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Question 1

- 1 The local sport and physical activity landscape is very fragmented, and impetus for greater co-ordination would certainly be valuable.
- 2 It is, therefore, positive that the new Sport England strategy emphasises much needed decentralisation and collaboration to develop contextually-grounded approaches to enabling active lifestyles. However, there would be benefit in clarifying the geographic scope of this decentralisation, both in terms of the local level(s) at which collaboration may be promoted and the extent to which Sport England may have capacity and resources to initiate new collaborative approaches on a widespread, or else targeted, basis.
- 3 From the turn of the century, there was significant national impetus for creating common local structures for co-ordination. Levels of participation continued to stagnate, however. Therefore, unless initiated on the basis of local need, further widespread structural reform would not be recommended. Instead, we would identify greater potential in reform, learning, evaluation and improvement within and across current organisational structures that exist at local levels.
- 4 Shared funding and budgeting amongst local organisations would be a key incentive towards collaborative approaches and greater co-ordination. Devolving decisions on allocation of some national funding to local organisations would also likely support more contextually-informed approaches to enabling physical activity, especially amongst underrepresented groups. Recognition of the skills required to lead collaborative approaches is relatively limited. Targeted investment in capacity development in this regard would be beneficial.
- 5 Further, doctoral research by Rigby identified how local cross-stakeholder networks may foster 'connections' within local physical activity systems through three key leadership practices: i) creating forums for the integrated exchange of information and knowledge, particularly amongst organisations outwith the traditional sport and physical activity sector; ii) actively distribute leadership by modelling appropriate behaviours, identifying clear roles for stakeholders, and supporting them to recognise the leadership they already offer (*e.g.* see Sport England Local Delivery Pilots); and iii) generating 'togetherness' through developing congruent cross-sectoral policies (and possibly formalised targets), particularly with public health teams, and public engagement activities to ensure responsiveness to local needs.

Question 2

- 6 There is an urgent need for incentives and impetus for local collaboration to enable co-ordinated provision and pathways for young people. Lindsey et al (2020) identified some unintended and harmful consequences that have emerged from solely devolving PE and Sport Premium Funding to individual primary schools. Co-ordination and sharing of expertise between primary and secondary schools is ad-hoc, and training programmes for school staff would be beneficial. A re-balancing of impetus and funding to include secondary schools is important in halting declines in provision and to improve engagement in later childhood. Engaging and, if not, regulating private providers working in primary schools is needed to address some poor practices and to sustainably improve provision. Enhancing pathways from schools through to participation outside schools would require the commitment of greater resource and human capacity within schools or else amongst other local organisations.
- 7 Active Partnerships, together with other key local education agencies, could be importantly placed to lead enactment of some of the proposals above and generally develop a more co-ordinated approach to developing participation amongst young people. Greater funding for Active Partnerships would be required for them to have the capacity to undertake this role more substantially and, as with answer 1, enabling them to lead local decision making on funding priorities and distribution may help to better prioritise available resources.

Question 3

- 8 One key route into activity for those with, or at risk of, poorer health is via prescription or referral services. Recent years have seen the increased provision of alternative referral programmes, which support engagement in sports and recreation beyond traditional gym-based activities, for example.
- 9 Our research ([Oliver and Dodd-Reynolds](#)) demonstrates that exercise referral schemes have the potential to positively impact health and activity inequalities. Data show that schemes successfully engage those with poorer health, from ethnic minority backgrounds, or living in areas of deprivation, with local health-leisure collaboration vital for identifying and promoting access for targeted groups (Oliver et al., under review). However, untargeted referrals are currently pressurising scheme resources and the data suggests schemes are not well-placed to support patients with more complex needs (including those with a mental health condition, higher obesity, or living in a more deprived area). This may be particularly evident in alternative sport and recreation-based programmes (Oliver et al., 2016). We argue therefore that referral schemes are most effectively used as one part of a more comprehensive system of support for activity, with more substantial or cross-sector support appropriate for those with multiple complex barriers to activity.
- 10 Published evidence from research (Smith et al. 2019, 2020, 2021) conducted for Public Health England, the UK Chief Medical Officer's Physical Activity Guidelines, Sport England, and Disability Rights UK shows that to enable

more disabled people to be active the following are priorities. 1) More safe and accessible indoor and outdoors spaces to enjoy being active in needs creating; 2) A Moving Professionals programme needs creating that incorporates multiple professionals to make every contact count. Along with GPs, occupational therapists and social workers are vital to supporting disabled people get active and improve health. Occupational therapists and social workers require physical activity training at both university and CPD levels. They need to be formally identified in policy for the vital and different roles they play in getting people active; 3) Disabled children have fewer opportunities to be active than non-disabled children. Sport organisations, leisure facilities, and youth groups need to more inclusive and work with – not on – disabled children to know how best to do this.

Question 4

- 11 Rigby's aforementioned doctoral research highlighted that the 2015 sports strategy was well received among local stakeholders in the sport and recreation sector. At the time, these priorities were right in the sense that they catalysed collaboration and engagement outside the sector, as well as offering some flexibility for local authorities and County Sport Partnerships (now Active Partnerships) to meet community need and direct resources toward initiatives that had sport and recreation as their means, not end.
- 12 It is encouraging that the new Sport England strategy cites these priorities and offers continuity in progress to achieving such outcomes. The potential benefits of sport and recreation are well documented. As suggested elsewhere, it may not be prudent to change the goal posts at this time, rather pool efforts to achieving well-received and understood priorities. To do this, however, Active Partnerships and other local organisations in particular may require investment or other forms of support to generate appropriate surveillance and evaluation processes, a capacity issue noted in Rigby's research.

Question 5

- 13 The Active Lives and Active Lives Children surveys represent good approaches to collecting data on participation in sport, recreation and physical activity. However, sample sizes are mostly too small and would need to be increased in order for this data to effectively inform local strategy and decision making. This is particularly pertinent in large county authorities (*e.g.* Durham) that do not receive borough or district-level data.
- 14 The analysis and use of existing data remains a widespread weakness. Together with the local Active Partnership, Durham University's Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences and Research Methods Centre are currently undertaking modelling with the Active Lives dataset to better understand place-based inequalities, which may be beneficial to inform future use of this dataset. There is also a need for capacity building for analysis and evidence-use across the sport and recreation sector.

Question 10

- 15 The new Sport England strategy provides an important long-term framework for improving engagement in sport and recreation. Rather than a further new national plan for sport and recreation, it would be more beneficial for there to be cross-party and cross-governmental support for implementing and embedding the strategic approach developed by Sport England, and enabling further opportunities for people to achieve the updated UK Chief Medical Officers' recommendations for physical activity participation. Furthermore, existing policy frameworks for physical activity beyond sport and recreation may benefit from reformulation to account for these latest strategic developments.
- 16 Rigby's doctoral research has further highlighted a recognition among UK policy-makers and politicians that more can be done to increase cross-party and cross-governmental support in this way. To do this, however, they suggested that cross-departmental targets and shared budgets A further suggestion to truly demonstrate the benefit of sport and recreation across government would be to use ministerial appointments to ensure co-ordination and accountability across departments that may not ordinarily see sport and recreation (or its outcomes) as their business. A potential example in this regard may be embedding ministers with responsibility for sport, recreation and physical activity in the Department of Health and Social Care.

References

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