

Ian Halliday – Written evidence (NPS0040)

HOW CAN WE LEAD MORE ACTIVE LIFESTYLES?

RESPONSE TO CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Q1 RESPONSE

Aside from my voluntary coaching roles, I also work full time for a local authority and have over 40 years' experience of such work. As such, I feel that I am well placed to comment in response to this question. My coaching role causes me to directly interact with the operators of the Manchester Regional Arena and Stanley Park Blackpool. Through my coaching contacts I am regularly updated on and discuss their experiences at various other venues across England and Scotland.

The Covid pandemic has highlighted a number of facility management issues that have been a hindrance to clubs and coaches across the UK for some years. Very few clubs have the luxury of ownership or management control of the facility at which they operate. The vast majority are at the mercy of local authorities or commissioned providers, many of whose managers and staff have limited knowledge or expertise in running an athletics track.

Those local authorities have other priorities to contend with, and their sports and leisure facilities are easy targets when budget reductions are necessary, for example to prop up adult social care services. They are also easily sacrificed during times of crisis. During Covid, the reopening of some facilities during the Summer, when restrictions were relaxed, was delayed as staff had been redeployed to other parts of the Council, helping with tasks such as food parcel delivery and support to the street homeless.

When budgets are tight, local authorities and (where this is the case) their commissioned operators think commercially. Books have to be balanced so activities that bring the most revenue in come first. Athletics tracks and those that use them are not big earners. Some recent examples:

- At Manchester Regional Arena, during the winter months, when multi event athletes and any others who need to continue work on technical events need indoor access the most, at least two weekends are unavailable due to the operator taking commercially lucrative bookings for Crossfit events. This is in addition to a week being booked out in February, right in the middle of the indoor competitive season for use as a show court for the British Squash Championships
- At Stanley Park, as Covid restrictions were relaxed in the Summer, and the sequence of those relaxations was outdoor then indoor, the outdoor track did not open until over a month after the on-site gym and indoor leisure centre. I was told first hand by the Head of Sport and Leisure that this was because gym members pay valuable monthly subscriptions and the operator needed to get their income coming in as soon as possible

- At Bolton's track, the indoor track is only available to the club's athletes until 11.45 on a Saturday morning because the operator takes bookings from local residents for children's birthday parties and athletes have to vacate the premises in order for a bouncy castle and buffet table to be set up. The impact of this on the state of the track is as unpleasant as you might imagine. The operator hasn't sought fit to clean it for at least three years
- My colleague at a club in Glasgow advised me on an occasion during last winter that her group had been forced to train outside in snow and ice in January due to the operator taking a booking for a cat show

Investment in maintenance and upkeep of tracks at local authority-run venues is a further concern. The comment above regarding lack of cleaning of a track is by no means isolated. Stanley Park, once a leading venue in the North of England, is in a desperate state and failed its track inspection earlier this year. Rochdale's track was brand new in the early 2000s and has long since fallen into neglect, unfit to host even league level events. At the Regional Arena, the relaying of the outdoor track has been a welcome, though overdue development. The same activity with the indoor track cannot come soon enough.

Three things need to happen:

- preferably, the Government needs to make a genuine commitment to athletics and adequately fund local authorities to operate venues (and then the operators be compelled to ring fence that money to make sure it doesn't get siphoned off to plug other budget gaps).
- otherwise, consideration needs to be given to adequately funding co-partnership arrangements, where clubs get to manage their own facility, with sufficient resources to enable day to day maintenance and upkeep, and support in securing further inward investment to tackle the big ticket repair and upgrade jobs when they become necessary.
- If local authorities are to continue to run athletics venues, there needs to be a commitment from them to recruit managers and staff with some interest in the sport and appreciation of users needs, in terms of the track, the infield and the equipment, and the athletics training and competition calendar.

Q2 RESPONSE

The loss of School Sports Partnerships, and the officers that worked in them, has been a significant factor in the reduction in young people trying new sports and activities, developing an interest in them and having the opportunity to be fed into clubs who may be able to nurture and develop the talent and interest they may have.

SSPs were instrumental in helping primary schools to deliver competition for their pupils, and to build links with the secondary schools they would go on to. They were also important in forging links with sports clubs in their area and signposting children with ability and interest in a sport towards them.

There needs to be a return to properly funded and encouraged SSPs, across the country, so that there is no postcode lottery of access, and that, wherever children go to school, their opportunities to try new sports and develop their ability and interest in them are equal and sufficient.

Too few schools have adequate facilities for delivering good quality sport and physical activity on site. This is particularly prevalent in primary schools and most schools in our most densely populated towns and cities. Many also have limited means to transport children to a suitable facility, assuming there is one reasonably close by. As a consequence, a postcode lottery of inequality develops. I have personally visited, in the course of my coaching work, facilities at either end of the spectrum. Some have multi million pound indoor and outdoor facilities to make use of, others have a tiny hall that also serves as the dining room.

Q3 RESPONSE

I do think that local authority sports development services (and some of their commissioned providers) largely do good work in trying to promote engagement in sport and physical activity by adults across the country, working hard to promote the public health benefits of exercise. This is one area in which Covid has indirectly brought about some benefit in that it has sharpened the focus on restoring people's fitness after Covid through steady but incremental exercise, and also the benefits of exercise as a preventative tool, to help people minimise the long term impact if they are unfortunate enough to contract it.

There remain issues of a similar nature to those described in Q1 above in relation to athletics. Funding remains an issue impacting the ability of local authorities even to maintain the status quo, never mind develop and enhance their offer. In my local Borough (Wyre), there is currently a battle on to retain the local swimming pool in Fleetwood, a town with chronic public health issues and significant deprivation, because the local authority is facing a budget shortfall due to Covid that, as yet, the Government has been unable to help with.

Q4 RESPONSE

In general I would agree that the range of priorities listed are about right, and are set out in the right order. I think there has been progress in recent years, highlighted by Covid, in linking the benefits of exercise on mental health, and a lot of good work done locally and nationally to promote this.

Where more could be done? There are still significant areas of the country, particularly those that are more deprived, where physical health, diet and nutrition are very poor, leading to life limiting conditions and increased demand on the NHS and other public services. It is interesting that the lack of alternative things for people to do during Covid lockdowns has caused people to, by default, find out about the benefits of really simple forms of exercise like walking, cycling or just playing sport on the beach or in a park. When Covid is behind us and restrictions are relaxed, the challenge for Government, the sport and leisure sector and public health is to maintain engagement and interest in such

activities, encouraging people to have a balance, when the pub / restaurant is calling them back.

Going back to my response to Q3, availability of local, affordable and well maintained facilities is a challenge that urgently needs addressing. Walking and cycling will suit many, but latent interest in trying other things, especially amongst children and young people, who are inquisitive and need to test a few things out before settling on something, need to be encouraged, not squashed because it's not available or too expensive.

A final point about the links to health, some sports are struggling to sustain themselves in terms of players and administrators, yet could be helped by initiatives such as use of the GP Exercise Referral Scheme. Crown Green Bowls is one such example, urgently needing an influx of new blood to keep it going in some areas, it is the sort of sport that could be ideal for people needing exercise as therapy to be directed towards to try and see if they like it. If they do, the sport may end up with many new participants.

Q5 RESPONSE

I am not particularly sighted on this, though I do regularly see figures from my own sport of athletics and in a wider sense from other NGBs and Sport England, and it would seem that there is an improving sense of understanding of the picture locally and nationally

Q6 RESPONSE

My own sport of athletics is, I feel, a particularly inclusive one, where anyone can get on and enjoy it, and have opportunities to develop their interest and passion. There are many different and excellent role models to aspire to, across ambulant and para disciplines, and from BAME backgrounds.

My main current concern in terms of issues of discrimination and abuse lies with social media. It can be a positive tool for tackling such issues and has been used very effectively by many high profile sportspeople from various disciplines. However, there have been many examples where it can also be hurtful, destructive and debilitating to be on the end of cowardly and unpleasant social media abuse.

Tough penalties need to be in place and regularly enforced against those who commit such abuse, to deter others from thinking it is acceptable. Social media companies need to play their part too.

Even at a much lower, grass roots level, social media issues can pervade into the day to day running of groups and clubs, causing coaches, club officials and referees to give up the sport as they don't need to be on the end of such unpleasantness when most are giving their time for free. I have witnessed numerous examples of such issues over the past decade at grass roots, club level.

My other concern is with the behaviour of spectators and how this is policed, particularly at football matches though, sadly, not exclusively. Anyone who

thought the high profile incident at Chelsea with Raheem Sterling was an isolated one has no idea how football crowds behave. No doubt any professional footballer in any of the 92 clubs would be able to give an account where they or a team mate, or their manager have been subject to the same sort of vile treatment from 'supporters'.

Government, football authorities, clubs and police need to work together to stamp such behaviour out with clear and decisive action against offenders, naming and shaming them where appropriate, so that decent people feel it is safe to attend matches in the future, when we are allowed back into them.

Q7 RESPONSE

Sports governing bodies and safeguarding agencies have made significant steps forward in recent years, in light of the horrific cases that have been brought to public attention over the past few years, not just in football, and not just in this country. Awareness is better, processes are better and conduct is better. We can never be complacent though, and it is important that safeguarding policies and procedures are constantly kept under review and revised where necessary.

As with Q6 above, technology brings with it new threats and opportunities for those seeking to cause harm. Safeguarding policies, procedures, licensing and training, particularly at grass roots level need to be continually reviewed and updated, so that they fully take account of potential risks from use of social media in connection with the running of groups, coaching of athletes and maintaining communication.

Q8 RESPONSE

Looking at my own sport, the governance landscape and hierarchy is confusing, even for someone like myself who has been in the sport actively as a coach and passively as a spectator, for many years. That confusing landscape of UK Sport, British Athletics, England Athletics etc is difficult for athletes, coaches, clubs and parents to navigate and make sense of. It needs simplifying and streamlining, so it is lean, efficient and easily accountable.

On encouraging participation, England Athletics has done much good work that I have seen to promote engagement across the disciplines, and, during Covid, has come up with some imaginative ideas to keep people involved, active and entertained. Where it has been less successful, in my view, has been in lobbying Government for some common sense interpretation of lockdown rules and Tier arrangements that would enable continued, legitimate participation in Covid safe environments rather than everyone being forced into the same parks and open spaces to undertake their permitted exercise. As mentioned in Q1 above, EA and the other national bodies, need to show greater assertiveness and strength with local authorities and venue operators to protect the ability of athletes, young and old, to use their local facility when they need to in order to continue their development, and for those facilities to be clean, well maintained and sufficiently equipped to the required standard. The neglect of facilities they have stood by and allowed over the past 10 years is a disgrace and they must be seen to be doing more, influencing downwards to those authorities and operators, and

upwards to DCMS with regard to adequately funding equitable provision across the country.

Aside from advocating for the upkeep and maintenance of existing facilities, the athletics governing bodies, individually and collectively, need to press much harder for the funding and development of new facilities, especially indoor ones. Athletics is an all year round sport, and our weather is getting more volatile, extreme and unpredictable. There is a serious shortage and sparse distribution of indoor training and competition facilities, with many athletes and coaches being more than 50 miles from the nearest such facility, with only a very small number of those being fully equipped to stage indoor competition. Until the developments in Birmingham for the Commonwealth Games have brought about the potential for a legacy indoor facility, there was nothing between Sheffield and London. The nearest indoor facilities for an athlete in Cumbria to aim for are at Gateshead or Manchester. In the South and South West the picture is no better.

Q9 RESPONSE

I am not particularly sighted on policy interventions and initiatives of other countries, though where I do observe them being in front of us is on the issue of facilities, as referenced in Q8 above, not just for clubs and municipally, but also in schools and colleges. The collegiate system in the USA is one many of our young athletes aspire to experience as they reach the appropriate age - I have one such individual in my group now and have had another previously who has followed such a route.

Why can't we follow it, but make it more accessible and affordable for those with modest budgets and from less affluent backgrounds. Too often, success of young athletes beyond Year 11 is linked to their academic ability, chosen path and financial means, in other words doing a degree at a university that is known for its sports facilities and prowess. There are plenty of talented young athletes who would prefer to go down a vocational route when they leave school and be a builder, plumber, electrician for example. Why shouldn't they have access to the same sort of sporting facilities as those who go to university?

Q10 RESPONSE

The answer is yes, if for nothing else to bring a sense of co-ordination of governance, funding and accountability. It needs to be clear, easily understood, easily engaged with and practically based, with clear ambitions and realistic, achievable targets. Most of all, it needs to be fully funded, long-term.

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