

## Lauren Martin – Written evidence (NPS0007)

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1. The focus of this submission is on the relationship between sport and recreation and civic engagement. The main argument is that a national conversation on the ability of physical activity to rebuild and reconnect society post-Brexit and post-Covid-19 is necessary now more than ever. A 'national plan' for sport and recreation demands a focus on the 'transition points' in which we may connect a disconnected society back together.
2. This submission will address the three interrelated points, outlined below, which the Committee might wish to consider going forward. These points will provide the structure of this submission and fit in more broadly with the questions outlined in the call for evidence surrounding engagement with sport and recreation from adults of *all* backgrounds (Q3), what the government's priorities should be going forward (Q4) and, whether there ought to be a national plan for sport and recreation (Q10).
  - a. *The Civic Journey*: How can sport and recreation provide citizens with a sense of belonging and confidence about both their future and their community?
  - b. *Fixing the Disconnect*: How can sport and recreation be used to nurture fresh relationships and to reconnect an increasingly divided society?
  - c. *Sport and Mental Health*: How can sport and recreation help to overcome the deepening mental health crisis?
3. My insights are driven predominantly by the overarching concern with point c: mental health and sport's ability to connect people together, overcoming battles of loneliness and social isolation. I hope that my own experiences as Wellbeing Officer of the University of Sheffield Triathlon Club will provide the Committee with 'street-level' insights that are invaluable in terms of understanding the positive impact of physical activity. The evidence given in this submission is based entirely on my own views, not those of the club.

### *The Civic Journey*

4. A key background document for understanding the approach I put forward is the House of Lords Citizenship and Engagement Committee's Report of Session 2017-19 '*The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*'. It is in this report that the idea of a 'civic journey' - a framework for individuals for benefitting from and contributing to society - was first discussed, taking into account the different transition points in an individual's life stage from which they can become more engaged citizens. In practical terms for sport and recreation, this may take form in a focus on points at which people become *disengaged* with sport and recreation, preventing such disengagement in the first instance and

encouraging reengagement in the second. Two 'transition points' which the Committee may wish to consider to create a comprehensive national plan include ensuring girls do not become disengaged with sport beyond their primary school years and that the elderly are provided with sufficient opportunity to engage with sport and recreation within their local communities. Of course, these are not the only points which ought to be considered, and the Committee should explore other points in the life stage at which engagement with sport and recreation can be nurtured.

5. The value of viewing sport and recreation through this lens is that it provides a comprehensive framework from which otherwise chaotic and fragmented policies may be joined. Thus far, the approach to sport and recreation has been marred by lack of clarity because responsibility for policy execution does not fall under the remit of one department or national governing body. Encouraging a focus from all on the civic journey and providing policy recommendations that ensure engagement with sport and recreation through the *entire* lifespan will help the national plan to be *holistic*. Indeed, an apt quote from the Lords report is that "initiatives are too often not deep rooted and pursued with insufficient vigour". A new national plan for sport focused on civic engagement at different entry and exit points can address this.

#### *Ensuring Inclusivity and Fixing the Disconnect*

6. A further benefit of this framework related to point b. is that sport-as-civic-engagement facilitates a focus on the obstacles facing different groups at different stages of their lifespan. It is well documented that girls and people of black and minority ethnic backgrounds are less engaged with sport on the whole. A focus on the civic journey naturally leads to discussion on the approach needed to ensure that these groups do not become totally disengaged.
7. On this point, the approach taken by the University of Sheffield Triathlon Club to ensure inclusivity and engagement is worth noting. Triathlon is a sport dominated by men who are overwhelmingly white and middle class and thus the club works hard to ensure that participation from all groups is possible. Every year we run a series of 'Give it a Go' events which are free to participants and give them the opportunity to try out the sport in a pressure-and-cost-free environment. We also have equipment including bikes for members to use free of charge so that everyone can participate regardless of their financial situation. We hope that by prioritising accessibility by investing in club equipment we can ensure that participation from all groups is encouraged. It would serve other much larger clubs to run similar schemes so that everyone can participate in a more active lifestyle.
8. The Committee asks what the Government's main priority going forward ought to be. I argue that a key priority needs to be focused on re-connecting society going forward. Sport has the unique ability to bring together people of all backgrounds and political leanings. It would be a mistake to miss the opportunity to use this ability post-Brexit and post-Covid-19. Indeed, a focus on sport-as-citizenship will help to provide a

real sense of belonging and clarity about the relationship between citizens themselves but also between citizens and state. While it is naive to think that sport and recreation alone can reconnect a disconnected society, sport and recreation is a key starting point from which relationships can be forged and bridges built. The aim here is not to force people into an active lifestyle, but to nudge them in the right direction by facilitating discussions surrounding health, relationships and sport and recreation. Perhaps what is more needed than a national 'plan' is a national conversation.

### *Mental Health*

9. Finally, and most importantly, mental health is what connects all the above points; without a focus on the role of sport and recreation in the ongoing mental health crisis, any national plan will fall by the wayside. As Wellbeing Officer, I have seen the ability of leading an active lifestyle to support good mental health. Throughout the pandemic, I have seen members use exercise as a tool to cope with lockdowns and as a way to remain connected with others in a time of mandatory isolation. On a personal level, staying active has helped me to overcome the normal stresses of university life, but also the unique challenges facing a student studying online during a pandemic, away from family and isolated from friends. It has been an opportunity to 'escape' and de-stress and, importantly, it has ensured I have daily routine and structure. I am sure that this is the case for students (and, indeed, non-students) up and down the country.

*10 January 2021*