OBSERVATORY FOR SPORT IN SCOTLAND

# The Value of Sport: Beyond Physical Activity

## Does public policy underestimate the value of sport to social benefit, population health and wellbeing? The implications for sport and public policy in Scotland

## An academic review commissioned by the Observatory for Sport in Scotland

**Nicholas F. Rowe[1] and Ryan Brown[2]**

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[1] Nick Rowe was the Head of Strategy and Research at Sport England for over 25 years, where he helped develop a UK-wide 'Active People' approach to understanding sport and physical activity; and was Visiting Research Fellow at Leeds Beckett University. He currently works as an independent research consultant in sport and social policy, Chairs the Observatory for Sport in Scotland (OSS) Research Advisory Group and advises internationally on sport research. His book, *'Sporting Capital: Transforming Sports Development Policy and Practice', was* published in December 2018.

[2] Ryan Brown is the Research Manager at the Observatory for Sport in Scotland (OSS). A former Scotland and UK elite athlete, he graduated from the University of the West of Scotland with a BSc in Sport and Exercise Science. He works across different areas of sport research, from elite to community, and has published work on *'Women in Leadership in Scottish Sport' (2021)*, a study of gender equity in leadership roles across Scottish sport, commissioned by Scottish Women in Sport.

## THE OSS

The Observatory for Sport in Scotland was formed in 2016 to bring research, evidence and analysis to the community sport and recreation landscape in Scotland. It is steered a board of 12 people from across government, education, health, business, sport and communications backgrounds, and underpinned by research, sport, business and university advisory groups drawing on expertise from across Scotland and around the world.

It works closely with a range of people and organisations from national and local government to health, education, housing, criminal justice, business, leisure, sport bodies, communities and the third sector, and engages with all universities in Scotland and many across the world.

This paper is one in an ongoing series of research reviews analysing what existing research tells us about challenges, trends and potential solutions, and is designed to help to inform all with an interest in community sport for all ages and abilities.

If you would like to be part of the OSS, either by joining our forums or sharing research, contact OSS Chief Executive David Ferguson (david@oss.scot). For more information, visit www.oss.scot.

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## BACKGROUND

The central argument made in this review is that community sport provides value beyond the well-evidenced benefits of physical activity, and that public policy in Scotland currently fails to recognise or give sufficient priority to its contribution as it seeks to define social progress not solely by measures of GDP but by a wider set of values that prioritise sustainability, population health and wellbeing, individual happiness, and social and civic connection.

Taking part in sport is to be physically active, but is that its sum total? What do we miss if we characterise sport solely in terms of frequency, intensity and duration of activity but ignore other attributes associated with play, such as self-esteem, self-confidence, mastery, self-expression and social connection? Community sport makes a significant contribution to helping the nation be active, but does it do much more than this?

In exploring these questions, we do not suggest that a choice be made between public investment and support for 'sport development', and public investment and support for 'physical activity promotion.' Both are vital to a healthy and thriving population. However, our review of the research and policy evidence shows that the direction of travel in public policy in Scotland has been to increasingly conflate the two; to treat sport and other physical activities as equivalents and, consequently, by design or default, potentially dilute or waste resources and investment in seeking to address the huge public health challenge that is physical inactivity.

This analysis does not seek to mount a defence or uncritical affirmation of the value of all community sport but suggests that conflation of physical activity and sport in public policy could be failing both by not playing to their respective strengths and consequently not optimising the impact of investment of limited public resources. We conclude by recommending a new vision of 'sport as society', not merely 'sport in society', supported by a new National Strategy for Sport in Scotland engaging widely across government, health, education and communities, underpinned by investment in research capacity and evidence building.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis suggests that public policy in Scotland would benefit from a more cohesive strategic approach and support for delivery models that can harness community sport's potential and optimise its impact in delivering heightened societal value in the 21st Century. A number of recommendations follow from this analysis that could help to shape community sport policy, practice and delivery in Scotland:

- **Community sport should be recognised in public policy for multiple contributions to outcomes that drive improved wellbeing in Scotland**
- **Community sport in Scotland requires renewed strategic purpose to provide a platform for investment and unite stakeholders in a shared vision and agenda for change**
- **Topic area reviews: Priority topics should be agreed in a strategic planning stakeholder consultation**
- **Scottish sport must agree societal purpose and demonstrate impact, value and reach**
- **Cultural and funding shift in research commitment in areas of sport policy**

# 1. Introduction

This review is characterised by a question that might suggest a semantic debate on the value of sport and its place in public policy. However, the analysis of evidence and arguments shaped present a perspective with practical consequences for the future salience of sport in the public policy domain. To the extent that a substantial part of what we consider to be 'community sport' is dependent upon public intervention and subsidy, it goes further to suggest that the challenges raised in how we value and support localised activity in public policy may be of critical importance to the future health and wellbeing, social cohesion and sustainability of communities, in all parts of Scotland.

From a big picture perspective sport is part of Scotland's culture, not separate from it. The focus of this review is on a country that is proud of a sporting heritage from community beginnings, and where sport remains embedded in national identity (Scottish Government, 2022a):

*"Scotland's sporting traditions are legendary worldwide and our impact on the world of sport is truly massive. We can lay claim to the invention, or early development, of a number of the most popular international sports - including football, golf, hockey, rugby and tennis."*

Importantly, however, sport as cultural identity goes beyond elite institutional forms of sport – sport as spectacle - to embrace everyday acts of participation, volunteering and social engagement. The focus of this review is on these small, unheralded and individual acts of participation and civic engagement, that happen in their tens of thousands on every day in every community across the length and breadth of Scotland. From an individual perspective each of these behaviours, driven by a range of motivations and sustained by the quality of experience, contribute to personal wellbeing and quality of life, but, in aggregate, they make a significant contribution to overall societal health and wellbeing. This is community sport as a public good – sport not just as a good thing in and of itself, but as an instrument to generate wider outcomes beneficial to society, as summarised succinctly by Seippel (2006, p.52):

*"….it is obvious that sport as a social good implies more than physiology, biology and the question of how various sport activities have certain psychological effects. Sport activities also have a direct and intrinsic social meaning for those involved, and this is an important aspect of sport as a social good."*

This contention, that the value of sport 'goes beyond its contribution to physical activity', is central to this thesis, and to underrate this wider contribution is to undermine the importance of sport in what may be called a wellbeing society where social progress is defined not solely by GDP but by a wider set of values that incorporate individual happiness or subjective wellbeing (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012). At a country level, New Zealand provides a notable example of how the concept of wellbeing has shaped the political narrative and definition of progress. At a sectoral level, Mansfield et al, (2020, p. 4) refer to the centrality of wellbeing in people's leisure experiences:

*"The circumstances that frame people's engagement with leisure, their experiences, leisure pursuits and preferences can all help to explain wellbeing, or the lack of it. Wellbeing, in turn, can influence our opportunities, activities, engagement and our ability to benefit from leisure in our everyday lives."*

The title of this review might suggest competition in the public policy space between sport and physical activity. Such a perspective is contentious and as far as the authors are aware is not one articulated in either the academic or policy focused literature. In fact, sport and (other) physical activity have invariably been seen as complementary and, in a public policy context, mutually beneficial supporting domains. As we see later, the terms sport and physical activity are used interchangeably and increasingly sport is seen as one of several equally valuable sub-domains of overall physical activity. On the surface these perspectives appear uncontentious and a rational policy response. However, drawing upon evidence in the Scottish context, but also from experience in nearby countries, the arguments supporting or challenging this positioning of sport in the public policy space as *primarily* a physical activity contributor, are examined and the potential consequences explored.

In taking this perspective we are not suggesting that a choice be made between public investment and support for 'sport development' and public investment and support for 'physical activity promotion'. Our argument is that the direction of travel in public policy is increasingly to conflate the two, to treat sport and other physical activities as equivalents and, consequently, by design or default, to dilute or redirect resources and investment in sport to addressing a huge public health challenge around physical inactivity (Rowe, 2020).

This analysis does not seek to mount a defence or uncritical affirmation of the value of all community sport but suggests that conflation of physical activity and sport in public policy could be failing both by not playing to their respective strengths and consequently not optimising the impact of investment of limited public resources.

# 2. Defining sport, physical activity and wellbeing

## 2.1 Why definitions are important – conceptual and public policy implications

The starting point for this review is to explore what we mean by 'sport'. This is well-trodden ground with implicit dangers of entering an academic debate with limited practical consequences or value. In the context of this review, however, understanding how we interpret these terms is central to our applied understanding of the place and function of sport in public policy. As we see later, a fuzzy conception of sport in public policy used interchangeably or inconsistently with terms like physical activity, recreational physical activity and exercise, serves not only to muddy the conceptual water but also to raise challenging questions about what public policy is focused on, why and to what end. As Rowe (2018, p. 4) suggested and a theme we return to later in this review:

*"… the scope of the definition of sport in a policy context cannot be ignored as it impacts on its policy leverage and impact…. a very wide definition of sport embracing physical activity extends its relevance to public health and specifically to the obesity policy domain increasing potential funding opportunities and political influence. However, such a wide definition also increases the potential for sport policy to lose its focus, to dilute its impact by spreading investment too thinly and to undermine its relationships with its more traditional core constituencies and stakeholders."*

## 2.2 What do we mean by 'sport', 'exercise 'and 'physical activity' and how do they relate to each other?

Before we examine specific terms and definitions it is useful to take a step back to consider the philosophical roots of what we define as 'sport'. Huizinga's seminal study Homo Ludens (Ludens, 1938) claims that sport is, or should be, like play: voluntary, set off from daily or 'real' life, taking place at particular arenas, both with respect to time and space. Similarly, Suits (1973), in his foundational essay, posited his main thesis that all sports are games with the very same four elements that mark an activity as a game also marking an activity as a sport, i.e. they are goal oriented, that there are certain understood means by which you can play them, that there are rules that often result in 'less efficient ways' of achieving the end goals and that there is acceptance of (shared buy-in to) the rules.

Importantly, however, according to Suits although all sports are games not all games are sports. Suits defines sport as being a 'game of skill' and not just a game of chance; more specifically it is a game of *physical skill* which distinguishes it from board games and card games; it is a game that has a 'wide following' (so not just an idiosyncratic individual activity); and it possesses 'institutional and structural stability', by which he means it includes ancillary institutional structures, organisations and governance, and roles including, for example teachers, coaches, researchers and critics.

Morgan (2019) further examines Suit's conceptualisation of sport and expresses the view that recent commentaries and interpretations that suggest the definition of sport exists independent of how we commonly understand and use the term linguistically are ill-founded. To an extent this tension between a pragmatic view of sport as being what people understand sport to be (for example sport that **sport**scotland 'recognises' in its funding eligibility) and one that understands sport as existing in its essence independent of common interpretation, lies at the heart of the challenges sport faces as an identified, discrete area of public policy. The trend over the last three decades, with roots as far back as the European Sport Charter (1992), has been for national and supra-national organisations to develop a 'working definition of sport' wider than the philosophical one to extend to recreation, fitness and exercise activities.

In 2021 the Council of Europe (CoE, 2021, p. 4) re-affirmed its definition of sport with very slight modification from the 1992 original:
*"For the purpose of this Charter, "sport" means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, are aimed at maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels."*

At the same time the Council of Europe (CoE 2021, p.2) elaborated on what it viewed as essential qualities of sport: *"Sport is a social, educational and cultural activity based on voluntary choice which encourages contact between European countries and their citizens and plays a fundamental role in the realisation of the aim of the Council of Europe reinforcing the bonds between peoples and developing awareness of a European cultural identity". (Article 2).* The preamble to the same document states: *"Sport can make diverse contributions to personal wellbeing and social development, and physical exercise in particular helps to promote both physical and mental wellbeing."*

The Council of Europe definition, in making no reference to sport as a game requiring physical skills defined by rules, broke the conceptual boundaries defined philosophically by Huizinga and Suits. Taken literally, the CoE definition may be adjudged as "encompassing anything that moves" (Rowe, 2018), with the qualification that it is framed by certain motivations of maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental wellbeing, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition. At best, the CoE definition provides a broad framework for countries and national and supra-national sports organisations to make pragmatic decisions on how they define sport 'locally' in a way that aligns with their own culture and policy objectives, and this has been the direction of travel in the past 30 years or so. In a similar vein, the UN definition of sport (United Nations, 2003) has gained currency across many European countries referring to "*All forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction, such as play, recreation, organised or competitive sport, and indigenous sports and games."* Although open to wide interpretation it does by way of example provide some clarity on where the boundary may lie between sport and other physical activities.

Van Bottenburg et al (2005, p. 15) in their analysis of sport trends across the European Union made the pertinent and still relevant observation that:

*"Sport has become a strongly differentiated and diffuse phenomenon, which is practiced for many different ends, in diverse ways and in divergent contexts and organisational forms. How people experience sport is also related to this. More than ever before, people have the tendency to label their activities as 'sport'. ... one of the consequences of this is that sport in the year 2004 encompasses a broad spectrum with the Olympic games at one extreme, as the ultimate manifestation of organised competitive sport, and at the other, all kinds of physical activity that people (in contrast to 50 years ago) perceive as sporting behaviour."*

In a similar vein, Coalter (2007, p. 7) has gone so far as to suggest that *"…. sport is a collective noun which hides much more than it reveals …. There are almost endless variations of sport processes, mechanisms, participants and experiences."*

We may seek to find greater clarity about what sport is by examining what it is not through exploring the definitions and interpretation of related terms like 'physical activity', 'exercise' and 'physical recreation'. Caspersen et al (1985, p. 126) define physical activity and exercise as follows:

*"Physical activity is defined as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure… physical activity in daily life can be categorised into occupational, sports, conditioning, household or other activities. Exercise is a subset of physical activity that is planned, structured and repetitive and has, as a final or intermediate objective, the improvement or maintenance of physical fitness."*

The above definition has informed health policies around the world including that of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018), but it is not accepted universally. Piggins (2020) summarises an interesting critique of what he refers to as the epidemiological interpretation of physical activity as solely a function of 'depersonalised' bodily movement produced by the 'biomechanics' of skeletal muscle. He goes on to argue that this physiological perspective fails to recognise that physical activity is inherently 'cerebral, 'cognitive', 'psychological' and 'emotional'.

*"…physical activity is so innately intertwined with the human mind as an antecedent (or motivator) of activity, as the central processor of the experience, and as being responsible for remembering and reflecting on the experience, that to exclude it from a definition renders it incomplete."*

Beyond this, Piggins (2020) argues that the accepted definition fails to recognise that physical activity is an inherently social (and gendered) activity:

*"As social beings, humans move through space in communion with others (such as in protest marches), in competition with others (in sport), out of necessity (for food gathering or employment) or for pleasure (sexual, cathartic or otherwise). These endeavours result in an array of productive, creative outputs,* ***which should not be underestimated in comparison with the health benefits that tend to dominate academic discourse on physical activity*** *(our emphasis)."*

In the same article (and see Piggins, 2019), Piggins presents a broader holistic definition of physical activity that in addition to the personal, affective and social aspects referred to above, include the salience of physical and cultural spaces and political discourse and influence:

*"Physical activity involves people moving, acting and performing within culturally specific spaces and contexts, and influenced by a unique array of interests, emotions, ideas, instructions and relationships."*

Other authors (Crumbley et al, 2019, p. 32) highlighted the importance of more holistic interpretation of physical activity in the context of concerns around physical inactivity in early childhood:

*"As PA and sedentary behaviors are developed during the early childhood period (ages 0 to 5 years), this stage represents a unique opportunity for clinicians to encourage activity at the family level. Clinicians should discuss the holistic benefits of PA, including the development of social skills and relationships, motor skills that could be applicable to sports later in life, and cognitive skills that could translate to academic achievements in school."*

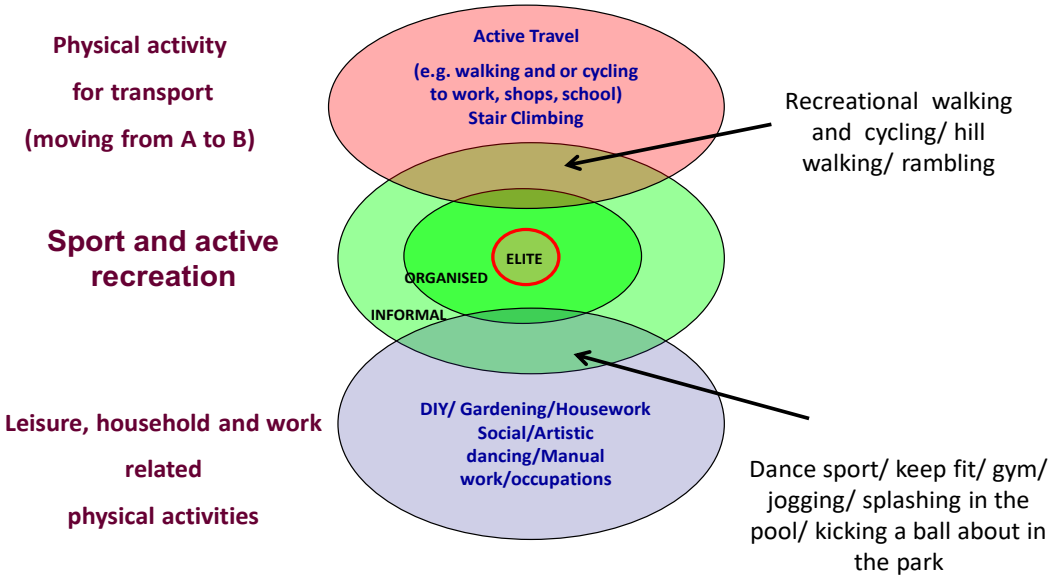
It can be argued that this broad holistic understanding of physical activity as being more than just about 'movement' is even more cogent when applied to sport with its social, institutional and cultural associations.

While there are blurred lines at the conceptual margins of what we might define as 'sport', e.g., to include 'exercise', 'fitness activities' and 'outdoor recreational activities', we may in a public policy context be clear as to what is not sport. Rowe (2019, p. 23) conceptualised this diagrammatically in Figure 1 below, which identifies three domains: sport and active recreation; physical activity for transport; and leisure, household and work-related physical activities. Each domain is a sub-set of overall physical activity levels. What we might consider to be sport in a public policy context overlaps with the other two domains to extend to a definition of 'sport' that goes beyond that characterised by Suits. But there is a point at which we would be likely to find consensual agreement that the activities referred to are not 'sport', for example gardening, walking or cycling to work, stair climbing, DIY, occupational activity, most if not all board games (in some countries chess is defined as a sport), many hobbies and craft activities, and many forms of dance. This consensual definition of what we might understand as sport is open to challenge and does evolve over time. The recent debates around the place of e-sports in public policy is a case in point (Hawthorne, M., 2019, Burton, A. et al, 2021). As referenced earlier, this is not an academic debate as where we draw the line between sport and wider physical activity and how we position the two in the public policy space has important consequences for both - a discussion we return to later.

Within 'sport', a distinction is also important between elite sport and what might be termed 'community sport'. Elite sport is high performance, competitive sport primarily performed professionally and, albeit culturally important and connected to wider community sport through talent pathways, limited in its participation to an exceedingly small proportion of the population - typically, less than one percent. Community sport, the focus of this paper, embraces the 99 percent, those who participate at lower than

elite level, is in the domain of discretionary leisure activities, is not motivated by financial reward and is participated at varying levels of organisation and in a wide variety of social and physical contexts.

**Figure 1: Conceptual definition of sport and physical activity**




## 2.3 How do we define 'wellbeing' – and what is the place of physical activity and sport in a wellbeing society?

The concept of wellbeing and its various manifestations as 'subjective wellbeing', 'happiness' and 'life satisfaction' has grown in traction not just academically but also politically over the last 30 years or so (Diener, 2000; Dolan et al, 2012; Stiglitz et al, 2009; Jaquiery, 2022). In part, this has been driven by an increasing disenchantment with using economic indicators, and particularly Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the measure of welfare and social progress (Hicks et al, 2013). However, as with the definition of sport, the definition of wellbeing poses significant challenges. The terms life satisfaction, happiness and subjective wellbeing are often used interchangeably and in conceptually confusing ways (see Dodge et al, 2012). Crucially, however, they represent individually and in combination, a sense that a good life or life well lived is more than the absence of illness, disease, or hardships but is defined by positive attributes of meaning, fulfilment, flourishing and thriving (Ryan et al, 2013). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) summarise this well as follows:

*"Traditionally, health-related quality of life has been linked to patient outcomes and has generally focused on deficits in functioning (e.g., pain, negative affect). In contrast, well-being focuses on assets in functioning, including positive emotions and psychological resources (e.g., positive affect, autonomy, mastery) as key components."*

This is not the place for debate on conceptual and definitional challenges around wellbeing. In the context of 'sport policy' the definition developed by Dodge et al in 2012 has application and resonance. They define wellbeing as '*the balance point between an individual's resource pool (their psychological, social and physical resources) and the challenges (psychological, physical and social) faced*. This can be pictured as a 'see-saw' with 'resources' on one side, 'challenges' on the other and 'wellbeing' at the

centre or fulcrum. The see-saw represents *"an individual's drive to return to a set point for wellbeing"*, Dodge et al (2012, p. 230) conclude that:
*"In essence, stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa."*

Defined in this way an individual's wellbeing is in a constant state of flux as resources interact with challenges – but is optimised when they are in equilibrium. This idea aligns with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow and with the theory of sporting capital which focuses attention on an individual's capacities to participate mediated by the external barriers they face (Rowe, 2015; Rowe, 2018).

Over recent years there has been increasing academic interest in the relationship between sport participation and subjective wellbeing, including life satisfaction and happiness. Sport is a discretionary 'experience-based' activity with complex and wide-ranging motivations which span instrumental benefits, but, centrally, enjoyment and opportunities for diversion and time out from the stresses of everyday life (Goretzki and Esser, 2008). It is little surprise, therefore, that recent research has shown a positive relationship between participation in sport and 'happiness' or subjective wellbeing (Downward and Rasciute, 2011; Bryson and MacKerron 2013).

## 2.4 Conclusions and observations

The definition of what is and is not sport is contestable and, it is suggested here, not solely of academic interest but with implications for priority in government policy and associated funding consequences. The direction of travel for the public policy definition of sport is towards a wider and more encompassing one that includes exercise, fitness and recreational activities. This pragmatic definition has been accepted as uncontroversial with little public or academic discourse, debate or scrutiny. Yet it has significant implications for how resources are distributed and on where and how public policy focuses its effort, as a wide definition of sport dilutes resources and focus and can hide important trends that a narrower focus would reveal.

The extent to which this wide definition of sport is embodied in policy documents and investment decisions in the Scottish context is explored later, as is the relative positions of sport policy and physical activity policy and value attached to them. This exploration takes place within a broader context where the concept of wellbeing is gaining increasing academic interest and political traction. It raises the question as to whether the value of sport in a 'wellbeing society' is underrated, particularly when viewed through a reductionist lens focusing more on the physicality of exercise and energy expenditure than on the distinctive multiple qualities of the sporting experience that encompass social, cultural and psychological growth and development. Before we address this directly, we need to understand what is happening to sport participation in Scotland and the social, economic and cultural contexts framing these trends.

# 3. Sport in Scottish society – behavioural trends, social context, policy and practice implications

It is important in the context of this review to understand the place of community sport in Scottish society in the 21st Century, recent trends in participation and factors shaping those trends, and the overall 'direction of travel' with potential consequences, both intended and unintended.
It is only with this strategic insight that sport policy makers can make informed, evidenced decisions. In the analysis that follows there is a suggestion that we are moving towards a society where the fabric and experience of 'sport' in Scotland will look quite different to that which we have taken for granted for generations. If this is the case then it is crucial to assess whether this direction is desirable, what might be lost, whether it is inevitable and, if not, what legitimate and effective role public policy can and should take. At the very least, we must be assured that public policy as currently framed is not complicit in exacerbating negative trends in sport participation and its wider health and social impacts, either by inaction or through misplaced priorities. The lack of research and analysis into these elements of sport activity in Scotland in the past 20 years means this assurance cannot currently be provided.

Participation in sport may be viewed from several perspectives. One is to examine what people do – sport as a type of behaviour – to describe what they take part in, how frequently, who takes part and where they do it. This descriptive quantification, the main thrust of Scotland's sport evaluation, has its place in public policy but increasingly has been recognised as a necessary but not sufficient measure of the impact and value of sport (Coalter, 2007) - a theme explored more fully in the next section. Another perspective is to examine sport participation within the context of broader social, cultural and economic trends, to explore both how sporting behaviours are shaped by these 'megatrends' (see for example Hajkowicz et al, 2013) and how participation can impact on them, and in ways that are seen as socially beneficial. A third perspective is to focus on the individual, to understand the motivations that drive them to or away from sport activity, and the barriers and constraints that prevent or constrain participation. The latter two elements have become common areas of research across Europe but have not been systematically explored or evidenced in Scotland to any significant degree for more than two decades.

The reality is that motivations, barriers and contexts interact in complex and often reinforcing feedback loops to shape behaviour and behavioural experiences, which, in turn, impact on context, motivations and perceived barriers (Rowe, 2018). It is this inherent complexity that sport policy makers and practitioners face when designing interventions and operating programmes and it is this inherent complexity that should lead us to distrust any policy or practice framed as a silver bullet solution.

Socio-ecological theoretical perspectives have for some time been applied to physical activity behaviours in a health context (see for example Sallis et al, 2002). This is starting to permeate sport policy and practice globally where it is recognised that sport takes place in a complex system (see for example Foster et al, 2005; Sport England 2017a; Rowe 2018; Hoekman, 2018) that impacts on and is impacted by social, economic and cultural factors.

## 3.1 What are the trends in participation in sport in Scotland?

Participation in sport in Scotland over recent years has broadly shown a static 'flatline' trajectory (Rowe, 2019). This tendency for a stagnation in sport participation is not unique to Scotland but can be found in many western countries including, for example, Australia, Canada and England where recent trends in participation in sport show little change (Weed, 2016; Australian Sports Commission 2022; Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2022).

However, this perspective of 'static' participation rates is potentially misleading and from a public policy perspective, on the assumption that stagnation is better than decline, may engender a complacency that is unwarranted. Rowe (2019, p.36), in his report on participation trends in Scotland, emphasised that a focus on overall 'averaged' trends in participation in sport hides *"considerable turbulence in the patterns of participation and its distribution across the population".* This turbulence is

masked by how sport is defined with a wide definition in Scotland that includes walking overshadowing changes in patterns of participation, for example from more traditional and organised sport to more informal fitness-based activities (Harris et al, 2017).

Turbulence in Scottish sport participation hidden by averages takes several forms. A big picture overview of the evidence on long term trends suggests that participation in sport, amongst the young, may be on the decline (Rowe, 2004; Sport New Zealand, 2016; Eime et al, 2019; Sport England 2022a). A report examining trends in children's and adolescent participation in organised sports across 27 European countries (Emmonds et al, 2021) over the period 2017 to 2020 concluded that participation rates increased from under 8 to under 14 for both girls and boys. However, a significant decrease in participation was observed in adolescence.

This drop out of sport in adolescence, particularly amongst girls, is not new but it may be becoming more marked. A comparative analysis of trends applying an indexed measure of change in participation in sport between Scotland, the Netherlands and Denmark showed similar patterns of recent decline in participation amongst the young (Rowe, 2019, p.35). In the Scottish context, Rowe (2019, p.35) concluded that:

*"…there are worrying signs that young people's participation in sport is starting to decline. There is not sufficient evidence to suggest it is the start of a downward trend but the figures are currently heading in the wrong direction. The evidence points to the next generation of Scots being more inactive and less sporty than their parents and grandparents were at the same age with the consequences for deteriorating health and wellbeing."*

This turbulence extends to changing patterns and distribution of participation in sport across the population. In Scotland this is demonstrated by Rowe's (2019, pp. 35, 52, 53) analysis which found:

- *"Although adult participation in sport remained constant between 2007 and 2016 any overall growth in sport participation has been driven by the inclusion of recreational walking, which has reported significant increases since 2010.*

- *In four of the six 'fitness sports' (keep fit/ aerobics; multigym/ weight training; cycling and running/ jogging) there has been an upward trend in participation (swimming and dancing are exceptions). In the three more traditional sports (football, golf and bowls) the trend is in a downward direction.*

- *Sport participation rates in Scotland are significantly higher for men than they are for women. Gender difference is more marked when walking is excluded and the 'gender gap' in sport participation (excluding walking) has persisted over the last 10 years.*

- *The drop-out with age remains significant and is showing no signs of decreasing with a halving of the participation rate between the ages of 16 to 25 years and 66 to 75 years.*

- *People living in the most deprived areas of Scotland are much less likely to participate in sport (42%, excluding walking, in 2017) compared with those living in the least deprived areas (65%).*

- *Whilst the percentage of adults taking part overall (at least once in the previous 4 weeks) has remained flat over the 10 years to 2018 the percentages participating more frequently - once a week and three times a week - have shown a steady upward trend."*

Rowe (2019, p.55) concluded his analysis of trends in participation in sport in Scotland with the following observation:

*"The trend towards engagement in fitness activities dominates and grows alongside a parallel decrease in the more traditional and organised sport participation market. The extent to which these two trends*

*are interrelated is open to question but given that the overall rate of participation (the size of the cake) has remained static there is a suggestion of a substitution effect with fitness-related sports taking the place of other activities rather than, as many might hope, complementing or adding to them."*

He went on to conclude (Rowe, 2019, p.55) that there is now in Scotland an *"Increasing polarisation between classes - the growth of an 'active class', which, in disposition and behaviours is a world apart from an increasingly left behind unsporty and inactive class that now makes up a significant minority of the Scottish population."*

Shibli (2018) in his analysis of the Scottish data came to the same conclusion as Rowe, that although overall levels of participation in sport are 'relatively steady' there are indications that people who are already active are becoming even more active and the less active becoming even less so. He characterised this as sport being effective at 'market penetration' but much less effective at 'market development'. Similarly, Kay (2018, p.20) in her review report on sport and social inequality in Scotland highlighted the divergent participation rates by level of education and by area deprivation and concluded that: *"The significance of social disadvantage in shaping inequalities in participation in sport and other physical activity [in Scotland] has been underplayed in policy and practice as well as research."*

## 3.2 The disruptive impact of COVID-19 on participation in sport and physical activity

The COVID-19 pandemic sent a disruptive shockwave through societies, impacting on all aspects of our lives and particularly on those living in poverty (Scottish Government, undated). The impact of Covid was being felt in a society where the social determinants of health were already polarised, growing wider and, for the first time in over a century, life expectancy was stalling (Marmot, 2020). A sport system that was already creaking through long-term austerity (see next sub-section), stagnating participation and structural inequalities (as discussed above) was particularly vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic with successive lockdowns and associated closures of sport facilities. As pointed out in a House of Lords report (2021, p.14), the impacts were unlikely to have affected everyone equally but to have fallen disproportionately on the least affluent, least healthy and sedentary:

*"There is an overlap between those groups hardest hit by the pandemic and those less likely to be active. For example, mortality rates from COVID-19 have been higher among those with pre-existing health conditions, the elderly, disabled people, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities. The impact of COVID-19 on these groups has exacerbated existing health inequalities."*

Evidence suggests that COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on participation in sport and physical activity. A global multi-national survey conducted across fourteen countries (Wilke et al, 2021) found that the amount of habitual movement declined by 41% and 42% for moderate to vigorous physical activity and vigorous physical activity respectively. Compared to pre-pandemic, compliance with WHO guidelines decreased from 80.9% to 62.5%. It concluded that "*a large portion of the population may be silently suffering from a less visible impact of the pandemic on public health*." (p.8). It also found that*: "the highest reductions (in PA) were ….in the youngest and oldest participants, resembling a U-shaped distribution (across age)."* A systematic review to investigate whether and to what extent physical activity changed from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic, taking age, gender and measurement method into account found that 32 studies revealed a significant decline in physical activity, whereas only five studies found a significant increase, while 14 studies revealed mixed results (Wunsch et al, 2022).

A UK study (McCarthy et al, 2021) found similar declines in levels of physical activity during the pandemic with the authors concluding: *"Those who were more active at baseline had the largest drops in PA and inactive people remained so throughout, contrary to findings that suggest a surge in PA during lockdown. Perhaps of most concern are the fairly active group, who were close to doing*

*recommended levels of PA for a number of weeks prior to lockdown and then dropped to doing no PA, with no sign of change as the lockdown was eased."*

A Sport England survey carried out in the Summer of 2020 (Sport England 2021a, p.3), as restrictions eased found: *"A reduction in the number of active children and young people of 2.3% – or just over 100,000 – compared to the same period 12 months before."* It hinted at the potential for longer term consequences: *"Although overall reductions have been minimised, the disruption has had an unprecedented impact upon physical literacy, with changes to perceived competence, confidence and enjoyment of concern going forward."* A study conducted in the UK (Salway et al, 2022) on children aged 10 to 11 years using objective measures of physical activity found that their activity levels decreased and did not return to pre-pandemic levels despite easing of restrictions. The most recent Active Lives report for the period 2020-21 (Sport England, 2022b, p.3) concluded that: "*Some groups, such as our youngest adults, continue to see activity levels fall at a worrying rate while our physical spaces, such as gyms and leisure centres, are seeing slow recovery in numbers – with those taking part in fitness activities remaining notably below pre-pandemic levels."*

The impacts identified above in England and worldwide equally apply to Scotland, according to **sport**scotland (2020, pp.1, 2). Their brief review of the evidence of impact of COVID-19 focusing on those people with protected characteristics and socio-economic disadvantage concluded: *"COVID-19 is affecting everyone. But the harms caused by the pandemic are not being felt equally"* and, *"We also have to recognise one of the key risks of the restrictions put in place to deal with the virus is declining levels of physical activity."* Empirical evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on participation rates in Scotland is sparse. A survey of adults in Scotland commissioned by the Observatory for Sport in Scotland (Rowe, 2021) found that 47 per cent of the adult (18 years plus) population of Scotland (just over two million people) felt that their participation in sport and exercise activity was a lot or a little less in the last 12 months than the equivalent period before COVID-19, with men reporting more of a drop than women, while 14 per cent of adults reported undertaking a lot or a little more activity than in the previous year. The amount of time spent sitting, an independent risk factor for cardiovascular disease and diabetes, was reported to have increased by 2.5 million Scots, 56% of the adult population, and was highest amongst those aged 18 to 24 years. As for sport activity levels in children (5-18 years), an unpublished review carried out by the Observatory for Sport in Scotland in 2021 found that 23 of 32 local authority areas in Scotland prevented extra-curricular state school sport from returning until at least 18 months after the first lockdown began. In contrast, most independent schools restored extra-curricular sport within six months. Another contrasting approach was revealed in Physical Education classes, which were typically reduced in Scotland during 2020-21, apparently to enable children to catch up with lost academic subjects, whereas in New Zealand PE and games were increased, with Covid restrictions, to support children's mental health recovery.

Consistent with the theme of this review, most studies of the impact of COVID-19 have focused on overall physical activity rather than specifically on 'sport'. However, there is evidence that the impact of COVID-19 has extended beyond the physical to include significant negative mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety and traumatic stress, and that this has been felt particularly among vulnerable populations including those with low socio-economic status (Boden et al, 2021). Taking this wider view may well have underplayed the specific impacts of COVID on sport which is characterised by socially engaged, formal activities, supported by volunteers and taking place in public spaces and venues. Evidence from a study in Australia (Eime et al, 2022) supports this view, finding that the greatest decline in participation was in club team sports and that individuals who were active within sports clubs were less likely to exercise during COVID-19 restrictions. Sport England's Active Lives survey (Sport England, 2022b) showed some recovery in team sports participation as facilities opened post lockdowns although this was in the wider context of an overall decline of team sport participants from 3.5 million in November 2015/16 to 2.2 million in November 2020/21. A survey of voluntary sports clubs in England commissioned by the Sport and Recreation Alliance (Barrett and Coleman, 2021, p.9) found that, "*organisations responding to the survey lost an average of 60% of the members and participants during lockdown but expect to recover to 75% of pre-pandemic levels once restrictions are removed."*

## 3.3 The megatrends impacting on sport participation

COVID-19 may be characterised as a "grey rhino" event, i.e., a highly probable but neglected threat that has an enormous impact. It could be argued that we could see it coming but did little to prepare for it. Megatrends, however, are different to this high impact event, being characterised as predictable, forecasted trends in the patterns of social, economic or environmental change that happen inexorably but gradually over time (Hajkowicz et al, 2013) with the inference that they are contextual 'givens' that require adaptation and modification as a policy response. A comprehensive review of the evidence of the societal trends impacting on and impacted by sport would constitute a separate article. In the context of this review, it is sufficient to examine what others, having taken stock of the evidence, have identified as salient underlying 'mega' trends or social, economic and cultural drivers.

A recent horizon scanning exercise conducted by Sport England (2022c) *"to reveal the trends that will impact sport and physical activity to 2031",* re-framed or resonated with many of the drivers identified in a strategic review carried out in 2003 (Sport England, 2004). These include 'an ageing population' with the opportunities and challenges that this brings; and levels of obesity and associated challenges around preventative healthcare but also accompanied by greater health awareness potentially associated with positive lifestyle changes. Economic factors still feature with what is referred to as a 'multi-speed economy' with higher inflation, a lower GDP and unequal recovery geographically and between different social groups exacerbated by heightened pressure on local budgets post the 2008 economic crash. Important trends and drivers did, however, emerge in the recent analysis that did not feature significantly in 2003 including increasing precarity of work, an increasing concern about young people's mental health, increased remote and home working and flexibility of hours, the democratisation of information with increasing digital skills, a growth in 'digital leisure, and 'greener lives' with potential for new regulations in building and energy consumption. COVID-19 is implicated in many of these drivers – invariably serving to amplify trends that were already bubbling under the surface.

These 'megatrends' are not unique to England. A consultation conducted by Rowe (2018) with a range of stakeholders in Scotland found that five drivers emerged as a priority – health status/overweight/obesity; social media and technology - the distracted young; sport and education; socio-economic inequality; and 'provision - austerity in public investment'. The drivers that were felt to have the greatest downward impact were 'provision-austerity in public investment' followed by 'health status/overweight/obesity' and 'socio-economic inequality'. At the other end of the spectrum 'gender and sport - societal shift or more of the same' was felt to be likely to pull sport participation up from current levels as were 'new age fitness and health' and 'access to open space and countryside'. This consultation took place pre COVID-19 and it says something for the pace and unpredictability of change that even in the months since the Sport England Horizon Scanning report was written (one assumes in late 2021) there has been a deepening cost-of-living crisis, spiralling energy costs exacerbated by a war in Europe, financial turmoil in the markets, increasing interest rates and the prospect of a new era of austerity with rises in taxation and cuts to public services.

The prospects for community sport and leisure are of particular concern with these shocks to the system overlaid on an already fragile and potentially unsustainable infrastructure (Community Leisure UK, 2020; APSE, 2021). A survey of public sector leisure operators in the UK carried out in late 2022 found that 40% of council areas are at risk of losing their leisure centre(s) or seeing reduced services at their leisure centre(s) before 31 March 2023 and three quarters (74%) of council areas classified as 'unsecure', meaning there is risk of the closure of leisure centres and/or reduced services before 31 March 2024 (UK Active, 2022). In Scotland attendances at local authority sports facilities, provided directly or through trusts, in 2020/21 reduced by 91.2%, from 50 million to 4.6 million. During the same period, expenditure increased by 20.9% as councils moved to compensate ALEOs/Trusts for loss of income because of COVID-19 restrictions. This resulted in unit costs increasing from £2.92 to £40.36 (an increase of over 1000%). These costs pre-dated the energy crisis that followed in 2022, which has had a significant impact on swimming pools and leisure centres, and forced up membership and usage fees, or led to closure.

It will take some time for evidence to emerge, but we are already seeing widespread concern about the potential for closing facilities and pressures on volunteers (CLOA, 2022; Volunteer Scotland, 2022). Based upon interviews with Scotland's 25 leisure trusts, Community Leisure UK reporting in November 2022 concluded that the landscape for the provision of public leisure and culture in Scotland is unsustainable with 89% of leisure and culture charities at risk (CLUK, 2022). On the demand side it is impossible to envisage anything but an amplification of the polarisation and structural inequalities in participation in sport as income inequalities widen, the numbers experiencing poverty increase and discretionary spending reduces.

## 3.4 Conclusions and observations

In this section we have touched on salient trends in sport participation focusing on Scotland and contextualising these trends within the broader underlying megatrends that impact on community sport. It is not a comprehensive evaluation in what is a large topic with a vast source of literature and supporting evidence, but it is sufficient to provide markers that support a developing narrative around the role of sport in society, its place in public policy and increasing threats. From this brief analysis we can draw important observations and conclusions, as follows:

1) Although sport participation rates in Scotland appear static prior to 2019 the aggregation of statistics in a wide definition of what constitutes sport to include informal fitness and recreational activities in addition to more formal socially structured and organised sport hides a sustained decline in the latter. As we explore later in this paper, the reasons for this decline are often presented as having a degree of inevitability consequential upon changing tastes and preferences, and to that extent may be used to abnegate public policy responsibility for halting or even reversing this tide. Associated with this contraction in organised sport are signs that young people are moving away from sport participation. One does not necessarily follow the other but given the historical relationship between youth participation and more organised forms of sport it is not a surprise to see these trends juxtaposed.

2) The COVID-19 pandemic created a major shock to an already fragile sport system. Under investment in the sporting infrastructure over many years and increasing pressures to 'break even' in what is a discretionary non-statutory local service has taken its toll. As we emerge from COVID there is considerable pessimism on the sustainability of local sport facilities. This pessimism has been described as a crisis for the sector as COVID is accompanied by spiralling inflation, record increases in energy costs and uncertain economic markets and business environments. A new era of austerity looms, and previous experience of policy in Scotland shows that despite evidence of value, social return on investment and health returns (see the next section), community sport as a non-statutory service will not be prioritised over other pressing areas of what are considered essential public services such as the NHS, education, social care, housing and community safety. This contrasts with other more active countries where community sport and wider physical activity has continued to retain a priority in public policy in response to these social and economic challenges.

3) As important as it is to focus on provision and opportunity - the infrastructure of sport – it would be a mistake to lose sight of the impact of recent shocks to the social and economic system on the consumers of sport, i.e., to fail to take a demand side perspective. The impact of COVID has been disproportionately felt by those living in poverty or on low incomes and COVID-19 has amplified many of the inequalities in society. Sport participation, which was already highly socially structured and polarised in Scottish society before COVID, will not have been immune from this disproportionate impact. There is little substantive evidence to show how or whether participation in community sport in Scotland has bounced back from COVID. But evidence from other countries shows that recovery has been at best a slow process and where progress is being made it is more likely to be found in informal activities such as recreational walking and cycling than in organised sport. There is also a suggestion that any potential bounce-back that we may have hoped for may be derailed by the additional pressures brought upon consumers facing a cost-of-living crisis and new era of austerity in public services, an increasing tax burden and higher of owning or renting a home.

This analysis suggests a gloomy prospect for community sport. But there is an alternative narrative to the one described which sees organised, socially structured sport, not as an inevitable casualty to the social and economic challenges we face but as part of the solution. In a new progressive perspective in Scotland, sport could feature as one of the levers available to government to build a more optimistic, thriving, physically and socially resilient wellbeing society. It is this argument for 'sport going beyond physical activity' that we explore in the next section of this review paper.

# 4. The value of sport – physical and beyond

The strength of the evidence base on the value of sport is central to arguments made in this review. Value and benefit take various forms and operate at different levels from the individual to the local community to society as a whole. Rowe (2018) argued from an individual perspective that sport should be viewed as a form of (sporting) capital, part of a family of interrelated transferable capitals that include cultural, human and social capital. This is to view sport participation and the experience of sport as a capacity building, empowering process contributing to individual self-fulfilment and wellbeing (see also Rowe, 2015). But an evolving evidence base shows that the value of sport goes beyond the individual to include 'spill-over' impacts or externalities where what benefits one person in aggregate benefits everybody. There are many examples of this, from increases in social trust through civic engagement and reduced anti-social behaviours to improvements in public health from a more physically active, socially engaged lifestyle to the inter-generational effects of sporting parents 'building' the sporting capital of their children, to in the workplace a more productive workforce from improved educational outcomes (human capital), and less time lost to sickness.

In the context of this review, we have not attempted a systematic assessment of the literature and evidence base on the value and benefits of sport which would be a substantive exercise, and in many ways would serve only to replicate what is already out there (Cox, 2012; Coalter, 2013; Taylor et al, 2015; Sport England 2017b). Rather, our focus here is on examining the evidence to test the premise set out in the title of this review that the value of sport goes beyond physical activity and consequently needs to be re-appraised in the context of public policy. To this extent we have focused primarily on accessing recent narrative reviews that have summarised the state of the evidence base and or applied it in the context of social return on investment appraisals. Given the purpose of this review, we have concentrated on the health and social benefits of participating in community sport rather than the potential economic returns or the benefits that might accrue for national pride and identity from success in elite sport. To that extent we are presenting a conservative view of the total benefit that a wider perspective on the value of sport might show. We also acknowledge that participation in sport is not always beneficial and is linked to costs associated with sports injuries (Ryan et al, 2019) and for some an association with anti-social behaviours (Taylor, 2015; Kavussanu and Al-Yaaribi, 2021) although the net balance sheet is strongly positive (Davies et al, undated). The institution of sport also faces many challenges in both its representation (see for example, Brown and Murray, 2021) and racism in its governance (Long and Spracken, 2011; Hylton, 2021; Plan4Sport, 2022).

## 4.1 The physiological health benefits of being physically active

Evaluated from any perspective, the evidence on the value of sport and physical activity has grown substantially over the last 70 years, building on the earliest foundational study of Jerry Morris which showed a strong independent relationship between levels of physical activity and reduced risk of coronary heart disease (Morris, 1953). This initial focus on the physiological response to exercise has played a long and formative role in the epistemological development of the value of sport, exercise and broader physical activity. In part this may be because the physiological response and associated health benefits better lend themselves to clinical models of research than the more conceptually challenging and methodologically difficult research paradigms associated with social and psychological benefits, programme impacts and effectiveness (Coalter, 2017).

Consequently, the most substantive and compelling evidence base is on the physical health benefits of 'physical activity' (Department of Health, 2004; Reiner et al, 2013; Warburton et al 2017; Sport England, 2017). According to the World Health Organisation (2022):

*"Regular physical activity is proven to help prevent and manage non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and several cancers. It also helps prevent hypertension, maintain healthy body weight and can improve mental health, quality of life and well-being*."

This is crystallised in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (undated) conclusion:

*"Regular physical activity is one of the most important things you can do for your health. Being physically active can improve your brain health, help manage weight, reduce the risk of disease, strengthen bones and muscles, and improve your ability to do everyday activities."*

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have demonstrated a curvilinear dose-response relationship between physical activity and premature mortality, and the primary and secondary prevention of several chronic medical conditions (Warburton et al, 2017). The implication is that significant health benefits are observed with relatively minor volumes of physical activity and these increase as frequency and intensity of activity increase. Similar results are found for young people where a systematic review of the evidence (Janssen et al, 2010, p. 13) concluded:

*".....physical activity is associated with numerous health benefits in school-aged children and youth. The dose-response relations between physical activity and health that were observed in several observational studies suggest that the more physical the activity, the greater the health benefit. However, the results from several experimental studies suggested that even modest amounts of physical activity can have tremendous health benefits in high-risk youngsters (e.g., obese, high blood pressure)."*

The UK Chief Medical Officer Physical Activity Guidelines updated in 2019 (Department of Health and Social Care et al, 2019, p.8) made a significant addition to the earlier 2011 guidelines responding to evidence that recognised:

*"...an emerging evidence base for the health benefits of performing very vigorous intensity activity performed in short bouts interspersed with periods of rest or recovery....The available evidence demonstrates that high intensity interval exercise has clinically meaningful effects on fitness, body weight and insulin resistance, and can be as or more effective than MVPA and. This option has therefore been incorporated into the recommendation for adults."*

Interestingly, and pertinent to this review, it was noted in the foreword by the four Home Country Chief Medical Officers (Department of Health and Social Care et al, 2019, p.3) that:

*"Physical activity is not just a health issue. It brings people together to enjoy shared activities and contributes to building strong communities whilst supporting the economy to grow."*

## 4.2 The mental health and wellbeing benefits of sport and physical activity

The evidence base on the mental health benefits of a physically active lifestyle has trailed those on the physiological benefits but has strengthened and become more substantive (Taylor et al, 2015). As far back as 1988 an independent positive association between levels of physical activity and various aspects of mental health was identified in large cross-sectional populations in Canada and the United States (Stephens, 1988), including general well-being, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and positive mood. Tellingly, however, in the context of this review the observation was made that:

*"Data on the comparative effects of recreation and housework suggest that quality of time, and not mere energy expenditure, must be taken into account in attempts to explain the psychological benefits of physical activity."*

In a narrative review Fox (1999) concluded:

*"Sufficient evidence now exists for the effectiveness of exercise in the treatment of clinical depression. Additionally, exercise has a moderate reducing effect on state and trait anxiety and can improve physical self-perceptions and in some cases global self-esteem. Also there is now good evidence that aerobic and resistance exercise enhances mood states, and weaker evidence that exercise can improve cognitive function (primarily assessed by reaction time) in older adults."*

Eime et al (2013, p.19) in their systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for children and adolescents concluded:

*"There is substantive evidence of many different psychological and social health benefits of participation in sport by children and adolescents. Furthermore, there is a general consensus that participation in sport for children and adolescence is associated with improved psychological and social health, above and beyond other forms of leisure-time PA."*

A review of reviews carried out in 2019 (Biddle et al, 2019) concluded that physical activity continued to be shown to be associated with certain mental health outcomes in young people with "*a causal association found with cognitive functioning, a partial association for depression, no association for self-esteem, and research focusing on the association of physical activity with anxiety was reported to be variable but generally showed small beneficial effects."*

Sport England in its review of the evidence on the outcomes of sport and physical activity (Sport England, 2017b, p.34) concluded: *"Compared with some other outcome areas, mental wellbeing as an outcome area appears to be well-established".* Evidence of a positive impact of sport and exercise activity was reported on enjoyment and happiness; confidence and self-esteem; reduction of anxiety, stress and depression; improvements in terms of cognitive function; and reducing the risk of dementia. But Sport England noted limitations in the evidence base in terms of the quality of studies and directions of causality and, importantly in the context of this review, on "*the effectiveness of different types of sports, exercise and physical activities."* A similar conclusion was noted by Taylor et al (2015, pp. 31, 32): *"One noticeable gap in the literature is the lack of evidence on the relative effectiveness of different forms of exercise and sport on health… Other factors (beyond those of frequency and intensity) such as the organisational setting, whether the activity is indoors or outdoors in natural surroundings, and the role project facilitators play may be important in influencing mental health benefits."*

The relationship between participation in sport and exercise activity and subjective wellbeing (happiness) has been of increasing academic and policy interest (Downward et al 2011; Fujiwara et al, 2014). Taylor et al (2015, pp. 35, 37) note that *"there is growing evidence of the association between sport, exercise and subjective wellbeing",* but draw attention to the limitations inherent in this research referring in particular to *"the little or no evidence of the differential effects of participation in sport and exercise on wellbeing for various subgroups of the population, although it is clear that there are differentiated effects depending on individual versus team sports".* This conclusion is supported in empirical research *(*Downward and Rasciute 2011, p. 344) which suggests that *"the value of happiness is enhanced by sports participation and that this is particularly the case with social interaction sports."* A systematic review of the evidence on the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for children and adolescents (Eime et al, 2013, p.19) concluded: *"there is a general consensus that participation in sport for children and adolescence is associated with improved psychological and social health, above and beyond other forms of leisure-time PA. More specifically, there are reports that participation in team sports rather than individual activities is associated with better health."* In New Zealand an empirical study (Wilson et al, 2022) examining the association between wellbeing and organised sport participation among adolescents whilst accounting for demographic characteristics and other recreational physical activity concluded that:

*"….. participation in organized sport appears to offer a unique benefit to wellbeing above and beyond participation in other recreational physical activities. Thus, while quality experiences of recreational physical activity are evidently beneficial for wellbeing, promoting participation in organized sport may offer greater value for those who are already active."*

## 4.3 Going beyond physical activity - the social benefits of sport

The evidence base continues to evolve and develop, but as we widen the lens on the impact of sport to examine broader social benefits it is incumbent on us to explore more challenging research questions. Coalter writing in 2007 identified four limitations that affected the cumulative body of evidence in this area as, conceptual weakness in the vague definition of sport (see the earlier section that discusses this); methodological weaknesses in programme evaluation in part as a consequence of the mythopoeic status of sport; little consideration of sufficient conditions over and above the necessary condition of

participation; and the selective nature of the evidence base that fails to provide information on the full complexity.

Importantly, however, Coalter (2007) did not conclude the social impacts of sport to be unsubstantive but suggested a degree of caution with the verdict of 'case not proven' and, drawing particularly on the work of Pawson (2006), concluded that research in this area needs to focus on process and mechanisms informed by sound programme theory. In his review of the evidence base carried out in 2013 on behalf of **sport**scotland, Coalter (2013, p. 18) concluded in relation to educational benefits that:

*"… there are clear indications that sport and physical education does not have a negative effect, it might have a positive effect (given certain conditions) and it has the potential to confer independent physical and emotional health benefits. The importance of sport in many young people's lives can be used to attract educationally under-achieving young people to educational programmes…"*

Notwithstanding the healthy degree of caution called for by Coalter, recent summary reviews have made a range of positive conclusions on an emerging evidence base on the social impacts of sport to include positive impacts on criminal behaviours and recidivism particularly amongst young males; positive social capital impacts from sport including reduced social and ethnic tensions; more collective action and community involvement; and *"considerable evidence of the positive effect of sport and exercise on educational outcomes",* including educational attainment (Taylor et al, 2015, p.18).

Limited studies have identified negative social effects but these are strongly outweighed by the positive ones, and in part reflect the importance of context as referenced by Coalter's critique (see also Coalter, 2013) which emphasises sufficient over necessary conditions. As Taylor et al (2015, p.46) note in relation to sport and crime, *"Any relationships between sport/exercise and crime/anti-social behaviour are not direct, but via moderating protective factors, particularly the quality of leadership, and effects on risk factors."* Nichols (2007, p.204) similarly, in the context of sport programmes to reduce youth crime rates, refers to sport as *"a tool to facilitate a process much more than an end in its own right."* Taylor et al again touch on the difference between understanding necessary and sufficient conditions for impact when, in the case of sport building social capital, they conclude: *"There is no evidence on the differential impacts of different sports on social capital. Other untested issues include the dose response relationship - e.g., how much sport, how often, and for how long do you have to do it in order to increase social capital?"*

This discourse on the value of sport has been evident in the context of education and school sport, its creation of a foundation for healthy living, and the differences between the state and independent sectors in Scotland, and between children from high and low SIMD areas. Research in Scotland is sparse, but Rowe (2018) highlights the importance of building sporting capital – physical, psychological and social capacities – at a young age to sustain lifelong engagement in sport and other physical activity. There is extensive evidence that early positive experiences and participation in sport through school years impacts on later life participation as an adult (Tammelin et al, 2003; Kirk, 2005; Roberts and Brodie, 1992). As we have seen in a previous section, the early teenage years are a critical and fragile period when drop-out from sport remains high in Scotland, particularly amongst girls. We refer above to the distinction between the necessary condition of participation and the sufficient conditions of the context and quality of experience that delivers the positive outcomes of improved physical and mental health and social benefits. Bailey (2006) in his review of the evidence summarises this concisely:

*"…physical education and sport (PES) have the potential to make distinctive contributions to the development of children's fundamental movement skills and physical competences, which are necessary precursors of participation in later lifestyle and sporting physical activities. They also, when appropriately presented, can support the development of social skills and social behaviours, self-esteem and pro-school attitudes, and, in certain circumstances, academic and cognitive development."*
*…….many of these benefits will not necessarily result from participation, per se; the effects are likely to be mediated by the nature of the interactions between students and their teachers, parents, and coaches who work with them."*

In an educational context these sufficient conditions are increasingly represented in what is termed a co-curriculum teaching environment. Co-curricular refers to "*activities, programs, and learning experiences that complement, in some way, what students are learning in school, i.e. experiences that are connected to or mirror the academic curriculum"* (Great Schools Partnership, 2022). Co-curricular activities are an extension of the formal learning experiences in a course or academic programme, while extracurricular activities may be offered or coordinated by a school but may not be explicitly connected to academic learning. However, this distinction is *"extremely fuzzy in practice, and the terms are often used interchangeably."*

Sport is only one of a long list of activities that may be provided in a co-curricular context, but with its multiplicity of potential benefits, delivered in the right way it provides the opportunity for developing important soft skills that support cross-curricular learning and attainment, school attendance, educational aspirations, personal development, and pro-social values and civic engagement in adulthood (Donnelly, undated). Many schools, particularly in the independent sector in Scotland, place an increasing value on co-curricular activities: *"Great emphasis is placed on developing rich and diverse co-curricular programmes based on the conviction that individuals thrive in an environment in which all of their abilities and talents are recognised and nurtured. This commitment to providing exceptional co-curricular programmes ensures that independent schools are successful and outstanding in specialist areas, such as sport, music, arts, drama as well as academically"* (HMC, undated). However, research carried out on behalf of the Social Mobility Commission (Donnelly, 2019), drawing upon empirical data from the UK Understanding Society panel survey, concluded: *"Opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities* (the term used interchangeably with co-curricular activities) *is profoundly structured by socioeconomic status, with participation gaps between rich and poor households evident through the national-level analysis as well as the case study research in the four localities."* They go on to conclude: *"Analysis of …. data showed that across every type of extracurricular activity, as household income declined, so too did participation in each activity. Children from poorer households were especially excluded from music classes and sports, where the participation gap is much more pronounced".* To address these inequalities, they recommend a 'national extracurricular bursary scheme' to support children from low-income families; initiatives that work directly with schools to allow young people to 'trial' activities and provide heavily subsidised fees; and the appointment of a designated extra-curricular co-ordinator in every state school.

Outside of the school environment community amateur sports clubs play an important role in the institutional structure of sport (Breuer et al, 2015) and, to the extent that they are embedded in local communities and sustained by volunteers, make an important civic contribution. A **sport**scotland study in 2001 estimated the number of sports clubs in Scotland at 13,000 with over half the responding clubs having fewer than 60 members (**sport**scotland, 2001). Evidence from 2000-2005 showed that 40% of sport participants in Scotland did so in a club context although, as we noted in an earlier section, sports clubs are facing increasing challenges from both a demand and supply perspective as people increasingly gravitate towards individualised activity (Harris et al, 2017), and as pressures on costs and volunteering increase (Volunteer Scotland, 2022). The extent to which voluntary sports clubs contribute towards social capital has been an ongoing debate. Research in Australia has evidenced the potential for sports clubs to perform wide ranging socio-cultural functions, including leadership, participation and skill development, and provide a community hub, health promotion, social networks and community identity. Eime et al (2013, p.1) conclude from a systematic review that there is:

*"…consistent evidence that club-based and team-based sport participation, when compared to other individual forms of PA, is associated with better psychological and social health outcomes. It is generally concluded that it is the social nature of this participation that is the factor mediating the relationship between participation and improved health."*

However, the contribution of sports clubs to social capital is contested (Nicholson and Hoye, 2008) with stronger evidence for their role in contributing to bonding rather than bridging social capital. An interesting concept of an 'open club' (Blom, 2015) has developed in the Netherlands to describe sports clubs that are *"financially and organisationally healthy… with strong governance and good policies that develop realistic and future-oriented activities from its own responsibility, for both its members and*

*its surroundings, and thus is capable to fulfil its role in both sports and society."* Both Sweden and the Netherlands provide striking examples of how sports clubs are playing a crucial social entrepreneurship role that has been shown to protect community sport from financial cuts associated with a neoliberal austerity policy environment (Hoekman et al, 2018; Bjarsholm and Norberg, 2021). This contrasts with developments in Scotland and across the UK where evidence detailing decreasing local authority investment in sport and recreation through the 21st Century is associated with an ongoing failure to meet policy goals to increase and widen participation, particularly amongst 'hard-to-reach' groups (Widdop et al, 2017; EKOS, 2019).

## 4.4 Sport and its social return on investment

Over recent years there has been an increasing interest in extending evaluation of outcomes to examining the social return on investment in sport (Davies, 2018; Gosselin et al, 2020). Social return on investment (SROI) goes beyond traditional cost benefit analysis models to provide "*a framework for measuring and accounting for this much broader concept of value; it seeks to reduce inequality and environmental degradation and improve wellbeing by incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits"* (Nicholls et al, 2012, p.8).

In England, this interest culminated in a report using 2017/18 as its base model to assess the net social value of sport and physical activity expressing the total value of the social outcomes as a proportion of inputs (Davies et al, undated). Value was assessed based on 16 social outcomes spanning the physical and mental health benefits (including risk of stroke CHD, various cancers, Type 2 diabetes, dementia, depression hip fracture, back pain and risk of injury), mental wellbeing (including subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction), individual development (including educational attainment and enhanced human capital) and social and community development (including reduced criminal incidences, enhanced social capital and non-market benefits from volunteering). These outcomes were selected on the basis that they have a sufficiently established evidence base (Sport England, 2017b) with what were considered to be conservative assumptions applied on attribution and benefit.

Interestingly, in the context of this review, impact (value) was assessed in relation to *"wider physical activity, including active travel (for health outcomes) rather than just sport participation"* (Davies et al, undated p. 13). In 2018, the threshold used for valuing social outcomes (excluding physical and mental health) was 'at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week'. This was a significant change from the authors' 2014 social return on investment appraisal – also commissioned in part by Sport England – where the threshold was set for 'at least 1 x 30 minutes of sport participation per week' (SIRC, 2016). This reflected Sport England's strategic shift from a sport development agency to a wider sport and physical activity promotion agency (see the next section) and it may be argued is itself indicative of a shift in the public policy priority.

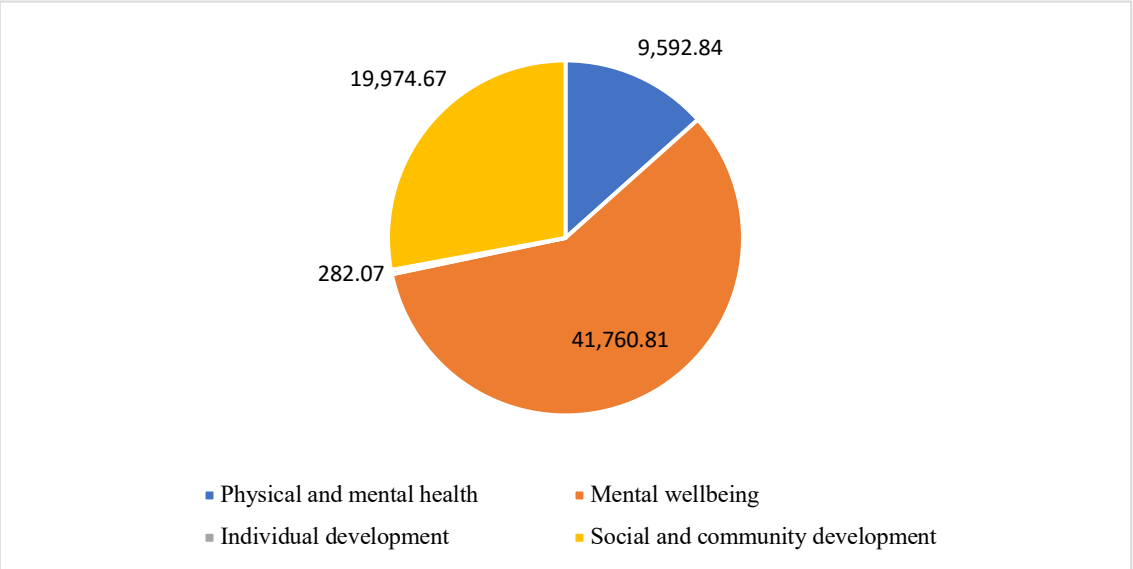
SIRC (Davies et al, undated) concluded that the overall social return on investment ratio (that is the value of the return net of the costs of inputs) was an SROI of £3.28, i.e., for every £1.00 'invested' in sport and physical activity in England, £3.28 worth of social benefits is generated. But of more importance in the context of this paper it concluded (Davies et al, undated, p.38):

*"In our calculations, the largest contribution to social value is associated with mental wellbeing, totalling £41.76bn. This is 58.3% of all social value generated by sport and physical activity in England. The second largest contribution is from social and community development which contributes 27.9% (£19.97bn), followed by physical and mental health at 13.4% (£9.59bn)."*

When assessed in the context of this review this conclusion is significant. It suggests that the value of the benefits to society of sport and physical activity are predominantly not from the physical and clinical mental health benefits – although these are substantial – but from the mental wellbeing and social and community benefits. This is the case even when the definition of participation is one based on levels, intensity and duration of physical activity rather than on a narrower definition of sport and where the definition extends to include active travel. The chart below (Figure 2) (applying statistics from Davies et al, undated, p. 39) reflects these different contributions graphically. At a local level a social return on

investment for sport-related programmes in London with at-risk young people reinforces this perspective, suggesting that young people who engaged in Active Community Network programmes, *"benefit from their participation in terms of the development of self-confidence and sports skills, improved relationships with peers and adults, improved self-esteem and a consequent reduction in anti-social behaviour"* (Butler and Leatham, undated). This again emphasises the value of wider social, wellbeing and community development benefits that go beyond physical and clinical mental health.

**Figure 2: Outcome (social value) of social return on investment (£m) calculations in England (statistics input from SIRC study, measuring social and economic impact of sport in England, 'base model' 2017/18).**




SIRC in their final recommendations touch again on the issue of lack of specificity as to what types of interventions potentially deliver what impacts and with whom: *"We recommend that Sport England consider commissioning research to identify how the national SROI model could be used to produce sub-population estimates for the social value of specific sports or activities, geographical areas and specific interventions and projects."* There has been no such research conducted in Scotland.

## 4.5 Conclusions and observations

This section has provided an overview of the evidence on the value and benefit of a physically active lifestyle, and of participation and engagement in sport. It does not purport to be comprehensive but, to the extent that it draws on existing narrative reviews which themselves are supported by meta-analyses and systematic reviews, the presentation of evidence here is sufficient for the purposes of this paper. There are, as a result, important conclusions and observations that we may make on the state of the evidence that we believe have important implications for the place of sport in public policy as follows:

1) The evidence base on the physiological health benefits (physical and more recently mental) of physical activity has longer antecedents and is generally grounded in more methodologically sound research designs than is the case for the psychological wellbeing, social and community benefits. In part, this reflects the more mature research community and funding environment in clinically based research, human physiology and health. But it is also in part reflective of the fact that research in the areas of social benefit associated with physical activity, exercise and sport are inherently challenging with a multiplicity of outcomes, processes, confounding variables, difficulties of definition, attribution and causality. Notwithstanding, there is an increasing realisation in the research community of this imbalance between 'physiological benefits' and 'social benefits' and the evidence gap is narrowing. It is, however, being frustrated by the lack of funding and high quality, theoretically informed evaluations, particularly with experimental designs and large-scale longitudinal studies.

2) It is important to recognise that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. This is not a glib argument to support a mythopoeic evangelical support for sport but is one designed to set a realistic pragmatic framework for public policy. The social benefits of sport are not without evidence, but it is messier and is 'less compelling' than the evidence base on the physiological benefits of physical activity. Interestingly, while good, healthy debate continues across research on the extent to which sport contributes to impact and positive outcomes, there is widespread agreement that sport at least provides for many a focus, tool or 'hook' with which to develop and deliver impact. Notwithstanding, public investment in sport should be evidenced based in confronting social complexity whilst the test in public policy may be one of 'beyond reasonable doubt' rather than of 'proven cause and effect' (even with physiological outcomes this absolute level of proof is difficult if not impossible to achieve). Applying the standard of beyond reasonable doubt, the evidence base on the individual social and community value of sport, exercise and physical activity is both plausible and convincing, and sufficient to suggest that the question is not whether these benefits occur but in what form they occur, in what contexts and under what conditions. Failure to address these contextual and conditional questions is a common weakness in programme evaluations and research designs which make no distinction on the specific nature of the intervention, and, beyond frequency, intensity and duration, fail to distinguish between the type of activity and context in which it occurs. This often results in research that treats all activity in multiple contexts as 'equivalents' without considering the inherent differences in, for example, walking to the shops, exercising on a treadmill alone at home, taking part in an exercise class at a local gym, playing weekly games of football or skateboarding with friends, or playing a game of golf, pickleball or walking netball in a club with associated after-match socialising.

3) The evidence from an extensive analysis of the social return on investment from sport and physical activity in England showed a substantial credit of approaching a 3.28 to 1 return. Again, the distinction on how much benefit is accrued by different types of activities in different contexts is not clearly made. Volunteering is identified and counted separately, but participation in sport is not, being subsumed within a broader measure of physical activity in the calculation of health benefits. Notwithstanding, it is interesting in the context of this review that much greater value was estimated from the individual wellbeing and social and community benefits associated with participation in sport than from the physical and mental health benefits from being active. This was despite including active travel in the physical benefit equation. In many ways this confounds the dominant discourse that places primacy on getting more people to be more physically active whilst potentially neglecting the quality of life and wellbeing premium from being active through sport.

# 5. The place of community sport in public policy in Scotland

## 5.1 Introduction

In this section we turn our attention to the positioning of sport in public policy in Scotland as represented in key national documents and frameworks and consider this in the context of the conclusions drawn so far in this review.

Our focus is on policy at a national level which not only sets the framework for decisions on public sector funding that permeate down to the local level, but also create a culture and attitude about the place and value of sport in society. However, we acknowledge that the sport landscape and what has been referred to as the sport eco-system in Scotland is complex and our analysis of national policy does not necessarily reflect the culture and focus of all the players in the 'sport delivery system'. Local authorities and leisure trusts are a case in point where sport features as part of a wider cultural and leisure agenda, which contrasts, for example, with many voluntary clubs that have a specific sport remit. While our focus is on Scotland, it is useful to draw upon the experience of neighbouring countries that share common issues and challenges, not least in the context of the megatrends identified earlier, but often with different policy responses.

Hylton and Totten (2008) suggest that sport development intervention exists in a continuum from at one extreme an emphasis that is purely sport-related development outcomes to the other extreme of initiatives predominantly focused on community wellbeing. Rowe (2018, p. 5) similarly has suggested that the characterisation of the justification for public policy investment in sport as being either that of 'sport for sports sake' or 'sport for good', i.e. sport as a means to achieve other social educational, economic and public health outcomes, is an oversimplification: *"The political context in which sport policy has acted out has perhaps inevitably presented national sports policy as unequivocally at one or other end of this spectrum, although the reality is always more nuanced."* Notwithstanding, the sport for sport's sake to sport for good spectrum provides a useful frame of reference to examine and gain insight on the policy space that sport occupies and the priority it might be afforded.

## 5.2 Sport policy in Scotland

In Scotland, **sport**scotland plays a primary national strategic role in 'the sport system' as the Scottish Government's 'sports development agency'. It operates within a 'National Performance Framework' (NPF) set by the Scottish Government. Established in 2007, the NPF sets out the Scottish Government's *"ambitions, providing a vision for national wellbeing across a range of economic, social and environmental factors."* It also sets the *"strategic outcomes which collectively describe the kind of Scotland in which people would like to live and guides the decisions and actions of national and local government"* (Scottish Government, 2021). The NPF is made up of 'National Outcomes' which fit together with the aim to create a more successful country; give opportunities to all people living in Scotland; increase the wellbeing of people living in Scotland; create sustainable and inclusive growth; and reduce inequalities and give equal importance to economic, environmental and social progress.

A review of the NPF carried out by the Scottish Parliament Finance and Public Administration Committee (Scottish Parliament 2022, p.36) concluded:

*"The NPF remains an important vision of the type of place Scotland should aspire to be but there needs to be more sustained progress towards achieving that vision. Whilst there will be no one solution, of key importance is positioning the NPF as the start of a 'golden thread' from which all other frameworks, strategies and plans flow, through to delivery on the ground."*

This so-called 'golden thread' as it applies to sport is represented diagrammatically in Figure 3 below. Analysing the planning documents and frameworks and their relationship provides us with useful insight on the place of sport in the public policy framework in Scotland. The logic or rationale of the golden thread is that we move from local 'delivery on the ground', in this case represented by

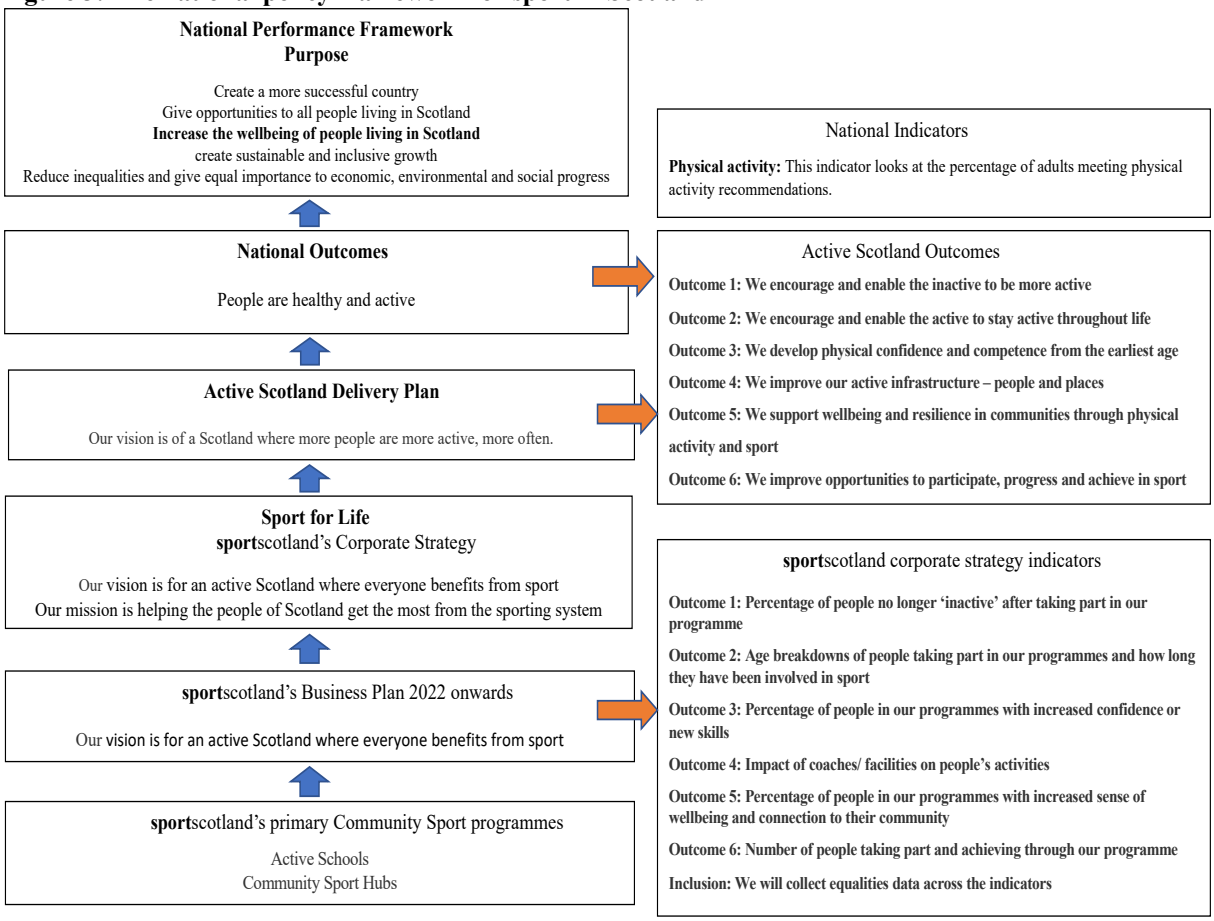
**sport**scotland's main programmes, Active Schools and Community Sports Hubs, which connect to the wider vision, mission and objectives set in its 'Business Plan' and 'Corporate Strategy', and then on to the Active Scotland Delivery Plan and through the National Outcomes to the National Performance Framework. This all seems straightforward and logical, but to understand how it impacts upon public policy decisions and strategic priorities for sport in Scotland we need to dissect this conceptualisation as represented and expressed in relevant strategic planning documents.

Increasing the wellbeing of people in Scotland is an ultimate purpose in the National Performance Framework supported by the vision of *an active and healthy* nation where *"We regard the health of all our people as being of upmost importance. Consequently, we live long, healthy and active lives regardless of where we come from",* and where "*we are active and have widespread engagement with sport and exercise*" (Scottish Government, 2022b). A key performance indicator to measure progress in relation to this outcome is defined in terms of the percentage of adults meeting the Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines (Department of Health and Social Care et al, 2019).

There is no separate indicator for sport participation in the National Performance Framework, although, interestingly, there is an indicator for, *'the proportion of short journeys less than 2 miles that are made by walking and the proportion of journeys under 5 miles made by cycling'.* The Active Scotland Delivery Plan (Scottish Government, 2018) sits below the National Outcomes Framework and has the *"vision of a Scotland where more people are more active, more often".* Sport is positioned primarily as a contributor to achieving a more active nation, not as an important outcome in its own right and with only passing reference to the wider social benefits that are particular to the sporting experience:

*"Sport and physical activity are a powerful force for positive change in communities, empowering people to improve their own and others' lives, and bringing people together* ***through sharing the enjoyment of being active****. The Sport for Change agenda uses* ***physical activity and sport*** *intentionally to bring about positive benefits for individuals and communities, to address specific needs."*

**Figure 3: The national policy framework for sport in Scotland**



The tendency throughout the Active Scotland Delivery Plan, as demonstrated above, is to conflate and treat as equivalents 'sport and physical activity', with little if any differentiation in terms of, for example, prevalence in the population, types of activity behaviours, the contexts and challenges that they face, the foundations of sustained behaviour change and theoretical thinking underpinning them, or differentials in terms of social return on investment. It would be unfair to suggest that sport is seen as an 'add on' to public policy in this area, but it is clearly viewed as having a subsidiary rather than primary role.

As we move the focus to **sport**scotland we would expect to see a greater priority given to 'sport' as an outcome with inherent value or as instrumental benefit. In this context it is interesting to note how **sport**scotland positioned itself in its strategy document Sport 21 (**sport**scotland, 2003, p.5):

*"Sport does not equate directly to physical activity, which, for instance, includes walking to work, housework, gardening and play as well as sport. Nor is it presumed that sport equates to physical education, which involves instruction for a particular purpose. While sport can make a contribution to physical activity and health, it is by no means the only contributor;* ***also, a physically active nation will not necessarily be a sporting nation*** *(my emphasis)."*

In that strategy of 20 years ago, **sport**scotland had the ambition 'to have over one million of the Scottish population playing sport in membership of clubs' (at the end of 2022 the figure was 734,000 (**sport**scotland, undated). In 2011, **sport**scotland (**sport**scotland, 2011, p. 2) went so far as to state that: *"Our role is to put sport first: we will work alongside those who have a greater focus on other types of physical activity such as dance, active living and active play to ensure people in Scotland find it easy to lead an active life. Our programmes will have a sport and athlete focus but we recognise the crossover between playing, exercising, doing organised and informal sports, and the foundation stones of people, places and joined-up planning that make all of this happen"* (**sport**scotland, 2011).

A decade on, in 2022, **sport**scotland still sees itself as the national sports development agency 'helping the people of Scotland get the most from the sporting system', and its new *Sport for Life Corporate Plan* and related 2022 Business Plan (**sport**scotland, 2019, p.13 and **sport**scotland 2022, p.3) demonstrate a subtle shift when referring to *"our vision is for an active Scotland where everyone benefits from sport"* and to *"Sport (as) key to getting more people more active more often … **sport**scotland leads the sporting system to demonstrate its contribution to the Active Scotland Outcomes Framework. We show our contribution to the outcomes through a set of performance indicators."* The report on 'Sport for Change' (Research Scotland, 2017) has also had some impact of shifting **sport**scotland towards a more instrumental view of the benefits of sport although this has not so far translated into any major shifts in their programmes and funding streams.

**sport**scotland's performance indicators are focused on demonstrating the impact of **sport**scotland's two primary programme streams of Active Schools and Community Sport Hubs. They are linked directly to the Active Scotland Outcomes Framework and specified in terms of:

*'the number of people taking part and achieving through our programmes; percentage of people in the programmes with an increased sense of wellbeing; age breakdown of programme participants and how long they have been involved in sport; impact of coaches/facilities on people's activity; percentages of people no longer inactive after taking part in the programme; the percentage of people in our programmes with increased confidence or new skills; all indicators profiled by equality measures.*

These indicators reinforce the notion of a 'golden thread' that links outcomes to activity to impact on the ground. However, as we saw in section 4 of this review, it can reasonably be argued that sport has multiple golden threads and evidence would suggest that it would be reasonable to make the case for sport impacting on and contributing to most if not all the outcomes in the National Outcome Framework extending beyond those of health (Research Scotland, 2017).

## 5.3 Sports policy in neighbouring countries – comparisons with Scotland

This paper does not attempt to conduct an extensive comparative analysis between the development and positioning of sports policy in Scotland with that in other countries, but we can discern broad thematic comparisons from cursory analysis of the positioning of sport in public policy across neighbouring countries. Examining the policy experience in England, for example, the Netherlands and Denmark, and comparing it with Scotland would suggest a convergence in public policy narrative away from a sport for sport's sake rationale towards an instrumental value of sport justification (Waardenburg and van Bottenburg, 2013; Hylton, 2013). In all countries, the health benefits of sport and physical activity is the dominant paradigm while it is probably fair to suggest that the civic benefits of sport in a 'participation society' feature more strongly in public policy in the Netherlands and Denmark than they do in the UK (Anderson, 2008; Hoekman et al 2018). Issues regarding inequalities of participation and access feature in all four countries and policies designed to target under-represented populations are evident in all, with a particular focus on using sport to integrate immigrant populations in Denmark (Agergaard and la Cour, 2012).

All four countries have a strong and important tradition of voluntary sports clubs and these provide a crucial organised backbone to local provision of opportunities (Breuer et al 2015). However, local associations and clubs have a more central place in the public policy discourse in Denmark and the Netherlands than in the UK. In the former a national ambition has been set that by 2025 50% of the population should be a member of a non-profit sports club, and 75% physically active (Danish Institute for Sport Studies, 2019). Sports policies and delivery frameworks are more decentralised in Denmark and the Netherlands (Ibsen, 2017; Breedveld and Hoekman, 2017)) than they are in Scotland and England. Yet, in all four countries local authorities are the major investors in sport, albeit through different models: leisure trusts feature more prominently as a social enterprise model in Scotland (Audit Scotland, 2010) while asset-owning clubs or clubs self-organising and/or managing municipal-owned facilities feature more strongly in the Netherlands and Denmark (Hoekman, 2018). Interestingly, Hoekman (2018) found in his analysis of the impact of austerity policies in the Netherlands that, as a result of research highlighting the wider socio-economic benefits of sport, funding for community activity has been protected and even increased - in stark contrast to the UK, where it continues to be reduced. All countries acknowledge the importance of PE and sport in schools although only in Denmark is there a statutory provision for at least 45 minutes of sport and PE each day (Danish Institute of Sports Studies, 2019).

We have already seen how in Scotland sport and physical activity are terms often used interchangeably. This conflation and interchangeable use of terminology also features in England, Denmark and the Netherlands to varying degrees, but only in England do we see a formalisation of the policy context embedded in a national physical activity strategy 'Uniting the Movement' (Sport England, 2021c, p.8) where Sport England views its mission to *"recognise the need to invest in sport and physical activity… But we need now to go further in promoting movement in general as the means to unlock sport and activity for some people."* Sport England goes beyond sport and physical activity to extol the benefits of 'moving' and includes in its remit 'active travel', in addition to fitness activities, and informal and formal organised sport. To this extent Sport England is no longer solely the national sports development agency but a national advocate *'for movement, sport and physical activity'* (Sport England, 2021c, p.15). This is a significant shift in strategic focus from sport as an instrument for wider policy benefit to sport as one player in a wider strategic agenda prioritising increasing 'movement'. This is encapsulated in Sport England's definition of key measures of success as improving the distribution of the percentage of the population who are active at least 150 minutes a week or 'fairly active' at 30 to 149 minutes a week, and reducing the percentage that are inactive at less than 30 minutes a week (Sport England, 2022b) and with Sport England no longer having levels of participation in sport as a lead indicator.

## 5.4 Conclusions and observations

When assessed from a national perspective, sports policy in Scotland may be characterised as being positioned, in principle, at the 'sport for instrumental outcomes' end of the public policy spectrum. consistent with the general trend seen in neighbouring countries. **sport**scotland, as the national sports development agency, has been consistent in its focus on the sport system and on participation, albeit widely defined, as its primary purpose. To this extent, it resonates with public policy in Denmark and the Netherlands but differs from the current strategic focus taken by Sport England which has widened its remit to include broader objectives around physical activity and 'movement'. **sport**scotland sees its role as contributing towards national physical activity outcomes linked to the National Outcomes Framework and Active Scotland Outcomes Framework. However, in assessing its contribution to these outcomes it reports a relatively narrow set of measures confined to **sport**scotland's own programme impacts as opposed to a wider, national picture of sport participation. This perspective is missing from the Scottish landscape.

**sport**scotland publishes a Corporate Strategy and Business Plans which provide an inward-looking focus on its progress as an organisation and what it is seeking to achieve, narrowly defined in terms of programme impacts. But there is no shared common ownership of a strategy for sport in Scotland. Similarly, in the absence of a national strategy for sport in Scotland there is an absence of an accountability framework for sport outcomes that focus on participation in the population, drop out or sustained engagement in sport, club membership and volunteering. Possibly as a consequence, when compared to other European countries, Scotland has a very limited evidence base of national population surveys to draw upon in shaping sport policy.

In concluding, it is interesting to note that whereas participation in sport does not feature in the key performance indicators in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework, both 'attendance at cultural events' and 'participation in a cultural activity' are elevated as leading measures in Scotland's vision to create a vibrant and creative country, as is 'people working in the arts and culture'. This suggests that the Scottish Government values participation in the arts and other creative activities as a measure of cultural value without being subsidiary to other outcome areas, as is the case of sport - as demonstrated by its connection to physical activity and health as primary national outcomes.

# 6. Valuing sport in Scottish public policy – new perspective, strategic approach and delivery models

Community sport in Scotland is facing unprecedented challenges in the early part of the 21st century. Many of the megatrends affecting sport are working in the direction of pushing participation down in Scotland rather than up, increasing social divides and inequalities rather than reducing them, and potentially diminishing rather than enhancing the salience and visibility of community sport in Scottish society. Perhaps of most concern is the increasing fragility of participation in sport amongst the young. Public agencies have over the past 20 years or so continued to present a view that PE and sport in schools is in good health. Yet the national statistics on participation paint a different picture with continuing high levels of drop-out from sport in teenage years, particularly but not exclusively amongst girls, and with the foundations of structural inequalities in participation by social class, income and neighbourhood entrenched at a young age and persistent into adulthood.

From a demand perspective there is a suggestion that people are turning their backs on organised sport, preferring more individual fitness-based activity and that this is the future that public policy should endorse, embrace and support. Or is this indicative of a reduction in community provision and opportunity? Or both? And yet many bemoan the decline in community cohesion and social networks, and increasing social isolation and loneliness (Putnam, 2000; Teuton, 2018).

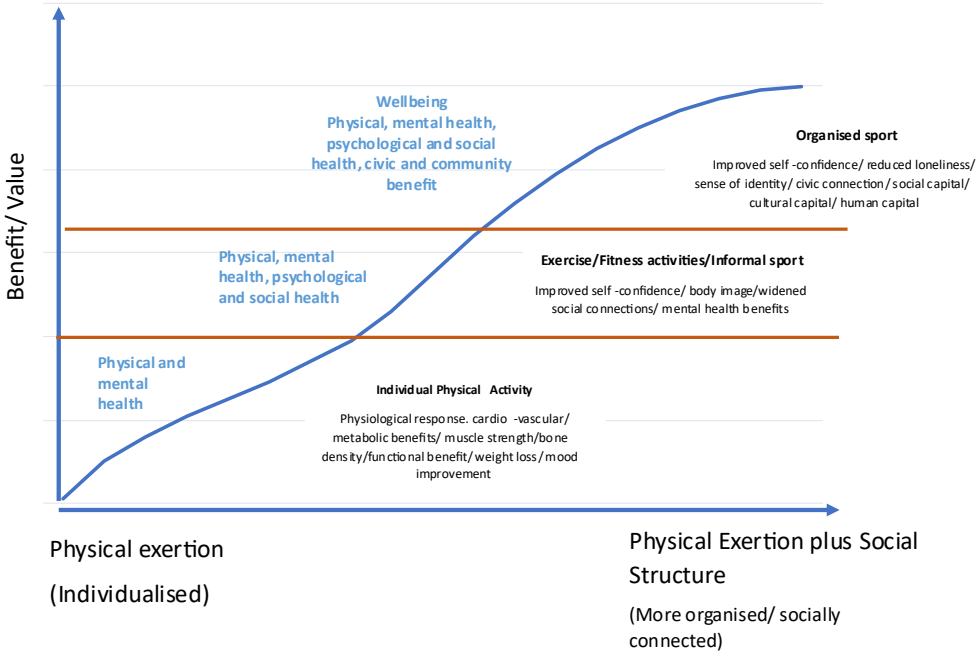
The previous sections of this review have taken the form of a diagnostic, but a request by the Observatory for Sport in Scotland was that this paper helps to shape future policy thinking and is solution focused. In this section, therefore, we are taking a normative perspective looking forward to a new strategic positioning for sport in public policy in Scotland. This positioning is founded on the premise that a society where sport participation declines, where it becomes the preserve of an ever-smaller privileged minority, where for most it becomes an individual rather than a shared experience and where spectacle replaces participation is not a society that most would subscribe to, aspire to, or want for their children and their children's children.

The argument made in this review is that the value of sport has been underrated and that the emphasis on its relationship to improving physical health outcomes has in a perverse way operated to its detriment in public policy. This is not: a) to deny the importance in a public health context of preventive health policies that prioritise reducing sedentary behaviours and getting the nation more physically active; nor b) to deny the important contribution sport participation makes to physical health - being physically active is intrinsic to the sporting experience. However, it is to lift understanding of the need to look beyond the physical and to recognise the potential value sport brings to individuals and society by combining physical activity with its associated qualities of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954), self-expression, purposive behaviour and social engagement.

To view sport from a 'physical activity plus' perspective is not new. But in embracing and giving primacy to the physical activity and health paradigm in its public policy positioning over the cultural, sociological and psychological paradigms these intrinsic benefits of sport have, we suggest, become background factors, when they should be foreground ones, threatening to diminish their value in Scotland.

This value positioning of sport is demonstrated in Figure 4 which draws upon the evidence presented earlier on social return on investment to provide a theoretical model of the relationship between benefit/value and different levels of physical activity and social engagement in sport.

**Figure 4: Sport going beyond physical activity: theoretical model of benefit/value curve for different levels of physical activity and social engagement in sport**




The horizontal axis in Figure 4 represents a spectrum that ranges from, at one extreme, physical activity of a low intensity carried out individually, to, at the other extreme, participation in structured sport in organised settings. The vertical axis represents the accumulated individual, community and societal benefits. The plotted 'curve' shows the theoretical relationship. Working from left to right we see that as an individual becomes more physically active, they derive considerable health benefit from the physiological response that extend beyond metabolic responses to include positive impacts on mood and mental health.

We have seen earlier that this dose-response relationship is underpinned by extensive research which shows that the greatest returns are from the inactive doing some activity and although they continue to increase with more activity they do so at a slower rate. This part of the curve is the predominant paradigm that has shaped physical activity and health promotion policies. Crucially, however, Figure 4 shows how the value proposition to individuals and society is enhanced as we move from individualised physical activity to being physically active in more organised socially structured settings. It is only at this higher order engagement that we start to optimise value and benefit by going beyond physical activity and bringing into play those things that come only from participation in structured social networks (additional to the levels of intense physical activity intrinsic to the sport experience) that are characteristic of most if not all sports.

The theoretical proposition is that the added value of going beyond individualised physical activity is significant and can reach up to twice that of physical activity alone. The precise shape of the curve beyond the physical is contentious and lacks the empirical evidence associated with the physical activity dose response relationship.

The model is also illustrative as it simplifies the interactive relationship between physical activity and degree of physical exertion and places them on one scale. But the relationship is plausible and consistent with research on social return on investment, and the accumulating evidence of the social, psychological and civic benefits from participating in sport.

Our analysis suggests that in a context where community sport is facing many challenges public policy in Scotland requires a paradigm shift to a strategic approach and delivery models that properly recognise its potential and optimise its impact in delivering added societal value.

A number of recommendations follow from this analysis that we believe should be embraced in shaping future community sport policy, practice and delivery in Scotland:

1) **Community sport should be recognised in public policy for multiple contributions to outcomes that drive improved wellbeing in Scotland.** These include cultural, sociological and psychological benefits in addition to physiological. Any review of the National Outcomes Framework should embed these elements and seek to determine how community sport contributes to a wide range of outcomes and cross-cutting agendas, rather than presented as subsidiary to physical activity and public health. This positioning should be solidified in the National Performance Framework by a set of sport participation indicators that measure both the necessary condition of regular participation and sufficient conditions of participation in different organised contexts, and amongst population subgroups.

2) **Community sport in Scotland would benefit from a renewed strategic purpose to provide a platform for investment and unite stakeholders in a shared vision and agenda for change.** Community sport in Scotland sits in a strategic vacuum. A 'National Strategy for Sport in Scotland' (to include sport and active recreation) would critically examine where we are now, the challenges faced by sport, effectiveness of existing programmes and funding routes, where Scotland wishes to get to in the next 10 years, how it gets there and which, and how, stakeholders can play their part. It should address short-term pressing challenges within a longer-term vision, with realistic policy ambitions relevant and appropriate to the social, economic and environmental realities of life in Scotland. We suggest that this vision is unapologetically about 'sport as society' not merely 'sport in society'. This would not be a national physical activity and health strategy but would complement such a strategy, for example, Public Health Scotland's new systems-based approach to physical activity in Scotland and the Active Scotland Outcomes Framework. Ideally, the strategies would be developed in a parallel but connected process with clearly defined vision, set of priority markets, motivational drivers, primary stakeholders, ambitions and return on investment models.

3) **In setting a renewed strategic purpose, topic area reviews should be prioritised.** The priority topics should be agreed as part of a strategic planning stakeholder consultation process, but our review would suggest the following priorities for consideration**:** a) review of the workforce engaged in community sport in conjunction with key stakeholders, including sportscotland, Community Leisure UK and CIMSPA, to include the potential for a modernised sports development profession with appropriate skills and training support; b) unlocking civic potential to review the growing proliferation of models of asset transfer, co-production, community engagement, public sector/community partnerships; sports clubs and volunteer development; and document and share good and failing practice; c) review of PE and school sport to include its place in the curriculum, in extracurricular and co-curriculum contexts, preparation for lifelong engagement, building sporting capital, reducing drop-out and addressing inequalities; and c) review causes and solutions to sporting inequalities in Scotland's poorest neighbourhoods and vulnerable populations. Each review would engage a variety of relevant stakeholders to understand and share insight, and establish how partnerships can be formed across sport, leisure, health, education and business sectors to shape economically, socially and environmentally sustainable provision.

4) **Scottish sport must agree societal purpose and demonstrate impact, value and reach.** We believe the evidence on the benefit and value of sport in this review justifies an elevated status in public policy in Scotland. However, this cannot be a free pass for community sport. If sport is to have widespread societal benefit it must be evaluated differently in Scotland. For consideration, we suggest progress includes measurements against three important tests:
   - 'Test 1' is whether ambitions put forward by proponents of community sport are realistic and grounded in theory, i.e. in the realm of the possible *(The Realistic Ambition Test);*
   - 'Test 2' is whether sport activity can achieve wider social benefit and value, and demonstrate this with credible evidence of impact *(The Evidence of Impact Test)*; and

- 'Test 3' is whether public policy intervention can 'deliver the goods' to reach the people who need them most *(The Evidence of Delivery Test)*.

5) To achieve this, community sport requires **a cultural and funding shift in research commitment in the sport policy area.** Relatively little research has been commissioned by the Scottish Government and **sport**scotland in the last 20 years, and so Scotland now lags its European neighbours in its commitment to and co-ordination of research, and available data and insight. To support a new National Strategy to address the challenges with evidence and insight, community sport in Scotland needs a National Sport Research Strategy underpinned by secure funding commitment for at least five years, to allow it to develop credible understanding of the landscape.
   The Research Strategy is likely to have as its foundation a commitment to a regular national survey to inform ambitions in the National Performance Framework and provide ongoing insight. Beyond this it would include a commitment to a longitudinal panel to develop insight on drivers of sustained behaviour change through the life course, the impact of life transitions, relationship between sport participation in different contexts and impact on national outcomes.
   To meet the three tests referred to above, the Research Strategy also requires a commitment to building a Scottish evidence base on what works on the ground, and why, with an experimental programme of research and development testing innovative interventions, of which there are many in Scotland, and potential for scalability.
   To support and drive the Research Strategy requires national co-ordination with incentivisation of capacity building in academia; bridges built between policy, practice and academic research communities; promotion and facilitation of institutional and disciplinary collaboration around a shared strategic ambition; and networks for sharing and collaborating internationally.
   These approaches have been developed in recent years by a number of European countries and networks, to address similar concerns around health and wellbeing, sport and physical activity decline and economic pressures. We believe that it should be achievable relatively quickly in Scotland, building into and supporting the COVID pandemic creation of national strategic groups with sport, health, education and academic stakeholders, to create a new, innovative culture of research and evidence, with international input, that shapes effective, cohesive and sustainable policy and drives lasting benefit across all populations in Scotland.

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