 years old and I still cannot make a direct phone call to my bank. I am a professional. It is embarrassing.

Henry Hughes: Can I add to that? A great example is women's sport and the increased funding for women's sport, especially over the summer with the Red Roses and the Lionesses. Lots of girls now have a role model that was absent from their life for many years. I know my mother would have loved that when she was younger.

This is what the case is. In the longer term, it is going to pay off, with a lot of Deaf people and mainstream people able to name British Deaflympians. If you walk into a room and say, "Can you name a single British Deaflympian who has represented your country?" the answer will be, "Sorry, I don't know. I don't even know what the Deaflympics is." Can we have it so that in 10 or 15 years' time, you can walk into a room and everyone will say Henry Hughes, Nathan Young and so forth? That is what you call addressing systemic change in society. That is what you call addressing something, so that younger people coming through do not have to face it.

Going back to women's sport, if we had the investment and hosted our own Deaflympics and subsequent world championships and so on, and people came to these events and started learning about the Deaf community, because maybe their uncle, grandmother or friend at school is Deaf and they want to do their best to support them, that will have a great impact.



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Talking about the longer-term benefit for Deaf people, Deaf people retire earlier because of the mental strain and mental energy that go into just being Deaf, let alone being Deaf in the outside world. There are many statistics out there about the poor quality of life for Deaf people. That needs to be addressed by the Government, and sport has always played a great role in amplifying these messages. I know that because I do a sports management degree, so I am able to reference that. That is what we want to change today, for the future.

- Q20 Damian Hinds:** We have been talking about funding, but also about visibility and profile. I wonder what breakthrough or kick-start effect there might be from just having a much higher profile with one event. In the Tokyo Deaflympics, will there be live broadcasts of any events? Have you had discussions with Channel 4, for example, about having live broadcasts? What kind of effect would that have?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* There are two parts to that question. First, there is going to be no broadcast. There is no live broadcast here of what is going on in Tokyo. We are working with a media company called LumoTV, and one of our sponsors, SignVideo, will be doing daily updates on a YouTube channel. That is the coverage. The International Committee of Sports for the Deaf, which runs the Deaflympics, has a relatively low profile on the international stage.

We also have to consider that, without the financial might and the influence that broadcast brings, it is very hard to generate that interest, which is clearly the inference from your question. It would be really nice to have that, but at the moment nothing has. That is where we are. Also, if you look at the capacity of a small organisation such as ours, we have lots of things we would like to do, but when it comes to priorities, that is getting a team together, getting to Japan and competing. We haven't really been able to stretch ourselves much beyond that.

- Q21 Damian Hinds:** There is a big question that hangs over this whole subject and which we have not addressed directly yet. Would you prefer to have a better funded elite sport programme specific to Deaf people and a higher-profile Deaflympics, or to be fully integrated in some way into the Paralympics, with the funding, the visibility and everything else that comes from the Paralympic movement? Perhaps we should direct that first to Henry and Nathan, and then Chris may wish to comment as well.

Henry Hughes: It is an easy answer, because we absolutely do not want to be part of the Paralympics, in any format, because we were the first ones here, frankly. We were the ones who actually set the pathway for the Paralympics to come through. It was Deaf people who were the ones who pioneered Deaf sporting rights and the perception of Deaf people in society. I am very proud, and I know Nathan and many other Deaflympians are very proud, to be part of the Deaflympics. There is a whole cultural element behind it, in terms of what it means to be Deaf, as opposed to someone with a para-ability or disability.



Also, any integration of the Deaflympics in the Paralympics will immediately cut probably 80% of current Deaf athletes, just because of the scale we are at. We are actually quite a big games, with all the coverage and the global movement we have, compared with the Paralympics. Any sort of integration would mean many fewer Deaf athletes—just focusing on a select few Deaf athletes, as opposed to opening up and celebrating Deaf culture around the world. That is my point. Nathan, do you want to add to that?

Nathan Young: You are saying, “Why don’t you join the Paralympics?” Well, other countries have no problem doing this. Ukraine have their own Paralympic and Deaflympic teams—both receive the same amount of funding—as do lots of countries in Europe, and India. It can be done; it is just that here it is not being done. So it is not a case of, “Why don’t you join?” It is a case of, “Why doesn’t the system help?” Deaf people in general society always have to fit around everyone else. Why can’t society fit around us? We are Deaf, and so we have to make adjustments. So everyone else should have to make adjustments for us.

Henry Hughes: On top of that, it goes back to Nathan’s previous comment about design. It has always been the case that we have had to fit the design and mould of other people. Why can’t society for once say, “We are going to, with you, design something”? That could be a high-profile event like the Deaflympics. Just trust us in our aspect—I think that is what we are asking you. For once, just trust Deaf people to do what Deaf people know best, which is to be Deaf people, as opposed to society around us telling us where we should fit in. As Nathan said, many countries have been able to do it. It is not a case of, “Are we pioneering it?” It is a case of, “Do we have the motivation to do it and get those challenges done?”

Q22 **Chair:** Can I ask a question about broadcasting? Chris, you said that there is no mainstream coverage on television of the Deaflympics. Does that happen in other countries? Do other countries carry the Deaflympics on television?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* It varies from country to country; there is no uniformity. Usually, it is on in at least the host country. I am not sure what the situation is in Japan, but when Turkey hosted in 2017, it was on the main national broadcaster in Turkey. In 2009, we were in Taiwan, where there was full, wall-to-wall coverage; it was on the national broadcaster and many other channels besides. It really depends on the organising committee that is hosting the Deaflympics.

Going back to the London 2012 effect, those were the first games where the Paralympics were profiled in much the same way as the Olympics. What was amazing for me personally was that the BBC lost out in the bidding to Channel 4. That was because there was bidding for it—not just, “Can a broadcaster host it?” It is a great product and people are interested in bidding for it. It would be good to see mainstream broadcasters supporting the Deaflympics to the high standard of elite sport.



- Q23 Chair:** Nathan, you spoke about the fact that you were not born Deaf and that you did not know any other Deaf people when you were growing up. If something like the Deaflympics had been carried on television, what would that have meant to you? How would that have influenced you as a child and growing up?

Nathan Young: It is difficult to say, because we are talking hypothetically. It is all about Deaf identity. I was not the person I am now, the confident person sitting in front of you today. I got pulled out of school because the education system failed me. I got put in noisy classes. I got things thrown at me—firecrackers set off indoors. I had no hearing when I was younger. That goes back to education.

What I mean about sport is that it would have given me a platform to stand on and say, "Look at me: I can be anyone I want to be." When I was younger, there was no platform for me to be like that. In school, I was put in the worst classes, isolated and left in some of the worst conditions to be in, but sport was my happy place. Sport was where I was able to thrive, be myself and not worry about being there. I know Henry would have exactly the same story.

- Q24 Chair:** At the beginning, Chris mentioned how many millions of people in this country are Deaf or hearing-impaired, so there are millions of children out there today who need role models like you. You guys are amazing role models for young children. Henry, you spoke about how amazing women's sport has been this summer and how many young girls are inspired by the Red Roses and the Lionesses. Nathan, how important were role models to you growing up?

Nathan Young: As I said previously, I did not know any Deaf people until I was about 14 or 15, and that is quite a sad indication of my life. When I met Deaf people at Deaf swimming, my life changed dramatically. I realised that I did not have to be embarrassed of who I was. I did not have to be embarrassed that I was Deaf. I could look up to role models and realise that my life is going to be okay. Growing up, I was scared for the future. Now I look back and think that actually I had no reason to be scared. I have a lot to look forward to. The world is my oyster, really.

- Q25 Chair:** You are huge role models for other young people. That is a position of responsibility, but you could do so much more if you had the right funding and the right focus from Government and broadcasters.

Nathan Young: Exactly.

Henry Hughes: If I can add to that, it would have helped my mum. Mum has five boys, and I am No. 3. I am her first Deaf child. As someone who grew up being Deaf and did not have people to support her in her deafness, she was really scared about how I was going to turn out. Having a pathway in sport would have given her a better understanding earlier on of, "This is what my son could do." I was home-schooled as well, as I had to be pulled out of the education system because of deafness and the teachers. My mum home-schooled me for 11 years before I moved over



here, because she wanted me to go and change the world to make sure that other Deaf people have those role models.

Going back to your and Nathan's point, role models are what we need today. In society in general, there is a real lack of positive models, given how society is, and having role models in these groups is really important in amplifying and representing. Having Deaf role models will do that in broader discussions about making decisions and having input, so that we do not get left behind, as we always have been. Instead of always trying to catch up, let's try and get ahead for once.

Chair: Your mum sounds incredible.

Henry Hughes: Yes. I think she is watching some of this.

Chair: She sounds like she deserves a medal, too. As a mother of sons, I think having five deserves a medal, regardless of any elite sporting ability.

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* I just want to add that over the last few years there have been other effects in general mainstream society, such as the closing down of special schools and Deaf schools. It is very difficult to have the opportunity to mix with and be around other people like me, as our two Deaflympians here today have said. We now have an outreach programme that has reached 3,000 Deaf children across three different centres. It is very hard for us to have these outreach programmes and provide these sporting facilities, but it is vital.

Chair: Which takes us very neatly back to Damian. Apologies for having interrupted you, Damian.

- Q26 **Damian Hinds:** Not at all. Looking more widely than elite sports, in the national disability strategy the Government is committed to addressing the inequalities that people with disabilities face in sport and physical activity. How would you assess performance against that objective? The Committee has talked about this in the context of school sport, for example, and the expectation of a certain amount of sport every week. I think there is even a recognised gap in the goal for people with disabilities, and there are certainly some gaps in delivering. How would you comment on performance against those objectives and how it could best be improved?

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* What has been useful is the recognition of British Sign Language. The 2022 Act has helped to shift attitudes in Government Departments. The development of a BSL GCSE is an obvious example, and there is a commitment to accessible communications from Government Departments in British Sign Language. There is a sub-group on health more widely, which can feed into governmental thinking, for Deaf people.

But there are still numerous barriers. There is still a lack of access to health services, employment services and everyday services. It seems to me that there is a lack of accountability, which brings me to a more direct answer to your question: the Equality Act is obviously a fantastic piece of legislation, but Deaf people are still behind the curve, especially if you



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compare Deaf people to the pan-disability movement. I do not know whether either of our Deaflympians would like to add to that.

Henry Hughes: I was just going to say that if we are here today, obviously something has not worked out. If we always have to be in spaces where we are trying to champion deafness, Deaf sport and Deaf people in general, there is still that stigma, lagging behind us, that we are “deaf and dumb”. The challenge is trying to tell people that we are not dumb; we are actually quite smart. Deaf people are very, very observant people and good at reading body language and facial expressions. In a room, you can become very focused on an individual person.

It is about that challenge. People do not understand the context; people do not see it as an interesting or fiery issue to take up as their own personal piece of legislation or policy. That is why we are very grateful to be here today: finally, after all these years, we are being listened to. We are in the room with decision makers who can drastically change the path of Deaf people’s lives, so that Nathan and I, for the rest of our sporting career, can have a chance to become what we would love to be: a Deaflympic champion. Annoying, we both swim in the same events, but we will keep it between both of us. It is about having an equal chance to compete and make sure that Britain is on that stage in future.

At the 1996 Olympics, or maybe the one before, Britain’s Olympic team won only one gold medal—that is why UK Sport exists. The Deaflympic team won 12 gold medals, I think; Chris might correct me. We did very well. The moment that UK Sport came in and funding came in, it switched overnight. That goes to show the power of money, the power of funding, the power of community and the power of collaboration.

We have spoken a lot about the Paralympics: “Why can’t we integrate?” I have always seen the Deaflympics as the second or third jewel in the crown of the Olympic movement. It is very important that Britain uses its role in the world to support the Deaflympic movement around the world, so that in 10 or 15 years’ time we can go, “Wow, when we were in that room, we did not expect what was going to come.”

Q27 **Chair:** That concludes our questions for you all this morning, but before we wrap up, let me say that I listened very carefully to what you said at the beginning, Chris. You said that the Deaflympics started 101 years ago. You said that it is shameful that there is no support or representation for these elite Deaf athletes and swimmers. I agree, and I am sure that the rest of the Committee feels the same.

The role of our Committee is to make recommendations to the Government and others for tackling this, so I ask each of you: if you were in our shoes, what would you put in our recommendations to the Government and maybe others for addressing the issue and ensuring that in future we are not in what you called this shameful situation.

Chris Ratcliffe: *[In British Sign Language]* Thank you very much for the opportunity to give my answer. I would say that there are two key recommendations to be made. First, we need to recognise the Deaflympics



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equally with the Paralympics and the Olympics, in terms of funding criteria. As Henry said, be proud of our Deaflympians. Be proud of the fact that they are Deaf and competing against other elite Deaf sportspeople in the world, rather than trying to fit them into other boxes. Be proud of the Deaflympics as it is. It has been around for 101 years; it is an important event. That recognition would enable our sportspeople to be the best they can be. It would stop setting them up to fail, or to have success despite being set up to fail. Those would be my recommendations.

Chair: Nathan, what should we ask the Government for?

Nathan Young: I completely agree with Chris's recommendations, but I would add something. I am 26 and I work full-time. After this Deaflympics, I do not see how I can continue competing at the highest level beyond the Deaflympics. For me, this is like a last lifeline to ask you for help and support. The main thing is recognition: we need to be supported like our Paralympic counterparts. The only reason I am telling you about what is going to happen to me is that if I cannot be there to support the next line of Deaflympians, I want to be with Henry at the next Deaflympics. Yes, I will be 30 or a bit older, but I want to be there and I do not want to have to witness younger kids going through what I did. I want them to have support and full careers moving forward.

Chair: By support, do you mean financial support?

Nathan Young: Financial support and recognition, like being able to go on the news. Hopefully, Henry and I will be standing there with medals in a few months' time and will be able to go on the news and be celebrated, so Deaf children can see us on the news and say, "I want to be like him, or like her." Right now, there is none of that. That would be my wish: recognition and funding.

Henry Hughes: I echo what Chris and Nathan have said. My recommendation to the Committee is to finally hold our hand and welcome us into the sporting community. Your support and help are needed to integrate us into the wider UK sport context. Funding and recognition are really important to doing that. It has a soft power that lingers over time and that changes people's perceptions. We have seen it many times before, with many other marginalised groups: when you get funding and support, and when you have role models, it pays off in the long run.

But we have to start somewhere. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road and saying, "We'll do it next year." Nathan and I have heard that many times before—"It'll happen next time"—but there is always something to prevent it. So it is about taking action now and making sure that future and current generations do not go through what happened in the past.

Chair: Thank you very much. As a Committee, we will work on our recommendations for the Government and others. In the meantime, both Nathan and Henry have gained a number of new fans in the room today and among those watching on television. We would be very proud to see



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you on television wearing medals round your neck, because we will be able to say, "We met them once." We wish you both enormous luck in Tokyo next month.

Thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your experience and expertise. It has been fascinating to learn from you; you are all incredibly inspiring in the commitment that you bring to your sport and to ensuring that you change the sporting environment for others in future. It has been wonderful to meet you.