

House of Commons

Women and Equalities Committee

---

# **Health barriers for girls and women in sport: Government and Sport England responses to the Committee's Third Report**

---

**Fourth Special Report of Session 2023–24**

*Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 15 May 2024*

**HC 751**

Published on 17 May 2024

by authority of the House of Commons

## **Women and Equalities Committee**

The Women and Equalities Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

### **Current membership**

Caroline Nokes MP (*Conservative, Romsey and Southampton North*) (Chair)

Dr Lisa Cameron MP (*Conservative, East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow*)

Elliot Colburn MP (*Conservative, Carshalton and Wallington*)

Dame Caroline Dinenage MP (*Conservative, Gosport*)

Jackie Doyle-Price MP (*Conservative, Thurrock*)

Carolyn Harris MP (*Labour, Swansea East*)

Kim Johnson MP (*Labour, Liverpool, Riverside*)

Lia Nici MP (*Conservative, Great Grimsby*)

Kate Osborne MP (*Labour, Jarrow*)

Kirsten Oswald MP (*Scottish National Party, East Renfrewshire*)

Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP (*Labour, Streatham*)

## **Powers**

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

## **Publication**

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2023. This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament Licence, which is published at [www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright-parliament](http://www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright-parliament).

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at [www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities](http://www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities) and in print by Order of the House.

## **Committee staff**

The current staff of the Committee are Lizzie Arnold (Senior Media and Communications Officer), James Clarke (Committee Specialist), Chloë Cockett (Senior Committee Specialist), Mark Earl (Safeguarding and Witness Support Officer), Matthew Eaton (Committee Specialist), Michelle Garratty (Committee Operations Manager), Roberta Guerrina (Parliamentary Academic Fellow), Phil Jones (Clerk), Jack Smith (Committee Operations Officer), Charlotte Swift (Second Clerk) and Hennie Ward (Media and Communications Officer)

## **Contacts**

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Women and Equalities Committee,

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 0207 219 4452; the Committee's email address is [womeqcom@parliament.uk](mailto:womeqcom@parliament.uk).

You can follow the Committee on X (formerly Twitter) using [@Commonswomequ](https://twitter.com/Commonswomequ).

## **Contents**

---

<b>Fourth Special Report</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Government Response</b>	<b>3</b>
Introduction	3
Barriers to girls' participation	4
Relationships, Sex and Health Education	4
Physical Education and the curriculum	5
Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Early Career Framework (ECF)	5
Midlife and menopause	9
Sports and exercise research	10
Coaching	12
Pregnancy and maternity	15
Conclusion	16
<b>Appendix 2: Sport England Response on Swim England</b>	<b>17</b>
Steps taken to oversee the situation	17

Sport England's assessment of Swim	
England's response	18
Annex 1: 2023–2024 Award Conditions	18
Annex 2: 2024–2025 Award Conditions	19

## **Fourth Special Report**

---

The Committee published its Third Report of Session 2023–24, Health barriers for women and girls in sport (HC 130) on 5 March 2024. The Government response was received on 3 May, and the Sport England response was received on the 29 April. Both are appended below.

## **Appendix 1: Government Response**

---

### **Introduction**

The Government welcomes the Women and Equalities Select Committee report on health barriers for girls and women in sport. We recognise the need for more awareness and understanding of the health and physiological needs of women and girls across sport. The Government is committed to supporting women's sport, health and physical activity at every opportunity including pushing for greater participation.



## 4

The Women and Equalities Select Committee report covers some of the same areas as the Government commissioned Independent Review of Women's Football which Government accepted and is taking action on those areas it is responsible for. Recommendations that are particularly relevant to women and girls participation include delivering on commitments around equal access to school sport for girls, increasing investment in order to accommodate meaningful access for women and girls, and ensuring women and girls are benefiting from funding flowing into facilities across the pyramid. Government is taking action to address this with unprecedented levels of facilities investment, most recently with the £30 million Lionesses Futures Fund focused on supporting more opportunities for women and girls. We have also committed to over £600m investment across the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years for the PE and Sport Premium—a funding commitment to

improve the quality of PE and sports in primary schools to help all children benefit from regular physical activity.

The report also aligns with the objectives detailed in the Government's sport strategy, Get Active, which sets out the importance of sport and physical activity for all. Get Active highlights our ambition to make the nation more active and our expectation for the sector to be working to overcome the barriers for individuals and to focus on those most in need. It includes bold national participation targets of an additional 2.5 million adults, 1.25 million women and 1 million children active by 2030. At its heart is a new National Physical Activity Taskforce which brings the Government and the sector together to drive the strategy forward and track progress on these goals.

We recognise that there are various obstacles which still exist that prevent women and other under-represented groups from taking part in

sport and wider physical activity including fear of judgement, lacking confidence, and not having enough time. Therefore, we accept most of the report recommendations. We will continue to work with the sector to remove the barriers that prevent women and girls from being active and continue to give women and girls a voice on what they want. What matters is that women and girls are getting active in a way that suits them, making them more likely to continue being active in future.

### **Barriers to girls' participation**

Recommendation 1: ***The Department for Education must urgently review the quality and timeliness of education on girls' health and physiology, including the effects of puberty, the menstrual cycle, and periods in the context of PE and school sport. Whether part of PE or PSHE, or ideally both, this education needs to be delivered more effectively and much earlier. Teachers***

***need to be better trained to deliver it, including around how to have effective conversations with girls and support them during this significant life stage. Education on reproductive health is a positive, not a barrier to overcome. Our recommendations reflect what girls are asking for and are straightforward to implement. The DfE must make clear to all schools that not delivering education on the menstrual cycle is unacceptable and set out in response to this Report the steps it will take to ensure 100% compliance with the current requirements, with a clear timeframe to achieve this. We further recommend the DfE supports pilots of new approaches, such as the enhanced, four-week lesson plan being developed by Swansea University, and commits to rolling out an improved offer across all primary and secondary schools within the next 12 months. (Paragraph 34)***

## ***Relationships, Sex and Health Education***

The Government partially accepts the recommendation as menstruation is taught as part of the statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum.

The Health Education curriculum in England became compulsory for all state-funded schools from September 2020. It includes teaching both girls and boys key facts about the menstrual cycle, menstrual products, and the implications for emotional and physical health. Statutory guidance requires schools to provide adequate support for girls in managing periods, including access to period products. The Department for Education has also issued non-statutory implementation guidance titled 'Plan your Relationships, Sex and Health Education Curriculum' (RSHE), alongside teacher training materials and case studies from lead teaching schools. The Department for Education is currently reviewing the RSHE statutory guidance

and will release updated guidance as soon as possible which will include updated health education guidance.

Ofsted's school inspection framework has an emphasis on ensuring schools provide a broad and balanced curriculum and Ofsted is tasked with assessing a school's support for a pupil's development. Inspectors will also discuss with schools whether they are teaching RSHE in line with the statutory guidance.

Along with the teaching of menstruation through Biology in secondary schools, as mentioned in the report, there is an opportunity for students to learn about it in primary school. Specifically, in Year 5 pupils should be taught to describe the changes as humans develop to old age, under the topic 'animals, including humans'. It is written in the non-statutory guidance that within this topic students should learn about the changes

experienced in puberty. However, teachers have flexibility in how they approach teaching this subject based on their classroom context.

Alongside the teaching of menstruation in the curriculum, the Period Product Scheme is available for schools to order a wide range of free period products for their pupils, including sustainable options such as period underwear. The Department for Education's guidance to schools provides information on how schools can use the scheme to help tackle any stigma around menstruation. 99% of secondary schools, and 75% of primary schools have used the scheme since it began in 2020.

### ***Physical Education and the curriculum***

The Physical Education (PE) curriculum is focused on children and young people being physically active and is designed to ensure that all pupils develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities, are physically active for sustained periods of time and lead

healthy and active lives. Schools are free to organise and deliver a diverse and challenging PE curriculum that suits the needs of all their pupils.

The Department for Education does acknowledge that menstruation is cited as a barrier to participation in PE. Research from Women in Sport in 2022 found that around 7 in 10 girls regularly or sometimes avoided being active when on their period. Pain was the most common reason for not being active with 73% of responses reporting this, 62% reported it was because of fear of leakage, 52% because of tiredness and 45% reported because they were self-conscious. Similar results were found in research conducted by the Youth Sport Trust—Girls Active National report 2023. When asked what worries them about participating in PE or school sport when they have their period, girls were most likely to say “I am in pain/



uncomfortable (68%)”, “I worry about leaking (60%)”, or “My mood is low (57%)”. 9% said that they “weren’t concerned by any of these issues”.

The Department for Education recently published non-statutory PE and sport guidance on 23 March 2024. The guidance supports schools in reviewing how to deliver a minimum two hours of PE per week during curriculum time, and equality of access to PE and extra-curricular school sport and competition for all pupils, where wanted. Schools are free to draw on high-quality resources based on the needs of their pupils, for example, the guidance includes links to free resources from the Studio You and Bodyform partnership which was created to help teenage girls overcome the barriers that stop them getting active and feel comfortable exercising on their period.

The Department for Education has no current plans to change the national curriculum for PE. However, following the guidance we will conduct

further work to review PE delivery to develop our understanding of how the PE national curriculum is being delivered and how it supports equal access and increased physical activity. This will include a call for evidence focused on how the PE national curriculum is being implemented and how it supports pupils to be more active including in key stage 4.

### ***Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Early Career Framework (ECF)***

The initial training for teachers comprises two main components: the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework. These were merged in 2023 to form the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF), effective from September 2025. The ITTECF is comprehensive and applies universally across phases and subjects, though it does not include subject-specific content. Accredited Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers must integrate the

ITTECF's minimum training entitlement into their curriculum for courses leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). However, Early Career Teachers (ECTs) will receive enhanced subject-specific training tailored to their needs and contexts from ITTECF-based training providers. Beyond initial training and induction, decisions regarding professional development are deemed best managed by schools, headteachers, and teachers themselves, who are most capable of determining their own requirements.

In addition to the core funding schools receive to deliver their curriculum and for facilities, all schools with primary aged pupils receive the PE and Sport Premium. In March 2023, the Department announced over £600 million across the academic years 2023/24 and 2024/25 for the primary PE and sport premium.

The PE and sport premium grant can be utilised by all eligible primary schools to fund continuing professional development. Schools should see

the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers as a key priority to make sure that the future quality of the teaching of PE, sport and physical activity is sustainable.

**Recommendation 2: *The evidence on girls' anxieties around PE kit is overwhelming. We recommend the Department for Education and National Physical Activity Taskforce review guidance for schools on school PE kit, with the aim of ensuring all schools permit the widest possible choice for girls. That guidance should include advice to schools on use of sports bras by girls taking part in PE and school sports.*** (Paragraph 35)

The Government accepts this recommendation.

The Department for Education recognises the importance of ensuring schools offer the widest possible choice of PE kit to girls to promote their participation in sport and PE. School governing boards are responsible for deciding whether to have a school uniform and what it should

be—including any clothing needed for PE. To support schools in developing and implementing their school uniform policy, the Department for Education has already issued Non Statutory Guidance regarding school uniform and recommends that schools proactively engage with parents and pupils when designing their uniform policies. The guidance advises schools to select PE kit which is practical, comfortable, and appropriate to the activity involved.

The Department for Education is committed to continually reviewing the guidance issued to schools for the development of their school uniform and PE kit policy.

Whilst not directly relevant to PE kit, it is important to note wider changes happening in this space. For example, the UK Sports Institute (a wholly owned subsidiary of UK Sport) have been working closely with research partners and commercial suppliers over the past four years to provide athletes with education and access

to correctly fitting sports bras. This culminated in over 100 athletes from 15 different sports being provided with bespoke bras for the Tokyo Games. During the Paris cycle, UKSI partnered with Panache to continue this work and have worked with around 50 athletes from six sports so far. As part of the Paris cycle, UKSI have also worked with 11 sports and approximately 150 female athletes on apparel development. Work in this space explores the fit, feel and form of female training and competition kit, collating both qualitative and quantitative data on how it performs and is perceived. The collaboration with the athletes enables them to take ownership of kit selection, making informed decisions.

Recommendation 3: ***We recommend Sport England launch a new strand of the “This Girl Can” campaign aimed at parents, tackling early years gender stereotypes around physical activity and sport. This should include a specific focus on the***

***positive role fathers can play in encouraging girls in sport and exercise. Sport England should also work with the Department for Education to roll out the “Studio You” platform across all secondary schools, with the aim of reaching all girls meeting the Government’s definition of inactive in Key Stages 3 and 4. The DfE should further update its School Sport and Physical Activity Action Plan to include measurable targets for closing the “enjoyment gap” in PE between boys and girls. (Paragraph 36)***

The Government partially accepts this recommendation.

This Girl Can tackles the emotional barriers faced by women and girls between 14 and 60. This age bracket is the focus of the insight, creative and activation of the campaign. There is evidence to show that children (both boys and girls) of active mothers are more likely to be active in childhood and beyond. This has

been built into the campaign messaging, with some women finding it easier to get active for altruistic rather than personal reasons. However, This Girl Can still wants to encourage women to prioritise their own needs, rather than getting active being something women do for their family. Anecdotally, we know that This Girl Can has been used in primary schools to discuss stereotypes and encourage mothers and fathers to help their daughters get active and recognise the barriers they face. However, tackling early years stereotypes was not an original objective of the This Girl Can campaign and therefore there is no impact evaluation available to support this.

Studio You which was launched by Sport England in 2021 and has seen registrations from over 50% of secondary schools in England—1,996 out of 3,444. The platform is estimated to have reached over 150,000 secondary school-aged girls. The online platform is a library of non-competitive and



non-traditional activities designed to give 11 to 16 year old girls a more positive experience of PE. The platform is free for all schools and PE teachers in England. Studio You features classes in activities such as yoga, boxing, Pilates, and dance. Sport England is content to work with DfE to support more schools to utilise Studio You.

In July 2023, the Department for Education published an update to the cross-Government School Sport and Activity Action Plan (SSAAP). The action plan covers academic years 2023/24 and 2024/25. The action plan update has been developed alongside the Government's sport strategy Get Active. The strategy sets an ambition that children should meet the UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines that all children and young people should take part in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes every day. Children with special educational needs and disabilities should take

part in a minimum of 20 minutes of daily activity. With a target of getting 1 million more children active by 2030.

There are no current plans to update the School Sport and Activity Action Plan (SSAAP), therefore DfE does not accept this part of the recommendation. The Government is, however, committed to ensuring that all pupils have equal access to PE and sport and recognise that enjoyment is a key driver of participation. The Government is supporting schools through new, non-statutory guidance which was published in March 2024. The non-statutory guidance exemplifies practice from primary, secondary, special, and alternative provision settings to embed PE and school sport into the school ethos and culture. It also demonstrates school approaches to timetabling at least 2 hours of curriculum PE, school approaches to ensuring a high level of uptake in extracurricular sport and physical activity as well as delivering equal opportunity to access PE and extracurricular

sport programmes. The guidance references the “enjoyment gap” which is pronounced in key stage 4 and supports schools to deliver engaging and high-quality PE to girls and boys across all four key stages.

The Department for Education has invested in the addition of equality criteria for the School Games Mark, which is delivered by the Youth Sport Trust, where schools will be encouraged and recognised for providing equal access for girls. From September 2023, schools must demonstrate how they are overcoming gender barriers faced by girls and boys in PE and wider school sport as part of their planning and delivery.

The Department for Education committed in March 2023 to fund over £600 million across the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years for the PE and Sport Premium. The PE and Sport Premium

is a funding commitment to improve the quality of PE and sports in primary schools to help all children benefit from regular physical activity.

The Department for Education has also committed to fund up to £57 million to deliver phase three of the Opening School Facilities programme. This programme allows schools to open their sport facilities outside of the core school hours. The programme targets schools in lower socio-economic areas to improve access to sport for the children and the wider community. The intention is for this to increase access for children with low participation levels.

Furthermore, physical activity in early years was a headline topic at the National Physical Activity Taskforce (NPAT) in March 2024.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) presented a paper to the group on the importance of the Government meeting its shared health ambition in line with the UK Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidelines

for children under five years old. The NPAT will continue to work collaboratively with DHSC to seek opportunities for alignment on policy development.

**Recommendation 4: *Given the very distinctive issues for girls, and to ensure their needs are not overlooked, we recommend the Minister for Women and Equality Hub officials attend the National Physical Activity Taskforce, alongside organisations with data and expertise in this area, including Youth Sport Trust and The Well HQ. The Taskforce must consider as a priority the best available evidence, including from the Youth Sport Trust’s “Girls Active” survey series, on which to base interventions designed to address girls’ health and physiology-related barriers.*** (Paragraph 37)

The Government accepts this recommendation.

The National Physical Activity Taskforce (NPAT) meets quarterly and has held three productive

meetings since its launch in September 2023. The next NPAT meeting is scheduled for June 2024. To make the ambitions of the Government's sport strategy Get Active a reality requires long term behavioural change and that is why we have set our targets to 2030.

The NPAT uses the Sport England Active Live Survey, and the Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, to map trends, targets and trajectories for the taskforce. These two surveys provide extensive data and insights into activity levels and behaviours. The NPAT commissions short term-actions to members and sets milestones that can be measured to supplement our national level 2030 targets. The analysis sub group reports into the NPAT to track progress on the delivery of the goals and metrics set out in the Government's sport strategy Get Active and provides joined up Government analysis.

The Youth Sport Trust is a rotating member of the NPAT in their capacity as a member of the

National Sector Partnerships Group (NSPG). The Youth Sport Trust has attended two NPAT meetings to date, Ministerial roundtable discussions, and also contributed to the analysis sub group, providing data and evidence on the barriers to participation for children and young people, to further inform the NPAT.

Furthermore, the Review of Women's Football, published in July 2023, highlighted the lack of active, formalised cross-sport sharing of best practices and innovation around issues that impact elite female athletes across the sports industry. The Review recommended that Government convene a Board of Women's Sport to look at some of the prevalent issues facing women's sport more broadly, and facing female athletes. The Board is focused primarily on elite and professional sports to ensure a clear distinction from the National Physical Activity Taskforce, which focuses on participation and activity rates. The Board of Women's Sport met for the first time on 26 March 2024 and focused

on the theme of physical health and welfare in line with the gaps in research highlighted by the Review. The Board brought together experts including The Well HQ, academics and National Governing Bodies to look at existing and future opportunities to support women's sport. We will continue to engage with Board members over the coming months to look at some possible opportunities and solutions around physical welfare ahead of the Board meeting again in early summer 2024.

### **Midlife and menopause**

Recommendation 5: ***We recommend Sport England prioritise another phase of the “This Girl Can” campaign focused on women in midlife, showing real life examples of women in the 40 to 60 year old age group participating in a wide range of sports and physical activities, to inspire others.***

(Paragraph 45)



The Government and Sport England accept this recommendation.

Sport England is the arm's length body of Government with responsibility for growing and developing grassroots sport and getting more people active across England. Decisions on the organisation's priorities and investment are for Sport England to make independently.

This Girl Can's imagery and messaging has always included women from a range of life stages. Data from Sport England's insight tracker shows that the This Girl Can campaign has positively impacted women aged between 41 and 60. Since 2020, of the women aged between 41 and 60 who were aware of the campaign:

- Up to 17% reported doing more activity because of This Girl Can. This translates to 6% of all women.

- Up to 81% reported that the campaign helped women to feel more confident being active.
- Up to 77% say the campaign helped women to overcome the fear of being judged when being active.
- Up to 36% say they want to be more active because of the campaign.

In addition to this, the next phase of the This Girl Can campaign will include a specific focus on women aged 50 and over.

**Recommendation 6: *We recommend the DCMS update its “Get Active” strategy for the future of sport and physical activity in relation to women in midlife. It should work with organisations including Women in Sport and The Well HQ to include an analysis of the key barriers faced by women in this age group, measurable targets***

***to increase their levels of activity, and specifically tailored interventions.*** (Paragraph 46)

The Government accepts this recommendation.

While there are currently no plans to update the Government's sport strategy Get Active, the Government has established the National Physical Activity Taskforce to monitor progress against the targets set out in the strategy, which are aimed at increasing participation in groups where inactivity rates have remained stubbornly high. Our targets to reduce disparities in participation rates include 1.5 million more active adults aged 55+ and 1.25 million more active women.

The Government regularly meets with organisations such as Women in Sport and The Well HQ to hear about the latest research, resources and initiatives that have been developed in relation to women being active in midlife. As a result of the Review of Women's

Football, the Government has established a Board of Women's Sport which works with a number of organisations such as The Well HQ. While the Board is primarily focused on female's in elite sport, it is another opportunity to identify barriers and challenges faced by women and girls in sport and, more generally, being active.

As mentioned in our response to recommendation five, initiatives such as This Girl Can are already inspiring millions of women to get active including those in midlife. The This Girl Can campaign encourages women and girls to get active, regardless of shape, size and ability.

### **Sports and exercise research**

Recommendation 7: ***We recommend the DCMS and DfE establish a taskforce, including UK Sport, the UK Sports Institute, women's health and fitness experts including The Well HQ, sport and exercise research institutes, and the UK divisions***

***of leading sportswear and sporting goods brands, to develop a long-term strategy to tackle sportswomen's health and physiology-related issues. The strategy should set out key priorities for research; actions to increase availability of suitable, female-specific sportswear and kit (and given the associations with discomfort and injury, football boots must be a priority); and steps to achieve equal representation of women, as authors and study participants, in the field of sports and exercise research. We recommend this strategy be published within six months.*** (Paragraph 79)

The Government accepts this recommendation. The Government believes that, through the National Physical Activity Taskforce (NPAT) and Board of Women's Sport, the above recommendation can be achieved.

In September 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) established the

NPAT to deliver against the Government's sport strategy Get Active. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and Department for Education are both standing members of the NPAT.

The Review of Women's Football highlighted that it has been estimated that only 6% of sports exercise and science research involve only women. The Review called for DCMS to convene a Board of Women's Sport to look at some of the prevalent issues facing women's sport and female athletes. The Board has been formally established and the first meeting took place on 26 March 2024. The first Board meeting was attended by academics, NGBs and sporting organisations, such as The Well HQ, UK Sports Institute and Women's Sport Trust. The DHSC is a member of the Board of Women's Sport.

The first meeting of the Board of Women's Sport focused on player welfare and challenges

that face female athletes. We recognise the issues that still exist in the appropriate kit being available and designed for females and there is no doubt that the design and availability of suitable kit will form part of future discussion too including work already being taken forward in this space by sports.

In July 2022, the Department of Health and Social Care published the Women's Health Strategy for England. The strategy sets out the Government's plans for boosting the health and wellbeing of all women and girls, and improving the ways in which the health and care system engages and listens to women and girls. Research and evidence is a key priority for the Women's Health Strategy. The strategy has several ambitions such as to increasing the representation of women in research both in terms of participation and across research awards and decision-making committees, to place women's voices and priorities at the heart of research from identification of need to

dissemination and implementation in practice, and to ensure that we have the right data and evidence to improve women's health outcomes and their experiences of healthcare services. These ambitions extend beyond the topic of girls and women in sport.

The DHSC funds research through the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR). The NIHR actively seeks opportunities to drive the research and evidence ambitions detailed in the Women's Health Strategy forward. The NIHR Research Inclusion Strategy 2022–2027 aims to ensure that research is representative and reflects the diversity of the population.

A key initiative linked to this strategy is the publication of the NIHR INCLUDE guidance to improve the inclusion of under-served groups in clinical research. Another notable focal point is to increase the representation of women across NIHR awards and committees. The NIHR has therefore announced a set of aspirational targets to improve the diversity of professional



committee and panel membership by 2027, which includes a target of at least 50% females (sex). Furthermore, the NIHR is working with organisations across the research system through the Medical Science Sex and Gender Equity project (MESSAGE) to co-develop both a sex and gender policy framework for funders and regulators, and guidance for sex and gender disaggregation in research design, to improve health outcomes for all in the UK.

In addition to this strategic activity, the NIHR commissions research through a range of infrastructure and research programmes. For example, the NIHR School for Public Health Research explored how young people (aged 12 to 21) feel about engaging in physical activity such as sports, exercise and walking in public places, with a particular focus on how these individuals felt about the environments associated with physical activity. These findings revealed that feelings of insecurity, worry and fear were prevalent among the study group,

who were all living in areas of England with high deprivation. The research recommends that more work is needed to create environments where young people feel confident and safe enough to exercise and play sport, and that young people, especially those who experience intersecting barriers to participating in physical activity, need to be involved and listened to when policy and practice linked to physical activity is being developed, to help remove the complex barriers to physical activity and encourage them to adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles.

This research was recently published by the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR) on 15 March 2024. The School's primary activity is to conduct high quality research to build the evidence base for effective public health practice. SPHR research looks at what works practically to improve population health and reduce health inequalities, can be applied across the country, and better meets

the needs of policymakers, practitioners, and the public. The School is committed to research impact and its Public Health Research Impact Strategy is applied to all the research that it undertakes. The NIHR welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including health barriers for girls and women in sport.

## Coaching

Recommendation 8: ***We recommend that UK Sport, Sport England, UK Coaching, the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity and the national governing bodies come together to convene a female health in coach education working group. It should draw on emerging best practice from programmes such as NETBALLHer to develop a strategy to better educate coaches at all levels in female health, including, where appropriate, through mandatory qualifications, alongside***

***an action plan setting out how this will be achieved. The strategy and action plan should be published within six months.***

(Paragraph 93)

The Government accepts this recommendation.

Sport England is in the process of finalising an award to Women in Sport to act as a facilitating agent for the Women in Coaching Taskforce.

The taskforce is a Collective Action Group, made up of individuals from across the sector who have been convened by Sport England over the past three years. The taskforce will address the stubborn, cultural, and systemic challenges that prevent women from entering and progressing in the coaching workforce.

The taskforce features a number of National Governing Bodies and a broad cross section of individuals from across the sector who are all committed to tackling the lack of women in coaching.

Sport England is also working with Exercise, Movement and Dance (EMD) UK to develop a This Girl Can inspired training course for all group exercise instructors so they have more information to engage previously inactive women.

In addition, Sport England is taking forward a £100,000 action learning project that will be managed by Women in Sport and delivered by The Well HQ. The project will educate parents, teachers, and other sports leaders to educate them in female health and support women and girls to participate through puberty and the menopause. The format of the programme will be based on both research, and insight from those across the school sport landscape (students, teachers, parents, leaders). The programme aims to:

- Empower and equip teachers and coaches through training and development, and tools and resources to support action.

- Educate and empower female PE teachers through important life stages. Support senior leadership to curate a workplace where women want to be, across their lives.
- Ensure parents also receive education about the ambitions of the programme and how to support it at home.
- Activate girls within schools, to raise their awareness and expectations of what the sporting environment could look and feel like so that it works well for them.

Furthermore, UK Sport is working to address the current under-representation of female coaches at all levels of the talent pathway. The aim is to increase the number of coaches in the UK's high performance sport community by 25%. Initiatives that are working toward this target include: 'Supporting coaching in high performance sport' which is a programme designed to equip coach-development

practitioners with the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to support World Class Coaching. Of the coaches that have taken part in the programme so far, 62% have been women.

UK Coaching is also working across the country alongside local partners to help develop coaches within local communities. In 2022, the group received £10 million of Government and national lottery funding through Sport England to provide support for coaches, enhanced learning and development, and to ensure that coaches are able to deliver more inclusive sessions for all groups including women.

As mentioned previously, the Board of Women's Sport is currently focusing on the theme of physical health and welfare. In the first meeting of the Board of Women's Sport, there was extensive discussion around education about female health, both for female athletes as well as coaches.

**Recommendation 9: *Public weighing and body-shaming of girls and young women is wholly unacceptable. That this should have occurred in a sports environment, in which girls already face barriers to participation, is deplorable. Swim England must restore trust in swimming's coaching practices and culture, and Sport England must oversee the change process until this is achieved. Sport England must, in response to this Report in no later than two months, update us on its assessment of Swim England's response to the issues and the steps it is taking to oversee the situation.*** (Paragraph 103)

The Government accepts this recommendation.

Sport England will be writing to the Committee to share an assessment of Swim England's response to these issues, including adherence with safeguarding and regulatory improvements, the appointment of a new CEO, and the undertaking of a comprehensive and



independent ‘listening exercise’. Sport England will outline the steps it has taken—and continues to take—to oversee the situation.

Recommendation 10: ***Issues of bullying, harassment, abuse, and discrimination are not limited to swimming, with issues emerging across several sports in recent years. We welcome the DCMS’s call for evidence on integrity in sport, which closed three months ago, and expect to see tangible actions as a result. In response to this Report, the DCMS should set out in detail:***

- ***Insights from the call for evidence on integrity in sport;***
- ***The proposed next steps in improving how concerns and grievances are dealt with in the sector;***
- ***Its evaluation of the effectiveness of the Sport Integrity pilot; and***

- ***A timetable for further change in the sports sector.*** (Paragraph 104)

The Government accepts this recommendation.

Sport needs to be a welcoming, inclusive and fair environment that participants and their parents or guardians can have confidence in.

We also want to ensure that we have the strongest possible systems for addressing sport integrity issues and that we remain at the forefront of global efforts around fairness and inclusion in sport.

We intend to work alongside the sport and physical activity sector to identify the most pressing integrity challenges and potential improvements, including how processes around complaint handling and dispute resolution can be strengthened.

In light of this, we ran a call for evidence over autumn 2023 to gather information and views on current experiences of how issues and concerns

in sport across the UK are dealt with in the sector, and how these could be strengthened. Over 600 responses were received. We will set out the results of this exercise and an outline of our next steps in due course.

Since its launch in May 2022, the number of individuals coming forward to use the Sport Integrity service has increased, and a high proportion of individuals are contacting the service directly rather than through referrals. This indicates that the service is increasingly viewed with confidence as a trusted space for investigating allegations of misconduct at the elite level of Olympic and Paralympic sport. UK Sport will continue to monitor the performance of the service to ensure it continues to provide access to effective, independent investigations.

### **Pregnancy and maternity**

Recommendation 11: ***We recommend the DCMS, UK Sport, Sport England and the sports' national governing bodies establish***

***a permanent working group on best practice in pregnancy and maternity policy, including maternity leave and pay and wider policies to support pregnant sportswomen and returning mothers. This working group must consider a road map to equal access to leave and funding/pay in line with statutory maternity rights, across all international sports.*** (Paragraph 121)

The Government partially accepts this recommendation.

An individual's employment rights are determined by their employment status, not the type of employment contract they have, or the type of work they do. Employment status is based on the nature of the relationship between an individual and the person for whom services are provided. Comprehensive guidance was published in July 2022.

All employed women, including sportswomen who are employees, are entitled to 52 weeks'

Maternity Leave if they are pregnant or give birth. It is a “day one” right and there are no qualifying conditions. Pregnant women or mothers may be entitled to Statutory Maternity Pay or Maternity Allowance. There are qualifying requirements for pay. Further information can be found on [gov.uk](http://gov.uk).

Employees who were working for their employer before falling pregnant may be entitled to Statutory Maternity Pay, which runs for 39 weeks. It is paid at an “enhanced” rate of 90% of their average weekly salary (with no upper limit) for the first 6 weeks and then at the statutory rate (currently £184.03 a week) for the remaining 33 weeks. Working mothers (including self-employed mothers) who do not qualify for Statutory Maternity Pay may be entitled to Maternity Allowance, which is paid at the standard rate £184.03 a week for 39 weeks.

Maternity payments are primarily a health and safety provision to allow pregnant working

women to take time off work in the later stages of their pregnancy and in the months following childbirth, in the interests of their own and their baby's health and wellbeing.

UK Sport's Pregnancy Guidance for sports and athletes, published in November 2021, provides advice to athletes about how and when to share their pregnancy with their sport and advice to sports on how to respond should an athlete share news of a pregnancy with them. It also recommends a framework which athletes and sports may follow to ensure a responsible and reasonable approach is adopted pre, during and post-childbirth, including return to training and competition. In addition to the Guidance, UK Sport also supports athletes on funded programmes who become pregnant by ensuring that they continue to receive their full Athlete Performance Award (APA) throughout the duration of the pregnancy and for up to nine months post childbirth. At nine months post childbirth the potential of the athlete should be

assessed and confirmed to UK Sport in order to continue to access the APA. It is important to note that this assessment should indicate the athlete's future medal potential and not necessarily current performance outcomes. Having consulted with the UK Sports Institute, athletes, coaches, performance directors, researchers, charities and professional sports, updated guidance was released in December 2023.

The UK Sports Institute also offers one-to-one consultation with a Multi-Disciplinary Team for pregnant athletes through the Female Athlete Health Clinic at Bisham Abbey. This is in addition to support available through sports' medical teams. The UK Sports Institute also coordinates a pregnancy support group for athletes on WhatsApp.

The Review of Women's Football, published in July last year, recommended that both the Women's Super League and Women's

Championship should become fully professional environments designed to attract, develop and sustain the best playing talent in the world including mandating a world-leading parental package. The Women's Football Review Implementation Group has been set up to bring together key decision-makers from the organisations with responsibility for taking forward the Review recommendations. This is an opportunity for everyone to come together to share both updates and challenges being faced as they deliver against the ten strategic recommendations that were outlined in the review. As mentioned, the Board of Women's Sport has been set up to look at some of the prevalent issues facing women's sport more broadly, and facing female athletes, it is also looking at player welfare and there is no doubt that maternity leave and pay will form part of those discussions too. Both UK Sport and Sport England are members of the Board of Women's Sport and contribute to these discussions.



## Conclusion

In summary, we accept most of the recommendations set out in the Select Committee's report. Government is clear that everyone across the country and from whatever background, including as many women and girls as possible, should have access to and benefit from quality sport and physical activity opportunities. Our focus is on establishing a lifetime of engagement with sport and, supporting the sector to be welcoming to all, and ensuring the sector is prepared for future challenges and opportunities. This includes our ambition to provide the infrastructure and conditions needed to get as many women and girls involved in sport. We will continue to work with sports organisations and others including academics and health organisations to ensure that all aspects of women's sport continue to flourish.

## Appendix 2: Sport England Response on Swim England

---

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Women & Equalities Select Committee on 22 November 2023, where I shared Sport England's work to support more women and girls to get active.

I note that on 5 March 2024, the Committee published its report, Health barriers for girls and women in sport. I am writing to you today with an update on Sport England's assessment of Swim England's response to the issues of public weighing, body- shaming and restoring trust in swimming's coaching practices and culture, and the steps Sport England is taking to oversee the situation, as per Recommendation 16 of the report.

Sport England recognises the importance and impact of these issues, and we are committed to ensuring sport and physical activity is enjoyable for all. Although Sport England is not a regulator,

we want to build a sector where those taking part in sport and physical activity do so in a safe environment.

### **Steps taken to oversee the situation**

The complaint relating to historic weighing practices was one of three complaints about Swim England received by Sport England that led to the commissioning of the Weston Report in 2022.

The Weston Report made nine recommendations, which Swim England accepted and produced their Heart of Aquatics safeguarding, welfare and culture action plan in response.

It should be noted that public weighing is one important issue among a process of wider cultural reform required of Swim England. Sport England has not mandated a response from

Swim England on this specific issue, but our wider approach and oversight is driving change, and we are monitoring this closely.

Instead of providing long term funding into Swim England in 2022, Sport England only confirmed annual investment, bound by progress against seven award conditions (see Annex 1).

These conditions stipulated implementation of the Weston recommendations, along with safeguarding and regulatory improvements, and the undertaking of a comprehensive and independent 'listening exercise'. Quarterly reviews of progress against the award conditions and the Heart of Aquatics plan were held throughout 2023–24.

Barrister Louis Weston was re-engaged by Sport England to assist with assessing Swim England's response to his nine recommendations, and therefore their adherence to the award conditions as stipulated by Sport England. Following the further report

provided by Mr Weston and assessment by Sport England, Swim England was deemed to have met the 2023–24 award conditions.

The findings of the listening exercise were published by Swim England in March 2024. The themes of the report are saddening and cause for deep concern including ‘culture of fear’, ‘closed community’ and ‘performance focussed’. The report includes

21 significant recommendations for Swim England, which has apologised and committed to further reform. Sport England has also provided support to Swim England in the recruitment process for their new CEO, Andy Salmon, who took up post in February 2024. The new CEO is committed to leading the culture change needed across the sport and his response to the listening report has been encouraging.

In October 2023, Swim England produced new guidance on the subject of how to identify low

energy availability and the potential health and performance consequences this may have. This was accompanied by a campaign headed by Olympic medallist Cassie Patten and signposted to regional support services for disordered eating and eating disorders.

### **Sport England's assessment of Swim England's response**

The new Swim England leadership provides an opportunity to drive the meaningful change that is needed across the sport. Based on this and the significant work and progress made in recent months, Sport England has an improved level of confidence in Swim England's ability to respond to the challenges.

However, the outstanding issues require widespread cultural and operational reform across the sport and its leadership. The findings of Swim England's listening exercise have only

recently been published and the robustness and authenticity of the longer-term response is currently unknown.

Taking all the above points into consideration, long-term investment was again ruled out by the Sport England Board in March 2024, and another annual award with further conditions was agreed (see Annex 2). Adherence to these conditions by Swim England will continue to be monitored closely, with quarterly reporting again mandated. Central to these conditions is a robust and meaningful response to the listening report. Any further investment into Swim England remains in principle and subject to performance against these conditions.

Sport England welcomes both the overall focus of this inquiry, and the recommendation to update the Committee with regard to Swim England. Please advise if there is anything further I or colleagues can do to support the Committee's ongoing work in any way we can.

## Annex 1: 2023–2024 Award Conditions

1. By 01/07/2023, Swim England shall commission, to the satisfaction of Sport England, an independent and expert ‘listening exercise’ or review to hear and understand the experiences of those in swimming and to establish the nature and scale of the challenge and recommendations for addressing. Sport England shall agree the Terms of Reference for the project and approve the appointment of the reviewer. Following the conclusion of this review, Swim England shall implement any recommendations, to the satisfaction of Sport England. **MET**
2. By 01/08/2023, Swim England shall agree with Sport England, a plan to implement the recommendations of the Sport Resolutions UK review of 3 complaints. **MET**



3. By 31/03/2024, Swim England shall implement, to the satisfaction of Sport England, the recommendations of the Sport Resolutions UK review of 3 complaints. **MET**
4. By 31/12/2023, Swim England shall fully meet the Standards for safeguarding and protecting children in sport (as deemed by the NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit). **MET**
5. For year one of the award, Swim England will provide quarterly updates to Sport England on the progress of the 'Heart of Aquatics' plan and related activities including the listening exercise detailed at condition 1. **MET**
6. By 01/08/2023, Swim England shall update their Complaints Policy in line with the recommendations of the Sport Resolutions UK review, to the satisfaction of Sport

England. Sport England shall continue to monitor the handling of material complaints by Swim England. **MET**

7. By 31/03/2024, Swim England shall update their Judicial Process, Judicial Regulations and Safeguarding & Welfare Regulations in line with the recommendations of the Sport Resolutions UK review, to the satisfaction of Sport England. **MET**

## **Annex 2: 2024–2025 Award Conditions**

1. Before first drawdown of the 2024/2025 funding, Swim England shall agree with Sport England a binding timetable for the completion of conditions 2 and 3 below.
2. In accordance with the timetable referred to at condition 1 above, Swim England shall agree with Sport England, a detailed plan to implement the recommendations

of the Heart of Aquatics Listening Exercise (“the Listening Exercise Implementation Plan”).

3. In accordance with the timetable referred to at condition 1 above, Swim England shall consider the feedback provided in the February 2024 Weston report and integrate the further actions into the Listening Exercise Implementation plan.
4. Swim England shall provide quarterly updates to Sport England on progress on the development of the Listening Exercise Implementation Plan, and any other matters as requested by Sport England.
5. Sport England reserves the right to set additional award conditions as deemed necessary, for the duration of the award.