

# Cross-Party Group on Sport

12th March 2026, 12.45pm-1.45pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP  
Brian Whittle MSP  
Tess White MSP

Non-MSP Group Members

Liz Smith MSP  
Brian Whittle MSP  
Tess White MSP  
Kieran Chand, sportscotland  
Gillian Keast, sportscotland  
Liz Corbett, Parkrun  
Kirsty Cumming, Community Leisure UK  
Jillian Gibson, COSLA  
Stew Fowlie, SSS  
Liza Linton, Scottish ClubSport  
Mark Gaffney, Scottish Disability Sport  
Adam Martin, Scottish Rowing  
Andy Sinclair, Scottish Government  
Mark Spence, Pickleball Scotland  
Ailidh Hood, sported  
Sandra Macrae, Pickleball Scotland  
Billy Brown, Coaches and Managers Association  
Penny Hendrick, DR Inclusive Fitness and Wellbeing  
Anna Campbell  
Kim Atkinson, SSA  
Gregor Muir, SSA

Apologies

Clare Adamson MSP  
Sandesh Gulhane MSP  
Jeremy Balfour MSP  
Jane Harvey, Taekwondo  
Desmond Tinney, NHS Scotland  
Graham Law, Scottish Rugby  
Mhairi Adam, Pickleball Scotland  
Lorna Curtis, Oriam  
Kevin Lee, SFA  
Marc Hope, Scottish Squash  
Joan O'Sullivan, Swimtime  
David Black, Children 1st  
Neil Alexander, Scottish Liberal Democrats  
Malcolm Dingwall-Smith, Bowls Scotland  
Steve Walsh, HighLife Highland  
Judith McCleary, JudoScotland  
Margarita Sweeney-Baird, Inclusive Skating  
Diana Winfield  
Sonya Campbell Perry, horsescotland  
Heidi Vistisen, LEAP Sports Scotland

## Agenda item 1

The meeting start was delayed due to Chamber business. In advance of MSP members arriving, KA as secretariat conducted the initial meeting business.

### **Approval of minutes**

- Approval of minutes of 30th October 2025 meeting  
Proposer, Liza Linton  
Seconder, Mark Gaffney  
Minutes approved

Tess White MSP joined the meeting at this point.

### **Matters Arising**

- Since the last meeting of the Group, the New Year UK Honours list was announced, with recipients from Scottish sport including:
  - Ann Budge, lately chair and chief executive officer at Heart of Midlothian Football Club, awarded an OBE for services to Sport and the community in Midlothian
  - Dr James Craig, awarded an OBE for services to Scottish Association Football and charity

- Kathryn Bennet, chair of Gareloch Riding for the Disabled Association, awarded an MBE for services to the Disabled Community in West and Central Scotland
- Daniel Costello, former manager of Spartans Football Club, awarded an MBE for services to Community Sport and Youth Development
- David Laing, lately chair of Borders Disability Sport Group, awarded an MBE for services to sport
- Daniel Pollacchi, volunteer coach and founding trustee board member, Lochend Football Academy, awarded an MBE for services to the community in Lochend
- Kerry Davis, awarded an MBE for services to Association Football and Diversity in Sport
- John McMillan, Chief Executive, The Eric Liddell Community, awarded an MBE for services to Community Development, to Sport and to Social Enterprise
- Dr Robert Sharp, awarded an MBE for voluntary service to Mountain Rescue in Scotland
- Dr Andrew Trevett, Medical Director, Orkney Hyperbaric Unit, awarded an MBE for services to Medicine, to Diving, and to the community of Orkney
- Paul Hugh McNeill, Ambassador for Dyslexia Scotland and Head of Football Development for the Scottish Football Association, awarded an MBE for services to Young People with Dyslexia
- James Wilson, chair of Bonnyrigg Rose Community Football Club, awarded a BEM for services to Youth Development, Sport and to Community Empowerment
- Alison Milne, Highland Dance teacher, awarded a BEM for services to Highland Dancing

Congratulations were given to all of the individuals recognised in this round.

Liz Smith MSP and Brian Whittle MSP joined the meeting at this point.

## Agenda item 2

### **Topic for this meeting: Future challenges and opportunities for Scottish sport**

LS opened the meeting by reflecting on her time in Parliament and her involvement with the Cross-Party Group on Sport, and gave thanks to the engagement of members of the group for their enthusiasm and dynamism and to the staff of the SSA for providing a high level of service as secretariat throughout her time on the CPG. LS also gave particular thanks to individuals across Scottish sport who work and volunteer in grassroots sport and with children and young people, recognising the hugely important impact that this has.

Looking to the future, there are many exciting opportunities for Scottish sport in 2026 and beyond, but LS also highlighted several key areas where she believes significant challenges remain.

Funding challenges are front and centre for many organisations. Funding for sport has remained fairly static in recent years, while the range of funded sports and the amount sports are expected to deliver have both grown, meaning funding has had to go further. There is a need for prioritisation and there will be difficult choices within sport, but there is also an opportunity to leverage much better working collaboration between the private, public and voluntary sectors to come together with shared ambitions. The Deputy First Minister Kate Forbes made a very important speech last summer highlighting the need for much greater collaboration between the two sectors public and private, particularly when it comes to infrastructure, and that's got a very important role within the sporting world because we're not going to be able to do everything we'd like to do unless we get that collaboration.

Employers greatly value the skills that young people who are involved in sport can provide. There are opportunities to bring employers, in the public and private sector, to come together to try to ensure that that funding is better spread, but also is more qualitative is delivery.

LS noted that on a participatory level, there are some really good signs, but there remain concerns about youth participation. Some of that may be attributable to a lack of opportunities in schools, which is a serious concern because it's at that level that you're inspiring young people to participate in sport. That may be because of a lack of facilities and the pressure on buildings. The Scottish Government has recently committed funding towards swimming provision, which is all very well as long as you have the pools, and many swimming pools are under threat in Scotland.

There are wider challenges about inclusivity and diversity. A lot has been done with a lot of the sporting bodies and we're seeing improvements there, but don't be in any doubt that there are many people in our more vulnerable communities perhaps who don't really feel that it's easy for them to participate in sport and we have to try to make that a much easier option.

Support throughout the sporting pathway is also a concern - Scotland does remarkably well given the size of the country in relation to a lot of our other competitor nations, but we can do a lot more. There are opportunities to inspire people of all ages to reach the heights that they can, because it's not just about the grassroots, it's ensuring that the whole structure works well and the elite athletes can perform at the very highest level. From my own constituency angle, I have been very concerned when I hear that youngsters who have been picked to play for their country, in a variety of different sports, where the funding is not there for accommodation and kit and for going abroad. That is a worry because you can't expect people to earn the privilege of playing for their country, and you take away the support network that goes with that. We have to do more on that basis.

LS closed her opening remarks with a note of thanks, adding how much she has enjoyed this Cross-Party Group over a long period of time and that discussions have provided lots of food for thought and hoped that she had become a better parliamentarian as a result of it.

**COSLA Policy Manager – Sport and Physical Activity Jillian Gibson** provided an overview of recent work from COSLA and specifically the Special Interest Group (SIG)

for Sport and Physical Activity, which has been working extremely hard over the last 18 months on several of the key issues raised today. COSLA launched its manifesto in November and the SIG has been working on the development of a white paper, which looks specifically at the future of public leisure and sport.

Public leisure on the contribution of sport is undervalued in its contribution to public life and other local and national government priorities. The white paper aims to set that out in the context of poverty, including child poverty, public sector reform, health and social care and its contribution to the economy. It also looks to set out some of what we think are the solutions, rather than just the challenges.

The white paper has been in development over the last six or seven months, with around 50 to 60 contributing stakeholders involved in that, many of whom are in the room, including governing bodies, academia, local authorities, the national agency - it's been a real collaborative effort. Yes, this is COSLA's white paper for local government but, actually, public sport and leisure doesn't just happen in councils, it happens with community sports clubs and organisations and what I and what the Special Interest Group really wanted to do is that the white paper reflected the sector and stakeholders and partners, as opposed to something that is only about local government. We can all get behind what we think are the solutions to improving, increasing and sustaining physical activity and sport, including looking at the infrastructure and how we do things differently in future.

The white paper will be published before the pre-election period, however it's been through COSLA's governance so the high level themes can be shared now.

Public sector money is shrinking, and we need to think differently about private/public investment. There are brilliant examples of private/public investment in schools, for example, and the Lost Shore resort is an example of looking at new money and new infrastructure. The public and private sector around leisure could work differently and better together - it would be no surprise that our very first theme is around finance. That theme is around introducing a multi-year, flexible funding settlement for local government.

The next theme is looking at the Local Government and Planning (Scotland) Act 1982, which is the legislation where public leisure and culture sits. Sitting here in 2026, does that legislation reflect the contribution that leisure and culture bring to Scottish society?

We need to look at infrastructure. We've got a lot to do in terms of our ambitions around climate change and Net Zero, but also our buildings, as sportscotland's estate review has shown, it's an ageing estate. Our public assets are old and there is not a lot of money left to rebuild or to modernise them. That links in with the theme of public and private sector and how we look differently at accessing and leveraging some different money.

The next theme is around the recognition of the social contribution of public leisure and sport to Scotland, and whether the social return on investment and the social value is really understood and valued within our funding models.

The next theme is inclusive participation and workforce development. We've got an incredible workforce in Scotland but do we do enough to bring that together as a cohesive sector that values them as individuals in the workforce, and also presents leisure and sports where it can be seen as a career.

The last theme is around leadership, governance and data - do we have enough data and do we use enough to inform decisions.

Hopefully those themes resonate with the sector as well as they have resonated with our politicians, across all parties. It has been a very cross party project and has had a number of stakeholders around the room contributing to it, so it should hopefully reflect what people think the sector needs. It's not challenging any one part of the sector, it's putting solutions in front of people who make decisions.

**Community Leisure UK CEO Kirsty Cumming** provided an update from the membership body for leisure trusts. Many of the core themes raised by the discussion already are those highlighted by the CLUK membership too - that's a reason CLUK has not done a manifesto for these elections, as there is really good partnership working with COSLA, with the SSA, with others in the room like Scottish Disability Sport, where we've seen opportunities to feed in the voice of our members. Close partnership working strengthens those messages.

Having Jillian's role in COSLA over the past 18 months has been very beneficial to have a voice and a route of influence at local government level. Many of the themes that have been raised today are echoed by our members. For example, many do not feel valued for their contribution across public service, across different portfolio areas, beyond sport for sport's sake, in terms of social value. But there is also direct financial value to the work of our members, so how can we better articulate that to be more impactful and allow others to appreciate what sport and leisure contributes.

Sustainable funding is a challenge, with year on year decreases across a range of sources. As most of sport and leisure is not a statutory service, it is consistently getting squeezed by the demand on statutory services. We need to have a conversation about sustainable funding to allow long term planning - what do the communities of 10 years' time look like and need? How do we get there, rather than salami slicing year on year with cuts that don't allow a longer term vision?

In terms of assets and infrastructure, there is better understanding now about the baseline and what we have, and we know the challenges around net zero and inclusion that need to be built into what sustainable infrastructure actually looks like. Our members' view would be that the status quo is not sustainable, but in reality we probably don't need the status quo for the way that people participate in physical activity. What will actually serve communities now and into the future in terms of our infrastructure needs?

The final point is around workforce and volunteering. The workforce is around two thirds of what it was in 2019, predominantly as a result of budget cuts. At the same time, you've seen demand and expectations grow. There's also more specialised roles required with our members if we are serious about the contribution we can make to the health agenda, like how to support people with more complex needs - we need the

skills within the workforce to deliver that. There is a cost there, and also a need to retain talent. We're seeing members losing staff to other sectors. Historically, there was significant movement across the workforce, but predominantly across sport and leisure. Now people are predominantly leaving for higher paid roles in different sectors, and we're losing talent.

Volunteering is another part of that as well. Our volunteer programme is performing well and we're seeing an upturn in volunteering numbers through putting in place better processes and a better understanding of volunteer needs. But we also need to understand pathways, why do people want to volunteer, where do they want to get to - for example, improving employability? How can we maximise the route between volunteers, those looking for employment and our skills shortages.

Tess White MSP raised three queries related to access to the school estate, the cost of accessing sports halls and on public sector equality duties being implemented across the leisure estate.

JG provided an update on strong progress on the school estate query, with a review set to begin and the ambition of developing a principled approach to opening the school estate across Local Authorities. On costs, JG recognised there were challenges there, and the cost of accessing facilities is part of wider work following the white paper and ambitions about improving accessibility. On the Equality Duty, the Accounts Commission Review published a spotlight on culture and leisure last October, and the COSLA Community Wellbeing Board has taken that on board and asked for work to be done with the Improvement Service to see what's working well, what's not working and where are there gaps that we need to address.

**Scottish Sports Association chief executive Kim Atkinson** provided a high level summary of asks related to the SSA manifesto on behalf of its Scottish governing bodies of sport membership. The three key themes are funding, specifically for Scottish Government to achieve a sustainable doubling of the sports budget and to commit to the SCVO Fair Funding principles including long term funding, sustainable funding, inflationary increases and the flexibility to deliver and to plan for the future.

The second theme is around access to community facilities for community organisations, including sports clubs and recognising the opportunities around the school estate. There is also recognition that there is the blue and green estate that is essential to participation in many sports and activities, and access to this must also be protected and improved.

The third strand is around volunteering, notably employer supported volunteering to overcome the barrier of time. This includes support for wider public sector volunteering allowances and for improvement in opportunities for young people to volunteer, including through schools.

**Scottish Disability Sport Head of Policy Mark Gaffney** provided an update on the organisation's Call to Action, while noting that he is pleased that the organisation feels embedded with partners and able to contribute and be valued. Ensuring disabled people have opportunities to be active is hugely important - a quarter of the Scottish

population have a disability according to the Scottish census, but we have a fear that disabled people can be left behind. The most vulnerable are often the most affected when money gets tighter.

SDS's four point Call to Action is based on responses to its national survey, to both ensure credibility and to demonstrate that disabled people are really being heard.

The first point is to plan to include. Every organisation and everyone involved in the delivery of sport should be intentionally planning to be inclusive and accessible, and that proportionate funding is there to ensure that the needs of disabled people are met. We still hear stories of kids with disabilities in schools being left to watch a video while the rest of their classmates do PE, and it's not good enough. Including people will have a big impact on health inequalities and it needs to be the baseline so that everyone can be involved in activities.

We want to see an inclusive whole systems approach, supporting that work led by Public Health Scotland, so that every part of the system is speaking to each other. Healthcare professionals are asking about physical activity and people can be signposted to appropriate referral points and activity. We want to be able to help people with disabilities find sports clubs and activities that will help them get and stay active.

We're championing intersectionality as a key barrier to activity. People with disabilities are not just people with disabilities, they're made up of lots of different characteristics, as we all are. But that means some people face multiple barriers to participation, and we need a person-centred approach.

There remain issues about physical activity and financial assistance - there are real fears among people with disabilities that if they become more physically active, they could lose government financial assistance. Some support strands, like self-directed support, are not supporting them to be active. There is still a postcode lottery with regard to accessing support and activity.

Following this, all attendees provided a brief update on their organisations and priorities and opportunities they see going into the upcoming election and the new Parliament.

Thanks were given to all speakers and attendees.

Particular thanks were given to the MSP members of the Group and to Liz Smith as convener for her tireless efforts on behalf of Scottish sport and for being a champion for the Group and for Scottish sport within the Parliament.

Meeting Closed

