

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Sport in our communities, HC 869

Tuesday 2 March 2021

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Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Alex Davies-Jones; Clive Efford; Damian Green; Damian Hinds; John Nicolson; Giles Watling; Mrs Heather Wheeler.

Questions 290 - 358

Witnesses

[I](#): Nahimul Islam, Founder and Director, Wapping Youth FC; and Louise Morby, Senior Lecturer in Sport Development, Leeds Beckett University.

[II](#): Mark Lawrie, Chief Executive, StreetGames; and Nicola Walker, Chief Executive, Sported.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Nahimul Islam and Louise Morby.

Q290 Chair: This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and our inquiry into sport in our communities post Covid. We have two panels with us today. The first panel will include Louise Morby, grassroots netball player and coach, senior lecturer in sport development and former chair of the Huddersfield Giants Netball Club, and Nahimul Islam, founder and director of Wapping Youth Football Club and a member of the London FA Council. Afterwards we will have our second panel, which includes Nicola Walker, CEO of Sported, and Mark Lawrie, CEO of StreetGames.

Before we welcome our first panel, I want to go through the Committee to find out if there are any interests to declare.

Clive Efford: I am chair of trustees at Samuel Montagu youth club in my constituency. We are a member of Sported and we have worked in the past with StreetGames.

Giles Watling: I am a patron of Clacton Football Club.

Chair: Our first witnesses will be Louise Morby and Nahimul Islam. Good morning, Louise and Nahimul. Thank you for virtually attending. Our first questions today will come from Alex Davies-Jones.

Q291 Alex Davies-Jones: Good morning, both, and thank you for agreeing to be with us today. I would like to ask you both what your involvement is in community sport and how you have seen that change over the past year.

Louise Morby: Over the past year my role has become a little more virtual. I sit on the regional management board for Yorkshire netball. There has been no going to meetings and things like that, as you know. It has become virtual; however, we have met more regularly than we would usually do. In terms of talking about core issues, especially with regards to equality, diversity and inclusion, we have been able to meet and discuss them more often as a board.

I know that sounds like a positive aspect over the past 12 months, but we have been a little more in touch. What we have seen, though, is that clubs have not been able to run. I do not want to call it a false start, as that sounds negative, but we had the start-up of netball again, albeit outside, and then it has gone back down into the ground.

For the first lockdown what was quite interesting is that, in West Yorkshire alone, 80% of people still paid their membership to England Netball, despite the fact that there was no activity going on. It has really made the region, and certainly the governing body, realise just how reliant they are on those members and volunteers—there is that joint feel about it. However, I feel that goodwill might be starting to run out a little bit, as in we want netball back and it is not the easiest sport to start from



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scratch because we do not own any facilities or anything like that, so we are dependent on facility bookings, et cetera.

Q292 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Nahimul, if I come to you next about football, how has it changed for you over the past year?

Nahimul Islam: The last 12 months have been pretty difficult, especially for grassroots organisations where we do not have the facilities, as my colleague has said. It is slightly different now. One of the major issues has been the fact of trying to engage, motivate and inspire the volunteers. A lot of volunteers are struggling to adapt to the virtual lifestyle that we have recently adapted to in such a quick instance.

One of the key issues we found has been the fact that, due to lockdown, a lot of young people have started staying at home and started developing much more interest in gaming than they already had. What that has led to is that, every time we have come out of lockdown, we have realised our numbers are starting to decrease. There is definitely a sign of decreased activity among young people, which for me has been a massive key issue.

Being based in an area with a lot of deprived young people, people have not paid their membership fees. As an organisation we are probably going to have to get donors, sponsors and do what we can to make ends meet. Where we are based, which is east London, there are massive levels of poverty, so people are reluctant to pay and a lot of families are struggling.

When it came down to delivering sessions online, we have realised that a lot of young people do not have access to sufficient internet or they do not have access to tablets, so we have had to get funding from different partners and different sponsors to deliver and try to tackle technological poverty. Again, it is one of those things that, in this day and age, you think everyone should have access to a laptop or a tablet, but a lot of families have not, which has been a massive issue for us.

Yes, we are trying to do everything virtually but, at the same time, we have young people who do not have access to the virtual capacity that is needed to be able to take part in online fitness sessions. That has been a massive key difference for us.

Louise Morby: I think that is one of the key issues at the moment, digital poverty and the other distractions that are creeping up. You might be in a household where there are three children who need access to one device. This is mostly anecdotal but, from 20 years of experience, netball is a very middle-class, white sport. I do not think netball has had the issues that other sports and other community clubs have had, but it is where we need to improve 100%. We need to improve, we need to be reaching those communities, we need to be more representative of the areas in which we operate. I completely agree with what Nahimul is saying; it is a mega issue for sport in general. Putting my other hat on as



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a senior lecturer in sport development, we have to get better at making sure everybody has the opportunity to participate. The only reason they do not do it should be that they choose not to. There should not be any other barrier in the way.

Q293 Alex Davies-Jones: I completely agree with you, Louise, and you touched on the fact that 80% of members are still paying their subs to England Netball, which is fantastic. How well has the national governing body supported you and your sport throughout the pandemic?

Louise Morby: I have to say they have been faultless. It has been out of their hands. I am speaking on behalf of England Netball here, but I have a bit of knowledge about the other governing bodies, and I think they have done the absolute best they can. Bearing in mind a lot of staff within England Netball and the governing bodies have been unsure about their future, they still manage somehow to support the volunteers. They have been very open and honest. We have been updated regularly; we have had emails every week. There has been a little bit of virtual netball club-type vibe going on, which they have led, but that only reaches the people who can access that platform.

There has been a big focus on Superleague, as you will know. It is something they have managed to nail. I am yet to see if that has been at the detriment of grassroots sport, because they have put all their eggs into the Superleague franchising process. I cannot fault them, especially with a lot less staff than they had previously. They attend regional committee meetings and things like that. They are there for us.

Q294 Alex Davies-Jones: Have you had support from any other organisations apart from your governing body, such as local charities or local authorities? Have they given you any support or assistance?

Louise Morby: Unfortunately, because there are not very many sport development units remaining within the local authority setting at the moment, there is a massive gap in the return to play, as far as I am concerned, for all sports. It is about having that link at the local level, the person who can support those volunteers in getting their clubs back up and running. A big issue for netball is the facilities, but it is something that is affecting all sports. Without having that link at a local authority level, it is going to be really tough because it is going to be volunteers who have to make those connections off their own back. I do not know if it is a role for a governing body to plug that gap at a local level. Certainly active partnerships and district activity partnerships have a big role to play, but we really miss that voluntary sector support at a local authority level, without a doubt.

Q295 Alex Davies-Jones: Nahimul, have you had much support from your governing body?

Nahimul Islam: I was going to say what Louise said. Governing bodies outside of football, for example, have been amazing. They are absolutely tremendous in terms of supporting us in delivering other projects, and



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one of the things that we have been supported with is diversifying. We were so focused on football a year ago. Now we are doing so many different sports. We are doing online fitness sessions, we are trying to get out into the community to try to deliver meals, art packs or whatever it might be.

One of the things I want to touch base on is the fact that while our governing body, London FA, has been absolutely amazing in sharing the knowledge, sharing ideas, what has been happening and keeping us updated, there are a lot of organisations in the football industry, the grassroots football industry, that are not a constituted organisation, which means they cannot apply for funding elsewhere. With the massive funding cuts at the FA, these organisations are unable to apply anywhere else, so these organisations might end up folding or dissolving. I think that is where we need to step in and support them where we can.

Organisations like us, which are constituted, are okay because we can apply elsewhere to the Government, to local government or to national governing bodies. That is one of the things we really need to look into, where those small organisations that have been doing some amazing work very locally in a niche market are at risk of dissolving and disappearing. That is where we need to focus our resources at the moment.

Q296 Alex Davies-Jones: I completely agree with you, and you have brought me nicely on to my final question. You have both talked a lot about the importance of your governing bodies and how they have supported you, kept you updated and allowed you to apply for funding. Where there are not constituted groups or teams, or where a sport does not have a governing body, do you think they would have coped throughout the pandemic? I should probably declare here, Chair, that I am the co-chair of the all-party group on wrestling, which does not have a governing body or a regulatory board, for example, and that has put it at a disadvantage.

Louise, you talked about the work you have been doing with governing bodies. Do you have any comments on that?

Louise Morby: I completely agree. Organisations that do not have that formal structure in place are doing some phenomenal provision. We are talking doorstep, in-the-thick-of-it sport, recreation, physical activity. They have really struggled and, again, that is back to the lack of a link at the local authority level. The local authority officer who was doing community sport in those communities, working with those groups to help them attract these funds; organisations like that will have really struggled unless they have the expertise within their volunteer workforce. It is all very finger in the air as to whether they have or they haven't.

England Netball and other governing bodies have had the Covid-specific recovery fund. That has been distributed a little unequally, it could be argued, as netball received £2.4 million, which we are really thankful for,



but other sports received tens of millions of pounds. I know it is representative of the size of the sport, but we are the biggest participation sport in the country—I think we still are—and it is like we are the poor relative to women's football, for example, even though we have higher participation rates.

It is really difficult, and we have a fragmented structure in place at the moment. If you are not constituted, if you are not a formal club, if you do not have a relationship with a governing body, if you do not have that social capital or cultural capital to traverse in those situations, I think you would suffer as a voluntary organisation.

Nahimul Islam: I totally agree with Louise. There are a lot of organisations, especially with social media, who are very active online and you can see a lot of organisations have been completely quiet, and that means there is nothing going on at the moment. While we have been given a lot of advice in terms of what we can and cannot do throughout lockdown, I understand the FA has gone through massive cuts and a lot of staff have resigned.

We used to engage our volunteers by promising them level 1 and level 2 coaching courses, but we have realised that the coaching courses and the coaching education at the FA has had a massive cut, and everything has now been digitalised. That now means that, potentially, the quality of coaches that come through our voluntary sector might be very low.

Football is a massive participation sport as well and, with the cuts, the differences have been very evident. Yes, a lot of grassroots clubs have gone quiet, have pretty much disappeared. A lot of them are struggling, to be fair, and organisations like us that have a vision to become a semi-professional organisation or a football club now have to change our vision. It is pretty impossible to do it in this day and age. There have not been funding opportunities from governing bodies, and something needs to be put in place because a lot of grassroots organisations are disappearing at the moment.

Q297 **Kevin Brennan:** Welcome to our witnesses. Louise, I am interested in what you were saying to Alex about local authority support and involvement, and how that is not what it used to be. Can you tell the Committee specifically what kind of support you used to have that was valuable, which is missing now, and what ought to happen into the future to allow community sport to flourish?

Louise Morby: Am I allowed to answer that with money is no issue, a utopia scenario?

Kevin Brennan: Let us take it as a given that everyone would like more money for their sector. What are the things that were good and are no longer there, and should they be brought back?

Louise Morby: That is a really good question and I am glad you have asked me it, because I can give you quite a decent example. Back in the



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day when I was 24, I started working for what is now called Active Partnerships—it was then called the county sport partnership—as a netball development officer. I was housed within a local authority; they hosted me as an employee. Right across from me was the voluntary sector development officer for that particular area. Near them was a priority communities development officer for sport. There was a physical activity development team and a sport development team, and it was my task to grow netball within that region. I did not know the local stuff that they knew. I did not know the politics with a small “p”, I did not know the particular issues within certain estates, but what I could do is I could get up, walk over, have a chat with the local authority unit that knew every single thing. They knew what made people tick, they knew where the main issues were, and that local knowledge is absolutely amazing.

To flip it, from a club perspective—I was also chair of the netball club—it is all very cyclical. We used support from the local authority on stuff that we could specifically access for the area: their expertise, their time, sitting down helping us with our Clubmark file, which was a really big deal, safeguarding courses, all the hoops that we had to jump through as volunteers. They basically held the hoops and helped us through. The club got more strategic support through the county sport partnership, as it was called back then, and we flourished. We had one senior team, and within six months we had three senior teams, three junior clubs and the infrastructure to deal with that.

Q298 Kevin Brennan: We do not need to go into the politics of this, but would it be fair to say that what was there but then lost, for whatever reason, was basically an infrastructure that allowed the community and voluntary side of sport development to flourish locally? Is that a fair assessment, and would a restoration of something like that be welcome?

Louise Morby: Absolutely. There was a single system in place, and it was easy. That would be amazing.

Q299 Kevin Brennan: I want to give a little shout out to Caerau Ely Rugby Club in my own constituency and some of the work they do in the community. My constituent, Liam Mackay, is a tremendous contributor to community action including with people from very disadvantaged backgrounds, disabled people. A young girl called Chloe has become a bit of a star on Welsh TV as a result of her involvement with the rugby club. Nahimul, what are the barriers, and what is the best way to overcome participation for women, for people from BAME backgrounds, for people from disabled backgrounds, in community sport?

Nahimul Islam: I think the main thing is understanding the culture. We have to understand what the needs are of that specific culture and of people from that background. Sports development has gone missing from local authorities, and that has been a huge issue. Back in the day when we first started up, we used to go to our local youth centres to recruit the young people, the young women. With the disappearance of youth centres, we cannot get participation. Young people are staying indoors



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and there is only so much we can do, and with data protection policies in place we cannot really get hold of young people's data. That is one of the reasons why participation has decreased with the closure of youth centres. As a grassroots organisation, we are not entirely sure where to recruit young people from.

Access to schools is not that easy, either. With the Covid pandemic, schools are pretty much closed to outsiders coming in. There is that issue at the same time. Simultaneously, sports development teams in a lot of local authorities have disappeared, too. That has led to not having enough support, enough guidance.

On your previous question, when it comes to funding from local authorities, a lot of organisations deem it to be a long process full of red tape. Whereas you would get a similar amount of money from a national governing body, with fewer evaluations, reviews or inspections. The commissioning teams that give out the money from local authorities have a process in place that is full of paperwork, full of red tape, and a lot of organisations tend to avoid it.

One of the other things I realised recently is that, previously, local authorities used to give out small pots of money, where a lot of smaller organisations were eligible to apply. Now, I feel like everything has been put together into massive contracts, worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, where only the big fish in the sporting industry can apply. You are filtering out the organisations that cannot apply. Organisations like ours are pretty small, and we are completely run by volunteers. I have a full-time job, and I am doing this in the evenings. Someone like me does not have the time to spend on a contract, whereas organisations that might have full-time members can apply. That is where we are almost dividing the small and the big organisations, and that links to participation at the same time. Who has enough funding to go out and do a massive marketing campaign? It is all marketing now.

Q300 Kevin Brennan: That is a good point. When I was a local authority finance chair, I used to chair a small subcommittee that gave out small grants to sports organisations with minimum bureaucracy. My secret policy, which I never told the officers, was that any application from any women's sports team, for example, would automatically get the money because the level of applications was so different from other areas. Louise, from your point of view, what are the best ways to get women, BAME groups, disabled people, et cetera, involved?

Louise Morby: From my experience, it is through working with and using people from those communities to design and plan the provision that you want to implement. It is about working closely for a longer period of time, remember development takes time, with people from ethnically diverse communities. Sorry, I sound like I am banging on about local authorities, but that is where the local authority officers had the rapport, they had that kind of capital. It is about working closely with key members of those communities, sitting down and taking the time to have a cup of



tea, a cup of coffee, and speak to them about the needs and involve them within the planning. It is an asset-based community development approach. You look at the communities, you look at the assets that they have and you use what is there, rather than looking at a deficiency model of what they do not have and plugging it in. That is highly linked to sustainability as well. It is nothing innovative. It is something that we have been doing for the past 20 or 30 years. It is just not something that is resourced as much anymore, that local neighbourhood community level, getting in there and involving them in the planning of the provision.

Q301 Kevin Brennan: From what you have said all along, Louise, with local authorities as the facilitator of that, with the resource, time and ability to provide the facility.

Final question from me to both of you, how do we ensure that we safeguard young people and people of any age involved in sport while also attracting and generating enough good coaches, who are absolutely vital in community sport? How do we get the right balance?

Nahimul Islam: With safeguarding, again, it is education. It is the workshops. A lot of the time, smaller organisations might not have the funding to hold safeguarding workshops. If there were some capacity where funding was available for organisations to host safeguarding workshops, that is definitely a start.

What we need to do, and what we have done recently, is work with a few organisations to adopt safeguarding bands for young people. With the technological advancements happening within the sport industry, it is key to find ways where we can be very current and up to date. One of the things we have done is, rather than holding a lot of paperwork, we are trying to digitalise everything. We have given out tablets to our members and to staff to try to make sure that the data is kept safe and encrypted at all times. There are different ways. With football especially, you are out on the grass, out in the open. How can you safeguard young people's data at all times? It is education, simply educating the coaches, having a system in place that works really well, whether it is using wristbands or tablets or whatever it might be, and generally just working with the local authority.

Our safeguarding policies and everything were put in place with support from our local authority, but a lot of organisations are not really aware of how to write and follow the policies. One of the things that people are really struggling with is governing organisations. Yes, they are all good delivering on the ground, but how do the organisations work behind the scenes to make sure there are governing processes on safeguarding and having a safeguarding committee? I have not really come across any grassroots organisations that have a safeguarding committee in place. This is the kind of thing that needs to be introduced and that people need to be educated on.



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Louise Morby: You need more volunteers who are not coaches. Sport needs more volunteers. We need to get it right. We need to support them, we need to retain them. If you have more volunteers within your clubs who are not coaches, you can develop your safeguarding committees, you can have your safeguarding officers, but we need to develop them and support them correctly and not just put on them, too.

Q302 **John Nicolson:** Thank you both for joining us this morning. Louise, I have to confess I do not know a great deal about netball. I have never played netball, but it is an incredibly popular sport for women. All the statistics appear to show that women play sport much less than men, which is a worry for long-term health. What do you think is the particular appeal of netball?

Louise Morby: First, I think it is linked to the experience they may have had at school. That could be negative or positive, bear in mind, but I think you will struggle to find a woman of my age who has not played netball at school. There is a familiarity there. There is almost that fear of judgment that everybody feels when they are exposed within a sporting context, and I think that fear of the unknown is taken away.

It is a team sport, and there is that social side of sport. A lot of my friends got into playing netball for the social side, definitely not for the playing side, and that really appeals. There are just so many female role models within netball. It is a sport for women by women, and I think it is a bit of a sleeping giant, if I am being honest. I think it has the potential to play a key role in working in communities where health inequalities are prevalent. Again, that is back to what we really need to be focusing on—addressing those inequalities. The people who want to play and can afford to play will play. Let us focus on the people who have health inequalities and people from diverse backgrounds.

That is why it is popular to a certain type of female. It is not popular to all women and girls, obviously.

Q303 **John Nicolson:** Who are the women and girls who do not want to play netball, and how can they be turned around?

Louise Morby: I think a lot of it might be due to the negative experience they had at school through PE.

Q304 **John Nicolson:** That is not uncommon for a lot of us. I remember sport in school as being a hellish experience: angry, wee gym teachers barking at you, making fun of you. If you are not masculine enough, mocking you. It was miserable. Fortunately, cross-country running at my school, there was a big patch of trees, so I was able to take off like a whippet and park myself in the trees while all the other boys did 10 laps, and then I would spring out, fresh as a daisy, towards the end. I had to be careful that I never did well enough to qualify for any of the teams, which I would have hated. Anyway, I digress. Do you think a lot of it is a bad school experience?



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Louise Morby: I think that is really important. I did a bit of research on this in my day job. I spoke to quite a few non-netball players and netball players, and what I found is it is associated with a hyper-feminine kind of image and that is the reason why a lot of women find it attractive. They feel they can play the sport, yet they can still maintain that kind of feminine image that they feel they have to project while they are playing sport. We are in 2021, and we are still talking about the male gaze. You have seen the kit; it is the shortest dress in the world. I used to wear the longest leggings possible when I was playing. You are not seeing my legs; I do not care, but a lot of women say they find it empowering. They like the fact that they are classed as feminine when they are playing it, and they also feel like it projects heterosexuality as well. It is classed as a straight sport at grassroots level.

On the other side of that—

Q305 **John Nicolson:** That is interesting, so you cannot be a lesbian netball player?

Louise Morby: This is just based on the things I saw. On the flip side of that, it is very off-putting to certain types of women, as in, "I would not fit in there, I would never fit into the netball world." I am not going to lie; people look at me and think, "She's a rugby player." They do not look at me and think, "She's a netballer." All my friends that I have played with are like, "Louise, Louise, you are absolutely a rugby player. You are not a netballer," and I am what you would class as an "other" kind of person.

It is certainly seen as the feminine brigade at a grassroots level by a significant number of people. If you have seen the Superleague, it absolutely gets rid of any of those stereotypes. Athleticism, power. People think netball is clapping when people have scored and you are really nice to people. There is nothing nice about netball. It is brutal. It is a hard game, elbows in your stomach when the umpire cannot see you. It is a brutal game, and it is fast. I really think that having those role models in place to change those perceptions is crucial to permeate beyond your nice, white, middle-class lady.

Q306 **John Nicolson:** Absolutely fascinating. In a broader sense, therefore, if netball is as accessible as you describe and can be made more accessible, you think, if some of the stereotypes are addressed, it could presumably play a big role in tackling the issue of underperformance in sport as a society. I am interested in your take on that. Why do you think it is that women are much less predisposed to taking part in sport than men in society? That must have long-term damaging health effects.

Louise Morby: Absolutely. The thing that makes it so complex is that there are lots of different reasons. Myself as an example, I am somebody who has naturally turned to sport because that is all I know. That is how I was brought up. My dad raised me to be active and enjoy sport. I had a child three years ago. Have I stepped on the netball court since? No. I have not been near a netball court. I have a full-time job, quite a decent



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job people tell me, working at a university. My husband works full-time. It is a 50:50 partnership. There are no gender roles in our house, but I have 100% not had the time, or my body has just not wanted me to, to go running around, because it is physically demanding. I have not been on a netball court, so the volunteering has gone through the roof because I have had to fill that time somehow.

There is the time element as well. Even for somebody who is classed as a professional worker like me, in a household where there are not those traditional gender roles, I have found it near impossible to return to netball.

Q307 John Nicolson: Are you arguing that, in more traditional houses than your own, the reason that men are able to take part in sport, like presumably football at the weekend or whatever, is because their wives are picking up the childcare duties?

Louise Morby: There is much less pressure on men to undertake that role naturally, and there is quite a significant amount of research that Women in Sport have done that unpacks some of these reasons around time and balancing childcare, work and things like that as an indicator for why women are less active.

A big thing is the fear of judgment. We are seeing a drop off in PE lessons among girls at ages seven and eight, because they are worried that they will look sweaty and that their makeup is going to run off. There is an academic journal out there—I cannot remember who wrote it, because I read quite a few of those things—saying we used to talk about the post-16 drop off. We are talking about the post-seven drop off now when we are talking about girls. It is really complex, and it is this thing about changing. The This Girl Can campaign was the tip of the iceberg, changing the way we perceive women being active. It is quite funny that there were women exercising in the kitchen. I was like, “Oh, no, don’t do a woman in a kitchen in your campaign,” but I think we are heading in the right direction. It is very complex.

Q308 John Nicolson: You have certainly talked me into netball. After this Covid business is over, do you think you could perhaps knock the Committee into shape to create a netball team? You could choose the uniforms as well.

Louise Morby: I would love that, and you can choose the uniforms. It is what you are comfortable in.

John Nicolson: I know what I am comfortable in. I would love to choose uniforms for my fellow Committee members. I cannot promise it would be so that they are comfortable. Thank you very much indeed. Fascinating testimony.

Chair: I am glad we drew a veil on that eventually, John.

Q309 Damian Green: Follow that. After John’s confession of hating sport at



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school, I feel like confessing that I loved all sports at school and, as a result, I managed to avoid the drop off and carried on playing football into my 40s. I am at the other end of the spectrum.

I want to pick up on one of the points Louise made about volunteers and how important they are. I assume both of you, and the sports and clubs you are involved with, are dependent on volunteers. Nahimul, talk us through how important volunteers are for you.

Nahimul Islam: We have 46 volunteers who operate in our organisation, and that is it. We barely employ anyone. For us it is crucial to increase and retain our volunteers at all times. From our management board to our trustees to our parent governors to our youth council, it is all voluntary. We pride ourselves on being a voluntary organisation.

With the reduction in volunteers coming through recently, it has been super tough for how we operate our organisation logistically—the admin side of things, the paperwork, the funding applications. We tend to get a lot of coaches who want to volunteer, but we do not really get board members who want to volunteer their skills in accounting or treasury, or to be secretaries or admin staff. That is one of the things we need to keep in mind, that we get a lot of coaches as volunteers but how can we increase the number of board members and individuals with expertise in different professions coming on board as volunteers to support us in terms of the back end? That is where a lot of organisations collapse when they do not have enough experts on board. We have been quite fortunate in that a lot of our partners from the financial sector lend us volunteers to do our accounts for us, to do balance sheets for us. That is the tough part of recruiting volunteers; there are not many of those individuals around. Generally, we are reliant on volunteers to run.

Q310 **Damian Green:** What are the barriers for people? Is it just that doing the accounts voluntarily is a lot more boring than getting out on the pitch and coaching someone?

Nahimul Islam: It is boring but, at the same time, because those roles are very highly incentivised in the professional industry, people often expect payment or some sort of incentive. In the coaching world, if someone comes on board, we might pay for their transport or we might pay for expenses. For those board members, we cannot provide them with much incentive. We cannot really give them an accounting qualification or a leadership qualification. These would be very costly to the organisation. It is a matter of what we can find to motivate those individuals and inspire them. People tend to want something out of volunteering. A lot of times one of the key issues we have is the turnover of staff. We might get a volunteer for six or seven months, and then they leave. What that means is we then spend three or four months trying to find another person, and that takes our work and our efforts away from what we should be doing. Retention of volunteers has been pretty difficult.



Why do we not get volunteers? It is simply that we are not well connected. A lot of grassroots organisations are not connected. If there was a way where we could connect with a lot more of those higher-profile organisations that can lend some of the volunteers, and a lot of those organisations have a lot of social responsibility, but we are not aware of those organisations. Sometimes just by networking we might come across organisations but, with the pandemic in place, we have not had a chance to network. Coming across huge organisations to support us with social responsibility has been pretty tough, but recently we have had a few mentors come to support us by guiding us through what needs to be done and what we can do. Generally it is about motivation. How can we motivate those individuals to come on board and support us? People want to see personal development, and we cannot provide much development for board members.

Q311 Damian Green: Louise, you were nodding along with that. Is it the same? Is it more difficult in a sport like netball, which is obviously heavily female? Is it more difficult to find women than men?

Louise Morby: First, netball is 99.9% dependent on its volunteers. We have regional structures and club structures. The management committees are all volunteers. Above that you have the England Netball staff who are salaried, so we are heavily reliant on them, but what you get unfortunately is one person wearing 10 or 15 hats. They have different roles and they are saturated, and it has always been the case with netball that you get burnout. You literally get people who say, "I cannot take this anymore. I am going to have to walk away. There is too much pressure on us."

The biggest barrier in sport, and this is netball also, is the burden that comes along with being a volunteer who is not necessarily a coach. As an example, as I mentioned, I sit on the regional board for netball as a volunteer. There is cash in the account that is quite significant, and I am liable for that, being a volunteer member of that board. Sometimes you sit there in a meeting thinking, "Oh, wow," and it hits you sometimes. That responsibility as a volunteer can be very off-putting to people. That is once you have got them in.

We do not recruit properly. Sport does not recruit volunteer positions as a professional thing to do, and I mean "professional" not as in paid but as in your CPD, your development. We do not retain them, because I do not think we necessarily value them properly. We now have Covid officers in every netball club in the country. Covid officers at an accounting level, Covid officers at a regional level. It is a huge responsibility. Even through to the Superleague there is a Covid officer. Guess what? She is the volunteer person on the Superleague team. It is a huge burden, it really is. I know at times I have not felt valued, but I have not let people put me off. There are a lot of people who would be put off by that.

Nahimul Islam: There is a massive trend in a lot of grassroots organisations that volunteers tend to be parents. What happens is that,



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once that young person finishes their football career or their sport career, those volunteers disappear as well. It is retaining them but, again, it is how we can encourage more parents to start coming out to support the organisations. That has been the trend for us, where most of our volunteers behind the teams are the parents of the kids.

Q312 Damian Green: One last question to each of you, what change do you think will be most beneficial that would enable you both to recruit and retain volunteers? What needs to change most of all?

Nahimul Islam: For us it would be a nice volunteering strategy and support in terms of how we can develop all our volunteers. Yes, there are always ways to provide courses or workshops, but one of the key things is that each individual has a role and development journey and we, as an organisation, need to find out what each volunteer wants. Something that could really change that process would probably be a bit more of a structure for organisations. As Louise said, we do not have a recruitment process. These are all done voluntarily by us. If there was a process where volunteers could come in, go through some paperwork, go through the whole process, have an induction and make it a bit more of a formalised process, I think that could be a game changer, where there is a lot more value to the volunteers and they feel like they have really done well to get this role.

Right now, volunteers coming in feel like these organisations need them to be here and it has almost become a kind of thing where they will do it when they can. When they cannot be bothered, they are just going to leave. It is just a matter of putting emphasis on that role and how important it is, and every organisation needs to be educated in terms of understanding the formality of the role, taking people through the formalities and making it as valuable as we can. Otherwise, if the recruitment process is pretty bad, it means volunteers will not put all their effort in. I think that is where we are slacking at the moment.

Louise Morby: I agree that a clear strategy needs to be in place, probably from a governing body perspective, but resource needs to follow that. I am not talking about pounds; I am talking about resources in terms of people and workforce to support that volunteer structure. I am going to bring it up again, but that support from a local government officer or even a full-time development officer at a local level for netball, or for a specific sport, who is there to sit with a volunteer when they are fed up, who is on the other end of the phone to have a chat with a volunteer and who can say, "The money that you have to find, I know of a grant that you can go for. How about we go and sit down, and I will help you go through that process?" That is something that is missing that we used to have. We used to have that in place, the local support that was there to develop and look after the clubs and the volunteers. That is what I think would make a massive change.

Nahimul Islam: You asked what can change, and if there was a platform that local authorities managed, where all the volunteers come from one



pool and they are vetted by the local authority before they come to the organisations, that could be a massive change. Sometimes we get volunteers where, once we spend our resources on doing a background check, we realise they are not the right person. If there was a way where local authorities or national governing bodies could have a process or a pool of volunteers that we could reach out to, and who have already gone through a vetting process, it could be very beneficial for a lot of grassroots organisations. It saves us all the resources that we would put towards checking the background of a volunteer.

Damian Green: Great. That is really interesting and practical.

Q313 **Damian Hinds:** Good morning. Following on from what Damian was asking on volunteers, it is important for this inquiry for us to understand the reality of doing the admin and what the realistic prospects could be for relieving it. Nahimul, could I start with you? It has been suggested to us in written evidence that there is essentially a key incompatibility between the reliance that we have on volunteers to run these organisations and the administrative expectations that are made of those people. How would you respond to that?

Nahimul Islam: I totally agree. We cannot expect volunteers to do a lot of the admin side of things. What I have realised is that there are some national governing bodies where, when they give funding for us to deliver a project, some admin funds are allocated towards that as well. Those are the projects that have worked efficiently and effectively, where the volunteers have given maximum effort because they have got something out of it as well. There are a lot of projects where it is small pots of funding with no admin fee attached, and those are the projects that sometimes fall through.

It is one of those things. The admin side of things is always looked down on, and that is the reality of it. People do not want to do it. People want to avoid it as much as they can. As I was saying, with local authority funding there are a lot of reviews, evaluations and inspections on the back of it. You have to do a lot more paperwork before you can even get the funding.

With some organisations there are places where you get 10% or 25% of the funding before, and then you have to do the admin side of things before you get the rest of the funding. Those organisations are pretty hard to work with because we want to deliver the project; that is the reality. We want to get on with it, deliver stuff on the ground that impacts young people and our members, but if there is more of an admin side attached to it, it just means that we are slowed down slightly, and that demotivates members. I had a project recently that I gave to one of my volunteers, and I had to chase him up for the paperwork because he had not done it yet. It is one of those things that slows us down completely. If it were separated, it would be amazing, or if there was some sort of funding attached to it, it just means that we can get on with it and volunteers would be more likely to do it.



Q314 **Damian Hinds:** Louise, in practical terms, do reporting requirements affect what pots of funding you might apply for?

Louise Morby: I think so, yes. Absolutely. The monitoring and the evaluation is something that a lot of volunteers do not have the time to do. From a volunteer coaching perspective, they usually drive straight from work, straight to the netball. I know I used to do it, and get stuck in traffic all the way from Leeds to Huddersfield. I am running in thinking, "Right, okay, I need to make sure that I am ticking some boxes here, because we have some funding from X, Y or Z, and that needs to go back every quarter." As the chairperson, I am thinking, "Oh, yes, I need to remember to ask the other coaches for all this." It is stressful. Coaches and volunteers are not very good at paperwork. We do not sign up for that; we sign up because we are passionate about the sport we are servicing.

You do tend to think about these things, but you have to have that knowledge to start off with, with regard to pots of money, otherwise you just apply for whatever you can get. Clubs are hand to mouth. For me personally, it would be a deciding factor.

Q315 **Damian Hinds:** Overall, I do not know how straightforward it is to put numbers on these kinds of things, but can you give us some sort of idea, in terms of person hours, of the amount of administration involved—I know different sports are different sizes and have different complexities—in running, says a netball club or, in Nahimul's case, a football club? What does it add up to over a year?

Louise Morby: I did some sums on this. It was a while ago, though. It was our awards evening at the club, and I thought I would work out and tell the parents how many hours go into running this club. I worked out that I did an average of five hours a night every night. That is what I was doing, because I had more than one role: chair, coach, chair of the West Yorkshire Junior Netball League, which I founded. There are always emails, arranging umpires because an umpire has dropped out, making sure that team managers know the venue has changed. I had a great team of volunteers as well, but they had their responsibilities on which they were spending a couple of hours a night. That is without the standing up and coaching side of it. That is outside of it, and it was phenomenal. I did not then have a child who does not sleep. It was just a laptop on my knee all the time, so it is quite significant. That is very normal in netball. I know that for a fact.

Q316 **Damian Hinds:** Nahimul, do you know if anybody counts up the hours? Let us say you are setting up a new club. How much human resource does that need?

Nahimul Islam: I set up our club seven or eight years ago. I was about 18. It took me countless months. I was having sleepless nights, especially when you are starting up. You do your funding applications. You put in 10 funding applications and you only get one. That is the



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reality of it. It is pretty tough. I would say, on average, I probably spend about 20 hours a week on top of the other roles that I have. Again, when you are doing funding applications, you are spending a lot more hours. Some nights you are staying up, like a university assignment almost, so there is a lot of time that we put into it.

I was quickly going to come back to one of the previous points. It is all based on numbers at the moment, where you receive funding and you have to produce the outputs. One of the things that would be vital for us to work through is to have a more outcome-based approach where, rather than just having numbers of what we have delivered, why can we not tell a story of what the impact is? If that was the case, it would be a lot easier for our volunteers to measure and provide case studies of young people. That way we, as grassroots organisations, can tell a story, and that can feed into some of our funding applications as evidence that this is the impact we are having and these are the lives that we have changed, rather than saying, "Yes, 60 kids, 10 sessions a week they have attended," and that is it. Right now the numbers we are collecting are via surveys and questionnaires, but if we could tell a story about some of the work we do, I think all of us in the government and local authority could be more knowledgeable in terms of the impact that the organisation is having.

Q317 Damian Hinds: Finally from me, can you both give your top one or two things? Nahimul, you suggested one earlier on background checks, but one or two practical things that you think could be done and could apply broadly across different sports, different parts of the country, and which would have some material impact on the administrative burden. Maybe things that we have discovered as a result of having to do stuff online during the coronavirus, or whatever it might be. What would be your practical suggestions?

Louise Morby: I would look at bringing in something similar to the Step into Sport programme that was in place at least 10 years ago now—time flies, doesn't it?—where you are looking at the top link of college students who are showing interest in working in sport, or an interest in leadership in general, and getting that programme back into place where we are developing them and training them up to be volunteers who are then allocated to clubs, all checked, all vetted, all developed and they then have to do a certain amount of voluntary hours. For me it is about getting younger people into volunteer roles as well. It will perpetuate, because it is seen as something that my age group does or whatever. Let us learn from what has worked in the past, and let us make it work in the context that we are in now. I am not naive. I know that 10 years ago we were in different times, but let us look at what has worked in the past and let us not be too proud to bring it back.

Nahimul Islam: Two things that I would say are multipurpose facilities. There is a lack of facilities across most of the boroughs—

Damian Hinds: I think you just got a "like" for that.



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Nahimul Islam: Yes, facilities have been key. We have diversified into different sports and where, for example, we deliver football in Tower Hamlets, for cricket we have to travel outside of the borough. If we had multipurpose facilities, that would be a huge win for local organisations.

I am all for empowering our members in grassroots organisations. I feel we need a platform where people can have their voices heard and get together. I am representing as many people as I can right now, but there are a lot of authorities that are missing out. If there was a platform where we could listen to everyone, that would be amazing. At the moment I am quite fortunate in that I have a seat on the London FA Council, and I see quite a few boards, but there are a lot of organisations that do not have a say. They are just waiting around to see what happens.

If there was a platform or a data management system where we had everyone on there, we could share each other's data and do some partnership work as well. There are a lot of pros and cons with it, but I think one of the biggest pros is getting everyone together and creating a cohesive sport community, nationally if we can, via some sort of platform. That is my recommendation. I would love to deliver netball one day, but I am not sure who to contact, so if there was that sort of platform that encouraged organisations to diversify and try out different sports.

Q318 **Clive Efford:** I would like to continue on that, as I wanted to ask some questions about co-operation at local level, where you can pool resources, get some economies of scale. You could possibly do that around DBS checks, perhaps even around training coaches and volunteers. Do you think we do enough to facilitate and augment that sort of co-operation at local level?

Louise Morby: I certainly think things are heading in the right direction. A lot of that local collaboration is relying on the district activity partnerships that are in place. That is fantastic, but that collaboration will only be as strong as the district activity partnership. There are structures in place for us to do the things that you have just mentioned, maybe through those district activity partnerships, but it is the level below that I think is really important. I see the district level as strategic, talking at a neighbourhood level. The partnerships and the collaboration that need to start happening again at a neighbourhood or a ward level is really crucial.

I think there is a need for something that sits, and I do not want to say "below" because that sounds hierarchical, and it really is not, it is almost like where everything should be starting, at a ward level.

Q319 **Clive Efford:** I will come to you in a minute, Nahimul, but at local level you have schools and there are after-school clubs, there are a number of volunteers who provide local clubs, some operate on a very small scale, like, let us say, a local judo club that have only a couple of leaders. You have sports clubs that would have facilities, like rugby, football, tennis



and so on. If there was a forum at local level, maybe at local authority boundary level, that brought all those people together, do you not think it would have a major impact on how sport is delivered and provide a focus for the issues that they have to confront, like the ones you have been talking about here this morning, and the local authority and others would probably get more value for money out of what they are providing?

Louise Morby: Absolutely, and those partners you have just mentioned do sit on the various district activity boards that are in place at the moment, but the key thing that you mentioned is those ward-level boundaries, because the needs of one ward compared with another are so different. I can't believe I am saying that to a group of MPs—you know that. They are so different, even from postcode to postcode, but it is a little bit utopian to get down to that level.

I think exactly what you are saying, that something needs to cascade out of the district structure that we have in place at the moment that is really local, and then, yes, obviously collaborate back up. Yes, it would make a huge impact.

Q320 Clive Efford: I heard you say earlier that you could not fault netball, and netball has over the years had a very innovative sport governing body. Back to Netball was a major success about 10 years ago in getting people back into the sport. It was quite a major example, but there are issues. When I was talking to people in local netball clubs, they were charged quite exorbitant fees at times for insurance by England Netball, so that they were covered for running their clubs. What do you get out of governing bodies? What are the big items of support that you get from your national governing body?

Louise Morby: For me as a paying member, at the moment, not very much because I am not playing and I am not coaching, and I have never really tested it, but I am told that the level of insurance you get is quite decent. If you are affiliated, you get to play in affiliated leagues, which are at a decent level; you get a magazine every month; that kind of stuff—they are the tangible things that you get.

Q321 Clive Efford: Okay. What are the fees? Are they quite high? Do you have to pay large fees to the governing body?

Louise Morby: Like everything in netball, it is a little more complicated. England Netball set their fee. I cannot remember what it is this year—I still need to pay mine—but let's just say they set a minimal £15 fee. Then what happens is the region—so, Yorkshire—puts their price on top of that, and then there is a county fee, because there are obviously all the counties within netball as well.

Q322 Clive Efford: Yes, but does that become a barrier to people setting up clubs or clubs continuing? Is it a problem during Covid? Have the fees been cut so that clubs can survive? Can you comment on that?



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Louise Morby: Yes, it has. Certainly on a club level, I think people might have withheld their membership fees. Bearing in mind you pay membership to England Netball to become affiliated, but then you have your club membership fees on top of that, which pay for coaches and facilities, and nothing else. A lot of clubs, unless they have a significant amount of money in their reserves, which unless they have a decent accountant on the committee, they are not going to have thought that way, are really going to struggle. They are really going to struggle.

It is expensive. I used to pay something like £25 to £30 a month membership to my club, but on top of that, obviously, you affiliate, and your match fees are separate to all of that. You have to pay every time you play as well. It does become really, really expensive, but it is not because we are greedy—we are just running the sport.

Q323 **Clive Efford:** This is my last question, and I will move onto Nahimul with similar questions. Back in November, the Government made some money available to sports governing bodies. Netball got £4 million. Did you see any of that?

Louise Morby: Only because I looked for it. In my day job, I post stuff like that to the students, so they know what is going on outside of Leeds Beckett students' union, and things like that. Absolutely, yes, I did see that. I do not know if it is something that you would have seen unless you were looking for it, but absolutely.

You mentioned Back to Netball and, yes, it was successful, but there were exits from the clubs—the clubs almost suffered because of Back to Netball, with people realising, "Well, I can just rock up at Back to Netball, I can pay my £4.50 or whatever it is, and just play netball. It is cheaper than going to do spinning or whatever."

Yes, this is brilliant. I am not knocking it. As a development officer, it is great, but the clubs were not getting that link—for people who maybe wanted to go forwards and join clubs, the link was not there. When the link was there, the clubs did not have the capacity because they did not have enough facility time to get more people.

Q324 **Clive Efford:** That is the competing demands of clubs versus participation, isn't it?

Louise Morby: Yes, it is.

Q325 **Clive Efford:** Nahimul, local co-operation, do you think we do enough to facilitate it?

Nahimul Islam: Not from local government, no, but from national governing bodies there has been a lot of stuff going on and that has been the key part for us. We have joined a lot of voluntary organisations, voluntary groups, and that is where a lot of the partnerships are being formed. Nothing from our local authority has been happening, nor from some of the neighbouring local authorities, but other organisations like



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StreetGames and Sported have come out and set up those partnership groups. They are the ones we are part of, and they are the ones that we are benefiting from at the moment.

Q326 Clive Efford: Can you give us an example? What have they done that has enabled you to co-operate with other sports at a local level?

Nahimul Islam: Especially with StreetGames, over the last 12 months we have started working closely with them and they have introduced us to different sports. I think there is a tennis programme that they deliver with the Lawn Tennis Association, so we started an idea of developing tennis. We recently looked at basketball and, I think, badminton. With those activator workshops that they have, all those little workshops—almost like introductory coaching courses—we have started putting our volunteers on those. Rather than us paying for coaching badges and qualifications, we are at least giving them a little taste of what those coaching qualifications will be like, which has been a massive benefit to us as well.

One of the key things that we did over the last summer holidays, before we formed our partnership with StreetGames, was deliver a summer camp across 12 different locations. Where we, as an organisation, might not have been able to apply to local authorities for a contract worth over £50,000, we managed to work with them and win a contract where we delivered across 12 different locations and engaged over 500 young people across 6 weeks of summer holidays. Those partnerships, for us, are key, and we can now think like a big organisation. Where we cannot apply, we are partnering up with organisations that can apply. For us as an organisation, it has been pretty significant to expand, grow and develop what we already have.

Q327 Clive Efford: What we need is a national structure that can enhance that, and make sure it happens everywhere. Can I ask you about your fees to your national governing body? Are they exorbitant? Are they high? Do you get value for money?

Nahimul Islam: Our fees are pretty simple. It makes life a lot easier because, when you apply for it, you get public liability; you get your personal accident insurance; and it saves us trying to look for it elsewhere. Our fees are pretty low as it is. It is not a significant amount that would stop people becoming a constituted football club, and this year they have also reduced by 30%, I believe. That has been a massive help as well. It is one of those things where, the more football teams you have within your organisation, the more you pay but, again, we have 15-plus football teams where we pay, I think, just under £1,000, which is not significant if you think of it on an annual basis. In that sense, I think the fees are perfectly fine and, if anything, they encourage people to become football teams.

Q328 Clive Efford: Providing that amount of sport, 15 teams is a lot, do you get the chance to train, or is the cost too exorbitant? Do you just play



matches and not train in between? How does it work for you?

Nahimul Islam: Yes, we train once a week and we have matches once a week, so that is two sessions a week. There is a lack of facilities in our area. There is one massive pitch funded by the FA, which is subsidised, so that is the cheapest facility and the best facility, but getting hold of it is very difficult. We tend to go out to private facilities owned by private companies, and that is where our costs go—it is super expensive. Due to our local authority's park structure, we play our football matches in parks where, as you can imagine, the facilities are not that amazing. Now, with Covid being—

Q329 **Clive Efford:** Is it grass or all-weather?

Nahimul Islam: All-weather, yes.

Q330 **Clive Efford:** And floodlights?

Nahimul Islam: No, the training grounds are all-weather with floodlights, but the matches are on standard parks with a few goal posts up. In those circumstances, when it is raining, your match is not going ahead because of poor facilities. One of the things that we have really struggled with is the fact that, because it is a park, parks have their closing and opening times; they have seasons where they are closed. When it comes to March-April, they tend to close the football pitches. Now, especially with the current lockdown, there has been guidance that sports can continue from 29 March, and leagues have basically been instructed to extend the league up to June and July. Even if that is the case, a lot of the parks close for football by April-May. We don't know if we will be able to play football in June and July, or if we will have to go elsewhere outside of our borough.

That is one of the key things: there is not enough guidance. I feel like our local authority facilities are very backdated and behind the game. We do not have enough, and there are about 30 or 40 football teams across the borough. That is just one borough. If you go to other neighbouring boroughs, it is exactly the same issue. Facilities is one of the biggest things, and I think 60% of our costs are on facilities, and that is the truth. Most of our costs go on facilities, and we cannot afford it. If a member does not pay, we are completely stuck.

Clive Efford: I will leave it there. Thank you for coming today.

Chair: Thank you, Clive. I was about to say the same thing. Louise Morby and Nahimul Islam, thank you very much for your evidence today. It has been most engaging.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Lawrie and Nicola Walker.

Q331 **Chair:** This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and our session looking at sport in the community post Covid-19. Our second panel consists of Nicola Walker, the CEO of Sported, and Mark Lawrie,



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CEO of StreetGames. Nicola and Mark, thank you very much for joining us today.

Nicola Walker: My pleasure.

Mark Lawrie: Thank you very much for the invitation.

Chair: I have a very simple question to kick off with. It is for both of you. We saw that activity levels fell 6% during the first lockdown nearly a year ago, and they did not recover in the period prior to the second lockdown. What do you think we ought to do to correct that and bring activity levels back up to where they were prior to the pandemic?

Mark Lawrie: One of the big challenges of getting participation up again, particularly with children and young people, is access to the right places to go and play and the right groups. Between the two lockdowns, during the summer, a lot of the groups that we work with that provide participation opportunities for children and young people were very, very nervous about the things they had to meet in terms of Covid security, and they were concerned about the group sizes of children and young people that they could get together, from a legal perspective and from a health and safety perspective. From my point of view, the most crucial thing in getting those groups that we are concerned about active again is about fully opening up safe, local access for those groups and organisations.

Nicola Walker: Yes, and from the Sported network, around a third of our members did not reopen between lockdown one and lockdown two, even in areas where they were allowed to. That came down to a number of reasons. Some of it was cost—they were short on funds; they had to hire facilities; they needed to buy PPE; they needed to ensure social distancing—and a lot of it was to do with nervousness, I think, both among the volunteers, whether or not they felt safe to deliver sport, and the habits of the young children, and getting the young children back into their activities.

I think there wasn't quite enough time in that middle period to get the sector back up and running. What I am nervous about now is that, as we look to open these groups again towards the end of March, I think we will face very similar issues, which is how these groups actually get to a position where they can afford to open; where they have facilities where they can operate; and where young children and volunteers feel comfortable to go.

Q332 **Chair:** Nicola, just on that point, are you confident that it will be different this time around?

Nicola Walker: No. I think, if anything, it is going to be more difficult because groups have now had a very long, sustained period of time without operating and without income. Children, as both Nahimul and Louise mentioned, have got out of the habit of playing their sports. So,



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yes, there is a great deal of nervousness for the group operators and the group organisers about whether the young people will return.

The facilities point cannot be overestimated: 85% of the grassroots sports that we support do not have their own facilities, and that is certainly true of the netball and football examples that we have just heard about. The operators of those facilities are going to have to create social distance and have potentially fewer groups and customers coming through. The nervousness is that community sports are disadvantaged in that respect, in that they do not necessarily pay the same rates that others might.

Q333 Damian Hinds: Mark and Nicola, good morning. Just to set the scene, can you say a bit about the types of clubs that you work with, the variety in them and their importance to community sport and activity?

Nicola Walker: Sported is the UK's largest network of grassroots community clubs. We have 2,600 groups, a third of which are in very deprived areas across the UK. We are sport-agnostic. Our groups employ about 96 different sports, and many of our groups are multi-sport groups. For them, and this is the reason we support them, the sport is the means to the end, in that they are there for some kind of social outcome, generally to do with the health of their communities; the health of their young people; education; employability prospects. So, whereas in previous conversations we talked about NGBs and the support that NGBs can give, actually, if you are a youth group that uses sport to engage young people, you may not only deliver one sport; you deliver a number of sports. Our groups are very heavily led by volunteers. Over half of them have no paid member of staff. So, it is entirely volunteer led, and they generally operate on less than £10,000 a year.

Q334 Damian Hinds: Is that a trend? Are you seeing growth in those multi-sports clubs, or has it always had those kinds of proportions?

Nicola Walker: I think it has always been there, actually. I think we tend to focus on those sports that either have heavy spectator aspects to them or that we play at school. Where groups are being clever—and we talked before about inclusion, particularly of girls—is in introducing activities that aren't those traditional team sports that you had to be good at at school in order to participate, whether that is yoga or frisbee or dance. I think groups are tending to use activities that they think will best engage the young people who are currently inactive.

Mark Lawrie: StreetGames works solely in the most disadvantaged areas of the country. We have our roots in community regeneration. We started as a very small charity in neighbourhood renewal areas about 15 years ago. The kinds of organisations that we support are locally trusted; heavily embedded in their communities; often running out of community centres; or even just using their local games area; and, similar to what Nicola said, they are very much about improving the quality of life in their neighbourhoods. Sport and physical activity is part of what they do. They



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want their communities to be healthier, safer and more successful. We support a network across the UK that is smaller than Nicola's—about 1,400—but less than 15% of those are affiliated to NGBs. They tend to be charities and community-interest companies. We also work with larger bodies like housing associations and local authorities because what we know is, as long as those organisations take a community-focused approach—an asset-based approach—even larger organisations can still engage the young people that we are concerned about in those neighbourhoods.

The thing in our work that is, again, slightly different from Sported is that a lot of our groups have at least one paid member of staff. The reason for that is that the levels of volunteering in the most deprived areas are still stubbornly low. Trying to get the human capital and the social capital to get volunteers to run the activities is extremely hard.

Nicola Walker: I wouldn't mind commenting on that because you asked the question before about how to get more volunteers into sport, and I think the key response is to ask slightly less of them. The sorts of hours that Louise and Nahimul are putting in are just enormous. Across our organisations, about 2,600, some half a million hours a week of volunteering are being given. I think it is off-putting for many people who would like to get engaged, but in a structure where their help is supporting rather than running. Having paid staff makes a massive difference to an organisation's sustainability.

Q335 Damian Hinds: Let me ask the same question I asked the previous two witnesses. Do you have in mind one or two practical things that could start to make a dent in the total amount of admin time asked of volunteers?

Nicola Walker: The two main areas for me are around facilities and funding. Facilities, I think, are a constant challenge for groups in terms of trying to get access to affordable facilities they can use at a time that suits their young participants, and that is a challenge that takes quite a lot of organising and quite a lot of time. Funding is difficult, because every funding application is slightly different. Each funding application needs a different set of criteria around your governance, and around your measurement and impact. It has to be written in a certain style and, of course, the success rates are not huge.

Where you are using volunteers to constantly look for funds to support the group, then that is very time consuming. Having some kind of a centralised approach to funding—not the funds themselves, but just the methodology—and for those funders to be prepared to support core activity, as opposed to shiny new projects that funders can often like.

Then there are the efficiencies of volunteering that we talked about before, which is creating more centralised resources that can be used by volunteers, particularly during Covid. Imagine you run a multi-sports operation in an area, you are having to deal with local rules around Covid



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and safety, and you are having to deal with each of the individual rules of the different sports. It becomes incredibly difficult to try to collate all of that information coming at you. I think there is an element in which we can help volunteers by translating the information that they need to run their clubs.

Q336 Damian Hinds: On that point you made about having, effectively, a funding clearing house with standard processes and standardised reporting, there is nothing that would have stopped that happening already. Presumably, it is within the gift of big governing bodies to get together to do something. I don't know. Do you have any thoughts on why it has not happened?

Nicola Walker: I think reporting is difficult in that each group is funding a slightly different project with a slightly different outcome. That is a challenge for the entire sector. A lot of the evidence base of the sport for development sector is qualitative and outcomes based, and it is often difficult to quantify that. However, I think the sector has failed to come up with a set of metrics that we are happy to be judged by, and then selling that to funders is something that is being worked on but has never quite been resolved.

Creating one centralised pot would never be feasible. However, for funders to understand they are asking similar questions, having similar application forms would save huge amounts of time for volunteers by not having to meet a specific funder's needs.

Q337 Damian Hinds: You have things like community foundations, which are not a single pot, but they are a way of funnelling different groups who are funding something and different groups who are after something and streamlining the whole process, because when you have thousands of buyers and thousands of sellers, you need a marketplace, you need a shop to bring them together. Is there anything else that could stop that happening, any impediment?

Nicola Walker: One thing is access, actually; just knowing where these groups are. I think that has been one of the biggest challenges for some of the larger groups. Having moved away from the local authority position that was discussed earlier, it is difficult for those large organisations to know where all these very small groups are in really quite deprived areas. One of the wonderful things that has happened during Covid is that the sports councils both, Sport England and Sport Wales, have used national partners like Sported and StreetGames to distribute grants down to organisations where we have access, where they wouldn't necessarily, ordinarily see themselves as a customer of a sports body.

The other things those grants have both done is become very liberal in terms of the sorts of information that you need to provide during Covid in order to get grants. So, things that have been new to our sector like video applications, for example, have been really welcomed by groups



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who struggle when English isn't their first language, and they struggle with a formalised application form.

Q338 Damian Hinds: Mark, what are your practical proposals for reducing the admin burden?

Mark Lawrie: Building on what Nicola was saying, we did a piece of work with the University of Bedford a few years ago where we looked at the small grants forms of all the lottery distributors, and we got some of their undergraduate students to try and complete them. We found that you had to be operating at A-level standard or above to answer the questions being asked. For that reason, in a large part of our network, certainly over the last 10 years when you look back, less than 10% of small grants from the lottery distributors have gone to groups like the ones we support in the most deprived areas, and a large part of that is to do with the process. I agree with Nicola. I give a lot of credit to Sport England for the way they have developed the Tackling Inequalities Fund in a way that allows groups to show video, to reduce the amount of information they give for funding.

On the impact point, we have been involved in a piece of work with the Sport for Development Coalition, around creating a very simple-to-use impact portal that local groups can use. They can measure themselves against the Office for National Statistics marker questions on mental wellbeing and physical wellbeing, so there is a route to make this easier for local organisations and to help volunteers.

If I may, the final point I would make is that, on Nicola's point about guidance for volunteers, Sport England's return to play guidance on their website is so clear and so logical in helping volunteers to try to understand what they can and cannot do in different situations. Maintaining that level of simplicity as we go forward will really help volunteers.

Q339 Giles Watling: Thank you both for coming in, and thank you for the great work you are doing out there in the community. It is really appreciated by so many people.

I am going to be mercifully brief, because a lot of the points I wanted to cover have been covered. It is all very well to talk about finances, and we know they are vital in an academic way, but Sported's leaders have said that the biggest concern is the wellbeing of the participants. Nicola, how are the groups you support handling the pandemic, and what sort of feedback have you had?

Nicola Walker: Thank you, Giles. That is a brilliant question, and it is the one area that I thought had not been covered yet. We have been running some surveys throughout Covid—so, from March right through to this month—where we have asked community groups what their biggest concern is. While those have slightly changed over the months as there have been financial concerns and then relief funds have come through, and now issues around return to play have come to the fore, the most



consistent concern for our leaders throughout the entire pandemic has been the mental health of their young participants, many of whom they have not been able to contact because they do not have the digital technology. Certainly, 60% of them say that their primary concern is the wellbeing of their young people.

Mark Lawrie: I echo the comment about mental wellbeing. Part of what Covid has done nationally is shine a light on some of the issues in some of the areas that we and Sported both focus on. The incidence of poor mental health among children in deprived areas was already three times higher before the pandemic started, and the numbers have just gone up and up and up. A lot of the work that we have done through our training academy—Nahimul mentioned the activator workshops in the last session—has been about supporting coaches and leaders to have mental health conversations with young people, so helping them with the mentoring skills to talk on the phone to young people if they cannot access digital, to guide and support them as much as they can without being face to face.

We have had a huge demand, as well, for our mental health first aid courses, which are not a panacea—they are not the answer to everything—but they give coaches, leaders and project workers that starting point for understanding the basics of mental health, and then being able to refer young people on if they can tell that the problem is really acute, referring them on to other services, child and adolescent mental health services and local voluntary sector charities that support children's mental health. Mental health is a huge issue. It is only going to get bigger, I suspect, as children come back to school. The role that the organisations that we work with play is so fundamental, because the young people trust their coaches and leaders to help them.

Q340 **Giles Watling:** We are starting on the back foot, and it is getting worse as we go on, so there is going to be a lot of catch up to do, I take it from your answers. That is talking about the participants. Who helps the helpers? As we have heard a lot, volunteers are such a major part of all that you do. It has been reported that many volunteers are physically and mentally exhausted. What can we do to reach out to them?

Nicola Walker: That emotional burden has been huge. The surveys that we have done have shown that the level of anxiety among the leaders is much higher than in the national population, so it is a concern. Clearly, they have been worried for their young people, they have been worried for the sustainability of their groups.

In the first lockdown, Sported called and gave moral support. For many of these groups who did not feel they were having that, it was some element of help, which is just being able to talk through and being able to understand that other people were also suffering in the same way.

Some of the work that Mark is doing at StreetGames, around supporting the leaders to help their young people, is critical. But there isn't an easy



answer to that sort of “oxygen mask on first” piece, about how we also give mental health support to the leaders themselves because there is this huge pent up demand. I think the Centre for Mental Health has said that something like 1.5 million children now have mental health issues. That has dramatically increased during Covid, so there is this slight tsunami that leaders are aware of. Looking after their health is going to be key.

Q341 Giles Watling: I would imagine that there is a big sort of “roll up the sleeves and let’s get on with it” approach, because people must be realising the monumental task ahead of them. As we saw the NHS step up to the plate in so many ways over the pandemic directly, I should imagine there is that sort of sentiment going through the volunteers. Is that so?

Mark Lawrie: Yes, I would definitely have said so. The volunteers, as much as they are struggling, I completely agree, are very willing to accept support. We have always run network meetings for the LTOs we work with, where they can come together and talk and share.

One of the benefits, in some ways, of being locked down in a pandemic is that we can have volunteers from Cornwall to Newcastle talking to each other, supporting each other in the way that we are talking now, so there have been some positives in the way that volunteers and project leaders have supported each other.

Our experience from last summer, though, when some were delivering, is that there is a challenge in passing on young people to core services for support. With the thresholds for things like safeguarding and mental health within public sector services being so high, projects can often be trying to get young people the support they need, but if they do not meet a threshold, they are not considered to be struggling enough almost. I have had several examples of this. I spoke to a coach in Derby on a Friday night who was saying they had been running their holiday activities all week and they were really worried about a child going home, but they did not meet the statutory threshold to be taken into care or to be supported. There is an additional layer of pressure there on volunteers, and we need to make as many connections as we can around them and for them, to help support them in that situation with young people.

Giles Watling: One of the silver linings to this extremely dark cloud we are under is that we have improved communications. I take that from what you have just been saying. We do not want to throw that away when we get back to something like normal.

I am going to leave it there, because most of it has been covered, but thank you so much for all you do.

Q342 Clive Efford: Welcome, Mark and Nicola. How bad is the crisis that we are facing for grassroots sport?



Mark Lawrie: I think it is really nuanced. I thought originally, when we did our initial surveys with organisations, that there was a genuine sense of panic and a real concern about funding. Because Sport England, Sport Wales and the Government stepped up with emergency funding, quite a lot of the organisations that were initially vulnerable in the pandemic managed to get through the summer into the autumn in reasonable shape. When we did our survey, around 4% of organisations said they were in critical trouble. We were then able to give them support to access funding.

What is more of a concern, looking forward, is that obviously a lot of funders have put an awful lot into pandemic relief in the last 11 to 12 months, and the forward-looking funding landscape for local community organisations could be an awful lot tougher. What we are finding now is that the confidence of those organisations about their financial sustainability has dropped from about 60% to about 20% in the last six months, which is a significant concern for us.

For a lot of them, the things that they do—the Robin Hood things that they do—to generate income, like going into schools and running paid-for after-school sessions to subsidise their free community sessions, they just have not been able to do and it is not entirely clear at this stage when schools will feel confident to be able to let them do so.

There are an awful lot of factors at play for these local organisations but the forward outlook, whereas they have historically always been really agile, able to bring in funding from lots of different sources, they feel a lot more fragile. They have used a huge amount of energy supporting their communities during the pandemic. A lot of them have spent their reserves to give the additional support, outside of sport and physical activity, supporting the wider needs of families and children and young people, so we have concerns about how we support their sustainability going forward.

Nicola Walker: I wholeheartedly agree with Mark again. Before Covid even hit, many of our groups weren't sure that they would be in existence in six months' time, so this was already a very fragile environment for these very small groups.

Interestingly that number is lower now, so only one in 10 actually think that they will not survive, partly because of the funds that have been available, which have been swiftly delivered in some of the nations. Secondly, the smaller the group the less their outgoings were, so one of the advantages of not having paid staff, of not having facilities, is that they could mothball for a while and then hopefully start to reopen when they could.

What has replaced that now is the challenge of how they will restart. How do they get that initial seed capital to get back up and running? How do they get their young people back? We think about a quarter of groups may not restart, that the sheer effort of getting back up and getting



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everything sorted out again may be too much for them, so there needs to be a focus on returning to play, which many of the sports councils are already looking at.

The last point for me is around the inequalities of sport provision, which as we all recognise were huge, be that through gender, ethnicity or disability, before Covid hit, and those inequalities are now even worse and, certainly, disability sport organisations, for example, are much more nervous about reopening because of some of the implications of so doing.

Q343 Clive Efford: The way we fund sport is that we quite often pour money in at the top, at the national governing body level, and expect it to reach the grassroots community level. Is that a proper way to go about funding sport, do you think, or should we be funding the grassroots more in a direct way?

Nicola Walker: There has already been some change. A lot of the sports bodies are already using organisations like Sported and StreetGames to distribute down to community sports, recognising that they do not necessarily fit within the structure of the national governing bodies.

We have just done some research on whether our groups are associated with national governing bodies and how they use those governing bodies. It has been interesting. We have a slightly higher percentage of groups that are with governing bodies, about two thirds. They tend to use their governing bodies for the sport aspects of what they do, so coaching, coaching development, sport insurance and so on, not necessarily the resilience and sustainability of the group.

I think, as the shift is made towards organisational strength rather than sporting strength, there is a need for a different type of organisation to help grassroots with those things.

Mark Lawrie: I think we need a mixed model, because NGBs are not a homogenous group. Organisations like boxing, basketball and rugby league—which are sports that we work with—and tennis have committed over the last few years to taking the funding they get from Sport England and others and ensuring that it does get down into grassroots organisations. Others maybe not so much, but our finding is that to get funding into place, so that local groups can access it, you need to support them to look more broadly than just sports money.

We have a number of what we call sustainability leads who support local organisations. During the period between April and December last year, they put £4 million into the hands of local groups, of which only 15% came from sport. The other 85% came from other funders who were interested in what sport could do to deliver their outcomes. That catalyst of our having some resource from Sport England and Sport Wales to set that up allowed us to attract a great deal more funding into those groups who really need it on the ground.



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Q344 Clive Efford: You were talking earlier about the problems for small organisations in bidding for funds. Do you think that local authorities miss a trick here? If they were to provide a small team of officers, maybe even a couple, to assist those small groups in making bids, in terms of inward investment into sport and probably facilities and other things, wouldn't they have a much bigger bang for their buck if they were to invest in that way? Should local authorities be doing more of that?

Mark Lawrie: It would be an ideal scenario if local authorities could, but I think there are a number of organisations in the sports world that can do it. Active Partnerships are in a good position to be able to help local organisations with funding applications. We and Sported work with our members to support them to make funding applications.

We have just been piloting a programme where we are not writing bids for local organisations but we are helping them take a step-by-step approach, so that we build their ability to do it over time. Local authorities could definitely have a role. You could have a support unit that would help with that. You also have some of the residue of the CVSs, obviously, in local areas. They have a role in supporting funding. Even the community foundations, which I think were mentioned earlier, a lot of them have now reached a position where they are helping organisations to look at how they bid.

Q345 Clive Efford: Do you think people have the knowledge at grassroots level? As MPs, we sometimes have people come to us saying, "Look, there are kids in my local community, I want to do something for them." There is a lot of enthusiasm and goodwill there, but of course there is not the capacity to set up a governing body and fill in memberships and articles of association and get to the point where you could bid for money. How do you grow that goodwill at grassroots level and not lose it in the bureaucracy and the minefield of trying to get some support from a governing body or Sport England, or whoever?

Mark Lawrie: What you need to do in that scenario, what we have done in the past, is connect them into a body that can carry the governance weight for them. I mentioned housing associations earlier. I can think of an example in Bolton where they now have a triathlon club on an estate up there. The people involved, as you say, Clive, did not want to set up the governance structure and all the rest of it, but they were picked up by Bolton at Home, the local housing association, and they helped that group of residents to gain the funding to deliver the constitution of the club, which was a bit unlikely in that particular area but that is what they decided they wanted to do.

There are structures that people who are really keen can be plugged into at a local level, and for those that want to constitute themselves, organisations like StreetGames, Sported, Active Partnerships and others, have tools, templates, things that can speed that process up for them.

Q346 Clive Efford: Again, a question to either of you. Is there anything that



you would change about how Sport England and NGBs deliver resources and support at community level?

Nicola Walker: The conversation has been about how we access those deprived community groups who would not necessarily have seen themselves as the correct audience for a large sporting body in any of the regions in the UK. We feel the movement strategy that Sport England has just released is excellent, in that it really does focus on tackling inequalities and reaching those that have not previously been reached.

The challenge is in creating some structure around those groups. There is no one set of figures even on how many groups are out there. We did some calculations that there were probably 58,000 community groups working on a sport for development purpose—and we have 2,500 of those—so a lot of these groups are still not benefiting from support from any of these environments. I think one of the first things to do is being able to quantify, identify and reach groups in order to be able to make sure that funds and resources, and so on, are made available to them.

Q347 **Clive Efford:** You say that you think Sport England's strategy is excellent, but is it really going to cut through? One of the criticisms of Sport England, over a very long period of time now, is that it has been very good at capturing the low-hanging fruit but it has not really cut through in terms of dealing with inequalities and social exclusion, that it has not got to those harder-to-reach sections of the community. Do you think that is a fair criticism? Do you think that is going to change?

Nicola Walker: I think it is a fair criticism that Sport England would accept. Sport England absolutely appreciates that there are demographics that have been more difficult to engage in sport. I think there is a recognition across most deliverables that local people delivering local activities, people who really know their community and their young people, is the solution. The question is how to support an infrastructure to make sure that there aren't barriers for those people to participate.

Q348 **Clive Efford:** Can you give an example of where they have done that? Are there any positive examples of where an NGB or Sport England have supported community groups at a grassroots level?

Nicola Walker: Yes, I think both.

Mark Lawrie: I think the best example is probably the local delivery pilots that Sport England has been running for the last four years. They have been very much looking at the needs, almost at a neighbourhood level in some cases, and trying to make sure that funding gets right into the hands of local groups. I was talking to a person involved in the one in Wigan, which has been doing things like giving groups £50 just to put up a basketball hoop on the outside of their building so that the kids can play basketball. That is not a huge funding decision, but it is the kind of thing that can make an enormous difference in a local community, to children just being that bit more active.



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I do not think we are anywhere near a long way through the journey. I have been in the industry for 20-odd years, and we have been talking about these kinds of inequalities all that time. It is about the whole sector wanting to tackle it. If Sport England's intent to unite the movement around proportionate universalism is followed through—so actually putting the money in the areas where it is most needed and towards the groups where it is most needed—I think that will make a huge difference.

The other thing is that there are some good governing bodies. We do a lot of work with governing bodies, both in England and Wales. Last summer, during the pandemic, we and the LTA gave out 5,000 sets of racquets and balls to children living in the most deprived areas of England and Wales. The Welsh Rugby Union gave out 100-plus rugby balls to 100 families. Badminton got involved in giving out kit. All of these things, even though they may just be small things to start with, are about intent and a shift of purpose away from just purely governing the competitive aspects of traditional sport towards playing their part in tackling inequalities.

Nicola Walker: I think the Tackling Inequalities Fund has made many groups, who would not have ordinarily benefited from Sport England funding, realise that they are the sorts of organisations that can benefit now. The support that they have received during Covid will have changed their perception of sports bodies across all four nations.

Q349 **Chair:** The Government have just announced that they want to wade once more into the cesspit that is FIFA to try to host the 2030 World Cup. Does the Government's focus on elite sport—and, for example, Olympic medals—frustrate you when you see kids up and down the country being inactive, when you see obesity levels as they are and when you see sports clubs closing? What are your thoughts on that?

Mark Lawrie: Shall I go first, Nicola?

Nicola Walker: Yes.

Chair: A hospital pass, Mark.

Mark Lawrie: I will catch it and then pass it across to Nicola.

I have to say that, as StreetGames, we have used the power of major events since we were formed to drive participation in local communities. Look at London 2012: we did a huge amount of work to bring the magic of the games into local communities, getting things like pop-up bags for Olympic sports, so that children and young people could watch what was happening on the television and could then enact it in their parks or their back gardens. We did the same around the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. We did the same around the Rugby World Cup when it was here in 2015.

To half-answer your question, I suspect, I think that elite sport can have a positive impact on grassroots sport in communities, but we are already



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talking to Birmingham 2022 about how the 65,000 children on free school meals in Birmingham are going to feel connected to the games that are going to be taking place right in the middle of their city and, in some cases—in Perry Barr, where the athletics stadium is—right in the middle of some of the most deprived areas of the city. There is definitely an argument for using major events to have an impact on participation in our most disadvantaged areas.

Nicola Walker: Sported itself is a legacy of the 2012 Olympics, so big events do generate long-term support, and for the Euros and the Commonwealth Games, et cetera, there are big legacy projects under way to make sure that young people also benefit.

The separate point I would make is that they are almost like two different sectors, two completely different industries, and there are not sufficient employability pathways to move you through from community sport to elite sport. We did a report recently on racism in community sport. One of the frustrations is that lack of pathways through for individuals who volunteer, who find employability in grassroots sport. There is almost no route for them to take the experience gained there through to elite organisations.

Q350 **Chair:** Is £250,000 for a medal worth it, Nicola? What could you do with £250,000?

Nicola Walker: Well, £250,000 would clearly help an enormous number of young people at a community level.

Q351 **Chair:** But is it worth it?

Nicola Walker: It is so difficult to make a comparison between the two. As I said, it is almost like two different sectors. With that £250,000 one assumes will come media rights, employability, legacy and so on. There are other benefits associated with it. Certainly I think sport does suffer from extreme wealth at one end—very overt, mediacentric wealth—and then, on the other hand, the deprivation that many of the community groups face, where they are struggling to get the subs in and to spend the few thousand pounds a year that they spend on operating their groups. I think it is probably a perception issue rather than an economic issue.

Q352 **Chair:** Yes, but obviously there is £2.5 million of seed funding already announced to scope out the 2030 World Cup bid. Knowing the way Government works, there is obviously now going to be quite a bit of time—ministerial time and official time—taken up with organising ourselves to go over to FIFA with our begging bowl and, no doubt, probably be humiliated. Do you think that is a good use of departmental time, and do you think it would be a better use of that time to focus on our kids, our health outcomes and our community sports?

Nicola Walker: I would like to pick up on another point. I do not think that sport for development is just a sport problem. You have talked about



Ministers within a sporting environment making those decisions. Actually, I think the biggest benefit for community groups would be the involvement of the Department for Education. Making school sports facilities available would be about public health, understanding the physical and mental health issues concerning grassroots sports.

I am sorry to deflect your question again, but for me it is less about pitching ourselves against major championships, which I do think have some element of a halo effect, and actually understanding that the sorts of social outcomes that are being tackled by community groups have a much broader remit than a DCMS remit, in that they really are about physical and mental health. At the moment, it feels like it is a one-directorate approach to community sport, where I think it should be much broader.

Q353 Mrs Heather Wheeler: Having had this excellent foray into high-level stuff, can I bring you back down to the grassroots?

Mark, StreetGames supports groups to apply for Government funding. From the information that you sent us, 67% of organisations that you are involved with applied for support through the pandemic. Why wasn't it 100%, and how did the 67% get on in receiving that money?

Mark Lawrie: As I said before, between April and December last year, we brought in around £4 million directly to locally trusted organisations. A mix of that came from things like the Sport England emergency fund that was around in the first instance, then the Tackling Inequalities Fund, which Nicola has already mentioned.

There is still an issue with funders understanding the types of organisations that we support. A single example: I had a conversation in the West Midlands with a youth organisation that is really a mental health organisation that offers sport. It made an application through a sports fund and had not been successful. I think part of the journey we need to go on is about understanding that the voluntary and community sector, the locally trusted organisations that we support, will present slightly differently from your traditional hockey club or your traditional rugby club in the way that they describe what they are trying to do, and I think that is challenging.

We did a lot of work, in fact Sported and ourselves did a lot of work, on the Tackling Inequality and Economic Disadvantage Fund a few years ago with Sport England. A lot of that was about talking to the grant assessors about how this is going to come through. When a group that isn't a sports club writes an application for sports money, what kind of language are they going to use? How are they going to describe what they do? They are not going to talk about coaches, clubs, volunteers or level 2 and level 3 qualifications. They are going to talk about fun, informal activity, multisport on a Friday night that keeps young people diverted from other activities and has a positive impact on their mental wellbeing.



I do not have the figure in front of me, but our success rate is probably around 80% for what we did with organisations last year, because it was just so focused. As an organisation during the pandemic, we have narrowed ourselves down to doing five things basically: listening to our network and understanding their support needs; helping them with funding and fund raising, so where we raise funds nationally, we passport it on to them as much as we can; helping them with training for their workforce, so again around fundraising some of it but also what we touched on before around mental health; and advocating for them. A lot of the funding may not have been about applications necessarily; it may have been partnership introductions. We do a lot of work with Police and Crime Commissioners and supporting local organisations to connect with their local PCC, because PCCs want to use sport as a means to divert young people away from other behaviours, so it is not always about an application process. It can sometimes be about a partnership connection for funding.

Q354 Mrs Heather Wheeler: That is very interesting. Thank you very much. Nicola, do you have a similar story to tell us?

Nicola Walker: I do not have quite such a specific stat as Mark does. We do fundraising bulletins once or twice a month, where we try to signpost groups to any regional or national funds that would be relevant for them. There isn't always that carry through in terms of our understanding whether they were successful or not, but we try to do the leg work in terms of the analysis for them.

What I think has been really nice during Covid is organisations like Sported and StreetGames being given grants that we can then issue to our members, knowing where those needs are, and some of that has been Government but, encouragingly, quite a lot of it has been from corporations that want to give back but don't necessarily have the route into these types of groups, and the other thing they would like, rather than just giving money and leaving a group to spend it, even given a sensible application form, is some kind of professional support alongside that money.

I think that both StreetGames and Sported are doing that. We provide business mentors to groups to make sure they can spend the money in a sustainable way. That has tended to give confidence to the funders to use us as a distribution channel.

Mrs Heather Wheeler: In effect, that is spreading the sport funding in a different way. That is interesting. Thank you both very much indeed.

Q355 Chair: Just following on from our exchange on elite sport, traditional sports clubs and grassroots. Mark, in your written evidence you say, "Recognise and value locally trusted community organisations in the same way as more traditional sports clubs". What would that mean in practice if the Government were to do it?



Mark Lawrie: If you ask people who do not know very much about sport for their mental picture of what sport looks like, it is probably a hockey club, a football club, a netball club, an after-school type provision. For me and for us it is about establishing that these voluntary and community sector organisations, which might look a bit like youth groups, tenants' groups or other types of voluntary organisation, absolutely have a role to play in increasing the levels of activity in the country, because we know that 65% of the young people who come along to our locally trusted organisations do no other sport outside school.

It is the only place they go to play, and in large part, because of the areas we work in, that is because there are no clubs. There are no netball clubs. There are no hockey clubs. There are no other clubs that young people could join in the areas that StreetGames focuses on. I do not think there is a lack of appetite. We know that a lot of young people would like to play mainstream sport. Colleagues were talking in the previous session about what it costs to join a netball club for a month. We have done a piece of work with Sheffield Hallam that shows that low-income families have around £3.21 a week to spend on sport. That is families, and it is less than the cost of a single swim.

In terms of actually connecting into mainstream sport, these local organisations that can provide a sporting offer for free on the doorstep of young people, in a way that they want it and still keep them active, are just fundamental. Also, from a cross-Government point of view, they deliver across so many outcomes. They deliver community safety outcomes. They deliver public health outcomes. They deliver education outcomes.

We have been involved in—Nahimul was talking about it—running a fit and fed programme for the last five years, which is around addressing holiday hunger and also getting children active and keeping them engaged in positive activity throughout the holidays. We must recognise that sports clubs are important, and that 20%-odd of people who play go to NGB clubs, but for a huge proportion of young people, clubs are not the answer and these voluntary organisations need to be recognised as a core part of what sport does.

Q356 **Chair:** Does DCMS get that, Mark?

Mark Lawrie: I think we are getting there. We had a positive conversation with the Sports Minister a few weeks ago. I was talking to the House of Lords Select Committee last week, and I was asked for a single recommendation and it was that. It was let's get locally trusted organisations from the voluntary sector right at the heart of how we take sport forward, and not prioritise them completely over NGB sport—we need to keep the core market running—but we need to invest in these groups that make such a difference locally.

Q357 **Chair:** Is there any way in which the traditional clubs are not focusing enough on the people you are talking about? You used the example of



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our witness in the first panel who was paying, I think, £25 a month to play netball. Having played cricket and having been a member of cricket clubs in the past, I know that what generally happens is that people my age—the useless stiff in the second eleven—pay quite high subs, and the kids effectively get it for free or as close to free as possible. Is that pattern repeated elsewhere in other sports? Is this something that you have seen, and do you think there needs to be much more of it?

Mark Lawrie: Funnily enough, my local cricket club does exactly that, and it works with young people who don't have much money on the back of it, so, yes, there are clubs that are prepared to heavily subsidise membership.

I think there is a broader issue about whether those clubs are in the right location, because it is not just about whether you can afford the membership fees. A good example is if you turn up at a cricket club and you are a young person on a very low income, or your family is on a very low income. You won't have the bat, you won't have the pads, you won't have the bag, you won't be able to afford to go to away games. There is a raft of issues that are not just purely about the cost of membership fees but are about the way that young people fit in.

There are some absolutely brilliant clubs that do both. The one that gets oft quoted at the moment is Brighton Table Tennis Club. It has elite performers and great table tennis players, but it also provides free sessions for refugees, for people with learning disabilities. It is very much about the culture of the club. Is the club somewhere where young people feel welcomed, where young people feel comfortable? The money bit is important, because if they only have £3.21 a week that is an issue, but it is more about the environment.

I think an honest choice is important. I took my daughter to a netball club recently. They said they were a community club. My daughter is about as sporty as I am. I was never a first league player in anything. It wasn't a community club. It was a high-performance club, and that is brilliant. It had a great team. But you cannot bring young people who can barely throw a ball into that environment, because you get exactly the same response that we were talking about earlier as people who fail at school. You get that horrible sense that you are not good enough. This is multidimensional but, certainly, clubs that are prepared to make themselves really welcoming environments for a range of different participants go a long way.

Q358 **Chair:** There is also, I presume, using any facilities they have for many different disciplines, many different types of activities. Leicestershire County Cricket Club, for instance, has quite a strong emphasis on community dance, which feeds in very well considering the demographics of the local community and the expanding reach it has within that. Is that something that also needs to be thought of? Would you both welcome the idea of more traditional clubs effectively being encouraged, as much as possible, to open up their facilities for other means of activity but, also,



other less formal types of sporting activity?

Nicola Walker: I think it depends on whether or not you have your own facility. Certainly, there has been a lot of work recently where people have built large facilities, even in areas of deprivation, but they have been specifically targeted at inactive audiences. This is very much true of football. Sometimes if the pricing is wrong or the timing is wrong, the very people that the facility was built for do not use it and wealthier participants will drive in and go and use these swanky new facilities.

There is a bit to do with the welcome and making the space and the time for the individuals that the facilities were targeted for, and then I wholly agree with Mark in terms of the welcome. We have done quite a lot of work on gender inclusion and getting women and girls into sport, and that first experience of walking in and the group and the club having set up the right infrastructure for those girls. I think Louise was talking about kit—for girls, kit can be an enormous issue—and letting the girls choose the kit that they want to wear is just one of the barriers that you can remove.

Chair: Yes. Just don't get John Nicolson to pick any sports kits.

Mark Lawrie: I saw walking football for over-65s happening on the side of the cricket pitch at a local cricket club recently. Yes, absolutely, where you have clubs that are prepared to have that community ethos, there is so much you can potentially do, but it is all about people recognising that.

A lot of traditional sports clubs play their fixtures in deprived areas because land is cheaper and things like artificial pitches get built there but, as Nicola says, a lot of their members drive in from 10 miles away, play their match and drive away again. There aren't local users in the local community, and the national benchmarking survey data around leisure centres shows that that problem is getting worse. Those leisure facilities in the most deprived areas are being less used by the local population than they were five years ago.

If we have great facilities, which we are lucky to have in this country—I know we will never have enough—how are we planning to create community sport hubs where young people, adults and families who live in those areas can come in and use the things that are on their doorstep and feel like they are theirs and not just being used by the local club that can afford to pay.

Nicola Walker: Plus there is the role of schools. I just do not think we have covered this enough. Nearly 40% of all sports facilities are behind closed doors. Something like 77% of sports halls are on school campuses. Those are not available to young people in the evenings or the weekends, unless they are in progressive schools that make the facilities available.

Creating a connection between community groups and the school is fundamental, and not only to a variety of delivery while children are of



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school age. We have talked about the horrendous drop off that happens, particularly with girls, when children leave school and then don't return to sport. Trying to pick up activity after that is so much more difficult. There could be a much more fluid interaction of community groups benefiting from school facilities, school facilities benefiting from all the different sports that community groups can create and the young people benefiting from a pathway through from being a young person to leaving school and still having an infrastructure of sport in their lives.

Chair: Thank you, and thank you for your evidence today, Nicola Walker and Mark Lawrie. It has been most interesting.