

Minutes of the Sport England Board meeting of 3 November 2020

The Board met remotely by videoconference.

Members Nick Bitel (Chair)
Natalie Ceeney
Azeem Akhtar (items 6,7,8)
Rashmi Becker
Ian Cumming
Chris Grant
Sue James
Andy Long
David Mahoney
Tove Okunniwa
Karen Pickering

Officers Jess Bell, Administrator – Secretariat Team
Mike Diaper ED – Children, Young People and Tackling Inactivity
Ali Donnelly, ED – Digital Marketing and Communications
Jon Fox, Strategic Lead – Investment design
Tim Hollingsworth, Chief Executive Officer
Serena Jacobs, Director-Finance
Charles Johnston, ED – Property
Richard Mabbitt, Board Secretary
Simon Macqueen, Director – Strategy
Lisa O’Keefe, ED – Insight
Chris Perks, ED – Local Delivery
Nick Pontefract, Chief Operating Officer
Naomi Shearon, Strategic Lead – Strategy
Phil Smith, ED – Sport

Guests: James Wurr, Head of Sports Participation – DCMS

1. Chair’s Welcome and introductory comments

- 1.1 Nick Bitel welcomed members and officers to the meeting, held remotely under ongoing COVID-19 social distancing measures. The meeting had been called in addition to regularly scheduled meetings in order to provide a further opportunity for Board scrutiny of and feedback on the draft Sport England Strategy.

2. Apologies for Absence

- 2.1 All Board members were present. Anna Deignan (Head of Sport – DCMS) was unable to observe the meeting and James Wurr (Head of Sports Participation – DCMS) was attending on her behalf.

3. Declarations of Interests

- 3.1 No declarations of interests were made by members additional to those already registered.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

- 4.1 The Board **AGREED** the minutes of the previous Board meeting of 8 September 2020 (paper [MB20-59](#)) as an accurate record of events.

5. Matters arising

- 5.1 The Board reviewed the log of decisions and actions (paper [MB20-60](#)). Board members were content that matters arising from previous meetings were either complete, satisfactorily in hand, or to be addressed under later agenda items.
- 5.2 Four papers had been circulated for information since the previous meeting: Sector Support Update ([MB20-55](#)); Communications update ([MB20-56](#)); Active Lives (Adult) Report: ([MB20-57](#)); and Return to Play update ([MB20-58A](#)). No further comments were made on these.
- 5.3 The Board had also since the previous meeting agreed proposals in relation to Project Arena (Government support for spectator sports) set out for its decision by correspondence in paper [MB20-58](#). No further comments were made on this paper. However, the Board noted that the need for rapid decisions here as discussions with Government continued could well necessitate further between-meeting correspondence.

6. CEO Introduction

- 6.1 Tim Hollingsworth briefed Board members on key issues and developments, particularly those that had happened after it had become apparent that a four-week period of stricter COVID-19 restrictions in England would be

implemented by the Government with effect from 2 November. These restrictions would hit the sector extremely hard at a critical time.

- a) In the immediate run up to the announcement of increased restrictions and thereafter, Sport England had been in urgent conversation with Government to secure further clarity on the implications for sport and physical activity, and to present the evidence as to how it might safely continue in some form.
- b) Stakeholders were being kept aware of substantive developments. A number were expected independently to lobby the Government for a relaxation of the rules for outdoor sports and activities that could be practised in a socially distanced way.
- c) There remained uncertainty, which Sport England was seeking to clarify, about the application of the restrictions to sport and activity that would normally take place in school premises.
- d) Sport England continued to engage sympathetically with those partners making a reasoned case for exceptions from what they perceived as blanket lockdown measures. However, its focus was on working with government in the interests of coherent arrangements for sport and physical activity within the regionally tiered lockdown approach to which it was Government's intention to revert in the longer term. The tiered arrangements had not worked consistently well for sport and physical activity, and it was here that Sport England intervention was likely to make the greatest and widest-felt impacts.
- e) As an immediate action, Sport England had for a short, defined period of time paused applications to the small grants option within the new Return to Play Fund, and was rapidly reviewing the likely impacts of the new restrictions and the type of support and help groups would now need given that an imminent return to play was now unlikely.
- f) Discussion continued with Government and partners for the proposed 'Project Arena' programme of support (see [item 5](#)).
- g) Sport England continued to play an active and leading role in discussions relating to central government support for the leisure sector.
- h) Sport England remained mindful that the current restrictions would exacerbate the challenges faced by many - including children and young people and other target audiences - in becoming and staying active and healthy physically and mentally. It was mindful too of the disproportionate impacts of restrictions on certain parts of the population. It was therefore ramping up work being carried out under its 'Keeping the Nation Active' priority.
- i) Finally, and of particular note in respect of the current meeting, the draft Strategy had been re-worked with the aim of ensuring an optimal

balance between action to tackle the more immediate impacts of COVID-19 on the sector and longer-term actions.

- 6.2 Board members acknowledged the speed and effectiveness of this response and supported the approach going forward.

7. Strategy

- 7.1 Simon Macqueen introduced the draft Sport England Strategy and covering paper (MB20-61). Officers felt that Sport England remained on track for publication in January 2021, and anticipated final Board sign off at the Board meeting of 10 December. The present session comprised a final opportunity for the Board to contribute substantively to the strategy, further to its prior contributions throughout the consultation period, most recently via Investment Committee's scrutiny at its meeting of 14 October 2020 (minutes of that meeting and summary notes were available to Board members as Papers MB20-62 and MB20-63).

Overall views on the strategy document (Annex A) and the one page 'pyramid diagram' (Annex B): structure, content, key themes and tone;

- 7.2. Board members agreed that the document had progressed significantly. They were content that it was based on an intelligent and informed analysis of insight generated through deep and wide-ranging consultation. While not yet copy-edited, even in its plain text format it showed clear potential to be an extremely engaging document that was accessible and meaningful to its target audience. They felt that it showed ambition in its intent, and realism in its scope.
- 7.3 Board members welcomed the emphasis on tackling inequalities in the strategy. It felt that it was important to state explicitly in the strategy Sport England's approach to diversity generally and anti-racism specifically, while making sure that this was a consistent and embedded theme rather than a distinct objective. Board members noted the important distinction between: (i) inclusion and representation in wider activity statistics; and (ii) the representativeness of sectoral leadership and workforce (including Sport England's own). The latter was crucial to the former and needed more emphasis in the strategy. The Board felt that while it was right to emphasise the power of sport and activity to bringing communities together, the Strategy needed further acknowledgement of how barriers to this were presented (for example by protected characteristics and the inter-sectionalities between them).

- 7.4 Board members discussed the balance of content and presentation of sport and of physical activity. They felt that:
- a) it would be helpful to draw out the distinct characteristics and specific benefits of organised sport, and that this was possible without creating a false dichotomy with more informal physical activity and the wider benefits of movement. Sport was an implicit part of the vision, mission, and priorities of the strategy as drafted, but more explicit and up-front acknowledgement would benefit the document and be expected by some stakeholders;
 - b) the case for the health benefits of both sport and physical activity were well made, but that movement of whatever kind was essential – and not simply a 'leisure' or 'recreational' activity – could come through more strongly;
 - c) references to children and sport could be strengthened, with the role of sport in schools being particularly important for children's activity levels at this time. It was worth stressing that while there was a role for competitive sport here; children's first experiences of sport and physical activity needed to be positive, tailored, high quality, developmental and fun. Competition would then become a key element of this for many children and young people;
 - d) working across sectors – especially education and health – would be more important than ever and could be further emphasised.

7.5 Notwithstanding the need for final copy editing and formatting, Board members felt that the tone was already generally a comfortable balance of authoritative, collaborative and inspirational. They felt – bar a few drafting points – that the strategy persuasively communicated the message that sport and physical activity was for everyone, and was about realising the power of people. They advised that particular care was needed about the specificity of terminology (for example 'social integration' vs 'social inclusion'). They felt that the proposed use of graphics and an engaging format for the strategy, in combination with supplementary material to be produced for the launch phase would help to balance out the theoretical feel that would characterise any policy document of equivalent importance. Some choice examples would also be beneficial to illustrate key points: "how many children can't swim?" for example. Very clear and engaging language in respect of what success looked like was seen as particularly important, recognising that some stakeholders were less holistic in their thinking about what constituted success in their own areas.

7.6 Additional comments from members related to:

- a) ensuring that the introductory section and the 'pyramid' model clearly articulated a 'golden thread' of how purpose translated ultimately to catalysts, and was reflected in values;
- b) further emphasis on the role of active travel in the strategy, given the behavioural shifts (positive and negative) that COVID-19 and lockdown measures had stimulated;
- c) a clearer statement of Sport England's relationship with wider policy on curricula and schools sport;
- d) unpicking how Sport England conceptualised sustainability and the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental benefits, with the demands of climate change mitigation and adaptation a significant contextual factor over the strategy period and beyond;
- e) earlier flagging of workforce challenges, and better linking of the 'people' section to the earlier 'we will's';
- f) the desire of some parts of the audience for evidence of how things would be done differently in terms of Sport England Activities that might need to stop or be scaled down.

7.7 Overall, the Board agreed that the strategy document was commendably concise and directional and was keen that its comments be taken on board with this in mind.

The Balance in the strategy of Short term Covid-19 response vs long term change, and Implementation planning,

7.8 The Board felt that the Strategy as drafted balanced well the need to address meaningfully the immediate and ongoing impacts of COVID-19 without compromising its longer-term and bigger picture aspirations. It noted that while COVID-19 would likely have ramifications even at the latter stages of the strategy period, an over-prescriptive approach to the significant unknowns it presented in the medium to long term would be unwise.

7.9 The Board felt that the strategy was drafted in such a way that the implementation plan for year one offered an opportunity to be clear and focussed about immediate actions (building on those already in train) without losing sight of strategic objectives, or constraining opportunities to capitalise positively and innovatively on the disruption that COVID-19 had brought. In this respect, the 'Recover and reinvent' priority in the strategy could be more clearly badged as 'for the sector'. The first implementation

plan would be likely to major on this, recognising that:

- a) a functioning (even if weakened and recovering) and joined-up sector was critical to progress on other priorities;
- b) 'recover and reinvent' did not imply a return to the pre-COVID-19 status quo.

7.10 The Board felt strongly that careful contextualisation and communications around the strategy launch were crucial to its credibility and to Sport England's continued success in taking stakeholders with it. While cautious about the timing of relaxations to lockdown measures, the Board felt that there was nonetheless a realistic prospect of the launch coinciding with incremental removal of physical and practical constraints to sport and physical activity, in a context of continued political focus on public health and the role of sport, exercise and activity.

7.11 The Board was alert to the risks that elements of the strategy that focussed on COVID-19 response could in time appear dated. It felt that to some extent this was a risk attendant to any 10-year strategy. It felt strongly that the risks of under-playing the impacts of COVID 19 were much greater.

Measurement

7.12 The Board noted the challenges of using high-level population targets where Sport England activity was not the principal determinant of whether these targets were met. It felt that whole population targets remained important, but that their 'ownership' should be collective, and reflective of wider government and sectoral action on health, transport, education and other relevant policy areas, rather than something that Sport England was seen as directly accountable for, or could unfairly be critiqued against.

7.13 The Board therefore inclined strongly towards indicators and measures that could demonstrate clearly how well Sport England was delivering specifically on the five strategic priorities within the new strategy, and that were formative of its activities as well as summative of its achievements. Such targets should be ambitious but informed by Sport England's experience and learning, notably from its Local Development Pilots. The quality of relationships including the building of trust and local responsiveness to place-based issues, was seen as one key variable. Greater use of qualitative indicators (values, attitudes and behaviour change) rather than quantitative statistics was suggested. The Board emphasised the importance of integrating whole organisation success

measures with operational indicators in an overall measurement and evaluation framework that worked at all levels.

- 7.14 The Board was content that Sport England continued to develop its thinking and discussions with DCMS sponsor officials on these, with the aim of agreeing a hybrid measurement model that retained indicative population measures but focussed on more formative and meaningful priority-oriented metrics.

Launch and implementation phases

- 7.15 The Board was content that its focus now shift to the launch and early implementation phases of the strategy. The Board felt that:
- a) having consulted and engaged widely, Sport England's permission from the sector and authority to lead was strong;
 - b) the wider population of participants and would-be participants in sport and physical activity was also likely to be highly receptive to the strategy's objectives;
 - c) the read across to wider government policy objectives was clear, and this was an opportunity to further embed the importance of sport and physical activity in Government thinking in a range of policy areas.
- 7.16 The Board highlighted the importance of landing the strategy well with the major players in the sport and physical activity sector, and of ongoing engagement to ensure that the broad agreement and support they had expressed thus far was not diluted by misunderstandings over matters of emphasis, detail or delivery phasing. Positioning in the implementation plans the immediate (and existing) actions addressing the impacts of COVID as the bases for further action was key to this.
- 7.17 The Board flagged the importance of engaging new and still-sceptical audiences in the launch and implementation phases. It needed to recognise that Sport England needed to take with it those audiences who had in the past viewed sport from a narrow or privileged perspective, without compromising its universal approach.
- 7.18 Overall, the Board was reassured by Sport England's current thinking regarding the launch and implementation of the Strategy and looked forward to further discussion at its meeting on 8 December.

Next Steps

- 7.19 Board members noted the significant amount of internal work being done to flesh out the implementation plans that supported each of the Strategy's priorities. It noted the continuing engagement with stakeholders, including DCMS officials here. Given this and the overall positive feedback the draft had received at the present meeting, the Board was satisfied that Sport England remained on schedule to bring a final or very near final iteration of the strategy to the Board's meeting of 8 December for agreement in time for publication early in the new year.
- 7.20 The Chair thanked officers for their efforts in bring the draft strategy to this satisfactory state and asked for the process of refining the content and presentation of the strategy and plans for its implementation to proceed with the Board's feedback in mind. **Action: Simon Macqueen**

8. Any Other Business

- 8.1 The Board reflected on Sport England's increasingly active role in proposed Government support schemes for spectator sports and for leisure operators. This was new territory for the organisation and the scale and complexity of these programmes and the timescale for delivery would be very challenging. Nonetheless, the Board felt that Sport England's capabilities played well to these agendas, and its expertise (including the rapid learning experience from its key role in support arrangements for Rugby League clubs) would be important in their success. The longer-term opportunities to strengthen and develop new relationships in new ways were significant.
- 8.2 The Board noted progress on work under the Home Country Sports Councils' Racism in Sport and Physical Activity review. The contract for the data-gathering element of the work had been awarded. Three bids had been received for the lived experience element of the work, and a contract decision was expected in the next few days.
- 8.3 With no further substantive items of business being raised, Nick Bitel closed the formal meeting. Board members would meet privately for a short debrief after the meeting. The next meeting of the Board was scheduled for 8 December.

These minutes were agreed by the Board at its meeting of 8 December 2020