

## Sport and mental health: tackling stigma and promoting community wellbeing.

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### Summary

- This policy briefing outlines the Government's pre-election commitments to sport and mental health. The briefing is relevant for council leaders, lead members for sport and leisure, GPs and health workers, and public sector professionals with an interest in sport, physical and mental health, community development and social care.
- 1 in 6 people experience a mental health problem every day and there is a staggering cost of £105.2 billion a year to the economy from mental ill health. NHS and social care costs are over £21 billion a year whilst sick leave absence and unemployment costs are as high as £30 billion a year
- The Coalition Government has launched [a charter for sport and mental health](#) that aims to remove stigma and prejudice around mental health through sport. There is a large [bank of research and evidence](#) that shows that physical activity can be as effective as medication in treating depression.
- There is a range of existing good practice where sport initiatives are contributing to positive mental health and community wellbeing. A common thread is that the coaches and session leaders have been effectively trained to not only deliver sporting outcomes but also to provide emotional support. Providing a space for people to connect and socialise is also important.
- The [cross parliamentary health committee](#) has called on the next government to prioritise prevention, health promotion and early intervention to tackle health inequalities, including mental health, resulting from physical inactivity. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has called on GPs to do more to promote and prescribe [the 'miracle cure' of regular exercise](#).
- Local authorities can expect funding for sport to be tied even more closely to wider social goals, such as mental health, after the general election.

## Briefing in full

### Introduction

In one of many pre-election announcements, the Coalition Government launched a [mental health charter for sport](#), in the context of its wider [spending commitments to mental health](#), spearheaded by the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. The charter, produced by the Sport and Recreation Alliance, the umbrella association for more than 320 sports governing bodies and over 8,000 sports clubs, aims to remove stigma and prejudice around mental health. The announcement was welcomed by the sports sector which has for a long time championed the social and psychological benefits of sport, leisure and recreation.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Sajid Javid, after a year in the role, has set out [his vision for sport](#) in which he indicated that a future Conservative Government would target investment at delivering wider social goals, including physical and mental health and social cohesion, rather than participation for its own sake. Labour meanwhile, has put the NHS and the integration of health and social care at the heart of its election campaign, identifying physical activity as an area for priority investment because of its role in preventing long term physical and mental health problems. And in its [final report of the parliamentary session](#), the Health committee has called on the Government, the NHS and local authorities to do more to reduce health inequalities resulting from physical inactivity, at a time when the NHS struggles to cope with the pressures of mental illness, alongside obesity and diabetes.

As politicians embrace the relationship between sport and the population's wellbeing in the post-2012 era, sports organisations have clubbed together to call for the rhetoric to be matched by reality. The Sport and Recreation Alliance's ministerial 'to-do' list, [Raising the Heartbeat of the Population](#), calls for, among other things, a requirement for each local authority to provide a "robust and comprehensive strategy" for physical-activity opportunities.

In this policy briefing we review the Government's vision and direction of travel for sport and mental health, unpicking what this could mean for local authorities. We review some examples of good practice where sport is being used to promote positive mental health, before commenting on where the political parties stand going into the general election.

**Sport and mental health****The mental health needs of the population**

Encouragingly more and more people are talking about mental health and although there is still much more to do to tackle stigma, it is fast becoming an established topic in public life. This is partly due to a number of high profile campaigns but also better understanding of the mental health needs of the population and the staggering financial costs to the NHS as a result of growing demand and an ageing population. These headlines needs are summarised below:

- 1 in 6 people experience a mental health problem every day and there is a staggering cost of £105.2 billion a year to the economy from mental ill health; NHS and social care costs are over £21 billion a year whilst sick leave absence and unemployment costs are as high as £30 billion a year
- physical activity in natural environments is associated with a reduction in the risk of poor mental health to a greater extent than physical activity in other environments
- there is a strong relationship between mental ill health and physical ill health: people with long-term illnesses such as diabetes or hypertension have double the rate of depression in comparison to the general population, and where people have 2 or more long term physical illnesses the chance of depression is an alarming 7 times higher
- mental ill health increases the risk of physical ill health – for adults, depression doubles the risk of coronary heart disease and leads to a 50% increase in the risk of mortality
- obesity and mental health have a two-way relationship: obese people have a 55% increased risk of developing depression over time when compared to people of a healthy weight, and people with depression have a 58% increased risk of becoming obese
- obese children are also more likely than non-obese children to experience psychological or psychiatric problems including low self-esteem, depression, conduct disorders and reduced school performance and social functioning
- elderly people with low physical activity levels have more than twice the risk of Alzheimer's

Importantly, there is a large [bank of research and evidence](#) that shows that physical activity can be as effective as medication in treating anxiety and depression and boosting confidence and self-esteem. For example, in one much cited 16-week study of 202 men and women, 45% of patients diagnosed with major depression no longer met the criteria for depression after exercising 3 times a week in a supervised group setting, this matched the 47% of patients who no longer met the criteria after taking anti-depressants. Regular exercise can also reduce the risk of dementia by up to a third through increased cognitive function, improved memory and better maintenance of brain connectivity.

**A mental health charter for sport**

Launched by the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and the Sport and Recreation Alliance, England's first [Mental Health Charter for Sport](#) is based on the positive impact that sport has on mental health and is backed by the country's biggest sports organisations including the Football Association, Lawn Tennis Association, Rugby Football Union, English Cricket Board and UK Athletics, as well the professional player associations. The aim of the charter is to help remove stigma and prejudice around mental health using sport and to encourage more people to understand the impact of physical activity on mental wellbeing.

The charter recognises that exercise can be as effective anti-depressants for those with mild clinical depression. "This is one of those areas where sport and physical activity really can change lives but there's not enough awareness of it as a treatment or as a way of preventing people from falling into poor mental health in the first place," explains Emma Boggis, Chief Executive of the Sport and Recreation Alliance. "Too much of the association between sport and mental health is negative – like when a top athlete suffers problems. We want to re-frame that relationship so that people understand that sport is a positive place for conversations about mental health."

The charter has the following overall objectives:

- using the power of sport and recreation to promote well being, with a special focus on encouraging physical activity and social interaction for their contribution to good mental health
- publicly promoting and adopting good mental health policies and best practice within our sports and recreational activities
- promoting positive public health messages using diverse role models and ambassadors to reduce the stigma attached to mental health problems
- actively tackling discrimination on the grounds of mental health to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect
- supporting the establishment of a pan-sport platform to work closely with the mental health sector to develop and share networks, resources and best practice
- regularly monitoring performance, assessing progress and taking positive action on mental health issues

The charter follows wider spending commitments from the coalition government in the spring budget to improve the population's mental health. These included a £1.25 billion investment in children's mental healthcare to treat 110,000 children access mental health services over a five year period, and £37 billion over the next three years to help 40,000 people with mental health needs back into work through treatments at job centres, such as access to talking therapies and online mental health. .

**Sport, community wellbeing and social inclusion**

In the same week, Culture Secretary Sajid Javid spoke to the Centre for Social Justice and set out [his vision](#) for sport in his first major speech on sports policy after a year in the role. A key message in his speech was a commitment to move away from focusing on participation rates to targeting resources to deliver wider social and community goals, including physical and mental health and social cohesion.

He said: “It means sport funding not just rewarding participation but actually focused on the projects that deliver social impact. Whether that’s new skills for our younger people, better health for older people, less anti-social behaviour or more social cohesion.”

Drawing on the government commissioned research [A review of the Social Impacts of Culture and Sport](#), and the Centre for Social Justice’s publication [Sport for Social Good](#), Javid also championed the role of sport in tackling poverty, and explicitly mental health since the link between poverty and mental health is well known. Those with low incomes are more likely to suffer from poor mental health. Those with mental health problems are more likely to experience poverty since once incapacitated, an individual’s socio-economic status is likely to fall further. This is something of a chicken-and-egg policy challenge as there is also a clear correlation between poverty and participation, with fewer people in poverty playing sport.

The focus of the Culture Secretary’s speech also highlights the social element of sport and its role in tackling social isolation. Sport and exercise/recreation in an organised context provides a social element, which can help tackle feelings of isolation, often a symptom associated with poor mental health. The government has also funded community cricket schemes which play a unique role in bringing together Asian and White communities.

The Sport and Recreation Alliance says that joining a sport club adds to life satisfaction as much as a £3,600 pay raise. One of LGiU’s researchers has written about her own experiences of the ‘community value’ of sport [HERE](#).

## Case Studies

Sport England’s [Value of Sport Monitor](#), the Sport and Recreation’s Game of Life [Research on Mental Health](#), and the [Culture and Sport Evidence \(CASE\) programme](#), collectively provides a comprehensive review of the impact of sport on mental health. Informed by this research, this section provides some examples where sport is making a positive contribution to mental health, to help guide sports commissioners on what works. A common theme is that the sports coaches have been effectively trained to not only deliver sporting outcomes but also emotional and wellbeing outcomes. Many local authorities now commission effective mental health first aid training courses. A low cost quick win to promote sport and mental health could be to ensure that team managers are trained in mental health first aid. Another similarity is that all the examples create the space for informal social interaction and connection that contributes to community and group wellbeing. This is particularly valued by those participating.

**Boxing academies**

Boxing academies have long been recognised for their role in providing diversionary activities for young people, but they also play an important role in contributing to young people's emotional wellbeing too. [The Boxing Academy](#) in Hackney offers support for young people who are at risk of educational exclusion, placing them in a class of six students with a dedicated boxer who acts as mentor, teacher support and coach. It uses the beneficial effects of sport to empower students between the ages of 13 and 16, to teach them to manage their anger, give them confidence in their learning and direct them towards further education, training or employment. David Lammy, MP for Tottenham has praised the club for its contribution to the lives of young people: "It has provided a safe and supportive space for young people to pursue academic, physical and emotional success. The Boxing Academy can be credited with complete positive transformations in the lives of many young people in London."

**Greenhouse sports works**

[Greenhouse](#) is working in inner-city London schools to give opportunities to young people in disadvantaged communities through the provision of high quality sports programmes. It provides sports programmes that nurture social, thinking, emotional and physical skills that equip young people for life. By working full time in schools and in the community Greenhouse coaches develop strong relationships with young people, helping them to improve their health and fitness whilst mentoring them to improve their engagement with their education and community.

**Walking clubs**

[Walking for Health](#) is a walking club with a difference. Together the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support deliver Walking for Health, an initiative helping people to get active and stay active. In partnership they support 600 local schemes across England which offer short, free and friendly walks with the aim of helping more people, including those affected by cancer, discover the joys and health benefits of walking. More than 70,000 people walk regularly with Walking for Health at 3,400 weekly walks. The walks are led by 10,000 volunteers who are all friendly, knowledgeable people, specifically trained for the job. In just a short time, a small amount of regular exercise can significantly improve a person's health, wellbeing and confidence

**Metal detecting clubs**

Beyond the benefits of regular exercise, a member of a local metal detecting club in Coventry highlights the importance of social interaction. "Some members of the society are older single people, and taking part in the searches gives these people regular contact with others in the community. The social aspect is really important. At times, metal detecting feels more like the by-product. Metal detecting is a very community-minded activity. We clear a lot of rubbish off fields for farmers and landowners, and we do charity rallies to raise money for good causes locally."

**I Will If You Will**

Bury Council's ['I Will if You Will' project](#) is getting more women and girls in Bury active through sport, by focusing on creating an environment that encourages women to get together and try sport in new ways. It has a particular focus on building confidence and self-esteem. Sport England's This Girl Can campaign meanwhile is challenging the stigma that some women experience when they get involved in sport.

**BEATS**

Bury's [Exercise and Therapy Scheme \(BEATS\)](#) is a 12 month exercise referral scheme for people with a recurring illness. Service users have reported improved mental wellbeing, inclusion and confidence, alongside reduced weight.

**Community cricket**

[Participation programmes](#) in Crawley are using the unique reach of cricket to help further integrate the diverse communities of Crawley. In Whitehawk and Moulsecoomb in Brighton, a cricket format known as ['Street20'](#) is being used to engage young people, with an emphasis on education and health.

**Sport England's Sport and Mental Health Programme**

Sport England and the mental health charity Mind have partnered to deliver England's [first large scale programme](#) using sport to improve the lives of 75,000 people experiencing mental health problems. People experiencing mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, will be supported to join mainstream sports clubs, go to the gym or take up a new sport. The project, which will be run in eight areas across England, will be designed in collaboration with people living with mental health problems and will offer peer support groups, taster sessions and events to help people make sport part of their everyday lives. Sports coaches taking part on the scheme will receive training to understand the issues faced by those with mental health problems. The target is for 25,000 people to be helped in the first 15 months of the project. Mind will deliver the project after securing £1.5 million of National Lottery funding from Sport England. The charity has raised a further £514,000 towards the project from other sources.

**Prescribing sport**

In its report the [Impact of physical activity and diet on health](#), the cross parliamentary health committee calls on the next Government to prioritise prevention, health promotion and early intervention to tackle health inequalities, including mental health

inequalities, resulting from physical inactivity. “Tackling these problems will require action at all levels and must also be core business for the NHS and local authorities,” the report says. It goes on to criticise the NHS for not doing enough to prevent obesity by promoting physical activity. “The Committee regards it as inexplicable and unacceptable that the NHS is now spending more on bariatric surgery for obesity than on a national roll-out of intensive lifestyle intervention programmes that were first shown to cut obesity and prevent diabetes over a decade over.” Similarly the prescription of sport and leisure as part of package of care for people with presenting mental health needs is under utilised. As the Transport and Health Study Group have argued in even stronger terms: “If physical activity were a drug then the range of its benefits on mental well being, mental illness, heart disease, obesity, diabetes and osteoporosis is such that no politician would dare withhold those benefits from the public. At a time when the NHS struggles to cope with the pressures of mental illness, obesity and diabetes, it is financially irresponsible to fail to promote physical activity.”

A report published by the Academy of Medical Colleges entitled [\*The miracle cure and the role of the doctor in promoting it\*](#) also calls on GPs to do more to promote the 'miracle cure' of regular exercise. The report asks GPs to be clear about the benefits of sport and recreation and give clear messages to patients about the benefits of 30 minutes of exercise five times a week. The report identifies that regular exercise can reduce the chances of getting dementia by 30%. Professor John Wass, public health lead at the Royal College of Physicians, said hospital doctors had “a key responsibility to try to incorporate messages about the impact exercise can have when talking to our patients – as the benefits are plain to see. We must also move away from the idea that exercise is only for a specific short-term purpose but impress the advantages that a lifelong appreciation of physical activity can bring.”

If the next government does go down the route of ring-fencing sports funding to deliver health outcomes, local authorities will need to work closely with GPs to ensure a service offer exists for them to ‘prescribe into’ – and to ensure that they are supported to do so.

## Comment

The announcements from the Deputy Prime Minister and the Culture Secretary set out a clear and welcome ambition for promoting positive mental health through sport. It is encouraging too that the first ever parliamentary debate on physical activity at the end of last year has translated through into clear policy commitments linking sport to health outcomes. But as the Health Committee’s report emphasises there is still a long way to go to bridge the gap between aspiration and reality.

The sports sector is understandably concerned about the outcome of the next governmental spending review which has led it to call on the Government to do more

to raise the profile of sport. Both the Conservatives and Labour have made commitments to cut taxes or increase spending on key services as part of their election campaigns and the main Westminster parties are all committed to reducing the deficit. Last year's Autumn Statement set out a plan for at least £10 billion in further efficiency savings by 2017-18 and up to £15-20 billion by 2019/20, meaning that local authority and sport budgets will likely continue to come under significant pressure in the coming years. We can therefore expect funding for sport to be tied even more closely to wider social goals, such as mental health. At the very least local authorities, with the remit for public health should ensure their sport and leisure services are talking to mental health services and social care.

Interestingly, it is also worth noting that the Scottish National Party, which could play the kingmaker in the outcome of the general election, last year moved mental health into the same ministerial portfolio as sport and health improvement, giving an indication of a possible future model for sport provision under a Labour and SNP alliance.

The Sport and Recreation Alliance has suggested that although it is unrealistic to expect funding priorities to change hugely, there was more that could be done to help local authorities make the most of their remaining investment. "We think that a co-ordinated local strategy, based on need, would help to deliver a focused, quality offer to get local people more active," says their Head of Policy, James Allen.

Dr Marc Keech, Principal Lecturer in Sport Policy at the University of Brighton, meanwhile, reminds us that "policies and provision for sport are not a panacea for social problems, and it must not be forgotten that even when barriers are removed the individual has a right to refuse to participate regardless of the evidence of the benefits." His research identifies four key principles on which politicians and decision makers should ground themselves in when it comes to improving community sport participation:

- **Access** – recognising that we need to tackle the constraints on people's social circumstances (e.g. housing, education or health needs) but who wish to participate.
- **Equity** – remaining sensitive to issues such as race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and gender. The #ThisGirlCan Campaign reminds us that participation can be equally beneficial if it is informal, personal and suitable.
- **Opportunity** – recognising that it just takes one appropriate opportunity to allow people to benefit from sport. Awareness of who is physically inactive is important for design of policy interventions to reverse sport and physical inactivity trends.
- **Sustainability** – this principle must be retained as the one that drives on those working in community sport. Sustaining participation opportunities in sport requires a positive local infrastructure for all.

Clear principles along with an overarching commitment to unleash sport for 'social good', in areas such as mental health, should be at the heart of future decision making on sport funding and delivery both nationally and locally.

## Related briefings

[The legacy of the Olympic and Paralympic games: tackling physical inactivity](#)

[Closing the gap: women and sport](#)

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on [janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk](mailto:janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk)