



National Audit Office



Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

REPORT

**by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

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Key facts



10 years

since the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which promised a decade-long legacy, including for sports participation



£85.5bn

estimate of the contribution in social and economic benefits from community sport and physical activity in England in 2017-18



£1.9bn

amount spent by Sport England since the launch of government's *Sporting Future* strategy in 2015-16



1.2%

more of the adult population were active in the year to November 2019 (pre-COVID-19 pandemic) than the year to November 2016



1.9%

fewer of the adult population were active in the year to November 2021 than pre-COVID-19 pandemic



52%

of people found new ways to be active during the COVID-19 pandemic



£250m

amount committed by Sport England to tackling inactivity between 2017 and 2021



Almost six-fold

increase in the number of organisations awarded grant funding by Sport England in 2020-21 during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared with 2019-20

Summary

1 The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games ran at an overall public cost of £8.8 billion.¹ The government committed to a lasting legacy, including an increase in grassroots sports participation. Successive governments have since adopted strategies to further their objectives for grassroots sport and physical activity. These strategies have highlighted the role of physical activity in supporting the government's wider strategic objectives, such as levelling up and tackling obesity. Community sport and physical activity brought an estimated contribution of £85.5 billion to England in 2017-18 in social and economic benefits (including £9.5 billion from improved physical and mental health), an estimated return of £3.91 for each £1 spent on community sport and physical activity.

2 The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (the Department) has overall policy responsibility for maximising participation in sport and physical activity. In 2015, it set out its strategic objectives of:

- more people from every background regularly and meaningfully taking part in sport and physical activity, in volunteering and experiencing live sport;
- maximising international and domestic sporting success and the impact of major events; and
- a more productive, sustainable and responsible sport sector.

3 This study focuses on the Department's efforts to increase participation in sport and physical activity. It directs most of its spending for this objective through Sport England, its arm's length body created in 1996 to develop grassroots sport and get more people active across England. UK Sport, another arm's length body of the Department, was also established in 1996 to lead on elite sport, such as funding for Olympic and Paralympic athletes, but is not a focus of this study.

¹ Anticipated forecast cost of the Olympic and Paralympic programme reported on 16 July 2013 by the then Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media & Sport.

4 Sport England receives around one-third of its income from the Exchequer, with the remainder from the National Lottery. It has spent an average of £323 million a year in the six years since 2015-16, totalling £1.9 billion, and is accountable to the Department and Parliament for how it spends its funding.² During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sport England distributed £271 million in pandemic-related financial support, and the Department provided £700 million for organisations affected by the loss of spectator ticket income and for public leisure centres. This pandemic-related funding, however, is not a focus of this study.

5 The Department and Sport England operate within a wide and complex delivery environment. Multiple other central and local government bodies have a role in encouraging physical activity: for example, the Department for Transport delivers walking and cycling infrastructure and measures to encourage active travel, and local authorities manage public sector sport and leisure facilities. There are also a range of stakeholders across the third and private sectors, including facility providers, grassroots sports clubs and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) such as the Football Association.

6 This report examines how far the Department and Sport England have achieved value for money in their spending on grassroots sport and physical activity amongst those aged 16 and over, and have supported value for money in the system-wide spending across government. We examine this by considering achievement of intended objectives; monitoring and evaluating impacts of spending; promoting equality and diversity; and effectiveness of oversight and collaboration. We focus on the roles of the Department and Sport England within the wider sporting sector and government landscape. We consider the decade since the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, with a particular focus on the period since 2015, when government launched its *Sporting Future* strategy. This covers the decade since we last reported on this area in our 2012 report, *The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games review*, and revisits the themes of our 2010 report *Increasing participation in sport*.³ We also consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the constraints it has presented for the Department and Sport England in achieving their objectives. We examine the following:

- Developing approaches to participation in sport and physical activity (Part One).
- Progress in achieving objectives (Part Two).
- Adopting an approach for the future (Part Three).

² These data include additional spending in 2020-21 related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Excluding 2020-21, Sport England's average spend in the five years from 2015-16 to 2019-20 was £278 million, totalling £1.4 billion.

³ Comptroller and Auditor General, *The London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games: post-Games review*, Session 2012-13, HC 794, National Audit Office, December 2012. Comptroller and Auditor General, *Increasing participation in sport*, Session 2010-11, HC 22, National Audit Office, May 2010.

Key findings

Developing approaches to participation in sport and physical activity

7 The proportion of adults participating in sport declined in the three years following the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and government attention to legacy had waned by 2016. The 2005 bid for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games committed to “deliver a lasting sporting legacy”. In 2008 Sport England aimed to increase the number of adults participating in sport three times a week by one million by 2013. By October 2013, 0.9 million more adults were participating in sport by this measure against the baseline set in December 2008. This was 1.4 million more than in 2006, the earliest data available. Following the Games, the government committed to deliver a 10-year legacy and set up an Olympic and Paralympic Legacy Cabinet Committee in 2012 to oversee delivery across government. Increasing participation in sport was a core element of the legacy, which the government aimed to deliver through several initiatives, including Sport England’s £135 million programme for improving local facilities, training local sports leaders and encouraging adults to try Olympic and Paralympic sports. However, the proportion of adults participating in sport at least once a week (Sport England’s new progress measure) fell in the three years after the Games. The Olympic and Paralympic Legacy Cabinet Committee was disbanded in 2015 and the Department published what was to be its last legacy monitoring report in 2016. The Department did not complete a promised evaluation of the long-term impact of the Games in 2020 and so does not know the full extent of any sporting legacy delivered from the £8.8 billion that the government spent on the Games (paragraphs 1.5 to 1.9).

8 In 2015 the government shifted its strategic approach to focus on the outcomes from sport and physical activity. It published a new cross-government sporting strategy, *Sporting Future*, in 2015. This strategy stated that future funding decisions would be based on achieving five key outcomes:

- Physical well-being.
- Mental well-being.
- Individual development.
- Social and community development.
- Economic development.

The strategy promised to target funding at less active groups of the population, believing this would deliver the biggest gains for public spending. At the same time, the government expanded Sport England's remit to include not only sport but also certain kinds of physical activity such as walking. Sport England reflected these changes in its 2016-2021 strategy, *Towards an Active Nation*. It aimed to understand and address the barriers to activity for the least active by working with a broader range of partners than the NGBs of traditional sports, and by encouraging local collaboration. Its new interventions included allocating £100 million over the three years from 2018 to 12 community pilots with local partners to tackle inactivity and inequalities (paragraphs 1.10 to 1.14 and 2.14).

9 Leadership and collaboration across government to increase activity has been inconsistent. The Department has overall policy responsibility for maximising participation in sport and physical activity, which also contributes to a range of other departments' strategic priorities, such as levelling up and tackling obesity. The 2015 *Sporting Future* strategy committed departments to work more closely together on delivery and funding. While this led to some increased collaboration, the government's actions to deliver its objectives were not sustained. For example, the government established an Inter-Ministerial Group on Healthy Living in 2018 to facilitate joint working. This stopped meeting in 2019, removing one of the Department's key influencing and oversight mechanisms. Some stakeholders told us that the Department by itself lacks the levers, budget and influence necessary to have a sustained impact on the rest of government. Collaboration between departments has focused on specific strategies and initiatives – for example, policy discussions related to active travel. There are signs of increasing collaboration following the COVID-19 pandemic (paragraphs 1.2, 1.15 to 1.18 and 3.9).

Progress in achieving objectives

10 National participation rates increased modestly between 2016 and 2019, but progress with specific less active groups was mixed despite being a strategic focus.

At population level, the percentage of active adults increased by 1.2 percentage points between November 2016 and November 2019, from 62.1% to 63.3%, more than double Sport England's target. Sport England also set itself activity targets for the four years to 2020 for two specific less active groups, lower socio-economic groups and women aged 16–60. Its interventions included, for example, *This Girl Can*, a campaign aiming to address lower activity rates among women. Immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic, with around a year remaining of the four-year target period, progress was mixed. The number of people from lower socio-economic groups increasing their activity levels through involvement in Sport England funded projects and programmes was on track at 83% of the target level. But, among women aged 16–60 the rise was only 18% of the target. Among less active groups that did not have targets, the over-75s and disabled people experienced statistically significant increases in activity levels before the pandemic, but there was no such increase in Black or Asian ethnicity groups (paragraphs 2.3, 2.5, 2.8 to 2.13).

11 The COVID-19 pandemic was a highly disruptive force for sports and physical activity, and the Department is exploring what long-term learning it can take from the experience.

Government measures to control the pandemic restricted people's opportunities to use sports facilities but, at the same time physical activity such as walking was one of the few reasons people were allowed outside during lockdowns. The percentage of adults who were active fell to 61.4% in the year to November 2021, a 1.9 percentage point fall on the year to November 2019, the last full year before the pandemic. These falls have exacerbated inequalities in activity for the least affluent, Asian people and disabled people. However, there have also been large rises in walking for leisure and innovation in the provision of online physical activity offers, and 52% of people have found new ways to be active since the pandemic started. The Department is exploring what long-term learning it can take from the pandemic – for example, whether the increase in walking included previously inactive people (paragraphs 2.15 to 2.18).

12 Sport England sought to rebalance its grant funding towards the inactive, in line with the government's new strategic approach. Sport England pledged £250 million, or 25% of its budget, over the four years from 2017 to encourage the inactive to be active, with lower socio-economic groups one of the areas of focus. It distributed £1.5 billion in grants during the five years starting in 2016-17, of which £450 million can be traced to specific local authorities. Of this £450 million, the most deprived local authorities received, on average, 23% more funding per head of population than the least deprived. Overall, however, the share of local grants awarded to the most deprived local authorities was less in the five years from 2016-17 than in the previous five years. In 2020, Sport England commissioned research on under-representation of lower socio-economic groups in sport and physical activity. This found that applications for funding can be complicated and unconsciously biased against those from lower socio-economic groups. Sport England is now taking steps to overcome this by simplifying its application process and working with partners to reach those organisations at risk of being disadvantaged in applications (paragraphs 2.5 and 2.24 to 2.25).

13 Sport England sought to expand the range of organisations it relied on to deliver its participation objectives, but its overall network of grant recipients did not increase significantly until during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of its 2016 strategy, Sport England sought to expand its supply chain, but it did not define explicitly what was meant by this proposed expansion. Sport England reduced its funding to NGBs, awarding them 33% less in 2017–2021 than in the previous four years. It also told us that the number of what it terms its 'funded partners' – those that typically play a connecting, influencing or governing role in the sector – increased from 107 in 2015-16 to 134 in 2020-21. Our analysis of the available data on organisations awarded grant funding by Sport England shows no expansion before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the number of organisations awarded grant funding increased almost six-fold in 2020-21 during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared with 2019-20 (paragraphs 2.5, 2.20 to 2.23 and 3.11).

Adopting an approach for the future

14 Sport England's new strategy for grassroots sport and physical activity takes a more localised and collaborative approach, in line with lessons learned and feedback from stakeholders. Sport England evaluates the impact of its programmes such as national campaigns and local delivery pilots. It does not seek to compare the effectiveness of the different types of programmes it has funded, but it has taken account of the lessons learned from evaluations in its January 2021 strategy, *Uniting the Movement*. This strategy continues the focus on encouraging activity among the inactive and, within that focus, it gives greater prominence to addressing inequalities in participation between groups. Sport England's evaluation of its local delivery pilots confirmed that inactivity reduced at a faster rate before the COVID-19 pandemic in local delivery pilot areas than in areas without the pilots, and the strategy commits to expanding place-based working. Sport England also identified that it needed a more collaborative approach to influence and connect the sector more widely. Some NGBs we spoke to agreed that Sport England could do more to share learning and support collaboration across the sector (paragraphs 2.14 and 3.2 to 3.5).

15 The Department intends to work in a more collaborative and joined-up way with the sector in the future. It plans to publish a new strategy in summer 2022 to replace its 2015 strategy. According to the Department, one of its new priorities will be to work across government to ensure greater joining up between the sector and government departments. There are signs that system-wide collaboration may be increasing following the COVID-19 pandemic as the importance of physical activity has been increasingly recognised across government. For example, in March 2022, the government signalled that the cross-government Health Promotion Taskforce would discuss physical activity at its next meeting. The Department has also set up two new stakeholder forums. It told us that it is working on a cross-sector strategy to tackle the challenges of the current ageing leisure estate. The government provided £100 million in financial support during the pandemic to publicly owned leisure centres and gyms. But as of June 2022, the Department had not finalised its plans for working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities to improve public facilities (paragraphs 3.9 and 3.12 to 3.14).

16 The Department and Sport England recognise that they need to improve the way they measure success under their new strategies, but have yet to finalise an approach. In its January 2021 strategy, Sport England set out the principles by which it will measure the strategy's success. It also intends to improve its approach to monitoring and evaluation. Previously, it focused largely on meeting three participation rate targets agreed with the Department. It now intends to capture not only the specific impacts of its programmes, interventions, partnerships and influence, but also how its work adds up to national-level change. For the first year of its strategy Sport England reported internally to the Department on an agreed set of key performance indicators. As at June 2022, Sport England was still working with the Department on developing published performance indicators to measure its strategy's success. The Department told us this delay is so that it can ensure that the new indicators align with its own new strategy due in summer 2022. The Department itself has not evaluated whether its 2015 *Sporting Future* strategy achieved its objectives but told us that it expects to include within its new strategy its approach for measuring success (paragraphs 3.7 to 3.10).

17 The Department has applied some lessons from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games to its approach to the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, but others have been missed. Based on lessons from the 2012 Games, the Department focused its legacy ambitions for the Commonwealth Games on the most inactive and under-represented groups. It set out from 2019 its intention for the Games to bring health and well-being benefits, but it did not ringfence any funding for legacy in the £778 million public Games budget. Funding has been committed by a partnership of organisations to support legacy ambitions first set out in a March 2021 Legacy Plan. For example, Sport England is spending £35 million on a range of national and local legacy programmes. The Department told us it considers that the £778 million public expenditure itself, notably the assets created such as the Sandwell Aquatics Centre, is the central legacy of the Games (paragraphs 3.16 to 3.17).

Conclusion on value for money

18 The Department has made mixed progress towards its objectives of increasing participation, tackling inactivity and reducing inequalities in activity levels since it changed its strategy in 2015. Achieving this kind of behaviour change at a national level contributes to a range of social and economic benefits, including from improved physical and mental health, but it takes time. The Department has shifted its approach since 2015 to build on lessons learned, including targeting spending towards the inactive, trialling more localised approaches, and running behaviour change campaigns to tackle barriers to activity. The proportion of active adults saw a modest increase nationally before the COVID-19 pandemic, with mixed results in less active groups. Activity rates fell during the pandemic, exacerbating some of the existing inequalities. The Department now faces the challenge of recovering its previous gains, from a lower base, and tackling persistent inequalities in participation.

19 While highly disruptive for sports and physical activity, the pandemic has also prompted positive change, increasing the Department's collaboration with the sector and focusing the government's attention on the health benefits of exercise. This, together with the launch of the Department's and Sport England's new strategies, which are building on past lessons learned, presents an opportunity for renewed progress. However, as at June 2022 the Department and Sport England have yet to produce a robust plan for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of their approaches for the future. There is also a lack of effective leadership and collaboration across government. The Department must address these issues to capitalise on the present opportunities and promote long-term value for money gains across government.

Recommendations

20 The Department should:

- a** **Set out how it will lead delivery of the objectives and outcomes for sport and physical activity that it shares with other departments.** The Department should clarify its plans for leading and influencing cross-government efforts designed to sustain its objectives and ensure better whole-system working. This should include, for example, establishing with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities how to tackle the challenges facing public sector facilities.
- b** **Set out how it will measure the success of its forthcoming strategy.** Elements should include: the measures and milestones by which the Department will track progress and its social and economic return, plans for regular monitoring of delivery against these at programme and strategic level, and a comparison of different programmes to identify their relative effectiveness and the lessons for long-term impact. Sport England should publish a similar framework for its 2021 *Uniting the Movement* strategy.

- c Clarify whether and how major sporting events will deliver increased participation in sport and physical activity when bidding to host such events.** If no such legacy is planned, the Department should articulate clearly the other benefits it expects such events to deliver. Any expectations the Department sets to deliver a physical activity and sporting legacy should be matched by proper arrangements for funding, monitoring and evaluating progress after the event.
- 21** Sport England should:
- d Check that its distribution of funding supports its objective to target lower socio-economic groups.** Given Sport England's aim to reach lower socio-economic groups as part of its objective to tackle inactivity, it should review whether its mechanisms for allocation and distribution of funding fully support this aim.
- e Exploit its networks to identify and share findings, themes and learning from its work that could accelerate greater collaboration across the sector.** Sport England should use its insight from its research and evaluation, including its learning from the COVID-19 pandemic, to highlight common challenges whereby organisations it funds can learn from each other, such as approaches to reaching deprived communities and tackling inequality.
- f Set out how it will reach organisations it has not previously funded to support its objectives.** Sport England expanded its reach during the COVID-19 pandemic to fund new organisations. It should apply what it has learned from this to ensure that awareness of its activities and associated funding are accessible to organisations it may not previously have reached.