

Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas

Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism

Dyddiad | Date: 9 February 2021

Pwnc | Subject: Follow-up work on the impact of COVID-19 on sport

Annwyl Dafydd,

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee has examined many of the implications of COVID-19 for areas within your ministerial portfolio. This has included our initial [report on the impact on sport in Wales](#) published in June 2020. In January 2021 we agreed to revisit this area of work and took evidence from the following individuals and organisations:

- Brian Davies, Sport Wales;
- Victoria Ward, Welsh Sport Association (WSA);
- Jonathan Ford, Football Association of Wales (FAW);
- Marcus Kingwell, EMD UK; and
- Steve Phillips, Welsh Rugby Union (WRU).

We are very grateful to all those who assisted the Committee in its work. It is important to stress from the beginning that, due to the limited amount of time currently available to the Committee, we were unable to take a broader look at other sports that undoubtedly play an important role in local communities and our national life. Instead we hope to raise some of the issues which are common to the whole sector.

A [transcript of the session](#) is available on our website. Following the session the Committee agreed to write to you with a number of questions, findings and recommendations which are set out in the annex below.

I am also copying this letter to Dai Lloyd MS, Chair of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

Yours sincerely,



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Chair of the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee



Annex

Impact of the pandemic on participation and physical activity

The impact of the pandemic and lockdown measures were variously described as “catastrophic” and “devastating” for sport in Wales.¹ Brian Davies of Sport Wales described the impact of the current lockdown measures as “paralysing” particularly at a grassroots level.² Under current level four restrictions, all but a very small number of elite sporting activities are prohibited. Outside the professional sports (such as rugby, football and netball) Mr Davies estimated that only around 200 athletes in Wales have a dispensation from the lockdown regulations.³

In terms of physical activity, [research by Sport Wales](#) suggests that the pandemic has, to an extent, reinforced and exacerbated existing trends. The Sport Wales survey found that overall participation in sport and physical activity in Wales kept to roughly the same levels during lockdown, despite no structured sport taking place. However, children, older adults (55+) and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tended to take part in less sport and physical activity during lockdown than they had done previously.

Victoria Ward from WSA and Brian Davies from Sport Wales agreed that the pandemic has exacerbated the existing “inequalities gap” in terms of physical activity.⁴ Similarly, Marcus Kingwell of EMD UK stated that the impact of pandemic had been, in particular, “very detrimental to women.” Mr Kingwell said:

“[...] within group exercise, which is pretty much the most popular physical activity that women take part in, 80 per cent of the participants are female. So, with restrictions on that—and I fully accept them in level 4, by the way—it disproportionately impacts women. And if we look back through the history of sport and physical activity in an organised manner, there's been significantly more barriers to female participation across the board, and those are starting to return.”⁵

When our evidence session took place, the level four restrictions in Wales limited individuals to outdoor exercise, once a day and alone, with members of their household or support bubble. Victoria Ward of the WSA stated that they would welcome an adjustment to these regulations allowing for more than one household to join together for the outdoor exercise, which would “bring us into line with other home countries”.⁶ At the most recent three-week review of the coronavirus regulations on 29 January, the First Minister announced that the regulations would be amended to allow a maximum of two people from two different households to exercise together.⁷

¹ Welsh Parliament, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 91, 92, 98

² Paragraph 8

³ Paragraph 10

⁴ Paragraphs 28 + 31

⁵ Paragraph 147

⁶ Paragraph 73

⁷ Written Statement, [Written Statement: Review of the Health Protection \(Coronavirus Restriction\) \(No.5\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2020](#) – 29 January 2021



The consequences of the pandemic continue to be felt keenly across the sector and at all levels. There are continuing signs that the impact of the pandemic on participation and levels of physical activity are being felt unevenly across different socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. We have also heard concerns through our day-to-day work about the impact that a lack of physical and sporting activities is having on children and young people and the toll that this is having on their physical and mental health and well-being.

Recommendation 1) The Welsh Government should work with Sport Wales and others to conduct further research on the impact of the pandemic on levels of participation in physical activity on groups with protected characteristics in order to inform post-pandemic planning and policy. This research must include an assessment of the impact on participation for women, the BAME community, and on children and young people.

As noted in evidence – different level/tier four restrictions apply in Wales, Scotland, and England as regards outdoor exercise and the Committee heard calls for these to be looked at again.

We welcome the decision by the First Minister to allow two people from two different households to exercise together (provided every effort is made to maintain social distancing) along with an exemption for accompanying children under the age of 11. In our view this exemption should also be retained in any future level four lockdown.

While tackling the pandemic must take precedence – there are clear public health benefits (both physical and mental) to physical activity and exercise. Currently all but a very small and limited set of activities are prohibited and (in addition to the concerns relating to specific groups noted above) this is having a significant negative impact on individuals and the sector as a whole.

Recommendation 2) When conditions (in terms of controlling the virus) allow, the Welsh Government must ensure that gyms, sport venues, and other exercise settings (including group exercise classes that meet outdoors) are among the priorities when coming out of lockdown.

Guidance and the coronavirus control plan

Stakeholders were supportive of the new [coronavirus control plan](#) published in December 2020 which outlines the different activities that are permissible across the four alert levels in Wales.

Sport Wales, EMD UK, the WRU and the FAW all agreed that the level of engagement with the Welsh Government had been good.⁸ Moreover Jonathan Ford of the FAW and Marcus Kingwell of EMD UK both wanted to be more heavily involved in the detailed aspects of future guidance. In particular Mr Ford stated that there was sometimes “a disconnect” between discussions and the eventual policy as it is written and communicated more broadly. Mr Ford cited the example of the 30 person limit on outdoor activities (previously in place during the summer of 2020) stating that it

⁸ Paragraphs 17, 111, 112, 113



seemed “an arbitrary figure that was used across society” and was not “generated with any consultation.”⁹

The Committee welcomes the good levels of engagement between the sector, the Welsh Government and officials at senior levels and expects this to continue in the coming months. We have subsequently received information which suggests, however, that information is not always cascading from senior levels to the grassroots in an effective and timely manner. We therefore expect every effort to be made to ensure that guidance and information is disseminated effectively by the Welsh Government and relevant bodies to the grassroots level when future changes take place.

In terms of future guidance, we note that the rule regarding a maximum of 30 participants for outdoor exercise remains in place in the new coronavirus control plan across alert levels two and three. This rises to 100 participants at alert level one.

Recommendation 3) We would welcome more detail on how the maximum number of 30 was decided on. To enable us to do this, the Welsh Government should publish the scientific evidence upon which this rule is based. Furthermore, the Welsh Government should outline what assessment it has made of the impact that a 30 person limit will have on the resumption of sport activities particularly at grassroots level.

Spectators and spectator sports

COVID-19 restrictions since the beginning of the pandemic in Wales have prohibited all spectators from physically attending sporting events. The detrimental economic impact on sport of prohibiting spectators - and the revenue they bring - has undoubtedly been profound.¹⁰

Jonathan Ford, from the FAW and Steve Phillips, from WRU, stressed the importance of establishing a clear road map for the safe return of spectators to sporting events (across all levels of the game).

Mr Ford explained:

“It’s having a little bit more clarity so that people can see that there’s light at the end of the tunnel. At the moment, there’s no light at the end of the spectator tunnel, and we would just like to have some assurances that there is a plan going to be put in place, and if things go according to plan, which we appreciate that everything changes, but if they go according to plan and the vaccination roll-out works and the numbers come down and we go down the scales, it will be increased. If people can understand that, they can start putting their business models back in place. At this moment in time, the business model is broken without match-day attendances and without the additional spend, and we just need to try and find that solution, otherwise people are looking back at me and I cannot be the bank, unfortunately; we only have so much money and we are looking at survival ourselves.”

⁹ Paragraph 112

¹⁰ Paragraphs 66, 102, 158



Jonathan Ford from the FAW, explained that the mixture of professional and semi-professional teams playing in the Welsh premier league means that the Welsh premier league cannot currently operate. The WRU added that this is also the case for the Welsh rugby premier league.¹¹

In terms of the 2021 Six Nations Tournament, Steve Phillips of the WRU explained that normally the three tournaments (senior women; senior men; and the under 20s tournaments) are run concurrently but that with the coronavirus protocols around facilities, testing etc. this would not be possible. Mr Phillips explained that it was now their intention to run each tournament separately and in turn.¹²

The sector as a whole is to be commended for the way in which it has worked to ensure that some sporting activities have been able to take place, sometimes involving personal sacrifices by the sportspeople themselves. Notable examples of sporting activity have included the safe resumption of the professional football league and the recent Autumn Nations Cup.

We note that the mixture of professional and semi-professional clubs playing in important sporting leagues such as the Welsh rugby and football premier leagues means that those leagues are currently at a stop. This is in contrast to the small number of professional football clubs playing in the English football league.

When the Committee set out to revisit the issue of COVID-19 and sport, one of the key areas of interest to us was the safe resumption of spectator sports. During the autumn, Wales was the only UK nation to prohibit spectators attending sporting events in a limited way. The fact that the public health situation across the UK deteriorated so significantly in the interim, is proof of the difficult job the Welsh Government and the sector, has had in terms of responding to an unpredictable and fast-moving pandemic.

Recommendation 4) The Welsh Government should outline its view on:

- ***the conditions that would enable piloting of safe spectator sporting events;***
- ***the relationship between the vaccination programme and the return of spectators to sporting events;***
- ***details of any engagement it is having with Welsh clubs playing in the English football league to ensure joined-up thinking; and***
- ***an update on the current timescales that it is working towards in that regard.***

The Committee notes the decision to postpone the 2021 Six Nations Women's tournament and expects every effort to be made to ensure that the tournament can take place later this year.

¹¹ Paragraphs 95 + 96

¹² Paragraph 143



Funding

Financial support for the sector has been critical to weathering the storm of the pandemic. Sport Wales outlined how a total of £22.7 million in funding had been allocated so far in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ Mr Davies said:

“the Be Active Wales fund has been the primary source for community clubs et cetera to apply, but we've also supported governing bodies, and some governing bodies have also allocated some of that resource down to that level of their membership. We've allocated around about £2.2 million of the Be Active Wales fund, and that has all gone to community grass-roots organisations. I'd have to dig out the exact stats, but it's something like around about 900 supported applicants, who would all be different entities. Football has been a big beneficiary of that, but that's what you'd expect; there are far more football clubs than any other type of clubs at grass-roots level. So, around about £2.2 million has gone, through the Be Active Wales fund, and we've supported governing bodies, not only with protected funding they would have had annually, but also £2.5 million worth of additional funding for, primarily, grass-roots activity that they're responsible for.”¹⁴

At the same time, Victoria Ward of the WSA cautioned that while Sport Wales had “done a great job in terms of getting money out into communities,” the funding to date was small in relative terms and would not offset the loss of income faced by the sector.¹⁵

Similarly the FAW described the funding through the Be Active and Sport Resilience Fund as “a lifeline” but cautioned that more funding would be needed to ensure that the nearly 1,000 football clubs can survive. Mr Ford also highlighted other sources of funding that his sport had benefitted from including FIFA and the National Lottery.¹⁶

In terms of the impact on individual practitioners within the sector, Marcus Kingwell from EMDUK, highlighted the **gaps in support**, particularly for those who are self-employed.

On 25 January the Welsh Government announced a £17.7 million **Spectator Sports Survival Fund**. The vast majority of this Fund (£13.5 million) has been allocated to the Welsh Rugby Union with the next three main recipients – football, cricket, and horseracing – receiving between £1 and £1.5 million each. The Welsh Government said that this funding was “based on an assumption that spectators are unlikely to return in any significant numbers before the summer”.¹⁷

In response to this pandemic, the Welsh Government has allocated an unprecedented package of funding support for the sector and the Committee commends the way in which the sector has worked together to distribute this funding.

In terms of support for the self-employed we heard of gaps in the support provided, and despite one-off payments of £1,500 – which are very welcomed - from the Sport Freelancers

¹³ Paragraph 51

¹⁴ Paragraph 55

¹⁵ Paragraph 59

¹⁶ Paragraphs 157 - 158

¹⁷ Welsh Government written statement, 29 January 2021



Fund, it is clear that the self-employed face another prolonged period without access to income. Furthermore, we understand that different criteria applied to Phase 2 may make it more difficult for some self-employed people to claim (see [additional information from EMD UK](#)).

Recommendation 5) The Welsh Government should respond to the concerns of EMDUK regarding Phase 2 of the Sport Freelancers Fund. In particular, the effectiveness of arrangements to support self-employed people within the sector.

We welcome the funding to support spectator sports in Wales and agree that while spectators are prohibited from attending events the Welsh Government should continue to support them. We note that the vast proportion of this funding has been allocated to the Welsh Rugby Union and would welcome more detail on the rationale for this.

Recommendation 6) In terms of the Spectator Sports Survival Fund, the Welsh Government should:

- ***provide more detail on the rationale behind allocating the vast proportion of the Fund to Rugby Union;***
- ***confirm whether this funding has been re-allocated from spending elsewhere or is it new money;***
- ***confirm the timescales for reaching a decision in relation to any additional funding mentioned in the written statement from 29 January 2021; and***
- ***confirm whether there are any conditions attached to the funding provided to governing bodies, if so, how will the Welsh Government ensure that funding is fairly distributed among different tiers and levels of activity – particularly the grassroots level.***

We also previously heard concerns regarding the financial sustainability of leisure trusts, given the extended reduction in incomes they have faced. What assessment has the Welsh Government made of the financial sustainability of leisure trusts, and what financial support is available to help those trusts that need it to survive the pandemic?"

Post-pandemic recovery for the sector

Looking ahead to post-pandemic recovery, stakeholders agreed that more could be done to align sport and physical activity policy with public health in future.¹⁸

Brian Davies explained that Sport Wales has been involved in discussions on COVID recovery at a high level, but that he and the sector would like to play a more "fundamental role".¹⁹ In particular Mr Davies cautioned that the future resilience of the sector is "interlinked" and that "what we don't

¹⁸ Paragraphs 182, 183, 184

¹⁹ Paragraph 36



want to do is focus on one thing more than another, and certainly not an elite at the expense of community sport.”²⁰

This was also a key theme in **our previous report** where we called for greater cooperation between the health and sports sectors in planning for post-pandemic recovery.

The second wave of the pandemic has meant that planning for post-pandemic recovery has been put on hold for the time being. However, there are encouraging developments on the horizon including the roll-out of mass vaccination.

The Welsh Government should ensure that post-pandemic recovery has a strong emphasis on the benefits of sport and physical activity.

Recommendation 7) We would welcome an update on the Welsh Government’s post-pandemic recovery planning to include:

- ***detail on how it is engaging with the sport and health sectors to ensure a joined-up approach to policy-making;***
- ***the implications of the rollout of mass vaccination for the COVID-19 recovery timetable; and***
- ***what lessons it has learnt from the pandemic about the preventative health benefits of physical activity. Will this experience lead to a step-change in this area, and if so, how will this be achieved?***

²⁰ Paragraph 44

