



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

**Tuesday 30 November 2021**

**Session 6**



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**Tuesday 30 November 2021**

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**HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND SPORT COMMITTEE**  
**13<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2021, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

\*Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)

\*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

\*Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green)

\*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)

\*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Kim Atkinson (Scottish Sports Association)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)

David Ferguson (Observatory for Sport in Scotland)

Gavin Macleod (Scottish Disability Sport)

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Steve Walsh (High Life Highland)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Alex Bruce

**LOCATION**

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)



## Scottish Parliament

### Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

*Tuesday 30 November 2021*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Gillian Martin):** Good morning and welcome to the 13th meeting in 2021 of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. I have received apologies from Evelyn Tweed, David Torrance and Paul O’Kane, and I welcome Jackie Baillie and Marie McNair back as committee substitutes.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take item 3 in private?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Sport and Physical Activity

09:30

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is an evidence-taking session with stakeholders on sport and physical activity. This will be our initial session on this aspect of the committee’s portfolio, and I welcome to the committee the following witnesses, who are joining us online: David Ferguson is the chief executive of the Observatory for Sport in Scotland; Kim Atkinson is the chief executive officer of the Scottish Sports Association; Gavin Macleod is the chief executive officer of the Scottish Disability Sport; and Steve Walsh is the chief executive of High Life Highland.

Like everything else these days, the issues in question seem to revolve around what happened pre-Covid and during Covid, and I think that there is an obvious question to start off with. First, can you give us a summary of your view of the general physical activity of the people of Scotland pre-pandemic and issues with regard to getting people moving and active? Secondly, what changes have you seen as a result of the pandemic? Given that the lockdown itself inhibited people’s ability to be active, I am thinking in particular of the post-lockdown period, when things started to open up again.

Members will have their own questions and will identify which witness they want to answer them, but perhaps all the witnesses can make some opening remarks on the question that I have just asked.

**David Ferguson (Observatory for Sport in Scotland):** Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee. I hope that the Parliament builds on all this as we move forward.

Perhaps I can give a quick introduction to the Observatory for Sport in Scotland, for committee members who might not know about us. We were created five years ago to bring together research and evidence on sport’s wider connection with health and wellbeing, education and communities and to support more effective policy and practice in Scotland, and we are now being helped in that work by more than 50 researchers with all kinds of experience and expertise, from Scottish universities and institutions across the United Kingdom and globally. As with any research institute or think tank, we like to base our work on fact and are therefore using research and evidence.

With regard to the impact of Covid on Scotland, our research lead was Nick Rowe, who was for many years Sport England’s head of research strategy and is well versed in UK data and trends. Perhaps I can share some of his findings with you.

First, the fact is that not a lot of research has been carried out on this issue in Scotland. However, a lot of research has been carried out in England and across Europe, and we are involved in quite a bit of that work. We have offered to research the impact on Scotland, and we make that proposal again to the committee today. As yet our offer has not been taken up, although we hope that it will be.

To get some insight into the situation in Scotland, the OSS started by surveying a national cross-section of adults with an equal split between men and women aged from 18 to over 80. We found that 47 per cent of the adult population in Scotland felt that their participation in sport and exercise was a lot or a little less than it had been before Covid, with just 14 per cent saying that they had taken part in more activity. There was slightly more of a drop-off in men, but in Scotland men generally start from a level of participation that is 10 per cent higher than that for women. There is a gender gap, which we have taken into account; indeed, we found that women held on to their activity slightly more than men, and the situation was similar for indoor and outdoor activity.

One of the main positives that we saw was in walking, with 45 per cent of adults saying that they walked more during the pandemic compared with the previous 12 months. However, 33 per cent said that they walked just the same amount and 20 per cent said that they walked less, which meant that around 53 or 54 per cent had not changed the amount that they were walking or were walking less. Geographically, the Lothians topped the scale, with the central region and the west of Scotland also noting high levels of walking. I am sad to say, though, that the rise in walking did not compensate for a decline in sport and exercise elsewhere.

Research tells us that sitting brings a greater risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, so we had a look at that and we found that 56 per cent of adults reported sitting more every day during the first year of the pandemic. The biggest group was young adults aged 18 to 24, followed by 25 to 34-year-olds.

We have also seen evidence globally on the impact of Covid on social anxiety, loneliness, depression, self-harm among young people, panic attacks and loss of motivation. We asked questions about that and, in Scotland, we found that between 47 and 53 per cent of adults across different areas reported a negative impact on their physical and mental health and/or happiness from the loss of sport and exercise. The group that reported the biggest impact on mental health was the 25 to 34-year-old cohort. More than 60 per cent of young adults told us that they felt that their

mental health had suffered, with 18 to 24-year-olds and 35 to 44-year-olds close behind.

We also asked how motivated people felt about getting back to hobbies and sport activities, and we saw a similar pattern there. Those aged 18 to 44 are less motivated now than people aged 45 and over.

I have a final stat to share with the committee from the work that we did and as we look ahead. We asked what people wanted and how important sport activity was to them, and nearly two-thirds of Scots told us that they felt that it was important that regular opportunities to take part in sport and exercise were available in their communities after lockdown was lifted. That was evenly split across men and women but, again, people aged 18 to 44 were the strongest in their call for more opportunities to be available.

That is a summary of some of the research that we have done so far.

**The Convener:** Thank you. That is really interesting. Kim Atkinson, can I have your views on my initial question?

**Kim Atkinson (Scottish Sports Association):** Thank you, convener. It is a real pleasure to be here today, so thank you for giving us this time.

The Scottish Sports Association is the membership body for the governing bodies for the different sports in Scotland. We are their independent voice. Their members are 13,000 sports clubs with 900,000 members.

In the pre-Covid time, we knew that there were challenges but we were progressing across quite a number of sports. We are still in a position in which sport presents a great number of opportunities, as does physical activity, although more could be done. There is a collective effort behind that.

We know that if people are physically active, there is one-third reduction in all causes of mortality. We know that there is a 30 per cent increase in wellbeing among people who are active and that physical inactivity costs the Scottish Government about £91 million annually. We also know that, pre-Covid, there was a 20 per cent difference between the most active and the least active in society.

We knew that there were challenges, but at the same time, Scotland is a world leader in the policy environment for sport and physical activity. There are opportunities to put that into practice more on behalf of our members, and I should say that the views that we are sharing are those that we have gathered from our members, as a membership organisation.

Pre-Covid, we were in a strong policy position, with practical opportunities. A lot of governing bodies were at the cutting edge and were delivering new opportunities for their members to keep active people active and to enable inactive people to be more active.

As compared to the pre-lockdown period, lockdown brought new challenges and exacerbated existing challenges, but I think that our members agree that Covid has the potential to bring new opportunities, predominantly around the removal of barriers. Where our members see opportunities is probably where we would like to focus; we want to look at what we can practically do and where the committee can help us with that.

We see a real opportunity to remove the three main barriers to people being active. One of the main reasons people give for not being active is that they do not have time, but the premise of flexible working means that we see a lot of people doing an active commute. Our members believe that, as a nation, we can look at things holistically, and employers and educators can look at things differently.

Our members consistently report that the cost of facilities is a challenge. I would argue that that is not just a sport issue. In conversations that we have had with colleagues across the sector, in youth work, in culture, in heritage and in a number of other areas, access to community facilities has come up as a key challenge that people face. It is not just about sports facilities; community groups have issues in accessing community facilities.

Sports clubs form a third of all voluntary organisations. When we add the other groups that I mentioned, we are talking about two thirds of all voluntary organisations. One of the biggest challenges that they face is accessing community facilities.

The third opportunity is in the challenge of reducing inequality. The equalities gap has probably grown and I am sure that all members see addressing that as a priority. There is a pressing need for action to support benefits for people who have a disability so that they can participate and volunteer in sport. I am sure that Gavin Macleod, who is the expert on the subject from Scottish Disability Sport—it does amazing work—will tell the committee more about that. An opportunity lies there. As things stand and as social security powers come to Scotland, we really need to be ahead of the game on that.

The fourth opportunity is in looking at the environment that we work in. That is about funding, what we measure and minimising bureaucracy as much as possible. We must focus as much as we can on delivering activities and not on monitoring. Through Covid and through the

programme for government, progress has been made on a number of those areas, but there is the opportunity to do more. I really look forward to today's discussion.

**The Convener:** There is a lot to unpack in what you said.

**Gavin Macleod (Scottish Disability Sport):** Thank you for the opportunity to participate, convener. I thank Kim Atkinson for setting us up nicely by speaking about equality and inclusion.

Scottish Disability Sport is the recognised governing body for—[*Inaudible.*—]in Scotland. We are pan-disability and multisport and we work across the groups of physical, sensory and intellectual impairments. Our remit is about changing culture and embedding inclusion in physical activity and sport across Scotland.

Pre-Covid, almost a quarter of the population considered themselves to have a disability or a long-term limiting health condition. The physical, social and psychological benefits of physical activity and sport and their benefits for quality of life are proven. For some of the athletes we work with, sport is prolonging their lives.

There is latent demand out there. Four out of five disabled people want to be more physically active, but there are substantial barriers to do with transport, perceptual issues and cost. Kim Atkinson teed up nicely for me the issue of benefits, which we came across in 2019, when research showed that almost half the disabled people who were questioned feared that becoming more physically active could mean that they lost benefits, if they were judged to be more able. That is where we are.

Pre-Covid, disabled people were way behind on meeting targets for participation in physical activity. People with a disability accounted for 8 per cent of sports club members and only 2 per cent of the qualified coaching workforce, so big gaps existed, despite great work happening out there.

As members can imagine, Covid created a pretty bleak picture for us. Lockdown happened early for a lot of the individuals we work with. We picked up early on quite worrying mental health issues for some of our athletes and participants, and we did a lot of work to put all our programmes online. We also did a lot of work with the Scottish Association for Mental Health to support our athletes through the lockdown.

In coming out of lockdown, a lot of individuals with disabilities have hesitated to return to physical activity and sport. Probably 50 per cent were keen—they were champing at the bit and are back already—but a big number are still not coming back. The reasons for that are a lack of

confidence, issues with care packages being reduced or taken away and issues with accessing sports clubs and transport.

Our events programme has been back up and running since September. The return rates to events have been between 40 and 60 per cent. Societal issues sit behind that and are causing the problems. Schools are not yet sending individuals or teams and social care packages are not supporting the sending of individuals. The lack of confidence sits behind that.

For us, the next 12 months will be about supporting reluctant returners to find the confidence to come back and getting back to the figures that we had pre-Covid, without even trying to push things forward. We have a lot of work to do in the next 12 months.

**The Convener:** Thank you, Gavin. Lots of people here are furiously making notes on questions to ask you about what you have said. I will come to Steve Walsh before I bring in other members.

09:45

**Steve Walsh (High Life Highland):** Thank you for the invitation to speak to your committee. High Life Highland is a sport, leisure and culture trust that sits at arm's length from Highland Council. We occupy one of the biggest regions in Scotland. With that come the challenges of remote and rural communities and geographical barriers—transport being one of the biggest barriers that we encounter.

I have had the benefit of taking notes while others spoke. On the return to sporting activities from a leisure perspective, the returnee rate sits at about 60 to 80 per cent across our organisations. There are a few outliers but, in general, that is where we are. My membership is at 75 per cent. The reasons for non-returns go back to what Gavin Macleod said about confidence. Many people who were shielding have not returned to physical activity. We sit with quite a few frozen memberships, because some people do not have the confidence to come back to a leisure centre.

Also on the return, it is difficult to establish what we are benchmarking against—are we benchmarking against the pre-pandemic situation or are we looking at something completely different as we move forward? Outdoor sporting activities have certainly increased, particularly golf and tennis, in which there has been a massive uplift, but other sports have struggled. Part of the reason for that, which has not yet been picked up by the other witnesses, is the big reduction in the cohort of volunteers across the sector. I will give you a figure from the Highlands. We had more than 1,600 volunteers across leisure, youth work,

libraries and all the other services that we deliver, but that is now down to fewer than 1,000 volunteers. Much of the decrease is down to lifestyle choices as we come out of lockdown, and a little bit of volunteer fatigue as people suffer the impact of the pandemic.

There are a couple of other things that I would like to cover. Kim Atkinson spoke about access. I agree that sports organisations should be entitled to affordable, if not free—if we could make it free, that would be fantastic—access to public facilities. The challenge for someone like me—I am almost classed as being in the squeezed middle on this—is that if we do not charge for access to facilities, we might have to look at closures, which I do not say lightly. As we come out of the pandemic, we are all in recovery, having really struggled financially. Free access is a great aspiration but we have to think about the consequences of doing something like that. However, I would be supportive of such an approach.

I will pitch the High Life Highland model, which is based on maximising participation at an affordable price. Our all-inclusive family membership in the Highlands is less than £35 a month. That includes swimming lessons and all classes. In terms of elasticity, High Life Highland has a high number of members—about 17,000 at the moment and, pre-pandemic, more than 21,000, which compares favourably against the rest of the country. We also have a 50p rate—any family that is hard-pressed and on income support can access any of our facilities for 50p. Care-experienced young people enjoy free access to our facilities, as do foster families. Those are a couple of the things that we do to break down barriers.

As it happens, straight after the committee meeting, Gavin Macleod—who is sitting in my office down the road in Inverness—and I have an inclusion forum for disability sport, which, as we move out of the pandemic, we are trying to recover across the region in order to give more young disabled people opportunities in the sporting field.

**The Convener:** Thank you. That has been a great opener. I will bring in colleagues who want to ask questions, but first I will make a few points on meeting management, because all our panellists are online. On the whole, members will direct their questions to particular individuals, but if you would like to add something, please type the letter R in the chat box, or type “I want to speak on this”. I am logged on and I can see the chat box, so you will catch my attention.

We will structure our questions by going through the outcomes in the active Scotland delivery plan and asking for your feedback on them. First, however, I will bring in Gillian Mackay, who wants

to pick up on some of the things that you have mentioned.

**Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** In a previous evidence session, I asked the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care about the impact that the pandemic has had on social prescribing. He said that the Government was monitoring that very closely but that he did not have evidence on it to hand. Do panellists have a sense of the impact? Is there a feeling that people have less time to engage with social prescribing, and particularly exercise referrals? I put that question to David Ferguson.

**David Ferguson:** That is a good question. I would guess that some of the other panellists might be better placed to answer it. Recently, we had an event with the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of General Practitioners at which we considered social prescribing. As you noted, however, it is an area on which we do not have enough research and evidence. We have been looking at it, but we have not yet been in a position to develop the facts and evidence that we would like to have.

We have made an offer to Government around developing research in key areas such as children and young people and using social prescribing differently and in an innovative way. As I said, that is happening in England and across Europe.

There are some great examples in Scotland. Glasgow Life is one of several leisure trusts that are working with health boards to look at co-location of services and how we can bring sport and health together in order to develop accessibility in communities. The committee heard about that from Steve Walsh, but something that he did not mention is that one reason why people are not coming back to sport and leisure is that some facilities are closed. A lot of facilities that are allowed to open in line with the Covid regulations have not opened yet for financial reasons or because they do not have enough staff to operate. That is a big concern in relation to how we get people to come back.

We are working closely with Gavin Macleod on research around disability, as well as with Steve Walsh of High Life Highland. They will have a wee bit more insight into the current situation.

**Gavin Macleod:** We have physiotherapy referral schemes in place across the country. They relate largely to paediatric physios, and that relationship has been really good. Unfortunately, however, it has been built on person-to-person relationships, which is not as strategic an approach as I would like it to be. The referral system should be more strategic and built in. It stopped completely during lockdown, for obvious reasons, but we are starting to see it pick up

again. From the physio and occupational therapy point of view, it has worked, but it could be stronger.

We are doing a piece of work with NHS Tayside called get out, get active. It is funded by Spirit of 2012 and the London Marathon Charitable Trust. As chance had it, it started just as Covid kicked in, but we moved everything online during lockdown—as we did with our own programmes—and we got a huge response. A lot of that involved referrals from national health service practitioners in relation to low-level physical activity and support with mental health. We ran that right through the lockdown.

We have now started to return to face-to-face activity. As I said earlier, we see probably a 50 per cent split between those who are keen to engage in some face-to-face activity and those who are happy to stay online because they still have nervousness and a lack of confidence about doing the face-to-face bit.

The GOGA programme in Tayside is brilliant because it has now been built into the national physical activity pathway as part of the NHS programme. We are delivering education and training to all the clinical practitioners in Tayside and we are creating all the links into physical activity output on the ground in local communities. As a model, it is great, and an awful lot of monitoring, evaluation and learning are being built around it. It is a UK-wide programme, but its Scottish leg is focusing on the NHS. It is a three-year programme. By its end, we will have a lot of learning, and we will be delighted to come back and talk to you about what has come out of it.

**Kim Atkinson:** I thank Gillian Mackay for asking a super question. The opportunity has been recognised across sport and physical activity for many years. We are now 10-plus years on from the Christie commission, and the question goes to the heart of prevention. The work that Gavin Macleod and the team are doing with the GOGA model is groundbreaking and sector leading, but we need to look at additional opportunities as well.

We know that 2,500 people each year die in Scotland, which is a developed-world nation, because they are not active enough. Surely that needs to be addressed. It goes to the heart of the connection between sport and physical activity and healthcare, and how they work and can come together. It is refreshing that Public Health Scotland has been increasing its work in the area, but sport and physical activity need to be prioritised in healthcare more than ever.

Professor Sir Harry Burns, the former chief medical officer, called sport and physical activity “the best buy in public health”,

yet their importance in healthcare at the highest level is not really recognised in the national performance framework. They are also the key indicator of life expectancy. Sir Harry has said that how active someone is will determine more than any other indicator how long they will live. We do not talk about sport and physical activity as a priority for life expectancy, but the research shows that we should. We need to look at that opportunity and prioritise sport and physical activity in healthcare.

There are some really good examples. The model that High Life Highland works through is unique, so I am delighted that Steve Walsh is here and can talk about what sector-leading trust work can do. Another interesting model, which I think your predecessor committee went to see, is at Atlantis Leisure in Oban. It has a really strong connection with the local general practice surgeries, and a sport and physical activity co-ordinator sits there as part of the referral process. I am not aware that that has been rolled out more widely, but we raise such examples every time we talk about the topic.

Our members are really clear that social prescribing is a huge opportunity. It is part of the manifesto on which our members worked with us in advance of the election. Their ask is for

“a clear and resourced strategy for social prescribing”

that recognises and embraces the breadth of opportunities for people to try different activities and sporting opportunities, and for community clubs to be at the heart of that because, at the end of the day, they are closest to their communities.

**The Convener:** Gillian, your question has excited a number of members and they want to ask about social prescribing. Do you have a supplementary question on that?

**Gillian Mackay:** No. I have a question on a different subject.

**The Convener:** I will come back to you.

Emma, you have a question on social prescribing. Please direct it to somebody.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Sure. In the previous session of Parliament, the Health and Sport Committee, of which I was a member, held an inquiry into the subject, and its report was called “Social prescribing: physical activity is an investment, not a cost”. We gathered evidence and held sessions around that.

My question is for David Ferguson, who asked what further evidence we need in order to do more to support social prescribing programmes. I know that there are general practices that do a fantastic job in signposting people, but community link workers would help to play a part in that. Do you

have any reflections on the Health and Sport Committee’s report and how it can feed in to develop further evidence about the benefits of social prescribing of physical activity?

10:00

**David Ferguson:** It is definitely an area that the committee and the Government have to focus on more. I echo what we heard from Kim Atkinson from the sports world. A lot of talk goes on in parliamentary committees, but we have found that it is often not followed up by work to pull together the evidence nationally.

I often speak to colleagues at Sport England and in the Netherlands, Denmark and New Zealand, where the Governments are now using sport as a tool to address health and wellbeing challenges. It is not about investing in sport to improve sport; it is about seeing sport as part of wider society. We have not really done that yet. We tend to throw a bit of money at sport and hope that it will solve the issues. Sport cannot do that; it can only go so far. It has to be pulled out of that basket, and proper support needs to be provided across the network.

We can do social prescribing well. I echo what Kim Atkinson said about that. The evidence that we have seen across Scotland shows that there are really good examples. She gave an example from Argyll, and we have examples in Aberdeen, the Highlands and Inverclyde, which has a really good system of social prescribing involving GP referrals. There is good practice in pockets but, as we have said, we would like all of that to be pulled together. There should be proper research that looks at where social prescribing is and is not working and why that is the case, so that we have a proper national picture. We are concerned that, so far, we have not had that focus.

We have discussions in parliamentary committees and lots of forums across Scotland. Everyone says that social prescribing is great and that we should be doing more of it, but no one is taking the bull by the horns and saying, “Okay—let’s invest in this.” We should try to understand what the picture is telling us so that we can help every part of Scotland to use social prescribing properly and learn from where it works and where it does not.

We should also learn from what is happening internationally. Some of that could work in Scotland and some of it might not. We need to start to take action, step forward and make that happen. We should see sport and physical activity not as an end in itself or as a little luxury on the side, but as part of Covid recovery and as part of rebuilding and creating the resilience that we need

in communities to help people of every age to recover and be healthier.

**The Convener:** I have a long list of people who want to comment on social prescribing. We could probably spend the whole 90 minutes on that—which is fine, if members want to do that. Steve Walsh wants to comment.

**Steve Walsh:** Two things might be of interest to the committee on a practical level. The first relates to our work on cardiac rehabilitation and falls prevention, and our work with Parkinson's sufferers. We take referrals not only from GPs—I will come on to that in a second—but from social health professionals. We also take self-referrals. Before the pandemic, we had about 250 people on preventative courses. We pivoted to providing online courses, and we now have a hybrid offer, which works particularly well.

However, GP referrals have not expanded as much as we would like. I spoke to healthcare professionals in NHS Highland yesterday. We have 60-odd general practices here, but only a handful of them have moved forward in a progressive way with social prescribing. In fairness, it is about providing time, space and training. The general practices with which we work well tend to be those that have GPs who have an interest in the area and focus on it. There is work to do in that regard. We have community link officers who go round general practices to upscale the work.

Whether it is cardiac rehab or social prescribing by GPs, the work is all very scalable, but we tend to scramble around for little pockets of money to do it. If the correct resources were provided, we could work collectively to do what we have been talking about on a grander scale, with more joined-up working.

**Kim Atkinson:** I completely agree with what Steve Walsh has said. I thank Emma Harper for her question. I think that “sport needs to be an investment, not a cost” is a direct quote from our submission or the previous evidence session.

One of the biggest things that we need to change, as a society, is the culture. As Steve Walsh said, we know what the ambition is. I completely agree with him about access to facilities and the challenges for the budgets of local authorities and leisure trusts. However, we must stop seeing that as a cost. I say that not to Steve, but to everyone. There is a wider principle about seeing sport and physical activity as an investment in our physical and mental health and the education of our young people. We know that it leads to enhanced immune systems and greater potency of vaccinations, so there is no better time to be having this conversation.

Allied to that, I note for the committee's reference that 90 per cent of investment in sport in Scotland goes through local authorities, so Steve's point about why this is such a challenge—in cash-strapped times for local authorities and leisure trusts—is fundamental. None of that money is ring fenced, so I would be surprised if all of the 90 per cent actually ended up in sport and physical activity. That adds further challenge to the work that Steve and his colleagues are doing.

In looking at previous programmes for government and in conversations that we have had with previous ministers, our members have identified link workers as representing a huge opportunity. In the current programme for government, our members see exactly the same opportunity with the £650 million commitment to health boards, which includes physical activity for under-fives. We need to be ahead of the game in having that conversation about how sport and physical activity is involved. Governing bodies, local authorities and other key partners need to involve those who understand that best, instead of things being done to sport and physical activity.

My fundamental point in response to Emma Harper's question is that we must ask where the gaps are. In the routine conversations that we have, we are often asked whether we can provide a case study. We have phenomenal case studies. Gavin Macleod could bring a tear to any eye with the case studies that he can talk about, which involve lives being not just changed, but saved. We have any case study that you might require.

There is also a huge amount of evidence now. Some of it could perhaps be pulled together differently, but we know that sport and physical activity is a phenomenal thing across Government agendas. I would therefore ask what evidence we are missing. We need an action plan where we come together and say, “This is what needs to be done and here is the bill for it, but this is why it is an investment.” I feel that we have never quite got to that point in the argument; instead, the money is seen as spend. If we are truly to stick to prevention, we need to consider our language and change that culture.

There is an opportunity for a sport and physical activity group to come together at a strategic level to have a different dialogue. Sport does not come together strategically. It comes together with Government, with physical activity and with wider colleagues, but sport as an entity does not come together. I have had this conversation previously. There is an opportunity for those of us who represent the sports governing bodies, along with the representatives of leisure trusts, local authorities, sportscotland and potentially some other partners, to come together and ask what we

need to and can do together collectively. That is the gap.

My other suggestion is that we may need to raise the issue higher in Scottish Government agendas. The active Scotland division does phenomenal work, but maybe we could work with it and say that we need a cross-ministerial or cross-Cabinet group to look at the role and the contribution of sport and physical activity. It probably touches every agenda and every national outcome, so it would be good to have a working group that helped us to talk about that.

**The Convener:** Thank you. We are still on social prescribing, on which Carol Mochan has a question. Can you direct the question to a particular witness, because a lot of members want to come in?

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I thank all the witnesses. There is so much that we could pick up on.

Because of the time, I will just pick up on the notion that we need to go from talk to action. That is very clear—we need to get things done. Are there good examples that we should be looking at in other countries? We know that the evidence is there; it is clear what we need to do. Are there good examples of countries that have taken action and are starting to see outcomes? That question is for David or Kim.

**David Ferguson:** We know that we have support from the committee's members, which is really encouraging. I know that you understand some of the issues, and we have talked with many of you before now.

What Kim Atkinson said is really important. It is important to understand that we do not have a set-up in which all the partners are around the table, looking at how sport is used. We had a really positive meeting with the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, in his role as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery, along with his Covid recovery team. It was interesting that they perhaps did not realise, in relation to sport coming together, that we sometimes operate in silos in Scotland. However, John Swinney said that we have to bring it all together—that we have to make sport and physical activity part of Covid recovery. I was encouraged by that.

I shared with John Swinney an example that I will share with the committee. Five years ago, the Netherlands created a sport agreement that brought all stakeholders on to the same page at national level—the Government, health services, education, criminal justice and so on. We have heard about lots of great examples, such as when Police Scotland talks about the advantages of local sports clubs in tackling antisocial behaviour

and things like that. They are important, as is private business.

Research was, of course, part of the equation in the Netherlands. What was done there has now been replicated at the local level. I speak with colleagues in the Netherlands quite often. They are ensuring that there is investment from the national Government in communities in their 360 or so municipalities to ensure that there is a consistent approach to health and wellbeing in communities. It is not an approach to sport; it is an approach to improving health and wellbeing. How the local council, schools, clubs, health services, business and other partners come together to do that is up to the people in each area; they make it fit their area. The key is that they are all involved and contributing to that community activity, and they all understand their roles in delivering health and wellbeing, education and social cohesion objectives. That is how they are coming together to plot their way out of Covid.

That was also done post austerity. In Scotland, our investment in community sport started to decline in 2008. It is therefore interesting to note that the Netherlands saw sport and physical activity as a way of tackling unemployment, depression, mental ill health and so on, on the back of austerity. The Netherlands has stuck with that approach and is now using it to tackle Covid.

I will also throw in the New Zealand example, briefly. It took a three-category approach. The first was called "Reset and rebuild". It, too, pulled all the key stakeholders together from a population of about 4 million—which is a bit closer to ours than is the population of the Netherlands—to help sport and recreation to get through the initial impact of Covid. The next phase was called "Strengthen and adapt". They looked at support to rebuild in the medium term, but they also started to look at how to change operating models, through collaboration, in order to develop post pandemic.

The third approach is really intriguing and we need to look at it. They called it "Different and better", having recognised that much of the delivery of sport and physical activity and how it had been developed was quite dated, and that some of the structures were no longer sustainable. Innovative approaches to delivering play, recreation and sport were piloted. In Scotland, close to 50 per cent of our population are not engaged in any regular sport activity, so we need to do the same.

I echo what Kim Atkinson said about starting with a national coming together, which we could replicate locally. We have only 32 regional areas, which is many fewer than in the Netherlands. It is not difficult to pull together and to start thinking strategically, rather than the Scottish Government just looking to its active Scotland delivery plan and

sportscotland to deal with sport and solve the problem.

I go back to the encouragement that we had from Mr Swinney. We said then that we could help to deliver; I make that offer again today, but all the sectors have to come together. There is real enthusiasm for engaging with GPs and physicians and talking about social improvement.

We have to act quickly. As you have heard from Steve Walsh and others, there are real pressures on our facilities. I am sure that I do not need to tell members of the Scottish Parliament that once we have lost community facilities they do not come back. We will be under real pressure for the next year, so now is a good time for us to take action and to consider how we can come out of the pandemic healthier and more positive than we were when we went into it.

**The Convener:** Gillian Mackay has a supplementary question, then we will move on.

**Gillian Mackay:** I have a question about something different. During lockdown, we heard about how people with access to green space were more likely to spend time outdoors than were people who did not have such access. What has been the impact of that disparity on activity levels, and how is it linked to, for example, socioeconomic status? Gavin Macleod might want to answer that one.

10:15

**Gavin Macleod:** We do not have an awful lot of evidence to back this up, but what we saw in the recovery from the lockdown and shielding period was that, as far as outdoor activities were concerned, green spaces were a bit of a lifeline for disabled people, but only where access allowed it. Access in the outdoors is always a big problem for many disabled people. However, we saw a huge increase in walking groups and cycling programmes, in particular, all of which relate to the social aspect. Having been locked up for so long, people were able to get out and socialise—they could go for a walk or cycle, have a cup of tea and just feel normal again. That was the feedback that we were getting. As I have said, we do not have an awful lot of evidence to back that up, but from our point of view, that has played a big part in the recovery from Covid.

**Kim Atkinson:** I will build on what Gavin Macleod has just said. I am not aware, either, of a huge amount of evidence, but in the anecdotal feedback that we have had from members, a number of factors have been highlighted that show the priority that people have been attaching to such things. For a start, the idea of wellbeing has never been more important—certainly, in my lifetime. In fact, I think that it was, for the first time

ever, almost a higher priority than the economy. Obviously the economy will rise in importance, and rightly so, but the importance of our wellbeing—not just as a society, but as individuals—is something that we need to hold on to. We need the focus on social health and we need to highlight, as Gavin Macleod said, the particular role that sport and physical activity play in getting people out and active. Indeed, going for a walk with friends has been seen as a social gathering in a way that it never was before.

Local clubs, too, have played a really important role. Those of us who are involved in sport and physical activity already knew that clubs are the heart of so many communities, but we have seen that more and more throughout the pandemic. So many sports clubs reached out into their local communities to provide facilities where people could come to get food, to meet people and to do other things that had nothing to do with sport. That happened because the clubs are seen as trusted partners in their communities.

The factors that have been highlighted to us have been availability of local facilities, people having more time and more flexibility in how they could use that time, and access to things at reduced cost. In other words, cost was not a barrier to doing certain things, because people were able to use the outdoors and the environment.

We need to remember those principles in moving forward on any new opportunities. I totally agree with David Ferguson that there should not be more of the same; instead, this should be a real opportunity for change. The committee can play a very important role in that respect.

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** Good morning, panel, and thank you for your time this morning.

My questions are for Gavin Macleod. I was interested to read in your submission about reduced participation in volunteering by disabled people because of the potential impact on their benefits; you have referred to that again this morning. Can you say a bit more about that and tell us about experiences of which you have been made aware?

Secondly, with disability benefits being transferred to Scotland, do you plan to look, with the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland, at the barriers that exist? Unfortunately, responsibility for universal credit and capability assessments remains with the Department for Work and Pensions.

**Gavin Macleod:** The research that we cited in our submission was English research, but up here some of our athletes have had their Motability entitlement taken away from them and their

benefits cut. We recently had a volunteer with a disability whose expenses we paid, and who then had his benefits stopped. We fought to get them reinstated, but we should not be having those fights just to support people in doing the work. It is undoubtedly an issue. We speak to our participants and they are all nervous about the assessment and their benefits being cut.

We have an apprenticeship programme for the Paralympic sport boccia, which focuses on athletes who are retiring with the aim of keeping them in the sport and getting them involved as coaches. However, all the athletes to whom we spoke were reluctant to get involved because of the potential impacts on their benefits. We are trying to keep athletes in sport and keep them engaged, but they face real and tangible societal barriers.

We would love to be engaged in looking at the barriers, but we have had no engagement yet. We could bring into the fold the lived experience of the participants and athletes with whom we are working. You are right to say that the opportunity exists to do something significant because the barriers are a disincentive, at the moment. We need to turn the situation around and incentivise people—especially people with disabilities—to become more physically active.

**The Convener:** I am looking at the chat box; a couple of other panellists want to respond to you, Marie. We will hear from David Ferguson then Kim Atkinson.

**David Ferguson:** [*Inaudible.*]—because that is a really important issue, which has to be addressed. We are working with Gavin Macleod and the Scottish Disability Sport team, and Disability Equality Scotland is also involved in that on-going research. As Gavin has said, much of the research around disability has had to use data from England, with either no cohort or just a small cohort from Scotland. We are doing the first research in 20 years on disability sports in Scotland; we hope to come up with some answers and real experiences in that project over the next few months.

**Kim Atkinson:** I will pick up on volunteering. As Steve Walsh said earlier, we know that volunteering has been a challenge throughout the pandemic. We know that fewer volunteers are returning and that there is—understandably—particular reluctance among older adults. Many young people want to volunteer, and people who are returning to volunteering generally are looking for a bit more support, but providing a support network has been hard.

The people who are involved in supporting volunteers throughout the wider voluntary sector find that work more time-consuming. There has

never been a more important time to recognise that volunteering is not free, but is fundamental to how sport operates—one sixth of all adults who volunteer do so in sport, and half of all young people who want to volunteer want to do so in sport.

From a policy point of view, the issue with the DWP is in relation to its guidance. People who are being assessed for benefits are asked whether they volunteer. Research from across the voluntary sector has shown that people are reluctant to volunteer because they fear that their benefits will be cut. Our colleagues in the Scottish Volunteering Forum have progressed that conversation with the DWP. My understanding is that a statement of guidance now outlines that people can volunteer without their benefits being cut, but that statement cannot be published, put online or shared electronically, which does not strike me as being a transparent way of working. We know that volunteering reduces all causes of mortality by 20 per cent. Surely, we need to encourage more people to volunteer.

We had a chat recently with the convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, Joe Fitzpatrick; we are striving for support from that committee on how to move the matter forward. First, we need a serious conversation with the DWP, which I know the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport is keen to have. Secondly, we need serious conversations about how, before social security powers transfer to Scotland, we ensure that the issue is not replicated here. We need to redress now and protect for the future.

**The Convener:** I come back to what Kim said earlier about things being cross-portfolio—there are issues of planning, the considerations in Gillian Mackay's questions, and now social security issues.

I believe that Sue Webber wants to ask questions about older people.

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** I have questions on funding.

**The Convener:** You can start with questions on funding and move on to older people, if that is okay.

**Sue Webber:** Thank you.

My first question is for Steve Walsh, who mentioned scrambling around for little pockets of money. Kim Atkinson mentioned that 90 per cent of funding is cascaded through local authorities—I should declare that I am a councillor in the City of Edinburgh Council. We all know the pressure that local authorities are under.

We have a letter here from Maree Todd that states that

“the investment in sport and active living”

is being doubled

“to £100 million a year by the end of”

the current session of Parliament, which might not be enough, given some of your comments today. I want to ask about that level of investment specifically, and about what confidence you have that the investment is reaching the intended recipients, given that local authorities control its distribution.

**Steve Walsh:** That is a really good question. I have to tread quite carefully when I answer it, because nobody in my shoes wants to bite the hand that feeds them. However, I can say that my sport and leisure trust colleagues in Community Leisure UK would very much welcome ring-fenced funding for sport and leisure. Over the past two years, in terms of Scottish Government funding, arm’s-length leisure trust organisations have not qualified directly for any funding apart from money from the lost income recovery fund, which went through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local government and was delivered to sport and leisure trusts in a variety of ways, depending on how the local authority decided to distribute it.

In the Highlands, we are well supported by the local authority. Do I have enough revenue to do everything that I want to do to support our communities? Absolutely not. Do I have challenges year on year with regard to making efficiencies? I absolutely do. I need to make somewhere between 3 per cent and 5 per cent efficiencies every year from a £30 million turnover, which is a significant amount.

From the perspective of my trust, one of the challenges involves the fact that most of the services that I deliver—including libraries, museums, youth work, adult learning and, now, music tuition—are not income generating. There is an argument to be made that a lot of the income that I generate from the leisure side goes towards keeping many of those other facilities going.

It is a bit of a paradox and it is difficult for us all. I do not think that we are at the culmination point yet but, as you rightly suggest, as the pressure on local government finances becomes more and more acute, that will inevitably be transferred to sport and leisure trusts, unless we do something different.

**The Convener:** Sue, could you turn to your next question theme, please?

**Sue Webber:** On outcome 2?

**The Convener:** Yes, on older people.

**Sue Webber:** This question, which regards the disability element, is directed to Gavin Macleod,

whose report and presentation spoke quite acutely of how disabled people have been impacted to a greater extent than other groups. What one thing could we do to rectify the situation with regard to that group more quickly than with regard to the less disadvantaged groups? How can we support the reluctant returners to sport?

**Gavin Macleod:** What has become clear is that personal support is required. The “If you build it, they will come” approach is not going to work. With regard to the reluctant returners, we have found from the GOGA programme that there is a real nervousness about coming into and returning to physical activity. There is a quantum leap involved in going from being inactive to joining a sports club. We have learned that that low-level physical activity has to be supported, friendly, local and fun—it really has to be fun because, if it is not, people will disengage.

From our point of view, we need to put in place support through our regional managers and local branches across the country to help people to get back to places that they know, with people who they know—people who are like them. That will take time. We see news every day about new variants and potential new lockdowns, and that sits in the psyche of people and makes it even more difficult for people to take the leap to come back to sport. It is going to be a long, hard slog to get those people back.

**The Convener:** Conversely, Stephanie Callaghan has some questions on outcome 3, on physical confidence and competence from the earliest age.

**Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** I thank our witnesses for being here today. Can you tell me a wee bit about what you think the impact of early activities with young people will be on their future level of activity and health? I also have to declare an interest as a councillor. Councils put quite a bit of funding into getting older people out, but maybe we do not look at getting younger children into early healthy patterns that would—we hope—continue through their lives. What evidence is there to back that up?

**The Convener:** I see lots of nods; we will go to Kim Atkinson first.

10:30

**Kim Atkinson:** Thank you—it is a great question, Stephanie. Before I answer it, I have a couple of quick thoughts on Sue Webber’s question. I offer a quick reminder that, as I am sure Sue knows, sport is not a statutory matter, so there are budget questions. The most recent Audit Scotland report showed that investment from local authorities into trusts was decreasing on an annual basis, and I suspect that that has

continued. We routinely hear language about “biting the hand that feeds them”, which is a challenge, and we are probably one of the few independent organisations that do not sit with that as a challenge.

We also need to remember that access to culture is free but sport and physical activity are not, and that always strikes me as a challenge. Our members have identified a few questions on the programme for government. With regard to the £100 million investment in sport and active living, what is the definition of active living? I do not know what it is, so that would be good to understand. How can we work with health boards to identify physical activity opportunities? That ties in neatly with Stephanie Callaghan’s question.

Sue Webber asked whether the money is reaching the right groups. The premise that the active schools programme will be free is great, but that money needs to get to the community clubs that support the volunteers and coaches who make that difference. Rather than letting it get tied up in bureaucracy or other systems, we must make sure that it gets to the individuals who are making that difference. I love Steve Walsh’s point about funding being ring fenced.

Fundamentally—not just for sport and physical activity but for the voluntary sector more broadly—what is the multiyear funding agreement that is proposed in the programme for government? Is sport included in that? If sports governing bodies are to be included, sportscotland has to be included, so that it can pass that funding on to members.

With regard to Stephanie Callaghan’s question on young people, that is always a favourite topic for our members. If we put a couple of our chief executives together for more than five minutes, they will talk about physical education and physical literacy, which is one of their key phrases. For a long period, the ask from our members has remained two hours a week of quality PE for all young people. Ideally, that would also be two hours in secondary schools, although, at the moment, it is two periods. At the moment, 98 per cent of young people get the two hours or periods of PE. We do not have that provision for secondary 4 and S5, which is, arguably, the most stressful time of a young person’s life, so S4 to S6 are a priority.

In relation to a more holistic environment, we need to remember transitions in education, and our colleagues at Scottish Student Sport do a huge amount of work on that, because the transition period is critical.

We need to remember that the percentage of young people with a disability who get two hours or periods of PE a week does not reach 98 per

cent. Gavin Macleod is better placed to pick up on that than we are, and his organisation’s incredibly world-leading disability inclusion training should be a priority.

In the youngest age group, it is about supporting physical literacy. In the simplest terms, that is the opportunity to run, jump, throw, catch and swim. For every young person to have that quality experience, it needs to go back to primary school teaching. Every teacher should come out of initial teacher training with the confidence and competence to teach those skills. In some institutions that provide postgraduate primary school teacher training, students get only six hours of PE training, despite the fact that, for the rest of their teaching lives, they will have to deliver two hours of PE a week. PE is the only subject that has a mandated minimum number of hours, and the teacher has to deliver two hours a week, but students might get only three weeks’ worth—six hours—of training.

We also need to look at supporting young parents of pre-schoolers to take advantage of physical activity opportunities. Physical activity and physical literacy should also be part of the training for individuals who provide care, so that all young people have access to those core activities before they start school.

**David Ferguson:** To go back to Sue Webber’s question, for perspective, the leisure trusts manage around £400 million of investment in community sport and leisure. Education authorities invest a considerable amount in sport and physical activity; health and social care authorities spend on physical activity; and community sports groups are funded by a wealth of different sources, including charitable trusts and foundations, which also spend quite a lot on community support. Because it is spread quite widely, we do not have a total figure in Scotland for spend on sport and physical activity, but it is somewhere between £500 million and £1 billion. Therefore, although it is welcome and great, the Government’s offer of £50 million across areas of active living over the next five years is not expected to change anything.

To answer Stephanie Callaghan’s question, we have done quite a bit of research into impacts on young people. One of our research associates, Fotini Vasilopoulos, recently published work that she had done looking at 4,000 children, which I found very interesting. It found a clear correlation between sport activity in the school environment and the ability of children to regulate their emotions and behaviour in school. She is now looking in more depth at how that relates to educational attainment. Her findings are an example of why we think that sport in school is so important.

We know that, prior to Covid, opportunities were declining and access was becoming an issue; Steve Walsh has shared some detail on that. We are doing work with the Data for Children Collaborative and its partners UNICEF and the University of Edinburgh, and we have invited the Scottish Government to be part of that. We are hearing from teachers and parents that a gap has been developing over the past couple of years—it was there pre-Covid—between activity levels in independent and state schools, and abilities are also very different now.

Globally, our international research partners are speaking of around 40 per cent of children having not yet returned to pre-Covid levels of activity. As I said, New Zealand has done things a bit differently, but we are not alone in that in Scotland. However, we are starting from a lower base than many European countries, which is why it is a concern for us. Our research shows that, up to the age of about 10, our children are as active as those in the most active countries in Europe. We compare very well up to 10 years of age, so children at primary level seem to be accessing plenty of sport activity.

Where we have a real problem is from 11 or 12 years old and up. The research that we have produced, which Nick Rowe published a year or so ago, looked at Scottish household figures in the Scottish health survey. They show that our decline from the ages of 11 and 12 is a lot steeper than it is in most other countries. There is also still a greater decline for girls, despite a lot of really good work in that area. It is also sharper for children from less affluent backgrounds and children with disabilities. One of our associates, Professor Tess Kay, has highlighted that poverty and inequality are now the main barrier to sport activity in Scotland.

We are focusing on that teenage area, because it is a real problem. Activity among our 10-year-olds compares pretty well internationally, but by adulthood we are among the lowest-ranking nations for sport activity and participation. That big drop-out in the teenage years is the real concern for us.

**Gavin Macleod:** I want to follow up on what Kim Atkinson said. It is a massive issue for us. We were hearing anecdotally from lots of young people who were coming through schools that they had been excluded from, or not been fully included in, the PE experience in school. When we did a piece of research for a single local authority, only 7 per cent of the parents and pupils we spoke to felt that they or their child was getting the two hours or two periods of quality PE, whereas the attainment rate was 98 per cent. That shocked us. That piece of research was fairly low level, but when a journalist asked the audience at an

education conference at Heriot-Watt University, with 200 teachers and educationists sitting in the auditorium, “How confident do you feel about delivering the curriculum to pupils with disabilities, particularly PE?” only one hand went up. We knew that we had something to do there.

We set out on a mission to embed disability inclusion training in tertiary education establishments in Scotland. It took us six or seven years of banging on doors and convincing people to embed it in the curriculum, but we have now got it embedded. Over the past two or three weeks, we delivered nine hours of training to the fourth-year PE students at the University of Edinburgh who are just about to go out into the big, bad world of teaching. The feedback has been brilliant. The ratings have been 98 per cent positive, 71 per cent have been using the models of inclusion in their teaching and 63 per cent are sharing what they have learned with colleagues. It has been very positive. However, we do not yet see the impact of that training in the schools. We hope that that will come down the line, as those trained teachers empty out into the schools.

The big worry for us is that, because of Covid and its impact, we have lost the two key sponsors that were driving that training and delivery. We are trying to find funding sources through grant applications and approaches to sponsors to try to keep that going, because we deliver it free at source.

The impact is there, but we are not seeing it just yet. I hope that it will come in with inclusive PE.

**Steve Walsh:** The active schools programme is one of the best programmes that the Government has ever implemented. One of the benefits of it for us is that the funding comes directly from sportscotland to the trusts, and we can deploy it to good effect in all active schools groups, especially secondary schools.

One thing that would help the debate about young girls in particular stopping participating in sporting activity as they move from primary to secondary school is the sharing of data. In the active schools delivery, we sometimes struggle to identify young people with additional support needs. If there was a national policy for sharing that data safely in a way that protected young people, that would be incredibly helpful because it would allow us to deploy our assets more effectively. Kim Atkinson’s organisation has support groups whereas our active schools co-ordinators co-ordinate, bringing young people a huge amount of benefit through physical activity.

In the Highlands, active schools activity is already free—we do not charge for it. We have a leadership programme up here that is viewed as sector leading. That is not me saying that; it is

sportscotland. That leadership programme brings young girls in particular in to volunteer, and they get a Scottish vocational qualification out of it. It is a fantastic programme and I encourage the committee to look at upscaling it across the country.

**Stephanie Callaghan:** David Ferguson pre-empted me when he started to talk about people dropping out of sport as they become teenagers. Earlier, Kim Atkinson was talking about sport and—I think that you have all done this—wound into that play activities and wellbeing, yet you all have “sport” in the title of your organisation. When I was looking at the information for today’s meeting, I was wondering whether those things are going to be incorporated. Is it a wider issue that we see sport as something quite separate when actually we are talking about activities and wellbeing together? I am interested in that aspect.

We are doing a lot of outdoor activities, risky play and so on in the early years right now, and I am interested in what kind of difference that is making to our younger children. Schools were doing great with PE and so on, but there is quite a limited range of activities on offer and we get people dropping out in their teenage years. Is there a wide enough range of activities on offer? Should we be looking to focus on other activities that might capture the interests of people in that age group and introducing them earlier? I am talking about things such as climbing and parkour that might be a bit more attractive to young people and might capture their attention.

**The Convener:** I am nodding along because I am thinking about my own children, who did not like competitive sport. I do not want to talk about my kids, obviously, but I am also thinking about my own teenage years. I enjoyed physical activity but, when it came to competitive sport, I was not as good as everyone else, so my interest dropped off. I see that happening with other people. I do not want this to be a therapy session for us all, but do the witnesses have any thoughts on the points that Stephanie Callaghan raised?

**Kim Atkinson:** Those are some great questions, Stephanie. The priority for our members for the two hours of quality PE is made up of two things. One is that being active should be just a habit for young people. It should be how they have grown up—a culture that they are used to. Hopefully, people can then set lifelong habits at the youngest possible age. The second part is that young people should be physically literate, as I said earlier.

The third part is to not forget that sport and physical activity is fun. I am not precious about what it is called. I see it all as being on a continuum—people go into different things at different ages. For me, sport is not just

competitive. Many of our members are non-competitive in what they do as a sport and there are sports that have competitive and non-competitive elements in them—in fact, almost all do.

10:45

The priority in the diversity of activities that young people are provided through PE and school sport is recognising that there is a community link opportunity—that is the ideal. I feel that opening up the school estate and ensuring that young people get to try a range of activities is a priority. I am sure that everybody will find different activities at different stages of their lives, exactly as you have said, convener. With a community link, young people get to try a sport—they go along to play table tennis, for example, and see that a table tennis club exists in the local area, ideally even in the same school environment. Young people have confidence about going to known environments, so the school estate offers a huge opportunity if clubs are based in that locality.

We need to be relentless in ensuring that the two hours or periods of quality PE achieve the outcomes that we need. The daily mile is an amazing policy with an amazing outcome, but it does not replace two hours or periods of quality PE, and neither do active schools. We need to be clear that physically literate individuals are ones who have the confidence and the competence to try a range of sports and activities throughout their lives. Different sporting opportunities allow that to happen. That is the priority.

**The Convener:** After Steve Walsh answers, Sandesh Gulhane will ask a quick question and then we will have to move on to a couple of themes around infrastructure.

**Steve Walsh:** One thing that we have not mentioned is listening to the young people. What would they like to see up here? Dance is one thing, and we have our movers and shakers programme, which young girls absolutely love. It is non-competitive, and they lead it themselves, which is fantastic. There are also things such as outdoor foraging with our countryside rangers—those are kind of strange things, but it is about listening to the young people. It is about trying to create that community hub in schools, where youth workers and active school co-ordinators can work with educators, speak to the young people and try to bring out of them what it is that they would like to see. We are sitting here as a group of grown-ups, if I can class myself as one, to determine what young people want, but we probably need to ask them.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** I want to come in on the level of adults’ activity and

participation in sport that David Ferguson spoke about. I also want to expand on Stephanie Callaghan's question and what the convener said.

I love sport. I played competitive sport all the way through university, but in adulthood that activity is gone. Weather and access to facilities are key factors when we leave school. Norway, which has worse weather than we have, deals with that situation well, so how can we improve it?

**The Convener:** Any panellist who would like to come in first should raise their hand, and I will come to them.

**David Ferguson:** You are right to spotlight Norway, Sandesh. We have done quite a bit of research on how different parts of the world have done that work. We could talk about that forever, but we do not have the time this morning.

Much of the issue comes back to what we said earlier about having a proper strategy. Scotland has frameworks and corporate plans but does not have a national strategy that brings everybody on to the same page to understand how to deliver on a national and local level. A strategy makes the development of facilities much easier.

We have heard Judy Murray on the radio and television this week complaining about the lack of tennis facilities. Again, much is happening in silos there.

Sandesh Gulhane mentioned Stephanie Callaghan's question about children. Research shows that it does not matter what children have learned up to the age of 10 or 11, if they drop out of sport at 11 or 12 years of age, they generally do not have the confidence and skills to come back to it later in life. Sport needs to be part of the maelstrom that teenagers go through, when everything changes for them.

We have the word "sport" in our title and we think about that all the time, because we are conscious that people see that word as a turn-off—I understand Gillian Martin's comment on that point—but we do not see it like that. We see sport in its widest sense. We see play, dance, Tumble Tots and walking groups all as part of it. Our vision is that we will, over time, help to make sport accessible to everybody in the country, whatever shape they want sport to take. For that reason, we are doing a lot of work with Steve Walsh on the dance project in the Highlands.

We do feel, however, that sport needs to work harder in the areas that have been mentioned. There is no doubt that it must become more inclusive. Traditional sport must adapt to the children, environment and expectations of today, which differ. We have posed such questions to sports bodies and to others.

We are talking about moving towards ensuring that sport is fun and part of every element of society. That involves taking sport out of the sport basket and making it a more mainstream part of society. That is what happens in Scandinavian countries and in New Zealand, where sport is seen almost as a right. It is not a statutory requirement, but no politician would cut funding for sport, because it is seen as part of the quality of life. Pulling back on investment in sport in communities there would be perceived as damaging the electorate's quality of life, which is why there is a push for every community to provide people with low-cost—if not free—access to sport. That is important and Scotland does not quite have such a philosophy yet.

**The Convener:** Anyone who has ever been to Scandinavian countries will recognise that approach straight away.

**Kim Atkinson:** Sandesh Gulhane asked a great question. I will briefly cover the five strands that are in my mind. We mentioned at the beginning that a key reason why people do not take part in physical activity—ironically, it is also a key reason why people do not volunteer—is a lack of time. One ask from our members is about the idea of the wellbeing employer and the wellbeing educator, whereby all employers and educational institutions give their staff and pupils or students time to be active in the working or school day. That means that the employer says, "We'll give you time to be active each day," because time is a big barrier for people.

The national planning framework 4 consultation is taking place and we know that planning is a huge aspect of ensuring that people have access to local opportunities, in that it relates to school facilities, sports facilities, access routes for active travel and green space. Sport and physical activity need to be integral to planning, and I hope that NPF4 presents an opportunity for that to happen.

We have mentioned that people need to know what community facilities are available locally. Can noticeboards show all the sports clubs that are available? How do we create and make a bit easier the informal referral process? Should we expect facility advisory groups to be part of the running of facilities? I am sure that Steve Walsh could tell me about examples of that working well. Local communities and sports clubs need to be part of deciding and guiding how facilities are run. That is not community asset transfer—or community liability transfer, which is what it routinely is—but communities being more involved in guiding, not managing, community facilities.

Key performance indicators for sport and physical activity are all routine. We do not expect other departments and agencies to report back, so that provides an opportunity, as does funding. As

Steve Walsh said, we do not have ring-fenced funding, but the money that is raised from the sugar tax down south has been ring-fenced for sport and physical activity. That provides an opportunity, as will the Barnett consequentials from the Commonwealth games in Birmingham. There are a number of opportunities.

**The Convener:** After Steve Walsh responds, I must move on, because we are rapidly running out of time and members still want to ask the panel about a few more things.

**Steve Walsh:** I will make just a couple of points. Local authorities are under huge pressure to deliver schools, roads and amenities. When we look at new infrastructure, I encourage us all to think about having not a school but a community hub that includes sports facilities and a library and becomes a focus for a community to use.

I completely agree with everything that Kim Atkinson said. Up here, we have suffered from management committee fatigue as management committee members have got a little older and had to step down. We have had to step in and take on an enormous number of facilities. Handing over facilities to communities is an aspiration that we should try to achieve, but we must question the sustainability of that, because running facilities can often lead to fatigue.

The question about sport riled me a little. We are all about wellbeing. When I look at the six outcomes, I wonder why one outcome does not say just wellbeing. That is a theme throughout all six outcomes, but we do not refer to it explicitly—it is implied. My approach is about physical and mental health and wellbeing, rather than sport—we are much more than that.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I have a couple of quick questions.

One witness—I cannot remember who—identified poverty and inequality as being among the main barriers to access. I suspect that you would all do that, so I will put my question to Kim Atkinson. Access to facilities for disadvantaged communities has been, and continues to be, a perennial problem. My example is of a local football team in a disadvantaged area. It costs them £100 for one session on a local football pitch that is owned by the local authority. How do we get beyond that, so that we remove barriers to access?

**Kim Atkinson:** That is a great question. As you have said, it is a perennial problem, and I feel that we never quite move forward with it.

Community facilities and clubs are at the heart of how sport and physical activity happen. As I have said, there are 13,000 sports clubs, with 900,000 members. The largest cost that clubs face

is in facilities. A number of sports clubs operate their own facilities, but the majority use those that are run by a local authority or a leisure trust, and the biggest cost to those clubs is in access to the facilities.

I completely understand Steve Walsh's point that facilities are expected to generate income. The issue is not of the trusts doing something that they should not; it is about expectations of the trusts. They are certainly doing their best in the challenging financial times that they face. However, as the cost of facilities goes up, the cost of membership goes up, because that is the only way in which most sports clubs bring in money.

Given that culture is free, why is sport not free? I have no arguments about the huge role that culture plays, and I certainly do not want us to charge for it, so it is definitely about sport being equal, rather than taking things the other way. It comes back to sport and physical activity being, at their heart, an investment. Culture is an investment in our cultural identity, wellbeing and mental health. Sport and physical activity are all those things, and they represent a 30 per cent reduction in all causes of mortality, yet we expect them to make money. We are losing that cultural recognition of sports clubs as the fabric of society.

Jackie, you are absolutely right that cost is the biggest barrier to participation in the most deprived areas, and we need to break that barrier by investing, making sure that the investment gets into the right areas, and by making sure that Steve Walsh and his colleagues can do the amazing work that High Life Highland does. That model has very rarely been replicated, although I am sure that there are a few that Steve could tell us about. Nobody else has taken up that model.

I remember Steve's predecessor in High Life Highland talking very eloquently about one of his first days in post. He stood and looked out into the car park of one of their facilities, at the BMWs and Audis, and thought, "What are we doing? If these are the people who are coming to our facilities, we are not reaching the market that we need to reach, because these people can afford private facilities." We need to provide support and to look at culture, in order to make that change that we all need to see.

**Jackie Baillie:** Given that we all agree, is your action plan, with revenue attached, the route in?

**Kim Atkinson:** Ultimately, it has to be about money, to a degree. However, part of it is also about principle. The school estate is a set of community facilities that is run on behalf of the community, in order to enable that community, yet we charge the community—clubs—so that they can charge the local community to access

community facilities. It is just the strangest little model.

We have never got to the heart of how to break the public-private partnership or private finance initiative contracts, nor to the heart of the charging issues that make that happen. The most recent report was done by sportscotland in 2015, and it showed that a fifth of the school estate was used during holiday time and that only a third was used during term time. It is there; it needs to be managed; and it needs a structure and programming that allow it to be accessed. There will be examples of great practice, but that is the most recent data that we have. It cannot be that expensive to break. That will provide the home for facilities, surely, at an affordable rate.

That is the answer, as I see it, not just for sport and physical activity but as a key action for Covid recovery. We should engage communities, get them involved and provide them with an opportunity, through a school facility as a community hub, exactly as Steve Walsh has mentioned.

**The Convener:** Colleagues, we are officially up against our deadline. I will extend the meeting by 10 minutes, but I will prioritise people who have not had a chance to ask questions. We will go to Emma Harper next. If anybody wants to come in and mop up any issues, you need to let me know, and I will put you on the list, otherwise, we will completely run out of time.

11:00

**Emma Harper:** Thank you, convener. I will be as quick as possible.

This is a question for David Ferguson. It is about how we can use our infrastructure to meet our climate change, net zero and biodiversity targets. I am talking about issues such as having access to green space, 20-minute neighbourhoods and so on. When I lived in California, we got points for car pooling and walking or cycling. There was a scheme whereby those points could be exchanged for movie tickets, which was great in Los Angeles. That was a good way of getting outside and getting active. However, I do not know whether we have car pooling or car sharing or walking or cycling incentive schemes in Scotland. Do we need to provide such schemes?

I am also thinking about the e-bike revolution. How do we make e-bikes less expensive? Do we need to do more to encourage uptake of e-bikes? I know that the Scottish Government has an e-bike grant fund. In 2019-20, £273,000 was given out and more than 100 e-bikes were provided. So far, more than 600 e-bikes have been provided through that scheme. How do we use our infrastructure to support our net zero targets?

**David Ferguson:** That is a good question, and one that is very topical at the moment. The answer is quite varied. We have lots of examples of using our infrastructure in that way. We have looked at what leisure trusts, councils and other stakeholders are doing. There is some really innovative practice out there.

The challenge that we have in Scotland—this has been said throughout this morning's session—is that that work has not been pulled together. In other words, it is being done in silos, whether it is a local authority, a leisure trust or a community organisation that is leading on it. As a result, it is not properly funded. Typically, the funding will be short term. An innovative project might take off and be doing well, but because long-term funding is not provided, a community group will have to spend a lot of time making funding applications in an effort to maintain it. We come back to the issue that we discussed earlier.

That is why the OSS was created. We are driving the ability to pull together all that understanding and learning. I speak to Steve Walsh of High Life Highland, other chief executives, local authorities, Gavin Macleod and representatives of various sports regularly, and they all tell me about lots of great work that is being done. We have offered to pull all that together so that we can give Government and those who deliver services a better understanding of what is happening, where it is happening, where the funding is working and where it is not, and to help them to share the data.

The committee has heard quite a bit about a lack of data and knowledge gaps, but I am sure that members will agree that they have also heard that there is a lot of enthusiasm and encouragement to change that and make the situation better. People are doing a good job, but there is a powerful argument from a public health and a wider public good perspective for us to look at a process of reinvention and renewal.

Net zero can easily be part of that. I will give an example. One leisure trust that I spoke to was looking at changing the big boilers that it uses for all its swimming pools to a greener boiler system. The problem was that it did not have enough money in the bank, because it received a year-to-year management fee from the local authority. The bank would not provide a loan because the leisure trust did not have the certainty of several years of income, so it could not change the system.

Leisure trusts and others want to change. There is a lot of innovative practice out there, but we need to properly understand how that works and how we fund it, and allow organisations to take such steps. Sometimes, the issue is not about money; it is about providing security of income. It was mentioned earlier that volunteers have been

lost. We can use the local community much more effectively than we do at the moment. You might be surprised to hear that more people are employed in sport in Scotland and the UK, per head of population, than in any European nation. We employ a lot more people in sport than countries such as France, Germany, Italy and the Scandinavian countries. As a result, we now have fewer volunteers involved in sport and leisure than we had 30 or 40 years ago.

There are solutions that do not necessarily need a big investment of money, but investment will be necessary alongside those solutions.

**Emma Harper:** We have seen a massive uptake of e-bikes and cargo bikes. Even Michael Matheson, who is the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, has an e-bike. What more should be done to encourage folk to get out and use their e-bikes?

**David Ferguson:** That is a big question. We can share research and evidence with you on the value of that. However, again, it is about moving away from piecemeal approaches—we are all trying to get that message across. We need to move away from little pots of short-term funding and saying, for example, “Okay, we want to invest in e-bikes, because it looks good and helps with our green efficiency.”

We have to be more strategic about sport and physical activity and how we get people moving. If we take cycle lessons out of schools so that some schools in deprived areas do not provide cycle lessons, but then we invest in e-bikes, people will not use them, because will not feel safe and they will not be happy about going on the roads. Their confidence will not have been built up as children and teenagers to allow them to do that. The issue has to be thought of in the round and as part of a strategic approach. I advise against continuing with that piecemeal approach.

**The Convener:** I have some meeting management news: three members have told me that they have short questions that will be directed at specific witnesses. That is all that we have time for, I am afraid.

**Marie McNair:** The witnesses have welcomed the approach of increasing green space and improving access to it. In relation to access to green space, women’s safety is important. Do the witnesses have views on how safety can be maximised? Are there any examples of good practice in that regard?

**The Convener:** Steve Walsh has indicated that he wants to come in, although I do not know whether it is on that issue.

**Steve Walsh:** I do not have enough knowledge on that particular point, but I want to say

something on the previous point. I want to mention the importance of bringing together Government organisations in a comprehensive approach. We have been talking about transport, and health and education are also involved. We find ourselves working with Government agencies in all those areas. From the point of view of the shop floor, it would certainly be helpful to have a much more joined-up and co-ordinated approach. I guess that that leads to things happening on outdoor spaces, the use of e-bikes and all the other good things that we are trying to do.

We have an Archimedes screw going into the River Ness, and it will reduce the carbon emissions of our biggest leisure centre by about 50 per cent. Expeditious use of Salix Finance funding, which has been absolutely brilliant, has allowed us and many other trusts to reduce our carbon footprint, and we will continue to do that.

**Kim Atkinson:** There were a couple of great questions there. Just to give Emma Harper some reassurance, during COP26—the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—we ran a session on sports with our home countries counterparts and Irish colleagues to look at different opportunities. I think that 100 per cent of people who participated in that call have said that they have prioritised climate change and sustainability more after having been on the call. It is certainly something that people are looking at.

On e-bikes, I have a point that also relates to the question that Marie McNair asked about women’s safety. It is about planning. NPF4 is about planning for spaces and providing attractive safer spaces for people to walk and cycle so that they feel safe doing it and want to do it.

A huge part of women’s safety is about lighting, and there are a number of parts to that. Cost is part of the challenge for local facilities. We have seen that issue throughout the Covid pandemic in a different way.

A live issue for sport is that very few sports clubs and organisations are charities, so most cannot access grants from trusts and other organisations that provide funding. Gavin Macleod mentioned that his organisation is one of the few sports organisations that are charities. Our members have identified that a necessary key outcome is a new governance model for sport. If an organisation is not a charity, it does not get access to water and sewerage rates relief, grant aid and a number of other opportunities through trust funding. Sport and physical activity organisations are therefore not on a level playing field with charities. We need to change that model. As Steve Walsh said, sport organisations want to do more, but they cannot access the same grants without that charitable tag, which is a big problem.

**The Convener:** Two members still want to ask questions. I again ask members to direct their questions. We will have to close after that.

**Sue Webber:** My question follows on quite nicely, I think. It is about eco-ableism, and is mainly directed to Gavin Macleod. We have heard about a number of environmental policies on active travel and redesigning streets, which might make it more difficult and challenging for those with a disability to access them. What are your thoughts on that? Do you feel included in those discussions?

**Gavin Macleod:** Access is a huge issue for us, and anything that impacts on the ability to travel either by foot or bike is an issue. Recently, we have done a lot of work with paths for all, including in relation to access to the countryside and training. When we are delivering the training, which can be in an urban or a rural environment, it is incredible how many obstacles there are, such as bins, cambers on pavements and potholes that are not repaired. People can step over potholes, but if you are in a wheelchair, they are dangerous. The design of pavements to allow water to drain into the gutter also pushes wheelchairs into the road and parked cars.

It would be good to have a more inclusive approach to some of the design aspects, and have a consultation at the outset when they are being put in place. At the moment, we do not get that consultation, which proves problematic.

**The Convener:** I need to move on. Stephanie, could you please ask your question?

**Stephanie Callaghan:** My question is for Kim Atkinson, and is about equality and cross-cutting approaches. I am interested in the seasonal variations in walking and other outdoor activities in summer and winter. Are we taking the wider look that we need to take? Earlier, you mentioned a cross-ministerial group, and I wonder whether anything can be done around equality. For instance, in Sweden, paths and cycle paths are cleared first, then local roads and then highways. That allows women to be out and walking around, and it also provides greater access for those with disabilities. Is that the sort of thing you were talking about, and is there any such work going on here at the moment?

**Kim Atkinson:** Thank you. Can I ask what you mean by seasonal variations?

**Stephanie Callaghan:** During the summer, people are more active and get out and about more. In winter, when it is slippery, dark and cold, is that a barrier to people getting out, and do activity levels drop?

**Kim Atkinson:** It varies by sport. Some sports are summer sports, and some are winter sports,

but actually, most sports are all year round. Tennis is making the call for more indoor facilities, for example. If you are involved in an outdoor sport, playing through winter in some of the winter facilities is a challenge. Equally, some of the indoor sports report higher participation figures through the winter period. Therefore, it varies by sport.

There can be a challenge because of the number of organisations that want to access indoor facilities throughout the winter, and I am sure that the same applies to outdoor facilities. That leads to a pressure and a pinch point in terms of market demand. Access becomes an operational challenge, and I am sure that Gavin Macleod would say the same for people with disabilities with regard to travel and transport.

What you said about clearing pavements first is exactly the point. Where there is a will, there is a way. Are we genuinely prioritising sport and physical activity, and seeing their cross-cutting agenda across all national outcomes? I would argue that we are not doing so as much as we could. I know that the ambition is shared across sport and physical activity, and with the active Scotland team in the Scottish Government. It is about being able to challenge each portfolio, each national indicator and outcome, and each minister and cabinet secretary, and ask what they are doing to support to support physical activity and sport.

We know that the small £30-something million pot for sport supports every other national outcome, so I would argue that the beneficiaries are not sport and physical activity; they are educational attainment, mental health and physical health. Therefore, are we asking them what are their key performance indicators and reporting in order to support the six active Scotland framework outcomes? Together we can do more—that is the opportunity.

**The Convener:** That is a good note on which to end. I thank you all for your time this morning. We cannot cover everything in 90 minutes, but you have certainly given us a lot of food for thought and ideas for further scrutiny.

At our next meeting on 7 December, the committee will take evidence on perinatal mental health from two panels of stakeholders. That concludes the public part of our meeting today.

11:14

*Meeting continued in private until 11:42.*



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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