



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### SPORT AND RECREATION ARE GOOD FOR YOU.

This statement instinctively feels right. After all, what could be better for you than fresh air, exercise, teamwork, nature, camaraderie?

But where is the evidence that underpins that feeling? We can claim that physical activity improves health, helps educational attainment and brings communities closer but can we support that claim? The answer is in these pages. The Game of Life brings together, for the first time, all of the best evidence to support those gut feelings we have about sport. But it is also even-handed, pointing out where the evidence is patchy or where more research is required.

In many cases the evidence proves the point outright; in others it points the way towards an answer without establishing it conclusively.

Put together, however, the case for leading a more active lifestyle is compelling – both personally and societally.

We are all aware of some of the potential problems looming like storm clouds over the UK. We know, for example, that there is an obesity crisis and that modern sedentary lifestyles are causing untold stresses on the NHS and society. We know that cardiovascular disease costs the UK economy over £30 billion per year and diabetes costs £9 billion.

Mental health problems cost the care system £21 billion and costs UK businesses £30 billion in sick leave absence and unemployment costs. Dementia costs society £23 billion per year and offending by young people costs £11 billion per year. All of these costs are rising and there is a consensus that our economy cannot continue to carry their burden.

Sport and recreation are not a panacea, but as this evidence volubly demonstrates, it can certainly be a significant part of the solution. This research outlines the evidence that exists that shows how more activity can have huge effects on our society. Burning 2000 kcal per week reduces coronary mortality by between a quarter and a third. For every 500 kcal of extra energy spent per week, your likelihood of type 2 diabetes is 6% lower. Exercise can be as effective as antidepressants for those with mild clinical depression. Elderly people with low physical activity levels have more than twice the risk of Alzheimer's. And at the other end of life, seven out of ten teenagers believe that antisocial behaviour occurs because they are bored.

For years interested parties have asked for a more joined-up approach to sport and recreation policy within Government, but such a coordinated approach has always been considered difficult to implement. However, if the evidence in this paper points to one thing, it is surely that coordinating the role of sport throughout Government departments should be moved from the "too hard to do" folder to the "too expensive to ignore". Politicians can no longer afford to ignore the magic bullet that sport and recreation provides to our policy-makers.

Whilst the evidence supporting change is clear, we don't underestimate the challenge of changing people's habits. Getting those in a habitual sedentary lifestyle to be more active is much easier said than done. The good news is that the research shows that there is a dose-based response to physical activity. In other words, even if you do just a little exercise, you will get some benefit, and the more you do, the bigger the improvement. Being overweight can ironically make exercise more effective and getting moving at any level helps.

What will also come as no surprise is that prevention is far better than cure and that habits developed when you are young tend to ingrain themselves. Studies in Scandinavia have shown that boys and girls who were active every day at the age of 14 are respectively four and three times more likely to be active at the age of 31 – a huge impact. Membership of a sports club also increased the likelihood of being active later in life and being part of a sports club also increases the likelihood of being active citizens – 81% of sports club members establish new relationships in the community compared to only 14% of gym users.

So the message is simple: we need to encourage people to be more active and to be more active from an earlier age. The Government's current emphasis on youth sport and school club links moves us in the right direction, but too slowly. Children younger than this target age group should be doing quality sport at school and teachers should be aiming to provide activities every day to ingrain good habits. Sports clubs should be playing an integral role in this provision because of the other benefits the evidence tells us they provide. And national governing bodies of sport and recreation are in the perfect place to deliver their activities through clubs if the Government ensures that this is their priority.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Nelson Mandela stated that, “sport has the power to change the world. The power to inspire, the power to unite people in a way little else can”. The eloquence of such a great man captured a less eloquent belief that “sport is good” that had been gaining significant momentum in government since the late 1990s and has continued to receive interest and support from a research and policy perspective. The unsurprising common themes to emerge from research and policy work in this area since then have been that firstly, more research is needed, and secondly, the Government should adopt a more joined up approach to delivering policy. The consensus is that sport cuts across many other sectors and has the widest and most beneficial impact when delivered with knowledge from these sectors. This is important because sport can also have a negative impact on society. There is evidence that at its best sport<sup>1</sup> can improve physical health and so reduce the risk of obesity, heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis and many other illnesses, treat depression, stress and anxiety, aid in the prevention of dementia, help rehabilitate offenders back into society, reduce youth crime, enhance social cohesion, play a role in the regeneration of communities, improve educational attainment and strengthen employment opportunities. However, it has also been seen that sport can enhance division, result in serious injury, and has the potential to encourage excessive drinking, drug use or gambling when not delivered intelligently.

There is now a considerable amount of work in existence on the impact that sport and recreational or physical activity can have in other areas of life. Research, reviews and papers predominantly explore the impact of physical activity on physical and mental health, crime prevention, educational attainment and social cohesion, although often not in one overarching document. Oughton and Tacon (2007) summarise a wide range of reports and resources on the additional social benefits of sport, but this breadth of coverage sometimes comes at the price of detail and facts around each piece of evidence. However, in some instances, this review provides a more balanced assessment with the inclusion, albeit briefly, of the negative effects sport can also have. For example, Oughton and Tacon highlight that evidence shows sport to aid the primary (reduces initial risk) and secondary (slows progression and promotes recovery) prevention of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity,

<sup>1</sup> The focus of this review is on leisure time physical activity as opposed to occupational or domestic physical activity. The word “sport” is used here in the broadest sense, understood as incorporating “traditional” sports, outdoor recreation, water pursuits, movement and dance and mind games. For simplicity and consistency the expression “physical activity” is used throughout this report. Unless otherwise stated it is intended to include all forms of leisure time or recreational physical activity.

some cancers and osteoporosis. From a physical health perspective evidence also shows that street joggers and cyclists are at risk from traffic accidents, high levels of training may lower the efficacy of the immune system, undiagnosed cardiovascular conditions could lead to cardiac problems whilst exercising, and drinking or drug taking can occur either as part of the social side to some sports or through efforts to enhance performance. On balance, however, these risks are seen to be largely avoidable or controllable, and, for example, the risk of cardiac difficulties in someone with an undiagnosed cardiovascular condition is outweighed by the risk reduction in heart disease associated with regular physical activity.

Usefully, Oughton and Tacon draw a distinction between practical physical activities, such as walking up the stairs, and sport or leisure physical activities. The latter, they argue, are more enjoyable which increases the likelihood of frequent participation and brings about additional benefits to pure physical activity as a result of, “the salience of sport and sport’s economic and social dimensions” (Oughton and Tacon, 2007, p.2). It is this additional quality that sport and leisure physical activities have that makes them so useful for enhancing other areas of social life and allows a variety of activities to serve a range of purposes.

Earlier work produced by the Sport and Recreation Alliance under its former name (CCPR) in 2002 has also explored the evidence for the wider benefits of sport and recreation for several social benefits. *Everybody Wins, Sport and Social Inclusion* is a short digestible report that explores the positive impact of sporting activity in different areas with a couple of case studies under each heading and a summary of the benefits of sport. However, as with much of the existing research, this document is missing hard facts and largely builds on the assumption that the notion of “sport is good” has already been accepted. Coalter (2007a) explores the historical and political context to this notion as well as examining the key areas where sport is thought to do good and the global evidence case for this. It is frustrating, but not surprising, to read Coalter’s conclusion that robust evidence on the direct impact of sport is limited due largely to the difficulty of isolating the direct role sport plays.

This is not helpful for sport and recreation in a climate of evidence-based policy making. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s Culture and Sport Evidence programme (CASE) has a wider remit than just sporting activities but nevertheless aims to gather an evidence base that can support the delivery of, “*high quality culture and sporting opportunities to the widest audience, generating positive outcomes for society.*”<sup>2</sup>

2 DCMS website, [http://culture.gov.uk/what\\_we\\_do/research\\_and\\_statistics/5698.aspx](http://culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/research_and_statistics/5698.aspx), last accessed 03.02.2012.

The broad scope of this website makes it difficult to pull out a coherent story for the value of sport, but there are a lot of resources and links to valuable information that can be explored in greater detail and the evidence focus of the programme is much needed.

Sport England also has an online resource for scoping the wider value of sport with their aptly entitled *Value of Sport Monitor*. This is the outcome of a joint initiative with UK Sport in collaboration with the University of Stirling and has very recently been updated (January 2012). This monitor is divided into seven categories and for each there is an overall summary of the evidence provided, mostly as a literature review.

The categories are: Crime reduction and community safety; Economic Impact and regeneration of local communities; Education and lifelong learning; Participation; Physical fitness and health; Psychological health and wellbeing and Social capacity and cohesion. Each category then details and links to relevant research with a useful summary of findings and notes on methodology. This tool provides a wealth of really valuable information, the parameters of which are well set out and signposted. The Sport and Recreation Alliance is keen to complement rather than duplicate such existing work, however the summaries are extremely academic in focus and do not easily present clear facts and figures to demonstrate the value of sport, or simple statements on the wider role of sport. There is an enormous amount of material on the *Value of Sport Monitor* and some excellent recommendations are made, but it is difficult to find a clear message that can be utilised by national governing bodies or MPs.

It should also be noted that there are a number of journals that focus on sport and society as an overarching theme. As might be expected, the remit of these can best be described under the sociology of sport and the focus tends to be of an academic or theoretical nature to explore the dimensions of sport in society rather than simply the value that sport can bring. Whilst the journals unite the theme, the articles within them also tend to be specific in their focus. Some journals of note here include The European Journal of Sport and Society, The International Journal of Sport and Society, Journal of Sport and Social Issues and Sport in Society.

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