

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

CELG(4) PS 17

Inquiry into participation levels in sport in Wales

Response from : Public Health Wales

- **The extent to which the Welsh Government and Sport Wales are achieving the goals set out in the *Programme for Government*, the *Creating an Active Wales* action plan and the *Vision for Sport in Wales* with regard to participation levels in sport;**

Participation levels in sport have been static for a decade or more despite a range of different promotions and incentives provided by Sport Wales and its predecessor organisation the Sports Council for Wales. However, this is no different to the equally static trend in physical activity in the population generally which has also remained stubbornly unmoved for many years. The reasons for this are complex so future attempts to reverse the trend need to be directed not only at the whole population but need to recognise the different motivation of sub-groups, by developing a range of complementary approaches working on many levels. Sport is only one aspect of physical activity, albeit an important one, not least because it has the potential to engage children and young people in habits that have the potential to last a lifetime. However, establishing the habit in the first place means that sport must be easily accessible requiring minimal financial outlay and above all enjoyable. Historically there has tended to be a gender bias with significantly more resource going towards male dominated sports such as rugby and football, and whilst these have become more inclusive with increasing numbers of girls taking them up, there are relatively few alternatives that are readily and easily accessible. This is particularly important for teenage girls where we know we see a significant drop off in sport participation in their early to mid teens.

A further key feature of sport is its competitive nature, which is of course important in the context of developing elite sportsmen & women, where Wales has generated a disproportionately large number compared to our UK colleagues. The downside of this is that by definition competition also creates losers who naturally will be the less able and less enthusiastic and all too easily disenfranchised by a process that continues to affirm their negative perceptions.

As previously inferred however, sport is only one aspect of physical activity and sits alongside active play, active recreation, active

transport and work as other key contributors to active living. Unfortunately we have spent much of the last three decades manufacturing barriers to all of these and in many cases these are irreversible and we need to identify creative solutions to redress the balance.

The notion of manual labour for example has changed out of all recognition with the many labour intensive jobs that dominated employment 50 years ago now superseded by ever more sedentary occupations where people sit for long periods in offices, calls centres and the like. And this is a situation that is unlikely to change. Play has similarly changed significantly as a toxic combination of health and safety fears (often overstated), increasing urban traffic mean and wall-to-wall screen time mean that children no longer play in the street or climb trees but sit parked in front of TV sets and computer screens for hours on end. But perhaps the greatest change has been in the way we get from 'A to B' where 30 or 40 years ago we would happily walk or cycle to work, school, church etc. and when local shops provided for all our consumer needs. Now of course most people have at least one and often two cars that they use to drive everywhere, including the shops that are increasingly being built 'out of town', work is now a 'commute' and again healthy and safety are cited as reasons for driving children even short distances to school. For several decades urban and transport planners have prioritised cars vans and lorries over pedestrians and cyclists; housing and commercial development over green spaces; and risk aversion over risk management.

Despite these social and ecological setbacks, there are emerging good practices and opportunities to start to redress the balance, and there is some evidence of these starting to have an impact as childhood obesity levels in the USA and parts of the UK now suggesting a reverse to the negative trends of the last decades. And that is an important issue to recognise. It is rather like turning a supertanker – it takes a long time to stop before it commences its change in direction. We have spent half a century creating this obesogenic environment and have only just started to try and re-establish a more pro-kinetic one.

Building on best evidence Sport Wales and Public Health Wales have recently collaborated on a new joint delivery plan that has been submitted to ministers, developed with reference to global exemplars such as Finland, Canada and Australia. There is also a strong emphasis on children and young people as we recognise the critical importance of establishing early positive behaviours rather than trying to address later negative ones.

- **The availability of datasets and statistics to measure participation levels in sport, particularly those disaggregated by equality strand and socio-economic groups;**

Improved higher quality, regular and comparable data would allow us to accurately identify the scope, scale, trends and comparators that should inform subsequent actions. A review of data sources for physical activity outcomes was conducted by the Public Health Wales Observatory and published in September 2011.

(<http://www.physicalactivityandnutritionwales.org.uk/Documents/740/Review%20of%20data%20sources%20for%20physical%20activity%20outcomes%28English%29.pdf>)

Amongst the conclusions of the report it identified that:

1. No data source is perfect and all featured in this report have some data quality issues of relevance to the *Creating an Active Wales* action plan.
2. Data are available to monitor the two high level targets for *Creating an Active Wales*. Further options can be considered in relation to the target for children.
3. There are data to support outcome indicators for each of the four themes of *Creating an Active Wales*, although not all sub themes are covered and, for some, available data are of poor quality.
4. More work is needed to assess quality aspects of some data sources if it is intended to use them to construct indicators.

Recommendations on improving data collection have been made in the joint delivery plan by Sport Wales & Public Health Wales.

- **The opportunities and barriers to sports participation that exist for different groups of people, including by equality strand and socio-economic groups;**

As indicated above, sport participation is influenced by a range of factors but there is good evidence to suggest a relationship with social and economic demography as those from the most deprived communities tend to have lower participation rates than those from more affluent communities. The reasons for this are complex but it is reasonable to assume that costs associated with club membership, facilities, equipment etc. may play a part as does access to high quality local opportunities. However, recent evidence from the Sport Participation survey conducted by Sport Wales also indicate a general lack of awareness of local facilities and opportunities amongst many of the residents of our most deprived communities. The establishment of easily identifiable and accessible accurate, trusted and comprehensive local information is crucial and recommendations have been made in the joint delivery plan.

- **What are the links between programmes to develop sport in Wales and other Welsh Government initiatives to increase physical activity?**

Whilst there are numerous potential links between programmes and initiatives to increase physical activity in Wales it is probably fair to say that these have not been fully exploited or realised as highlighted in the recent 'Review of Health Improvement programmes' conducted by Public Health Wales. Nonetheless there are now moves to try and strengthen the links including:

The National Exercise Referral Scheme that supports people with or at risk of chronic disease through a structured physical activity programme based in Leisure Services is now linking to green exercise programmes such as Actif Woods, Green Gyms, Lets Walk Cymru and the Age Cymru Nordic Walking programme.

The establishment of a unique new website has been established to promote active and healthy environments. It highlights the tools, evidence and good practice across the world and was established by Public Health Wales in 2009. PlanetHealthCymru ([www.planethealthcymru.org](http://www.planethealthcymru.org)) pulls together the collective intelligence of planners, policy makers, researchers and practitioners working in the fields of transport, urban planning, green environment, sport, play, leisure and public health to help develop a common understanding, common language and collaborative approach to tackling the obesogenic environment.

Public Health Wales are working with Natural Resources Wales and others through the Outdoor Health Forum to identify opportunities to promote the outdoors as a key, free resource for the people of Wales to improve their health.

As indicated earlier Public Health Wales and Sport Wales have recently published a draft joint delivery plan for physical activity that has gone to Welsh Government for consideration.

Public Health Wales manage the Physical Activity and Nutrition Network for Wales ([www.physicalactivityandnutritionwales.org.uk](http://www.physicalactivityandnutritionwales.org.uk)) providing support to practitioners in all sectors in Wales in addressing physical activity. In addition to a popular website the network with over 2000 members provides quarterly newsletters, e.bulletins, research seminars, training events, conferences and a national Good Practice Scheme. The network has an advisory board with representation from Welsh Government, Sport Wales, private sector,

health, voluntary sector, Communities First; Skills Active and Welsh universities amongst others.

- **The impact of the Olympic and Paralympic legacy, the Ryder Cup and other high profile Welsh sporting events and achievements on participation levels in Wales.**

There is some emerging evidence that there has been a positive response to the Olympics and Paralympics in Wales with some sports clubs reporting significant increases in membership. However, the key issue will be retaining that initial interest, which in turn will depend to a large extent on the capacity of the sports sector to cope with the increasing demand and continue to provide a quality and enjoyable experience. There must be some note of caution as evaluation of previous Olympics and other sporting events has suggested that early gains are soon lost, although measures to gauge uptake were fairly primitive in some cases.

Fundamentally, there needs to be a major push on providing access to a wide range of community sports, recreation and physical activity opportunities that are cheap, easy to get to, run by enthusiastic champions and supported by an enhanced curriculum of equally broad ranging, and wholly inclusive fun activities including dance, martial arts and outdoor pursuits established both within the PE curriculum and as extra-curricular activities. At the same time we must continue to explore and promote new ways of encouraging people to build activity into their daily lives through active travel, active recreation and active workplaces.

Malcolm Ward FFPH, MPH, PG Dip  
Principal Health Promotion Specialist (Physical Activity Lead).