

Martin Hicks – Written evidence (NPS0133)

Summary

1. Anecdotally, the time provided for access to sport and recreation in schools and within general working patterns demonstrates the lack of importance placed on Active lifestyles.
2. The monetisation and more crucially the profitability of sport has marginalised access to and mass visibility of sport, particularly women's, youth and disabled sport.
3. Sport needs to be aspirational and accessible. Making athletes from underrepresented groups visible and accessible will help promote the aspirational nature of sport within those groups. Helping people understand their stories and connect to their own experiences will help generate the confidence to 'give it a go'. Building upon successful campaigns such as such as #thisgirlcan and #EquallyAmazing would support the promotion and aspirational nature of female sport. The use of this hashtag has grown organically in usage and is now applied to a wider scope of activities also; this provides opportunity.
4. Sport needs to build confidence, be fun and develop life skills beyond performance and technical skill acquisition, particularly for young people. The majority of positive connections, developments and interventions are provided by time-stretched, resource poor volunteers. Providing funding for time and access to training for the people creating positive, safe, protective coaching environments will support those people to deliver more for others.
5. A Government agenda focused on greater access to, education of and promotion of sport and recreation would help better connect the nation and in particular young people with sport and activity. This could begin with a National Plan for Sport and Recreation; however it should be followed up with specific actions across government departments as well as with local community providers, trusts and charities.

Introduction

6. This paper is submitted in response to a Request for Evidence by the House of Lords Select Committee on a National Plan for Sport and Recreation.
7. The response is written from the perspective of a passionate volunteer Coach, with very limited access to data and a relatively narrow experience base in a single sport (Hockey) albeit with anecdotal understanding of the wider Sport and Recreation sector.
8. As a hockey coach involved in coaching children and young people as well as women of all ages, across grassroots and 'performance pathway' environments; encouraging (young) people to involve themselves in a lifetime of sport and

recreation is to an extent my 'field of experience'. Accordingly, the response shall target the following three questions set, however additional responses are set out in the further information section.

- a. 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?
- b. How can adults of all ages and backgrounds, particularly those from under-represented groups, including women and girls, ethnic minorities, disabled people, older people, and those from less affluent backgrounds, be encouraged to lead more active lifestyles?
- c. Should there be a national plan for sport and recreation? Why/why not?

Recommendation

9. In my experience, there are 5 key factors in encouraging participation in sport particularly with respect to young people. It is recommended that further work is done in each of these areas in order to increase uptake of sport and recreational activity in the UK. The following paragraphs outline a summary of the focus area and detail a recommended intervention.

10. Quality coaching and positive environments - understanding of the needs and circumstances of the individual, both in school, club and elite environments is essential in making sport and recreation a positive experience and retaining those people in regular activity. Those positive, pastoral interventions are provided by coaches and teachers often in their own, very limited time. Sporting environments which may provide excellent 'performance' aspects but without or with limited pastoral focus have the opposite effect, they remove the fun, remove the focus on the individual development and make it all about success of the team, the sport, the country. More coaches and more quality, positive environments at both grassroots and elite sports is key to retaining (young) people in sport.

Recommended action: More Coaches are required to perform those positive interventions. Coaching is often unpaid or a (very) low-pay role; however great environments are led by great people who dedicate significant time and leadership skill in making their environment positive for the wider development of young people. Coaches generate and foster passion for sport and dedication to active personal development. Enabling time for those coaches, encouraging more people to coach by providing access to funding and enabling training for coaches to develop themselves will help facilitate better environments. Further information is provided on my lived experience of barriers to offering more of my time for coaching.

11. Positive role models - young people in particular need positive role models who are 'like them', regularly on television and across other media. Access to sport on television / internet channels has been heavily monetised and marginalised such that women's, youth, and various minority sports are infrequently publicised and thus not accessible or 'aspirational' en masse. The US approach to televise university sport for example (this is now available in the UK

for subscription tv customers) supports a US agenda of national excellence in sport. Sport is played to a semi-professional standard with access often to a high standard of facilities and education. There are also limitations to the US system, with focus on profits, over-competitive environments and a lack of sporting opportunity into adulthood, however promotion of sport as part of the national aspiration is a positive example.

Recommended action: greater promotion of womens, disabled and other minority sports like hockey, which is proudly #EquallyAmazing and open to all. Removal of barriers to putting more sport on television, particularly the BBC and other free-to-air platforms which should support providing a public service will help get the message 'out there'. Use of more digital / online platforms to promote and show a variety of sports to connect more sport and recreation with more people and make sport more aspirational.

12. **Access and opportunity** - Accessibility to more sporting opportunities in school time will help children and young people build the basic skills and confidence to participate more in sport and activities. A more flexible schedule and a greater affordance of time for teachers to spend on each individual to generate action plans with regards Physical development and Sport participation, would help children understand that activity is important and there is a sport out there for them. In countries such as Holland and Germany, huge hockey and tennis clubs, for example, facilitate members and their families being present, entertained and active in engaging in both watching and playing sports across their weekends. (common) Hub facilities for sports such as football, netball, handball, basketball, badminton and many others, indoor and outdoor, would facilitate community and greater community connection with clubs and sports (evidence - the Nottingham Hockey Centre). One factor in my experience dissuading some from engaging in (winter) sports is exposure to the elements, however so many sports have indoor variants, if there were the (common) facilities and the promotion of such opportunities by the governing bodies there may be far greater uptake.

Recommended action: An ability for community clubs to build and grow in a cost effective manner, remain open for their members and their families for longer and provide more facilities would allow a greater community link with sport. Encourage the building and growth of (more) sports clubs in communities, through any available government means; facilitate lower rates or reduction in the administration burden to enable not for profit organisations to give people more choice and more variety of sports to access. Encourage multi-use facilities to consider the widest range of sports able to use the available space. Impress on governing bodies to work together to jointly promote sports such as indoor hockey, netball, futsal, handball, within the same space, making better use of facilities available and encouraging more facilities to be built to give wider access to schools and the wider communities.

13. **Cost** - linked with the above, the cost of access to sport and in particular the cost of accessing 'enough' sport to bridge the gap between the have and have not amongst young people is a significant barrier to participation. The Private

School sector (in my region) allows significantly more access to sport versus State School provisions, thus there is a ever-growing gap in contact time, in good coaching and development time for private school pupils. Bringing those two groups, particularly within age group sports teams then often generates an unhelpful comparison and all too familiar feeling to some children that they will never catch up with their peers. Of course they can and many do, however perception is important and can have a significant effect on participation.

Recommended action: Greater access to sport & activity and good coaching provision within the state school curriculum will help generate greater confidence amongst state school pupils that they are able to 'compete' and play sport alongside their private school peers. A review of the costs of sport in the UK and further work with sport governing bodies and facility providers to increase efficiency, reduce wastes and share activities where possible will reduce the cost to the user and thus make sport more accessible to a wider cohort of people and in particular to less affluent groups.

14. **Education** - The linking of (education of) Strength and Conditioning (S&C), nutrition, human mechanics and psychology with sporting pursuits undertaken by pupils will help young people connect with the wide ranging benefits of lifelong sport and physical activity. Furthermore utilising sport in the development of leadership team-working and coaching skills as part of physical education can help young people understand more about the wider benefits of sport as part of their continued personal development. The sport that they are involved in can act as a case study to help young people fully understand and connect their sport with their studies and understanding of themselves and their development. understand the impact of S&C and nutrition on their participation in sport.

Recommended action: Whilst I have very limited experience of the current curriculum in schools thus may not be aware of existing provisions; I recommend that the closer link and use-case connection of education and sport to encourage young people to improve their levels of activity. It could be argued that there is currently no space in the current curriculum for additional subjects however lockdown learning has suggested that there are a number of subjects being learnt purely for regurgitation in tests which have limited practical application in the lives of our young people. Creating more content which can be applied to something they (may) love like sport and recreation would help in learning as well as in uptake of sport.

Background

15. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the state of the nation's underlying health to the forefront. It is acknowledged that the UK has a growing obesity problem which is putting pressure on our health and social care systems. Nurturing a love of sport and activity from an early age can only help to address this issue.

16. Experience suggests that enjoyment of sport and physical activity is heavily linked to self-confidence, particularly for women and girls and focus needs to be

given to providing coaching environments that support development of self confidence, resilience and growth mindset. Without positive interventions, young girls in particular can easily feel that sport is not for them. Conversely, from experience, no matter their ability, if a child feels comfortable, feels happy, feels as they are growing in an environment as well as having fun and enjoying the social aspect of sports and games, they will engage in it consistently. Quality coaching and an understanding of the needs, the engagement of each individual in your care is essential to making sport and recreation a good experience.

17. My lived experience is that girls who gain self confidence in their sporting activities also improve their overall self confidence, resilience, drive and determination in all aspects of their life beyond sport. The influence of sport in improving this self-confidence should not be underestimated. It can be argued that this is the case for all children.
18. My club has grown its (hockey) 'academy' to well over 150 members; specifically my focus group (Under 14 girls) has grown from zero to its maximum of 50 members within 4 years plus around 30 'graduates' now playing hockey in an adult setting. We are dedicated to providing a quality sporting and most crucially a caring personal development environment to maximise every child's individual development and enjoyment of their game and their experience, which has been key to our continued popularity. I would like to continue to expand this provision, however we are limited by a number of barriers:
- a. *Time and number of volunteers* - As a volunteer, much of my drive to create the right environments in sport for young people is limited upon the time I am able to dedicate to it. Personally, I would love to do more coaching, to offer more opportunities to more (young) people to experience the benefits of my sport and our environment, however considering the lack of 'reasonably funded' career opportunities as well as the lack of available free time to volunteer is a significant barrier for me personally.

The provision of time for volunteering activities within my employment, as a civil servant, is amongst the more generous around, however even within the civil service I am 'allowed' 6 days per year to undertake volunteering within the working day, with associated conditions, and even then my ability to take these extra days is further limited by expectations of the business as is any ability to flex my hours on a regular basis. Encouraging employers to really commit to flexible working, through policy and practice not just words will support employees in contributing (more) volunteer hours to society as well as the requisite time to their employer.

Though the majority of coaches at grassroots level are volunteers, the availability of funding for coaches and the development of those coaches in schools and within clubs would potentially encourage and enable more coaches and consequently more access to a variety of sports and a better provision of good quality environments.
 - b. *Cost* - the cost of booking 90 minutes at our local (all weather) pitch is now £140. Though this cost is shared amongst members we require at

least 30 members to take part in each session to break even at a reasonable cost per person; without considering the cost of providing coaches (expenses), equipment etc for a club operated by volunteers on a not for profit basis. Though a private venture and thus not controlled by the local authority, this is just one example of the barriers to access to sport in my local area. I am aware that hockey is more expensive than some sports due to its pitch requirements however I am sure there are countless similar issues with the cost of access being prohibitive to those of a less affluent background.

- c. *Availability of facilities* - linked to the point above on costs, the lack of availability of venues, pitches, facilities at an accessible cost provides barriers for sport in the community. Previous national plans for sport have focused on elite sport and this has had a good effect in making Team GB more successful which in turn makes sport more aspirational. However if this is then followed by a lack of opportunities for people to play because there are limited appropriate facilities or because the cost is too high to use those facilities due to monopolistic / profiteering business practices, the effect on the overall health of the nation from this funding may not be maximised.

Further information

19. With reference to question 1; whilst I have no factual evidence to provide, anecdotally it 'feels' as if the diverse stakeholders in providing sport and recreation in the local community have considerable overlap in their functions and a streamlining of some of the key actions, processes, deliverables, objectives and strategies would facilitate greater funding being provided to where it makes an impact upon the user rather than on the administration of sport. As a current civil servant faced with a number of overlapping stakeholders and agencies, this echoes the transformation of enterprise required and somewhat underway within the civil service. Streamlining and centralising IT and software, marketing activity, HR / finance / commercial functions et cetera where possible would seem to have an advantage to make the enterprise more efficient and thus for more of the available money reach the end consumer, where it will have the greatest effect on the population. In my sport, hockey, clubs are (mostly) run as not for profit organisations however require considerable volunteer time. Providing funding to individual clubs may be one route to getting all of the money available directly to the user however clubs may also not be able to use this in the most efficient manner. The more stakeholders working together, across sport, across area or region or trust or organisation the more can be done to support the end goal within the same means.

20. The committee has requested evidence on Safeguarding practices, in my experience this issue is taken appropriately seriously by Coaches, by Clubs and by the Governing Body. Where as a sport we may be failing is in ensuring all our environments are providing the right level of pastoral care for participants, in

particular at elite levels of the sport, where a focus on winning appears to have outstripped the need to care for our people. This is apparently also the case in other sports as has been widely publicised recently. Governing Bodies need to be held to account in this respect as well as in their sporting performance, however the Government and bodies involved with the distribution of funding must also take responsibility for this with the current focus being on performance and results.

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