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Committee of Public Accounts

Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity

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to the report*

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Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	4
Conclusions and recommendations	5
1 Participation rates in sport and physical education	9
The legacy of the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympic Games	9
Progress since 2015 in increasing physical activity levels	10
The Department's new strategy and future key performance measures	11
2 Addressing barriers to participation	13
Understanding and addressing barriers to participation	13
Sport England's targeting of spending at the least active	14
3 Working with others	16
Collaborative working	16
The sustainability of sports facilities	17
Formal minutes	19
Witnesses	20
Published written evidence	21
List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament	22

Summary

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London were a success in many ways. But ten years on, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has fallen short of the increase in grassroots sports and physical activity participation promised as part of the long-term legacy of the Games. The Department recognises that it relied too heavily on a national event to deliver increased participation and since 2015 has focused on local based approaches and encouraging the least active to become more active. While this shows some signs of working, disappointingly it has not translated into meaningful national level change. Despite Sport England spending an average of £323 million of taxpayers money each year since 2015 to increase participation in sport and physical activity and to support the sports sector, the percentage of active adults increased by only 1.2 percentage points between November 2016 and November 2019. Nearly two in five adults in England still do not meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines for recommended activity.

Increasing activity levels has the potential to deliver financial savings across government through a healthier population and improvements in people's wellbeing. But the Department and Sport England have made little progress in tackling inequalities and barriers to people participating in sport and physical activity and Sport England's spending data is not sufficiently granular to assess how well it targets spending at the least active. For example, it distributed £1.5 billion in grants in the five years starting 2016–17, but only knows which local authorities this funding went to for £450 million of this spending.

The Department lacks a compelling vision for integrating physical activity into everyday life and we are not convinced that its approach to working with wider government and industry is effective. The Department must urgently work with the Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities and other partners to address the financial sustainability and condition of the nation's leisure centre stock. Looking ahead, it will be essential that the Department's new strategy focuses on addressing the motivation, confidence and opportunity barriers to people participating in sport and physical activity, particularly among the most inactive groups, and sets out what it will do differently to achieve change where it has not so far succeeded.

Introduction

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games cost £8.8 billion. The government committed to delivering a lasting legacy as part of the Games, including increasing the number of adults participating in sports. The proportion of adults participating in sport at least once a week declined in the first three years following the Games. In 2015, government introduced a new strategy to focus on the social good that taking part in sport and physical activity can deliver and enabling more people from all backgrounds to regularly take part in meaningful sport and physical activity, volunteering and experiencing live sport. By November 2019, 63.3% of adults in England were physically active. Community sport and physical activity brought an estimated contribution of £85.5 billion to England in 2017–18 in social and economic benefits, including £9.5 billion from improved physical and mental health.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (the Department) has overall policy responsibility for maximising participation in sport and physical activity. It spends most of the money it allocates to this through Sport England, its arm's length body created in 1996 to develop grassroots sport and get more people active across England. Sport England spent an average of £323 million a year between 2015–16 and 2020–21. Multiple other central and local government bodies also have a role in encouraging physical activity and there are a range of stakeholders across the third and private sectors, including facility providers and grassroots sports clubs. The Department is currently developing a new sports strategy to replace its 2015 strategy, which will work alongside Sport England's own strategy published in 2021.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The 2012 Olympic games delivered substantial economic benefits to the UK, but its participation legacy fell short of expectations.** The government committed to a lasting legacy from the Games, including an increase in the number of adults participating in sport. The Games delivered £14.2 billion in economic value by 2014 against a spend of £8.8 billion. But national participation in sport declined in the three years following the Games. The Department does not know the long-term participation legacy of the Games as it stopped tracking this in 2016 to focus on its new 2015 strategy for grassroots sport and physical activity. Sport England acknowledges it relied too heavily on a national event to deliver increased participation and that elite sports success doesn't necessarily inspire activity at a grassroots level. The Department has applied some, but not all, of its learning from the 2012 Olympic games to the hosting of the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games. It aimed to create a legacy from the Commonwealth Games at a local level, including a £3 million programme in the West Midlands to tackle inactivity, which it says has helped nearly 75,000 people to become active. But it has no mechanisms in place to monitor the long-term participation legacy from the Commonwealth Games. It is, however, developing a revised framework to assist future major event organisers in delivering a legacy.

Recommendation 1: *Using its learning from hosting recent major sporting events, the Department should clearly set out in its Treasury Minute response, the intended participation outcomes from hosting future events. In-particular this should focus on the performance metrics it intends to use and the long-term approach for monitoring these.*

2. **Sport England's focus on local initiatives and encouraging those who are least active to take part has not yet resulted in meaningful change in national participation rates.** The government's 2015 strategy for an active nation committed to focusing on those groups who were the least active, believing this would deliver the biggest gains for spending. Sport England adapted its approach accordingly, with initiatives including 12 community pilots with local partners to tackle inactivity. Initial results were positive and inactivity levels reduced at a faster rate in areas with a community pilot than those without. However, Sport England has not been able to translate local results into national gains. Nationally, the percentage of adults who were active increased by only 1.2 percentage points between November 2016 and November 2019, from 62.1% to 63.3%. Nearly two in five adults in England still do not meet the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines for recommended activity. The percentage of adults who were active then fell to the lowest level on record during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sport England's new strategy, published in 2021, has committed to understanding how its initiatives can influence change at a national level, but it has not yet set out concrete proposals for this.

Recommendation 2: *In its Treasury Minute response, Sport England should report back to the Committee on how it expects each of its initiatives will translate into change in participation rates at a national level, and how it will evaluate this.*

3. **The Department has not yet set out how it will determine whether its efforts to tackle persistent inactivity levels are a success.** The cost-of-living crisis risks further

reductions in activity as households look to cut back on discretionary spending. But this challenge is not reflected in the pace of the Department and Sport England's new strategic approaches. Sport England had targets for increasing activity levels among some, but not all, groups identified as priorities in its 2016–2021 strategy. It asserts that it is not in a position to set out the key performance measures to monitor progress against its new 2021 strategy until government has published its new strategy for sports participation. Yet the Department is unable to say when its new strategy will be published. The new strategy is intended to tackle persistent inactivity, with an emphasis on improving data monitoring and tailoring approaches to local needs. The Department could not articulate what practical measures its strategy would include, the specific outcomes it is aiming to achieve nor how it will deliver increased activity levels where previous strategies have failed.

Recommendation 3: *In its new strategy, the Department should set out the specific outcomes it is aiming to achieve with inactive groups, what targets it is working towards, and how it will measure progress.*

4. **Sport England has not yet translated its understanding of the barriers to participation into action to enable inactive groups to participate in sport and physical activity.** Sport England recognises three key requirements to get inactive groups to participate: motivation, confidence and opportunity. It recognises that some groups face greater barriers to participating in sport and physical activity, including women, lower socio-economic groups and disabled people. Sport England set itself targets to increase activity levels between 2016 and 2020 for women aged 16–60 by 250,000 and lower socio-economic groups in targeted communities by 100,000. Immediately prior to the pandemic, it was on track to deliver against its target for lower socio-economic groups, but significantly off track on its women's target. Among inactive groups which did not have targets, activity levels among the over-75s and disabled people increased before the pandemic, but there was no such increase in activity levels within Black or Asian ethnicity groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated some of the existing inequalities in activity for the least affluent, Asian people and disabled people. Sport England accepts that its past work on addressing barriers has over-relied on creating opportunities to participate, through a focus on building facilities and opening up clubs, incorrectly assuming this would be enough to generate activity. Sport England says that its new strategy looks at how to build people's confidence and motivation, but it did not provide us with any concrete examples of what this looks like in practice.

Recommendation 4: *Sport England should, by June 2023, write to us with details of the barriers for the least active groups, and what action it is taking to address them to ensure people have the motivation, confidence and opportunity to participate in physical activity.*

5. **It is unacceptable that Sport England does not know where in the country its grants are spent or whether these are genuinely helping those most in need.** Sport England distributed £1.5 billion in grants in the five years starting 2016–17, but only knows which local authorities this funding went to for £450 million of this spending. It does not know where in the country the remaining two-thirds of grants awarded were spent, as it does not track the distribution of grants issued to national organisations. Sport England therefore cannot fully assess whether it is

meeting its objective to target spending at less active groups, including lower socio-economic groups. The share of the £450 million received by the most deprived local authorities has fallen since 2016–17. Sport England could not explain this fall and we would expect it to have a far better grasp of where its money is spent. In recent years, spending on grassroots sports has been disproportionately concentrated in areas hosting major sporting events, rather than according to local need. For example, there are large discrepancies in grant funding per head between some London boroughs according to whether or not they hosted 2012 Olympic Games facilities.

Recommendation 5: *Sport England should, as part of its 2023–24 Annual Report and Accounts, clearly set out a full geographical breakdown of where its funding is being spent and how it is ensuring spending is targeted at deprived and less active communities. If this is not possible, it should write to us and explain why that is the case and commit to implementing in future annual reports.*

6. **The Department’s approach to working in partnership with other organisations to encourage people to take part in sport and physical activity is not yet effective.** The Department recognises the importance of working with a variety of government departments, local organisations and charities to deliver increased levels of physical activity. It has committed to ensuring greater joining up between government departments. Sport England has also sought to expand the number of organisations it works with, with a six-fold increase in the number of organisations awarded grant funding in 2020–21 during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 2019–20. However, Sport England could not explain how increasing its network of grant recipients would deliver increased activity levels. It is not clear what the Department has learnt from its previous efforts at increased collaboration following its 2015 strategy, which were short-lived. There is more that Sport England could do to develop a partnership approach and integrate incentives for activity into the agendas of businesses and other bodies.

Recommendation 6: *In its new strategy, the Department should set out what it and Sport England will do differently to ensure sustained integration and collaboration with other bodies to achieve increased levels of physical activity.*

7. **The Department does not know if leisure facilities are financially sustainable or are delivering the sports facilities that communities need.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sport England and the Department distributed over £900 million to support sports clubs and leisure centres. But leisure facilities now face new challenges. The energy bill for the leisure sector is expected to rise from £500 million in 2019 to £1–1.2 billion for 2022. Some 70% of councils are considering scaling back their leisure services in response to these financial pressures. Sport England recognises the fragile financial position of some leisure providers, but lacks understanding of the support the sector may need. Leisure facilities also face longer standing challenges. Many types of sporting facilities have an average age of more than 30 years and are in poor condition. For example, 45% of public park tennis courts are categorised as being in poor, very poor or unplayable condition. The Department asserts that it is working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to help the sector deal with the impact of rising energy costs. But it is unable to point to a strategy with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities for the maintenance or development of leisure facilities.

Recommendation 7: The Department should urgently review the condition of leisure facilities and, working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities and other government departments, take action to ensure their financial sustainability. The Department should write to us with an update on this review by June 2023.

1 Participation rates in sport and physical education

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (the Department) and Sport England on their efforts to increase the population's levels of physical activity.¹

2. The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games cost the UK £8.8 billion. The government committed to ensuring a lasting legacy from the Games, including an increase in grassroots sports participation. This legacy ambition was supported by a range of initiatives, such as upgrading local facilities, improving and protecting playing fields from development and training local sports leaders. The legacy plans for the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, published in March 2021 by the government and partnering organisations, included an ambition to improve physical activity levels in the West Midlands.²

3. The Department has overall policy responsibility for maximising participation in sport and physical activity. It directs most of its spending to develop grassroots sport and get more people active through Sport England, its arm's length body created in 1996. Sport England spent an average of £323 million a year between 2015–16 and 2020–21. Government strategies for grassroots sport and physical activity have highlighted how this can help achieve its other objectives such as tackling obesity. Community sport and physical activity brought an estimated contribution of £85.5 billion to England in 2017–18 in social and economic benefits, including £9.5 billion from improved physical and mental health.³

The legacy of the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympic Games

4. The proportion of adults participating in sport at least once a week fell in the three years following the Games, from 36.9% in 2012 to 35.8% in 2015. We asked why the participation legacy for the Games had fallen short of expectations. Sport England said told us that the approach for the 2012 Olympics had been “too assumptive” that national programmes would deliver local benefit.⁴ It pointed to evidence from the Games and other major events that, while these events generated engagement, enjoyment and national pride, they did not necessarily inspire a person to become active if the sport does not look like something that they themselves could do.⁵ The Department told us that participation levels had risen in the 10 years following the successful Olympics bid in 2005, from 34.6% of adults playing sport once a week in 2006 to 36.1% in 2016. It also highlighted the broader positive legacy of the 2012 Olympics, including a £14.2 billion trade and industry boost in the two years after the Games and positive changes in perceptions of disability as a result of the Paralympic Games.⁶

1 C&AG's report, *Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity*, Session 2022–23, HC 72, 8 July 2022

2 Q 1; C&AG's report, paras 7 and 3.16

3 C&AG's report, paras 1–3

4 Qq 8, 13; C&AG's report, Figure 3

5 Q 19

6 Qq 8, 18; C&AG's report, Figure 3

5. When we conducted our review of the Games in April 2013, we concluded that it would be important for public confidence that the full legacy was delivered, and that the whole of government shared this responsibility. We recommended that the government should report publicly at the end of September 2013, and each year thereafter for the rest of the decade, on progress with implementing legacy commitments.⁷ The government committed to a 10 year legacy from the Games and published annual reports between 2012 and 2016 setting out progress. It did not complete a promised evaluation in 2020 of the long-term impact of the Games. We asked the Department why it had not followed through with its monitoring of the legacy. The Department told us that, following publication of the 2015 *Sporting Future* strategy, it decided to report on progress against this new strategy instead of the legacy of the Games. It said that it did not have the capacity in 2020 to complete the promised evaluation as staff were overwhelmed dealing with the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ The Department plans to evaluate the legacy of the 2022 Commonwealth Games only one year after the Games, as it considered that measuring the long-term impact is difficult.⁹

6. We asked witnesses what lessons they had learned from the Games in 2012 and how they had reflected these in other major sporting events in 2022. The Department told us that it had tried to place legacy “at the very heart” of how it planned the 2022 Commonwealth Games. It explained that lessons from the Games on the economic legacy had formed a crucial part of its planning for the 2022 Commonwealth Games, including creating new jobs and skills, encouraging visitors to Birmingham and the West Midlands, and infrastructure developments. It told us that the redevelopment of the Alexander Stadium, as well as other community and housing development, had happened as result of the 2022 Commonwealth games being in Birmingham.¹⁰

7. The Department highlighted some of the other learning it has applied from the 2012 Games. It has developed a framework for hosting major sporting events, which it is now updating, to ensure that thinking about the legacy and economic benefits happens right from the start. Sport England similarly said that it had “put sport and physical activity legacy at the heart of pre-games planning” and that it had recognised the importance of thinking about what would benefit local communities. It explained that it had concentrating spending in and around the local communities of Birmingham. It gave the example of a £3 million programme in the West Midlands to tackle inactivity, which it said had helped nearly 75,000 people to become active.¹¹

Progress since 2015 in increasing physical activity levels

8. Prior to the pandemic, between November 2016 and November 2019, the percentage of adults who were active increased by 1.2 percentage points, from 62.1% to 63.3%. Participation rates then fell to 61.4% in the year to November 2021, the lowest on record, as measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic restricted people’s opportunities to exercise. The proportion of adults who do not meet the Chief Medical

7 Committee of Public Accounts, *The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: post-Games review*, Fortieth Report of Session 2012–13, 19 April 2013

8 Qq 10–12; C&AG’s report, paras 1.6 and 1.8

9 C&AG’s report, para 3.18

10 Q 13

11 Q 13

Officer's guidelines for recommended activity—150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity equivalent exercise—has remained persistently high, at nearly two in five adults between November 2016 and November 2021.¹²

9. In 2015, the Department published a new cross-government sporting strategy, *Sporting Future*. The strategy promised to target funding at less active groups of the population, believing this would deliver the biggest gains for public spending.¹³ Sport England told us that, since 2015, it had adopted a variety of approaches to increase activity levels, from national media campaigns to working with local partners in 12 different UK cities as part of a pilot program to understand and address the barriers to getting people active. It explained that there had been some positive signs from this work and that insight from the pilots is helping it to make decisions at a national level. Its evaluation of the community pilots showed that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, inactivity reduced at a faster rate in local delivery pilot areas than in areas without the pilots. However, Sport England conceded it had found it hard to translate successes at local level and with specific groups into gains nationally. It explained that it expected that this will take time, particularly if tackling some of the most stubborn inequalities in society.¹⁴

10. We asked Sport England why there had only been a modest increase in participation between 2016 and 2019. Sport England said it felt this was actually a meaningful increase because physical activity is an inconsistent, discretionary part of people's lives. It asserted that it therefore must maintain activity levels among the already active in addition to increasing levels among the inactive. It highlighted that the 1.2 percentage point change represented a statistically significant improvement. Sport England told us spending on participation has wider value for the community, with research suggesting an estimated economic and social return of £3.91 for every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity.¹⁵

The Department's new strategy and future key performance measures

11. Under its previous strategy, Sport England agreed with the Department three numeric targets to increase activity levels among women, lower socio-economic groups and the population as a whole.¹⁶ As part of its 2021 Strategy, published in January 2021, it committed to developing key performance measure to monitor progress against its activities. These measures were not yet in place, so we asked Sport England how it would be able to tell whether its efforts had been a success. Sport England told us that it needed to complete discussions with the Department on “the exact suite of measures that we are going to use” but that it had not finalised these given that the Department was developing a new strategy.¹⁷ Sport England said it was looking at what were the best indicators of overall population change and the conditions for success that sit beneath that, which it was conscious that it would also need to meet if it was going to fulfil its ambition to tackle inequality. We pressed Sport England on when it would finalise its performance

12 Qq 29–30; C&AG's report, paras 10, 2.2, Figure 9

13 C&AG's report, para 8

14 Qq 32, 39, 44, 58; C&AG's Report para 14

15 Q 30

16 C&AG's report, para 2.3

17 Q 63

measures. It told us that it could not finalise these until the Department had published its new strategy, but that it expected to be able to put the measures in place “quite quickly” afterwards.¹⁸

12. The Department plans to publish a new strategy to replace *Sporting Future*, which will include as a priority greater joining up between government departments and the wider sector. The Department originally intended to publish this in Summer 2022.¹⁹ We therefore asked the Department why the new strategy had not been released and when it was likely to be published. The Department told us that the delay was due to the recent turnover of ministers and that new ministers would want to ensure that the new strategy fits with their priorities for the sector and to meet and engage with sector stakeholders before publishing it. The Department said the publication date was subject to a set of political clearance processes which it was not wholly in charge of, but that it had continued to work on getting the strategy ready to go as quickly as possible. We asked the Department if it expected to be able to publish its strategy by the end of the year but the Department was unable to give us a date.²⁰

13. We asked the Department for details about its new strategy and how it planned to ensure that the strategy would spark activity. The Department provided little concrete detail, only revealing that its new strategy would have the same overall aim and would focus on tackling persistent inactivity, with an emphasis on improving data monitoring and tailoring approaches to local needs. We further questioned the Department and Sport England as to whether their new strategies would be aligned with each other. The Department responded that although its strategy had a wider remit than that of Sport England, both the strategies were aligned. It confirmed that it aimed to have a clear action plan that is aligned with other departments.²¹

14. We received written evidence from the Local Government Association which highlighted concerns that the cost-of-living crisis will adversely affect the participation rates of more deprived communities and rural communities.²² Written evidence we received from the Lawn Tennis Association also told us that 27% of UK adults are cutting back on physical activity and sport due to escalating costs.²³ We therefore asked the Department and Sport England if it had a strategy to deal with these developments. Sport England told us it was monitoring this, with recent surveys showing that deteriorating personal finances are making people anxious about their ability to be active. It did not point to any modelling of the potential impact on the use of leisure facilities, but said the most common form of response had been to adapt activity rather than reduce it, such as switching to a lower cost gym provider. Sport England said it had levers it could apply, such as highlighting free and low-cost opportunities to be active, but it viewed the limitations on people’s ability to exercise were not as severe as during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴

18 Qq 23, 63, 64–65

19 C&AG’s report, para 15

20 Qq 23, 24, 27, 65

21 Qq 23, 26–28, 37

22 GPA0003, *Local Government Association, Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity*, 1 November 2022

23 GPA0017, *Lawn Tennis Association, Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity*, 1 November 2022

24 Q 29

2 Addressing barriers to participation

15. Sport England’s 2016–2021 strategy, *Towards an Active Nation*, aimed to understand and address the barriers to activity for the least active by working with a broader range of partners and encouraging local collaboration. Sport England pledged £250 million, or 25% of its budget, over the four years from 2017 to encourage the inactive to be active, with lower socio-economic groups one of the areas of focus. In 2021 it published a new strategy, *Uniting the Movement*, which continued to focus on encouraging activity among the inactive and aims to give greater prominence to addressing inequalities in participation.²⁵

Understanding and addressing barriers to participation

16. Sport England’s research has shown that certain groups have tended to be less active, such as women, disabled people and those in lower socio-economic groups. It agreed targets with the Department to increase activity levels between 2016 and 2020 for women aged 16–60 by 250,000 and lower socio-economic groups in targeted communities by 100,000. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a year of the four-year target period left, the number of people from lower socio-economic groups increasing their activity levels through involvement in Sport England funded projects and programmes was on track at 83% of target. However, for women aged 16–60, it was only 18% of target.²⁶

17. We questioned Sport England on the limited progress in increasing activity levels among women aged 16–60. Sport England acknowledged that the figure was low but told us that it had a significant programme of activity had lined up for the final year of the target period which had to be suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included a further iteration of its campaign ‘This Girl Can’, which it claimed had been proven in previous years to positively affect women’s attitudes to sport and activity, particularly among those who had previously felt excluded. It told us that, while it would have been a challenge to meet its target for activity levels among women aged 16–60, it was confident prior to the pandemic that it had “driven significant change in the activity of women as a whole”.²⁷

18. Sport England did not have a target for other less active groups, such as the over-75s, disabled people or those in Black or Asian ethnic groups. Prior to the pandemic, between November 2016 and November 2019, activity levels among the over-75s and disabled people saw statistically significant increases of 7.1 and 3.6 percentage points respectively. But there was no statistically significant improvement in activity levels in Black or Asian ethnicity groups between November 2016 and November 2019.²⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated some of the existing inequalities in activity for the least affluent, Asian people and disabled people.²⁹ We asked Sport England what more it could do to support those from Black and Asian ethnic groups to participate in sport and physical activity. Sport England said the results of the *Tackling Racism and Radical Inequality in Sport* report, published in 2021, found these groups can feel unwelcome in the sports sector, and that there had been some high-profile examples of this within certain sports. It acknowledged

25 C&AG’s report, paras 8, 12, 14

26 Q 58; C&AG’s report, paragraphs 10, 1.12, 2.10 and 2.11

27 Q 58

28 Q 59; C&AG’s report, paras 2.12–2.13

29 C&AG’s report, para 11

that it needed to work with organisations and community groups to understand how to engage with those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and ensure that the sector was much more inclusive going forward.³⁰

19. We asked Sport England how it can spark activity among the least active. It told us the answer was a combination of three key characteristics: motivation, confidence and opportunity. It noted that in the past government had over-relied on opportunity side, with a focus on building facilities and opening up clubs, assuming that people will then take up that provision. Sport England told us its new 2021 strategy had started to look at how to build people's confidence and motivation to participate in sport by showing the public the benefits of being active and that "people like them" can take part. Sport England said it intended to work within local communities to ensure initiatives were delivered through providers that were recognised and trusted in that community, because not everyone trusted a top-down programme from central government.³¹ However, when pressed, Sport England struggled to provide a tangible example of putting its motivation theory into practice.³²

Sport England's targeting of spending at the least active

20. Sport England sought to rebalance its grant funding towards the inactive in line with the objectives of its 2016–2021 strategy. Sport England distributed £1.5 billion in grants in the five years starting 2016–17, supporting a range of organisations from National Governing Bodies to local community sports clubs. While Sport England can identify programme-specific spend, its data were not sufficiently granular to fully track its spending and it cannot identify how the grants it had issued to national organisations were distributed geographically across the country. The NAO therefore found that Sport England only knows which local authorities this funding went to for £450 million of this spending.³³

21. National Audit Office (NAO) analysis of the grants issued at local level showed the share received by the most deprived quintile of local authorities fell from 40% in the five years before the 2016 strategy to 34% in the five years afterwards. We therefore asked Sport England how it can claim to be directing its spending towards the least active when the share of local grants going to the most deprived local authorities had fallen. Sport England told us that 27% of its investment in the last year had gone to the most deprived areas of the country. It also noted that its £40 million Together Fund had reached 6,000 local clubs and community groups in the most deprived areas of the country, 80% of which had not received public funding before.³⁴

22. Sport England told us the changes in distribution of spending reported by the NAO was due to where some of the national organisations were based rather than where the funding then goes on to be received. It explained that some organisations, such as the Football Foundation, may be distributing money nationally, but it was recorded as being distributed where they were based, in this case London.³⁵ However, the NAO's analysis

30 Q 59

31 Q 28

32 Qq 42, 43

33 C&AG's report, paras 12, 2.19 and 2.24

34 Qq 45, 49

35 Qq 45, 46

excluded grants issued to national organisations. We therefore pointed out to Sport England in reply that the fall in the share of funding received by the most deprived local authorities from 40% to 34% only related to money spent at local level. But it continued to insist that the fall was due to grants issued to national organisations and where these organisations were based.³⁶

23. The Department told us that it had invested significantly to build and upgrade sport facilities in locations hosting major sporting events, such as the Olympic Stadium in Stratford and the Sandwell Aquatics Centre in the West Midlands. Using the NAO's breakdown of Sport England grant funding per head in Committee member's local authority areas, we found that in London over the period 2016–17 to 2020–21, grant funding per head was four to five times higher in those localities with a clear physical legacy from the 2012 Olympic Games compared to those without one. We therefore asked Sport England if it had missed an opportunity to spread the legacy of major sporting events further afield. Sport England recognised that the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games had resulted in a demonstrable benefit to those area around where the Games were hosted. It also recognised that there had been a similar impact in and around Birmingham and the West Midlands relative to other parts of the country as a result of the 2022 Commonwealth Games. It explained that as a result of its change in approach from 2015, it worked towards engaging people in ways that made sense for them, rather than presuming that people would pick up activity on the back of a major Games.³⁷

36 Q 49

37 Qq 9, 13

3 Working with others

Collaborative working

24. While the Department plays the lead role in increasing physical activity, it told us other government bodies also have responsibilities in this area: the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities leads on local sports facilities and leisure centres; the Department for Transport oversees the newly established body Active Travel England; the Department for Education leads on school sport; and the Department for Health and Social Care helps promote the role of physical activity for mental and physical health. Recognising this dependency, the 2015 *Sporting Future* strategy committed departments to work more closely together on delivery and funding of initiatives related to activity. However, by 2018, the Department had stopped publishing progress reports which held other departments to account for their progress against the cross-government objectives. Similarly, a cross-government Inter-Ministerial Group on Healthy Living only met four times between 2018 and 2019. The Department did not evaluate if its 2015 strategy achieved its objectives.³⁸

25. The NAO found that there were signs that system-wide collaboration on sport and physical activity may be increasing following the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the Department was seeking to build on this increased collaboration.³⁹ The Department said its new strategy will include an action plan that is aligned across the departments.⁴⁰ We questioned the Department about how well it was collaborating with other stakeholders. It provided several examples of its current collaborative working, including:

- Working with the Department for Education and Ofsted to bring accountability and transparency to schools' decisions over whether to share their sports facilities with the local community.⁴¹
- Working with the Department for Transport and the Department for Education on children's journeys to and from school to think how this can be made a safe journey so that they can cycle and walk to school.⁴²
- Working with the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities on the *Moving Healthcare Professionals* programme to engage GPs and primary healthcare professionals in better understanding the opportunities for non-clinical prescription.⁴³
- Engaging with parkrun to learn lessons from its successes in drawing in people to participate.⁴⁴

26. Sport England increased the number of organisations that it awarded grant funding by six-fold in 2020–21 compared to 2019–20, from 1,666 to 9,538. We asked Sport England how increasing the number of grant recipients will help improve participation in sport

38 Q 35 ; C&AG's report, paras 9, 1.16, 3.10

39 C&AG's Report, para 3.9

40 Q 37

41 Q 17

42 Q 36

43 Q 38

44 Q 34

and physical activity. Sport England told us funding provided during the pandemic was to help the sector survive, it was not about progression of activity rates. It said it could not prove what benefit this funding has had, but could demonstrate what harm would have been caused without the funding⁴⁵.

27. We pressed the Department and Sport England on how they were working with businesses and other organisations to incentivise them to engage with increasing participation and activity rates, such as making sports equipment available in the workplace, or introducing a tax relief on gym membership. Sport England acknowledged that its work with businesses on this was probably underdeveloped, but it was aware that many employers offered schemes such as cycle to work or offered a healthy living allowance to their employees. It said it hoped its advocacy work will demonstrate to major employers the benefits they can get from an active workforce. Sport England also told us that it had learned that, while providing sports facilities in a single-use venue was of value, it was not as valuable as when services were co-located. It explained that a sports facility in a shared building alongside other services such as a GP's surgery or library can help to increase both footfall and people's confidence to use it, as well as making it more rooted in the community.⁴⁶ Following our evidence session, Sport England wrote to us to provide specific examples of successful co-located services, such as the Great Sankey Neighbourhood Hub in Warrington, which have sport and leisure provision alongside GP healthcare and other primary care in a single, integrated facility.⁴⁷

The sustainability of sports facilities

28. As part of measures to control the COVID-19 pandemic, sports facilities were closed multiple times by the government. During the pandemic, Sport England distributed £271 million to the grassroots sport and physical activity in financial support and the Department provided £700 million for organisations affected by the loss of spectator ticket income and for public leisure centres.⁴⁸ We asked what had been the impact of this funding, given that participation rates had not increased during this period. Sport England told us that the funding was emergency funding to enable the sector to survive the pandemic rather than to support increase in activity levels, and that it considered the funding to have been “absolutely necessary”⁴⁹. The Department told us that over 1,600 organisations had benefited from the sport survival package, and that no club that received funding went into administration during the pandemic.⁵⁰

29. Sport England told us that lots of sports facilities providers had used their organisational reserves to stay afloat during the pandemic and were now in a precarious financial position. The Department also recognised that “many clubs are coming out of a really difficult period and many clubs are struggling”⁵¹. We received written evidence from the Local Government Association, which told us that the total energy bill for the leisure sector had risen from £500 million in 2019 to between £1–1.2 billion for 2022.⁵² We also

45 Q 48; C&AG's report, para 2.23, Figure 11

46 Q 42

47 [Correspondence to the chair submitted by Sport England](#), 14 November 2022

48 Qq 56, 61; C&AG's report, para 1

49 Q 48

50 Q 56

51 Qq 54, 56

52 GPA0003, *Local Government Association, Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity*, 1 November 2022

received written evidence from the District Councils Network, which reported that 70% of councils were considering scaling back their leisure services amid financial pressures.⁵³ In addition to this, the leisure facilities estate is ageing—many types of sporting facilities have an average age of more than 30 years—and are in poor condition. For example, written evidence received from the Lawn Tennis Association told us that 45% of public park tennis courts are categorised as being in poor, very poor or unplayable condition.⁵⁴

30. We therefore asked the Department how it intended to address the short-term and long-term sustainability challenges facing sports clubs and facilities. The Department told us that the primary responsibility for leisure provisions sits with local government.⁵⁵ Similarly, it said that it was not responsible for government’s energy policy, but noted that the energy bill relief scheme will assist sports clubs in dealing with increased costs. It said it intended to continue working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on energy related issues.⁵⁶ Sport England told us that it can provide small grants to help those local sports clubs struggling with energy costs to become more energy efficient.⁵⁷ When pressed on how it will work with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to tackle the challenge of ageing public facilities, the Department told us it “could not point [us] directly to an actual strategy on development of leisure facilities” and that decisions on investment were ultimately for local authorities. As part of the Department’s forthcoming new strategy on sport, it said it was aiming to get a better national picture of where all the facilities are and the state and condition of those facilities.⁵⁸ Sport England also explained that it was not responsible for the national policy on the infrastructure of leisure facilities, but that it worked to provide “insight and understanding of how facilities can get people active”. It explained that it could not refurbish every facility in the country as this would be too expensive, but instead it can use its insight to target investment where this will have the greatest impact on participation numbers.⁵⁹

53 GPA0019, Districts Councils’ Network, *Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity*, 1 November 2022

54 Q 61; C&AG’s report, figure 16; [GPA0017](#), Lawn Tennis Association, *Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity*, 1 November 2022

55 Qq 35, 61

56 Qq 56–57

57 Q 29

58 Q 61

59 Q 61

Formal minutes

Monday 19 December 2022

Members present:

Dame Meg Hillier

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown

Mr Jonathan Djanogly

Mrs Flick Drummond

Mr Mark Francois

Mr Louie French

Peter Grant

Anne Marie Morris

Sarah Olney

Nick Smith

Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity

Draft Report (*Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 30 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Thirty-second of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Adjournment

Adjourned till Thursday 12 January at 9:30am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Monday 31 October 2022

Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary, Department for Culture, Media and Sport; **Ben Dean**, Director of Sport, Gambling and Platinum Jubilee, DCMS; **Tim Hollingsworth OBE**, Chief Executive Officer, Sport England; **Nick Pontefract**, Chief Strategy Officer, Sport England

[Q1-65](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

GPA numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Activity Alliance ([GPA0008](#))
- 2 Amies, Julie (Administrator, Energise Me) ([GPA0020](#))
- 3 Bank of England Sports Centre Members' Group ([GPA0005](#))
- 4 British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences ([GPA0001](#))
- 5 Community Leisure UK ([GPA0011](#))
- 6 District Councils' Network ([GPA0019](#))
- 7 Fair Play for Women ([GPA0004](#))
- 8 Ferrero UK Ltd ([GPA0015](#))
- 9 Girlguiding ([GPA0006](#))
- 10 LTA ([GPA0017](#))
- 11 De Oliveira, Professor Rita (Associate Professor Sport and Exercise Science, London South Bank University); Zaidall, Doctor Lisa (Lecturer within the Division of Human Sciences, London South Bank University); Szekeres, Zsafia (Research Associate, Cardiff Metropolitan University); and Mileva, Professor Katya (Professor in Human Neurophysiology, London South Bank University) ([GPA0022](#))
- 12 Richmond Group of Charities ([GPA0002](#))
- 13 Spirit of 2012 ([GPA0014](#))
- 14 Sport and Recreation Alliance ([GPA0013](#))
- 15 Sport for Development Coalition ([GPA0007](#))
- 16 Swim England ([GPA0018](#))
- 17 The Local Government Association ([GPA0003](#))
- 18 The Royal Mencap Society ([GPA0009](#))
- 19 The Sports Think Tank ([GPA0016](#))
- 20 The University of Essex - School of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences ([GPA0012](#))
- 21 UKactive ([GPA0010](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2022–23

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy Annual Report and Accounts 2020–21	HC 59
2nd	Lessons from implementing IR35 reforms	HC 60
3rd	The future of the Advanced Gas-cooled Reactors	HC 118
4th	Use of evaluation and modelling in government	HC 254
5th	Local economic growth	HC 252
6th	Department of Health and Social Care 2020–21 Annual Report and Accounts	HC 253
7th	Armoured Vehicles: the Ajax programme	HC 259
8th	Financial sustainability of the higher education sector in England	HC 257
9th	Child Maintenance	HC 255
10th	Restoration and Renewal of Parliament	HC 49
11th	The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine programme in England	HC 258
12th	Management of PPE contracts	HC 260
13th	Secure training centres and secure schools	HC 30
14th	Investigation into the British Steel Pension Scheme	HC 251
15th	The Police Uplift Programme	HC 261
16th	Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic	HC 29
17th	Government's contracts with Randox Laboratories Ltd	HC 28
18th	Government actions to combat waste crime	HC 33
19th	Regulating after EU Exit	HC 32
20th	Whole of Government Accounts 2019–20	HC 31
21st	Transforming electronic monitoring services	HC 34
22nd	Tackling local air quality breaches	HC 37
23rd	Measuring and reporting public sector greenhouse gas emissions	HC 39
24th	Redevelopment of Defra's animal health infrastructure	HC 42
25th	Regulation of energy suppliers	HC 41
26th	The Department for Work and Pensions' Accounts 2021–22 – Fraud and error in the benefits system	HC 44
27th	Evaluating innovation projects in children's social care	HC 38

Number	Title	Reference
28th	Improving the Accounting Officer Assessment process	HC 43
29th	The Affordable Homes Programme since 2015	HC 684
30th	Developing workforce skills for a strong economy	HC 685
31st	Managing central government property	HC 48
1st Special Report	Sixth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 50

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Low emission cars	HC 186
2nd	BBC strategic financial management	HC 187
3rd	COVID-19: Support for children's education	HC 240
4th	COVID-19: Local government finance	HC 239
5th	COVID-19: Government Support for Charities	HC 250
6th	Public Sector Pensions	HC 289
7th	Adult Social Care Markets	HC 252
8th	COVID 19: Culture Recovery Fund	HC 340
9th	Fraud and Error	HC 253
10th	Overview of the English rail system	HC 170
11th	Local auditor reporting on local government in England	HC 171
12th	COVID 19: Cost Tracker Update	HC 173
13th	Initial lessons from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic	HC 175
14th	Windrush Compensation Scheme	HC 174
15th	DWP Employment support	HC 177
16th	Principles of effective regulation	HC 176
17th	High Speed 2: Progress at Summer 2021	HC 329
18th	Government's delivery through arm's-length bodies	HC 181
19th	Protecting consumers from unsafe products	HC 180
20th	Optimising the defence estate	HC 179
21st	School Funding	HC 183
22nd	Improving the performance of major defence equipment contracts	HC 185
23rd	Test and Trace update	HC 182
24th	Crossrail: A progress update	HC 184
25th	The Department for Work and Pensions' Accounts 2020–21 – Fraud and error in the benefits system	HC 633

Number	Title	Reference
26th	Lessons from Greensill Capital: accreditation to business support schemes	HC 169
27th	Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme	HC 635
28th	Efficiency in government	HC 636
29th	The National Law Enforcement Data Programme	HC 638
30th	Challenges in implementing digital change	HC 637
31st	Environmental Land Management Scheme	HC 639
32nd	Delivering gigabitcapable broadband	HC 743
33rd	Underpayments of the State Pension	HC 654
34th	Local Government Finance System: Overview and Challenges	HC 646
35th	The pharmacy early payment and salary advance schemes in the NHS	HC 745
36th	EU Exit: UK Border post transition	HC 746
37th	HMRC Performance in 2020–21	HC 641
38th	COVID-19 cost tracker update	HC 640
39th	DWP Employment Support: Kickstart Scheme	HC 655
40th	Excess votes 2020–21: Serious Fraud Office	HC 1099
41st	Achieving Net Zero: Follow up	HC 642
42nd	Financial sustainability of schools in England	HC 650
43rd	Reducing the backlog in criminal courts	HC 643
44th	NHS backlogs and waiting times in England	HC 747
45th	Progress with trade negotiations	HC 993
46th	Government preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons for government on risk	HC 952
47th	Academies Sector Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20	HC 994
48th	HMRC's management of tax debt	HC 953
49th	Regulation of private renting	HC 996
50th	Bounce Back Loans Scheme: Follow-up	HC 951
51st	Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system	HC 997
52nd	Ministry of Defence Equipment Plan 2021–31	HC 1164
1st Special Report	Fifth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 222

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities	HC 85

Number	Title	Reference
2nd	Defence Nuclear Infrastructure	HC 86
3rd	High Speed 2: Spring 2020 Update	HC 84
4th	EU Exit: Get ready for Brexit Campaign	HC 131
5th	University technical colleges	HC 87
6th	Excess votes 2018–19	HC 243
7th	Gambling regulation: problem gambling and protecting vulnerable people	HC 134
8th	NHS capital expenditure and financial management	HC 344
9th	Water supply and demand management	HC 378
10th	Defence capability and the Equipment Plan	HC 247
11th	Local authority investment in commercial property	HC 312
12th	Management of tax reliefs	HC 379
13th	Whole of Government Response to COVID-19	HC 404
14th	Readying the NHS and social care for the COVID-19 peak	HC 405
15th	Improving the prison estate	HC 244
16th	Progress in remediating dangerous cladding	HC 406
17th	Immigration enforcement	HC 407
18th	NHS nursing workforce	HC 408
19th	Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster	HC 549
20th	Tackling the tax gap	HC 650
21st	Government support for UK exporters	HC 679
22nd	Digital transformation in the NHS	HC 680
23rd	Delivering carrier strike	HC 684
24th	Selecting towns for the Towns Fund	HC 651
25th	Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme	HC 683
26th	Department of Work and Pensions Accounts 2019–20	HC 681
27th	Covid-19: Supply of ventilators	HC 685
28th	The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's management of the Magnox contract	HC 653
29th	Whitehall preparations for EU Exit	HC 682
30th	The production and distribution of cash	HC 654
31st	Starter Homes	HC 88
32nd	Specialist Skills in the civil service	HC 686
33rd	Covid-19: Bounce Back Loan Scheme	HC 687
34th	Covid-19: Support for jobs	HC 920
35th	Improving Broadband	HC 688

Number	Title	Reference
36th	HMRC performance 2019–20	HC 690
37th	Whole of Government Accounts 2018–19	HC 655
38th	Managing colleges' financial sustainability	HC 692
39th	Lessons from major projects and programmes	HC 694
40th	Achieving government's long-term environmental goals	HC 927
41st	COVID 19: the free school meals voucher scheme	HC 689
42nd	COVID-19: Government procurement and supply of Personal Protective Equipment	HC 928
43rd	COVID-19: Planning for a vaccine Part 1	HC 930
44th	Excess Votes 2019–20	HC 1205
45th	Managing flood risk	HC 931
46th	Achieving Net Zero	HC 935
47th	COVID-19: Test, track and trace (part 1)	HC 932
48th	Digital Services at the Border	HC 936
49th	COVID-19: housing people sleeping rough	HC 934
50th	Defence Equipment Plan 2020–2030	HC 693
51st	Managing the expiry of PFI contracts	HC 1114
52nd	Key challenges facing the Ministry of Justice	HC 1190
53rd	Covid 19: supporting the vulnerable during lockdown	HC 938
54th	Improving single living accommodation for service personnel	HC 940
55th	Environmental tax measures	HC 937
56th	Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund	HC 941