

Written evidence submitted by Yorkshire Sport Foundation

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DCMS SECTORS: CALL FOR EVIDENCE

1. BACKGROUND

Yorkshire Sport Foundation (YSF) is the Lottery funded Active Partnership covering West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire. One of a national network of 43 Active Partnerships (APs), we work with nine unitary local authorities and health, education and sport sectors to connect, influence and provide support to increase physical activity levels.

During the COVID-19 pandemic we have solicited views from a range of partners and looked internally at new ways of working to determine what has changed that we would like to keep, what we can do without and what we would like to see develop as a result of the enforced living and working restrictions.

2. WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE SECTOR?

Along with many other sectors, formal sport and physical activity has largely ceased during the lockdown period. Community sports clubs, leisure centres and gyms have been closed, people are unable to exercise independently more than once a day (although this was gradually increased as lock down measures eased) and professional sport no longer takes place. School closures and the closure of play areas in parks have also resulted in opportunities for children and young people to be active being severely limited.

This has had a significant immediate impact on the economic, health and social outcomes of people employed by the sector or those who benefit from exercising regularly. Many National Governing Bodies of sport and leisure facilities were forced to furlough much of their workforce and community sports clubs still had running costs to pay with no income being generated.

Fortunately, many sports clubs are run by volunteers so redundancies in this sector have been low and our own staff at YSF, due to our privileged funding position with Sport England, have not been significantly adversely affected.

Concerns have been raised across the sector for a variety of reasons:

- How the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our communities are able to continue being active with many support systems no longer operating
- How community sports clubs are able to cover running costs including rent, maintenance and payment of staff
- How we continue to communicate with partners when many are furloughed or, at local authorities, internally reassigned
- How outdoor spaces are maintained to facilitate daily exercise when councils realign services
- How children and young people and their families are supported to be active without an education system in operation

The lockdown has highlighted the importance of strong anchor organisations in many areas. Ones that can quickly react, perform without constraints and be flexible in their delivery and approach. Many anchor organisations have been forced to turn their immediate attention to supporting their communities with deliveries of food parcels and medical supplies. However as we see this lockdown period continue there will be a shift in focus to resident's overall wellbeing especially now that the triage process has been navigated successfully.

3. HOW EFFECTIVELY HAS THE SUPPORT PROVIDED BY DCMS, OTHER GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND ARMS-LENGTH BODIES ADDRESSED THE SECTOR'S NEEDS?

Feedback from partners and our own experiences have been mostly positive. Sport England has been particularly swift, empathetic and appropriate in their response including two new funding opportunities which have undoubtedly supported many in the sector to survive the early stages of the lockdown.

At the time of writing, Sport England's Community Emergency fund had supported 371 sports organisations across West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire, totalling over £1.3m. Along with all other Active Partnerships, YSF have also been in receipt of significant additional funding (£140,000) through Sport England's Tackling Inequalities award to support our most disadvantaged communities.

The latter grant has done much to fill the gaps that the Community Emergency Fund left as it tended to cater for more accessible to established, better organised organisations. Smaller, community focussed groups stand to benefit from the Tackling Inequalities grant as it is managed by Active Partnerships who have a granular understanding of their localities and communities, ensuring that the funding goes to the right places that need it the most. We are pleased that Sport England has recognised the reach Active Partnerships have and have trusted them to support the programme in this way.

There has also been much cross-sector support for the media campaigns from Sport England; #StayHomeWorkOut and Join the Movement. This has seen good engagement from organisations and individuals alike, all sharing ways they have been forced to innovate in order to stay active.

On occasions, there have however been mixed messages from Government departments who have used the terms 'sport', 'being active' and 'taking exercise' interchangeably. The World Health Organisation warn against this as there is potential for misinterpretation:

The term "physical activity" should not be mistaken with "exercise". Exercise, is a subcategory of physical activity that is planned, structured, repetitive, and purposeful in the sense that the improvement or maintenance of one or more components of physical fitness is the objective
(www.who.int)

On the other hand, the repeated messaging from Government to take daily exercise has undoubtedly been a positive for the sector. During the early days of the lockdown period, exercise was one of the few permitted reasons to leave home and this message was repeated often at press conferences and in the media and doubtless had a positive impact on people's attitudes to physical activity. It is now the sector's task to ensure that the 'daily exercise' messaging is not forgotten and the habits developed at this time are not lost.

Some clubs that we have spoken to feel that they have not been supported at this critical time by their national governing body. Largely due to the furloughing of staff, other organisations such as Active Partnerships have had to step in to provide guidance and information.

4. WHAT WILL THE LIKELY LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF COVID-19 BE ON THE SECTOR, AND WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED TO DEAL WITH THOSE?

It is becoming clear that there will be both positive and negative long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the sector. As discussed above, the loud and regular messaging from Government about daily exercise has clearly resonated with many people with research by Sport England showing that almost two thirds of adults considering exercise to be more important than ever during the coronavirus crisis. Particular reference should be paid to the type of activity people have been doing, with walking and home exercise proving particularly popular. This however has potential to disrupt the long-term recovery of the sector as people find new ways to be active and may be less likely to renew gym or club memberships.

It also appears to have raised the profile of the importance of physical activity on mental health. Again, Sport England's research has shown that the majority of people (65%) believe exercise is helping them with their mental health during the outbreak. This is significant in our sector's attempts to work closer with a broad range of organisations supporting those that suffer from mental health problems.

In our communities it is likely that the fear of mixing socially, which was already a barrier to many groups, will be exacerbated. The longer that socially distanced living remains part of our lives, the harder it will be for some communities to emerge from the safety of their homes. Particularly found in disadvantaged and BAME groups, homes with multiple generations living under the same roof will likely be cautious for a long time to come about venturing outside unnecessarily, with sport or physical activity even further down their list of priorities than it would have been prior to the outbreak.

Low socioeconomic groups face other barriers including:

- Language. Understanding and interpreting rules and messages could have a lasting negative impact if not communicated effectively and exaggerate a lack of trust (we have examples locally of incorrect dialects being used in lockdown communications, causing additional confusion and stress).
- Transport. Families that survive on low incomes often depend on public transport. While restrictions are in place on public transport we expect to see a long term decline in the distance that people are able to travel to be active.

As mentioned above, anchor organisations that can be agile and reactive are imperative to communities and their recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. We have seen those communities that are most effective in being able to self-organise and respond to whatever challenges they might face, all have this in common. The presence of effective anchor organisations sitting under the control and ownership of local people offer a degree of local leadership on behalf of others when representing the interests of that community to external stakeholders. These have been important throughout the lockdown period at getting vital services to those most in need and will continue to be significant partners as communities emerge from the pandemic and in the long term through which to inform the sector's decision-making process and distribution of resources.

There is a significant likelihood of continued hardship for many community organisations, particularly sports clubs, if social distancing continues to restrict activity. While the Community Engagement grant supported many such bodies for the short term, the longer that activity is restricted, the higher the cost. Rent, subscriptions, insurance and other overheads will still need to be paid once initial funding has run out so more long-term planning must be put in place to ensure continued support until normal services are permitted to resume.

We are unclear yet of the financial implications for local authorities who play a huge role in promoting and providing sport and physical activity opportunities and in leading their "place". Many are fearful of further cuts to facilities and development services that will damage the health and prosperity of local communities.

5. WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNT FROM HOW DCMS, ARMS-LENGTH BODIES AND THE SECTOR HAVE DEALT WITH COVID-19?

DCMS and arm's length bodies' agile and immediate response to the crisis have benefitted the sector immensely. Sport England's easing of restrictions around funded projects, insistence to not furlough posts they fund and swift commitments to new pots of funding have meant that activity levels have, overall, remained unchanged.

While our most deprived communities have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, we are grateful that Sport England's Tackling Inequalities fund has been rapidly developed and awarded which will enable accurate and appropriate targeting of funds to people that need it the most. This rapid and flexible cascading of funds should be learned from and the positive impact that we hope to see should serve as evidence that money with few strings attached can be spent effectively.

That's not to say however that all vulnerable groups were well catered for. Children and young people have potentially been left behind during this period with not only big gaps in their education, but with the provision of suitable opportunities to be active no longer readily available, there is the very real potential of a loss of physical development and loss of engagement and enjoyment in physical activity. Anecdotal evidence suggests an increase in hospital admissions of children displaying evidence of physical abuse while at home and mental health problems which must be addressed.

On a more local level we have seen a rapid move to online services fulfilling what were previously face to face run sessions. For example online fitness training, broadcast through social media, has been very popular and successful for many independent deliverers. Yorkshire Sport Foundation have produced a library of videos to help parents teach physical education at home which have been viewed over 125,000 times on YouTube and recommended by the Department for Education. However this has shone a light on the lack of provision from national organisations to ensure that children remain active during this period. There is much evidence showing that children are most active while at school with significant reductions in activity levels at weekends and during school holidays. It is clear that parents and carers have struggled to adapt to this challenge with Sport England's research showing a significant reduction in children's activity levels during the first five weeks of the lockdown.

Additional funding to local authorities to support active travel has been welcomed and we hope that it will lead to a lasting legacy of more people walking or using cycle lanes for their commute. Leeds has seen a very successful 'School Streets' programme shut roads around schools during drop off and pick up times which has been made easier to implement by the reduced amount of traffic on the roads and a very supportive local authority. There is a risk however that many 'pop-up' cycle lanes and path widening schemes will disappear once restrictions are lifted and the sector will need strong leadership from DCMS and other national organisations to prevent this from happening.

As we emerge from lockdown there are many questions that remain unanswered. When will sports clubs be able to return to training? How will leisure centres operate in a socially distanced way? How can we build confidence to reengage with people who have been shielding or in high risk categories? Will the significant use of council resources during the lockdown require cuts to the sector's workforce? We don't have the answers to these questions yet, however open, honest and regular dialogue between DCMS, arms length organisations, local authorities and other bodies is required to support the sector recovery effectively.

DCMS and arms length organisations must remain supportive both in terms of guidance, communication and funding to ensure that the good levels of engagement throughout the crisis don't suffer as we return to normal operating conditions.

6. HOW MIGHT THE SECTOR EVOLVE AFTER COVID-19, AND HOW CAN DCMS SUPPORT SUCH INNOVATION TO DEAL WITH FUTURE CHALLENGES?

Daily exercise has never been a louder Government priority, resonated as deeply with the public, or been as essential for good health and wellbeing as it has been over the last few months. This message must continue to be reinforced post-COVID19 and as a sector we must have a coherent, joined up strategy about what this will entail.

Nationally and locally, a whole systems approach must take shape which requires collaboration between Government departments at the top level and the full range of stakeholders locally which understands how each respective part of the puzzle can fit together to create long lasting behaviour change. We have already started to see this happen in Yorkshire with many local authority transport, planning, leisure and health departments convening and understand their roles in improving health of their residents. Now central government and arm's length bodies must do the same.

Building on the agile response from Sport England and others, a focus must evolve to address the significant inequalities for specific groups including those in low socioeconomic places, BAME groups, women and girls and children and young people. Complicated application processes for grants, detailed monitoring and evaluation requirements, restrictive time scales and other barriers that have been overcome during the pandemic must continue to be reviewed to ensure that all organisations, not just the most organised, are able to access support when needed.

The increased use of technology must be harnessed and used as a tool for good in the future. Negative perceptions are still strong and mobiles, tablets, computers and televisions are still largely seen as being a threat to activity levels. However, we have seen significant developments and innovation in this field, largely by influential individuals (nationally and locally) which has demonstrated their ability to engage an audience which has previously been difficult for larger organisations to reach. The sector as a whole

should explore how we can work closer with role models and respected community champions to engage with hard to reach groups.

While online activity has seen a huge upsurge, there is still relatively little being done to capture its impact and use this information to inform our strategies. Pressure could be put on manufacturers of popular apps such as Apple Health and technology such as fitness trackers to ensure that the data being collected is shared and used in a positive way to influence behaviours and inform strategies.

Recognition and support of the crucial role that back bone organisations and volunteers have played throughout the crisis, many of whom who have commendably adapted their role to support their communities, must be continued. Many struggle to survive with limited funding or recognition however over the last few months it has been clear how communities often depend on them for essentials and their ability to be agile is an asset that the sector must value more in the future. Better funding and support to help diversify their offer so that they can offer a greater range of services, including physical activity, must be addressed to enable us to work closer with them in the future.
