HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 30 April 2008

Session 3

£5.00

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by RR Donnelley.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 30 April 2008

HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE
12th Meeting 2008, Session 3

CONVENER

*Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP)
*Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP)
*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
*Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP)
Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Shirley Robertson OBE

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Tracey White

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Douglas Thornton

ASSISTANT CLERK

David Slater

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Health and Sport Committee

Wednesday 30 April 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Christine Grahame): I welcome everyone to the Health and Sport Committee's 12th meeting in 2008. I remind all present to ensure that mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off. We have received apologies from Ross Finnie, who is, unfortunately, still unwell. I have e-mailed him our best wishes.

Agenda item 1 is to decide on taking business in private. Under item 4, we will consider whether to take further evidence on the Public Health (Scotland) Bill. Under item 5, we will consider a consultation paper that we have received from the Finance Committee. Are we agreed to take items 4 and 5 in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Pathways into Sport Inquiry

10:02

The Convener: For agenda item 2, I am pleased to welcome Shirley Robertson, who will give evidence as part of our pathways into sport inquiry. During the first phase of the inquiry, which has proved to be extremely interesting, we are taking evidence from successful sportspeople.

As members are aware, Shirley Robertson is a Scottish competitive sailor who has twice won Olympic gold—she puts committee members to shame—in Sydney in 2000 and in Athens in 2004. Members will find a brief timeline of her main sporting achievements in their papers.

If you want to make some opening remarks, that would be helpful. How did you get into your chosen sport? Our notes tell us that you started quite young.

Shirley Robertson OBE: First, thank you for inviting me. It is a pleasure to be here.

You mentioned that I have two gold medals. Usually, when people hear that, they imagine that I was one of those children who could do everything at school—that I was picked first for the hockey team and could do gymnastics and catch a ball. Really, I was none of those things. For me, primary school sport was a bit of a blur of disappointment. I was lucky if I hit the rounders ball. My dreaded memories are of doing something creative on a mat—

The Convener: I recognise myself in that. You have my sympathies so far.

Shirley Robertson: I still come out in a cold sweat when I think about it.

It was not until secondary school that I really started enjoying sport. I was a great swimmer—our school was lucky enough to have a pool—and I was taken skiing on the dry slope at Polmont and went off skiing.

Two years into my time at senior school, the teachers went on strike and all extra-curricular sport was stopped. I grew up in the small village of Menstrie, where we did not have a huge amount of facilities. I still remember the frustration—that caged feeling of not having any kind of outlet, having had two years of hockey practice, swimming and skiing after school. It was a very frustrating time.

I suppose that I then started to take sailing a lot more seriously. Like many people in the sport, I was introduced to sailing by my father, who had done his national service in the Navy. Although he was no great sailor, he met a friend who sailed dinghies—he built a dinghy in the garage—and we

joined a small family club called Loch Ard Sailing Club. We sailed there every weekend.

When hockey and swimming galas stopped, I took much more interest in sailing and wanted to go on Saturday and Sunday and during the week, too. A lot of it was social—I enjoyed meeting friends there and wanted to go every weekend—but I also loved the activity and found it great fun. Being in charge of a boat gives youngsters a tremendous sense of freedom. Long before I could drive a car, I was driving a boat.

I raced at the club, but I had no great passion to go to the Olympics. At that time there was not even an Olympic class for women so the idea had not entered my head, but my father dragged me along to a couple of races. I went to an event at Linlithgow loch and was spotted by the Scottish senior coach. I am not entirely sure what he spotted—I think that it was tenacity, rather than talent. I finished last in the event, but he invited me to train with the Scottish men that winter. At that time, we had a strong senior squad in Scotland. There were eight of them and me. It was a baptism of fire; we sailed at Cumbrae every weekend that winter—rain, hail, snow or shine—and I learned a lot. In sailing, and in sport generally, you need mental toughness. I emerged from those winters as a pretty tough cookie who could take on anything that the weather could throw at me. That was my great break; I was in the system and had been spotted. That is still often the hard part. An element of luck still seems to be involved, because you have to be in the right place at the right time to be spotted by the right person.

To progress any further, I had to do a lot more sailing, usually in the south of England. My poor dad drove up and down a lot at the weekends. There were still not any women in the Olympics and I was sailing in a non-Olympic class. I had never competed abroad and I went abroad for the first time at the age of 18; that is very different from the situation today.

The next turning point for me came in 1988. I remember watching the Seoul Olympics and seeing a 30-second clip of Mike McIntyre, who is Scottish—he is from Helensburgh—winning a gold medal in sailing. I thought, "I've met Mike. He's just normal." He had a similar background to me and had grown up in Scotland. That winter, a single-handed boat for women was announced and I thought, "If Mike can do it, perhaps I'll give it a go." That was me on the start of the Olympic path—I was going to use the term "Olympic success", but that was a long time coming. I had to drive to the south coast of England and was short of funding. Funding for all Olympic sport was dreadful at that time, and participants relied largely on parents and grants. I applied for grants from the local council when I was at school and from the college when I studied in Edinburgh. It always seemed to be that a few hundred pounds here or there would keep it all afloat and keep me going.

I went to the first world championships with that Olympic boat and the Brits were last, second last, third last and fourth last. I was fourth last, so I suppose that I was the best Brit. After that, I was lucky enough to get sponsorship from a Scottish construction company; I got a car and a bit of money and all of a sudden I was afloat. Looking back, it was all dreadfully unprofessional, but I got to the Olympics—I qualified and was the best Brit—in Barcelona. I can still close my eyes and remember the medal ceremony, which I was not involved in. I thought, "I will come back to the Olympics—it will be me standing there, listening to my anthem and watching my flag go up the pole."

To be successful at the Olympics, I suppose that you have to go there and see the work ethic, the resources and the funding that are required. Until I went, I had no idea what would be required for me to win a gold medal. I worked as hard as I could and raised as much money as I could. Then, I went to Atlanta. That was before lottery funding was available. I had a realistic medal chance, but I finished fourth, which was disappointing. I had a winter of post-Olympic depression, but I came back and I was still hungry to fulfil my Olympic dreams—and I won in Sydney.

Lottery funding came into place in 1998, and we saw the direct results in 2000. We were winning medals in all the technical sports, such as sailing, track cycling and rowing. We came back with a real medal haul from those games. After that, I changed class to a team event—the yngling class—and I came back in Athens. I surprised myself by winning that event—looking back, it was a tremendous achievement to change class, to start sailing with a team and to work that through.

That is my career in a nutshell. It seems easy just to rattle it all off, missing out the Olympic highs and lows that were involved. For sure, it has been a rollercoaster, and it remains so today.

The Convener: I would not say that it sounded easy to us, rather that you were very determined. Before we proceed, would you be content if a photographer took photographs while you are here?

Shirley Robertson: Yes, that is fine.

The Convener: Thank you. I invite questions from the committee. I was going to say that I see a sea of hands, but I must stop those metaphors. Mary Scanlon will begin.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Thank you for that interesting introduction. You mentioned that lottery funding was introduced in 1998. I get the impression that things are much

better now for people who are coming through. There is no doubt that you depended quite a bit on family finance to go to the south of England and so on. Are people in Scotland who are serious about sailing, or who are starting off, guaranteed an easier pathway now? Do people in Scotland still have to go to the south of England to progress in sailing? Are there additional facilities in Scotland where people can progress to your level? From what you said, it sounded as if you went to the south of England almost every weekend.

Shirley Robertson: There is a pathway now, although I do not know that it is guaranteed. Now, the difficult transition is from being a club sailor or a keen junior sailor to getting on to that pathway. That is often where the gap lies. There is quite good youth training in Scotland, but the senior level training to which I was party has gone, in essence. I trained with the best men, who were a lot older than me, but my goodness I learned a lot. That possibility has gone now. For me, that is the main worry.

In many ways, more things are centralised in the south of England than was the case when I started out. In part, that is because there is a national centre in Weymouth, which is the venue for the 2012 Olympics. It is a fantastic centre, and many sailors have moved there. We have some good Scottish sailors, who live in Weymouth part of the time. With cheap air travel, they can come home more regularly than I was able to do. The transition is not easy, but a pathway exists.

Mary Scanlon: I may be wrong, but I have always thought of sailing as a fairly elite sport, and not really a sport for people who have not got much money. I am not sure how people from all backgrounds can get involved in sailing. Is the pathway restricted, and should it be open to more people? Should more be done in schools to introduce people to the sport?

10:15

Shirley Robertson: In France, sailing is on the national curriculum—children learn to sail in the final two years of primary school, I think. I have been at centres in France where children learn to sail. They have a great time. Sailing is almost a national sport in France—there are little boats everywhere you go—and the country is extremely supportive of its elite-level sailors.

I would like sailing to be part of the national curriculum. I am not suggesting that pupils should do it every week, but they should get the opportunity at least to have a go. One thing that we have a lot of in Scotland is water—it is in abundance and it is free.

The Convener: Particularly today.

Mary Scanlon: Do you agree that sailing is still a fairly elite sport in Scotland, or is there a pathway into it that is open to everyone?

Shirley Robertson: I disagree. I think that sailing is much less of an elite sport in Scotland than it is on the Isle of Wight, where I now live. It is harder to get local children involved there than it would be here.

It is possible to buy a boat for a few hundred pounds. In the club that I was a member of, no one had a flash boat or was very wealthy. People just enjoyed the activity. The wind and the water are free resources—there is no need to fill up the boat with petrol every time you go sailing.

It is hard to make the transition from sailing in a club to sailing at a higher level. That is when it becomes more costly. I have been involved in an Royal Yachting Association of Scotland initiative, which, through the active schools programme, has given children the opportunity to have a go at sailing. Over the past four years, the organisation has taken 8,000 children sailing. That is no mean feat. As a sport and an activity, sailing has longevity—people can do it from the cradle to the grave. I hope that kids will run with it, whether they pick it up now or later.

The Convener: When and why was sailing introduced as part of the curriculum in France?

Shirley Robertson: I do not know when, but sailing has been part of the curriculum in France for at least as long as I have been racing there—in other words, for a good 20 years.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): You spoke about the highs and lows. If you were in our shoes and you had to make resource or policy decisions, are there any of those lows that you would wave a magic wand to address? Is there anything that you would fix, if you were a politician? What would you do to change the situation for sailors who are would-be Olympians?

Shirley Robertson: Often, the frustration is to do with coaching—you have probably heard that from everyone else who has given evidence. Getting good-quality coaching and getting enough commitment from a coach are the issues. In most sports, especially in Scotland, most coaches work on a voluntary basis. The fact that it is extremely hard to get coaching of a high enough standard or to get enough commitment from a coach has been a major frustration.

Bridging the gap between junior level and senior level often involves a hike in equipment costs, simply because more equipment is required. Everyone asks for money, but some kind of help in that department would be beneficial, too. Coaching is a fundamental problem. The hardest thing is to attract professional coaches here. Just

having someone who is positive about the sport and who is working at the highest level has tremendous knock-on effects.

Helen Eadie: Did you ever hit a low that made you think that you would never succeed? Was that associated with any of the issues that you have mentioned?

Shirley Robertson: Many times. Lots of people try to win an Olympic gold medal, but not many of them succeed. I often had days when I thought that it would never happen. One of my lowest points was during my last campaign. Eighteen months before the Athens Olympics, one of my crew developed a heart problem, which meant that I was a crew member down. She owned the boat, so we had no boat. We did not have a sponsor or a coach, either. Although I was an Olympic gold medallist, I did not think that I could turn the situation round in 18 months.

The most positive thing that happened was that I got a good coach. He saw something in us and believed that he could make it happen for us. Often things have a momentum of their own—if something is going to happen, it happens. With the right people involved, we made it happen. We got a good team member, raised money, gained sponsorship from Volvo and were off and running. The toughest thing is getting the right quality of people involved, with the right passion, who want to make it happen for and with you.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am interested in how we can get young people involved. You said that you were motivated by your father's enthusiasm, but many young people's parents cannot afford a boat or do not have such enthusiasm. My husband is involved with a sea scouts troop, which is hugely popular. Young people love it, for some of the reasons that you have given—the freedom of being out on the water and having great fun. However, the sea scouts are the only group of which I am aware that encourages young people to take part in sailing. How can young people get involved if they do not have the family backing that you had?

Shirley Robertson: It is important to give them the experience of sailing, as they may like it and pick it up when they are in a position to do it. That happened to me with skiing. My parents had never skied, but at the age of 13 I was taken to Polmont and instantly loved it. After that, I went skiing with a scout group. One of the crew with whom I won the gold medal in my previous campaign grew up near a reservoir close to Heathrow. Her parents had never sailed—her dad was a lorry driver—but one day she went to the reservoir, paid 50p and went sailing. She will probably win another gold medal at the Olympics this year.

We could offer sailing clubs incentives to make them more accessible. In some sports, it can be intimidating to walk through the door of a club. The active schools programme is good at managing the relationship between schools and clubs. If we encourage that further, entering a club will become much less intimidating. If someone has already been to a club with their school and has met the coaches and volunteers, it is easier for them to walk through the door again.

Rhoda Grant: In answer to a question from Mary Scanlon, you said that there is a difficult step between being part of a club and the more competitive level of going for the Olympics or the Commonwealth games. The problem seems to come down to finance. Is it easier now for people to get sponsorship or lottery funding, so that they can take that step?

Shirley Robertson: Getting on to the lottery funding ladder still involves a big jump. Someone may be a good club sailor and a member of the Scottish squad and may train every winter, but it is still tricky for them to take the next step. The problem exists not just in my sport but in many sports. If there is any area in which we can help, that is it. Once our athletes are up and running and are part of the British system, they are relatively well taken care of. There are other things that they need, but the Scottish Institute of Sport helps tremendously with those. The more personal service that it provides gives athletes the edge in many sports.

The transition between club and international level is hard. Funding for extra coaching and equipment is needed to give people a lift up and to help them with that transition. In my sport, a lot happens in the south-west of England, so when people become involved it is tough on their parents and hard for them at school. I was lucky, because my school really supported me and gave me the odd Friday off when I needed it. My college was also very understanding. We could make a difference in that area.

Rhoda Grant: I am not sure whether I have understood you correctly. Is the difficulty not in gaining financial support but in making the step up from club level to making a sport a career?

Shirley Robertson: In order to get lottery funding, a person has to have performed on the international circuit. How can people pay for that and guarantee success? For me, that is the hardest part, which is not well funded. Also, there are not coaching resources at that level.

Rhoda Grant: People have to fund themselves to get to a level at which they can secure funding to help them to get to the top of their sport.

Shirley Robertson: It happens in all sports. Plenty of parents are remortgaging their houses to go to the Alps, to give young skiers a boost that might enable them to reach a level at which they

can get lottery funding. We still rely on huge parental support for young people who want to get into the British system.

Rhoda Grant: I am sorry, convener, I think that I am hogging the discussion, but I want to ask another question.

The Convener: I dare not reply. I think that Rhoda Grant is going for gold.

Rhoda Grant: What needs to be put in place to make it easier for young people to make the step that we are talking about? Does the Scottish Institute of Sport have a role to play? Would a package of funding, perhaps for a year, help young people to make the transition?

Shirley Robertson: Yes, it absolutely would. The Scottish Institute of Sport knows the athletes and has a high level of expertise.

We often take a bit of a punt with young athletes. We do not know whether they will go on to become champions, because so many factors must fall into place for that to happen. We need to take a punt and say to young athletes, "We will support you for 18 months and give you £X for good coaching. We'll give you resources early, so that it is not left to your school or your parents to help you out." The Scottish Institute of Sport would be a great vehicle for such an approach.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): At our meeting last week we heard from Craig Brewster, the player-manager of Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club. He was concerned about the amount of travelling that his young footballers have to do. For example, players might have to go to Kilmarnock for a game and then travel back up to Inverness.

You travel regularly to south-east England and you said that your sport is becoming centred on the academy at Weymouth. Could we provide more facilities and resources to enable Scotland-based sailors to do more training here? I imagine that that would reduce problems to do with schooling and the burden on family finances.

Shirley Robertson: Your question brings us back to coaching. When I was growing up in Scotland there was a great senior circuit. A lot of seniors were racing in Scotland, so I had a lot of home competition. I travelled south to compete in youth competitions and women's competitions, but when I came home I raced against the guys at a high level.

I no longer race in Scotland, but my perception is that the senior circuit has waned. Although there are still quite strong youth sailing squads and youth classes are prospering, senior racing is not prospering. I am not sure what we do about that. I suppose that things go in cycles—there was a group of men who were all good and were competing and now there is not. I do not know how we address that.

When I was growing up, our governing body in Scotland had a good coaching staff and was very racing orientated. Now, looking on from the outside, I see that the governing body is much more participation orientated. It is about getting bums on boats and getting that entry level right. There is much less focus on racing, performance and medals. When I was growing up it was the other way around. I have not really answered your question but it is not possible to give a straightforward answer.

10:30

Michael Matheson: Is the governing body the Royal Yachting Association of Scotland? We can look at how it is balancing the programmes.

Shirley Robertson: Yes. Partly, it is evolution. When I was racing here, RYA Scotland had staff who were very racing orientated. They put the squad systems in place and were keen to get results. Now it is much more about entry level. The staff work with schools, liaise with the clubs and work with the active schools programme. There are different people in the governing body, so there is a different emphasis. There is much less emphasis on coaching and racing.

Michael Matheson: That is helpful.

My second question is about lottery funding. It appears from your experience that when lottery funding kicked in, it gave you that extra boost to move up to a level that, previously, you could not reach for lack of financial support. Reflecting on your comments to my colleague Rhoda Grant about trying to get on to the international circuit and to get up to that level of funding, is lottery funding pitched at the right level or should it kick in earlier, to support the development of athletes? How big a part does lottery funding play in the development of elite athletes?

Shirley Robertson: It plays an enormous part, not just in terms of the money that each athlete gets, but the money that the governing body gets. Sailing has a successful governing body and we win lots of medals, so we get a big pot of cash. The governing body does things that we would never have dreamed of ten years ago, such as technical development work and meteorology. For the Olympics in Beijing, the governing body has rented an entire hotel, with its own chef, and it will ship all its own food. Those things would never have been even on the horizon 10 years ago. It is, quite rightly, a whole different level of professionalism and we see the results. When I went to Atlanta there were many things that I could not do and I just accepted that.

Yes, lottery funding should kick in earlier. That is my point. There is a gap and it would be of great benefit to Scottish athletes if we could bridge it in whatever way, because that is the hard bit. That is the tough time when you are scraping around for grants and desperately trying to get your parents to help you out. When you start to get results on the international circuit you start to get lottery funding and life becomes a bit easier financially, although you have other issues.

It is also easier to get commercial funding when you are a proven performer than when you are just starting out, but there is an element of luck and fortune in so much of it. I remember my first commercial sponsor. I had a boyfriend and his parents had a little boat that was moored next to the sponsor's. That is just how it is. Slightly later in my career I was sponsored by British Telecom, which went on to become a long-term sponsor. I sat next to somebody at a dinner who ran a department in BT. I was off to San Francisco the next day and he asked me where I would be staying. I said that I did not know. Typically, we camped on beaches or stayed in cars. He said that he would give me enough money to stay in a hotel room the next night. I did and I wrote to him. That relationship lasted 10 to 12 years. So much is just down to luck. We would be doing a good thing if we could take that element of luck away.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I congratulate you on your modest presentation. As you were going through it I thought, "Oh gosh, I could do that. Maybe I will give it a go."

The Convener: You know you could.

Shirley Robertson: It is never too late.

Ian McKee: Then reality set in.

There are several different things for which one looks in gaining Olympic medals. There is obviously a tremendous personal achievement, for which we all applaud you. There is also the benefit that the country feels good when people know that Scotland has won a gold medal—everyone feels a bit happier. One of the committee's interests in pathways into sport is testing the theory that, if someone does well and gains medals, that encourages all sorts of other people to take up that sport who otherwise would not. Has that happened in your case? Are more young people going into sailing because of your success and the publicity that that has gained?

Shirley Robertson: I do not know whether, at entry level, that is necessarily the reason why people take up sailing. There are other reasons. However, they have perhaps continued with the sport because we have seen a lot of success. I was the first woman to win a gold medal in sailing, and the girls perhaps look at me and think, "She's nothing special. I could do that." There is an element of that. Once the spell has been broken, they see that it is possible and success breeds success. We have seen that in sailing, and the youth who are now coming through the system aspire to do nothing but win—that is their only goal.

Success has bred success, but it is difficult to quantify whether that is what attracts people initially to the sport. The worst thing that can happen is that young people decide to give it a go but the facilities, resources and teaching are not there. For me, that would be disappointing. I hope that, if people are interested in sailing, the clubs are now welcoming and have a youth training structure so that they can enjoy it.

Ian McKee: I do not know whether you are still a member of the club of which you were initially a member. Are there more or fewer members than when you joined?

Shirley Robertson: I am an honorary member of a lot of clubs now. People who win medals get access to quite a lot of places. However, I suspect that there are fewer members and that the club is less active than it was.

Ian McKee: Why do you think that that is?

Shirley Robertson: For the same reasons that other sports would give you. People's interest has been awakened to a lot of interesting things to do now. If I were a teenager now, would I want to go to Loch Ard Sailing Club every weekend and paint the changing rooms in the winter? Probably not. Things are different now from how they were 20 years ago. The hardest thing is keeping people involved, especially through the teenage years. That is difficult. The sport and the facilities need to be attractive and there needs to be a pathway.

Ian McKee: Is it a fair summary to say that your success does not seem to have attracted more people into the sport, although it has increased the ambition of those who are already in it? You are saying that there are fewer people in the clubs but that they are stimulated to go on to higher things.

Shirley Robertson: Yes. That is my perception from travelling around Scotland and England. However, if you spoke to the RYA—nationally, not just in Scotland—it would say that the number of entry-level members was up. The governing body has been working hard at entry level; the problem is in retaining those people. I think that every sport feels that. Until a sport is attractive, it is hard to retain club members, especially if the facilities are a bit rough. Expectations are so much higher than they were when I was a junior growing up in Scotland.

Ian McKee: In your introductory remarks, you said that you came last in a competition, yet you were spotted as having talent. I found that quite

strange. Now, with your knowledge of sailing and your success, how would you choose someone like that? Putting modesty to one side for the moment, what did they see in you? I have come last in many competitions, but no one has ever spotted my talent.

The Convener: We are still waiting.

Shirley Robertson: Your time will come.

That happened when I was racing in a senior competition aged 13, so I suppose they saw tenacity. Now, I am trying to spot and it is hard. I am looking for willingness never to give up, single-minded determination to make it work and, obviously, a level of physicality, but often I just go with my gut instinct. If somebody has been around a sport enough, they can see potential. In some sports perhaps it is possible to measure the height, width and growth of people in that age group and work out whether they will be top sportspeople, but sporting success is about much more than physical elements; it is so much in the head that people must have the right attitude and must want to make it happen.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I apologise for coming in late; I was held up.

The Convener: He was in training for something. We will settle for that.

Shirley Robertson: Ten press-ups.

Dr Simpson: I wish, I wish.

I was lucky that I got the opportunity to taste most sports, which is important. I have to say that, in the week that I was trying out sailing, I managed to capsize a wayfarer three times, which I am told is quite difficult. I decided that it was not the sport for me, but the important thing was that I got a taste of it.

I have two questions, one of which is about tasters. You talked about the active schools programme and said that 8,000 children are trying out sailing, which sounds quite a lot. We have heard that 6,000 are trying out curling. However, those are quite modest numbers. The cohort of youngsters is 54,000 each year, so 8,000 out of the whole group is not much.

You say that the active schools programme is doing a good job. Should we expand that and, if so, how? What constitutes a taster?

Shirley Robertson: It is important to taste a lot of activities, not only traditional sport—running, jumping and hitting a ball—which did not rock my boat, if you will excuse another pun. I am a great fan of giving people a taster so that, whether they take up a sport when they are at school or in adult life, they will have done it before and will remember a positive experience.

The most important thing in tasters is a high quality of teaching. In my sport, I am always on my soapbox about that. We all know that, if we had a bad or unenthusiastic teacher in any subject, we never go back to it. We loved our favourite subjects at school probably because they had the best teachers. I hope that the governing bodies are sharpening up the control that they have and the quality of teaching at entry level, because it is critical that we have the best teachers at that level and at the taster sessions.

Obviously, I would like my sport to be on the national curriculum—I would like more sport to be on it. School is where it is at. School children are a captive audience, so let us get them moving and try to give them as many opportunities as we can. I grew up in a tiny village in the middle of Scotland, and it was frustrating not be able to experience more and have better facilities. Even when I go back to my parents' house now, I can remember the sense of not really having much to do. There is only so often that one can cycle round and round the block or run up the hill and back. That is why more sport in school is critical and would make the biggest difference. Getting people more involved in sport would make the difference to elite-level sport, but it would also get people a lot more active. Activity is habit forming and, if we can start that habit as early as possible, we will be on to a good thing.

10:45

Dr Simpson: My second question leads on from that. The importance of coaching has become clear to us from the evidence of earlier witnesses. What is the coaching structure in your sport? Do the coaches pay for themselves? Are there modular courses to different levels and standards? Who pays for those? Who encourages people to go into coaching? Have we got it right in your sport?

Shirley Robertson: We have not got it right, and that goes up almost to Olympic level. That is partly because there is unwillingness to pay for the best people, which is frustrating. It does not matter what they cost, because the knock-on effects are so huge. Also, we do not have an avenue for the best sailors to roll back in. To me, coaching is not an inviting career. There are so many more lucrative and exciting things that I could do—things that are not bogged down by bureaucracy. I do not want to be stuck at a desk. I want to have the autonomy to work with my athletes as much as I can.

There is a coaching structure, but I suspect that people at the entry level pay for it themselves. In Scotland, the coaches are all volunteers, and it is difficult to get people.

Dr Simpson: That is helpful.

The Convener: I have little to add because most of my questions have been asked. However, like Michael Matheson and others, I am concerned about the gravitational pull of the Olympics and the Weymouth centre. Given your experience, do you think that things will get worse for Scotland in all sports or will the fact that the Commonwealth games will come here in 2014 redress what appears to be an imbalance?

Shirley Robertson: The Commonwealth games will not affect my sport, but they are a tremendous opportunity for sport in general. The run-up to 2012 and 2014 will put sport high on the agenda.

The Convener: I am thinking about facilities, resources, coaches and competitors.

Shirley Robertson: It depends. If we have good facilities and good coaches, we will retain the athletes.

The Convener: I was a schoolteacher many moons ago when teachers stopped doing extra-curricular activities—reasonably, in my view. I believe that they still do not run such activities, for the same reasons. Can we redress that by using other talent that exists in schools? For example, we had a maths teacher who was a great rugby player.

Shirley Robertson: Provision is dependent on individual teachers. My old senior school is Alva academy and the PE department there is now run by a guy called Ian Ash, who played rugby at senior level. Since he went in, he has lifted the school. It now has tremendous juniors who win at British level in judo, but that success relies on him. You are the experts, but perhaps there is a way of encouraging extra-curricular activity.

The Convener: Should we pay the teachers, for instance? That is a straightforward question. You said that coaches are not paid enough. Is that something that we should think about, given that they have accreditation?

Shirley Robertson: If that is an option, yes, or ex-sportspeople or coaches could be brought in. At the moment, provision is ad hoc and people are either lucky or they are not.

The Convener: Thank you for your interesting evidence and for drawing out some interesting confessions about members' attempts to reach Olympic heights or even just to keep a boat upright. Much of your evidence reflected the evidence that we have already taken. The evidence is beginning to crystallise into issues that the committee can pull together. With other top-level sportspeople, you have given us a direction for our inquiry. That is helpful. Thank you.

I was going to say "bon voyage", but I will not do that.

Subordinate Legislation

Plastic Materials and Articles in Contact with Food (Scotland) Regulations 2008 (SSI 2008/127)

National Health Service (Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2008 (SSI 2008/147)

10:50

The Convener: Item 3 is subordinate legislation. We have two sets of regulations to consider under the negative procedure.

Scottish statutory instrument 2008/127 implements European Commission directive 2007/19/EC, which establishes Europe-wide regulations on contact between certain types of plastic packaging and food products. The Subordinate Legislation Committee drew our attention to the regulations on the grounds of two instances of defective drafting and a devolution issue.

In respect of the defective drafting, the Subordinate Legislation Committee welcomed the Food Standards Agency Scotland's commitment to rectify the errors by amending the regulations. I think that the error came down to the FSA getting stimulants mixed up with simulants. Getting that right is quite important in life. [*Laughter.*] I am trying to keep serious about that.

Members are advised that the devolution issue relates to an issue of European devolution and not to devolution in the UK. In its response to the Subordinate Legislation Committee, the FSA made a commitment to correct the error.

SSI 2008/147 uprates the capital assets that are taken into account in the assessment of patients' eligibility for remittance of costs on the ground of low income. I am delighted to say that there are no drafting errors in that one.

No comments have been received from members and no motion to annul has been lodged. Are we agreed that the committee does not wish to make any recommendation on the instruments?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: That concludes our formal business in public for today.

10:51

Meeting continued in private until 11:09.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the archive edition should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Friday 9 May 2008

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

OFFICIAL REPORT daily editions

Single copies: £5.00
Meetings of the Parliament annual subscriptions: £350.00

The archive edition of the *Official Report* of meetings of the Parliament, written answers and public meetings of committees will be published on CD-ROM.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £3.75
Annual subscriptions: £150.00

Standing orders will be accepted at Document Supply.

Published in Edinburgh by RR Donnelley and available from:

Blackwell's Bookshop

53 South Bridge
Edinburgh EH1 1YS
0131 622 8222

Blackwell's Bookshops:
243-244 High Holborn
London WC1 7DZ
Tel 020 7831 9501

All trade orders for Scottish Parliament documents should be placed through Blackwell's Edinburgh.

Blackwell's Scottish Parliament Documentation Helpline may be able to assist with additional information on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament, their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries
0131 622 8283 or
0131 622 8258

Fax orders
0131 557 8149

E-mail orders
business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

Subscriptions & Standing Orders
business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

Scottish Parliament

RNID Typetalk calls welcome on
18001 0131 348 5000
Textphone 0845 270 0152

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents
(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers

Printed in Scotland by RR Donnelley