

## **National Futsal League – Written evidence (NPS0003)**

Thank you for providing the National Futsal League (NFL) with an opportunity to provide evidence to your Committee. The NFL is an FA-affiliated sports league with a membership of 40 teams and over 700 adult players across England, plus youth academies in many of our clubs.

In this submission we would like to use the sport of **futsal** as a model example when addressing the inquiry questions. The Football Association (FA) is the National Governing Body (NGB) responsible for both football and FIFA-recognised futsal in England. Our sport is played on indoor courts with five players on each side, using a heavier ball than football, and has been credited with the development of some of the world's most skilful ball players such as Messi, Iniesta, and Ronaldo. Currently over 17,000 FA-affiliated players of all ages play the sport across England and it is the fastest-growing indoor sport worldwide.

We address each of the inquiry questions below, using futsal as an example when appropriate.

### **1. How can local delivery, including funding structures, of sport and recreation be improved to ensure that people of all ages and abilities are able to lead an active lifestyle? For example, how successfully do local authorities and other bodies such as Active Partnerships, Leisure Trusts, local sports clubs and charities work together, and how might coordination be improved?**

Futsal is an indoor sport governed by an NGB (the FA) which is mainly responsible for an outdoor sport (football). This is an example of poor strategic fit and inevitably leads to a lack of effective co-ordination. Our experience of the FA's governance of our sport has led us to the general conclusion that along with the cost of play (see below), sports **facility** quantity, quality, and distribution are the most important drivers of potential participation and that strategic co-ordination of the planning, construction, and management of facilities is vital. For indoor sports which require use of a court this means that all such sports must be represented during the planning stage so that facilities of appropriate size, lighting, and flooring quality are available for all sports in all parts of the country.

Currently, sports such as futsal and handball struggle to find venues that meet acceptable internationally recognised standards. This retards their growth and leads to unnecessary competition between different sports to book the few suitable venues. Surprisingly, the FA does not have a list of futsal-compliant venues across England, despite being futsal's NGB, so it cannot produce a spatially co-ordinated futsal strategy. Sport England's Active Places website provides facility information relevant to some, but not all, sports and this also needs to be addressed so that relevant information on existing infrastructure is available for all sports. Co-ordination would be improved, and available funds would be used more efficiently and effectively, if new or refurbished sports

facilities were planned, built, and managed only after detailed input by informed representatives from all sports that might use them.

The conclusion we draw from our experiences with the FA's governance of futsal is that it would be unwise to rely on sport NGBs alone when co-ordinating local delivery of sport and recreation. Instead, we recommend that the sports clubs, and elected officials from the leagues in which teams from these clubs play, are the appropriate level of informed stakeholder who should be involved at all stages when planning local delivery of organised sports.

**2. How can children and young people be encouraged to participate in sport and recreation both at school and outside school, and lead an active lifestyle? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.**

We are stating the obvious here but, for a young person to want to participate, a sport needs to be safe, fun to play, available at a nearby venue, and reasonably inexpensive. Feedback from young futsal participants is that that the sport is both safe and fun, and many players prefer it to other team sports such as football or rugby. However, the growth of this and other indoor sports is held back by the patchy and uncoordinated distribution of appropriate venues (as mentioned above) and also by the hire cost of available venues.

In many other countries (e.g. Spain and Portugal), sports facilities are built by national or municipal authorities as a public good and hired out to community sports groups for either no, or a very low, fee. In contrast, in the UK it can cost more than £100 an hour to hire a local sports hall for a team sport. This therefore means that each participant usually needs to be charged in the region of £5 per training session or match just to cover venue hire costs, even when volunteer coaching staff work for free. At least two or three training sessions per week are necessary to become proficient at any sport, so it is easy to see how a parent of two children with an interest in an indoor sport may end up paying monthly fees of £120 or more, on top of any annual registration and kit fees. This is clearly prohibitive for poorer parents and means that their children are excluded from a wide range of indoor sports and recreational activities.

**3. How can adults of all ages and backgrounds, particularly those from under-represented groups, including women and girls, ethnic minorities, disabled people, older people, and those from less affluent backgrounds, be encouraged to lead more active lifestyles? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.**

Our answer to the previous question about the high cost of indoor facility hire in the UK also goes some way towards answering this question. Not everyone enjoys the outdoors during a British winter; and playing a team sport on a muddy or frozen pitch in February does not appeal to all. The obvious solution to this is to offer an opportunity to play either a different *indoor* sport, or an indoor

version of an outdoor sport, during the winter months. Indeed, several youth football leagues (e.g. the Berkshire Youth League) have done just that, and their young people play futsal during the coldest winter months and football for the rest of the season. However, this is not usually the case for adult sports for reasons of both tradition and cost<sup>1</sup>.

This means that under-represented groups, and particularly those who are less affluent, face a more limited choice of available activities than many of their counterparts in other European countries in which the cost of participation is lower across most sports.

**4. *Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation*, the Government's 2015 sports strategy, outlines five outcome priorities: physical health, mental health, individual development, social and community development and economic development. Are these the right priorities and how successful has the government been in measuring and delivering these outcomes to date?**

These are all clearly important strategic outcomes. However, there may be a lack of strategic fit between some of them because of tactical trade-offs between, for example, social versus economic development, or the development of widespread physical and mental health versus individual development.

Futsal once again provides a good example of how an NGB has delivered tactical responses that undermine these five strategic priorities. In the case of futsal, this was achieved when this year the FA withdrew all funding and support for the men's national futsal team (which then attracted a humiliating UEFA fine) and reduced the FA's wider futsal funding by approximately 90%. Even before this major reduction in support, the FA had in 2019 split the futsal community by forming a new league structure without proper community consultation or consent. The FA has argued that their actions are designed to improve the economic development of futsal but there is no evidence that this has occurred. Instead, their tactics have led to social disruption, the closure of several futsal clubs, and a consequent lack of opportunities for those who have had their sport taken away from them by an unaccountable NGB<sup>2</sup>. This example shows how NGB tactical confusion and incompetence can undermine strategic intentions.

We have not yet come across any evidence of strategic competence within the FA, especially in relation to futsal, and this may be a common problem across the sports sector. Most sports governing bodies are monopolies. They tend to attract staff with an interest in sport, but not necessarily the high-level skills required to develop appropriate strategies in what are often quite large and diffuse organisations. These rather mediocre levels of strategic competence

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Berkshire Youth League operates from September to April. Two-thirds of its annual budget is spent on just six weeks of indoor winter futsal, with only a third of the budget required for the other 26 weeks of football. Most of the futsal expenditure is on venue hire.

<sup>2</sup> Legal opinion received by the NFL suggests that this constitutes abuse of a dominant market position and is therefore in breach of the Competition Act 1998.

within a monopoly lead to poor decisions when appropriate checks and balances to ensure accountability are also missing.

If the government wishes to ensure accurate measurement and effective delivery of the stated strategic priorities then it should consider forming a high-level and independent sports and recreation regulatory body to oversee the NGB monopolies tasked with delivering much of the strategy. Sport England cannot fulfil this responsibility because it is too deeply enmeshed in the overall "complex" of sports NGBs and is therefore unable to provide focused, objective, and independent governance leadership.

## **5. Is government capturing an accurate picture of how people participate in sport and recreation activities in its data collection? How could this be improved?**

We cannot speak for other sports, but we know that the FA's data collection for futsal participation is historically poor and conflates different types of *football* participation with futsal participation. We therefore have very uncertain data on participation in our sport, with "official" FA figures at considerable variance with "unofficial" club reports.

Participation data for organised sports should be collected via standardised templates and subjected to standard data Quality Control and Quality Assurance measures before publication.

## **6. How can racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and ableism in sport be tackled?**

Sports governing bodies have clearly made considerable progress in the right direction, but constant vigilance is required plus recognition that a Platonic ideal of a discrimination-free world will never be fully achieved, so action will always be required.

However, it is obviously also important to recognise an individual's right to free speech under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This is not always observed in sport. For example, the FA's notorious "catch all" Rule E3 (which Manchester United's Cavani has recently fallen foul of) substantially overreaches antidiscrimination law and has a potentially chilling effect on free speech. The effect of this is to bring the FA's disciplinary system into disrepute, which then plays into the hands of the "you can't say anything these days" brigade as well as genuine racists and others who engage in unlawful discriminatory behaviour.

NGB rules on discrimination should comply with the law but NGBs should not seek to invent their own rules about what is or is not discriminatory.

**7. What can be done to improve and implement effective duty of care and safeguarding standards for sports and recreation activities at all levels?**

This is an area in which the FA has made considerable progress after the appalling cases of abuse that have come to public attention over the past few years.

Again, constant vigilance is required, but our impression is that this is one area in which the FA has performed well.

**8. What are the opportunities and challenges facing elite sports in the UK and what can be done to make national sports governing bodies more accountable? For example, accountability for representing and protecting their membership, promoting their sport and maximising participation.**

Our experience of the FA provides an example of how *not* to act as an accountable NGB, so we are unsure of its wider applicability to sports across the UK. However, it might be a useful negative case study and illustrates how important it is for a monopoly organisation such as a sport NGB to have rigorous accountability measures in place.

Sport England's *A Code for Sports Governance*, which the FA is obliged to follow, states: "Organisations shall be transparent and accountable, engaging effectively with stakeholders and nurturing internal democracy." Unfortunately, the FA's governance of futsal fulfils none of these criteria. It has, instead, delegated futsal governance to a subcommittee that is unelected by futsal stakeholders, and which refuses to publish agendas or minutes, or consult with the futsal community.

This lack of accountability has led to a completely unnecessary and toxic split in the futsal community, with those who support accountable and democratically-based governance on one side. On the other side are those who are content with an authoritarian and unaccountable FA governance model, either because they are beneficiaries of that system or because they do not believe that change is possible.

The consequence of this split is a time-wasting, zero-sum conflict between unpaid volunteers for the "soul" of futsal that would never have occurred if the FA had done its job as an NGB, been held accountable to futsal stakeholders, and complied with *A Code for Sports Governance*.

**9. What successful policy interventions have other countries used to encourage people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to participate in sport and recreation, and lead more active lifestyles?**

We would urge the committee to study the way in which indoor sport and recreation is provided in countries such as Spain and Portugal.

Our experience of these countries is that sports facilities are planned, built, and managed as a public good and for all sports. Children and young people in even remote areas and from poor families therefore have an opportunity to try many different recreational activities at low or no cost throughout their formative years. This then naturally translates into a more active adulthood.

We need to ask as a nation, even if we focus on only the narrow economic issue: Is it economically preferable to subsidise sport to a level at which no participant is excluded on the basis of cost, or is it preferable to subsidise the treatment and care of physically unfit individuals later in life?

## **10. Should there be a national plan for sport and recreation? Why/why not?**

Yes, there should be a national plan for sport and recreation, because without a strategic national plan any local solutions will be uncoordinated and will result in a postcode lottery of provision. It makes no sense, for example, for Oxfordshire to build facilities without consideration of similar initiatives in adjacent counties. The national plan therefore needs to provide an integrated strategy with a hierarchy of coordinated provision from the local (town and district) up to the national level. *Laissez faire* cannot deliver this.

The development of a plan should not be left in the hands of sports administrators but must involve local communities and the players, coaches, volunteer club and league officials, and parents who underpin most community-based sport and recreational provision. This is because our experience of sports administrators in the FA, with a few honourable exceptions, is that they of mediocre ability and are rapidly socialised into the narrow groupthink typical of an unaccountable monopoly. Their contribution to a national plan is therefore quite likely to be unimaginative, self-interested, and unrepresentative of wider societal needs.

We therefore recommend a bottom-up, community-based approach to plan development.

In summary, we hope that in this submission we have provided you with adequate answers to the inquiry questions, using futsal as a model example of a community-based amateur sport with poor governance by the NGB for a completely different sport. We doubt that many other sports in England find themselves in such an unfortunate position, but discussions with colleagues in other sports have revealed at least some common problems that might be addressed by:

- A co-ordinated national plan for sport and recreation;
- Segmentation of that plan by facility type;
- Input to sport and recreational facility planning, construction, and operation by local community representatives for every sport and recreational activity;
- Co-ordinated "layering" of sports facility planning, within an integrated hierarchy from local to national level.

- Detailed review of the extent to which venue hire cost is a barrier to entry for indoor sports for disadvantaged groups;
- Review of the governance structures for all sports to ensure that they are fully accountable to relevant stakeholders; and
- Consideration of the formation an independent sports regulatory body to provide effective oversight of sports NGB monopolies.

Once again, I would like to thank Committee Members for considering this submission and I am very happy to provide you with any further evidence or information upon request.

Peter Sharples

Secretary, National Futsal League

*20 December 2020*