Written evidence submitted by British Cycling

Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

About British Cycling

British Cycling is the national governing body (NGB) for cycling as recognised by the UCI – the international federation for the sport. British Cycling works across all levels and six disciplines of the sport, from providing the support and encouragement people need to get riding their bikes for the first time, to being home to the hugely successful Great Britain Cycling Team.

British Cycling also works hard to represent cyclists’ interests at all levels, including campaigning on the issues that matter to our 165,000 members.

Due to the breadth of our interest, and to ensure clarity, we have split our answers for each question into three sub-sections, relating to: the British Cycling Federation; the Great Britain Cycling Team; and the wider cycling sector. The cycling sector should be understood as the participants, volunteers, teams, event organisers, facilities, providers and others without whom the sport could not exist.

Summary

1. A welcome by-product of the current lockdown measures has been the growing appetite for cycling as a means of daily exercise, family recreation and transport, as seen by the growth in bike sales and increase in the number of people riding (Sport England’s weekly tracker showed 8% of the population were cycling in the first week of data collection as part of their daily activity. This has showed an uplift in cycling week on week, peaking at 16% of the population in week 7). With the capacity of public transport options such as trains, trams and buses set to remain low in the months ahead, we believe that there is a unique and time limited opportunity to bring about a transformational shift in the way we travel and commute, with a subsequent impact on wider societal objectives such as improving air quality, reducing congestion and tackling physical inactivity.

2. However, the impact of Covid-19 has been significant for our organisation, our events and activities and the wider health of the sport. While the current measures remain in place the extent of the impact is still unclear, but its impact will undoubtedly be felt for a number of years to come.

3. On March 23rd 2020 we suspended all sanctioned activity – from major events to organised recreational rides – initially until April 30, and we have since extended the suspension to July 4th for club and group activity, August 1st for regional racing and September 1st for international and national-level racing. As the majority of cycling activity at all levels is concentrated in the summer months our sport is especially
vulnerable, and the uncertainty surrounding the possible resumption of activities is posing significant challenges.

4. We are thankful for the swift and continued support of HM Government, DCMS, Sport England and UK Sport in helping to alleviate current financial pressures, in particular the extension of current funding settlements until March 2022. However, the growing and significant proportion of our revenue derived from membership fees, event levies and commercial partnerships means that our risk exposure is greater than that of many other Olympic and Paralympic sport NGBs.

5. We are concerned about the impact that Covid-19 will have on the wider cycling sector, especially those whose existence is almost wholly reliant upon commercial backing or event revenue. The longstanding funding model of domestic and continental cycling teams is much more precarious than that of other sports, and the continued existence of many teams, events and supporting businesses is likely to come under threat – particularly if sanctioned racing does not resume until Q4 2020.

6. The cessation of competition and training – and the postponement and continued uncertainty around the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games – has presented considerable challenges for the Great Britain Cycling Team. These vary from short-term logistical challenges arising from the Tokyo 2020 postponement to issues with much longer-term ramifications – such as the impact that Covid-19 will have on riders currently at key transition points in their careers.

Q. What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

On British Cycling

7. All sanctioned activities have been suspended since 23rd March, and will continue to be so until 4th July for club and group activity, 1st August for regional racing and 1st September for national and international-level racing – however it is possible that the suspension could yet be extended further. The suspension has impacted the vast majority of our day-to-day operations, including major events, competitive racing, club activity, coaching and our recreation programmes.

8. The suspension of organised racing has significant financial implications for us, as a sizeable proportion of our income is derived from event levies and other revenues associated with the administration of the sport. We have estimated that this will lead to a £5million shortfall between March and October. Though difficult to quantify at this time, the suspension of activity will also impact the numbers of people choosing to renew their annual Race Licences and Memberships.

9. The suspension of activities and inability to perform direct delivery roles (ie grassroots coaches) has had an obvious impact on the work that we are able to carry out, and therefore we took the decision to make use of the Government’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. On 8 April we announced that we would be
furloughing 90 roles – roughly one third of the organisation – while the Executive Leadership Team and senior colleagues across the organisation each took a 10% voluntary pay cut. We have since furloughed a further 40 employees.

10. Positively, our investment in digital products, resources and partnerships has enabled us to react quickly to the situation and continue to support our riders, members, clubs, and the general public from afar. In particular we have seen great success from: our partnership with virtual indoor cycling app Zwift; our free interactive resources to help families and children get to grips with riding, such as HSBC UK Ready Set Ride and HSBC UK Let’s Ride Local; our Insight Zone educational videos covering the basics of buying, riding and maintaining a bike; and our Choose Cycling campaign with associated commuter support and guidance.

While still ongoing, we have seen over 12,000 riders on our British Cycling Race Series through Zwift, reached over 1.6 million people with our HSBC UK Ready Set Ride games and activities for beginners, and views of our educational content have risen by more than a third.

11. The combination of reduced levels of traffic on the roads, warm weather and increased leisure time has all contributed to an increase in the numbers of people cycling, with Sport England figures highlighting that cycling levels have doubled\(^1\) during this period and that 18% of those who are cycling are doing so with children in their household\(^2\).

Previous British Cycling research showed that people were reluctant to see cycling as part of their lifestyles. Through COVID-19, cycling has become a fit in people’s lives to help with a number of different scenarios:

- People are using the bike to escape, whether that’s from the house, to find some routine or a sense of normality.
- They are also using it for health and fitness reasons, for their mental health, weight management and exercise.
- Some ride because they are allowed to, some to escape family, others to ride with family.
- Some miss their previous cycling commute, some see it as a way to boost their immune system against COVID-19.
- It is seen as an alternative to other non-permitted forms of exercise.
- A change in working patterns and working from home has also led to a shift in people believing they have more time to cycle.

This has led us to upweighting our activity aimed at supporting those who are just getting started, but also working to influence national and regional policymakers to help people continue to cycle once the current restrictions are fully lifted – through measures such as temporary cycle lanes and schemes to improve access to bikes –

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\(^1\) Sport England: Surge in appreciation of exercise and activity during lockdown

\(^2\) Sport England: New exercise habits forming during coronavirus crisis
our research continues to demonstrate that the fear of traffic and lack of segregated / traffic-free cycling infrastructure remains the main barrier to people cycling.

On the Great Britain Cycling Team

12. The most obvious impact of the pandemic on the Great Britain Cycling Team has been the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, while all other competitions on the international calendar (authorised by the sport’s governing body, the UCI) are suspended until at least 1 July.

13. As with all NGB elite training centres, our training facility at the HSBC UK National Cycling Centre (NCC) in Manchester has been closed since Monday 23 March, meaning that all of our funded riders are mainly training from home. Since May 25, the NCC has opened to allow limited training for small numbers of Great Britain Cycling Team. We have quickly modified the ways in which we communicate with riders and provided them with the necessary support needed for home training.

14. The postponement of an event which riders have been working towards for a number of years brings with it considerable emotional and psychological strain, and we have established a mental wellbeing unit to provide additional help and support to those riders and staff who require it.

15. On top of ensuring that our riders are in the best physiological shape for the Tokyo Games, we have also spent a number of years developing kit and equipment to support our riders’ ambitions. The original deadline for certifying equipment for use at the Games was 31 December 2019, however this has now been extended to 31 December 2020 in light of the postponement. While we believe that we were in a very strong position ahead of the Games, it is unclear what impact this extension may have on other competing nations.

16. While UK Sport’s request to Government for additional funding from March 2021 to September 2021 has our support, our investment in bespoke kit and logistical planning for the Games means that we already have considerable sunk costs which may not be retrievable. We are therefore making considerable efforts to reduce our costs over the coming months, notably through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

On the wider sector

17. Around half of all dedicated cycling facilities are run by either a charity or community interest company, both of which will typically only have very limited resources to withstand the difficulties currently being experienced.

18. While all indoor venues are currently closed, in line with Government guidance, leasing arrangements and utility costs are continuing to cause cashflow pressures. We have had reports from a number of operators that local authorities are refusing
to waive or reduce rent costs at this time, and while Government support is available the timescales involved in accessing it has placed significant strain on many.

Our survey of facility-managing clubs and organisations found that many were forecasting losses of around £30,000 for a three-month closure. To mitigate this many clubs are continuing to ask that membership subs are paid to support the sport, while others are pre-selling future use to support short-term cashflow.

19. Similarly, cashflow is a large concern amongst local authority facility operators, with a threat of widespread closures or a movement towards offering only revenue-positive activity, which in many cases cycling is not.

20. Our sport relies on volunteers, particularly at a grass roots level, and communication with our existing volunteers has indicated that the majority (over 70%) are doing less volunteering than before the impact of Covid-19. Whilst we are confident they will return to support the sport once sanctioned activity can re-commence, there is a clear risk that our volunteers, particularly older volunteers, will be reluctant to return.

Q. How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector’s needs?

On British Cycling

20. The support that we have received from Sport England at this time has been rapid, effective and significant. By providing 50% of 2020/21 funding up front, and the remaining 50% unconditionally, we have been able to focus our efforts on the immediate priority of securing the health of the organisation and our sport without the added worry of meeting wider targets.

21. Similarly, the ring-fencing of 2021/22 funding – and removal of the usual application process – has supported our business planning and provided us with an element of financial certainty at what is otherwise an incredibly tumultuous time.

22. Beyond our current financial support, Sport England has also encouraged us to consider their newly-established Innovation Funds; with a focus on how we can digitise our products and quickly adapt to the changing needs of the sector as we emerge from this crisis.

23. The changes to Government guidance on physical exercise, particularly those introduced in England on June 1, were announced at very short notice and left little time for British Cycling and other NGBs to provide updated guidance for our sports. A longer period of notice before introducing new measures would be welcomed and would enable us to provide greater clarity and encouragement to riders and coaches – many of whom are keen to resume activities after a prolonged absence. This would
also help us to provide better support to businesses within our sector, most notably cycling facility operators and tutors/instructors.

On the Great Britain Cycling Team

24. Support received from UK Sport – most notably the security of funding until March 2021 – was both welcomed and positively reactive, and enabled us to maintain our focus on preparations for the Games.

25. We support UK Sport’s request for an early and exceptional one-year commitment to a rollover of its current Exchequer funding settlement for 2021/22.

26. As noted in point 16 above, we have considerable ‘sunk costs’ in kit and logistics which may not be retrievable, however we appreciate that UK Sport has only limited discretionary income and we are instead working on how we can bridge this gap through alternative revenue streams.

26. DCMS's guidance on return to training in elite sport informed the Great Britain Cycling Team's return to training at the HSBC UK National Cycling Centre on May 27th.

On the wider sector

27. The advice provided by Sport England and UK Sport, alongside BDO Accountants, has been welcomed by clubs, operators and other businesses within the sport sector, as has the consolidation of available Government support provided by the Sport and Recreation Alliance.

28. While direct support from Government – such as Business Rates relief, cash grants and rental holidays for business tenants – has been vital to the short-term survival of many businesses, difficulties in quickly accessing this support has caused considerable angst for many operators. This has led to many facilities resorting to alternative funding models – such as crowdfunding – to secure their immediate future. One such example of this is Adrenaline Alley in Corby, home to the Great Britain Cycling Team BMX Freestyle Park squad.

29. Other facility operators have stressed to us the importance of clear guidance on whether their businesses should close and/or re-open. For many, recommendations or advice from Government is insufficiently clear to enable insurance claims for business interruption, and we are concerned that in the absence of clear encouragement to re-open facilities many will be deterred from doing so – fearing local criticism for attempting to resume business as usual too soon.

30. Moving forward, we would ask that DCMS consider providing additional support and guidance in key areas, including:
Additional guidance for volunteers on what is/is not their responsibility, such that they can confidently resume supporting our sport (e.g. first aid / risk / liability);

Insurance advice on what the accepted industry positions should be around, for example public liability;

Information around education and training requirements and proposals to address, where volunteers and workers have/are close to expiry of their DBS/Safeguarding/First Aid;

Access to ad hoc specialist support and advice, to supplement teams working with volunteers, clubs, groups, event organisers.

Q. What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

On British Cycling

30. While the full impact on our sport is still unclear, there are particular characteristics of competitive cycling which make a return to ‘normal’ activity difficult while social distancing measures remain in place. The majority of cycling events take place in public outdoor settings which limits our ability to resume activities ‘behind closed doors’, while the elite level of our sport is underpinned by extensive cross-border travel which will likely remain problematic for some time. This could be further complicated by the requirement of those entering the country to self-isolate for a period of time prior to working or competing.

Due to the risks involved in our sport, organising an event is already very mitigation-heavy, and we are concerned that the added complications involved in ensuring social distancing will discourage organisers from planning events and discourage riders from taking part.

For these reasons there will be a requirement to provide greater support and clearer guidance to event organisers, and to work more collaboratively with international federations.

31. Our recreational cycling offer – consisting largely of group rides and mass participation events – will also need to adapt while social distancing measures remain in place, and we are currently working to provide our volunteer workforce with new guidance on how they can deliver these activities safely once we are able to resume activities.

The difficulties in hosting mass participation events, such as our HSBC UK Let’s Ride events, free events in which city centre loops are closed to traffic, will have an impact on our overall participation figures, and we are already working with funding partners to establish how we can replace this activity with digital activations. An
example of this is our HSBC UK Let’s Ride Local microsite, to encourage family riding from home.

32. We currently enjoy productive partnerships with a number of local authorities, and the economic pressures brought about by the pandemic may hinder their ability to commit to future partnerships. While we are adapting our offer to the changing situation we would appreciate the continued support of DCMS and Sport England to demonstrate the value of investment in sport, and in gathering cross-sector evidence to support this.

33. The sport of cycling is dependent upon the commitment and vital support of volunteers, the vast majority of whom have been unable to fulfil their roles since the beginning of the crisis in March.

While our own surveying shows that 93% of those volunteers are likely to continue to do so once activities resume, there remain concerns that worries over safety related to being in large groups/crowds, and the age demographic of our volunteers (12.5% are aged 65 or over) may limit their ability and willingness to do so if the threat of the virus persists.

34. It is too early to tell what impact the current suspension of activity will have on the numbers racing at grassroots level, however we are concerned that the absence of a traditional road, BMX and cross-country mountain bike season may lead to some riders dropping out of competitive racing altogether.

This is something which we will be addressing as part of our plans for each of the cycling disciplines, which are currently under way.

On the Great Britain Cycling Team

35. Related to point 33 above, the absence of competition may lead to some riders pursuing other educational or employment opportunities as opposed to a career as a professional rider. For those on the talent pathway – and particularly those at key transition phases (i.e. moving up age categories) the absence of racing presents us with selection difficulties and may mean that we need to amend our traditional timings.

36. While the Tokyo Games have now been scheduled for 2021, we are mindful that the continued prevalence of the virus could result in a cancellation of the event, meaning that there would be an eight-year gap between the Rio and Paris Games.

This situation would present us with a number of questions, and would have obvious implications for our staff and riders too, but we are also concerned that such a prolonged gap would seriously hinder the visibility of our sport and its subsequent attractiveness to grassroots competitors, fans and prospective commercial partners. In such an instance the role of UK Sport in amplifying the work of ourselves and other Olympic and Paralympic NGBs would be more important than ever, and indeed
this would be vital to maintaining public support for elite sport investment in the lead-up to Paris.

37. If the Tokyo Games still go ahead, as we hope, in 2021, the wider financial predicament that the UK is likely to find itself in post-Covid will mean that there will be pressures to cut areas of public spending. We know that elite sport funding is vulnerable in this sense, and we would be keen to work with UK Sport on how demonstrate the wider value of that funding for the Paris and LA cycles and beyond.

On the wider sector

38. A pressing threat to the wider sector is the continued viability of cycling facilities, particularly those supporting young people, at a time when local authorities are facing significant financial constraints. As we stress in point 19 there is a serious threat of widespread closures, and we are already working on how we can enable clubs and community organisations to take charge of local authority facilities which would otherwise face closure.

39. The continued support of Sport England in demonstrating the societal impact of community sports facilities, and their ability to foster inclusion, diversity and community integration, will also become more important than ever.

40. While the immediate focus of returning children to schools will be their academic studies, we are keen to ensure that cycling (through programmes such as Bikeability) and physical activity more widely are properly accommodated in the re-shaped curriculum.

The challenges we already face in childhood inactivity have been exacerbated further by the current crisis, with those from poorer backgrounds (who often have limited or no private outdoor space) being impacted most by the absence of programmes like Bikeability and formalised PE lessons.

For many children Bikeability is their only opportunity to learn to ride a bike, and given the Government’s renewed ambition to get more people cycling everyday journeys we hope that DCMS will encourage colleagues at the Department for Transport and Department for Education to take appropriate action to ensure that the programme returns to schools as soon as possible.

41. We are concerned about the impact the crisis may have on future insurance premiums, as brokers seek to recover losses associated with Covid-19, and the subsequent impact this will have on the financial viability of cycling events. Insurance is British Cycling’s second largest area of expenditure, and any significant increase in our premiums would likely need to be offset in part by a reduction in staffing costs – our largest area of expenditure.
This could also have a significant impact on Britain’s flagship cycling events, which make an enormous contribution to both the economy and society through tourism, investment and charity fundraising.

Q. What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

42. As with other organisations, critical to the way we have responded to Covid-19 has been our ability to function with all staff working remotely. Key to that has been our digital infrastructure.

43. The sector’s response to Covid-19 has highlighted the power of digital innovation and connectivity for the physical activity sector. Through our own activations and channels we have seen strong levels of engagement, and we believe the positive impacts on accessibility and building new audiences will continue to be felt long after the current crisis has abated. With this in mind, future support from UK Sport and Sport England and sector collaboration on how we can digitise more of our output would be welcomed.

44. The leadership provided to the sector by UK Sport and Sport England has been greatly appreciated and we have enjoyed the collaborative spirit fostered on cross-sport projects, such as the return to training for elite sportspeople.

Q. How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

On British Cycling

45. Research by Sport England shows that the percentage of people cycling has doubled from 8% to 16% between 3rd April and 18th May, with many new cyclists being encouraged by the reduction in traffic levels, increase in leisure time and good weather.

We know that the perception of safety is the most significant barrier to getting more people cycling, and there is a real risk that cycling levels will regress if the level of road traffic returns to pre-Covid levels and we do not provide increased protections for those continuing to exercise and travel by bike.

46. With public transport set to continue running at a much-reduced capacity for the foreseeable future, cycling for transport is going to play a vital role in the country’s recovery from the current crisis.
We are pleased to see that the Department for Transport has moved quickly to support this shift, and that many town and city councils have already implemented (or have plans to implement) large scale networks of temporary bike lanes.

However, translating this into long-term impact will require clear support from across Government to enable long-term behaviour change. In particular, investment in infrastructure will be essential to address the significant barriers to cycling that traffic creates.

Recognising this is a simplification of a complex picture, from an infrastructure investment perspective, there are essentially four categories where Government support could facilitate long-term behaviour change, alongside activities delivered by British Cycling to help learn to ride and develop skills and confidence:

- Highways & related infrastructure – including roads, cycle lanes, segregated cycle lanes – with leadership from Government and local authorities to create integrated networks to support active travel and commuting;

- National Cycle Network and major landowner provision – with a focus primarily on traffic-free recreational riding. Sustrans are responsible for the NCN, whilst key landowners such as National Trust, Canals & Rivers Trust, Forestry England, MoD and others have a critical role to play in maintaining access and opportunities for traffic free recreational riding;

- Local infrastructure for children & young people (Places to Ride) – learn to ride / skills development on school sites, in community parks and open spaces. Ownership of spaces is generally with local authorities, but British Cycling plays a key role in developing and promoting solutions, investment and activation;

- Cycle sport infrastructure – closed road circuits / BMX tracks / cycle speedway tracks, velodromes – meeting the needs of the sport and providing accessible opportunities for riders to develop and progress.

Within ‘Highways and related infrastructure’ and ‘local infrastructure for children & young people’ there is an important distinction for development of new communities, where the role of house-builders and developers should be highlighted and influenced by Government, around road design, housing design, storage, communal open spaces and play areas etc. which plays a key role in creating communities that encourage physical activity and cycling.

On the Great Britain Cycling Team

47. Online training platforms like Zwift have helped riders to continue to train at a good level of intensity, and in some cases provided virtual racing opportunities.
British Cycling’s series of open-access rides on Zwift have proved incredibly popular with over 25,000 registrations to date, and going forwards we are optimistic that such online platforms will provide a route for people to enter our sport and our talent pathway.