

Welsh Government's evidence to the Committee's inquiry into participation in sport in disadvantaged areas

Context

1. Since devolution, the Welsh Government has committed significant investment to a range of policies and programmes to promote prosperity, prevent, and mitigate poverty. Despite this, poverty levels have remained relatively stagnant in Wales for over 15 years and any progress has been challenging, particularly in some of our post-industrial communities. This has not been aided by over a decade of UK driven austerity and welfare cuts have constrained WG budgets and reduced household budgets and disposable income. The impact of the pandemic followed by the cost of living crisis will deepen the challenges in these communities. Whilst the most recent Welsh Government action on poverty has focussed on mitigating the impact of poverty, wider efforts will also require the need to build future resilience.
2. The Programme for Government sets out clear ambitions to deliver a more prosperous and a more equal Wales and to create better outcomes for people now and in the future. Tackling poverty and associated inequalities is at the heart of these ambitions. In March of last year, the socio-economic Duty was commenced, placing a statutory commitment on Welsh Ministers, and certain public bodies, to ensure their strategic decision-making considers socio-economic disadvantage.

The importance of sport

3. Sport is vital to our national life. It has a powerful influence on our national identity; it unites us as a nation and gives us an enviable presence on the world stage. Sport is also key to our health and wellbeing as a nation with our vision of an active nation where everyone can have a lifetime enjoyment of sport.
4. Sport has a significant contribution to make in delivering our Programme for Government, with its reach and influence extending beyond the specific commitments on enhancing equal access, improving participation and building on our provision of sporting facilities across the country. Sport has a key role to play in delivering our commitments around a more prosperous, greener, healthier and more equal nation.
5. In this context, the Welsh Government, working with Sport Wales, will continue to lead the sector and encourage collaboration with others to nurture and facilitate a population increase in physical activity and to invest effort and resources where it is needed most; where there are significant variations in participation and where there is a lack of opportunity or aspiration to be active.

Challenges facing sport and leisure

6. The health, social and economic value of sport is widely recognised, and that is why the Welsh Government continues to invest in sport through its preventative power.

7. The inequalities of sporting activity during the lockdown period have been shown clearly by successive studies commissioned by Sport Wales since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the strict lockdown period, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds were much more likely to have reported a drop in their physical activity levels. Most worryingly, people who reported their children were not doing any physical activity or exercise on a typical day was 9% but this rose to 14% for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
8. As we turn our sights to our recovery from the pandemic, expanding on the opportunities to increase participation to support our mental and physical health will be more important than ever. However, the legacy of the pandemic is already being seen as efforts focus on gearing up facilities, rebuilding memberships and regaining consumer confidence. These are some of the examples impacting income given to us by the leisure centre operators and trusts which then affects their ability to recruit and retain staff to provide the range of services that was on offer pre-pandemic.
9. Additionally, the cost of living crisis is compounding an already difficult position with energy costs and inflation affecting families' spending power. This will probably affect those in disadvantaged areas more than others and we know that vulnerable groups, such as single parents, young children, disabled people, and minority ethnic groups, are more likely to live in poverty.
10. Participation in sport can be challenging for a whole host of reasons, such as the cost of specialist clothing and equipment, and travel to facilities. We know from research that the lack of opportunities people have to be physically active can be the root of inequality and poor motivation, and that physical activity levels can be related to socio-economic status based on recent research by Public Health Wales.

Welsh Government actions

11. During the pandemic, the Welsh Government provided £66.5 m in funding to support the sport and leisure sector to address the impact of the necessary restrictions. This included an additional £16.5m for the Sport and Leisure Recovery Fund to support national organisations, local sports clubs, leisure trusts and independent/self-employed providers of sport, fitness and leisure services, and £20.1m for professional sports clubs affected by the restrictions that required sports events to be played behind closed doors. There is no doubt that without this financial support, the sector would have suffered irreparable damage that would have had a long-lasting impact on the health and wellbeing of the nation.
12. The vast majority of Welsh Government funding for sport is channelled through Sport Wales, our delivery partner for sport. Sport Wales is expected to use this funding – and the funding it receives via the National Lottery – to deliver the objectives set out in its Term of Government remit letter. We will be investing more than £75m over the next three years for Sport Wales to deliver on its aims and objectives.

13. As we recovered from the pandemic the Welsh Government has provided funding for the successful Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing programmes. These programmes have delivered free play, sporting and cultural activities for children and young people aged 0-25 to address the social, emotional and physical impacts of the pandemic. Through the Winter of Wellbeing programme, more than £1m has been invested in sports organisations to deliver free activities across Wales. They include the Urdd's provision of sport and physical activity through the medium of Welsh in areas of rural and social deprivation, Colegau Cymru's programme to upskill college students to deliver sport and active recreation to their peers and to children and young people, and taster sessions for children in the sports of Athletics, Racket Sports, Bowls, Cycling and Weightlifting through their clubs and academies.
14. Supporting our community sports clubs across Wales is a priority for this Government at both the elite level and at the community level, as is investing in our nation's sports facilities so we can unlock more of our potential as a nation. If we are going to unleash the benefits of sport for everyone, from the grassroots to elite sportspeople, it is vital that we make facilities for sport and physical activity accessible to everyone. Modern, accessible and sustainable facilities are crucial to encourage people into sport, or back into sport. We have already committed to investing £24m of capital funding over the next three years in our sporting facilities which is in addition to the £13.2m capital investment in 2021-22. Sport Wales has recently established a Strategic Capital Investments Group to develop a strategic plan to direct and prioritise capital investment in facilities at those projects that address inequalities. Sport Wales successfully piloted a new funding initiative last year, Crowdfunder. This fund, which is continuing this year, disproportionately targets deprived communities - with funding provided at a higher percentage to those clubs in the most deprived areas based on Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation data. This new investment stream is a great way to encourage community cohesion and upskills those attached to the community club as support is given throughout the process by Sport Wales and Crowdfunder staff.
15. The Welsh Government will continue to invest in sports facilities across Wales in a sustainable and globally responsible way to ensure equal access and to support our talented athletes and coaches, wherever they live and whatever their background. We have already had positive and constructive dialogue with some of our national partners about delivering those objectives together.
16. Sport Wales has provided significant amounts of funding for many different sports across Wales. There are many examples across a range of sports, from improvements to the pitches at Gwernyfed Rugby Club and Denbigh Town Football Club; to new tennis courts in Chepstow, enabling disabled access at Beechwood Bowls Club in Newport. There are new practice nets for Pembroke County Cricket Club, new equipment for Bala Canoe Club and new mats for a Brazilian Ju-Jitsu Club in Ystradgynlais. Additionally new learn to ride parks in Dare Valley Park and Wattstown Memorial Park will regenerate land previously used for other purposes, and turn them to areas for young children to learn to ride their bicycles, encouraging the teaching of children how to cycle, as well as basic road safety.

17. We should also recognise that investing in sporting facilities is also now being undertaken by the UK Government. The UK Government has decided to actively undermine devolution by taking decisions on devolved matters, including sport with funding announcements regarding tennis and football serving as recent examples. The financial assistance powers provided in the UK Internal Market Act allows UK Ministers to take decisions on devolved matters without a mandate and with no accountability to the Senedd and its Committees. The UK Government's approach does not have regard for the legislative context within which it is directing public money and no work has been undertaken to prevent duplication. It also remains unclear how the UK Government will ensure that audit processes are satisfied in a manner that allows for proper accountability and how spend in devolved areas will be subject to Welsh parliamentary scrutiny. This incoherent approach is a threat to devolution that risks outcomes that poor value for money as a result of ill-informed policy development. The UK Government's approach to Levelling Up will leave Wales with less say over less money and we remain concerned at the UK Government's failure to prioritise need in their methodologies and allocations. There is currently no identifiable Levelling Up benefit for Wales as EU structural funds are replaced with less funding within a more regressive and centralised model that is owned entirely by Whitehall. These factors will ensure that less money is targeted where it is needed most.
18. This is only part of the picture though. The sport portfolio also works with other areas of the Welsh Government to deliver the best outcomes for sport that we can and have a direct impact on delivery of sporting opportunities.
19. Sport has a role to inspire. Our investment at the elite level, investing in world-class sports facilities to support our nation's sporting success on the international stage, is key to inspiring the next generation. It also increases the potential opportunities we have to host national and international events, which in turn further our global reach and can encourage participation.
20. The Healthy and Active Fund is an established, collaborative programme of work co-managed by the Welsh Government (health and sport), Sport Wales and Public Health Wales. Sport Wales manages the grant programme which has invested £5.9m in a variety of projects across Wales since 2018 to pilot new, innovative ways of increasing participation in physical activity and to improve people's mental wellbeing. The projects seek to reduce inequalities in outcomes and barriers in a variety of ways, from intergenerational approaches to gardening, encouraging families to get active with their new born babies, to increasing physical and social activities for people living in care homes. There are other projects that look to support people with mental health issues to lead independent and long-term active lifestyles, and one that uses sporting memories to help people with dementia.
21. The Welsh Government's Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales strategy sets out our plans, over a ten-year period, to transform the way decisions are made in everyday life which impact upon our weight and wellbeing. Among the interventions supported through the Delivery Plan are an over 60s Active Leisure Scheme, funded with Sport Wales, which is focussing upon health inequalities

and working through leisure centres to increase outreach. We are also continuing to deliver our National Exercise Referral Scheme with Public Health Wales and this has continued to adapt to offer additional opportunities through digital options and outdoor based activities. We also continue to invest in the Free Swimming Initiative and the Armed Forces Free Swimming Scheme to provide free access to local authority swimming pools for children and young people, people aged 60 and over and our veterans and armed forces personnel. The Free Swimming Initiative also supports our national efforts to provide children and young people with important life skills through the 'learn to swim' element of the provision.

22. Community owned and operated facilities can also play an important part in empowering local people, providing local jobs as well as opportunities to socialise - tackling loneliness and isolation and improving general health and wellbeing. A Community Facilities Programme budget of £6.5m has been allocated for 2022-23. Our Community Facilities Programme is designed to improve community facilities, which are useful to, and used by, people in the community. Community facilities, including sporting facilities, play a vital role, acting as a focus for community events, providing opportunities for volunteering and enabling local access to services. This can be even more important in rural areas. Grants awarded so far this year have supported Garndiffaeth Bowls Club, Boxing Community Action and Merthyr Tydfil Sailing Club.
23. The education estate, through our schools and colleges, also provides an important platform to our sporting facilities. Our Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme has a significant role to play in providing sports facilities. The Programme makes it clear that we expect schools and colleges in Wales to support both our learners and wider communities. Our aspiration is that all facilities receiving investment commit to making assets available for community use where local demand exists. This has resulted in the provision of excellent sporting facilities benefiting all age groups, such as at Ysgol Bro Teifi in Llandysul, Ceredigion. This is a new ages 3 to 19 Welsh medium school which has streamlined education in the area to support learners from primary age through to secondary education while ensuring their state of the art sports facilities, which includes an all-weather pitch and a sports hall, are readily available to the surrounding community outside the school day. We expect all projects that receive funding support to show how their school facilities can support the community around them. This includes extending the use of physical assets such as sports facilities for community use, both during and outside school hours. It is also vitally important to ensure there is join-up in how pupils access schools and we are investing in the active travel infrastructure across Wales with funding of £220m over this and the following two financial years.

Conclusion and next steps

24. Ensuring equal access to sport is a key commitment for this Welsh Government which is being addressed and supported in many various ways. However, we also recognise that it is not something we can achieve alone, and we need to work closely with the wider sporting family and key stakeholders such as local authorities and community groups to make further progress.

25. As we continue to recover from the pandemic and as we grapple with wider challenges, such as the cost of living crisis, it is our intention to host a Sport Summit later this year with a key focus on exploring how sport can drive increased participation in our most disadvantaged communities and with our harder to reach groups. This Summit will aim to build on the excellent spirit of collaboration we saw during the height of the pandemic and aim to forge new relationships and partnerships. We hope the Committee's work in this area will help shape and influence that forward work programme.

Dawn Bowden MS

Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport, and Chief Whip

June 2022