

Anonymous NPS4 – Written evidence (NPS0118)

Thank you for the chance to share my experiences that may hopefully offer some insight to issues relating to several of the questions posed in your Call for Evidence. My submission starts off with a specific focus on Futsal to highlight the kind of issues facing some sports. Based on this I then address several of the questions you pose.

While most of my submission is based on common knowledge and personal experience and therefore suitable for use in any way deemed appropriate by your Committee, I ask that before any part of my submission be made available outside of The Committee I should be notified and given chance to amend or update to best reflect the most up-to-date information I may be aware of at that time.

Although I am not involved with sports in any official capacity, my son is a sportsman. In facilitating his 15 year journey, I have engaged with sports communities in The USA and UK in many roles including fundraising and coaching. I have invested countless hours as chauffeur, taking the opportunity to get involved with other parents, coaches, event organisers, club and governing body officials and youth, men and women players at all levels.

In September 2020, an article in The Guardian provided the futsal community with the first news that all three national teams were being terminated immediately and commitments made to establish a Women's National Team shelved. The Men's First Team were due to play an important international game and were given contradictory and misleading information. They were told they could not participate due to funding constraints (even though the team offered to raise its own funds) as well as being told that they would get to play the game and supported further in the competition if they won the first game. Covid safety concern was blamed – while **football** teams under the same Governing Body were facilitated to continue playing. Just a few days before they were due to leave for the competition it transpired that no provision had in fact been made for the team to play. No support or counseling was offered to players struggling to deal with the sudden changes inflicted on them. The value of their often life long commitment and personal investment was destroyed by the Governing Body that was supposed to be their advocate and defender. Very recent (as yet purely speculative) decisions within The FA may seek to address this to some extent, but national sports teams should never be subject to this kind of treatment.

Such situations should not be possible. A highly popular international sport like Futsal that in 2018 was put at the heart of its latest strategy by The FA (The Governing Body for both football and futsal in England) (Fast Forward with Futsal) should not find itself at the mercy of hostile, unsupportive and inaccessible governance. Furthermore, Sports England funding provided to Futsal (some via The FA) requires compliance with their Code of Governance which clearly sets out minimum standards that appear to have been completely disregarded. (I am currently seeking additional information from Sport England and The FA with the support of my MP.) [Rev 28/01: See addendum for update on response from Sport

England via my MP]

The bedrock of sport must be integrity, respect, the maintenance of and willing adherence to established rules. Failure to embrace these elements would likely promote behaviour and realise outcomes that are the complete antithesis of what sport is supposed to be about. In the case of Futsal, while it is absolutely a sport in its own right (completely separate from football) (FIFA Futsal principles) its governance is buried in a governing body in such a manner as currently fails to deliver transparency and public accountability. The FA has stated at the highest level that it will not provide separate accounts for Futsal. There is a Futsal Committee within The FA, but this committee does not publish meeting minutes or other evidence in support of its operation. The FA has offered its financial hardship regarding Wembley as one factor leading to the slashing of its already meager futsal budget. Since Wembley has nothing to do with Futsal, the connection is at best highly tenuous.

While my specific Futsal example may appear narrow and initially not of general significance, I believe my journey and especially research in light of recent events highlights problem areas and possible solutions applicable to many of the questions posed by this House of Lords Call for Evidence. I am happy to provide additional information on request in support of the opinions presented here.

In response to the questions raised:

"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?"

Having started weekly futsal training sessions a few years ago, I had to try and find solutions for these problems. In my case, we had qualified coaches, a local sports centre prepared to work with us and a group of players keen to participate. In summary, after several months, attendance evolved to include a wider range of player ages than originally envisaged. In order to book the sports hall, I had to personally pay weeks in advance. I was fine subsidising the activity. To facilitate futsal coaching for 10-20 children for £60 for 90 minutes was good value in my opinion. I tried to get some support from appropriate sports funding bodies but none were interested until after we stopped the sessions. It wasn't even possible to get help with publicity from The County FA so the end result was that our local initiative based on a local need and opportunity failed because there was not even minimal support from sports bodies.

When starting the training sessions, I tried to find if any similar opportunities existed but there was no single place to look. Had there been a centralised database I could have may be found existing activities to support – or if there wasn't anything listed, our sessions would have had a recognised platform for

promotion.

A key factor in building solid participation is consistency. Especially during early phases, consistency is difficult to achieve. It is important that venues and organisers take this into account when plans are drawn up to introduce new activities. Once initial demand and viability is proven, planning needs to make allowance for inevitable deviance from 'the plan' and resist the temptation to make short term adjustments or last minute changes that could easily lead to failure through inconsistency.

Local Sports & Leisure Councils could be a great way to get local project organisers to network and cross pollinate ideas. By linking such councils with education, access to additional venues and closer integration with school activities could be facilitated. Initiatives like Big Local demonstrate what is possible. The villages communities of Hasland and Grassmoor are an example of how community self-investment can successfully be encouraged through public funding.

<https://www.grasslandhasmoor.co.uk/>

A national initiative as might be conjured up by such titles as 'Big Local Active', 'Local Active', 'Activate Local', 'Active Communities', 'Nation Active' could borrow some of Big Local's ideas. A key element is to avoid 'makework' and pointless duplication. Having a national body able to identify common elements in local plans and develop partly-approved project templates to streamline and expedite project implementation could bring benefits all around. What can be unhelpful is when competing plans dilute support or when existing organisations become excessively proprietorial and unable to unify and focus combined support effort.

"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."

School is a great place to establish good habits and active lifestyles. Especially in younger age groups, children typically have an adult chaperon, so there is an opportunity to encourage activities targeting youngsters and adult carers at the same venue. For example, rather than parents sitting eating snacks in a sports centre setting while their children engage in an activity, parents could be encouraged (by way of subsidised / free entry use of facilities during the child's activity and obviously subject to availability. In secondary school age groups, physical activity can easily become necessarily competitive and focused on 'winning'. As with many other areas of life, it is actually participation, perception and process that are far more important than specific pre-determined outcomes. Uncertainty and changes from year to year regarding which sports meet GCSE and A-Level assessability criteria doesn't help support the value of non-competitive physical activity either. Certain types of cycling are recognised as 'acceptable', while others not – possibly based on there needing to be a strong competitive element for the sport to 'qualify'. Similarly, sailing – a sport in which England has enjoyed a degree

of international success – has been accepted in some circumstances and years but not in others, with no equitable means of resolving anomalies. Futsal has its own GCSE curriculum and is ideally suited to broad adoption in schools (and already enjoys considerable support in Higher Education through the BUCS program) but appears to lack vision and commitment from a genuinely supportive governing body that could really build a strong adoption in schools. Colleges and Universities offering sports specialisation often attract high level athletes and also need opportunities for those students to develop coaching and related sports skills. This should be very fertile ground for building high quality sport and active recreation collaboration in communities while also promoting the value brought to communities by FE and HE educational establishments.

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

The Sport England 'Active Lives' survey obviously attempts to gather and collate activity data) <https://activelives.sportengland.org/> and has been suggested to me when I have been looking for participation data in connection with Futsal. The problem I found was that in the case of Futsal, even the Governing Body has no clear picture of participation levels. In the cases I looked into, such official records for active futsal players as I could find were wildly inaccurate – under counted by a factor of 10 or more. Sport England funding should be granted in accordance with their Code of Governance, which would ensure adherence to governance and accountability standards that should include accurate participation data. At least in the case of Futsal, this is apparently not the case.

"What can be done to improve and implement effective duty of care and safeguarding standards for sports and recreation actives at all levels?"

Although I do not have direct involvement in the implementation of these systems and controls, my own involvement in educational environments and my son's experience has highlighted anomalies. I gather that Duty of Care requirements for coaching are not harmonised with other areas. My son was able to pass coaching qualifications including safeguarding training while he was still a minor himself. I have heard from other sources that this gray area in which coaches and even U18 coaches could find themselves working in situations with unsatisfactory Duty of Care provision. As part of the 2015 'Sporting Future' strategy, the Minister for Sport asked Baroness Grey-Thompson to carry out an independent review concerning Duty of Care in sport.

Duty of Care Review

One of the ideas considered was that of a Sports Ombudsman. I am not aware that this idea has been implemented, but I feel that it is an essential element in ensuring that standards are upheld and grievances not resolved through normal channels do have a means of being addressed. I believe that any body or organisation that includes participation of minors should be obliged to recognise arbitration of a national ombudsman. In the case of adult sport, organisations that

receive public funding or that participate in affiliated national or international leagues should be bound by rulings from The Ombudsman also.

"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."

My son's futsal experience relates directly to this question. In my opinion, a large component involved is the recognition and protection of non-monetary value. Some sports such as professional football are highly monetised – some might argue to the detriment of the sport concerned. Certainly when top tier sport attracts massive media budgets, profits through gambling businesses, product endorsements, astronomic player salaries and a range of other commercial activities, it is easy for the 'real' grass roots sport to be swapped by its own commercial success. This presents huge, well documented challenges within football. For a sport like futsal, that (in England at least) is almost entirely amateur, volunteer led, driven by individual skill and passion for the game and with little likelihood of financial reward, the gulf between the needs of the Futsal and the primary concerns of its (football focused) governing body couldn't be wider. The recent events described in my opening paragraphs, combined with The FA all but dropping Futsal from their stated mission of 'getting more football wins' along with decimating futsal funding from an estimated peak of £900k pa to less than £100k has left the futsal community in disarray and questioning the role of The FA as custodian for the value of years of accumulated volunteer hours, public funding and player commitment. While The FA is evidently not prepared to hand over Futsal Governance to a separate governing body where it can find the genuine futsal-centric advocacy and support the sport needs and deserves, neither has The FA showed any interest in taking on those tasks itself. In fact, The FA repeatedly categorises futsal as a training tool for football, effectively treating futsal governance and the whole sport as a poorly defined, unaccountable sub-division of football.

Given increased pressure from the futsal community, it is possible that some move may be made by The FA to backtrack on some changes made in order to deflect some criticism and defuse frustration. The futsal community has taken steps to improve futsal's representation through the formation of a Club Association - <https://www.efca.co.uk/> . While the community can only hope that it will have the national teams reinstated and have The FA fully supporting the sport as should be expected of any governing body, the recent actions of The FA must stand as testimony to what can go wrong and how the governing body appeared to be able to act with complete impunity and with no public accountability.

The establishing of a Sports Ombudsman empowered to investigate perceived systemic failure or unresolved injustice would go a long way to addressing the issues that have adversely effected futsal and its development.

Finally, I would like to point out what may be obvious but that can easily go unconsidered when drawing up new strategies. In my limited research I have come

across many existing plans, guidance documents, initiatives, strategies, proposals and codes of practice. The parallel ongoing outreach process being conducted by DSMC Select Committee supported by input from various research organisations is touching on many common areas including sports governance and funding. At the same time, the public and in this case specifically sports and related community members can be excused for a level of apathy and skepticism when faced with the mountains of words generated by previous official strategic reviews. What is needed above all else is simple, light-weight proposals that deliver greatest results where they are most needed and deserved, along with on-going transparent checks and balances to ensure that objectives are met and maintained as well as lessons learned and fed back to improve the processes.

Building on previous work and honest reflection on strengths and weaknesses must be better than endless re-invention from scratch. Making sure that KPI's and data relating to previous initiatives are understood and utilised is essential to making true progress.

Thank you for your consideration of my points.
Addendum 28/01/2021

As referred to in the initial submission above, I have been participating in the Sport England outreach program relating to the launch of their 10 Year Strategy and also communication with The FA and Sport England with the assistance of my MP. Yesterday I received updates from both of these sources.

Sport England responded with information confirming that an indeterminate proportion of £87M paid to The FA NGB since 2009 plus around £300k through other channels will have benefited Futsal – a widely played sport with a recognised governing body in England. Although SE's not yet launched 'New 10 year strategy' appears to be moving away from the accountability of formal Codes of Governance requirements (at time of writing), for much of the period during which The FA has benefited from SE funding, SE's Three Tier requirements in its Code of Governance were applicable.

Sport England Code for Governance

Page 24 of this document sets out the Tier 3 requirements that would appear to apply in this case.

Although this is an ongoing matter (with significant additional material due to be published very soon) my personal direct knowledge indicates that public access to evidence showing compliance with the SE Code is not readily available – if at all.

While my primary concern focuses on Futsal, the general point is how checks and balances are applied regarding the very substantial sums of public finance flowing into large national Sports Governing Bodies. Since this is very much a moving target, I am not clear how this is best taken into consideration. I believe this needs

to be researched and tracked on an ongoing basis.

This link is to the current version of the Sport England "New 10 Year Strategy".

Draft Sport England Uniting the Movement strategy

It will probably become dead between now and the anticipated release date of 8th Feb.

The current headline text under the 'Governance' section of the document reads:

"We want the sector to embrace good governance, moving from compliance with a formal code, to a culture across sporting organisations that embrace good governance and strive to be among the best-run organisations in the world."

I found that text ambiguous depending on whether the reader assumes that continued requirement for compliance with the current SE Code can be assumed or not, and was offered this clarification by SE:

"Since launching the Code for Sports Governance (the Code) we've seen a positive response from the sector in terms of compliance with the requirements of the Code. We recently concluded a separate consultation on the future of the Code. We think that will continue to be a place for the Code. However, our ambition with Uniting the Movement is to work collaboratively with the sector in moving beyond compliance with the Code to a position where we and our partners work together to recognise and support the principles of good governance, embed these across the organisations we work with and use them to influence the behaviour and cultures within the system".

I feel this is still open to interpretation, and my experience in trying to determine that the current SE Code has been followed in the case of Futsal demonstrates just how important clear and broadly supported Codes are in order to maintain any accountability. This phrase specifically:

".... our ambition with Uniting the Movement is to work collaboratively with the sector in moving beyond compliance with the Code....."

does not suggest moving towards greater accountability.

I sincerely hope that this Select Committee will recognise the importance of accountable, transparent governance in maintaining the status quo. As recognised many times in research papers, setting up a Sports Ombudsmen would address concerns regarding compliance and accountability. I feel this could be a very worthwhile matter to prioritise.

29 January 2021