Jamie Foale – Written evidence (NPS0015)

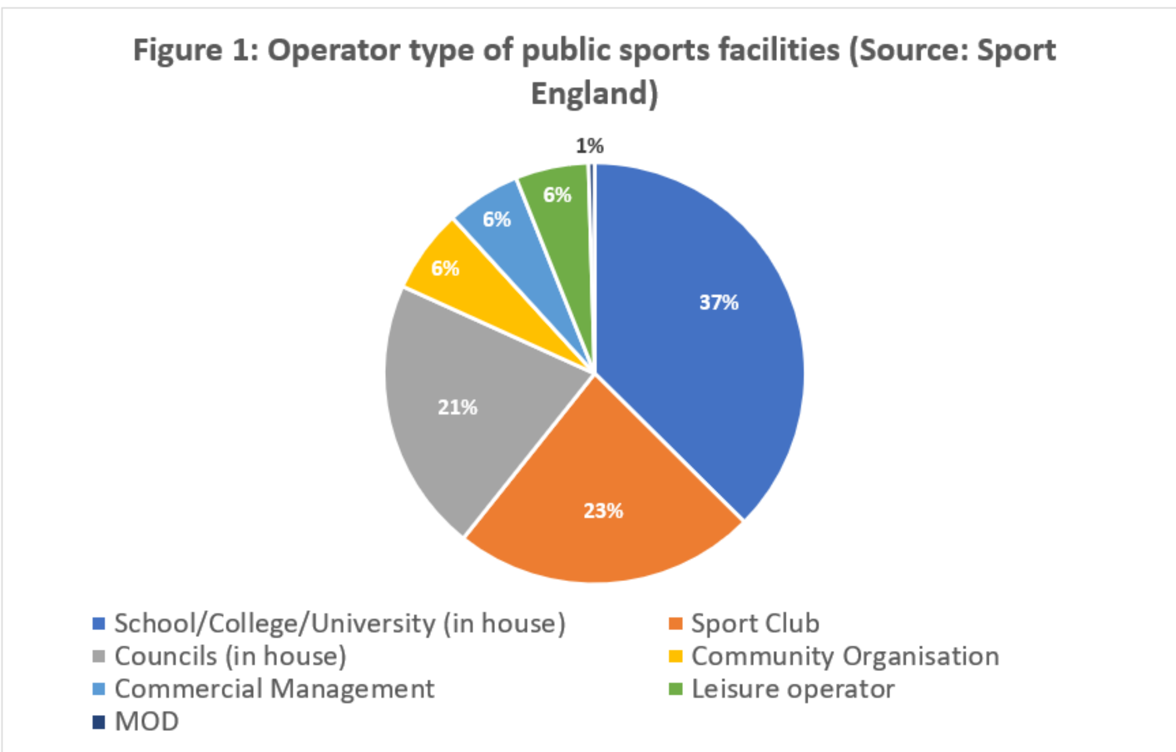
Written evidence submitted by Jamie Foale, CEO, Playfinder

Background

1. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the National Plan for Sport and Recreation Committee and hope that my experience after working in the market with a broad range of stakeholders is valuable.

2. Playfinder is an online booking platform for sports facilities, created in 2013, created after the frustrations when trying to find and book places to play sport.

3. There are over 140,000 different sports facilities in the country managed by over 30,000 operators. There are many different types of operator of facility, from council, leisure trust, school and university, sports club, community centre, commercial and even some MOD facilities are available to the public (Figure 1).



The data gaps in UK sport are resulting in inactivity and inefficiency

4. Digital reach remains limited in the market: a Football Foundation survey found 46% of funded venues were still using paper pen or Microsoft Excel to manage bookings; the Sport and Recreation Alliance found only 35% of sport clubs have online bookings.

5. A survey of 1,815 people conducted by ComRes for Sport England found that it is twice as easy to order a takeaway than it is to book a sport or fitness class online. Furthermore, 20% of adults have been put off doing a sport or physical activity because it was too difficult to find or book online.

6. According to Sport England's Active Lives survey, 25.5% of people in England (11.6m) are inactive so do less than 30 minutes of activity a week, a statistic which includes walking for travel or leisure.

Most that operate in the industry feel a collective responsibility to improve access to sport

7. In March 2013 when I first started working in the industry, I quickly realised this wasn't going to be a normal commercial environment to operate in. Sport runs through the fabric of the community, often depending on the work of volunteers, and plays a central part to the health and wellbeing of the country, and as a result there are special conditions that come with operating in the market, almost an unwritten contract that means that whatever we do it must be to improve people's access to sport and increase participation.

8. Part of this exchange is that we must all contribute to the overall understanding of who plays sport, where and when, so that those who operate in the industry can improve delivery to everyone.

9. That was what I believed anyway, and still do think is possible, however my experience is that there are weaknesses in the chain and missed opportunities.

The data collection process in the industry is antiquated

10. When talking about data in this context I mean the participation data which gives us the detail of how many people are engaging in each sport and physical activity.

11. The current model, Sport England's Active Lives survey, which is the predominant data source and an Official Statistic, is a 'push to web' survey involving a sample size of c. 175,000 who take part voluntarily and log their time. In return participants receive a £5 voucher given on completion.

12. While this seems to be a relatively large sample, the nature of it seems to depend on a) people taking the time to complete this voluntarily; b) the registered addresses, which may exclude e.g. students and other young people; c) an honest self-assessment, which I suspect much like asking people how much they drink, is not going to be the truest picture.

13. Separately, National Governing Bodies (NGBs) such as the LTA, FA, RFU keep their own statistics about participation in their sports, but this can often

exclude large sections of recreational players. For example, the FA's statistics only involve affiliated players, meaning those participating in soccer centres such as Powerleague, Goals and Playfootball can be excluded.

The case to instigate change

14. The coronavirus pandemic has put health and fitness at the forefront of the national picture, both in its importance to every single person as for example obese people are significantly more likely to become seriously ill with Covid-19 (source: Gov.uk), and also for the sector which has been particularly hard hit: before the pandemic it had increasingly become a low margin industry vulnerable to economic shocks and this was the biggest one imaginable.

15. People's habits about how they 'consume' sport and physical activity were changing enormously even before the pandemic. The recreational forms of sport are increasingly central to people's lives, with the flexibility and often lower cost associated to not playing in organised leagues or joining affiliated clubs. The roll out of all-weather pitches (AWPs) has been a great improvement but also means the formats are being broken down from e.g. 11-a-side football or hockey to 5-a-side, 15-a-side rugby to tag and touch rugby, the participation data of which are largely unknown to NGBs and funding bodies.

16. Therefore an updated methodology that helps us understand who's playing sport would seem to be of upmost importance, as you can't improve what you don't measure. Support to operators of activities and venues will be required now more than ever, and the government has ringfenced significant funding (£550m) for further facility improvements, so there is no better time to 'build back better' and create a sustainable way of collecting accurate data.

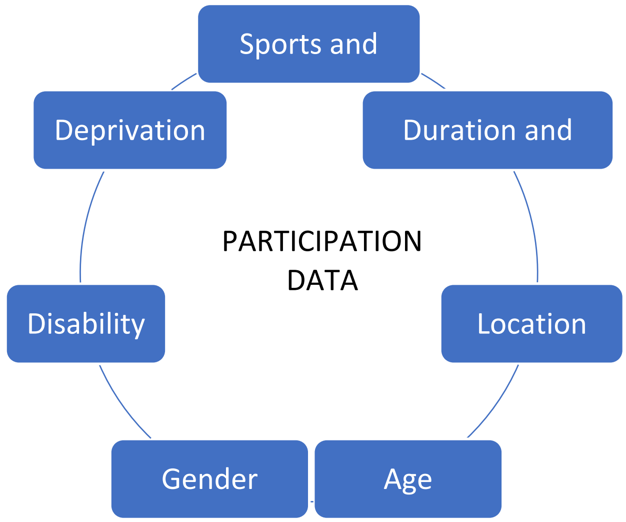
The role digital can play

17. For some time the industry has been trying to catch up with modern consumer habits and operational processes through the introduction of digital technologies. This was part of HMG's Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation plan, including the statement that "all organisations that receive funding from Sport England will be required to make data which is relevant to getting more people involved in sport and physical activity publicly available."

18. When looking for the most reliable data it is best to look for what could be considered the 'source', and in this context that could be described as the schedules of activities and facilities that occur. This is the context in which you'd expect to find the most honest and reliable data, as it is used for putting on the activity and often involves a financial transaction.

19. Figure 2 shows the types of participation data that are available through booking systems. There are some data points that are inherently known by nature of the schedule, others that are provided within a payment journey, and others with any accounts or membership registration process. All data would be anonymised and GDPR compliant, as well as not commercially sensitive for the operator (for example, giving revenue figures).

Figure 2: participation data (Source: Sport England and internal research)



20. By analysing this data, we can see not just the trends per sport, but also the level of accessibility and participation amongst socio-economic groups, ages, genders, and disability levels. Ethnicity is also possible but requires separate protections and conditions for processing being Special category data under GDPR.

Misaligned strategies to date

21. Sport England, UK Active and other bodies have been supportive of a transition to a more digital sector through inclusion in their strategy and the funding and support of OpenActive, a programme seeks to make opportunity data for facilities and sessions openly available. However there has been limited ambition on the end result of building a more accurate national picture of participation.

22. As para. 16 quotes, HMG's Sporting Future strategy says new funding should come with a requirement to make information on sports and physical activity publicly accessible. And while within funding agreements there are often clauses requiring the beneficiary to feed back on the efficacy of such funding, this is mostly done through a manual data input on an annual basis, which can often lead to inaccuracies.

Taking the opportunity to tie up loose ends

23. There seems to be a clear path which would capitalise on existing work to achieve a number of goals, rebuilding a stronger industry that is more data-driven and accessible.

24. All funding grants should be given not only with the condition of providing digital access to consumers, they should also come with a condition of feeding back participation data back to the funding body (exchange shown in Figure 3).

25. There should also be a publicly accessible central repository that would give an accurate picture of participation trends, helping NGBs develop their sports appropriately, people allocate funding in projects where there was a proven need.

26. Operators in the industry should be encouraged if not mandated to contribute their non-sensitive participation data to this central repository, so that the picture we get from 175,000 volunteers grows to millions and provided in real time.

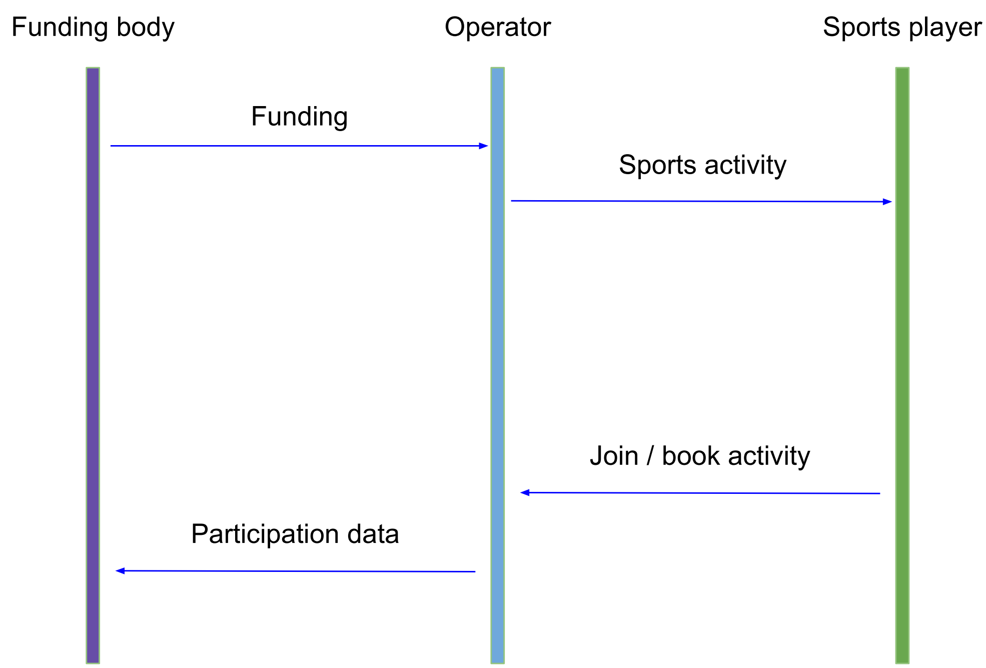


Figure 3: exchange between Funding bodies, Operators and Players

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