

## Written evidence submitted by Mencap

### Mencap submission to Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee Inquiry on 'Sport in our communities'

#### About our representation

1. Mencap welcomes this timely inquiry and the Committee's interest in grassroots sports and their importance in maintaining healthy and active lifestyles.
2. People with a learning disability, make up 1.5 million of the UK population and are nearly twice as likely to be inactive; twice as likely to become obese; and have shorter lifespans than the general population. To help turn these figures around we provide a range of support and programmes targeted to help get inactive people with a learning disability participating in sport and physical activity within their communities.

#### Round the World Challenge

3. Our central programme to achieve the above is the *Round the World Challenge* which we deliver in partnership with Sport England and The National Lottery. We launched the programme in January 2019, following piloting in 2014-17 and to date have engaged over 2900 people with a learning disability.
4. The Challenge is currently running in 27 locations over four years. Currently we are delivering in;
  - a. North Yorkshire
  - b. Merseyside
  - c. Lancashire
  - d. Leicestershire
  - e. Nottinghamshire
  - f. Coventry and Warwickshire
  - g. South Essex
  - h. South London
  - i. East Cornwall and Devon.
5. The initiative is all about turning hours of sport and physical activities into distance and 'racing' round the world, the more hours you do the further you go. Participants will take part in a variety of activities including zumba, boccia, yoga and more traditional sports like football, rugby, cycling and tennis. Participants then log activity time and convert this into miles. Participants can choose to complete 20 hours for the UK route, 40 hours for Europe, or 100 hours for the World route, or even all three. Once completed participants have the option to progress onto doing a sports leadership course, becoming a volunteer or joining one of Mencap's Employment programmes. You can see the project in action in a BBC Midlands segment [here](#).

6. Through the local participation hub model, Round the World Challenge has built strong community links to ensure people can access more sport in their community at the end of their Round the World Challenge journey. The programme has worked with almost 200 partner organisations, including grassroots clubs and leisure centres, providing guidance and expertise to allow people to be active in a time and setting of their choice.
7. *Neel, Ashton Mencap Group, Young Volunteer: "They (RTWC participants) have started not only getting more involved in the Mencap sports activities but have started joining sports disability teams and activities outside of Mencap, like swimming and football and other things, really increasing sports participation."*
8. As well as the health and community benefits of increasing physical activity, research and Mencap's projects have shown that getting people with a learning disability involved in sport can help boost their confidence in other areas of life, including: securing employment, reducing loneliness, building friendships and playing a full part in their communities.
9. Qasim, 30 who has just completed his journey in Manchester said: *"Round the World Challenge has been able to introduce me to subjects that I had not looked at recently so that helped me when I was thinking about what type of work I wanted to do. I have realised that I want to develop my photography skills so I have been able to look at courses that could help me develop those skills. I would like to work as a camera assistant in the future."*
10. In 2017 Canterbury Christ Church University, Centre for Sport, Physical Education and Activity Research (SPEAR) conducted an evaluation<sup>1</sup> on the impact of the Round the World Challenge, they found:
  - a. **Physical wellbeing:** *"There is a statistically significant increase in activity between weeks 1, 10 and 20, with three quarters of respondents now meeting Chief Medical Officer recommended levels of activity. Importantly there is evidence from participants' responses that an increase in activity outside of RTWC has also occurred, and that those seen as least likely to participate are actively engaged".*
  - b. *Lorraine, RTWC participant: 'The RTWC has made me fitter, healthier and I've lost weight! I am 60 years old and it has made me feel much more active every day. I didn't feel healthy before'.*
  - c. **Mental wellbeing:** 0% of participants said they felt worried, depressed or anxious after completing RTWC compared to 27% who did before. Reduced anxiety and depression correlates with increased social inclusion and improved social skills of participants including listening and helping, which in turn makes relationships reciprocally rewarding and sustainable.

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished, available on request

- d. *“The attitudes of RTWC participants towards activity have improved significantly over the course of the programme...reflected in participants and supporters demonstrating increases in confidence and recognition of the importance of activity, not just for health, but for broader well-being.”* (Spear 2017)
- e. **Transferable skills:** Participants in RTWC reported gaining transferrable skills such as time keeping, problem solving and resilience as well as increased confidence in their personal skills such as leadership:
- 40% of people who identified themselves as feeling confident at project start increased to 79% at the end of the project.
  - There was a statistically significant increase in participants’ perceptions of their ability to work between the start and end of the Challenge.

### **What are the biggest risks to the long-term viability of grassroots sport?**

11. Alongside Active Lives data, the Annual Disability and Activity study from Activity Alliance<sup>2</sup> shows that in the first part of 2020, before the Covid-19 outbreak, disabled people were becoming more active than ever before. This highlights the incredible work being done across the sector by programmes such as Round the World Challenge, to decrease the participation gap between disabled and non-disabled participants. These very positive developments included: disabled people being less likely to see their impairment as a barrier and more people reporting that they feel physical activity is for someone like them.
12. We know that the coronavirus pandemic is having a more significant impact on disabled people. Disabled people were twice as likely to feel coronavirus reduced their ability to be active by a great extent (29% of disabled people vs 13% of non-disabled people) as the percentage of disabled people who feel they aren’t given the opportunity to be as active as they would like rose to 44% after the pandemic, compared to 30% before (itself, down from 39% in 2019)<sup>3</sup>. A strong response is needed to ensure that positive changes in activity levels and perceptions are not lost once community sport sessions restart.
13. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to alter the way we have delivered the Round the World Challenge. We recognised that it is crucial that we continue to support people with a learning disability to remain as active as possible. This is especially the case given that a significant number have been asked to shield or take extra precautions due to the increased prevalence of underlying conditions such as diabetes and higher rates of respiratory illnesses (38% of disabled people reported self-isolating and shielding as the biggest barrier to participation.) Programmes like Round the World Challenge can also

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[http://www.activityalliance.org.uk/assets/000/003/308/Annual\\_Disability\\_and\\_Activity\\_Survey\\_%E2%80%93\\_executive\\_summary\\_original.pdf?1579607707](http://www.activityalliance.org.uk/assets/000/003/308/Annual_Disability_and_Activity_Survey_%E2%80%93_executive_summary_original.pdf?1579607707)

<sup>3</sup> Upcoming data from 2021 Annual Disability and Activity Survey

help boost the confidence of people with a learning disability and their supporters to remain active in their communities in a safe way.

14. We have continued to encourage participants and supporters to keep registering people for the challenge. To account for the lack of access to group activities we have introduced flexibilities such as supporting groups to adapt to online delivery and encouraging daily walking to count towards their target. We are also working with providers to encourage new, creative ways of engaging people in activity, which will help assist people return to community activity once it is safe to do so.
15. For the wider Learning Disability Community we host free bi-weekly exercise classes over Zoom and we created, printed and distributed 2500 [‘Move with Mencap’](#) Packs. The packs meant that recipients now have equipment, games and exercises that they can use at home, with no additional equipment needed. One Community partner, Phab Club in Kent fed back *“We really like them. There was a nice mix of indoor and outdoor ideas. We particularly liked the different levels, so the members could choose to maybe push themselves a little more.”*
16. Whilst we welcomed the Government’s guidance (before recent measures) allowing disability sport groups to continue, to meet in groups larger than 6; we have found that many clubs and facilities could not reopen. Many found it not viable to return to delivery without the income from mainstream groups, such as Gravesham Community Leisure Centre, who before the pandemic would provide discounted memberships for Round the World Challenge members, as-well as community sports sessions for disabled participants throughout the week. Providers also have concerns around shielding and confidence of people with a learning disability and their supporters.
17. The closure of these facilities has been difficult for many disabled people. Only 48% of disabled people feel they have received enough information on how to be physically active during this time, whilst a quarter of disabled people lack the space to exercise at home. Disabled men have found this particularly challenging, with 32%<sup>4</sup> of them stating that the closure of facilities has stopped them being active all together.
18. In the long-term, we are deeply concerned that the progress and habits formed over the past three years in increasing the number of people with a learning disability who reach the Chief Medical Officer’s guidance for activity levels could be reversed.
19. As we recover from the pandemic, we believe programmes like *Round the World Challenge* can play an important role as a catalyst in getting segments of society who have been forced to shield or take extra precautions, such as people with a learning disability, to reengage with their communities, become active, and help tackle issue around isolation and loneliness.
20. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragility of grassroots and community sports facilities across the UK. Should the pandemic last for a longer period of time, greater

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<sup>4</sup> Upcoming data from 2021 Annual Disability and Activity Survey

support must be provided by the Government to allow local clubs and sports facilities to reopen in a COVID-19 secure way.

### **To what extent should elite professional sports support the lower leagues and grassroots?**

21. Elite and professional sports have an important role to play in supporting grassroots clubs. We are pleased to say that there has been improvement in this relationship over the past few years in their approach to disability, which has been highlighted by the recent improvements in physical activity amongst disabled people. This has been particularly through community sports clubs with rugby league being one of the best examples. However, there is a real risk of this progress being undone as the sector has been adversely impacted by lockdown and the closure of facilities.
22. While there are significant gaps in pathways from grassroots to the elite level for people with a learning disability, we are concerned about the growing movement towards elite bodies self-regulating. A move towards having elite bodies in essence evaluating their work, could lead to a higher focus on programmes supporting the elite level of the game, rather than more resource intensive interventions to increase participation amongst disabled participants. This would also contribute to a decrease in accountability for the sport being responsible for providing broader community benefits. This lack of accountability and removal of a whole sport approach risks seeing current levels of support for grassroots sports reduce or removed entirely to focus increasingly on programmes supporting the elite level, rather than developing opportunities for everyone.
23. This can be seen in the lack of opportunities that exist currently for elite level competition for people with a learning disability. As there are only 3 sports available for people to compete at a Paralympic level, there is a lack of role models for aspiring athletes, and lack of investment into competitive opportunities. Without increased visibility at a professional level, supported by the sports organisation and sector, increasing the number of athletes with a learning disability at grassroots and competing across the country will remain a significant challenge.