

Health, Care, and Sport Committee
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Building on the 2026 Commonwealth Games and widening access to sport and physical activity

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Introduction

During this morning's meeting, Members will meet with two panels of witnesses to explore the potential legacy of the 2026 Commonwealth Games, and broadening participation in sport and physical activity in Scotland. This paper provides an overview of some of the current key issues affecting access to sport and physical activity, and is intended to inform both panel discussions.

Panel One

In this session, Members will hear from witnesses who can offer a broader perspective on the legacy of the 2026 Commonwealth Games, and issues affecting access to sport and physical activity in Scotland:

- Jon Doig OBE, Chief Executive, [Commonwealth Games Scotland](#)
- Professor David McGillivray, Chair in Event and Digital Cultures, University of the West of Scotland (representing the [Glasgow 2026 Legacy Network](#))
- Forbes Dunlop, Chief Executive Officer, [sportscotland](#)

- Gavin Macleod, Chief Executive Officer, [Scottish Disability Sport](#)

Panel Two

This panel is comprised of representatives from sports governing bodies and a community-based sports club. This session will provide an opportunity for Members to discuss how the Commonwealth Games legacy might affect sport and physical activity in Scotland, and to explore some of the issues affecting participation from the perspective of witnesses involved in grassroots sports and the development of elite athletes. Members will hear from:

- John Lunn, Chief Executive Officer, [Scottish Swimming](#)
- Colin Hutchison, Chief Executive Officer, [Scottish Athletics](#)
- Nick Rennie, Chief Executive, [Scottish Cycling](#)
- David Byrne, Chair of Hillhead High School War Memorial Trust, incorporating [Hillhead Sports Club](#), Glasgow

Scottish Swimming, Scottish Athletics, and Scottish Cycling are the governing bodies for their respective sports. Swimming, cycling, and athletics were Team Scotland's most represented sports in the 2026 Commonwealth Games medal table. Hillhead Sports Club is a private members' club located in the west end of Glasgow, offering multi-sports facilities to the local community.

Theme 1: The legacy of the 2026 Commonwealth Games

The 2026 Commonwealth Games took place in Glasgow from 23rd July to 2nd August. Glasgow [agreed to host the 2026 Games](#) at relatively short notice, following the Australian state of Victoria's decision to withdraw as hosts in 2023. The event was delivered with a streamlined budget under a new funding model, which did not involve direct public funding. Instead, the Games were funded partly through funding from the Commonwealth Games Federation, and partly through income generated from sponsorships and ticket sales. Glasgow also received financial compensation from Victoria following the state's withdrawal as host.

Team Scotland placed [fifth in the medal table](#) at the 2026 Games, winning twelve medals in swimming and para swimming, eight in track cycling and para track cycling, and seven in athletics and para athletics. 14 of Team Scotland's medals were won by para athletes.

The number of sports represented at the Games was reduced, with ten able-bodied and six para sports represented in comparison to the 17 able-bodied and five para sports at the Glasgow 2014 Games. Sports including diving, hockey, and rugby sevens were [excluded from this year's Games](#). The decision to streamline the number of sports represented at the Games was informed by a number of factors, including financial considerations, the public appeal of the sports, and the potential to integrate para athletes into the sports represented in order to realise the vision of an

inclusive Games. Some sporting bodies expressed concerns that [athletes from excluded sports may be disadvantaged](#) by missing out on this opportunity for competition.

In its written submission to the Committee, Scottish Swimming discussed the impact of the exclusion of diving from the 2026 Games. The submission emphasised the detrimental impact of this decision on athletes who rely on international multi-sports competitions as part of their journey in performance sports. This missed opportunity to experience international competition has also affected preparation for the 2028 Olympics.

Commonwealth Games Scotland released an initial legacy report, [The Story So Far](#), following the Games. The report highlighted the immediate impact of the event across four areas: environmental responsibility, inclusion, financial sustainability, and creating a welcoming Games. To illustrate the Games' commitment to inclusion, the report stated that the 2026 Games included the largest integrated para sport programme in the history of the Commonwealth Games, with 47 para sport events across six sports. A more detailed evaluation report is expected to be published later in 2026.

In their written submission to the Committee, the Glasgow 2026 Legacy Network highlighted a number of recommendations intended to ensure sustained legacy outcomes from the Games and share learning to inform other large-scale sporting events:

- Provide resources that incentivise the legacy outcomes you want to see realised.
- Embed legacy conversations and planning well in advance of the event.
- Create opportunities for cross-sector relationships.
- Provide opportunities to learn and share as well as network.
- Plan for relationships to continue beyond the Games.

Work to develop the legacy of the 2026 Games may also draw on learning from Glasgow's previous tenure as host of the Commonwealth Games in 2014. Following the 2014 Games, the Scottish Government commissioned [research to explore the legacy of the Games](#). The report found that although hosting the Games led to economic and reputational benefits for Glasgow and Scotland, it did not lead to an increase in physical activity at a population level. However, the improved infrastructure created for the Games appeared to create additional opportunities for participation in sport and physical activity.

A [2024 survey conducted by UWS](#) found that ten years on from the 2014 Games, the members of the public who participated in the survey had a positive view of the event. The survey found that:

- 71% of respondents felt that the 2014 Games led to an increased sense of civic pride.

- 75% felt an increased sense of national pride.
- 75% felt that the Games had improved Scotland's international reputation.
- 69% said that the Games led to enhanced access to sporting facilities and activities.
- 76% felt that the Games increased emphasis on public health and physical activity.
- 73% said that the Games enabled Glasgow to host other major sporting events.
- 69% believed that the 2014 Games generated a lasting impact for the host city.

These findings suggest that the legacy of large-scale sporting events can be wider than the direct impact on interest and participation in sport and physical activity. Such events can also carry benefits for local communities and the host city and country.

Scotland is preparing to host [a number of large-scale sporting events](#) in the coming years, including the 2027 Tour de France Grand Départ, the 2027 Open golf championship, and the UEFA Euro 2028 men's football tournament. Learning from the legacy of the 2026 Commonwealth Games may prove useful in the delivery of these and other sporting events.

In its written submission to the Committee, sportscotland acknowledged that although high-profile sporting events are beneficial to sport in Scotland, the primary value of sport is in its ability to improve population health and wellbeing, promote inclusion, and contribute to the prevention agenda. The submission invited the Committee to ensure that the legacy of the Games is considered alongside efforts to increase participation and address inequalities affecting access to sport and physical activity.

Potential topics to explore:

- Longer-term monitoring of the impact of the Games.
- Support for sports excluded from the Games, and athletes who missed out on the opportunity for competition.
- Translating the legacy of the Games and other large-scale sporting events into a tangible impact on participation in sport and physical activity.
- The wider social and cultural legacy of the Games, beyond its direct impact on sport and physical activity participation.
- Learning for other large-scale sporting events.
- **For Panel Two:** What outcomes they would like to see from the legacy of the Games for their sports.

Theme 2: Physical activity, health, and wellbeing

Healthy life expectancy – the number of years a person can expect to spend in good health – has decreased in Scotland in recent years. According to the [most recent National Records of Scotland data](#), in 2022-2024 healthy life expectancy at birth in Scotland was 59.4 years for females, and 59.1 years for males. Since 2014-2016, women have lost almost four years of healthy life expectancy, and men three years.

There is a significant gap in healthy life expectancy between Scotland's most and least deprived communities. Women born in Scotland's most deprived areas are expected to spend 26.7 years less in good health than those in the least deprived areas. For men, the gap in healthy life expectancy between Scotland's most and least deprived communities is 25.6 years. Meeting the recommended guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week has been [identified as a key factor](#) in improving healthy life expectancy.

A report published by [Public Health Scotland earlier this week](#) estimated the physical and mental health burden of physical inactivity in Scotland. The report stated that 24,000 disability-adjusted life years (years lost to disability or ill health) are lost in Scotland each year due to the impact of physical inactivity. Half of these lost disability-adjusted life years are attributable to musculoskeletal conditions and mental ill health.

The Scottish Government and COSLA's [Physical Activity for Health Framework](#), published in October 2024, sets out an evidence-based framework intended to increase levels of physical activity at a local and national level. The Framework included a commitment to addressing the inequalities affecting access to physical activity, listing "strengthen[ing] access to places, spaces and services that enable equitable and inclusive access and reduce inequalities" as a key action to be taken. sportscotland contributed to the development of the framework through its

membership of the Active Scotland Development Group. sportscotland is also involved in many of the physical activity projects detailed in the framework, such as the Daily Mile and Active Schools initiatives.

The Physical Activity for Health Framework was intended to support the delivery of the Scottish Government's [National Outcome that "we are healthy and active."](#) Progress towards this outcome was to be measured against the relevant [National Indicator on physical activity](#), which focused on the proportion of adults meeting current physical activity guidelines. However, the National Performance Framework is currently under review, and it is not yet clear how physical activity will be measured within the revised framework.

A recent [SPICe academic fellowship project](#) explored barriers to physical activity in Scotland, and identified potential policy solutions. The researchers [made a series of recommendations](#) including:

- Increased investment in social prescribing of physical activity as a means of illness prevention;
- Adequately resourcing implementation of the Physical Activity for Health framework;
- Focusing policy on engaging people who are physically inactive, as increased physical activity among this group would result in the biggest impact on health outcomes;
- Robust monitoring and evaluation of physical activity programmes in receipt of public funds, with the data made publicly available to improve the evidence base.
- Improved utilisation of the school estate for community physical activity.

In its written submission to the Committee, sportscotland highlighted the role of physical activity in promoting wellbeing and preventing ill health. The submission stated that an estimated 3,000 deaths in Scotland could be attributable to physical inactivity each year, and that an extra 15 minutes of physical activity per week among Scotland's least active people could significantly reduce deaths due to ischaemic heart disease.

In January 2026, the Scottish Government announced funding for a [free universal learn to swim offer](#) for primary school-aged children in Scotland. This announcement was part of a package of funding measures intended to promote physical activity, and is also intended to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn the life-saving skill of swimming. Scottish Swimming confirmed in its written submission to the Committee that its [National Primary School Swimming Framework](#) has been costed and evaluated, and that it hopes that the universal learn to swim offer will begin to be rolled out by the end of this calendar year.

Potential areas to explore:

- The impact of physical activity on healthy life expectancy.
- Implementation of the Physical Activity for Health Framework.
- The role of physical activity in prevention of ill health.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the Physical Activity for Health Framework, particularly in the context of the National Performance Framework review.
- **For Panel Two:** The potential role of their individual sports in promoting health and wellbeing through physical activity.
- **For Scottish Swimming (Panel Two):** The impact of the free universal learn to swim offer on physical activity participation and water safety.

Theme 3: Funding and facilities for sport in Scotland

As Scotland's national agency for sport, sportscotland is responsible for distributing most of the funding allocated to sport and physical activity by the Scottish Government. Sportscotland distributes funds to community sports organisations through [a range of funding initiatives](#).

Local government investment in sport, leisure, and culture in Scotland [has decreased by 20% in real terms since 2010-11](#), according to a 2024 report commissioned by Community Leisure UK, sportscotland, and Creative Scotland. Leisure facilities have been negatively impacted by increasing energy bills and staffing costs, and the cost-of-living crisis. A [November 2022 report by Community Leisure UK Scotland](#) found that 95% of Scotland's leisure facilities are at risk of closure, with 63% involved in active discussions and planning the impact of closures.

Swimming pools have been particularly affected by closures due to high operating costs and ageing facilities. [Scottish Swimming estimates](#) that 200 of Scotland's 396 public swimming pools are at risk of closure by 2030, based on the age of the facilities alone. Loss of access to swimming pools may disproportionately affect women and people with disabilities, a high proportion of whom participate in swimming.

During the previous Committee's [last evidence session on sport](#) in March 2026, Members and witnesses discussed funding for sports facilities in Scotland. Kim Atkinson of the Scottish Sports Association said that the majority of investment in sport that goes through local authorities is not ring-fenced, making it difficult to track how the investment is used.

In its written submission to the Committee, sportscotland highlighted that charges to access local authority sports and leisure facilities have increased in recent years,

due to factors such as increasing financial pressures on local authorities and leisure trusts, and increasing maintenance and operating costs for facilities. The submission stated that affordability is a key issue affecting participation in sport and physical activity, particularly in the context of rising access costs. Sportscotland also referenced the variation in costs between local authorities, meaning that people could face higher charges for participating in the same activity based on where they live.

In October 2025, sportscotland conducted an [estates review of sports facilities in Scotland](#). The review concluded that an investment of £15.5bn over the next 25 years is required to address the findings associated with the age and condition of the sport and physical activity infrastructure, position the estate to meet net zero targets, and deliver a desirable level of accessibility and inclusion. In its written submission to the Committee, sportscotland stated that the current funding model for sports facilities is unsustainable, and that decision-making is fragmented. The submission called on the Committee to support “a coordinated approach that aligns investment decisions with national health, wellbeing, equality and climate priorities.”

Potential areas to explore:

- What actions could be taken to improve the longer-term sustainability of sports funding.
- The impact of increasing maintenance and operating costs on access to sporting facilities.
- How sports facilities could be supported to remain operational, and how the maintenance backlog in the sport and leisure estate could be addressed.
- How data on spending of funding allocated to sports is recorded.

Theme 4: Disability sport and physical activity in Scotland

People with disabilities face a number of barriers to being physically active. A 2025 report [published by Scottish Disability Sport in collaboration with Queen Margaret University](#) provided an overview of participation rates among people living with disabilities in Scotland, stating that:

- Almost one in four people in Scotland have a disability.
- 90% of disabled people do not meet the recommended physical activity guidelines, despite 95% believing that it would positively impact their physical and mental wellbeing.
- People with disabilities are twice as likely to be inactive as those without.

- 12% of children with disabilities in Scotland take part in sporting activity compared to 81% of children without.

Although some people may experience challenges to being physically active related to their disability, many of the barriers affecting participation among people with disabilities are societal. For example, Scottish Disability Sport's 2025 report noted that one in five survey respondents said that they knew someone whose social security benefits had been reduced due to them seeking to become more physically active, and 40% of respondents were worried that they would lose financial support if they tried to be more physically active.

People with disabilities may also be impacted by a lack of suitable transport to access sports and leisure facilities, a lack of accessible sporting facilities, and being unable to afford the cost of participation. Those with disabilities may also be disproportionately affected by other factors that affect physical activity levels. For example, the additional costs associated with living with a disability can leave disabled people [more vulnerable to experiencing poverty](#).

Scottish Disability Sport's four-point [Call to Action](#) outlines its recommended approach to removing the barriers to sport and physical activity faced by people with disabilities:

- Plan to Include
- Deliver an inclusive whole system approach
- A benefits and social care system that equips individuals to be active
- Champion intersectionality through a person-centred approach

Potential areas to explore:

- How people with disabilities could be better supported to be physically active.
- **For Panel Two:** The accessibility of their sport for people with disabilities, and any improvements that could be made.
- How concerns regarding withdrawal of financial support could be mitigated to enable people with disabilities to be more active.
- Intersections between disability and other factors affecting access to sport, such as socioeconomic deprivation.

Theme 5: Socioeconomic inequality and physical activity

Access to sport and physical activity can help to improve health outcomes and increase healthy life expectancy. However, people experiencing socioeconomic deprivation can [face barriers to being physically active](#), including the cost of accessing sport and leisure opportunities, fewer opportunities for participation.

A [2024 sportscotland report](#) noted that people experiencing poverty may work longer or more irregular hours, affecting their ability to participate in physical activity. Additionally, they may be disproportionately affected by barriers such as childcare availability. The recommended that flexible, community-based options tailored to people's circumstances, and incorporating either free childcare or child-friendly classes, may help to create more opportunities for people experiencing poverty to be more active.

According to the most recent [Scottish Health Survey](#), 73% of adults living in Scotland's least deprived quintile met the recommended physical activity level of 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise per week, compared to 53% in the most deprived quintile.

People experiencing socioeconomic deprivation are also less likely to be able to access high-quality green spaces for physical activity. According to the [2024 Scottish Household Survey](#), 70% of people in Scotland overall live within a five-minute walk of their nearest area of green or blue space. However, for those in the most deprived quintile, this figure is 59%. Additionally, the green spaces that exist in socioeconomically deprived areas are [more likely to be of low quality](#), potentially deterring residents from using them. Public Health Scotland acknowledges that [access to good quality open spaces](#) is a public health issue, and that inequalities in access to such spaces can negatively impact on the health and wellbeing of Scotland's population.

Potential areas to explore:

- How people in socioeconomically deprived communities could be better supported to be physically active.
- How access to facilities for physical activity, including high-quality green spaces, could be improved for people in socioeconomically deprived areas.
- **For Panel Two:** Any work to overcome barriers to access to their sport for people experiencing socioeconomic deprivation.
- How data collection could be improved to better understand the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and physical inactivity.

Theme 6: Female participation in sport and physical activity

In 2023, the previous session's Health, Social Care, and Sport Committee conducted an inquiry into [female participation in sport and physical activity](#). Evidence heard by the Committee identified a number of [barriers affecting women and girls in sport](#) at both community and elite level, including:

- Funding and opportunities for female sport and physical activity;
- Boys' attitudes towards girls taking part in sport at school, and boys dominating playground spaces;
- Self-consciousness and physical changes experienced during puberty;
- Women's health concerns, including menstrual health issues, the menopause, and urinary incontinence;
- Inappropriate clothing regulations, such as the expectation to wear white during a period;
- A lack of positive role models, and negative media attitudes towards female athletes;
- Inappropriate changing facilities;
- Lack of support with childcare and other caring responsibilities;
- Harassment and safety concerns.

During a [meeting with the previous Committee](#) in March 2026, Jon Doig OBE told Members that gender inequality also affects high-performance sports coaching. Mr Doig shared that finding high-performance female coaches is a longstanding issue in sport, though he acknowledged that sportscotland was exploring solutions to this challenge. During the same meeting, Kim Atkinson of the Scottish Sports Association highlighted that there are fewer female volunteers engaged in community sports coaching than men, in contrast to the wider voluntary sector, within which women outnumber men. Ms Atkinson noted the importance of girls and young women having access to role models in sport and physical activity.

In its written submission to the Committee, Scottish Swimming discussed the impact of positive female role models on participation in swimming. Scottish Swimming's [Project Ailsa initiative](#) created opportunities for girls and young women to take part in workshops led by female competitive swimmers including Hannah Miley, and create an energising, inspiring environment for aspiring female swimmers. As Scottish Swimming noted in its written submission, the project also enabled them to work with young female swimmers to overcome some of the obstacles facing them, such as body consciousness, periods, and exam stress.

Large-scale sporting events such as the Commonwealth Games may help to promote female participation in sport, and provide positive examples of female role

models. Over [900 of the 2,749 athletes](#) who competed in this year's Commonwealth Games were female.

The Commonwealth Sport Foundation holds a [Women Leaders Programme](#), which offers £5000 scholarships to eligible female leaders in the sports industry across the Commonwealth, including coaches, administrators, executives, and officials. The scholarship is intended to support women to develop along their career pathway.

Potential areas to explore:

- The physical activity participation gap between school-aged boys and girls.
- Actions that could be taken to overcome some of the barriers affecting female participation in sport and physical activity.
- Update on sportscotland's work to increase the number of female high-performance coaches.
- How women and girls could be better supported to participate in sports volunteering.
- **For Panel Two:** Challenges and success stories regarding increasing female participation in their sport.

Theme 7: Data collection, monitoring, and evaluation of participation

During the previous Committee's [evidence session on sport](#) in March 2026, witnesses discussed the value of data in understanding participation in sport and physical activity. Dr David Meir of UWS shared that there are currently significant data gaps concerning physical activity, such as the Active Schools data, which, in Dr Meir's view, is insufficient to understand the reasons informing participation gaps among children. Dr Meir suggested forming closer links between sport and academia to improve data collection, and create a greater understanding of the inequalities affecting access to physical activity.

During the same meeting, Forbes Dunlop of sportscotland outlined sportscotland's plans to move towards a new method of data collection involving collating data from governing bodies, local authorities and school settings about all sporting facilities. The database will enable sportscotland to identify high and low areas of participation, and any mismatch between participation levels and facilities.

Potential topics to explore:

- How data collection could be improved to create a more rounded understanding of participation in sport and physical activity.
- Progress towards implementation of sportscotland's participation database.
- How the impact of the 2026 Games on sport and physical activity participation will be monitored and evaluated.

Sarah Swift, Researcher, SPICe

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The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot