

Written evidence submitted by SportCheer England NGB

Parliamentary Inquiry into Sport in Our Communities SportCheer England NGB Submitted 16/1//2020

Introduction

SportCheer England (SCE)¹ is the National Governing Body for the sport of Cheerleading in England. It is recognised by the world governing body for Cheerleading; the International Cheer Union (ICU)².

Cheerleading is a Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF)³ recognised sport, a provisional International Olympic Committee member sport⁴ and a partner of the Special Olympics Internationals⁵.

Cheerleading is a high energy, team-based performance sport that is athletic, artistic, and acrobatic. It is interdisciplinary, involving stunts, tumbling, jumps, dance, pyramids and tosses, combined to create exciting and engaging routines. This unique team sport is, by its very nature, the embodiment of “community”: It has a transformational power to develop skills like team-work and trust, raise aspirations, develop grit, determination, and empower young people to become not just Cheerleaders, but leaders in all walks of life.

Cheerleading has been a competitive sport in England for 30 years. It is one of the fastest growing sports in the country, with over 89,000 athletes across the UK participating at community recreational, competitive, and elite level. Over the past 6 years significant developments have been made in international success, and England is now considered one of the world’s top countries for the sport; medalling at the ICU world championships every year for the past 5 years.

96% of Cheerleading’s participants are female and the majority are under 18yrs, participating at a community sports level. Our sport is unique in capturing and retaining participation from girls and young women at an age when they are traditionally dropping out of sport, and is a critical activity to maintaining many young women’s physical and mental health.

SportCheer England was set up in 2019 with the support of the ICU, to govern the sport in England and oversee the national teams. As a newly established organisation, it is not yet formally recognised by Sport England, however, the board have met with Sport England over the past year to discuss the process for recognition, and have worked to align the organisation with the Sport England Code of Governance. Following our submission of an RTP Guidance Document to the DCMS, discussions took place between Sport England and the Government to suggest that while we are yet to go through the formal process of recognition in England, Cheerleading IS viewed as a sport and SportCheer England as its NGB (with the DCMS approving our RTP Guidance Document in October 2020)

Grassroots / Community overview

The majority of participation in England is from under 18's who are participating at grassroots recreational level. In our July 2020 national survey, over 80% of participation was recorded as being from these types of programmes.

As a growing sport, competition event providers report that across all ages, beginner and lower level teams make up the majority of competition entries nationally. We are also seeing more and more schools taking up the sport as an alternative PE and after-school club activity, and schools' competitions are a growth area for competition event providers.

Since 2015 Sport England has actively worked to improve the disproportionate gender gap in sport participation through their successful This Girl Can campaign. With 96% female participation, Cheerleading is a critical sport in promoting the physical and mental wellbeing of a key demographic in this country at risk of inactivity.

Community programmes operate in a variety of ways, reporting to our survey as being registered as Charities, Not for Profit, Community Sports Clubs, After-School Clubs, University teams and Community Interest Companies. The majority of coaches in this sector are volunteers, paying for their own qualifications, DBS checks, First Aid training and other CPD opportunities. The current lack of Sport England recognition means that funding opportunities for these clubs are limited and rely upon athlete subs to cover core costs such as space hire, insurance, and other essentials.

Elite level overview

England annually field 10 teams at the ICU World Cheerleading Championships, but receive no funding, or financial support. Our national teams are currently entirely self-funded, including volunteer coaching staff and any specialist staff (such as team physios).

For the past five years Team England has medalled with Gold in the Junior, Co-Ed, All Girl and Adaptive Abilities (Para sport) categories, as well a Gold medal for their Adaptive Abilities Pom team in the Performance Cheer divisions.

The ICU is a member of the IOC, and Cheerleading is an Olympic member sport. We are in no doubt we will be included in the 2028 games, so urgently need support and investment to retain and develop our national elite pathways. There are many talented athletes within our community sector who lack the funding to support an application to the national teams. Investment in our community programmes and elite pathways would help us identify, nurture and support talent.

Inquiry Q: Are current sports governance models fit for purpose?

SportCheer England is not yet a Sport England recognised NGB, nor is Cheerleading a Sport England recognised sport: As such Cheerleading clubs are not eligible for any funding by Sport England, local council, Government or other Government agencies specifically ring fenced for the purposes of sport (as the criteria for this funding often specifies applications must come from sports with a recognised NGB)

The 2015 Sporting Futures policy paper reaffirmed the Government's commitment to Olympic and Paralympic success, but also extended that ambition to "non-Olympic sports where Government will support success through grassroots investment". It also acknowledged that there are several demographic groups whose engagement in sport and physical activity was well below the national average, including women and girls, and that they would "distribute funding to focus on those people who tend not to take part in sport". Despite a high level of grassroots community engagement in Cheerleading across the country, and a high percentage of those being female participants, Cheerleading clubs have not received any funding from Government (or distributed down from Government through councils or agencies).

One of the key objectives of SportCheer England is to obtain recognition from Sport England in order to open up more funding opportunities to clubs, but the recognition process takes a minimum of 2 years, of which we are only at the end of year 1 - disadvantaging clubs during this critical period of survival. Covid has drastically exposed the lack of support for Cheerleading, with many clubs unable to survive the lockdown: Most operate as not-for-profit community clubs run by volunteers, with a focus on low cost access. This model, which hugely benefits the community, is not sustainable without access to funding.

We believe as Sport England shifts from a focus on regularly funded, established NGBs to encouraging access and engagement in more general physical activity, sports like Cheerleading should be included in funding opportunities, and the good work of individual clubs and coaches in improving thousands of young people's physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development, should not be penalised because their sport isn't yet in a position to establish recognised governance. Local councils and other funders should not require Sport England recognition as a prerequisite to eligibility for funding ring fenced for sport, and should instead award funding based on merit of the organisation and ability to engage communities in physical activity.

Inquiry Q: What are the biggest risks to the long-term viability of grassroots sport?

In response to the Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into Sport in Communities, SportCheer England conducted a short survey to understand the impact of Covid within our community - viewing the financial damage done by the Covid restrictions as having a critical impact on the future viability of the sport. 86 clubs inputted data between 9th November 2020 and 11th November 2020. Of the clubs responding, 54.6% of clubs train in their own facility with the remaining 45.4% gyms hiring a public facility such as leisure centre, school or community hall.

The survey demonstrates a 19.2% reduction in participation in Cheerleading from February 2020 until the time of the survey. For teams inclusive to athletes aged 18 and over, this increases to 24.7% reduction. 90.7% clubs completing the survey reported a reduction in participation.

A variety of reasons were given by clubs completing the survey for the reduction in participation, the most prevalent reasons included; Uncertainties if competitions will go ahead (61.6%), financial insecurities (59.3%), delayed approval by the DCMS of the Return to Sport for Cheerleading (57%), athletes unable to fully partake in

Cheerleading due to limitations with the Rule of 6 for over 18s (50%) and athletes unable to fully partake in Cheerleading due to local restrictions for indoor sports for over 18s (45.3%).

With regards to these common reasons, the DCMS has now approved a Return to Play for Cheerleading and strategies for financial securities of athletes and their families is a separate topic. Therefore looking at sport specific guidelines to ensure participation does not decline further and starts to thrive, the Government needs to re-evaluate 'team sport' rules for over 18s with regards to the 'Rule of 6' to ensure over 18s and mixed aged teams can fully participate in their sport. Strategies also need to be put in place to allow spectator sports to resume in a Covid secure manner.

Other reasons for reduced participation included anxiety to attend, venues not accepting bookings and athletes unable to travel to training, due to Government travel advice. If the latter could change, so that athletes were allowed to travel directly to/from their training this would help recover participation and allow Elite club teams and Team England to resume training in preparation for the Cheerleading World Championships. At present Cheerleading is exempt from the Government Elite sports person pathway.

With regards to financial support to help resilience, during the initial lockdown in March 2020, 40.7% of clubs received a Government grant (£25,000/£10,000) with a further 7% of clubs receiving a Government loan for small businesses. 52.3% of clubs did not receive any Government funding primarily due to not owning their own facility. Between the re-opening of leisure facilities on 4th July and the start of Lockdown on 5th November 2020, 33.7% (26 clubs) were required to close due to enforced local restrictions. Of these clubs, only 3 clubs have received additional Government support.

In addition to Government support, 27.9% of clubs reported receiving funding from non-Government sources since March 2020. Sources include Sport England (18.6%), local council (4.7%) and independent organisations for example charitable organisations, private investors, donations (8.1%). As previously mentioned SportCheer England is a new NGB which is not recognised officially by Sport England making applying for funding for clubs challenging. Separate funding options need to be made available for such NGBs.

In addition to Sport Recovery Fund, Government support to increase the resilience of sports clubs and their venues at this pivotal point in 2020/21 could also include publicly backing RTP Guidance Documents to allow programmes and their members to return to train, hence giving them more security and financial sustainability. Retention of athletes has been a problem nationwide over the lockdown, and a public backing/ message etc would go a long way to keeping athletes in the sport post-Covid.

We also believe the government could do more to support new NGBs in establishing good governance and application to Sport England, by providing funding for basic set up costs. SportCheer England is an entirely voluntary run board, with no full or part-time executive team. In this situation, the board have additionally taken on

operational roles in order to establish policy and structure for the NGB, while also maintaining day jobs (several running their own Cheerleading programmes and therefore undertaking at great personal cost the work required from an NGB, while managing the financial damage of Covid to their own clubs and businesses). Pro Bono guidance and support in funding administrative and basic operational costs would help alleviate a huge burden of time and personal financial loss to new voluntary boards in the process of establishment.

Inquiry Q: To what extent should elite professional sports support the lower leagues and grassroots?

Cheerleading is an entirely self-funded sport from lower level grassroots all the way up to our elite national teams for the world championships. There is currently no professional pathway within the sport for athletes. Some coaches will coach as their sole source of income, but high overheads and a desire to make the sport financially accessible to participants means that coaching Cheerleading is not a hugely profitable full-time role.

Our national teams are currently able to support the lower levels through raising the profile of the sport in the media and by providing an elite pathway for talent. As we move toward Olympic inclusion, we would hope that funding might be made available to the national teams and that a financial ecosystem could then develop to support engagement at the lower levels.

SportCheer England are currently working on creating a model whereby elite and established programmes can support grassroots, through partnering programmes to help with: advice, coach development, social media presence, branding, other business elements etc. This type of mentoring scheme would hugely benefit the community at large, but would require funding to establish, run and maintain oversight of.

Were our elite national teams to have full funding and support we would absolutely advocate for the professional sports programmes to support grassroots teams and clubs further.

Conclusion

Cheerleading is in a unique position as a sport in this country: We have high levels of engagement at the grassroots (particularly with teenage girls) and also huge success at an international level of elite competition... and yet we do not currently have a recognised national governing body or any financial support from the government. Covid has exposed a glaring inequality in the way the sport is viewed in relation to other sports, despite huge levels of participation and success. While a self-sustaining economic model is very much a positive, it is a fragile model that has begun to crumble due to the financial strain of Covid.

There are 3 key reasons as to why we would be best served with additional government support for grassroots in our sport:

1. Formal governance is required to help establish and regulate safeguarding and health and safety in the sport of Cheerleading. The development of formal

governance for us and other new NGBs would be more rapidly advanced with the financial support and guidance of the Government.

2. Grassroots programmes have been financially crushed by Covid and as a non-recognised sport, have little or no funding options available to them. Programmes urgently need financial assistance to plug the loss of income, or we could be facing a devastating loss of the sport in our country. The impact of this loss will not only be felt on a community level, but will have a domino effect on talent pathways at the elite level, and subsequently when announced, Olympic level.
3. As a completely unsubsidised sport, Cheerleading can be cost prohibitive to those from low income households. Financial subsidies for athletes would mean wider access and participation. Funding would also allow SportCheer England to run coach education, helping further widen access and participation in the sport, particularly in schools. We believe application to funding for community access and participation should be more easily accessible and based on the merit of the organisation and ability to successfully engage communities in physical activity, rather than whether their NGB is yet to be recognised.

Appendix

1. SportCheer England www.sportcheerengland.org
2. International Cheer Union (ICU) www.cheerunion.org
3. Global Association of International Sports Federations
<https://gaisf.sport/members/>
4. IOC provisional membership documentation www.olympic.org/international-cheer-union
5. Special Olympics International partnership documentation
<https://www.specialolympics.org/about/sports-federation-partnerships/international-cheer-union>