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Environmental Sustainability in Sport and Physical Activity

Consultation Findings – Executive Summary

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Sports and physical activity sector

Environmental Sustainability Consultation 2023



Executive Summary

Why this consultation matters

Extreme weather events and the energy crisis are already affecting all parts of society in Great Britain, and increasing awareness about the need for accelerated action to tackle climate change is becoming more widespread globally and locally.

Sport England, **sportscotland** and Sport Wales are acutely aware that the sports and physical activity sector will be impacted by climate change and environmental quality (affecting people's ability to participate), as well as having an impact on the environment. We acknowledge we have considerable scope, opportunity, and obligation to create positive change. However, there is no shared understanding of the problem across our sector, how to get started, and where the sector can have the greatest impact. This consultation is a first step in addressing this.

Sport England will use the findings from this consultation to develop a strategy for how it can support and influence the grassroots sports and physical activity sector to accelerate action on environmental sustainability. Sport Wales (who already has a sustainability strategy, the Sport Wales Environmental Sustainability Plan) and **sportscotland** will use the findings and insight to inform and prioritise the actions they take to support sports clubs/groups/organisations.

Methodology

The consultation was undertaken from April-May 2023 utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand current **challenges, action, opportunities** and **support** needed.

- An online survey, targeted at grassroots clubs/organisations/groups, had 475 responses from across GB and 76 different sports.
- 19 online interviews were held with a range of leaders from within the Sports Councils, system partners / umbrella bodies, and governing bodies.
- 6 online focus groups took place, with a total of 161 people attending from governing bodies and system partners / umbrella bodies, Local Authorities, and the owners and operators of the places and spaces where physical activity happens.

The consultation was undertaken by Useful Projects (a sustainability consultancy, Social Enterprise and B Corp), supported by Right Formula and EcoIMPACT SPORTS.



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Action

There is increasing public **awareness** about climate change, and this was reflected in the consultation. The consultation has revealed the sports and physical activity sector already has good levels of knowledge about environmental impacts and how it will affect clubs/organisations/groups, and plenty of **ambition** to tackle the issues. 82% of survey respondents said they want their organisation to be ambitious on environmental sustainability.

Whilst 62% of survey respondents said they have implemented some sort of environmental action; we believe this was particularly high because the survey was likely completed by the most engaged in the sector. During the interviews and focus groups, stakeholders generally felt that minimal action is being taken by grassroots clubs/groups, but that some NGBs have started.

It appears that the ability to take action is inhibited by lack of money and capacity to implement changes - in a sector that is heavily reliant on volunteers and is cash-constrained.

Some parts of the sector have been taking action to manage environmental impacts for many years, particularly sports that interface with **water** (either water quality, flooding or drought). Improving **energy efficiency** of buildings, **communications** to influence participant behaviours (e.g. the way they travel), and **reuse/recycling** initiatives were also commonly reported actions.

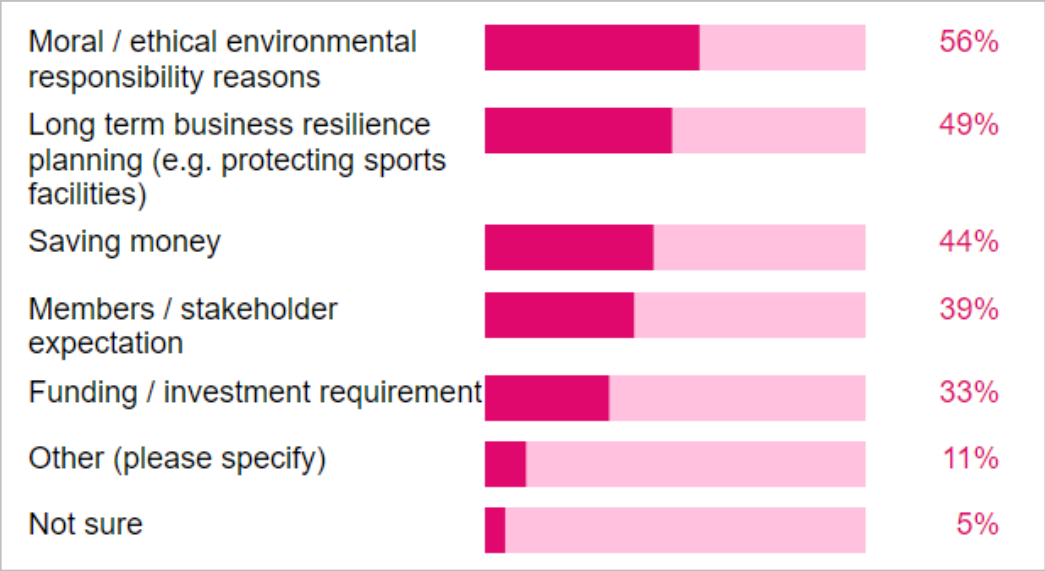
The survey revealed that organisations that own their own facilities tended to have implemented more actions than those that don't. This is likely to be because they have more control over the facility and its operations. Clubs/organisations with more money have also tended to have actioned more.

Nearly a quarter of survey respondents said they have assessed their impacts and put in place a formal Environmental Sustainability Policy, Action Plan or Strategy – but we are conscious that people that responded to a survey about environmental sustainability are likely to be more engaged with the agenda.

25% of survey respondents said they have never tried to access sustainability advice. For those that have, they go to a wide range of sources for this, which could be viewed as being inefficient and could also lead to mixed messaging. Sports clubs tend to go to governing bodies for advice, or seek expertise within their membership. Community organisations said they tend to go to their local authority or another local sport or physical activity organisation for advice, highlighting the importance of local networks within a geographical area.

Governing bodies tend to go to consultancies/charities, and the Sports Councils. These are important considerations for the support needed. The question for the Sports Councils, is, how can they influence the improvement of this?

We asked about the drivers for action. 56% of survey respondents said **moral and ethical reasons** are the strongest reasons, closely followed by long term **business resilience planning** and **saving money**.



Survey responses on reasons for the organisation's level of environmental sustainability ambition

Survey respondents were asked what they see as the key environmental **opportunities** for their organisation, as a free form answer. The most popular responses were related to:

- Energy and carbon
- Travel
- Waste reduction and recycling

This aligns with the key impacts sports and physical activity organisations/groups said they are having on the environment and are therefore key areas for support to be provided.

Through the consultation, we have gathered several **best practice case studies** from organisations and groups who have taken action, which can be shared with the wider sector to help accelerate progress.

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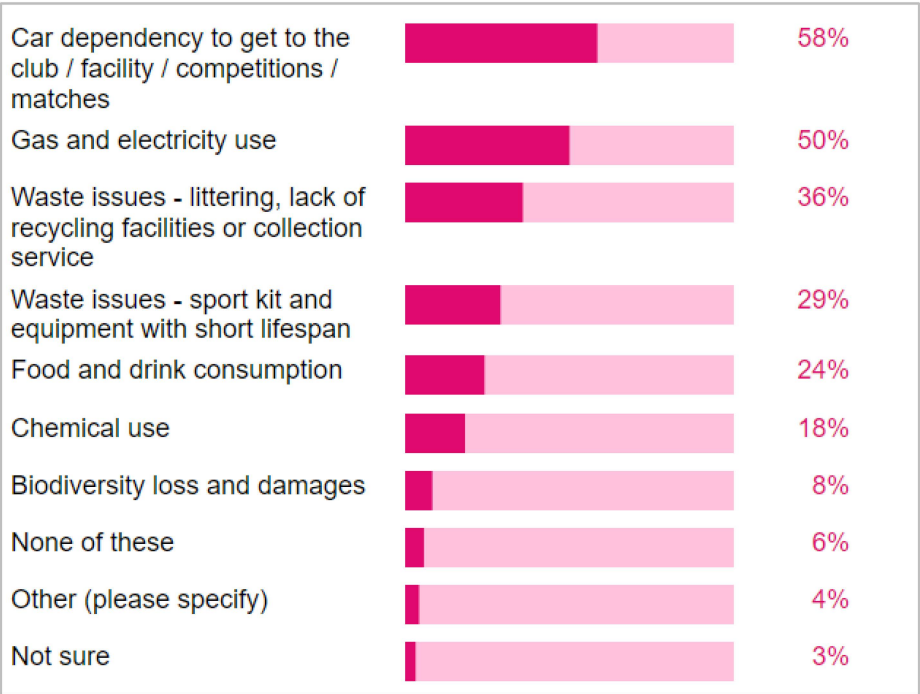
Key findings: Environmental Impacts and Challenges

A wide range of environmental challenges are facing the sector. Many of these are common across all sports, but naturally, some sports face different issues to others.

All parts of the sector are already being impacted by the energy crisis and resource availability. Rising **energy costs**, and the **costs of products and materials** were the top-rated perceived challenges in the survey, and this was reinforced in the focus groups and interviews.

Sports and physical activity undertaken **outdoors** are already being impacted by **extreme weather events** (floods/drought/heatwaves). 39% of respondents said weather related interruption to play was a challenge they’re facing.

The consultation findings indicate that the biggest impacts the sector has on the environment are: **car dependency** to travel to/from places where sport and physical activity happens; **gas and electricity use** from buildings (many of which are ageing, energy inefficient and costly to run); and **waste issues** (either littering/recycling challenges or sport kit and equipment with a short life span).



Survey question: What impacts, if any, do you think your organisation is having on the environment? (Pick your top 3)

Key findings: Barriers to acting on those challenges

One of the key questions posed during the consultation, was “what are the barriers to acting on these environmental challenges?”

Not enough **funding** was the greatest barrier for sports clubs and community organisations in the survey, and the second greatest barrier for governing bodies.

For governing and umbrella bodies, **lack of capacity** was the top barrier, with the majority lacking specific sustainability roles. These findings were reinforced through the interviews and focus groups with governing bodies wanting to “get their own house in order” before they feel they can support their members.

The interviews and focus groups indicated that clubs/groups understand the issues, but the main challenge is knowing where and how to start and having the time and money to do it: there is an **implementation challenge**. The survey identified the need to shift from awareness to **practical action and behaviour change**.

In recreational sport/physical activity, buildings and facilities are often not owned by the club/activity delivery partner, and this lack of control and ability to make changes was highlighted; placing emphasis on the role of influence, collaboration and shared action in achieving environmental sustainability ambitions.

Top voted	Does your organisation own its own facilities?	
	Yes	No
1	Not enough funding	Lack of capacity
2	Lack of capacity	Not enough funding
3	Lacking knowledge and expertise	Lack of ability to influence

Top barriers to acting on environmental challenges, depending on whether the organisation owns its own facilities

Executive Summary

Survey: Headline Findings

475



survey respondents from across GB

76



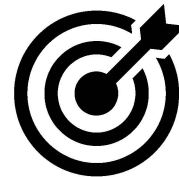
different sports and activities represented

86%



of respondents believe their organisations are either somewhat or very **knowledgeable** on sustainability issues

82%



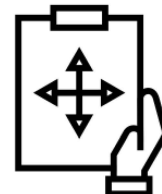
want their organisations to be **ambitious** on environmental sustainability

58%



consider **reliance on cars** as their organisation's greatest environmental impact

25%



of organisations have never tried to access **sustainability advice**

58%



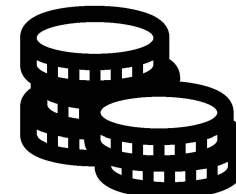
said **energy consumption** is a key environmental challenge, irrespective of whether they own their own facilities

56%



said **moral and ethical reasons** are the strongest drivers for action, closely followed by business resilience and saving money

55%



of organisations see **lack of funding** as the greatest **barrier** to acting on environmental sustainability

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Key findings: Support needed

A wide range of responses were provided, indicating that various types of environmental sustainability support would be beneficial for the sector. In the analysis, we bring out the support Governing Bodies/System Partners need (and where they currently access this support), as well as the support that the grassroots clubs and groups need.

Funding for environmental initiatives was identified as the most desired type of support for organisations: 59% of respondents said this. Funding and increased capacity for systems partners on sustainability also came through very strongly in the focus groups and interviews.

Other key areas of support needed were:

- **Guidance** - online material that could include guidance, templates, toolkits etc
- **Expert support and advice**, e.g. through in-person site visits or access to consultants
- Free **training and education sessions** (e.g. Carbon Literacy Sports Toolkit)
- Free downloadable **communications tools** (e.g. posters)
- Free **environmental measurement equipment** (e.g. energy meters, sensors)
- **Joint initiatives/campaigns** to participate in
- **Case studies** of best practice and lessons learnt

The need to focus on “**progress not perfection**” was highlighted, so support measures that make it easy for clubs to take bite-sized steps will be important.

In addition, the consultation has stressed the need for cross-sector **leadership**: the need for clear direction and messaging, one voice, clarity and alignment. This reinforces the importance of the [Sport Environment and Climate Coalition \(SECC\)](#), to lead and coordinate the sector’s efforts on climate change and broader environmental issues.

The sector is also seeking opportunities to **collaborate**, network with others on the same journey, share learning and expertise, and even work together to influence commercial partners for example.

The key **environmental challenges** that the sector would like support to tackle are highlighted in the text box to the right.

Focus areas for support

The key environmental challenges that the sector would like support to tackle are:

- **Travel:** Reducing carbon emissions associated with travel to/from the places where sports and physical activity takes place (training/competitions etc).
- **Buildings:** Reducing energy consumption and carbon emissions from buildings.
- **Circular economy:** reducing consumption and waste associated with kit, equipment and general operations.
- **Water quality and use:** improving water quality (rivers/lakes/sea), managing rising water costs, managing flooding and drought on outdoor pitches and urban green spaces.
- **Adapting to climate change and extreme weather events:** to maintain the sector’s ability to participate in sport and physical activity, now and in the future.

The power of sport to engage and positively influence everyday people has been acknowledged for many years. Throughout the consultation, the need for environmental **behaviour change** by sport and activity providers and participants alike was raised (how we travel, what we buy, avoiding waste, saving energy etc).

Whilst sporting champions/heroes have a role to play, the consultation revealed that it is often coaches/instructors that are respected leaders within the grassroots community, working with participants on a weekly basis. By providing coaches / instructors / managers with training and engagement sessions, and them demonstrating leadership for environmental sustainability action, we could achieve a “ripple effect” of behaviour change and action.

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The role of Sport England, sportscotland, and Sport Wales

There are many organisations operating in the sport and physical activity sector, and it is often unclear who is/should be doing what and how all the organisations' agendas and activities align (or not).

The key areas where consultation participants felt that Sport England, **sportscotland** and Sport Wales could play a role, given their position and role in the sector, were:

- **Leadership and influence:** Influence “up” to Government (e.g. policy change), influence and enable systems change working with partners, and inspire and support “down” to clubs and participants.
- **Investing in strategic partners:** Continue/increase funding of strategic partners – the Sports Councils could fund sustainability roles, which could in turn have huge influence across the sector.
- **Open funding for clubs/groups/facilities:** Use grant funding as a lever for change. Introduce an environmental/climate action grant, and/or introduce environmental criteria as part of other larger Grants Programmes.
- **Funding centralised guidance and resources:** Fund free impartial expert advice/expert support, online guidance and action plan templates, free training and education sessions (e.g. help fund the Carbon Literacy Sports Kit). The Sport Councils could introduce central resources that can be adapted / utilised across different sports / facilities – to avoid duplicated efforts. Signposting best practice case studies could be incorporated into this.
- **Facilities and planning:** Through our engagement in the planning system, leading sector design guidance and as an investor in sports facilities, the Sports Councils can raise the bar for new facilities and could introduce minimum sustainability standards based on type of facility whilst ensuring that they are realistic and viable.
- **Communications and campaigns:** Sports Councils can introduce powerful campaigns and help communicate the message to inspire action. As one stakeholder put it, “We see sport as a vehicle to reach a broader range of communities who might not otherwise engage with climate change.” Sport England’s ‘This Girl Can’ campaign was quoted several times as a great example of a powerful campaign. 22% of survey respondents thought that joint initiatives/campaigns to participate in would be useful. Stakeholders felt that the messaging could be focused on ‘why this is important for sport’ - this is important for our young people, future players and participants etc. Many suggested messaging could also reference the co-benefits, e.g., saving money, social benefits.
- **Coordination role:** The Sports Councils could be a coordinator/convenor, perhaps by introducing a sustainability network for representatives from the strategic partners and NGBs that they fund, plus environmental NGOs and sustainability experts. They could also engage wider sponsors and commercial partners in a sustainability working group or knowledge sharing network, to help drive change.
- **Inspiration and incentives:** Through the interviews and focus groups, the need for a “carrot rather than stick” approach was reinforced – i.e. for the Sports Councils to provide inspiration, incentives and support rather than strict requirements or criteria to comply with. The Sports Councils could consider evolving grassroots sports from participation focused targets to environmental focused targets.
- **Link the environment and social agendas:** Stakeholders felt there is a key opportunity for the Sports Councils to dovetail the environmental and social agendas rather than consider them separately, as part of the ‘just transition’ and ‘climate justice’.

Thank you.

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