

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol](#) ar gyfer yr [ymchwiliad i Gydlyniant Cymdeithasol](#)

This response was submitted to the [Equality and Social Justice Committee](#) on the [inquiry into Social Cohesion](#)

SC 25

Ymateb gan: Sefydliad Chwaraeon Cymru

Response from: Welsh Sports Foundation

The Welsh Sports Foundation's response to the Equality and Social Justice Committee's Social Cohesion Consultation

A key issue which impacts the social cohesion of our Welsh communities is the rise of poverty and more specifically child poverty. One consequence of child poverty is the direct impact it has on the opportunities for young people in Wales to be active and regularly participate in sport.

As well as this child poverty leads to a huge disparity of experience in relation to young people's chances to feel a part of a community. From the School Sports Survey carried out by Sport Wales (2022) it was reported that just over a third of children had no frequent participation in organised sport outside of the curriculum. Sport has a significant barrier to entry in relation to the initial and ongoing cost of participation. Therefore, due to these expenses sport is an area of Welsh society where inequality is perpetuated leading to an overall absence of social cohesion.

What is the Welsh Sports Foundation

The purpose of our work as the Welsh Sports Foundation (WSF) is to remove the financial barriers around sport and physical activity for children and young people, up to age 25. The foundation was designed for Wales, to work alongside the Welsh Government and all the Welsh sporting national governing bodies to create an innovative solution to provide equal opportunities for the children of Wales. Through a pilot project alongside Y Bont and ACE we were able to offer out 13 vouchers to children enabling them to participate in sport. Feedback received from the participants and their families was extremely encouraging. They were grateful for the work of the WSF in helping their young people to stay active.

The benefits of sport to an individual can be as simple as improved physical health but there are also major societal benefits to having an active population. Unfortunately, too many children aren't afforded these opportunities due to the costs attached leading to communities with underperforming levels of social cohesion.

Barriers to social cohesion

Poverty is a pressing issue here in Wales, with 3 in 10 Welsh children living in relative poverty (see our previous evidence to the Senedd Culture, Communications and Welsh Language Committee in 2021). By definition this includes an inability to participate in activities that are taken for granted by others in society. It is important to understand how this inequality leads to a lack of social cohesion in Welsh communities. As the WSF we were able to help remove this obstacle for some children but due to a finite amount of resources available we couldn't accommodate for every application we received. This creates the possibility that communities will lose trust in the initiative, one of the most significant and repeated criticisms of funding streams is a lack of consistency and longevity to create a long term and lasting impact.

We were unsuccessful in our application for a Welsh Government grant to help mitigate the fact we had limited funding and resources. We believe with the aid of extra investment into the foundation more young people could have been helped in accessing physical activity opportunities thus far.

The key to enabling social cohesion through initiatives like ours is ensuring a community wide strategy with involvement from a range of stakeholders. As a foundation we have had the backing of all the sporting national governing bodies in Wales and have had discussions around future collaborations with a few in particular.

Furthermore, the foundation has utilised the FAW's PAWB fund through choosing not to use our vouchers on football related costs but by redirecting the applications to the PAWB fund. Nevertheless, even once we had done this, we were still unable to support every application that came through. From Welsh Government, support to galvanise the sector as well as a mechanism to allow sharing information with local authorities and communities and third sector organisations to ensure useful collaboration could increase the effectiveness of these initiatives in promoting social cohesion.

As the Welsh Sports Foundation we collaborate with sports and third sector to attempt to remove any barriers which exclude young people from engaging in sporting activities of their choice. One example from our pilot project saw a young girl caring for her disabled single parent no longer able to participate in sport due to the financial barriers attached. This was her only time to stay active and have fun, free of responsibility. With the help of the voucher scheme and the WSF, she was able to continue participating in her chosen activity.

Currently Welsh people living in material deprivation and individuals with poor general health are more likely to be lonely within their communities (Welsh Government, 2024). With examples like this of children only having very limited time where they are able to socialise, sport is a great facilitator for that. It can improve both someone's mental and physical health simultaneously. By having more children and young people engaging with each other it helps build positive relationships between different communities forming greater sustainable social cohesion.

Welsh families have the lowest disposable income across the UK, with some households previously having no more than £3.21 to spend weekly on leisure activities (see our previous evidence to the Senedd Culture, Communications and Welsh Language Committee in 2021). This leads to many Welsh families having to make difficult decisions and ultimately sacrifices around staying active.

One family from our pilot project were only able to financially support one of their children's participation in sport. They chose to fund their son's participation as they believed he was otherwise at risk of getting involved in criminal activity. This led to their daughter not being able to participate in her chosen sporting activity.

As a foundation we try to alleviate these pressures for Welsh families, in this example specifically through helping to cover the costs of the daughter's participation. The outcomes we see from these vouchers allows families a space to be happy and healthy within their community.

An unexpected limitation we noted through our pilot project, and other programs was the lack of resources namely staffing and time, consequentially slowing down the process.

This is where the Welsh Government and other public bodies should stand by their socio-economic duty and initiate collaboration between sectors to help reduce the inequality of outcomes for young people in Wales.

Another limitation we observed during our pilot project was once the voucher had been gifted to a young person there were still non-financial barriers to access. One example from the pilot scheme highlighted how a child was unable to use the voucher through an inability to access transport to attend sessions. Improving public transport access has been at the forefront of Senedd discussions for some time, and we anticipate the forthcoming Bus Bill to increase its ability to improve access.

If progress was made in this area the knock-on benefit to social cohesion could be significant. It would allow for more young people to join together and access opportunities otherwise out of reach. Future WSF projects would look to introduce with the assistance of additional funding voucher schemes which remove other known barriers to participation including transport aids as well as funding for kit and equipment too.

Other initiatives/best practice

Some international best practice around similar initiatives have taken place in Australia. They had noticed the lower participation rates in areas of less affluence suggesting the experiences were prohibited due to costs associated with participation (BMC Public Health, 2020). They have set up many different voucher schemes across the country. Alongside state government funding the results suggested voucher schemes are a feasible approach to increasing physical activity and fitness amongst young people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Reducing the costs of

participation through help from government funding subsequently leads to positive changes in people's attitudes towards physical activity and develops stronger community cohesion.

Conclusion

As it stands the social cohesion within our Welsh communities is going to be limited if many young people are excluded from accessing their rights, and specifically for the Welsh Sports Foundation their access to sport is limited. Our work and similar initiatives use sport to fight against these inequalities caused by a disparity in circumstances.

Sport offers significant opportunities to increase social cohesion, providing a setting in which to meet and interact with others with a shared interest. Sport also allows individuals to experience structured and managed social interaction in a safe and inclusive environment. Unfortunately, more than a decade of austerity has made these opportunities more difficult to access, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds.

Social cohesion can and should be at the front of all work under the Welsh government to ensure alignment with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015. The Welsh Sports Foundation believes that access to and involvement in sport can be at the heart of our efforts to create a Wales fit for Future Generations. Welsh Government should consider what it can do to facilitate greater access to sport by young people facing the highest levels of social and economic deprivation. Barriers faced are not only financial, but also social and administrative.

References

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