



National Plan for Sport and Recreation Committee

Corrected oral evidence: National plan for sport and recreation

Wednesday 26 May 2021

4.30 pm

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Members present: Lord Willis of Knaresborough (The Chair); Lord Addington; Baroness Blower; Baroness Brady; The Earl of Devon; Baroness Grey-Thompson; Lord Hayward; Lord Knight of Weymouth; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Lord Moynihan; Lord Snape.

Evidence Session No. 23

Virtual Proceedings

Questions 172 - 176

Witnesses

I: Dr Alex Fenton, Founder, FanFit, and Lecturer, Digital Business, Salford Business School, University of Salford; Jamie Foale, CEO, Playfinder; Paul Foster, Chief Executive, The Great Run Company.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Alex Fenton, Jamie Foale and Paul Foster.

Q172 **The Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to this, the 23rd evidence session of this inquiry. I welcome our three witnesses. I hope you enjoyed listening to the previous session. I seem to think we have met somewhere, Alex, but I cannot quite remember where it was. It was perhaps when I was at Salford.

In this inquiry, we are basically looking at how we can get the nation to be fit. How can we try to ensure that, in terms of their policy in the future, the Government strive to achieve a higher level of fitness and well-being among the public?

I will start with you, Jamie. We have heard a lot over the past five to 10 years, particularly since the Government's paper on sport and recreation, about active lifestyles and the opportunities and limitations of using technology. The Committee has various opinions about the use of certain technologies, but I think we are pretty united in saying that technology will play a huge part in the future of virtually every aspect of society. Clearly, in trying to get the nation more fit, there could not be a better opportunity than doing that.

Could you tell us what the opportunities and limitations are of using technology to encourage people to be more active? In particular, what lessons do you think we have learned during the pandemic on the potential for using technology to promote active and healthy lifestyles?

Jamie Foale: Thank you very much for inviting me to the Committee. It is a pleasure to be here.

From my perspective, the starting point for technology is making activities easier to find and book. We see people being five times more likely to make a booking for an activity if they are able to do it online, and technology obviously enables that. We also see people being more likely to do it more often, on the simple principle that, if it is easier to do, you are more likely to do it. We see nine out of 10 people coming back to make a booking when they have already booked once online.

Another opportunity for technology is that it helps people who are funding and investing in the infrastructure of sports and fitness to be able to measure the impact of that investment. We have worked with the Football Foundation to that effect. There is a real opportunity to measure participation data much more accurately than we are doing right now through the harnessing of simple technology.

Right now there is a bit of a problem in the sport sector, where more people are moving away from affiliated sport into recreational sport. For those who are looking to measure the trends within sport, that is making it more difficult to do. Technology can play a role in being able to track the people using facilities or booking activities from a casual recreational basis, rather than how many people are affiliated to the FA, the RFU or England Hockey.

Listening to the evidence before, what Chris Todd was saying was really interesting. From our experience, making things more accessible does increase participation across the board. We have seen people from more disadvantaged backgrounds playing more sport as a result of access opening up, and that is something that we are happy to see. That just comes from the ability to make things more accessible.

A current limitation in the market is that the sports and fitness sector, for both the supplier and the sports, fitness and player side, is hugely fragmented. One of the challenges that everyone seems to be grappling with is how many different types of people and how many different types of activity we are talking about here. That fragmentation both presents an opportunity for technology to bring things under one roof and represents a huge challenge. Within the sport sector, we have seen massive underinvestment in technology, meaning that the opportunities are much harder to access.

There are some great projects trying to address that at the moment. There is an open data project being led by Sport England called OpenActive, which is trying to upgrade the underlying infrastructure of technology in the market and to make technology much more accessible.

What we have seen from the pandemic is, first, a huge consumer demand. We have seen people coming out of the respective lockdowns and coming back to sport in much greater numbers than before. People are no longer taking access to sport and fitness for granted. There have been many things that have happened during the pandemic, such as the Joe Wicks and other at-home fitness programmes, which have meant that people have found sports and fitness more accessible than ever. That has been a real positive that has come out of the pandemic.

Another positive that I have seen—I am a bit of an optimist—is that operators are now embracing change in a much greater, more enthusiastic way than they did before. There was an element of stagnation in the sector before, whereas, now, people have used the downtime of the lockdowns to really productive effect, embracing new technology and finding ways to upgrade their tech. We can take this time to reflect on how we can build back better. I hope that is one of the things that comes out of this inquiry; there is a real turning point in the industry at the moment, and I think there is a real opportunity to build back better.

Paul Foster: Thanks again for having me here. There are a couple of points that Jamie has made that I would absolutely concur with, including tech making it easier to book. There is an issue there: the Sport England study found that people find it twice as easy to order takeaway food online than they do to book a sport or fitness class. That is true. The question—Jamie's business is trying to solve this—is: where is the Just Eat for activity? It is not here yet.

Underinvestment is also an issue. There is only one start-up that I am aware of in the world that has raised more than \$40 million for promoting

mass participation activity, which is where we are—a company called Let's Do This—but there are more than 70 in the same space for marketing music. There is a lack of investment.

On open data, it is a long-running project. The problem, and the reason we do not have the Just Eat model just yet, is that, while Just Eat solved the problem for both the customer and the pizza shop, we have a clear customer problem today with accessing activity. It is not 100% clear to the activity providers what the incentive should be for them to join the OpenActive project, certainly for event companies such as ours. That is not to say we are closed to the idea, but it needs to have another injection of energy to push that project forward, I think.

In terms of the opportunities that the technology brings for activity, it is clear that social media has played a huge role over the past decade or so in enabling connections of events to people and allowing like-minded people to take part in programmes, with communities of participants. It used to be much harder to build those connections.

The barriers to staging events have also fallen, which has been driven by technology. Registration platforms, payment platforms, databases and digital marketing make it much more accessible to businesses to compete in an event space today. [*Inaudible.*—timing used to be the preserve of extremely big and well-funded races; it is now available to everybody.

As I was told by a colleague at a parkrun, you cannot make friends with a chip, and the limitation of technology is that you cannot replace all of that person-to-person interaction with technology. Parkrun could happily take more volunteers out of its network, but that would not achieve parkrun's aims of building communities. Those human aspects are really important in using technology to connect people and to deliver events, but retaining that human connection.

That is the pandemic problem. It has removed the human connection in recent months and over this past year. We launched a successful virtual programme, with 95,000 people taking part in our running events, covering 5.1 million miles. That reached a new audience, which is important, but it is now declining as the novelty wears off and people are seeking in-person activity again.

The key opportunities lie in using technology to create connections between the activity, the community and the participant.

The Chair: Thanks, Paul. You keep breaking up on us. I do not know where your microphone is, but could you try to keep close to it, please, as we would like to hear what you say?

Paul Foster: I will sit closer. I hope that is better.

The Chair: Thanks ever so much, Paul.

Dr Alex Fenton: Thank you, everybody, for the opportunity to talk. My experience draws upon the past five years of working with sports clubs

and foundations, trying to use technology to do what Paul suggested: building bridges between people and creating a sense of community. Because there is such a sense of community and social capital built up around sports clubs and fandom, that provides a real opportunity to use technology to join the dots and encourage healthier behaviours.

The FanFit project was set up as a way for sports clubs to work with universities to explore these types of technologies and perhaps fill in some of the challenges that sports clubs and foundations have, with a lack of time and expertise to roll out such projects, taking advantage of technologies such as smartphones. We produced a white-label, customisable smartphone app that would work with any sports clubs or foundations that wanted to work with us, building out from the goals of those foundations to try to get people more active, looking after mental health, attracting different groups and co-designing with the communities through a user-centred design approach and community champions to co-design those products to enable that.

We discovered that people are motivated in lots of different ways. We started off giving out season tickets for the people who did the most steps, and that worked quite effectively. The winners of those things came along and said, "We have lost loads of weight". We realised, however, that that was not so inclusive, so we moved to models with personal targets and private leagues, where people could set up leagues with fellow fans. If people maintain a certain level of steps, they are entered into a prize draw.

More recently, we have been thinking not just about physical activity but about mental wellness and partnering with organisations such as Mind to produce content, looking at the opportunities for people who have so many steps recorded to make donations to charities and so on.

It seems that fans are motivated in lots of different ways, whether it is competition, personal targets, private leagues or just not being seen to be dropping down a private league.

One of the opportunities we found through working with fans was that they told us about two things that they wanted out of it. First, they wanted more connection with the players. That comes back to Baroness Brady's earlier point about influencers. We launched a version of the app with two Rangers players, and 8,000 fans downloaded it straightaway, but the challenge then is how to get those influencers working with them on an ongoing basis. The fans really want more connection with the players.

A second point was that fans were asking for a chat function behind the private leagues, which we have built now. Again, that speaks to what Paul was saying about the ability for technologies to build that sense of community. A lot of football clubs have some fantastic physical programmes, such as Football Fans in Training. They are a finite length. The technology has an opportunity beyond those physical activity

programmes to keep those motivations going and build those digital communities, as Paul was saying earlier.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is a good start.

Q173 **Lord Moynihan:** I will preface my question by making some declarations of interest. I am a member of the stewards' enclosure at the Henley regatta, chairman-elect of Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools, a vice chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Esports, a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Rowing, a member of Vincent's Club, a member of the London Rowing Club and a member of Leander Club.

My question is on how we can use technology to make it easier to book and access sport and recreation opportunities. On the booking side, Jamie and Paul have already touched on that. I would be interested to know whether it is much more effective if it can be local and if it can identify costs, so there is a limit over which that app and that information would not go, linking public and private sector opportunities for local communities on the booking side.

However, the question I would really like to start with is on access, using technology to access. Within the past few weeks you will all have seen that the International Olympic Committee has launched the Olympic virtual series, which looks to connect the physical sporting world with virtual and simulation sports. It is already huge around the world, not least with tae-kwon-do, which is the global leader, with tens of millions of people affected by IT encouraging them to be active in their lifestyles. The Olympic virtual series covers a number of sports: cycling, rowing, sailing and softball, among others.

Can I have your opinion about where this is going to go? Do you think there is a big opportunity to link technology with an active lifestyle, especially among young people whom you would otherwise not necessarily be able to engage with, who start off with gaming, moving through gaming and the use of influencers to physical participation?

I am sorry to come to you first on this, Alex, but it looks like your speciality. It would be much appreciated if you could give us your views.

Dr Alex Fenton: Absolutely. There are some really interesting opportunities to connect the physical and digital. The portmanteau now is "phygital". We are starting to talk to organisations such as Football Fans in Training, looking at how the digital side fits with the great success that it has had around the physical training side of things.

There are opportunities for the technology itself to link with the physical environment. The Committee was talking earlier about gamification. In terms of augmented reality and object recognition, if we look at the success of things such as Pokémon GO, there are real opportunities to think about people's localities and spaces, whether that is a football stadium or a university campus, with the ability of technology to create those opportunities where people can get out there, scan codes and recognise objects that can then be used for gamification and so on.

Physical groups are incredibly important for support, co-design and personalisation—and for the support of people who might not be so confident with the technology or who might not have the technology. In a lot of the grant funds that we have applied for, that is a big element—the digital divide or the age divide—building in the idea of digital buddies or companions and building in a price for equipment. It is those physical groups where you can really start to get hold of the technology and make it work, coming out of those physical groups, too.

Paul Foster: Twenty years ago, the difference between a video game and a sport was a very clear thing. That is clearly converging, from spectating and watching esports through to devices such as Zwift, which uses a fixed bike to compete in a virtual environment. There are equivalents in running and so on, too.

There is a lot of opportunity and a lot of it has been advanced by the pandemic, with people staying indoors and having to resort to things such as Zwift at times. It is the combination of the technology and the community that makes these things thrive.

I am quite an old-fashioned sports fan, and I do not watch “Call of Duty” games. I hope that does not get included in the Olympic Games, but I think there is some inevitability about there being more and more digital aspects to competition. I think it is up to the traditional sports to innovate in order to meet that; otherwise, the technology sector will gain a hand on the sports side of life.

In terms of engaging young people and the next generation not just of sports fans but of sports participants, changing the continuum between video games, real life and elite sport, we need to be careful that the sport sector does not get left behind in that.

Jamie Foale: There is definitely a link between the technology that you describe and people participating, especially in getting young people more involved in sport. I do not think that we want to be too cute about it, in a way. We have to recognise that, sometimes, some trends and fads might come out and, while they might get people active for a short amount of time, that does not really help to build a habit for a lifetime.

It goes without saying that the areas that we really need to focus on include getting young people into sport in the first place, rather than letting them spend too much time on technology. I also think that there can be a real bridge between technology and sport, especially to help people play sport.

There is a real trend where slightly more advanced technology such as GPS tracking is being introduced to more amateur clubs and youth clubs. That really helps the young people to improve their game and to learn how to develop their game. There is a great trend there, which we should embrace and try to accelerate as much as possible, getting that to as many communities as possible. There is no doubt that gamification in sport can help people develop that habit of a lifetime, but let us not

forget that sport itself is a game, so you should encourage the playing of sport as much as possible.

Lord Moynihan: On the access point, do you think we are a long way from achieving a sensible use of IT to book facilities? Can you give us an example of a really good town or city in the country that has the best booking facility that you have come across? Do you use one? Do your family use one? Should it be sport specific, or should it just cover active opportunities in the community?

Jamie Foale: The booking of an activity or facility is where we specialise. The problem that we have in the UK is that the technology is far behind where it should be, and the investment in that technology has been pretty underwhelming over the past few years, although it is starting to pick up pace now, I think.

There is a move, which I mentioned, around open data, helping the booking systems and the operators of facilities to make their availability data more accessible, so that people can find and book facilities. There is no area in the UK that has perfect accessibility. Because there are so many different types of operators and different operators use different systems, one system might be accessible, but another system might be inaccessible and too antiquated to allow the publishing of online opportunities.

There is a long way to go there. Sport England recognises that, and I know that a lot of investment is going into that. That should be prioritised, because when you have so much inventory and availability data that is inaccessible, as we do now, that really stymies progress and innovation.

Lord Moynihan: The Lord Chairman has said that, 10 or 20 years ago, it was pretty much the same as it is now. In other words, you can go past playing fields or sports facilities that are not being used outside school hours. Do you think that this needs to be a priority for government, not only to access sport and recreational activities across the board but to be able to communicate them through IT, better apps and better communication programmes? Is this something where we are a long way behind?

Jamie Foale: Yes, we are still quite far behind, without a doubt. It is improving, and there is momentum at the moment. We are seeing a number of schools being opened up for online booking and access. There are some really good green shoots that we can see at the moment, but there is a long way to go, and we are quite far behind, especially compared with other sectors and industries.

One area that I feel fairly strongly about is the public funding that goes into supporting infrastructure and facilities around the country. That should come with the condition of having that opportunity made accessible, whereas, right now, most tenders go out and they do not have that condition attached. Even though Sport England loosely

recommends that, people do not really put that in tenders. That really should change.

The Chair: Jamie, would it help if that was a requirement in getting a grant from Sport England?

Jamie Foale: Yes, I really think so. I wrote in my evidence about what I see as a kind of transaction in that respect. I think that funding should come with the condition of making the opportunities more accessible through good digital technology. What should come back to Sport England and other organisations that fund, such as the Football Foundation and other governing bodies, is that participation data. There is nothing better at tracking participation than being able to see who is booking and who their teammates are. That is what the opportunity in digital can provide. If there can be a move towards making the opportunities more accessible online and then getting, in return, the participation data that comes from that, we could be looking at a huge step change in how we understand participation in the country.

Lord Moynihan: I would put the same question to both Paul and Alex, picking up on your point, Lord Chairman. Should we not also be looking at planning law? In other words, the details when it comes to planning applications for a large housing estate normally come with some recreational activities, but should accessibility not be built into the planning requirements, too? That is something that Lord Addington has pushed for strongly, not least in the Environment Bill and elsewhere. Do Paul and Alex feel that we have sufficient accessibility or sufficient access to sport and recreation and active lifestyle facilities in the UK, or do you think we are behind?

Paul Foster: I think it is clear that we are behind. That is demonstrable, certainly from the customer side. You asked whether there are any good or bad areas. We are active in the north-east and across the country, and I do not believe there are any particular shining lights here.

I agree that grant funding should come with obligations to make data accessible. I think there are issues with persuading operators to share their participation data, which they would view as a competitive advantage. The incentive for doing so needs to be carefully explained and carefully communicated to the organisations. It is clear that there is an issue on accessibility, and the solution to that is to share more data. I worry about the incentives and about the motivation for certain partners in the space to do that.

Dr Alex Fenton: More facilities and more opportunities for people to get involved with more healthy sport activities would be great, but there is more work to be done around health messaging, too, carefully evaluating the audience and the motivators and finding out how best to reach those people, whether it is by TikTok or Instagram. What are the correct channels for content and data? Essentially, we need to connect up those people with the facilities that we have.

I agree with Paul about grant funding opportunities. There is real consideration around types of grant funds that would enable that to happen, but in a sustainable fashion. There are grant funds such as knowledge transfer partnerships, which are hugely successful at wealth generation, but in the other space it is incredibly competitive to get even small grant funds. That is the kind of short-term project that does not always have that sustainability with it. More schemes and the ability for universities, industry, sports clubs and others to work together would be welcome.

Lord Moynihan: TikTok has been critical in this area and a really important part of delivering what you have just been talking about, has it not?

Dr Alex Fenton: Absolutely. It has become known as an education platform. Certainly, both my children consider it that way.

Q174 **Lord Hayward:** I will follow on from the questions that Lord Moynihan has just asked. Essentially, what has concerned me throughout this inquiry is that we have a whole block of the population within one community or another who are not involved in physical activity at all. We are not reaching them and we are not making changes to achieve that.

So far this afternoon, nobody has actually said "Doing this has extended the reach of physical activity into this community, this age group or whatever" or cited specific examples. That is what I would like to hear in answer to the question: what are the key elements that need to be considered, both positive and negative, when developing an online or virtual physical activity offer?

Dr Alex Fenton: I point to the example of football fans and training as a really successful example of reaching hard-to-reach groups through sports and fandom. That has been a hugely successful scheme to get fans fitter, certainly in those hard-to-reach groups of men and women, including older men and women.

There are opportunities for technology to extend that and to increase those 12-week activity programmes. What they found was that people have become really motivated and have lost lots of weight, but keeping the motivation going was a real challenge. For me, that is where the technology can come in, so we can carefully design that experience and that user journey, as I said before, using technology to keep that going. The data that comes along with that will be hugely useful, too. I hope that answers your question.

Lord Hayward: Thank you.

Paul Foster: Our whole marketing presence and our whole outreach is based on physical events that we have spent 40 years developing. One of our traditional problems has been that, at the end of the event, we lose contact with the participant for six months or so until it is time to register again.

One thing we would like to work on going forward is taking the virtual events that we have had and tagging them on to the end of the real-life event as a way to maintain our connection with the participant.

Again, I come back to the interface between the virtual, technological solution and the real-world solution, maintaining a relationship with the participant beyond the end of the event to keep them engaged in the sport and with ourselves. That is an area that we will be looking at as soon as we are allowed to get back to real events.

Jamie Foale: We have started looking at where people are from, from the index of multiple deprivation, and we have started tracking that to see what the trend is of implementing our service and making the facilities more accessible to be booked by people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. We have done this with a national study and a local study.

The national study was with GLL, a national operator that we work with, and the local study was in Camden.¹ Since 2018, we saw an improvement of 24% in the index of multiple deprivation score. More people from disadvantaged backgrounds were booking the facilities as the years went on. That was not through any specific marketing campaign—I wish we could take credit for that—or a pricing campaign and reducing the price, as those are all set by the local authority; it was just by nature of making the facilities more accessible and easier to find. That shows that technology does not attract just the white middle-class population; it goes a long way to increasing accessibility to people from all backgrounds. That shows the value of it, I think.

Lord Hayward: Could I follow that up, Lord Chairman, and ask Jamie to respond first? What is the good practice when it comes to combining an online offer, including app-based activities and virtual events, with offline opportunities? How do you combine the two and transfer online into physical activity?

Jamie Foale: We were not that active during the lockdowns in providing online activities, but I know anecdotally from others in our sector that those who did have been able to attract people to digital, online classes during the pandemic and then convert them to joining in-person classes now that people have been able to attend them in person.

There is a kind of funnel that you can generate from getting people online, which, for some people—not everyone—is easier to do, to getting them in person.

To take another example that I would cite, we have worked with YouTube influencers, the most famous of whom is probably KSI. We have generated more than 250 million hits on YouTube app facilities that we operate. All of those facilities that the YouTubers operated and created

¹ Note by witness: GLL stands for Greenwich Leisure Limited, otherwise known as Better Leisure.

videos for saw a huge uptick in bookings and in people visiting and playing in events. Those YouTubers are generally known for gaming videos, which most people find it quite hard to get value from, but they do generate huge amounts of interest from young people.

The fact that these people also transition to playing sport for real has led to a good transition, with their users also getting interested in sport off the back of that.

The Chair: Jamie, do you have any evidence to support that? Is there any data that the Committee could receive?

Jamie Foale: Yes. I can show you the effect of the videos that were put on compared with the subsequent impact on bookings at those venues.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Sorry, Lord Hayward.

Lord Hayward: That is precisely the sort of question I wanted answered, Lord Chairman, so thank you for intervening with it. I now move on to Alex.

Dr Alex Fenton: For me, a good evidence source would be the recent book, *Football as Medicine*, which covers a number of different cases of where fandom and sports clubs have been used to motivate people to adopt healthier behaviours.² There was a case study from FanFit, and there were cases involving clubs such as Forest Green moving towards healthier eating and so on. There is a great statement in the conclusion of the book, saying that, when football clubs talk, people listen. There is a real opportunity to tap into that fandom, the brands and the social capital that exist within some fan communities, trying to utilise that to promote healthier behaviours, lifestyles and so on. There is a lot of evidence in that book.

A lot has been published not just on the FanFit project but on things such as Football Fans in Training, with a range of different experiments that demonstrate the success of that physical activity programme aligned with football clubs.³

Lord Hayward: Following up on the Lord Chairman's earlier question, on the examples you are citing, if you could write in and provide the detail, that would be very helpful. Paul, in conclusion on my section.

Paul Foster: In terms of best practice, it is early days in the virtual sector, but in the summer we were able to align very strong activation and the novel rewards of merchandise. Aligning that narrative and identity of our brand with our existing communications networks, we were able to reach a wider audience than we had done in the past, and we were encouraged by that.

² Note by witness: Peter Krustup and Daniel Parnell, *Football as Medicine: Prescribing Football for Global Health Promotion* (Routledge, 11 December 2019)

³ Note by witness: Football Fans in Training Outcome Study: <https://ffit.org.uk/>

A third of our participants were new to Great Run and to virtual events. Interestingly, we reached a very different audience when the virtual event participation was running at 61% female, which is much higher than what we normally see, with 48:52 male in normal events. It is hard to say exactly why that is the case. We have asked some questions. I would not say that we had any firm data on that, but it is very clear that the virtual events sector is reaching a different audience of runners. It is therefore something to be seen to run in parallel with the real events.

Q175 Lord Addington: What impact do you think the digital divide is having on innovation and participation in sport and recreation? In this, I would really like people to have a think about how, in education, we discovered that many families are dependent on one smartphone for several children, and so on. How are those groups being helped by this? What can you do? Can you not do anything?

Dr Alex Fenton: I mentioned that, in the projects that I have been involved with, the digital divide is always a key question in order to get the grant funding. To counteract that effect, we purchased equipment, including basic Android handsets for about £50 or £60 and some basic wristbands, but building in that concept not just of user-centred design but of community-led development and digital buddies, for example. There is lots of potential there to bridge that wealth divide and poverty divide. The physical events are critical for that. Through the grant funds, we can purchase additional equipment, but it is challenging, with the internet connections and so on that are needed. That is a key challenge. There is a kind of support and educational aspect of that divide, and an equipment and connectivity divide.

In the studies that we have done, the vast majority of our fans had a basic Android or iPhone that would run the kind of project that we are suggesting, which is why the project worked as a baseline, with a very basic Android phone as a starting point. That is one way to counteract that. Clearly, there is still a missing link in terms of the education and wealth aspect.

Lord Addington: In effect, you are saying that if you are within the tent, or even close to the door, you can do something, but there are certain groups that you just cannot touch.

Dr Alex Fenton: Yes, I would agree with that. Surveys and other things we have done showed that 98% of fans have an Android or an iPhone, but, of course, the survey is digital, so we would not be able to capture the other people in the first place.

We have talked about hard-to-reach groups and Football Fans in Training, with people in their 50s, but the really hard ones to reach are those who do not have an internet connection and so on. That is a big challenge, and it is something that we are trying to counteract, but the physical events and the idea of buddies and a buddy system provide one of those ways. It is incredibly challenging.

Lord Addington: Paul, it seems that we have a group who will be very difficult to reach, but let us go to the lower-hanging fruit: do you think that your physical events are a way through for people with bad connection? How would you approach that, and what examples do you have of that—*[Inaudible.]*

Paul Foster: Sorry: I lost the end of your question there. Could you repeat it?

Lord Addington: How would you use your physical events and that connection to engage people more with the structure here? If you do not have an internet connection, you cannot do anything on the internet. How would you bring that forward and encourage those groups that are not totally excluded at the moment?

Paul Foster: We tend to retain quite a lot of analogue elements to our offer. We have volunteering networks, which bring people alongside the event, and these are all community led. We have a lot of on-the-ground connections into running clubs and into communities, engaging with running alongside the clubs. We send printed information for our events, and we still take phone calls and so on. There is an element of making sure that you are available in an analogue world alongside being in a purely digital world. One of the dangers is in being fully absorbed in a technical solution that cannot be accessed, and therefore retaining the physical element in the customer journey and so on is really important.

Lord Addington: It will be interesting to hear your input, Jamie. How would you counter this idea that you are trying to get to groups of people who simply are not playing your game? Do you have anything to offer? How would you support them?

Jamie Foale: First, as I have just said, it is important to be able to make whatever you are providing and whatever opportunity accessible via telephone, for example. As well as our online booking platform, we provide telephone support, so that anyone can make a booking over the telephone. We are able to do that because the digital infrastructure that we have in place with our clients means that we can access those facilities but still take the booking manually. That has helped in putting on campaigns that help to access harder-to-reach communities.

We worked closely with StreetGames on its fit and fed programmes, which provide kids with somewhere to go and play a game of football and then get lunch during the summer holiday to combat “holiday hunger”, as it is called. We are able to do that because of our network of operators that has been built up through digital integrations. By using that technology, we are able to help people from backgrounds where they might not have better access otherwise.

Lord Addington: So, you are saying that in effect you are operators: they are being connected by phone, and they then do the internet connection. They are the interface with the system.

Jamie Foale: We will connect with them to place the booking; we will then take the booking over the phone from whoever it is who—

Lord Addington: That is what I mean. So, you phone up somebody who then goes to internet technology.

Jamie Foale: Yes—exactly.

Lord Addington: They provide it and they then relay it back to them.

Jamie Foale: Yes, exactly.

Lord Addington: So, you need that; that is an essential part of your offer, you would say.

Jamie Foale: An underlying infrastructure is needed to be able to facilitate bookings through third parties such as us. That does not mean that our offer is digital only. We have this manual offer that you can make a booking over the phone. However, our offer is enabled through digital innovation. That underlying infrastructure enables people who do not have access through digital.

Lord Addington: Do I get basic agreement on that from the other two participants? You definitely need the guy at the end of the phone. Is that a yes from both of you?

Paul Foster: If all the elements of the customer journey—the awareness, consideration and purchase—are digital, that will only grow the digital divide. You need to provide real-world interfaces in there; otherwise, you will just fuel the divide, rather than close it.

Lord Addington: Alex can have the last word.

Dr Alex Fenton: From my experience of working with sports clubs' charity foundations, part of their mission is to try to reach people, whether they are connected or not. So I suppose that is one way in which we can try to reach people, working with those charity foundations. Fans will gravitate towards their favourite sports club and therefore its charity foundation. We can leverage that through existing networks and the community groups that are set up, and so on. Ultimately, our offer is digital, but it tries to bridge that gap through working with charity foundations.

The Chair: That reminds me, Lady Morris and Lord Knight, of 10 years ago, when we were wrestling with this issue with the e-Learning Foundation.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: Yes.

The Chair: There were exactly the same arguments then. Perhaps there is a need to look beyond sport and recreation and to look at the whole of society in terms of the digital connect, and at how important it is now, if we are not going to disadvantage people, to look on a bigger scale, making sure that everybody has digital access. How we do that is

fundamental not just to this but to other programmes. With that little lecture, I will move on to you, Lady Morris.

Q176 **Baroness Morris of Yardley:** You are right: it is the same people who miss out in both spheres; they are not different people who are without digital access.

Thanks ever so much for that. It has been a fascinating session, and you have given us a lot of really practical examples, which really helps us in our recommendations.

The last question is: which one recommendation would you like to make sure that we have in our report, bearing in mind that our report goes to the Government?

I will start with you, Paul, if that is okay—and that was not because you were looking away from your camera, honestly; you just caught my eye at that point.

Paul Foster: It is a thorny issue, and finding one single recommendation is incredibly difficult, but I would say, based on what I think some of the other recommendations that might come forward are, that maintaining a physical relationship throughout the digital chain is exceptionally important for engagement in physical activity. Most people who have been engaged in sport know that sport works better in a team—even individual sports where you have a coach and people you compete with and train with regularly. Therefore, you cannot isolate yourselves entirely. Maintaining a strong physical relationship through all aspects of the chain for the consumer and the participant is really important. Not to disappear down a completely digital hole is my concluding thought on this.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: You are saying that, even if everybody had digital access, something would still be lost if there was not that physical presence.

Paul Foster: Absolutely. Technology cannot solve all the problems here. As I said right at the beginning, you cannot make friends with a chip. It is about the relationships. Anybody who has been involved with sport knows that: it is about the relationships you form along the way, which engage others in that sport.

Jamie Foale: I think I touched on this earlier. Sport and fitness is a fairly unique industry, with so much public funding that goes into supporting it. From what I understand, that is due to increase quite significantly, and there is a really positive trend of increased investment into the underlying infrastructure of facilities and activity operators.

Where the industry is right now in terms of technology is so far behind others, and I think that is stymying progress. I think there should be some sort of a transaction. This has already been loosely defined by Sport England, where public funding comes with the condition of having the data open and bookable. If that enables innovators who work with a whole range of different services that target different demographics, I

think that will result in much greater access to sports and fitness and much greater participation. That, in turn, will allow us to understand public participation in much better detail than we do right now.

That would be my key recommendation: public funding should come with the condition of making the data open and bookable.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: Does that need even more public funding to make sure that all the organisations in receipt of grants are able to do that, or do you think that is not a great cost for them?

Jamie Foale: There is a centralised body called OpenActive, which is driving that change at the moment. It is enabling the systems that operate these facilities and activities to make their data open and accessible. Only a relatively modest amount of stimulus funding is needed to get these systems to upgrade.

As with all development road maps, it is always a matter of prioritisation. Finding that catalyst to getting more accessible data is the name of the game at the moment. That could come, first, from that being put into tender requirements and, secondly, through enabling OpenActive to make that change.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: That is helpful, thank you. Alex?

Dr Alex Fenton: I would like to see more strategic support to allow public bodies, universities, sports clubs and foundations to work together to solve some of these health challenges. There is major potential. Universities recognise that they need to be doing more practical and impact research, but I think there should be more strategic opportunity to allow that to happen. We have heard some great examples and evidence of where that has happened in some best practice, which could potentially be scaled up.

As a researcher myself, I would say that it is challenging to find those opportunities and to allow that to happen. Equally, smart initiatives could allow those things to be sustainable, empowering communities to continue that good work and allowing that practice to be joined up. Any good practice that is provided and the data that is created could be scaled up to the next level.

The message from me would be to have more strategic support for universities, sports clubs and industry to work together to solve some of the health challenges that we have.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: Can I just be clear about that? Is the problem the financial incentive to do that, or is it the logistics of finding a relationship in the first place?

Dr Alex Fenton: It is both of those things. There is a real challenge within sports clubs and foundations in terms of time, funding, expertise and so on, which can be quite limited. In terms of university researchers, there needs to be time to buy out people so that they are able to work on

these projects. We could create fantastic case studies, journal papers and teaching materials, too. More opportunities to allow that to happen would be very welcome.

The Chair: It seems to me, Alex, that we are perhaps looking at universities, schools and colleges in a different way. We said earlier that it is fundamental to make internet access far broader in order to lessen the digital divide, but exactly the same thing is happening with facilities; 70% of all sports and recreational facilities are in the hands of schools, principally, universities and colleges. Should their funding also be tied into making sure that these offers are there and available? They have been provided by public funds, by and large.

Dr Alex Fenton: Definitely. There is an opportunity there to join the dots, and digital could help. We are currently working with our own sports centre on producing digital content, which could be put through smartphone apps, and we are thinking about physical activity, well-being and so forth. Absolutely, there is a piece of work to join up those activities and to get more bang for the buck.

The Chair: On that note, I will bring the session to a close. I thank our three witnesses. Thanks for a very interesting session this afternoon, which we have thoroughly enjoyed.

As I said to the previous group, there will be a transcript of the meeting, which will be published on the website. Before that happens, you will get an opportunity to correct anything you might have said—just to make sure you get your grants for the future. Thank you very much indeed.

On that note, I thank Committee Members for their questions this afternoon. Thank you all. I declare this session finished.