



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Via email only

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Dear Minister

Health and Sport Committee consideration of the impact of COVID-19 on sports clubs and other local recreational facilities

Thank you for your letter of December 20 in response to the Committee's questions relating to the financial support package for sport during COVID.

As you will be aware the Committee met with sport practitioners and members of sport organisations on 12 January to gain a better understanding of the issues being faced by those directly involved.

An overriding message we received was the need for confidence in the public health message. We were told the public will not feel ready to return to sport unless they have confidence that it is safe to do so.

The main areas of concern upon which the Committee would welcome views from the Scottish Government are set out in the remainder of this letter:

Finance

Your letter of 15 December states that the £25m of loan funding for Scottish Premiership football clubs and Scottish Rugby will come from financial transactions through the government's Spring Budget Revision. You helpfully indicate that financial transactions are ring-fenced for specific purposes only. Can you confirm

whether any ring fencing of the £30m of revenue funding is being applied or whether recipients are free to deploy as they see fit.

There has been, and continues to be, discussion over the allocations of funding the Scottish Government announced on 10 December.

In your letter of 20 December, you set out the rationale for the substantial funding of £2m to Horse Racing. While the Committee recognises the positive impact the sector adds to the real economy and jobs, could you elaborate further on the rationale for support, breakdown how the money is to be applied with the sector, as well as indicating how all other available funding streams e.g. the furlough scheme were taken into account.

During our session with sport organisations the Committee were concerned to hear from Claire Nelson, CEO of Netball Scotland, that the money allocated to her organisation, £100k, has not yet reached them. Can you update the Committee on what funding has actually been delivered to Netball Scotland and all sporting organisation and whether this matches the proposed allocations. If it doesn't, what are the barriers to money being distributed as planned?

In regard to the allocation intended for rugby, the Committee would welcome further information on what the government has agreed to fund. We have been provided information that suggests that of the £7m ring fenced for grass roots development of rugby, only £3m is being spent, with the remaining £4m being used for other purposes, including for overheads. Can you provide assurances to the Committee that there is robust interrogation on what the SRU, and the other sporting bodies who received money, are actually spending their allocations on.

Re-engaging participation

The Committee heard that getting children and adults to re-engage with sport once the environment allows will be a considerable challenge. Many local clubs are seeing a drop in their membership and fear this will not be a short-term loss. It is also reasonable to assume the economic impact of the pandemic will make it more challenging for those in deprived areas to access paid sporting clubs and facilities, thereby increasing the inequality gap that is already visible in respect of those participating in sport.

As well as the practitioners of sport, the nation also needs an army of volunteers, as coaches, first aiders and general helpers to return to the numbers pre-pandemic. Sports organisations are already experiencing a drift in interest from those previously involved. A number of reasons have been cited including training now being less fun/interesting more complicated due to having to learn and follow COVID processes, their children no longer being involved. Across the spectrum of sport there is real concern volunteers – “the backbone of sport” are being lost. Providing incentives to entice coaches and volunteers was suggested to the Committee as one way to help address these concerns and hopefully mitigate impacts by increasing numbers

As well as hearing about the risks to amateur and hobby sports, the Committee also heard about the risks to future elite athletes who contribute to the country's global success and image. The lack of competition, lack of development in their fields will invariably have an impact to the pipeline of Scottish athletes of the future.

The Committee would welcome Scottish Government proposals to address each of these issues.

Women in sport

Women athletes have found the past 10 months particularly challenging. In Scotland, statistics show, women and girls are far less likely to be involved in physical activity than men and boys. The lack of organised sport and decreased exposure to female role models during the lock down period risks compounding this.

The ingrained perception that women's sport is less worthy than men's has also gained traction during the pandemic. This perception, more a reality, was exemplified in the way the Scottish Women's Football League had to shut down during lock down last year, while most of their male counterparts were able to continue. This only adds to the challenge of increasing women and girl's participation in sport generally as well as finding and developing future female elite athletes.

Can you indicate what proposals the Scottish Government have to address these specific concerns.

Disability sport

Disability athletes have also faced particularly challenging times and similar concerns. Their complex needs, and affordability often make it a greater challenge during normal times, while some, do not comprehend why they are no longer able to participate in sport. For many resumption of activity and participation will be like starting from the beginning.

We have a proud record of elite Scottish women and disability athletes who have had great success in international events and the country should strive for this to continue.

Can you indicate what proposals are in place to assist in these areas and how these will be disseminated and accessed.

Mental Health

We heard strong evidence that the impact across the board caused by COVID-19 and the restrictions in place is taking a heavy toll on mental health. For those used to exercising and participating in sport this is compounded by lack of competition, general participation and the inability to meet friends and other like-minded people including club members.

Sport for the majority is more about friendship and camaraderie with others, than medals. The lock down measures have been strangling the opportunity to have

these relationships while also removing a sense of purpose and motivation for both amateur and elite athletes alike.

We heard examples of how the closing of bowling clubs was hitting the older generation particularly hard as it was often the only social interaction for many who lived alone. We were told about young athletes struggling to maintain motivation and at risk of being lost to any sport. This is something the country can ill-afford, not least because of the health impacts that likely follow.

The Committee were particularly concerned to hear that both practitioners of sport and those organisations we consulted all suggested a pandemic of mental health issues were on the horizon. The lack of knowledge on what support is available and how to access it was striking.

It is clear from this work we have undertaken, but also every other session we have held recently, that a mental health tsunami is coming, if indeed the first wave has not already reached us. Engaging in physical activity has to be part of the medicine and we have commented previously that social prescribing needs to be a stronger element within the Health budget. The developing situation only strengthens our position.

We would welcome the Scottish Governments proposals to address the mental health concerns we have heard about, particularly the ways in which support can be provided to sporting organisations and clubs to assist.

Facilities

The Committee heard of concerns over the upkeep of facilities during the pandemic, especially for costly facilities such as ice rinks. We heard there is a real risk these community assets may be lost before they are able to be reopened. What initiatives, if any, have the Scottish Government in place to prevent such closures?

The Committee has previously encouraged the opening of school assets to make physical activity more affordable as we try to close the inequalities gap. What measures are the government considering as we come out of the COVID-pandemic to encourage both young and old to access local facilities?

National strategy

The scale of work required to reinstate sport and physical and mental wellbeing as we come out of the pandemic is clearly huge and presents major challenges. These issues, which the country struggled with before COVID, are spread over many different portfolios and more importantly budgets which makes it difficult to track outputs and outcomes. But we firmly believe there are opportunities available to promote the benefits from exercise and sport.

The sport and leisure community have been hit hard by COVID. We were however struck by the positivity emanating from those we heard from and their unwavering confidence that they and the services they deliver, will be at the forefront in supporting the nation's recovery from COVID.

We urge the Scottish Government to grasp the opportunity presented and follow an approach designed to change the dynamic in Scotland. We recommend the early provision of a long-term national strategy to increase the physical and mental health of the nation, through healthier living and for this to be available as we exit lockdown and other restrictions.

We would welcome comment on how this can be achieved and when it can be available on the ground.

I would welcome your response by 3 March.

Yours sincerely

Lewis Macdonald
Convener, Health and Sport Committee