



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 24 June 2025

Session 6



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Tuesday 24 June 2025

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HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND SPORT COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP)

*Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Jillian Gibson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Gregor Muir (Scottish Sports Association)

Ailsa Wyllie (sportscotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alex Bruce

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 24 June 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Haughey): Good morning, and welcome to the 20th meeting in 2025 of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. I have received apologies from Emma Harper and David Torrance.

Under our first agenda item, does the committee agree to take items 3 to 5 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Children's and Young People's Participation in Sport and Physical Activity

09:30

The Convener: Under our next agenda item, we will take evidence on children's and young people's participation in sport and physical activity. I welcome Jillian Gibson, policy manager for sport and physical activity at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; Gregor Muir, policy and communications officer at the Scottish Sports Association; and Ailsa Wyllie, lead manager for sports development at sportscotland.

We will move straight to questions.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning. I thank the witnesses for coming. I will start by looking at the trends over time of participation in sport and physical activity. It is fair to say that the evidence shows that, on the face of it, nothing has moved, but I would make a strong argument that participation in sport and physical activity has declined, especially in relation to physical literacy. How would you reflect on what has happened over the past 20 or 30 years?

Jillian Gibson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I am happy to kick things off. In relation to national data and where we get information to understand the trends—this ties in with one of the other themes that the committee will be looking at today—there are only really two sources of data for us to draw on in order to understand trends in physical activity: the Scottish health survey and the Scottish household survey. The household survey asks about sport every two years, and the health survey is moving to that approach. Another source of data is the information that sportscotland gathers through its active schools programme and community sport hubs and from sport governing bodies.

Our national data shows that the trends are broadly consistent, except for the changing and stubborn gap relating to girls aged 13 to 15. At a local level, there are differing pictures because local authorities use different data sets. They collect their own data and carry out their own surveys, so they can identify and monitor trends and react more quickly than would be the case using annual surveys. The information that was gathered from some local authorities for today's meeting reflects the national picture: the trends are broadly consistent, except for the change relating to girls aged 13 to 15 and those in the next age bracket—16 to 24.

Locally and nationally, the picture is broadly consistent. There might be differences depending

on whether the area is rural, urban or an island, but the national and local data that we have available suggests that the trends are fairly consistent.

Brian Whittle: How should we reflect on the lack of progress?

Jillian Gibson: That goes back to the data question. We do not have good enough data to understand progress, because we use only national surveys that are carried out once every year or every couple of years. We need better data and intelligence to understand whether our progress is what the national surveys tell us it is.

At a local level, sportscotland, through its active schools programme and community sport hubs, and local authorities, through leisure trusts and health and social care partnerships, are making every effort to improve the trends. That is what local authority colleagues, reflecting on the national and local data, would say, but I absolutely take your point. There is a stubborn gap that we are struggling to close.

Ailsa Wyllie (sportscotland): We know from the Scottish health survey data that 62 per cent of children participate in sport, excluding school activity, in any given week, and we know that we need to tackle the inactivity of those who are not meeting the recommended level.

In relation to the statistics on programme involvement, there has been movement over the past few years. In the 2023-24 school year, there were 280,000 participants in the active schools programme. That represented a 6 per cent increase from the previous year. From governing bodies, we know that there has been an upward trend in junior membership, which has increased over the past year. There has also been an increase in female participation across a 10-year period.

There have been small changes and movements, and that is what we focus on in trying to increase participation levels. To do that, we need to know the barriers relating to inactivity among children and young people. That is our bread and butter in relation to the programmes that we deliver on the ground through our active schools programme, community sport hubs and governing body partners.

Gregor Muir (Scottish Sports Association): One of the stats that has not been touched on from the data from the health and household surveys shows that there has definitely been an increase in sedentary behaviour. Across sports, there is a massive risk that young people are not engaging in physical activity. Despite the overall trends not moving substantially, there has been an uptick in sedentary behaviour, which is a definite risk.

As Ailsa Wyllie said, across the governing body landscape, there is quite a lot of engagement at junior level. There is more engagement in trying to better link school activity with club activity over the long term, so that people have long-term engagements with sport from a young age.

The Scottish Government recognises in its "Physical Activity For Health: Scotland's National Framework" that we have not got to where we want to get yet. We need to target reducing physical inactivity, which is still a pretty entrenched problem. The fact that all parties recognise that we need to reduce physical inactivity suggests that a lot more still needs to be done, so I hope that the flat participation rates will tick up in the next few years.

Brian Whittle: I am pleased that physical inactivity has been mentioned. As Jillian Gibson said, the issue is having the data. Quite frankly, data showing that kids have participated in sport at least once a week provides a very poor data link when it is matched against physical inactivity, physical literacy and the rise in obesity. The trend shows that there has been a reduction in the number of times that people participate in physical activity. The data also does not show that a cohort of children will participate in several different sports in a week. Given the barriers and what influences participation, how do we change those trends?

Ailsa Wyllie: We have to acknowledge and understand the barriers. When we look at the issue through the lens of the active schools programme, we find more and more that we need to have data for each community, so that we understand the barriers and the needs in schools and the community environment in relation to school and club sport. We understand that the barriers to schools providing extracurricular activities for people to participate in are different from those relating to participation in club sport in the community. Our active schools network and our community sport hub officers are focusing on understanding the particular school or community needs in order to try to overcome some of the barriers, because we know that there are different needs across the country.

Brian Whittle: I will layer something on top of that. You mentioned school-based and non-school-based participation. It strikes me that, if kids want to participate in sport these days, they have to go home and then go somewhere else, because there has been a significant reduction in extracurricular activity in schools. Has that had an influence? Do we need to try to reverse that trend?

Ailsa Wyllie: On the active schools side of things, we can look at the trends in activity participation and at how many sessions are being provided. Since we have come out of Covid, those

figures have increased year on year. We know that more extracurricular sessions are available and that they take place in and around the school building after the school day, during lunch time or before school. That is the core role of the active schools programme.

A big priority is then connecting into the club and community space. We want our active schools co-ordinators to actively work with our clubs to ensure that there is a clear pathway to bring them into the school environment and to bring kids into the club environment. We know that cost and travel barriers to club sport participation come into play, especially for children and young people. We are working really hard and have an enhanced focus on club sport this year.

Brian Whittle: I recognise that we want to have a pathway for getting kids involved at school, with links into the community, but the reality is that the figures tell us that that is not happening at the level at which we want it to happen. How do we change that?

Ailsa Wyllie: We need to work and invest in the club and community space to make things easier. We know that clubs are doing lots of things on the ground at the entry level. They are trying to make participation easier through pay-what-you-can memberships, which strip away the cost challenge for parents who cannot afford to have their kids going to sports clubs. Through our active schools work, we know that there is a misconception that sport and sports clubs are not for some families. Consistent participation in after-school sport and co-ordinators enabling a pathway into clubs definitely help to break down some of those challenges. We try to provide children with a clear pathway from school into their community.

Brian Whittle: Again, I recognise that we should be providing that pathway, but the truth of the matter is that many clubs have waiting lists. That is a fairly recent trend. If there are children who want to participate but are being prevented from participating because of a waiting list, how does that play into the overall picture?

Ailsa Wyllie: We need to continue to work with our governing body partners to ensure that we have the right people development and that we extend the capacity of the club workforce so that we enable participation. We know that there are challenges with facilities. The pressures relating to accessing facilities and the costs of running more sessions in facilities to allow kids to participate lead to increases in what we charge families to bring their children to the clubs. We need to take a whole-system approach and work together to try to make the big changes that we want to make to participation rates. We will be able to do that if we take a more joined-up approach locally.

Jillian Gibson: In talking about the barriers to participation and understanding local and national trends, I do not want to underplay the work that is being done by lots of local authorities in using different tools and techniques to understand the barriers and work with children, young people and their families to remove them, whether they relate to gender, poverty, transport or minority ethnic communities. It is about giving young people and their families a chance to articulate, through existing mechanisms, what they need.

For example, since 2013, Dumfries and Galloway Council's education and learning directorate has carried out a survey of children and young people to understand specific participation levels and the barriers to participation. It has then put in place policies and funding to mitigate those challenges and barriers. However, the reality is that some of those things are in place only for a short period of time based on the funding that is available or to fit in with national and/or local priorities.

A significant amount of work is under way to understand the barriers. Those barriers might not relate only to taking part in physical activity and sport; there is the wider landscape in which children and families live. For example, the challenges in rural areas are different from those in urban areas. There is the work that is done at national level through sportscotland down to the work that is done by local authorities, including through the active schools programme, to understand their communities and put in place mitigations that are specific to the local authority or the area. However, a lot of the time, it comes down to the resources that are available.

The trend shows that there is also a decreasing number of volunteers who are available. That pattern has been evident since 2019. A number of the local authorities that I have spoken to in the past couple of weeks have said that the number of available volunteers is the most significant barrier. I cannot speak to the club sport landscape, but that issue certainly plays a part at the local level, and I am sure that it is reflected in clubs, too.

09:45

Gregor Muir: I will add a couple of quick points in relation to inequalities. On poverty and cost barriers, we have had some good examples from across our membership of clubs and governing bodies putting in place dedicated support in areas where there are challenges. For example, a club in Renfrew whose membership covers areas 1 and 2 according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation has grown its junior membership by having targeted funding in that area and, as we have talked about, by helping juniors to transition from the school environment to wider club

opportunities. That has involved providing subsidised equipment and transport and providing more wraparound support to get people active.

On the sex and gender question, there are interconnected issues—it is not just about how we get more girls active. One of the key indicators of how active a girl is is how active her mother is. If we want to get more girls active and involved in sport, we want more women to be more active and involved in sport, because a girl is something like three times more likely to be involved in sport if her mother is. We need to take a more holistic approach if we are to move the dial in that regard.

A big issue that we have not talked about is disability. A huge amount of great work has been done by Scottish Disability Sport, among others in the sector. The amount that is invested and the amount of support that is required to get a disabled individual physically active and engaged in sport cannot be reflected by the number ticking up by one on an engagement chart that shows how many people are participating. The benefit to that individual is huge. There might be an issue in how we measure some of the activity, because some of the kids who are furthest away from getting involved in physical activity and sport are the ones who require the most investment and the most support to reach, so there needs to be a genuine commitment to trying to achieve that aim. If we just think about how we can increase the numbers, we might accidentally target the people who are already closest to sport.

Brian Whittle: Thank you.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Gregor Muir, you just answered quite a lot of the questions that I was going to ask.

Gregor Muir: I can only apologise.

Elena Whitham: That is all right. My questions are about inequalities in participation, so I will pursue that a little bit further. When we think about participation and access to sport, we usually think about universalism, but some clubs have moved towards policies that involve the targeting of resource to unlock participation, and I am interested in understanding how that works. We are just coming to the end of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month, and those communities are sometimes the furthest away from activities that are on offer. Is there a way that targeting those communities would help them to participate, and how could that be done?

Gregor Muir: That is a good question. It is not an area that has been raised in particular by our members, as far as I am aware. My view is that, if you are going to move the dial through that approach, there will need to be dedicated, long-term and sustainable engagement. More than anything else, that probably comes back to the

funding question, which Jillian Gibson has already touched on.

At the moment, there are specific programmes involving that approach, but they run for only a set period of time. At a United Kingdom level, some of our sports have had programmes that have been running for 10 years. For example, the programme to encourage the participation of women and girls has been running for a substantial amount of time, but that support is coming to an end. Thought is now being given to how further support can be put in place, either through funding or through connections with local clubs, in order to support some of the people who were engaged through those programmes and get them involved in existing activity elsewhere.

There are definitely advantages to having a long-term approach, and, to be honest, with some demographics and groups, it is more important to have holistic, wraparound engagement that gets people involved for reasons other than the improved physical and mental health outcomes that we are talking about. If the emphasis is more on fun things to do, meeting new people, engaging with other communities and so on, that might be a more successful avenue.

Jillian Gibson: Certainly since I came in post, we have been talking about the universal approach versus the targeted approach. In the past couple of weeks, we have been talking with a number of local authorities about understanding the local data and intelligence piece that I mentioned, which involves a consideration of who is in their community and what barriers are faced by specific communities. We know that care-experienced young people, for example, are the least likely to be active within specific communities. They are further away from opportunities for participation and they need more support, as do children and young people with disabilities, as Gregor Muir said. It is important to talk to specific communities that you know are more inactive than the general population and target support to remove the barriers that they face.

A couple of local authorities—Moray Council and North Ayrshire Council—are taking a really targeted approach, and Stirling Council is doing work with care-experienced young people to make sure that they have free memberships to the Peak. That goes along with the free travel for under-22s scheme. North Ayrshire Council runs specific programmes for care-experienced young people, and Moray Council runs a sports kit for all programme in a number of communities whereby people can donate kit that young people have grown out of, so that somebody else can use it. That targeted approach has been intentionally run

alongside the broad-brush, universal approach in order to get as many people active as possible.

It is important to understand your communities and who within them is inactive so that you can be intentional with regard to your investment in programmes for the long term, as Gregor Muir said. Funding is a challenge within that, but that wraps around into wider council priorities and national priorities. There are lots of examples of using that local data and information to be intentional with regard to approaches to bringing in those furthest from activity. That might not involve getting people to take part in organised activity; it could involve encouraging things such as active travel and generally being outdoors a little bit more often. We need to use targeted interventions as well as universal support to help people become more active, which involves the community engagement and participation piece.

Elena Whitham: In all of this, we are making mention of specific areas and demographics. Do you think that the policies reflect the intersectional nature of inequalities, and the fact that an individual could be affected by multiple inequalities, which will mean that they are further away from engaging in what is on offer?

Jillian Gibson: Yes and no. There are some examples where we look at inequalities in the round, but, all too often, the policy is driven either by where the funding sits or by where the local priority is, and we end up targeting a specific group within a population.

COSLA has a new sport and physical activity special interest group, which is a cross-party group of elected members, and we have been talking from the outset about the intersectionality of inequality. I make no apologies for going back to the data piece, because even the data that we have does not allow us to have an intersectional understanding, so we have to make assumptions about, for example, females with a disability who live in SIMD 1 areas. It would be better if the data allowed us to understand the picture in a way that would enable us to make policy decisions on an intersectional basis. You will find such an approach at a local level, with local systems, data and intelligence, but I am not sure that there is a universal approach to targeting through that intersectional inequality lens. That is the intention, but there are probably barriers to that being consistently applied.

Elena Whitham: Ailsa Wyllie, you spoke about the active schools co-ordinators and how they would work with young people in the school setting to help them to find a path into community-based activities and sport. Do you think that those active schools co-ordinators have enough resource and time to really look across and respond to the

intersectional issues that might be putting barriers in front of young people?

Ailsa Wyllie: We have a network of more than 400 co-ordinators and managers across the 32 local authorities. A lot of them will be involved with multiple primary schools and secondary school settings, and it is a huge ask for them to get to know every child in every school community and find out why certain young people are inactive. However, through some upskilling that we are doing with the co-ordinators, we are trying to get under the skin of the issue and understand what intersectionality means and what effect that might have on the multiple barriers that children and young people face, depending on the situation.

Recently, we funded inclusion projects, which involved short-term investment in learning projects to build on our schools and community sport hubs in order to find out what is working and what inclusion approach principles can be learned from those projects. Unfortunately, that investment will end in March 2026, but we can take that learning and share it across the network. It is definitely not enough, and there is definitely more that we can do, but it is a step in the right direction in terms of that understanding.

Elena Whitham: Gregor Muir, you spoke about how increasing the participation rates of women in activities and sports might trickle down to increased participation on the part of their daughters. Should there be targeted interventions in some of the activities in local areas that would look to bring whole families in to participate in an activity together? I used to participate in local activities with my kids—it was an inexpensive night and there were a huge amount of different activities on offer for the family to participate in. Should we be looking at doing more of that?

Gregor Muir: The short answer is yes, absolutely. The involvement of parents is a key indicator of how active their children will be. I know that we are talking about other themes later on, but it is also a pathway to getting more people involved in volunteering. They come along to events, engage with other people and support the activity that is being delivered, so, as well as being active, they get engaged in the community.

On the disability point, it is important to support carers to get involved, so we should consider things such as giving them free access to events and ensuring that the set-up around those events takes into account the fact that some people need additional support. It is important to ensure that events are accessible to families and to other groups, which might involve offering additional support. Of course, resource is often the big challenge to covering all bases in terms of how much support you can offer to people.

In short, yes, getting families involved and setting physical activity standards from early in life is a huge opportunity in terms of making sure that people have lifelong participation in activities.

Jillian Gibson: I was talking to a colleague in Sport Ireland about the number of hours that a child spends in school, and it comes to 20 to 30 per cent of their year. Lots of phenomenal work is going on in school and with active schools, but we really need to focus on the wider family setting. There are phenomenal opportunities through the whole-family support programme that Government is really invested in at the moment. It prioritises the importance of physical activity and sport in terms of whole-family wellbeing and the whole-family approach to life. I am sure that everybody around the table is well aware of the multiple benefits of participating in physical activity and sport. It is important to engage in that activity individually and as a family, and we should provide opportunities and wraparound support to enable families to participate.

In Scotland, we need to strive towards establishing a culture in which physical activity and sport are part of life as opposed to doing lots of targeted little things based on the funding that is available. There are real opportunities to make sure that physical activity and sport opportunities are embedded in other work that is going on around national priorities such as child poverty and whole-family support. Instead of approaching sport and physical activity as a separate issue, we should transfer sport and physical activity into our wider priorities, whether that is through health and social care partnerships or whatever might exist at a local level. We should strive towards making physical activity and sport a part of life as opposed to being a thing that we do after school or on our own in the gym in the evening, when the kids are at home. We need to look more holistically at those opportunities.

10:00

Elena Whitham: What you are describing sounds like early intervention and prevention work in action.

Jillian Gibson: Absolutely.

The Convener: Sandesh Gulhane, we are not able to see you on the screens in the room. Could you check your camera, please?

Jillian Gibson, you have mentioned data and the lack of robust data around some of these issues. What is COSLA doing to try to encourage local authorities to collect data on participation in sport?

Jillian Gibson: As I mentioned, we have a new sport and physical activity special interest group, which is chaired by our community wellbeing

spokesperson and our health and social care spokesperson. It has 15 elected members and was established in October last year. One of its five priority themes is data improvement, recognising that our national data collection is based on the local government benchmarking framework.

There are four measures in the LGBF that are related to leisure, and there is widespread recognition that they need to be improved. We are working with the LGBF programme board and a number of local authorities and leisure trusts to understand what indicators we could add to the LGBF to better represent local government's role in the leisure sector—broadly, sport and physical activity—and to have better indicators to help us move towards improvement. We have started to explore that work, and have set up a short-life working group looking at how we improve the LGBF.

Separate to that, we are doing some work around data innovation and data creativity with partners, including sportscotland and Community Leisure UK, and we are learning about the mechanisms that are used by Sport England and Sport Ireland, in particular, as well as other organisations in other countries, to collect information. For example, Sport England conducts specific moving communities surveys and active life surveys, and Sport Ireland does something similar. It is important to invest in the collection of better data, and we also need a platform to which we can upload that data, for want of a better phrase, in a way that enables us to see the intersections of that data, as others have mentioned today.

We are exploring those ideas with partners, because we know that local government does not deliver all those services in isolation. That is the same for leisure trusts and sportscotland. We are exploring and learning from other countries about how we can do better, so that we can do some of the things that other committee members have mentioned today with regard to understanding the barriers and exploring how we break those down effectively. There is a lot of work to be done.

Data has been the fundamental part of my work in the first few months of my current post, because it will be difficult to move the inactive to active if we do not know who the inactive are or where they are. We have to be very intentional in exploring that data.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Gregor Muir talked earlier about the "Physical Activity for Health" framework, and I am keen to explore that a bit. As it was published last October, it is still relatively new, and it would be good to hear how the three organisations before us are responding to it and how they are trying to ensure

that it is not just some document on a shelf but something that is actually changing the way in which organisations work. Given that you mentioned it earlier, Gregor, do you want to go first?

Gregor Muir: Yes. There is lots to be positive about with the framework. We, for our part, think that there is a lot of positive ambition set out in its context, given its huge recognition of the importance of partnership between national and local government, with partners in a wider sense and with stakeholders across sport. The areas that it touches on are very broad ranging.

Moreover, when we look at the contextualisation element, we see a commitment from the Government in the framework, with cabinet secretaries and the First Minister providing a foreword. There is a recognition that this goes across directorates and policy areas, and that sport is not some addendum to everything else that we are doing but something that is pretty fundamental to a whole range of areas that the Government invests in.

In terms of context, therefore, there is a lot to be very positive about, but I have to say that I am not at this stage sure about the extent to which it has fully filtered down to governing bodies and the practice that they are implementing. I think that you will see it coming into more strategic and corporate plans as they get renewed. Indeed, it is a very helpful focus document, and it contains some positive case studies that show how some of that partnership work can be introduced.

That working in partnership principle is something that has come through from some of our members in support of this session. People have seen increases in numbers where there has been effective engagement not just with the governing body but with the local authority and private sector organisations that support their sport. That sort of thing is recognised in the framework, which highlights a number of different strands—active places, active workplaces and so on—that touch on lots of different areas in all of our work.

One significant issue is that all the ambitions in the framework need to be effectively resourced to make them happen. At the moment, the Scottish Government's sports budget is relatively flat in real terms. Indeed, over this parliamentary session, it has decreased in real terms, and if we want to achieve some of the ambitions that are talked about in the framework and put some of this stuff into practice, it should be significantly increased.

That is one thing that I would say. The ambitions in the framework are sound, and there is good recognition of how sport and physical activity fit

into a lot of different areas, but the resource behind some of those ambitions is not there yet.

Joe FitzPatrick: One of the things about the framework is its cross-cutting nature, which you have mentioned. Do you think that it gives you the ability to be more forceful in making the case for policy to take activity into account, if that is not happening? Do you feel that you can refer back to the framework, or is there more that we need to do in that respect?

By the way, when you said that we are not there yet, that was helpful and good to know. Had you thought that we were, we would be thinking that there was a problem, given that we know that we are not. Therefore, it was good to hear that directly from you.

Gregor Muir: I do think that it definitely has utility; indeed, we refer to it in our advocacy work. When it comes to engaging with other parts of the sector that do not typically consider sport and physical activity as part of their remit, it is very useful to be able to say, "This is what your cabinet secretary has said about sport and physical activity being important to our ambitions." It is a very helpful tool to have in our armoury. As for whether or not it has the required weight, though, I do not know that I can answer that question.

Joe FitzPatrick: Thanks.

I will come to Jillian Gibson last, for a really good reason. Ailsa, as you were involved in developing the framework, it would be good to hear your perspective.

Ailsa Wyllie: Absolutely. Currently, sportscotland is working alongside Public Health Scotland on this. We are in discussions with 20 local authorities about the systems-based approach and embedding the "Physical Activity for Health" strategy, with 13 actively adopting the approach through the framework. As you will have seen, Glasgow has been the first to launch its strategy, demonstrating that alignment with the national framework.

Our role in sportscotland, then, is to lead the sporting system in contributing to that framework and systems-based approach and to demonstrate that by showing how to help people participate, progress and achieve within sport. The evidence shows the clear contribution that sport makes, and I think that it is great to have the framework at the heart of that.

Joe FitzPatrick: Is the framework helping to bridge the gap between ensuring that those folk who, as we heard earlier, are physically inactive get a bit of activity and moving folk into organised sport? I guess that that is what we have to do if we are going to get elite athletes. After all, we do not know who the elite athletes are going to be—they

could be anywhere. We know for sure that socioeconomic factors influence who gets to participate, but they do not determine who has the potential.

Ailsa Wyllie: Absolutely. The sporting system that we and our partners have put in place and that has been embedded over the past number of years has helped with positioning that whole pathway, from those in school and education all the way through to our performance athletes, and it has really showcased the place that sport has in everyone's lives and the sport for life ethos that we have. The emphasis on the preventative health agenda is important, and it provides an important opportunity for us to switch on the role that physical activity and sport can play.

Joe FitzPatrick: That is great. Thank you.

Jillian Gibson, I wanted to come to you last because, although I think that the framework is a good document, local government will be key to making it happen in the real world. Therefore, it was good to hear about the special interest group. I know that there are some folk in local government who are—I will choose my words carefully—almost as passionate as Brian Whittle is in this area.

Jillian Gibson: Absolutely.

Joe FitzPatrick: So, it is good that you are pulling that resource together. It would be good to hear how that is working and how the Government's policies and ambitions are being reflected in the work that local government is doing on the ground.

Jillian Gibson: Perhaps I can explore the framework from both a national and a local perspective. The framework itself has been phenomenal in taking all the incredible systems-based work that Public Health Scotland has done as well as the international evidence, putting them into a Scottish context and putting front and centre the importance of physical activity, of which sport is a fundamental and key part.

The systems-based approach is all about reaching the World Health Organization target that we have adopted of reducing physical inactivity by 15 per cent to 2030, and the framework puts in the evidence base to ensure that, with those eight investment areas, we are able to become a more active nation. Local government is a key part of that and, as Ailsa Wyllie has mentioned, 13 authorities are at the moment directly working with Public Health Scotland and sportscotland to revise local strategies in line with the framework.

At a national level, we have the national leadership group for physical activity and sport, which is chaired by the minister, Maree Todd, and sitting alongside that is the national development

group for physical activity and sport. Indeed, it was at that cross-organisation level that the framework started.

That said, although I agree that sportscotland has absolutely bought into sport and recreation for all, I think that, nationally and at a Cabinet and ministerial level, we have more work to do to embed the other seven investment areas in the work and priorities of other organisations—for example, in planning with regard to active places and spaces, in Education Scotland and the further and higher education establishments with regard to active places of learning, and in Transport Scotland, too. There is more that we can do to ensure that, at a national level, the bodies with responsibility for those elements of the framework are as bought in and as accountable as sportscotland is to its part of the framework. It is working fundamentally on sport and recreation for all, but it is also trying to support six other systems and enable them at a local level through that systems-based work.

I say that because I think that we have a journey to go on. It has been only nine months or so—forgive my maths—since the framework was launched, and this is a long-term systems-based approach that we are talking about. We have more work that we can do, and we have the national forums for doing it, such as the leadership group and the development group as well as COSLA's special interest group. In fact, at the beginning of December, we will be bringing together the leadership group, which includes the minister, Transport Scotland, sportscotland, NatureScot, Public Health Scotland and so on, and COSLA's sport and physical activity group to make sure that we are nationally focused on the value that those national organisations can add in supporting work at the local level.

As Gregor Muir has said, one of the fundamental challenges is that the framework came with no money—[*Interruption.*] Excuse me—I have a frog in my throat. There was a commitment in the 2021-22 programme for government to double the sport and active living budget by the end of this Parliament; however, that commitment has not been met and, indeed, was not mentioned in the recent programme for government.

We have the framework's fundamentally phenomenal intentions, and it is very clear what we are trying to achieve with the physical inactivity target. There is more that we can do in the coming months and years, and we, in local government—and the leadership and development groups, too—are committed to doing that work, but we need to look at and have a conversation about the investment that will be needed to tackle some of

the things that your colleagues have mentioned on a long-term and sustained basis.

10:15

Joe FitzPatrick: That is great. It is also good that you covered the areas I was going to go ask about next—transport and education. The one area that you did not mention, and which it is probably worth throwing in here, is health and the need for the national health service to be proactive in this. After all, as part of the public service, the NHS probably has the most to gain from having a more active nation.

I am keen to go on to more transport stuff, but I feel that I would be treading where Mr Harvie wants to tread, so I will leave it to him to ask about that later.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I want to touch on facilities and their availability to communities, which is something that is raised with us frequently. There are the issues of the decline in stock, the availability—particularly in rural areas—and the need for funding to upgrade facilities so that people can access facilities that we would all enjoy using. Can anyone give us a little bit of a picture of how facilities out there are for people and whether any funding that has become available has been useful, which we might be able to think about in the context of other areas?

Ailsa Wyllie: We are facing a particular challenge with the sports facilities estate. It is well known that staffing, energy and construction costs have all been rising, especially since the pandemic, which has put local government and national Government capital budgets under severe pressure.

At sportscotland, we were asked to undertake the review of the sports facilities estate, and we are aware that carrying out that review is a significant undertaking. The review will be published later on this year and will establish a high-level summary of the changes from the previous national audit of the sports facilities estate. It will look at the age, condition and location of the facilities included within the previous audit and compare them with where we are now. We will then scope out a more detailed next phase, taking into consideration things such as the school estate and what needs upgrading.

Carol Mochan: Will that review look at who is going to be responsible for that estate? Over the past years, because of financial pressures, there has been more community ownership, which we know puts a heavy responsibility on our communities because the costs are so high.

Ailsa Wyllie: Local authorities are currently responsible for community sports and leisure facilities, and there are examples out there of where community asset transfers and so on are happening. However, I do not think that the focus of the review will cover that.

Carol Mochan: We will find out—no bother. That is helpful to know. In terms of any capital investment that is under way, has that happened in recent years for community assets?

Jillian Gibson: On your overall theme about access to facilities, just to reassure the committee, one of the key themes of the sport and physical activity special interest group is access to facilities and opportunities. We are working closely with sportscotland on that estate review to make sure that we have a high level of returns from all 32 authorities, so that we can understand what that picture looks like. We can then look at what investment is required to make sure that we have a sporting estate and an estate for physical activity that will meet our net zero targets, that will be sustainable for the future and that will enable us to reach those goals regarding physical inactivity.

In terms of capital investment, sportscotland has a specific facilities fund, and there is significant investment in local authorities. You will find some authorities building new facilities—for example, in Clackmannanshire, they are looking at a wellbeing hub where there is a holistic approach to physical activity, sport and mental health and wellbeing, all taking place in that wraparound area. There is also significant investment, as you will all know, in schools and the school estate, to make sure that the new school builds, with their sporting facilities, are open and accessible to communities.

Like you, through my members, elected members and local authorities and other organisations, I hear a lot of people mention that access to facilities is a challenge. I will sound like a broken record, but COSLA does not have the data to support that point. What we hear from Gregor Muir and his members and from other governing bodies—quite rightly—are comments such as, “We cannot access the school estate in this community. These facilities are closed.”

We hear a lot about access anecdotally, which is why we added access to facilities as one of our key themes and why we are so keen to work alongside sportscotland to get that data and evidence about what is available, what is open and what is accessible from the school estate to the general estate for sport. We need to understand that data so that we have a holistic picture.

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence, but I cannot speak to all the reasons that facilities might not be accessible. We know that a lot of it is about

cost, the availability of staff and schools prioritising the lets until 6 o'clock at night; there are lots of different reasons. However, we need to understand the picture at a national level to know how to address the access issues. I suspect that there will be lots of issues around accessing facilities that will not be down to capital investment. It will be about looking at the wider picture around staff availability and other priorities in the area.

We are keenly aware that access is an issue, and we are keen to work with partners who are doing work on that. The minister and sportscotland are coming along to the special interest group in August to give an update on the estates review, among other things, and to look at how we can work together to improve access to facilities and at what is needed to make the estate thrive. There has been no specific capital investment coming through directly to Government. There will be some Government support for some projects in some local areas as opposed to a universal capital investment programme for sport.

Gregor Muir: Facilities access is something that comes up a lot across our membership, including accessibility in terms of opening hours. A lot of leisure trusts have had to either reduce their hours or close on certain days due to financial pressures. That is not uncommon. I think that a lot of information will come out of the estate review that will help to inform that work.

The Scottish Government committed to a review of access to the school estate in the 2023-24 programme for government. I believe that that has been subsumed within the wider review, so the school estate will be captured within that. That is important, because schools can act as community hubs for a lot of this activity—not just physical activity and sports, but activity that connects to other local ambitions.

In terms of the time that the committee has, I think that facilities will be a major issue, including the investment that will be required to make sure that our sporting estate is fit for purpose for the future. Going into the next session of Parliament, I think that facilities should be a priority issue in the handover to the next Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. Without accessible and affordable facilities, none of the activity that we are talking about is possible. It is an absolutely fundamental issue and should be treated as such. We look forward to the review being published later this year and seeing what is in there that we can work on collaboratively.

Carol Mochan: Okay. I have two more questions. One thing that is raised with me repeatedly is that some things are quite expensive and they end up being down to local government to run, including swimming pools and access to

swimming pools. I do not need an answer on that; I think that we just need to be aware that many people want to encourage their children to learn to swim, but, when we talk to local authorities, we know that it is extremely expensive. They do not make any profit and it is down to them to provide it. That is an important thing for us to consider.

The other thing that was raised with us is the cost of younger people's participation in sport, which seems to be going up disproportionately compared to the cost for adults. Is that something that you are familiar with? Do you have any thoughts on why that might be?

Ailsa Wyllie: We recognise that barrier in pricing for local facilities. As we have mentioned, the sports facilities estate is an ageing estate, and with that there are pressures on the local authorities and commercial bodies that are running these facilities. That has a knock-on effect on participants. It is definitely something that we are aware of and, again, it is something we need to overcome by working together to keep the prices as low as they can be.

I will just touch on our sport facilities fund, through which we support capital projects, with Scottish Government and national lottery funding. Since 2007, we have invested over £211 million into sports clubs, community groups, local authorities, governing bodies and other organisations to upgrade some of the sporting facilities.

Jillian Gibson: I do not have specific information on the costs to hand, but sportscotland reviews the cost of facilities every year. I have some of the figures in front of me, but we can provide the committee with that information afterwards. It is something that sportscotland gathers. I have in front of me an alphabetical list by local authority of the cost of a swim, the cost of a badminton court and so on. I am happy to provide that information to the committee after the meeting.

Carol Mochan: That would be helpful. Thank you.

The Convener: There is a lot of interest in the subject. If we could have brief supplementaries and brief responses, that would be helpful.

Brian Whittle: The frustration for me when we are talking about having significant restrictions on the ability to invest is that we do not have an audit of facilities, whether those be community or school facilities, therefore we do not know what spare capacity is available in the structures that we currently have. We keep talking about investing in new facilities, yet we cannot gather the data to say where the spare capacity might be. Surely that is where we should start.

Jillian Gibson: That work is happening through the estates review that sportscotland is doing at the moment, which will report later in the year—towards the end of August, I believe. Part of that overall audit is about what facilities we have, when they are open, when they are closed and how accessible they are. Individual local authorities understand their own sporting estate, but at a national level that picture has not been updated for some time, and we are invested in doing that.

In recent months, we have spoken to the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers through the sport and physical activity special interest group, to make sure that there are returns from as close to 32 local authorities as possible and that there is a split between the core facts of the estate—what the estate is and what it looks like—and what the school estate is and what access there is to it. That is key and fundamental for the future. There will always be investment in schools, and community access to schools is a huge part of local authorities' looking at their sporting estate, which might include closing facilities because it is the right thing to do, because more people are using a new school that has been built in a community and there are better transport links. All of that happens at a local level when it comes to auditing what is there, what is needed to serve the community and what is affordable.

The reality is that, as you know, we are in a challenging fiscal environment where everything that we have right now is perhaps not affordable. That could just be down to energy costs and a lack of staff, so the audit that sportscotland is doing at the moment will be a key source of information for us all as we try to understand what the sporting estate is and what we need. The conversation does not need to be all about what we build, build, build. We have to maximise what we have, and that wraps around some of those other goals that we have around the fiscal environment and our net zero challenges—swimming pools are extremely energy inefficient, for example. We have to look at things in a holistic sense. It is not just about what we build; it is also about what we have and what we need.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I just want to follow up on the audit, because I think that getting it right is critical for our understanding of the picture. Will it be a time series, not just a snapshot in time? Will it also look at what was happening on the eve of the lockdown, so that we can understand the delta in capacity from the pre-lockdown period? In Glasgow, there has been a significant cliff edge—I speak from personal experience—and, in terms of ownership, a lot of assets that were previously council owned have now transitioned into third party operation. Will

such factors be included in the audit, or could they be? I think that that would be valuable data.

Ailsa Wyllie: I do not have all of that detail with me today, but it is certainly something that we can follow up and provide in a written response, if that is okay. The previous audit, back in 2006, highlighted costs in excess of £110 million in investment to upgrade and maintain the sports facilities that we had, looking ahead over a 25-year period. We can certainly provide that further information for you.

Paul Sweeney: That is helpful. Thank you.

10:30

Elena Whitham: I have a quick question on access to facilities. As we have been hearing, the school estate is one of the untapped resources that we have, but I wonder whether the legacy private finance initiative contracts have become a barrier to accessing that estate. I know that, when we tried that locally, having to get the facilities management company to come and open the schools made it completely cost prohibitive. Is that still an issue? Do we know that yet?

Jillian Gibson: Anecdotally, without the evidence in front of me, I can say that those contracts and the cost of opening the schools are still a challenge locally. Almost every local authority that has similar contracts would say that they are a barrier and that that is why the school gates are closed. It is cost inefficient to open the schools, because it is not the councils that are opening them—it is Mitie or whoever manages the schools.

Some of those contracts will start to come to an end next year. Falkirk Council is the first council where those types of contracts will start to end, and we have had some informal conversations with officers in Falkirk about what that will look like. It will be the first authority to come out of those contracts, and we do not know what those facilities and access to that school estate will look like in the next year or the next five, 10 or 15 years, when we are left with those facilities.

It absolutely is still a challenge—to what extent, I do not know, but I am happy to explore that a little bit further, if the committee wants us to do that. Like community asset transfers, if that is not included in the estates review I can explore it through our network and our special interest group, to understand it a little bit better and to get a more holistic approach to the assets that local government owns and manages.

Elena Whitham: That would be helpful. Thank you very much.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Good morning. I am going to move on to funding, which

follows on fairly neatly, but I also want to follow up Joe FitzPatrick's questions, as he teed me up earlier with the questions he was raising.

I will ask about the funding stuff first, because it follows on a little more smoothly. There has been discussion about the capital that is available for facilities, the need for upgrades and the impact of that on pricing. More generally, can you give us an overview of the current state of affairs in relation to the funding of on-going services, beyond the capital issues that have just been discussed? In particular, to what extent is the funding itself creating barriers to participation?

Jillian Gibson: I will kick off on that one—or I will try my best. Sportscotland is the beneficiary of a large portion of the money that comes from the active Scotland programme into the sporting landscape, whether that is revenue or capital. There is no ring-fenced funding—COSLA does not advocate for ring-fenced funding—and no direct funding comes out of the budget into increasing opportunities for physical activity and sport. That is down to local discretion and local decision making, which is where you will find some of the challenges that we have mentioned today.

In terms of funding, I have mentioned it already, but it would be remiss of me, as a COSLA officer, not to mention again the unfulfilled commitment to double the sport and active living budget within the current session of Parliament. That would have seen a significant investment, whether in revenue or capital, to meet some of our ambitions in the framework—or the active Scotland outcomes framework, as it was before the framework was published.

Significant third sector, national lottery and other funding is available, but those are bid funds and they are, as you know, short-term investments to target and tackle something that is happening locally. Funding remains a challenge, whether it is revenue funding or, as you have heard about already, capital investment.

Patrick Harvie: The briefing that we have been given suggests that local government investment in culture, sport and leisure across the whole country is down by at least 20 per cent since 2010-11. Is that accurate? Would local government recognise that figure?

Jillian Gibson: Yes. You are referring to the EKOS report, which was published with Community Leisure UK and sportscotland. I cannot speak for every local authority, but, as a broad-brush statement, some of them would see that as an absolute reality.

A fundamental challenge in this part of the sector and local government is the fact that it is a discretionary service. As pressure increases on statutory services such as health, social care and

education—which is where the money has to go—it squeezes discretionary services. I would love it if we could, as a society, challenge the fact that culture and leisure are discretionary and not things that we all should have access to, as a right, to improve our lives and ensure a well-rounded approach to life, but that is the reality at the coalface with increasing pressure on statutory services.

Yes, there was an increase in the local government budget settlement, but it only balanced out the real-terms cuts that had been made over previous years. The squeezes will continue as pressure to address ring-fenced Government priorities such as teacher numbers or whatever else it might be puts a squeeze on some of the discretionary services. I wish that I was not describing them as discretionary services, but that is the local reality.

Patrick Harvie: I do not for a moment want to underplay the importance of the funding question, but, right at the beginning of this evidence session, a broad picture was painted of the levels of participation in sport not having risen but having been fairly static over the long term. If we are using funding effectively and it has gone down by 20 per cent, what explains that discrepancy? If the funding is effective in increasing participation and it has gone down but participation has not, is there a mismatch? Was there a problem with how the funding was previously used, so that, if we restored that level of funding, we could find a more effective way of getting increased participation?

Jillian Gibson: This is a cop-out answer, but I will say yes and no, because it is true to say that not all physical activity and sport happens in a facility. More people are walking now than ever, and people enjoyed different activities as a result of lockdown. The couch to 5K plan, parkrun and other things have enabled people to be active in different ways. It is not as one-sided as saying that with less resource we have maintained physical activity levels, so we do not need the resource that we had before. We have to take a holistic view of what we need to do to ensure that the population that is active has places to remain active and to understand the challenges of bringing the inactive into activity.

Again, it plays into sportscotland's estates review and the database. We need to understand the landscape a little bit better. How people are active now is different compared to 10 years ago. Life is completely different from how it was pre-Covid, and we need the resource and the up-to-date data—not data that is two years old—to make decisions based on what the people who are in front of us need. That will be organised sport and activity through clubs; it will be informal activity in leisure centres and the like; and it will be people

just engaging with the public messaging, understanding that they need to be more active more often and finding a place that suits them to do that.

That is the balance. We have not seen a cliff-edge drop in participation, but, equally, imagine where those physical activity levels might go if it was not a discretionary service and was resourced as we would want to see it resourced.

Patrick Harvie: Unless there is an unexpected change, the picture for overall local government funding does not look rosy. Costs are continuing to be a bigger burden than would have been the case in previous years.

Are we yet at a point at which those who make decisions about how those pressures get managed are properly taking into account the role of sport and physical activity in preventing not only further human but financial costs? We are still seeing decisions made that will exacerbate those long-term costs for short-term expediency.

Jillian Gibson: Absolutely. I feel as though you have described my life's work, which, at the moment, is about ensuring that any decision maker, with whatever title they have, understands the value, the role and the contribution of physical activity and sport not just in a health and wellbeing context, but in the wider policy landscape. Although activity and sport are described as discretionary services, without them our statutory services would be poorer—maybe not financially poorer, but the lives of the people who need those statutory services would be poorer if they did not have access to the things that are described as discretionary services.

We have a way to go to take talking about the sport and physical activity landscape away from discussing sport for sport's sake or physical activity for physical activity's sake. Those things make multiple contributions to and have multiple benefits for the wider policy and legislative landscape. Certainly, the way that I talk about sport is to ask how it will help us with our net zero ambitions and to say that it should be included in public sector reform and in addressing poverty and child poverty. We need physical activity and sport to be all around that landscape.

However, on the early intervention and prevention side of things, it is a figure that I wrote down early this morning that we need to have in our mind. The cost of physical inactivity to the NHS in Scotland is estimated to be £77 million annually. We really need a wider conversation on prevention and early intervention. The earlier that people become active and the longer that they are active for, the better their life will be and the less pressure we will see on different services. We

need that holistic conversation about early intervention and prevention.

The important bit is a conversation that we have to have across sectors and across lines of responsibility. The imperative is there to do it: the "Physical Activity for Health" framework points out that 3,000 people die in Scotland every year from physical inactivity. If we do not get it right, we are doing a disservice to the people of Scotland, but we have to look at that away from only local government services and across the whole of the public sector.

Patrick Harvie: I have a last question on funding, and this might be a point at which to bring in our other witnesses.

Are there other solutions out there that are not being adequately explored? Perhaps there are other solutions that are, in some cases, having positive results, whether those are partnership models or provision through social enterprise or on a not-for-profit basis? Community ownership has been talked about—it has pros and cons. Are there other solutions out there that can help to increase or support provision and participation in the context of those local government finance pressures?

Ailsa Wyllie: Yes. Within the sporting sector, clubs have always been unique in this space in terms of how they can afford to run their club and how they can gain members and membership. We have seen that a lot over the years. Community sport hubs are in the community and, again, going back to community need, they are partnering with a lot of third sector organisations and charitable organisations to try to deliver things differently.

Fundamentally, greater public investment is needed within that sporting system at both local and national levels if we want to make fundamental changes and see growth in participation. It has been touched on, but we would certainly want to see progress made on the previous commitment to doubling the sport and active living budget, even if that extends into the future and the next parliamentary term.

Gregor Muir: To make it a full house, I too very much support the doubling of the sport and active living budget. Now we have all said it. That commitment absolutely needs to be followed through.

There is an issue with budgets being set in annual cycles. That does not leave a lot of space for innovation and forward planning. There are also inefficiencies with that structure in that people are thinking, "Right, we are into the cycle again. We just have to try to get a balanced budget out and then get into the next year." That, as you say, means that people make short-term decisions.

10:45

I know that the Scottish Government has been looking to do more multiyear funding agreements with wider voluntary sector organisations, and that model should be explored for sporting organisations. It gives people more capacity and more reassurance about workforce development and longer-term planning that potentially lets them put some more efficiencies in there and invest to decrease their overheads over time. A lot of people simply do not have the capital available to do innovation projects. Multiyear funding would be a big opportunity for a reduction in costs and different ways of working, but you need to invest to make those opportunities happen.

Patrick Harvie: That is a fair point.

I will crowbar in one supplementary to Joe FitzPatrick's questions about the framework. The question comes back to COSLA, in particular. Jillian, I do not expect you, as a representative of COSLA, to issue a scathing assessment of where local government is at on this. However, if you and your colleagues at individual councils who are focused on this topic are doing everything that you can and yet, across the other issues in the framework—such as active travel and economic development—if people who are making planning decisions about development end up generating more traffic between where young people live and where they want to get to, for all sorts of different purposes; if road traffic reduction targets are being scrapped; and if we do not recognise that we live in an environment that is built more for cars than for people and that there is a huge amount to change about that, then do you agree that we will not achieve what you and your colleagues who are working on this topic are trying to achieve unless a great deal else in local and national decision making priorities is changed? Where are we at with getting the issues in the framework understood, embedded and resulting in different decisions being made in other parts of Government, locally and nationally?

Jillian Gibson: That is a big question and I cannot answer all of it. I mentioned earlier the two leadership groups that are focused specifically on the framework. Transport Scotland is involved in both the national leadership group for physical activity and sport and the development group for physical activity and sport. I have also been liaising with colleagues in our environment and economy team who lead on planning.

National planning framework 4 is clear and explicit. It has brilliant policy connects about active travel and places for being physically active. The policy imperative in NPF4 is phenomenal. It is for us to connect that, working alongside planning colleagues and those who work on transport through regional transport partnerships, to make

sure that those people in RTPs or in local authorities who lead on active travel, or those in transport in general are aware of the framework and that there is national and local responsibility for the framework as a whole. It is not just the responsibility of the active Scotland division or of sportscotland. There is work that we need to do to make sure that walking is at the top of the transport hierarchy.

I will use this opportunity to talk about the unintended consequence of free bus travel for under-22s, which is that we see far fewer young people walking—why would you walk when you have a free bus pass to take you two stops? We see that far more in urban areas than in rural areas, where there is less bus travel and much more reliance on bus travel. Again, it is the holistic question. Where are the framework and the investment areas within the framework for travel embedded within Transport Scotland's policy and priorities? How do we make sure that that feeds down at a local level, through RTPs and local authorities?

That is part of the work that I am trying to do in COSLA. The "Physical Activity for Health" framework has been to COSLA leaders and to all four policy boards, so they have all had a chance to explore and understand their different responsibilities—I say that in inverted commas and loosely—for the active travel part of it. The active places and spaces outcome sits with the environment and economy team, so that we are holistic.

I would love the Cabinet to have exactly the same conversation that we are having now. The framework is not a sports strategy; it is a physical activity for health strategy. We need to get all the systems within the framework right, to make sure that more people walk or cycle. More can be done, nationally and locally. I cannot speak to it all, but it is about making sure that every organisation with responsibility for parts of the framework understands its responsibility and buys into it, as sportscotland has done with active sport and recreation, among other outcomes.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the witnesses for their contributions so far.

I will turn to volunteering and to the picture for volunteering since the pandemic, in particular. We know that many organisations that are volunteer led are struggling with what I can only describe as a doom loop, with reduced volunteer numbers leading to the remaining volunteers taking on more responsibilities, which leads to greater burnout. I mentioned facilities earlier, and the pressure on local authorities to hand over assets for management. The pot of funding is finite and organisations are chasing one another, competing for discretionary annual funds. That produces a lot

of pressure and a lot of stress. Perhaps that is taking the fun out of volunteering for a lot of organisations and lots of individuals.

I want to get the witnesses' impression of how the volunteer model in Scotland is functioning. If it is not functioning satisfactorily, how should volunteer organisations in sport and physical activity be further supported to try to end what I see as a bit of a doom loop and a cycle of pressure that is ratcheting up?

Ailsa Wyllie: I will start off on that one. As we all know, volunteers are vital to the running of sport within the sporting system.

I will start with a few positives. We still have lots of volunteers out there. Day in and day out, and at the weekend, they are running our sports, our clubs and our competitions for all our sports and community groups across the country. You are right to highlight that pressure and burnout and the burden that we are asking our volunteers to carry.

We have 19,000 people delivering across the active schools programme, and 91 per cent of them volunteer. They give up their time to deliver the programme. We have 13,000 sports clubs in Scotland, with more than 800,000 members of governing bodies and affiliate clubs. They, too, are upheld by volunteers.

We work in partnership with a lot of voluntary organisations to help with the training and education of our volunteers, so that they know their role and they know their job within it. However, there is a recognition that volunteer numbers are decreasing and that there is a huge ask of volunteers. We need to be aware of that to continue to help support them.

Paul Sweeney: Does Gregor Muir share that impression of a decline in volunteer numbers and that sense of pressure, despite the good work that is done?

Gregor Muir: It is absolutely the case that volunteer numbers are in decline—we have seen the figures. About 18 per cent of Scotland's adult population volunteered for an organisation or group in 2023, which was the first time that the figure has been below 20 per cent in a good number of years. Pre-pandemic, in 2019—I know that this was a high-water mark—the figure was about 26 per cent. That is a significant decline in volunteer numbers in organisations. Volunteer numbers are definitely in decline.

I sit as a trustee on the board of Volunteer Scotland, which is the national centre for volunteering, so I see a lot of conversation around the issue. Volunteers are absolutely under pressure.

There is a big opportunity with employer-supported volunteering. Time is a big barrier to

getting involved. A lot of people have to work longer hours or pick up additional jobs because of cost of living pressures. If we want more people to get involved—particularly women, who might have caring responsibilities—more can be done to support them. Employer-supported volunteering is where employers give their staff time during the working week to volunteer with a local organisation or local club. The volunteers get a massive benefit as well, in terms of their mental health and their health and wellbeing. We know that getting involved in volunteering is good for you and good for the organisations that you support. That is one big opportunity that we could collectively explore in more depth.

Paul Sweeney: That is an interesting point. What is COSLA's perspective? How are councils' interactions with volunteers and support structures looked at? We have discussed funding pressures on local authorities. I ask Jillian Gibson to comment on that.

Jillian Gibson: I cannot speak confidently to that. As Ailsa Wyllie said, sport in Scotland would not exist without those volunteers and without leisure trusts and local authorities working closely through community sport hubs or sports councils to support the infrastructure that supports volunteering. As a group of officers and local authorities, we are starting to explore local volunteer policies for employees, as Gregor Muir mentioned. For example, what is COSLA's volunteer support policy and how do we filter that down? How do we work with local authorities on that? I am not saying that that is not a big piece of work, but it is not something that we or I have explored since I started in post. Gregor Muir and Ailsa Wyllie are far closer to the work of volunteers than I am.

Paul Sweeney: You mentioned volunteer support policies. Are local authorities looking to support their employees with volunteering? In many areas, the council is the biggest employer, along with the NHS. Could that make a big impact?

Jillian Gibson: Yes. Some local authorities have a volunteer policy and some do not; that is up to them. In the next year, I would like to explore with Volunteer Scotland its new volunteer charter to see whether we can take an approach that is not necessarily a once-for-Scotland approach but one that looks at the value and role of volunteering.

The Commonwealth games will be held next year. There will be a push for volunteers and I am sure that, when applications for volunteers open, the roles will be filled within the day. How can we take people's want and will to volunteer at these huge national and international events and support that down at the local level? How can we explore

that? Glasgow 2026 will be a smaller Commonwealth games than Glasgow 2014 and will not need as many volunteers. How do we work with sportscotland and other organisations to harness that want and will to volunteer at those very shiny, incredible events in order to support and sustain volunteering at a local level?

At the most recent national leadership group meeting, in May, we explored that issue with the organisations present, which included sportscotland and ourselves. Public Health Scotland is looking at the public sector, which is a huge employer in Scotland, and at whether we can do more to explore supported volunteering. We are in the early stages, but we have started those conversations.

Paul Sweeney: I return to the point that Gregor Muir made about the opportunity for employer-supported volunteering. As I mentioned, I volunteered for the Commonwealth games in 2014. It was great—the atmosphere around it all was huge. How do you harness the opportunity of a big sporting event to develop links with employers and maybe test out a model that could work in the longer term? Have COSLA, sportscotland and the Commonwealth games organising committee looked at that legacy opportunity?

Ailsa Wyllie: We are aware of the volunteer opportunities that will come with the games. As we have done in the past, we will be around the table for those conversations. However, I am not sure of the specifics of looking at employee support or any pilots.

I would like to add a comment on our young people in Scotland and their appetite to volunteer and be leaders in the sporting sector. We have a huge number of young people in our schools—more than 24,000—who are involved in the active schools programme and in education and leadership programmes in the sporting environment. I am pleased to report that, of those 24,000 young people, 12,500 are girls and young women in those leadership opportunities. They deliver a lot back to the sporting sector, and we are definitely seeing a huge increase in active schools delivery from our senior pupils and from partnerships with our colleges on work-based placements. Those programmes serve a purpose for those pupils and their own development.

We recognise that young people volunteer in sport from a young age. How do we hold on to that and ensure that they continue and have lifelong involvement with volunteering and sport?

Paul Sweeney: How might you put structures in place to sustain that level of interest and engagement through the adult years?

Ailsa Wyllie: The system for sport lends itself well to that. In schools and elsewhere in education, young people get the chance to be on leadership programmes, some of which come with a qualification. We are also working with our colleges. In 18 colleges, we have invested in active college campus co-ordinators who look at the participation levels of college students and work-based placements to ensure that the pupils who were active in secondary school can continue that journey. We work with our partners at Scottish Student Sport in universities in the same way. We are trying to embed volunteering within our young people through that system.

Brian Whittle: I have been listening intently to what you have been saying. I want to talk about the role of sport. Jillian Gibson, you started the conversation about the impact that physical activity can have on the community and about the culture of being involved. I was interested in the figure that you gave of inactivity costing £77 million per year. I have heard that figure before and I think that it is a massive underestimation, given things such as the impact of the lack of physical activity on mental ill-health, which has exploded. Further, obesity costs the Scottish economy over £5 billion in musculoskeletal conditions, heart disease and economic inactivity. I am interested in that. I am always trying to work out where that £77 million figure came from, because I think that it is a massive underestimation.

11:00

We have also talked about sport reaching across portfolios. We know that being physically active will have a positive impact on health outcomes and a positive impact in decreasing the pressure on our health service. However, it also has impacts on education, welfare and justice—it has impacts on all those different things. Given that as a background, do the witnesses think that there is a policy vacuum in terms of the importance of physical activity? We have talked about that, and you have agreed that physical activity is important, but do you think that there is a policy vacuum in relation to sport in Scotland? Could we have more focused policy development in that area? I ask Jillian Gibson to answer first.

Jillian Gibson: I do not know whether I would describe it as a policy vacuum, because the framework has taken sport and physical activity out of just sport and physical activity. It talks about a whole-systems approach. We can do more through cross-party conversations such as this and within the Government to elevate and escalate your point about the benefit of cross-policy conversations. We talk a lot about the brilliant, positive impacts of sport, Scotland's role

on the world sporting stage and Scotland as a destination for international and national competition. We are leading the way on lots of different things, but we do not leave ourselves lots of time and space to talk about the real impact that sport and physical activity have on everything else.

Are there clear policy intentions? I am nervous to say that that might mean looking again at the legislation, which I think is from the 1980s, around local government making adequate provision for leisure and culture and about what adequate means.

We can be more ambitious. Looking to other countries, we see that the UK Government made an announcement about sport last week and that other countries invest in data so that they can understand the investment that is needed to make a difference. We can do more around commitments, investment and data to make that difference, so that those who do not have a portfolio foothold in sport—those who work in justice, education and welfare, for example—understand the importance of being active, whether through organised sport, walking more or whatever and how it benefits their policy and legislative objectives.

We have a long way to go, but I think that our framework and the conversations in our sport and physical activity special interest group, the leadership group and the development group are the right approach. We started well. We need to be clearer about the numbers that you mentioned around the costs of obesity and physical inactivity. We need to be much clearer and more up front; we need to feed our conversations into early intervention and prevention policies; and we need to face the fact that we have to invest, otherwise we will have a different public health crisis 10 years from now.

Brian Whittle: Ailsa Wyllie, Scotland is really good on the international stage in many sports, and we are very good at developing high-level performance. We have always been like that, but participation and physical literacy is declining at the grass roots. We have talked about investment and a commitment to doubling the sports budget, which has been on the decline since I have been an MSP. Guess what? There are outcomes from that. How do we develop policy to improve rates of participation among children and young people? It is not about developing kids for sport—developing kids through sport is probably the better expression. What policies do we need to put in place to tackle those issues?

Ailsa Wyllie: We need more of what we are already doing, with greater collaboration between the partners that we currently work with. The school environment must be joined up with the

physical education, physical activity and sport agenda, and we must ensure that high-quality PE is delivered throughout primary and secondary education. We can keep working with our partners at Education Scotland on that one and think about how that is translated into opportunities that are provided outwith schools. Our commitment at sportscotland is to deliver our corporate plan “Sport for Life” and to continue to support the sporting system, so that it is in place for children and young people to develop their skills and participate during the school day and in the club and community space.

Brian Whittle: On that point, one of the most dangerous phrases that we can use is “in my day”, but we can mark the decline of sport from the late 1970s through the teachers strike in the 1980s. Here it is—in my day, in Ayrshire, there were 36 teams playing rugby; now, there are six. That is a clear decline. We cannot go back to where it was, with teachers running sports teams and so on in their own time. It would be very difficult to go back to that, so we need to find another vehicle that gives kids the opportunity to be physically active and to participate in sport, if that is what they want to do. How do we do it?

Ailsa Wyllie: I go back to what is in place already. There is what we are doing with the investment to ensure that all parts of the system are working and that schools have the right environment and support to play their part. There is then sportscotland and its local authority partners on the ground that come in to provide support outside the school day and in the club and community environment.

We all appreciate the reality of the decline in participation, volunteering and investment, which has been talked about today. We are doing the best with what we have, but we can do more.

Brian Whittle: Gregor Muir, how do we bring the national governing bodies into the framework?

Gregor Muir: A lot of them have already bought into the principles of the framework. Much of the challenge is in their trying to balance meeting additional objectives with their day-to-day operational pressures, which include everything that we have said about funding, managing volunteers and ensuring that the club network is there. All the day job elements are quite hard when trying to think about how to link into a national objective on a long-term reduction in the burden of non-communicable disease—that is not really day-to-day operational work.

Those at leadership level have to provide capacity for staff to engage, provide support and make links with wider partners and other sectors. Any sport can put local partnerships in place between clubs, transport operators and schools,

and we, as intermediary bodies, can help to facilitate some of the stuff that the governing bodies do not have the direct resource for. A lot of it comes back to resource and the capacity to engage fully. From our perspective as an intermediary body, that is about how we can support some of that work and help to make those connections.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I have been listening intently from the beginning of the meeting, and I am quite confused as to whether we have good data or we do not have good data, because both things were said at the start. Which is it?

Jillian Gibson: I am happy to come in on that. It is my favourite subject at the moment. We do have good data and we do not have good data.

As you have heard from Ailsa Wyllie, sportscotland collects huge amounts of data on active schools programmes, community sport hubs and governing bodies. It holds all of that data and reports back to the Government and publicly on the data that it gathers and collects. So, sportscotland has good data.

There are also the Scottish health and Scottish household surveys, which are undertaken every one or two years. That is the only other information that we can use to represent physical activity and sport at a national level. That is where we have room for improvement at a national level, so that we can do things that your colleagues have talked about today, such as understanding and removing barriers and then being intentional and targeted alongside the universal support.

In local government, through the LGBF, we must do better at the national picture. Earlier, I mentioned the work with the local government benchmarking programme board and local authorities to improve what the LGBF says. However, even those bodies and their constituent parts do not give us better data. We have an opportunity right now. Do we follow other countries and the routes that they have taken? Sport England and Sport Ireland are comparable countries; they invest in their ability to gather specific data and information at almost a population level about participation, barriers and inequalities and then make policy and resourcing decisions based on that data.

Now, this might sound as though I am going to contradict myself, but we already have a lot of data that we could put in a better place. For example, the Scottish Library and Information Council has an incredible data platform that layers multiple levels of data sets on who goes to libraries, who does and does not have library membership, what age they are and what

background they are from, to understand the profile of library users.

Local authorities and leisure trusts have data through their management information systems, but we have no way to aggregate it at a national level at the moment—that is 32 authorities and 25 leisure trusts with their own data, which they gather and use for local information intelligence resourcing policy. We do not have a national platform like SLIC's to show the national picture, aggregate lots of different data sets to understand that picture and make better national policy and investment decisions. We are on the journey towards that, though. There is general recognition nationally among the organisations that are responsible for that data that we need to do better, and we are trying to have joined-up collaborative conversations about how to do better with the data that we have and to explore what data we do not have and what we need.

However, I imagine that investing in data is an unpopular thing when multiple things need investment. We need a collaborative conversation about whether we need to invest in the data to do all the things that committee members have mentioned today.

Sandesh Gulhane: Yes. Would it not be great if there was interoperability and a stable form of information technology to get all that information?

Jillian Gibson: Yes.

Sandesh Gulhane: That would be wonderful.

You spoke about local government needing to do better. Earlier, we heard about how Dumfries and Galloway Council has put in place mitigations based on 12 years of data. How much better is Dumfries and Galloway Council doing on participation in sports as a result of that?

Jillian Gibson: I cannot tell you that. We could tell you what is happening on an active schools level, but not every authority takes Dumfries and Galloway Council's approach, with its pupil survey on participation and physical activity in sport, which arose from a decision that the council made in 2013. Ailsa Wyllie would have the data and information that could tell you about the difference in terms of active schools participation between Dumfries and Galloway Council and other councils, although she probably does not have that in front of her right now.

There will be other examples of councils that have invested in surveys and tools, but it just so happens that I have information about Dumfries and Galloway Council in the papers before me just now. Dumfries and Galloway Council and its health and social care partnership work closely together and are invested in using data to make decisions and understand their population. I

cannot say which of the 31 other authorities take that approach, but I can certainly find out a little bit more information about how local data and intelligence is gathered and used.

I know that Dumfries and Galloway is committed to doing that local-level survey, but I do not know about other authorities off the top of my head.

11:15

Sandesh Gulhane: I do not want to pick on you, but, although it is possible that something might be done with the information that we are asking people to collect, as is the case in Dumfries and Galloway, I do not know what the outcome measurements are and whether we can tell whether the mitigations that have been put in place and the changes that we are talking about have worked. It is important to know whether you have spent money in the right place to make things better or whether you have missed that mark and need to change your approach, but I am just not hearing evidence about that. There is no point in getting data for data's sake. What I want to hear is that the data that you have is telling you whether something that you have done has worked. That does not seem to be happening.

Jillian Gibson: It is difficult to say that it is not helping at a national level. I can certainly submit all the information from Dumfries and Galloway Council. I feel like I am picking on that council, but it sent me its physical activity report yesterday, and I know that it is doing exactly what you suggest with its survey—it measures the investment that has been made and the impact that that has had in terms of levels of participation, and it then decides what interventions it needs to put in place.

We had a conversation in COSLA yesterday about whether the investment that we are making is achieving the outcomes that were set out. A number of local authority officers spoke about that. We probably do not look at finance that way across the public sector. That is probably not a discussion for me today, as it is not part of my responsibility, but, especially in the case of physical activity and sport, we need to know whether the money that we invest locally and nationally is making a difference. If it is not, we need to decide what we need to do differently.

Sandesh Gulhane: That is the point of collecting data. I think that people would be shocked to hear that we do not seem to have outcome-driven, focused interventions, not just in the area of sport but across local government and national Government. It is vital that we do that.

I want to ask about data in a slightly broader sense. Across the world, what is the gold standard that we should be aiming to achieve when it

comes to data? What do you think that achieving that would cost?

Jillian Gibson: I will go with your second question first. I have no idea what that would cost. I am not a data expert and I rely on colleagues in Government, in the Improvement Service and at the Digital Office for Scottish local government to support those data conversations.

On the gold standard, I can talk only to the experience that I have had with the countries that I have worked with so far. The gold standard is to have enough data to be able to achieve the outcome of having more people being more active more often and having that data held in one place. What do we need to know to be able to make the decisions that we need to make in order to have a more active population? How do we use the data to ensure that we understand what we have put in and what we have got out of it at the other end?

On the question of whether we have the data, we absolutely have it—32 local authorities will tell you that data is spilling out of their ears. COSLA, SOLACE, the Improvement Service and the Scottish Government are working on a local government data platform, and I think that local government reports outwardly on a million data points. What we do not have is a publicly accessible national repository for the relevant data on sport and physical activity that would enable us to go in and see where we are right now and how various parts of the data intersect with each other. That does not exist at the moment, but that would be my gold standard.

Sandesh Gulhane: So, we have all the data that we need to achieve better participation in sport but we do not have a national repository for it. Am I paraphrasing you correctly?

Jillian Gibson: To a certain extent, because I cannot tell you that we have all the data that we need without having all the data that we have in one place. I cannot tell you exactly all the data that all 32 local authorities collect around physical activity, leisure and sport to make their decisions, because they do not have to report that anywhere outwardly at the moment. They use it internally to look at outcome measures, participation levels, membership figures and so on. Their only imperative is to collect that local data and make local decisions based on it. I cannot tell you whether we have all that information in exactly the same form across 32 authorities, other than with regard to the active schools level data, the local government benchmarking framework, the Scottish health survey and the Scottish household survey data. That is the data improvement work that, as I explained earlier, we are exploring in partnership with Community Leisure UK and sportscotland.

Sandesh Gulhane: Okay, so we need to ask the Scottish Government to create a national repository for that data. Apart from the data that is collected by councils, what other data should be in that repository?

Jillian Gibson: Data from sportscotland, Community Leisure UK and the census, as well as health data—there is a lot of data that can be added into one place to make better decisions. It is not all physical activity data; there are lots of proxy-level data that we can use to help us make better decisions.

Sandesh Gulhane: If we were to do that, it would make a huge difference to our understanding of barriers and how to change them.

Jillian Gibson: It would help us to make fewer assumption-based decisions and make more data and evidence-based decisions.

Sandesh Gulhane: Thank you very much.

The Convener: I will bring Brian Whittle in for a very brief question and a very brief answer, because we have already run quite a bit over time.

Brian Whittle: When we read the household data, it basically tells us the number of people who are active; it does not break the data down into SIMD areas. My concern is that we are moving participation further and further up the SIMD groups—I have seen that during the decades that I have been involved in this area. Sport is almost becoming a middle-class activity, and the opportunity to participate in it is reducing across the whole country. However, the data does not tell us that. Is that something that you recognise?

Jillian Gibson: Yes.

Brian Whittle: There you go.

The Convener: Well, the witnesses heard what I said about brief answers. I thank you all for your evidence this morning.

This is our final meeting before the summer recess. The committee's next meeting will take place on Tuesday 2 September 2025, and further details of that meeting will be published towards the end of August. That concludes the public part of our meeting today.

11:22

Meeting continued in private until 12:00.

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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