

Sport Wales response to The Children and Young People Committee Inquiry into Childhood Obesity



1. About Sport Wales

1.1 We welcome the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. Sport Wales is the national organisation responsible for developing and promoting sport and physical recreation. Working with partner agencies, on a national and local level, we aim to increase the frequency of participation in sporting activity, as well as improving elite performance. We take a broad view of sport, from traditional sports, such as swimming and hockey to newer activities such as zumba and dance. We are also the main adviser on sporting matters to the Welsh Government and are responsible for distributing funds from the National Lottery to sport in Wales.

2. Overview

2.1 Lack of physical activity has been identified as one of the leading risk factors for global mortality by the World Health Organisation¹. At Sport Wales one of our primary purposes is to work with a range of partners to make sport as attractive and accessible as possible to the Welsh population, harnessing the inspiration of performances on the elite level to create vibrant sporting communities right across Wales. We firmly believe that sport has a key role to play in improving the overall health of the nation and for too long has been sat on the side lines of the national debate in relation to health and obesity.

2.2 We also believe that the nature of the debate around obesity needs to change. In the Welsh press in the last six to nine months we have seen a series of stories warning of increasing obesity in Wales and the potential impact on both the health of the nation and public finances. The focus on obesity is addressing the symptom and not the underlying problem, which is a lack of physical activity across the Welsh population. There can be no doubt that Wales is viewed across the world as a nation that gets behind its sport teams and stars, but much work is to be done in going from a nation of supporters to a nation of active participants. We need to create a cultural shift in attitudes towards sport and physical activity in Wales, starting with the very youngest.

2.3 It is no longer sustainable for people not to take personal responsibility for being active, but we have to ensure that we are creating an environment that not only encourages activity, making clear the positive impact it can have on your life, but also makes it easily accessible. If we are to reduce obesity we need to be making participation in physical activity a natural part of people's lives, a habit built from the earliest age that is almost not a choice but a lifestyle.

2.4 Our 2013 School Sport Survey has demonstrated a positive movement in children and young people being frequently physically active and enjoying sport, but this has not been seen uniformly across all sections of society. Unsurprisingly some of those groups that experience greater health problems, including obesity, are those who participate at a lower level than their peers, e.g. those living in poorer areas.

2.5 The Survey also pointed us in the direction of how we can make children and young people more active, through focusing on developing the basic skills, building confidence through activity and overall making the sporting opportunity fun. Ability, confidence and enjoyment need to be the three pillars that form the basis for all activity in both schools and communities. By taking this approach in Wales we have the

¹ Global Recommendations for Physical Activity for Health, World Health Organisation, 2010
http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241599979_eng.pdf

opportunity to create a generation of young adults with the ability and motivation to have a lifelong participation in sport.

2.6 Schools play a crucial role in providing all children and young people with the basic skills that they need to flourish as adults. The ability to be physically competent and confident should be regarded on the same level as learning your times tables and spelling. Enhancing the importance of PE within the Welsh curriculum would send out a clear message to all children and young people, that your physical health is as important as your academic ability. This would mean that it would no longer be left to those Heads who are passionate about the value sport brings and seek to embed it in the lives of their pupils, all schools and all pupils could expect to have a positive experience that they could then take into their adult life as a habit.

2.7 If we can get this right at an early stage through our schools, we can nurture the habit throughout life through greater collaboration between health, education, sport and other partners to be sharing outcomes and resources in order to ensure that sporting opportunities are accessible to all, we can make a significant impact on a whole range of preventable illnesses.

3. Increasing physical activity through schools

3.1 In October 2013 Sport Wales published the UK's largest ever survey of children and young people and sport. Our School Sport Survey spoke to almost 110,000 pupils from over 900 schools, making it the most comprehensive exercise in capturing the views of Welsh children ever undertaken.

3.2 The most positive indication from the survey was the increase from 27% in 2011 to 40% in 2013 of the number of children and young people taking part in sport on three or more occasions per week, Sport Wales' 'hooked on sport' measure. This leap in frequency is very promising as if it could be retained into adulthood it could make a considerable inroad into the level of obesity in Wales, with people having greater confidence to participate more often.

3.3 We are encouraged to see significant reductions in the percentage of children and young people undertaking sport and physical activity on less than three occasions a week, and particularly among the most sedentary. In 2011, for example, 17% did not take part in sport and physical activity at all. In 2013, this reduced to 12%. Putting this into numbers, we have 15,000 less children and young people who don't take part in any form of sport or physical activity (50,600 in 2011 and 35,600 in 2013).

3.4 The Survey also clearly identified that children and young people were enjoying PE and sport, with 60% of pupils saying they enjoyed PE 'a lot' and 60% saying they enjoy sport outside of school 'a lot'. There has also been an increase in participation in years 7-11 in extra-curricular activity with 78% of boys and 69% of girls now participating, compared with 68% and 63% respectively in 2011. This has also been mirrored in participation in sport in a club being 77% for boys and 70% for girls, compared to 72% and 65% in 2011. Overall this indicates a positive picture of more children and young people taking part in sport more often and enjoying it.

3.5 However there are a number of findings that make more sobering reading. There continues to be an attrition in participation from the age of 12 to 16, before there is a more dramatic decline in participation, particularly noticeable for girls. The participation gap between boys and girls, despite the rises seen since 2011, also stubbornly remains. 44% of boys are "hooked on sport", compared to 36% of girls.

3.6 This is also reflected in other groups with those in the least deprived schools (as measured by the receipt of Free School Meal measure) being 11% more likely to be "hooked on sport" than those in the most

deprived schools. White and mixed race pupils have a higher “hooked on sport” percentage than Black/Black British and Asian/Asian British pupils, with only 20% of Asian/Asian British girls regularly participating. Finally children and young people with a disability/impairment participate regularly 10% less than their non-disabled/impaired peers. It is no surprise that some of these groups are also the ones that experience some of the poorest health outcomes.

- 3.7 From this it is clear that there is still work to do in ensuring that every child is able to access a positive sporting experience and reap the health benefits of participation in an activity of their choice. We do not believe that sport is only for the few, we view sport as something that is a right for all children and young people. Being physically competent and confident should be basic skills that children and young people learn at school, alongside the academic skills of numeracy and literacy.
- 3.8 The Survey does provide some revealing information on what encourages greater frequency of participation and it is these elements that we believe need to lay at the heart of increasing physical activity and through that tackling obesity.
- 3.9 If pupils enjoyed the activity a lot they were a staggering 195% more likely to participate three or more times a week. If they played in a school team, so had a level of ability in a sport, they were 144% more likely to regularly participate. Finally if they felt very confident in trying new activities then they were 58% more likely to meet the "hooked on sport" measure. These three elements of ability, confidence and enjoyment should be the foundations blocks of all school and community activity, which are also some of the basic elements of physical literacy.
- 3.10 This is where our army of Young Ambassadors can be so influential. A London 2012 legacy project in partnership with the Youth Sport Trust we now have almost 4000 Young Ambassadors across Wales, actively promoting sporting opportunities to their peers. Whilst some young people will be inspired by their favorite sports star, we know that many more are influenced and inspired by their friends. These young people are working in our schools to get the voice of pupils heard in provision and act as that little bit of encouragement some of their friends need to try something new.
- 3.11 With all our messaging on the issue of obesity, or any other public health message, it has probably been a bit too “done to” young people rather than “done with”. The Survey shows that young people know the importance of activity as part of a healthy lifestyle, by harnessing the enthusiasm and creativity of our Young Ambassadors we are aiming to provide that mentoring and support to encourage greater participation.
- 3.12 The Survey identified that 33,000 children and young people (11,000 boys and 22,000 girls) would take part more regularly if they were "better at sport". These are not pupils who are saying sport is not for them, these are young people saying if you give them the understanding they would proactively get involved more than they currently are. School plays a critical role in delivering these basic skills for all children and young people.
- 3.13 It is for this reason that we fully endorse the recommendation made by the Schools and Physical Activity Task Group Chaired by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson that PE should become a core subject in the Welsh Curriculum. This ground breaking step would send out a clear signal that in Wales we want all our children to develop the physical skills to be able to live a healthy life and that we believe that physical development is as important as mental development.
- 3.14 The best way to influence culture is to embed it early as an activity that is enjoyed from childhood. Through getting the curriculum offer right, based on learning the key skills and building confidence in an enjoyable environment, and reflecting this in community activity that sets an appropriate challenge,

without losing the enjoyment, we can create a generation of young adults who see physical activity as simply part of their lives, not something they have to opt in or out of.

4. Greater partnerships delivering shared outcomes

- 4.1 This increase in participation has been created through the sport sector working with like-minded colleagues in the education sector, but if we are to tackle issues such as obesity seriously there needs to be much greater direction and expectation on partnership working to deliver increased sport participation and the associated health outcomes.
- 4.2 We have recently been asked by Ministers to pull together a joint programme of activity with Public Health Wales, with a view to the two organisations sharing knowledge and resources to encourage greater participation in sport and physical activity. Whilst we are at early days in terms of developments, we are encouraged by the positive approach that has been taken and hope that this partnership will make a significant difference to how the sport and health sectors work together.
- 4.3 As Sport Wales we have started to identify new partners to work with and invest in to create new opportunities for people to reap the benefits of sporting activity. We have made a £150,000 lottery investment into a partnership between Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board and Disability Sport Wales. The investment will see the creation of a specific post that will seek to signpost disabled people who come through the health board to sport and physical activity opportunities across the North Wales area, with the long term aim of reducing the requirement for medical intervention as a consequence of ill-health linked to physical inactivity. Whilst this is a three year investment, we are hopeful that if successful this could be a model replicated elsewhere.
- 4.4 We have also made a £60,000 investment into RCT Homes to support an active family service that will seek to facilitate behavior change within the families they house, supporting them to overcome barriers to participation in sport and physical activity. Like Betsi Cadwaladr, RCT Homes is a completely new partner for us at Sport Wales and again whilst we are at the very beginning of the three year funding, we are hopeful that this can prove to be a model that can be replicated and built upon in terms of reaching some of our more deprived communities in Wales with sporting opportunities.
- 4.5 These specific projects come on top of the funding that we provide to organisations such as StreetGames to work in deprived communities across Wales and the lottery awards that we make with partners in every local authority area in Wales. What we hope they demonstrate is that we are actively looking at new partnerships and investing in them where we believe that they can help us encourage greater sports participation and through that tackle some of the long standing health issues that these communities face.
- 4.6 However we recognise that we are trying to achieve this shift against a backdrop of ever tightening public finances, where local leisure budgets are being cut due to the pressure on local government budgets. We need to make a clear statement and work across sectors to ensure that we have a sustainable model for sport in our communities. Funding plays a role, but as does transport and local planning. We understand that difficult decisions will need to be made going forward, but if we value sport and activity as an intervention then we need to ensure that we are creating an environment for people to access opportunities.
- 4.7 An interesting model for the committee to consider would be the Be Active programme in Birmingham. The programme has been operating since September 2009 and is a funding partnership between Birmingham City Council and the local NHS primary care trusts. The aim is to tackle health inequalities by offering free physical activity sessions to all residents in the city. The evaluation of the programme

identified that the benefits generated by the scheme exceeded its cost by £445.2million, which included health cost saving and improved quality of life²

4.8 We firmly believe that there is a case to see greater collaboration between the sport and leisure sector and the health sector in tackling illnesses such as obesity.

5. Changing the image of sports participation

5.1 If we are to tackle obesity and other preventable illnesses through sport then we recognize the need for a cultural and attitudinal shift in the Welsh population towards sport. We recognise that some people, including professionals, take the view that sport is for the few, that you have to have an innate talent, that it is built on being aggressive and overly competitive. When described like that it is not really a surprise when people decide that it is not for them.

5.2 We believe that this is not what sport looks like in Wales in 2014. Our governing bodies are increasing their efforts to adapt their sports, making them more attractive and accessible for new participants. At Sport Wales we have launched our What Moves You? (www.whatmovesyou.org.uk) campaign, which seeks to present sporting opportunities in a more fun and sociable way to a female audience. What we find is that the biggest barrier for many people is taking that first step of trying an activity for the first time. Creating an approach and an environment that removes some of this trepidation should be our collective starting point.

5.3 Promoting greater sports participation needs to be a collective responsibility across professions and sectors. We need to move away from the mentality that sport might not be for everyone, to a position where we are saying that there is an opportunity for everyone to take part. Whether competitively challenging yourself against your peers or taking part in a recreational opportunity with your friends, there is something out there for you. If we can break down the myths around sport and change the perception it will be a huge stride forward in encouraging more healthy lifestyles for the Welsh population.

6. Conclusion

6.1 We believe that sport has been an underutilised resource in the fight against obesity and other preventable conditions. As a sector we are keen to work with all partners, public, private and voluntary, to ensure that everyone can reap the health benefits that participation in sport brings.

6.2 We believe that there are a few key areas that the committee could consider in the long term fight to tackle obesity:

- Increasing the importance and quality of PE in the national curriculum in Wales;
- Ensuring participation sport is included at the heart of preventative public health messaging and campaigns;
- Exploring models of collaboration to deliver increased sports participation, which also target particular groups that have poor health outcomes;
- Encourage a common approach that promotes sport as an inclusive activity for all, with a shared vision for increasing participation.

² Cost-benefit analysis and social impact bond feasibility analysis for the Birmingham Be Active scheme, Matrix Evidence, December 2011

6.3 The 110,000 pupils who completed our School Sport Survey have clearly pointed us in the direction of travel to secure ever greater numbers participating in sport. We recognise that in order to maintain participation into adulthood we as a sports sector cannot achieve this alone, but need to work across sectors.

6.4 We hope that this evidence has been useful to committee members and we would be happy to discuss further any aspect.

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