

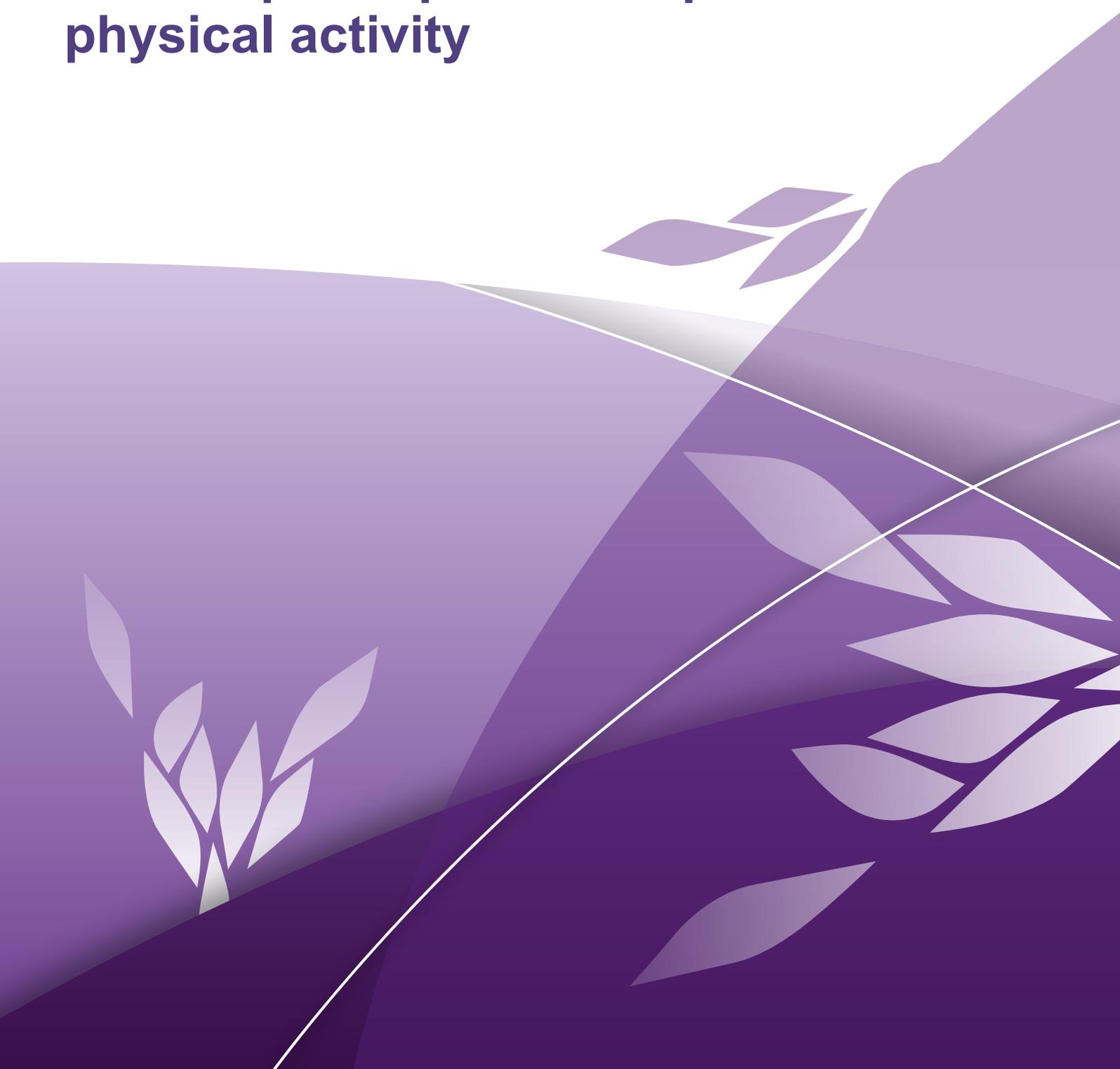


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Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Female participation in sport and physical activity



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Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, with the exception of matters relating to land reform, natural resources and peatland, Scottish Land Commission, Crown Estate Scotland, and Royal Botanic Garden..



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Membership changes

1. There were three changes to the membership of the Committee during the inquiry:
 - On 19 January 2023, Carol Mochan MSP was replaced by Paul Sweeney MSP.
 - On 18 April 2023, Gillian Martin MSP was replaced by Clare Haughey MSP.
 - On 25 April 2023, Paul O'Kane MSP was replaced by Carol Mochan MSP.

Executive summary

The importance of sport and physical activity

2. There is extensive evidence of the benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity for physical and mental health and wellbeing. In this context, the Committee is very concerned by evidence which shows a persistent gender gap in rates of participation in sport and physical activity that begins at the age of puberty and persists up to women in their early 40s.

Barriers faced by teenage girls

Puberty

3. The Committee welcomes progress to date in implementing the Scottish Government's Women's Health Plan and that this has included learning about menstrual health as part of the Scottish curriculum. The Committee hopes this will be beneficial in terms of normalising discussions about menstrual health, improving awareness and understanding about the impact menstruation can have on girls' participation in sport and physical activity and removing stigma around managing periods, particularly as this relates to girls' participation in P.E. classes.
4. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to set out how it will evaluate the impact of improved learning about menstrual health as part of the school curriculum in addressing the significant decline in participation of girls in sport and physical activity connected with puberty.
5. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to bring forward new statutory guidance on school uniforms that will increase the use of generic and unisex items of clothing, including for sports and P.E. clothing and equipment. It calls on the Scottish Government to provide further details of the expected timing for introduction of this new guidance and to set out how it will ensure that any new uniform requirements do not exacerbate existing concerns about body image or period leakage.

Gendered / restricted offerings

6. The Committee is concerned by evidence submitted to the inquiry (and supported by the findings of UK-wide research) which suggests that many girls and women are given limited opportunities to participate in sports and physical activities that are stereotypically viewed as being male-dominated and therefore unlikely to be of interest to them or suitable for female participation.
7. The Committee welcomes anecdotal evidence submitted to the inquiry that the Active Schools programme has had a positive impact in broadening girls' access to a wider range of sports and physical activities, including those such as football or rugby that have historically been or continue to be viewed as primarily suitable for boys and men.
8. At the same time, the Committee notes that the most recent full evaluation of the

Active Schools programme was completed in 2014. It therefore calls on the Scottish Government to commission an updated evaluation of the programme as a matter of urgency and suggests this should have a particular focus on evaluating its impact in supporting female participation and making recommendations to further improve the programme's performance against this metric in the future. The new evaluation should give specific consideration to whether girls are being given access to the same range and quality of sport and physical activity options as boys.

Focus on competition rather than having fun

9. The Committee recognises that, while some girls and women may actively welcome a strong element of competition to their participation in sport and physical activity, many will want to focus on enjoyment. Girls and women who wish to engage in sport and physical activity primarily for fun should be offered ample opportunities to do so with like-minded participants.
10. The Committee has heard about good examples of organisations engaging with participants in an informal and relaxed environment, away from sports facilities, to discuss their expectations and preferences as well as the health and wellbeing benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity.
11. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to set out how it ensures the sport and physical activity programmes it supports strike an appropriate balance between supporting the aims of those women and girls who want to focus on competing in their sports and those who want to focus on enjoyment.

Negative attitudes by boys

12. The Committee has been concerned to hear extensive evidence that negative attitudes by boys continue to create a major barrier to girls' participation in sport and physical activity, particularly during adolescence. The Committee commends the "Don't Be That Guy" campaign to tackle sexual harassment, run by Police Scotland, and the positive impact this has had in addressing negative attitudes by boys which in turn helps to foster an environment of mutual respect between boys and girls when participating in sport and physical activity.
13. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to consider what more it could do to learn lessons for future policy development from the implementation of the "Don't Be That Guy" campaign so far. The Committee further calls on the Scottish Government to consider how it can support wider roll-out of this campaign and other education programmes across all schools in Scotland aimed at tackling misogynistic attitudes and behaviours that discourage female participation in sport and physical activity.

Boys' domination of playground spaces

14. To address boys' domination of playground spaces and provide improved opportunities for girls to take part in physical activities in those spaces, the Committee calls on the Scottish Government, local authorities and schools to work together to develop support and guidance for teachers and playground

supervision staff to help them supervise playgrounds effectively and ensure all pupils, girls and boys alike, have an equal opportunity to use playground spaces for physical activity during the school day.

Barriers faced by women of all ages

Women's health

15. Beyond school settings and the teenage years, the Committee is concerned by evidence that women face persistent barriers to their participation in sport and physical activity as a result of a lack of understanding and education about the impacts of pregnancy, menopause and other women's health conditions on willingness and ability to participate in sport and physical activity.
16. The Committee believes that women themselves need to receive more and better information and advice about remaining physically active throughout their lives. Beyond this, there is an onus on health providers to provide more advice and information about how certain types of physical activity can actively help women to manage and alleviate the symptoms associated with conditions such as menopause and urinary incontinence.
17. The Committee also believes that sports organisations should be encouraged to offer a broader and more inclusive range of physical activities that are suitable for women experiencing specific women's health conditions and to actively promote activities that are suitable for women with a range of health conditions with a view to increasing rates of female participation.
18. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to set out precisely what steps it will take as part of the implementation of its Women's Health Plan to address these issues and increase rates of participation in sport and physical activity by women affected by a range of women's health conditions including pregnancy, menopause, urinary incontinence and endometriosis.

Negative body image and a lack of self confidence

19. The Committee recognises that many people, men and women, may be deterred from participating in sport and physical activity because they lack self-confidence or experience negative body image. The Committee believes that sporting venues need to do more to show themselves as welcoming and inclusive to participants of all abilities and to offer tailored advice and support to those who may be initially reluctant to participate due to a lack of self-confidence or experiencing a negative body image.

Lack of positive role models

20. The Committee has been encouraged to hear examples of good practice in encouraging more girls and women to put themselves forward for coaching and leadership roles in sport and physical activity, such as the Active Schools programme, leadership and coaching programmes run by sportscotland and the young women in sport leadership programme provided by SAMH. The Committee

calls on the Scottish Government to set out what it is doing to build on the positive experience of programmes such as these to try to attract even more girls and women into leadership roles in sport and physical activity in the future.

21. The Committee highlights the important role men in leadership roles have to play in demonstrating a real commitment to promoting and encouraging female participation in sport and physical activity. The Committee believes sporting organisations have a critical role to play in educating male coaches and leaders within their sport about the important role and responsibilities they have in this regard and to encourage them to demonstrate positive and inclusive behaviours.
22. The Committee also calls on the Scottish Government to set out what it is doing to gain a better understanding of what currently prevents girls and women putting themselves forward for coaching, leadership and volunteering roles in sport and physical activity and how those barriers can be overcome.

Mixed versus single sex provision

23. Amongst the evidence submitted to the inquiry, the Committee recognises a wide range of different views and experiences related to single sex versus mixed participation in sport and physical activity. With this in mind, the Committee concludes that there should be no "one size fits all" approach to provision across different categories of sport and physical activity. However, where there is demand and clear evidence that this would help to encourage participation, the Committee believes that girls and women should be offered greater opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity in a single sex environment.
24. At the same time, with particular reference to PE in schools, the Committee believes more work is needed to make mixed PE classes inclusive and enjoyable for all participants. This can partly be achieved by addressing potentially negative attitudes and behaviours of boys through better training and education of teachers and pupils. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to set out how it will work with local authorities to take forward this recommendation across all schools in Scotland.

Caring responsibilities

25. The Committee recognises the significant barrier childcare and other caring responsibilities presents to female participation in sport and physical activity.
26. In this context, the Committee believes that sports centres and other community facilities should be actively encouraged to offer opportunities for women to access childcare while participating in sport and physical activity or to be able to participate in this activity at the same time as their children.
27. The Committee would also support employers becoming "wellbeing employers" to allow employees time to be physically active or to engage in volunteering as sports leaders or coaches. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to set out how it can contribute to supporting employers to take this approach and to learning from existing examples of good practice.

28. For the sake of their own health and wellbeing, the Committee firmly believes that unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, must be given the time they need to participate regularly in sport and physical activity. To enable this to happen, the Committee calls on the Scottish Government to redouble its efforts to ensure all unpaid carers are able to access the rights, including regular breaks, to which they are entitled under the Carers Rights Scotland Act.

Harassment and safety concerns

29. The Committee has been concerned to hear extensive evidence of the harassment and abuse girls and women can be subjected to while exercising and believes there needs to be a zero tolerance approach towards tackling such unacceptable behaviour.
30. In particular, the Committee calls on the Scottish Government to set out what guidance it is providing to sport organisations and governing bodies to ensure they have robust policies in place to tackle instances of harassment and abuse of all kinds, including those which are directed towards female participants. Above all, the Committee concludes that the governing bodies responsible for all types of sport and physical activity must be required to have in place clear, transparent and easy-to-navigate processes for receiving, handling and dealing with complaints about harassment or abuse.
31. The Committee also calls on the Scottish Government to set out what guidance it has in place, or any plans for the development of future guidance, to ensure considerations around personal safety are properly integrated into decision-making around the design, construction and maintenance of infrastructure and facilities that support physical activity including active travel such as walking, running and cycling.
32. The Committee further recognises the potential for feminist town planning to make a positive contribution towards improving the safety of basic infrastructure for public transport and active travel and making it better suited to the needs of female participants. It calls on the Scottish Government to set out what steps it will take to encourage the systematic use of feminist town planning in the design of future active travel and transport infrastructure.

Facilities, including changing rooms

33. The Committee recognises widespread concerns that facilities and infrastructure for sport and physical activity tend to be catered primarily to the needs of male participants and opportunities for female participation are more restricted as a consequence. While acknowledging the commitment of many organisations to take greater account of female requirements in the future design of facilities and infrastructure, the Committee would advocate much more consistent use of equality impact assessments to ensure this commitment is effectively delivered in practice.
34. The Committee is concerned that, since its predecessor considered the issue as part of its inquiry into Sport for Everyone, little progress seems to have been made towards improving access to the school estate for sport and physical

activity at a community level. It is firmly of the view that improving this access would make an important contribution to increasing female participation in sport and physical activity. It would therefore encourage the Scottish Government and local authorities, as a matter of urgency, to revisit the issue and to develop a targeted action plan to improve the accessibility of the school estate as a valuable community resource.

35. The Committee acknowledges concerns that the more recent shift in design of changing facilities towards the creation of "changing villages" has prompted concerns from many women that these lack adequate levels of privacy. The Committee calls on sportscotland and the Scottish Government to investigate opportunities to update guidance on changing facilities in a way that maintains the goal of improved inclusivity while providing enhanced privacy for those women who desire it.

Funding

36. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to double investment in sport and active living to £100 million per year over the current term of the Scottish Parliament. At the same time, the Scottish Government must recognise that there will be many competing demands for this increased funding. In this context, the Scottish Government should set out how funding will be suitably targeted to ensure the goal of increased participation and visibility of women and girls in sport and physical activity is made a key priority.
37. Given responsibility for the overwhelming majority of public funding for sport and physical activity lies with local authorities, the Committee acknowledges the significant financial pressures they and the Scottish Government currently face. Nonetheless, it is concerned by the extent to which local authority funding for sport and physical activity has been cut over recent years and the particular negative impact this will have had on female participation.
38. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to address the possibility of introducing multi-year funding for sportscotland with a view to improving certainty for the sector. In particular, it calls on the Scottish Government to address to what extent a multi-year approach to funding of sport and physical activity might improve rates of, and break down barriers to, female participation.
39. The Committee believes more work needs to be done to measure the broader impact investment in sport and physical activity can have as a preventative measure that improves health and wellbeing while reducing the societal costs of poor health and wellbeing. The Committee would also be interested to see more sporting bodies being encouraged to undertake analysis of the social return on investment in their sport, including the wider benefits to female health and wellbeing.
40. Drawing on best practice examples from other countries, the Committee would support an element of conditionality being introduced to the allocation of public funding for sport and physical activity, whereby recipients would need to demonstrate that an appropriate proportion of that funding is being directed

towards increasing female participation.

41. In the context of statistical evidence showing a comparatively high proportion of those regularly participating in swimming are women, the Committee is concerned to hear evidence of the particularly intense financial pressures community swimming pools are currently under. Before reaching future spending decisions in this area, the Committee would urge central and local government to give careful consideration to the disproportionate negative impact any decision to close community swimming facilities is likely to have on rates of female participation in physical activity.

Addressing intersecting barriers to participation

42. The Committee acknowledges that girls facing intersecting barriers to participation in sport and physical activity will encounter these barriers from an early age. Just as it has recommended improved education in schools around menstrual health, the Committee believes work is needed to improve equalities education related to participation in sport and physical activity. This should improve understanding amongst teachers and fellow pupils of the importance of creating a friendly and inclusive environment for all participants, about any additional support girls facing intersecting barriers to participation may need to enable them to participate and to actively tackle stigma and discrimination, be that conscious or unconscious.
43. The Committee recognises the importance of positive role models to encourage more girls and women facing intersecting barriers to participation in sport and physical activity and to give them the confidence to aspire to progress into elite sport in the future. The Committee strongly encourages the Scottish Government, local authorities, sports governing bodies and schools to work together to identify and promote positive role models who properly reflect diversity and inclusion. Recruitment policies and strategies should encourage and support diverse applicants for coaching and leadership roles.
44. Similarly, imagery and messaging used to encourage participation in sport and physical activity should reflect a culture that is as welcoming and inclusive of diversity as possible.
45. The Committee recognises the particular barriers to participation in sport and physical activity faced by disabled girls and women, related to a lack of accessible and suitably adapted facilities and infrastructure. The more systematic use of equality impact assessments will help to ensure the design of facilities and infrastructure meets the particular needs of disabled participants.
46. The Committee has been encouraged to hear evidence of the success initiatives such as the culture, heritage and sport stream of the Welsh Government's Anti-racist Wales Action Plan have had in encouraging greater participation in sport and physical activity by girls and women from minority ethnic backgrounds. The Scottish Government should explore what lessons it can learn from such initiatives and the potential for similar initiatives to be rolled out in Scotland in the future.

47. The Committee welcomes suggestions made by contributors to the inquiry of ways in which community sport venues can be made more welcoming and inclusive of a diversity of participants, including those from the LGBTQ+ community. In particular, as advocated elsewhere in this report, it recognises the opportunity for changing villages to cater to a diverse range of participants by being family friendly while at the same time offering single sex spaces and options for individual privacy for those who desire it.
48. Related to the Scottish Government's commitment to double funding for sport and physical activity over the course of the current parliamentary term, the Committee notes the Minister's subsequent commitment to this inquiry that she would seek to target this additional funding towards tackling inequality. The Committee highlights evidence submitted to this and other recent inquiries which demonstrates that women tend to be disproportionately impacted by socio-economic inequality. In light of this evidence, it would urge the Scottish Government to make increasing participation in sport and physical activity by those women and girls experiencing intersecting inequalities an overriding priority for investment of this additional funding.

Key barriers to female participation at an elite level

Funding and pay

49. The Committee welcomes evidence of significant progress in terms of pay and prize money for women in elite sport over recent years but acknowledges there is still much more to be done to achieve anything approaching parity with elite men in sport.
50. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to explore whether the creation of an independent Women's Sport Trust for Scotland, comparable to the existing body in England, could support the growth in women's sport in Scotland, including growing the revenue generated by women's sports and reducing reliance for funding on the men's game.
51. The Scottish Government should also commission research to explore options for the development of sustainable career pathways for women in elite sport that enable them to pursue their sport at an elite level while earning a sustainable income.

Clothing and equipment

52. The Committee calls on all sporting organisations and governing bodies to ensure that any guidance they produce regarding clothing and equipment for women's sport and physical activity adheres to the principles of practicality, functionality and freedom of choice.

Women's health in elite sport

53. The Committee believes there is an urgent need for further research to gain a better understanding of the impact of menstruation and women's health conditions on training and performance of women in elite sport. It calls on sports

governing bodies to prioritise investment in this type of research and on the Scottish Government to explore what more it can do to support and encourage research in this area.

54. The Committee similarly calls for the development and implementation of a targeted programme of education across all sports to give coaches a better understanding of how women's health conditions can affect performance and training and to foster a culture of greater openness between female athletes and their coaches about how certain conditions may affect them and how these can be effectively managed.
55. The Committee is concerned by evidence that many women in elite sport are forced to make a choice between starting a family and continuing their career with a general expectation that women in elite sport will have to end their sporting career when they choose to become pregnant. The Committee believes that, with better support, women in many sports should be able to continue their sporting career post-partum. It has been encouraged by examples of good practice in a number of different sports and different countries where women receive appropriate support to be able to continue their sporting career after becoming a mother. We would urge action by sporting bodies to disseminate best practice in this area more widely across all fields of sport and physical activity at an elite level.

Sexism and abuse

56. The Committee has been saddened to hear substantial evidence of women in elite sport and female sports journalists being subjected to sexism and abuse and reiterates its view that there needs to be a zero tolerance approach to tackling such unacceptable behaviour.
57. The Scottish Government, in responding to this report, must provide an update on progress towards implementing the recommendations of the 2019 "Levelling the Playing Field" report and in particular, what impact it expects these measures to have in tackling instances of sexism and abuse towards women in elite sport.
58. The Scottish Government should consider whether an independent body should be set up to tackle misconduct and abuse in sport and, if not, what alternative strategy it has to tackle instances of sexism and abuse towards women in elite sport.

Media coverage and reporting

59. The Committee is firmly of the view that improved media coverage of women's elite sport is vital to encouraging greater female participation in sport and physical activity. It is therefore encouraging that the level of media coverage of women's elite sport has increased substantially in recent years. Nonetheless, a great deal more remains to be done. There should be a particular focus on increasing routine coverage of women's elite sport outside the window of major international tournaments and on broadening coverage to include a wider range of different sports and a greater diversity of women in elite sport, including those with disabilities or from minority ethnic backgrounds.

60. The Committee notes evidence suggesting a need for increased Government investment to enable media coverage of women's elite sport to be further expanded in the future. The Scottish Government should consider whether further investment is required and how this might be targeted cost-effectively to maximise the return in terms of expanded media coverage of women's elite sport.
61. The media themselves must also take proactive steps to encourage greater diversity and inclusion within sports journalism, particularly as this relates to organisational culture and recruitment practices.
62. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to organise a Scottish Sport Media Summit during the course of 2023. It should update the Committee by December 2023 on the outcome of the Summit and any particular conclusions or recommendations likely to have a bearing on future media coverage of women's elite sport and how it intends to take these forward.

Impact of social media on female participation at all levels

63. The Committee recognises the huge influence social media can exert - both positive and negative - on girls and women and their attitudes to and engagement with sport and physical activity. The Committee would encourage sports organisations and governing bodies to consider the development and implementation of proactive social media strategies that seek to amplify the voice of positive role models and to disseminate positive messaging around the health benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity as well as challenging misogynistic behaviour and attitudes.
64. The Scottish Government should set out what support and guidance it can provide to sports organisations and governing bodies with the development and implementation of their social media strategies.
65. The Scottish Government should work closely with the UK Government to ensure that, through implementation of the UK Online Safety Bill, social media companies can be issued with suitably comprehensive guidance and codes of practice that address the harmful impact of negative body image content on social media. This should include strong sanctions against those companies that persistently fail to regulate such content on their platforms.

Research and evaluation

66. The Committee acknowledges the existence of data on participation in sport and physical activity by people from different ethnic backgrounds through the Scottish Government's Active Schools and Active Scotland programmes. Nonetheless, it has been concerned to receive evidence of an overall lack of sufficient research and data to inform policy-making in this area, whether that is aimed at understanding the impact of certain women's health conditions on sporting performance at an elite level or capturing an accurate picture of current rates of participation in different sports by women and girls, including those facing a range of intersecting inequalities.
67. The Committee highlights the critical importance of creating an accurate and

comprehensive benchmark to measure the effectiveness of future policy interventions aimed at increasing female participation in sport and physical activity. It therefore urges the Scottish Government, as a matter of priority and as recommended by the OSS, to commission a population-level survey to measure current rates of participation in sport and physical activity, broken down by age, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, disability, sexuality, ethnic and religious background and other inequalities.

68. The Scottish Government should also explore ways of incentivising research organisations in receipt of public funding to direct more of their resources towards sports science research specifically focused on women.
69. While accepting there is already an existing focus within the National Performance Framework on being active and healthy, the Committee would welcome a debate, as part of the forthcoming five-year review, as to whether a more specific National Outcome on rates of participation in sport and physical activity could act as a positive driver of future policy to increase rates of female participation.

Introduction

70. Our 2022 inquiry into the health and wellbeing of children and young people highlighted a significant decline in participation of girls in sport and physical activity as they reach adolescence. During that inquiry, the Committee heard evidence of the significant negative impact this decline can have on the short, medium and long-term physical health and mental wellbeing of girls and women.
71. Following on from this, the Committee agreed to undertake a follow-up inquiry to identify key barriers to female participation in sport and physical activity, including the intersectionality of additional barriers to participation, such as ethnicity and disability. A key aim of this new inquiry would be to explore how these barriers might be overcome in the future.
72. The Committee began the inquiry by issuing a call for views on 30 September 2022 which asked:
 - What issues, if any, affect women and girls taking part in community sport and physical activity? How might these challenges be overcome?
 - What issues, if any, affect women and girls taking part in elite sport? How might these challenges be overcome?
 - What additional issues, if any, affect women and girls from marginalised groups taking part in sport or physical activity? How might these challenges be overcome?
73. The call for views ran from 30 September until 9 December 2022 and received [221 submissions](#). Following its closure, research colleagues produced a [summary of responses](#). The Committee also received a [video submission](#) setting out many of the challenges young women face when seeking to participate in sport and physical activity. A [transcript of the video](#) is also available to read.
74. The data gathered from the call for views is not intended to reflect a representative sample of the population, but rather to offer a snapshot of the experiences, opinions, and concerns expressed by those who responded, and to support the selection of appropriate witnesses to give oral evidence. The call for views was structured in a largely qualitative manner, with open text boxes to enable respondents to express their views in their own words. The responses were analysed using thematic analysis.
75. Before starting to take formal evidence as part of the inquiry, Members of the Committee participated in a programme of informal engagement in Dunfermline on 13 March 2023.

Members of the Committee meeting representatives of the Scottish Sports Association.



Source: Scottish Parliament

76. As part of this visit, Committee Members met with representatives of the Scottish Sports Association Leadership Group to discuss some of the key barriers women and girls may face when seeking to participate in the sports and physical activities.

Members of the Committee visiting the Fighting Chance Judo Project.



Source: Scottish Parliament

77. The Committee then visited the [Fighting Chance Judo Project](#) at Carnegie Judo in Dunfermline, which is "dedicated to helping disadvantaged or disengaged young people realise their potential through sharing with them the values of judo". Finally, the Committee visited [Dunfermline Reign Basketball Club](#) to speak with women and girls about their experiences.

Members of the Committee visiting the Dunfermline Reign Basketball Club.



Source: Scottish Parliament

78. The Committee also held eight formal evidence sessions, taking evidence from a broad range of relevant stakeholders, as detailed below:

Meeting date	Witnesses and themes
14 March 2023	Young Women's Movement (focusing on the Young Women Lead Committee)
21 March 2023	stakeholders (focusing on community sport and recreational activity)
28 March 2023	stakeholders (focusing on girls and young women)
18 April 2023	stakeholders (focusing on elite sport)
25 April 2023	stakeholders (focusing on media and broadcasting)
23 May 2023	stakeholders (focusing on inequalities)
30 May 2023	stakeholders (focusing on an overview of female participation)
6 June 2023	the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport.

Background

79. A [2019 Observatory for Sport in Scotland report](#) "Sports participation in Scotland: trends and future prospects" found that although girls are more active than boys between the ages of five and seven, their participation drops significantly from the age of eight onwards. By ages 13-15, approximately 11% of girls in Scotland meet physical activity guidelines, compared to 24% of boys. The Observatory for Sport in Scotland also note:
- ” The gender gap is at its greatest in mid to late teenage years through to late 30s/early 40s. Amongst older demographics the gap narrows in part because male participation rates fall to those of women as drop-out increases among older men.
80. The report included international comparisons on rates of participation in sport and physical activity between Scotland, the Netherlands and Denmark. The report identified "a growing trend in Scotland towards a very active and sporty minority" but found that 37% of the UK adult population reported never participating in exercise and sport, compared to 20% in Denmark and 31% in the Netherlands.
81. In terms of female participation in sport and physical activity, the report identified a marginal difference in participation between genders in the Netherlands in favour of men while in Denmark, "women are as likely to participate in sport as men and may even be slightly more likely to participate than men". By contrast, the report concluded: "The picture is very different in Scotland with a large and persistent gender gap with men having much higher participation rates than women and little sign of the gap narrowing".

The Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board

82. In 2017, the Scottish Government established a [Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board](#) with the aim of increasing participation of women and girls in sport and physical activity and raising awareness of the importance of being physically active. In 2019, the Board published its [Levelling the Playing Field report](#), setting out recommendations to support and encourage women and girls in sport.
83. The report includes recommendations for action by the Scottish Government to improve female representation in sports leadership and governance as well as recommendations to improve the gender balance of sports media coverage. It also recommends the creation of a Gender Beacon Collaborative for Sport to:
- ” Bring together leaders and experts from Scottish Government, local authorities, public bodies and third sector to take a holistic and systematic approach to gender equality in sport and physical activity and work to embed it across policy design and service delivery.
84. The remit and membership of the Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board [are currently under review](#). The Scottish Government states that the recommendations of the Levelling the Playing Field report remain priorities.

The Scottish Government's Women's Health Plan

85. In August 2021, the Scottish Government published its [Women's Health Plan](#), setting out a range of priorities aimed at reducing health inequalities for women. This included a commitment to establish a national Women's Health Champion and a Women's Health Lead in every NHS board "to drive change and share best practice and innovation". In January 2023, the Scottish Government announced [the appointment of Professor Anna Glasier OBE](#) as the first Women's Health Champion for Scotland.

The Young Women's Movement - Young Women Lead (YWL) Committee

86. [YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement](#) is an organisation that supports the wellbeing and development of girls and young women. Among their projects is [Young Women Lead \(YWL\)](#), [a leadership programme](#) intended to encourage young women to engage with local and national democracy and work together to create change.
87. During 2018-19, the YWL Committee initiative operated in partnership with the Scottish Parliament. As part of this collaboration, the Committee [held its own inquiry](#) focusing on issues affecting the participation of young women in sport and physical activity. This inquiry culminated in [a report detailing the YWL Committee's findings](#).

The importance of sport and physical activity

88. Evidence from [the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Scotland](#) highlighted some of the positive impacts of regular participation in sport and physical activity:
- ” It is well documented that children and young people who partake in regular physical activity witness physical and mental benefits to their health, including maintaining a healthy weight which in turn reduces the probability of developing several non-communicable diseases such as: coronary heart disease, stroke, type two diabetes, and colon cancer. Physical activity has many benefits – it is good for the heart and mind – and when coupled with a healthy diet, can enhance a child's health and wellbeing dramatically.
89. One [individual respondent](#) to the Committee's call for views, who works as a sports coach in schools, said: "Parents have told us, often, that the school sport improves their children's mental health, helps them settle and achieve in school, and is particularly beneficial for children with issues such as autism and ADHD."
90. Eilidh Paterson from Scottish Student Sport highlighted the wider benefits of sport and physical activity:
- ” The issue is not only about sporting activity; it is about how we view that activity and about wellbeing, as opposed to the NHS incurring costs. By seeing it that way, we will possibly stop some NHS services being used and that expense being incurred. Investing now in young people and creating good habits and ways of life will benefit us all in the future, with regard to health costs. ¹
91. There is extensive evidence of the benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity for physical and mental health and wellbeing. In this context, the Committee is very concerned by evidence which shows a persistent gender gap in rates of participation in sport and physical activity that begins at the age of puberty and persists up to women in their early 40s.

Key barriers to female participation at a community level

Barriers faced by teenage girls

92. The inquiry identified a number of barriers to participation in sport and physical activity which are faced by girls during their teenage years and which can have a much longer term impact on rates of participation beyond those years.

Puberty

93. Responses to the Committee's call for evidence confirmed the experience of many girls and women that the onset of puberty is a time when changes to their bodies, increased body consciousness and practical difficulties with managing periods can discourage many from taking part in sport or physical activity. Some individual adult respondents to the call for views reported that negative experiences during PE at school, associated with the onset of puberty, had deterred them from sport and physical activity well into adulthood.

94. The impact of puberty was also highlighted by the YWL Committee as a barrier to participation in PE. The bodily changes experienced by girls during puberty exacerbated feelings of self-consciousness, and made respondents feel uncomfortable about getting changed in open changing rooms, or participating in sports settings where they felt they could be looked at.

95. Rona Blackwood from the Children's Parliament told the Committee:

” The girls whom we spoke to said that periods are a huge barrier and that there is a lot of anxiety around periods and reproductive health; there is teasing and bullying around having your period. Boys do not always know or understand what is happening to girls when they are going into puberty and having their period...Regarding physical activity and sport, girls sometimes tell us that going to the toilet—or not being allowed to go to the toilet at certain times—is stressful for them, or that the toilet or the changing facilities do not feel private or suitable for using sanitary products.²

96. Respondents to the Committee's call for views shared teenage experiences of feeling self-conscious in exercise clothing, struggling to find supportive sports bras, and being worried about leaking whilst wearing white or form-fitting clothing during their period.

97. One [respondent](#) stated that helping girls to learn about supportive sports bras may help to address this barrier to participation. Another [respondent](#) suggested that modifying rules around sports kit to accommodate period-related concerns would also be beneficial, for example:

"Allowing dark kit to avoid period problems."

98. In a [written submission](#) to the Committee, Dr Laura Forrest, Senior Lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland, highlighted a study she conducted which found:

- Among 789 teachers from various educational stages across the UK, with 24 per cent of participants based in Scotland 88 per cent of teachers perceived the menstrual cycle to have an impact on participation in PE, as well as other areas such as school attendance, attitude and behaviour. Moreover, 80 per cent of teachers expressed the belief that receiving training would be beneficial in improving menstrual education.
99. In the January 2023 [progress report](#) on the Scottish Government's Women's Health Plan, the then Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport indicated that work to date has included "relationships, sexual health and parenthood (*RSHP*) education in the Scottish curriculum" and that this "includes learning about menstrual health, including menopause and endometriosis".
100. Eilidh Paterson from Scottish Student Sport noted a need for a cultural change and a continuing conversation to remove the stigma surrounding periods:
- ” Sport is at the centre of culture, and if we want to achieve a culture shift in this area of work, sport can be an assisting driver in that...Changing the colour of shorts is not necessarily a solution—we do not want anyone leaking, whether into white shorts or blue shorts...I do not think that we are yet at the point of solving the problem, but sport can be a driver in making the conversation more natural for boys and girls...everyone should be aware of this bodily process, as it affects everybody. It is hugely important and it should not be seen as something to be hidden...³
101. A lack of suitable sports kit and equipment was recognised by the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport as a barrier to participation, particularly for teenage girls. The Minister highlighted a collaboration between the Scottish Sports Futures and Sweaty Betty, a luxury sportswear brand in which the brand provided hundreds of bras to young women who might have otherwise been prevented from getting involved in sport and physical activity because they did not have the right equipment.⁴
102. The Minister also noted that the Scottish Government has made a commitment, during the current session of Parliament, to introduce statutory guidelines that would increase the use of generic items of uniform in schools. She indicated that clothing and equipment for physical activity and sport would also feature in these new guidelines.⁵
103. The Committee welcomes progress to date in implementing the Scottish Government's Women's Health Plan and that this has included learning about menstrual health as part of the Scottish curriculum. The Committee hopes this will be beneficial in terms of normalising discussions about menstrual health, improving awareness and understanding about the impact menstruation can have on girls' participation in sport and physical activity and removing stigma around managing periods, particularly as this relates to girls' participation in P.E. classes.
104. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to set out how it will evaluate the impact of improved learning about menstrual health as part of the school curriculum in addressing the significant decline in

participation of girls in sport and physical activity connected with puberty.

105. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to bring forward new statutory guidance on school uniforms that will increase the use of generic and unisex items of clothing, including for sports and P.E. clothing and equipment. It calls on the Scottish Government to provide further details of the expected timing for introduction of this new guidance and to set out how it will ensure that any new uniform requirements do not exacerbate existing concerns about body image or period leakage.

Gendered / restricted offerings

106. The Committee's inquiry identified a gendered approach to the types of sports and physical activities girls are offered the opportunity to participate in as a societal barrier to their participation. In particular, it was pointed out that being offered a narrower range of activities to try can make it more difficult for girls to identify an activity that suits their individual preferences and that could become an ongoing activity they are able to continue to access after leaving school.
107. The YWL Committee's 2019 inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity found that sporting activities offered to young women are often restricted to certain sports and gendered in nature, with limited opportunities offered to take part in sports such as football and rugby.
108. In August 2022, the annual [Childwise](#) Monitor Report found a significant gender gap in access to sports such as football, rugby and cricket across the UK. The report, based on a survey of more than 2,700 school children, found that only 33% of girls aged 11 to 16 said they play football in school, compared to 63% of boys. The corresponding figures for rugby were 14% of girls compared to 29% of boys, while the figures for cricket were 12% of girls compared to 21% of boys.
109. During the [Committee's evidence session with the Young Women's Movement](#) on 14 March 2023, Katie Heath said:
- ” There were not really opportunities in schools for tasters of sports that people could then continue. That was a real barrier to young women and girls taking up the chance to enjoy sport and get engaged in later life.
110. [LEAP Sports Scotland](#) highlighted examples of girls being excluded from certain activities in PE classes as a further barrier to their participation:
- ” Studies found that girls were actively marginalised in PE class by boys and many described not being able to get involved in games or even getting to use equipment. Many teachers were found to be complicit in this marginalisation by not challenging the disruptive behaviour of boys in class. These negative experiences track throughout adulthood and can severely impact women and girls participation rates for the rest of their life.
111. During the inquiry, the Committee also heard anecdotal evidence that the Active

Schools Programme helps introduce girls and young women to a wider variety of sports and activities, including providing an opportunity to take part in activities possibly not traditionally seen as girls' sports.⁶

112. In 2004, the Active Schools programme was launched and every local authority in Scotland committed to delivering the programme in Primary, Secondary and Additional Support Needs (ASN) schools. Active Schools followed on from, and replaced, the earlier School Sport Coordinator Programme and the Active Primary School Pilot Programme.
113. The most recent [evaluation of the Active Schools programme was completed in 2014](#). This concluded that "Active Schools has achieved its core aim of introducing "more and better" opportunities for young people in sport". In relation to female participation, the evaluation report stated: "Activity to target girls has been a real success in some areas. There is very clear evidence that girls only activities make a difference – particularly when based on consultation and when offering opportunities for peer support and leadership". However, it continued: "...there is a need for a continued focus on girls' participation, as nationally girls' participation remains slightly lower than boys". It should be noted that the evaluation report provides no specific figures in support of this claim around the difference in rates of participation between boys and girls. Indeed, as highlighted elsewhere in this report, there is ample evidence to suggest the difference in rates of participation between genders remains significant.

114. The Committee is concerned by evidence submitted to the inquiry (and supported by the findings of UK-wide research) which suggests that many girls and women are given limited opportunities to participate in sports and physical activities that are stereotypically viewed as being male-dominated and therefore unlikely to be of interest to them or suitable for female participation.
115. The Committee welcomes anecdotal evidence submitted to the inquiry that the Active Schools programme has had a positive impact in broadening girls' access to a wider range of sports and physical activities, including those such as football or rugby that have historically been or continue to be viewed as primarily suitable for boys and men.
116. At the same time, the Committee notes that the most recent full evaluation of the Active Schools programme was completed in 2014. It therefore calls on the Scottish Government to commission an updated evaluation of the programme as a matter of urgency and suggests this should have a particular focus on evaluating its impact in supporting female participation and making recommendations to further improve the programme's performance against this metric in the future. The new evaluation should give specific consideration to whether girls are being given access to the same range and quality of sport and physical activity options as boys.

Focus on competition rather than having fun

117. A further and related barrier to female participation identified by several

respondents to the Committee's call for evidence was that they felt deterred from participation in PE during secondary school because the focus had shifted from participating in physical activity for fun to becoming competitive, with a greater emphasis on skill level.

118. To overcome this barrier, the YWL Committee report recommended focusing on the "fun factor" of sport and physical activity, providing opportunities for young women to foster community, peer support, and enjoyment.
119. Dr Mairi Stark from the RCPCH noted that individuals' perceptions of what constitutes a fun sport vary, so emphasised the importance of giving children the opportunity to try different sports, and to show their participation need not be all about competition. She argued the focus needs to be more about "children having a fun day and enjoying what they have been doing, without even realising that what they have been doing has been sport and exercise, because what they have had has been a fun time doing activities."⁷
120. This point was echoed by Eilidh Paterson from Scottish Student Sport:
- ” Nobody should be sending a child to a class, session or sport with the aim of them winning. The idea is that they are there to enjoy themselves, to have fun and to make friends with other people. I therefore encourage that to be the central point of all sport and activity, no matter the age or stage of the people involved, although that should certainly be the case in the very early stages. After all, if people do not find sport fun, they will not come back to it, they will not remain active and they will then see themselves as having been othered or will be inactive, possibly for life, because they will not see themselves as being welcome in that space.”⁸

121. The Committee recognises that, while some girls and women may actively welcome a strong element of competition to their participation in sport and physical activity, many will want to focus on enjoyment. Girls and women who wish to engage in sport and physical activity primarily for fun should be offered ample opportunities to do so with like-minded participants.
122. The Committee has heard about good examples of organisations engaging with participants in an informal and relaxed environment, away from sports facilities, to discuss their expectations and preferences as well as the health and wellbeing benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity.
123. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to set out how it ensures the sport and physical activity programmes it supports strike an appropriate balance between supporting the aims of those women and girls who want to focus on competing in their sports and those who want to focus on enjoyment.

Negative attitudes by boys

124. Evidence submitted to the Committee suggests that negative attitudes and behaviour by boys act as a further societal barrier to girls' participation in sport and

physical activity, particularly during adolescence.

125. One individual submitting evidence to the Committee's recounted experiences of:

” Boys making disparaging remarks about girls appearance and skills.

Another referred to:

” Sexism from lads at school with derogatory comments about female abilities or body shaming.

126. Rona Blackwood from the Children's Parliament shared experience from a recent gender stereotyping project which showed that boys do not necessarily understand or relate to girls' experiences of feeling excluded and dismissed when participating in sport and physical activity. She emphasised the importance of addressing the issue directly with boys as well as fostering a friendly and mutually respectful atmosphere between boys and girls from a young age.⁹

127. Members heard from Jenni Snell and Katie Heath of the Young Women's Movement. They shared examples of successful engagement in schools with boys regarding their attitudes and behaviours towards girls, such as the "[Don't Be That Guy](#)" campaign run by Police Scotland. Jenni Snell added that these conversations should be a collaborative effort between schools and appropriate external partners, rather than expecting teachers to be solely responsible:

” Information and opportunities can be shared and there can be joined-up, collaborative work between third sector and youth work organisations and schools so that there is a holistic approach to education on misogynistic behaviours from a young age.

128. Asked about the impact of negative social attitudes on female participation in sport and physical activity, the Minister recognised that gender stereotypes continue to exist, where girls and women are expected to look and behave in a certain way and to conform to certain roles, with many believing that women's bodies are "pass-comment-able". The Minister acknowledged this can be particularly difficult for teenage girls, and that negative comments and attitudes by boys would be a barrier to girls' participation in sport and physical activity. The Minister emphasised the importance of education and the important role sport can play in changing culture more broadly for the better:

” Education can help to tackle that, but we have to recognise that—as with other societal challenges such as racism—the existence of sexism and misogyny in sport reflects society...I firmly believe that sport can lead the way on changing that culture.

129. The Committee has been concerned to hear extensive evidence that negative attitudes by boys continue to create a major barrier to girls' participation in sport and physical activity, particularly during adolescence. The Committee commends the "Don't Be That Guy" campaign to tackle sexual harassment, run by Police Scotland, and the positive impact this has had in addressing negative attitudes by boys which in turn helps to foster an environment of mutual respect between boys and girls when participating in sport and physical activity.

130. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to consider what more it could do to learn lessons for future policy development from the implementation of the "Don't Be That Guy" campaign so far. The Committee further calls on the Scottish Government to consider how it can support wider roll-out of this campaign and other education programmes across all schools in Scotland aimed at tackling misogynistic attitudes and behaviours that discourage female participation in sport and physical activity.

Boys' domination of playground spaces

131. During its inquiry, the Committee heard evidence that the comparative lack of opportunities for girls to engage in physical activity extends to informal settings such as the playground. During the Committee's [evidence session on children and young people](#) on 28 March 2023, Rona Blackwood from the Children's Parliament highlighted the negative impact on girls' levels of physical activity of boys dominating school playgrounds during break times:

” A really big issue is playground space. Boys often dominate playgrounds and playing fields, and if girls want to join in, they are not encouraged or allowed to. That is often not supported by the playground supervision staff, but it is allowed to happen, and huge swathes of the playground are taken over, often by football. Girls will often want to play but do not feel able to do so. The girls felt that trained supervision in the playground was really important.

132. To address boys' domination of playground spaces and provide improved opportunities for girls to take part in physical activities in those spaces, the Committee calls on the Scottish Government, local authorities and schools to work together to develop support and guidance for teachers and playground supervision staff to help them supervise playgrounds effectively and ensure all pupils, girls and boys alike, have an equal opportunity to use playground spaces for physical activity during the school day.

Barriers faced by women of all ages

133. Aside from those barriers to participation faced specifically by teenage girls, the inquiry also identified a range of barriers to participation in sport and physical activity that can affect women throughout their lives.

Women's health

134. Included amongst these barriers to participation affecting women of all ages, a variety of women's health considerations were highlighted. These include ongoing impacts associated with menstruation, as well as the impact of menopause and of reproductive health conditions.

Managing periods

135. In terms of menstruation, respondents identified a number of ongoing barriers to participation, including period pain, leakage, and a lack of adequate toilet facilities in sports environments. The impact of reproductive health conditions such as endometriosis also impacted on some respondents' ability to participate in sport and physical activity.
136. During its meeting on [23 May 2023](#), Baz Moffat from The Well HQ pointed out that, as well as those participating in sport and physical activity directly, challenges with managing periods could equally impact female coaches, umpires, volunteers, and others, acting as a barrier to their participation as well.
137. The Committee also heard evidence that these issues equally create barriers to participation for elite athletes. These issues are addressed separately in the section of this report that deals with barriers to female participation in elite sport.

Pregnancy and post-partum physical activity

138. The Committee heard evidence that women can face particular barriers to participation in sport and physical activity during pregnancy and the post-natal period. Some respondents felt that support for women to participate in physical activity when pregnant or post-partum could be improved.
139. In its written submission to the inquiry, Public Health Scotland outlined the findings of a variety of research into female participation in sport and physical activity during pregnancy and the post-partum period. This set out a number of additional barriers to participation faced by women in these circumstances:
 - ” Additional commonly reported barriers to sport and physical activity during pregnancy are pregnancy symptoms including discomfort and fatigue; a lack of knowledge of what constitutes safe activity; and the opinions of women's social circles, including others' expectations that they should 'sit down and slow down'. Time, maternal responsibilities and physical status were three broad categories identified as influencing exercise patterns in the postpartum period.
140. During the [Committee's evidence session on 18 April 2023](#), Connie Ramsay discussed her work to support women to return to physical activity after pregnancy:
 - ” Since opening my own gym, I have been trying to work with women who had no confidence to go into a normal gym... As soon as they fall pregnant, many people in society say, "Oh, I'm pregnant, so I can't do any exercise." I am trying to change people's mindset. Once they have had the baby, they can, if their body has healed properly, start to slowly get back into sport. We need to widen people's attitudes and encourage them to see that there are ways and means of doing this.
141. As addressed later in this report, the Committee also heard evidence that choosing to become pregnant or to start a family can create particular barriers to participation for female athletes at an elite level.

Menopause

142. The Committee heard evidence that a lack of understanding of the impact of the

menopause on physical activity and a lack of support for women to feel comfortable participating in sport whilst experiencing the physical symptoms associated with menopause create further barriers to participation. Some respondents to the Committee's call for evidence raised concerns that the marketing and promotion of female sport and physical activity made women in midlife feel that sport was "not for them".

143. In its written response to the Committee's call for views, [Public Health Scotland](#) reported a decline in physical activity by many women entering midlife, due in part to the additional barriers to participation associated with the menopause. Public Health Scotland suggested this decline is particularly regrettable since sustaining physical activity has the potential to address some of the health impacts of menopause:

” Particularly towards and into midlife, women cite reduced capability due to health issues, declining fitness levels and a lack of energy as another significant barrier. Embarrassment about weight and shame about menopause symptoms, and a fear that physical activity may worsen them, also contributed to a lack of participation. Conversely, evidence shows that regular physical activity can in fact oppose the detrimental effects not only of ageing, but also of the menopausal transition, on cardiovascular health. While vascular benefits can be gained at all ages, initiating physical activity before, at or soon after menopause may be more effective than later in life.

144. On 1 May 2023, the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) published its [Moving Through Menopause report](#), which explored the relationship between menopause and physical and mental wellbeing. The report called on sporting organisations to create more inclusive opportunities for women to be physically active during menopause, and advocated for a cross-sectoral approach to normalising menopause in physical activity and across society more generally.

145. [Women in Sport](#) shared their five principles for encouraging women experiencing menopause to become involved in sport and physical activity:

- Endless possibilities, expand perceptions and opportunities for being active.
- Judgement-free zone, make active environments welcoming and supportive.
- Support network, offer activities with built in social support.
- Expand the image of what 'sporty' means with inspiring, relatable role models.
- Make it relevant by referencing specific benefits for activity and sport.

Urinary incontinence and pelvic floor health

146. Several respondents also referred to the impact of urinary incontinence on female participation in sport and physical activity. Respondents felt that the prevalence and impact of urinary incontinence was under-acknowledged at health service and government level, and that further research and support was needed to facilitate the involvement of women experiencing incontinence.

147. Mairi Stark from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health told the Committee that urinary incontinence also represents a significant barrier to female

participation in sport and physical activity:

” Urinary incontinence is huge. It is not talked about; it is a bigger taboo than periods...If you cannot cough or sneeze or run for a bus, you are not going to want to do sport. It is about helping women who are older so that they can then be role models for their children, rather than have a situation where, once you are a certain age, you cannot do sport because you cannot actually move.¹⁰

148. Several individuals submitting evidence to the Committee's call for views agreed that urinary incontinence is a significant barrier to participation in sport and physical activity for many women but equally argued that it is a condition that can be easily resolved for a majority of women affected. One individual said:

” 60% [of] women wet themselves. This is a near total barrier to exercise. There is gold standard evidence behind the prevalence, we know that pelvic floor exercises work for 3/4 of women and Physiotherapy is front line treatment.

Improved education and research

149. To help break down barriers to participation associated with women's health conditions, [one respondent](#) to the Committee's call for evidence called for "proper research into periods, endometriosis and menopause and put the sport scientists to work on alleviating these problems that only affect females."

150. The need for improved education on female health was highlighted by Baz Moffat from The Well HQ. She advised she has been working with the Chartered Institute of the Management of Sport and Physical Activity to develop a standard for this. Baz concluded:

” Until we educate the people who look after girls about female health—covering all the life stages from puberty, to prenatal and postnatal to menopause, including issues such as periods, bras, pelvic health and the increased risk of injury—and implement that into our coaching education, it will not matter how much we promote sport in order to get girls in, we will still see a gender gap in female participation and performance.¹¹

151. Rona Blackwood from the Children's Parliament highlighted the importance of providing better education for boys in relation to periods and reproductive health:

” The girls whom we spoke to said that periods are a huge barrier and that there is a lot of anxiety around periods and reproductive health; there is teasing and bullying around having your period. Boys do not always know or understand what is happening to girls when they are going into puberty and having their period.

152. The Committee also heard evidence of the need for improved training for coaches to overcome barriers to participation of girls and women in sport and physical activity. Baz Moffat from The Well HQ suggested that female health should be an integral part of mandatory training modules for coaches on wellbeing and safeguarding:

- ” ...if we consider it as part of wellbeing and safeguarding, we will not be competing for space on coaching courses but will be saying that it is something that needs to be integrated into training.

153. Beyond school settings and the teenage years, the Committee is concerned by evidence that women face persistent barriers to their participation in sport and physical activity as a result of a lack of understanding and education about the impacts of pregnancy, menopause and other women's health conditions on willingness and ability to participate in sport and physical activity.
154. The Committee believes that women themselves need to receive more and better information and advice about remaining physically active throughout their lives. Beyond this, there is an onus on health providers to provide more advice and information about how certain types of physical activity can actively help women to manage and alleviate the symptoms associated with conditions such as menopause and urinary incontinence.
155. The Committee also believes that sports organisations should be encouraged to offer a broader and more inclusive range of physical activities that are suitable for women experiencing specific women's health conditions and to actively promote activities that are suitable for women with a range of health conditions with a view to increasing rates of female participation.
156. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to set out precisely what steps it will take as part of the implementation of its Women's Health Plan to address these issues and increase rates of participation in sport and physical activity by women affected by a range of women's health conditions including pregnancy, menopause, urinary incontinence and endometriosis.

Negative body image and a lack of self confidence

157. Many respondents to the Committee's call for evidence identified poor self confidence and issues around body image as a barrier to participation in sport and physical activity for many girls and women.
158. One contributor to the Committee's call for evidence suggested:
- ” ...the relationship between body image and physical activity is a vicious circle; the more self-conscious they feel about their bodies, the less likely they are to take part in physical activity.
159. The [Observatory for Sport in Scotland](#) advised psychological factors around self-identity, self-confidence, self-efficacy, body image and perceived competence are fundamental to whether a young person takes part in sport, and sustains participation into adulthood. The OSS stated:

” Evidence that these factors relate differently to young men and women, with an early socialisation process that leads to gender stereotyping, is shown repeatedly in studies. Many who lack self-confidence find sporting venues intimidating. This is a major challenge for providers, many of whom, being sporty themselves, reveal little recognition of what it feels like to enter a setting lacking self-confidence, unsure of how to behave, what to say, what to do and worrying about what other people think of you and of 'showing yourself up'.

160. The Committee recognises that many people, men and women, may be deterred from participating in sport and physical activity because they lack self-confidence or experience negative body image. The Committee believes that sporting venues need to do more to show themselves as welcoming and inclusive to participants of all abilities and to offer tailored advice and support to those who may be initially reluctant to participate due to a lack of self-confidence or experiencing a negative body image.

Lack of positive role models

161. The Committee heard that negative attitudes and behaviours by teachers and coaches and a lack of positive role models and women in leadership roles discourages female participation in sport and physical activity.
162. The importance of positive role models for young women and girls in sport was raised by many submitting written evidence to the inquiry. Respondents particularly emphasised the importance of female role models in leadership and coaching, in addition to girls and women being able to see positive representation of elite female athletes and athletes with disabilities. In this regard, [Women in Sport](#) argued that the aim should be to: "Expand the image of what 'sporty' means with inspiring, relatable role models." Women in Sport also argued that "Quite simply, the number of women in senior coaching and leadership roles in sport... ..is unacceptable."
163. The Committee heard that sports organisations often struggle to recruit women into leadership and management roles, receiving few applications for roles from female candidates. Attendees at the Committee's informal meeting with representatives of the membership of the Scottish Sports Association suggested that work should be undertaken to better understand why women are less likely to apply for such roles.
164. The [Women in Leadership report](#) produced by the Observatory for Sport in Scotland found that, in 2020, just over 27% of sports coaches were female. Meanwhile, the [Scottish Government's 2022 teacher census](#) found a total of 2,051 secondary school Physical Education teachers in Scotland of which 988 were female and 1,063 were male.
165. [Volunteer Scotland](#) told us that this is also an issue when it comes to voluntary roles:

” One of the key barriers women and girls face when participating in community sport and physical activity is a lack of representation from volunteers who support or lead it. The adult formal volunteering participation rate is fairly balanced between men and women, however this changes with sport and physical activity volunteering. In 2018, 21% of male formal volunteers supported organisations focussed on physical activity, sport and exercise, whilst the equivalent rate for female volunteers was only 11% - almost half.

166. The Committee heard many examples of good work being undertaken to try to overcome these barriers. The Active Schools Programme was highlighted numerous times as a successful vehicle for increasing girls' participation and of introducing girls and young women to leadership roles in sport and physical activity. The Committee also heard evidence of additional work in certain sports, such as Scottish Swimming, which has created a Young Volunteer Programme.¹²

167. Ailsa Wyllie from sportscotland highlighted that sportscotland receives more applications from girls than from boys for their leadership and coaching programmes. She concluded: "We hope that that will have a knock-on effect in years to come, so that those girls have the confidence and the self-esteem to be our future leaders and coaches in the sporting system."¹³

168. [Scottish Student Sport](#) also highlighted the role of male leaders and role models in promoting women's sport:

” A common solution within all of these issues is male leaders and peers. Ensuring it is not just women trying to invest and develop women's sport locally it is vital that the men are raising and part of these conversations and actions.

169. Baz Moffat from The Well HQ highlighted the importance of creating supportive, flexible working arrangements to encourage more female staff and volunteers in sport:

” It is not just about giving them the leadership programmes but about creating environments in which it is not expected that they will need to stick to a rigid sporting structure—for example, "You have to train on a Tuesday night and on a Saturday morning, and you have to commit to do everything." It is about taking a much more flexible approach to ensure that we have more female volunteers and coaches supporting girls and women.

170. Respondents also suggested that role models should reflect a diversity of sporting abilities and experiences, in addition to representing women and girls from marginalised communities. [Glasgow Life/Glasgow Sport](#) made a series of recommendations regarding this topic:

- ” A wide range of factors can support women and girls to participate fully in sport and physical activities at community-level. These include:
- Positive role models
 - Peer-to-peer support
 - Increasing the women and girls involved in the governance and management of sports' clubs and associations
 - Female coaches and programmes focusing on the recruitment and retention of female coaches.

171. The Committee has been encouraged to hear examples of good practice in encouraging more girls and women to put themselves forward for coaching and leadership roles in sport and physical activity, such as the Active Schools programme, leadership and coaching programmes run by sportscotland and the young women in sport leadership programme provided by SAMH. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to set out what it is doing to build on the positive experience of programmes such as these to try to attract even more girls and women into leadership roles in sport and physical activity in the future.
172. The Committee highlights the important role men in leadership roles have to play in demonstrating a real commitment to promoting and encouraging female participation in sport and physical activity. The Committee believes sporting organisations have a critical role to play in educating male coaches and leaders within their sport about the important role and responsibilities they have in this regard and to encourage them to demonstrate positive and inclusive behaviours.
173. The Committee also calls on the Scottish Government to set out what it is doing to gain a better understanding of what currently prevents girls and women putting themselves forward for coaching, leadership and volunteering roles in sport and physical activity and how those barriers can be overcome.

Mixed versus single sex provision

174. During the inquiry, the Committee heard a range of views regarding the relative benefits of providing opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport and physical activity in either a mixed or single sex environment.
175. Many respondents to the Committee's call for views reported a lack of available opportunities for women and girls to participate in female-only activities as a barrier to their participation.
176. In particular, the YWL Committee found a preference among many contributing to its inquiry for female-only sports classes and activities. As an example, the YWL Committee report noted a significant increase in PE attendance for swimming lessons at one particular high school after girls-only classes were introduced.

177. Conversely, some respondents argued that sex-segregated sport and physical activity might further exacerbate the problem. Instead, these respondents suggested inclusion of girls could be improved by integrating sporting activities in schools between boys and girls and by putting in place specific supervisor training to enable them to tackle instances of sexist behaviour and harassment. Some respondents also suggested that educating men and boys regarding their attitudes towards women and girls may help to create safer, more inclusive mixed-sex sporting environments. Eilidh Paterson from Scottish Student Sport questioned the need for all activity to be segregated:

” ...there is sometimes no need to segregate boys and girls when it comes to activities in which they take part. Why are we segregating boys and girls from a young age? Is there any particular reason why young people need to be segregated? In physical education classes, they take part together. Segregation by gender sometimes encourages negative thoughts, instead of having people play together with the idea that they can play that particular sport very well, whether they are a boy or a girl. ¹⁴

178. [Responding to the Committee's call for views, the Children's Parliament](#) shared key findings from its [2022 Gender Equality in Education and Learning report](#), which suggested that informed, supportive integration of boys' and girls' sports may help to address the barriers to participation in sport experienced by girls in school:

Amongst its calls to action, the report recommends that adults/key decision makers should:

- Support inclusion of girls in sport and play
- Provide space for girls to play alongside boys
- Ensure girls are included in all sport and play
- Provide trained supervision in playgrounds and spaces where girls experience sexism and sexual violence
- Remove gendered uniforms and sports kit to allow more inclusive play.

179. Amongst the evidence submitted to the inquiry, the Committee recognises a wide range of different views and experiences related to single sex versus mixed participation in sport and physical activity. With this in mind, the Committee concludes that there should be no "one size fits all" approach to provision across different categories of sport and physical activity. However, where there is demand and clear evidence that this would help to encourage participation, the Committee believes that girls and women should be offered greater opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity in a single sex environment.

180. At the same time, with particular reference to PE in schools, the Committee believes more work is needed to make mixed PE classes inclusive and enjoyable for all participants. This can partly be achieved by addressing potentially negative attitudes and behaviours of boys through better training and education of teachers and pupils. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to set out how it will work with local authorities to take

forward this recommendation across all schools in Scotland.

Caring responsibilities

181. The Committee has heard evidence throughout the inquiry of the impact childcare considerations and other caring responsibilities can have on female participation in community sport and physical activity. During the [Committee's evidence session with the Young Women's Movement](#) on 14 March 2023, Jenni Snell suggested that introducing accessible childcare options into leisure facilities could help to mitigate the impact of childcare costs upon women's ability to participate in sport:
- ” Recently, the cost of childcare for young mums—as it has for all mums and parents—has significantly increased. The Poverty Alliance did some research on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on women. They are bearing the brunt of childcare, which will certainly impact their ability and capacity to take part in sport. Having accessible childcare options within leisure facilities and sports clubs, or being able to take part in baby and mum or baby and parent classes, is an important part of lowering that barrier.
182. The [Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland](#) identified a significant gender disparity in the provision of unpaid care. This finding is further reinforced by the results of the [Carers Census Scotland 2021-22](#) which found that 73% of unpaid carers in Scotland are female. This means that any impact of caring responsibilities upon ability to participate in sport and physical activity therefore disproportionately affects women and girls.
183. In this context, the need for support to enable unpaid carers to take part in sport and physical activity themselves was highlighted as a related issue by [Parkinson's UK Scotland](#):
- ” Lack of carer identification means that unpaid carers are missing out on support, including access to short breaks or home care packages that could help them make time for physical activity. Action needs to be taken to make sure that carers are identified and enabled to access their rights under the Carers Rights Scotland Act.
184. Kim Atkinson from the Scottish Sports Association suggested employers should be actively encouraged to become "wellbeing employers", meaning they would give their staff time to be physically active and to volunteer. Whilst this would benefit everybody, Kim argued that this was likely to benefit women the most. She concluded:
- ” Maybe we would have more female coaches and female volunteers as role models if women had time, so let us not make cost a barrier to giving that time. Let us make employers think that, actually, that also helps people's wellbeing. At a time of a really difficult recruitment market, that might make it easier for employers to recruit and retain staff. ¹⁵
185. The Minister acknowledged that childcare and caring in general are important

issues, and told the Committee she has been encouraging many sports to think about ways of coordinating opportunities for women and their children to exercise at the same time as one another. She concluded: "...given that women do a lot of children's activities and organise a lot of aspects of children's lives, we need to provide opportunities for women to participate in sport while their children are doing the same." ¹⁶

186. The Committee recognises the significant barrier childcare and other caring responsibilities presents to female participation in sport and physical activity.
187. In this context, the Committee believes that sports centres and other community facilities should be actively encouraged to offer opportunities for women to access childcare while participating in sport and physical activity or to be able to participate in this activity at the same time as their children.
188. The Committee would also support employers becoming "wellbeing employers" to allow employees time to be physically active or to engage in volunteering as sports leaders or coaches. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to set out how it can contribute to supporting employers to take this approach and to learning from existing examples of good practice.
189. For the sake of their own health and wellbeing, the Committee firmly believes that unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, must be given the time they need to participate regularly in sport and physical activity. To enable this to happen, the Committee calls on the Scottish Government to redouble its efforts to ensure all unpaid carers are able to access the rights, including regular breaks, to which they are entitled under the Carers Rights Scotland Act.

Harassment and safety concerns

Fear and experiences of harassment in sporting venues and clubs

190. Fear and negative experiences of harassment at sporting venues and clubs have had a negative impact on many women submitting evidence to the inquiry., making them less willing to participate in sport and physical activity. At gyms and in pools, respondents shared experiences of being harassed by men, and filmed on mobile phones whilst exercising or in changing areas, without their consent.
191. [Glasgow Life/Glasgow Sport](#) stated that poor safeguarding, bullying, and harassment remain problems that discourage women and girls from participating in sport and physical activity. To overcome this, they called for the development of safe ways for people to report and challenge these behaviours:

” Some sport organisations and participants are dealing with issues with their origin in poor safeguarding, and attitudes ranging from bullying to harassment permeating functions from governance to the role of volunteers. It is important that learning from historical abuse informs current practice, but also that there are safe routes to flag and address concerns for anyone participating in community sport and physical activities which are taken seriously, properly investigated and supportive.

192. During the Committee's evidence session with representatives of community sports organisations, Kirsty Garrett of Glasgow Life outlined the role of sports governing bodies in addressing harassment and investigating complaints:

” Ideally, you expect the club to have good governance and good finance structures but also a good code of conduct. Therefore, if an incident were to happen, the person would know exactly who to speak to and the club would take the incident down an appropriate route. That might require the involvement of a governing body or Glasgow Life, depending on the circumstances. We expect our sports clubs and organisations to have a code of conduct, best practice, fair play and so on within their structures to ensure that issues can be dealt with at a local level. If they cannot be dealt with at a local level, as I say, it can be escalated to the governing body or us. ¹⁷

Fear and experiences of harassment in public places

193. A number of respondents to the Committee's call for evidence shared direct experiences of being harassed whilst exercising in public. Kate Joester emphasised the importance of addressing the harassment faced by girls and women whilst walking:

” ...there is a lot to be said about changing how we talk about women's physical safety in public spaces. However, there is also a lot to be said about changing the facts of how we as women and girls experience public spaces. Harassment needs to stop and to be taken seriously at every level, and that is work for men and boys to do, as much as it is for women and girls. ¹⁸

Access to public transport

194. Ewelina Chin from HSTAR Scotland noted that women who reside in rural places, and places that are more deprived, experience barriers to participation not only related to cost but because of safety concerns related to the use of public transport:

” Ladies are often scared about their safety or are unable to access transport. No accessibility is provided in rural places...They do not allow their girls to participate in sport activities, because that would require them to use public transport, which is not the safest after dark. Most classes are held in the evening. ...so a class at 6, 7 or 8 pm for a mother or a child is unacceptable, because the risk is too high. ¹⁹

Safety and perceptions of safety around walking, running and cycling

195. Amongst written submissions to the inquiry, safety and perceptions of safety were raised as particularly prominent concerns when discussing physical activities such as running or cycling, and everyday physical activity such as walking. During the Committee's meeting on [21 March 2023](#), Kate Joester from Living Streets Scotland said:

” Everyday walking is one of the things that have the potential to be absolutely transformational, in the sense that it can move a huge number of people from a position of not being sufficiently active to get the mental and physical health benefits to a position of being sufficiently physically active... However, we have the problem that women feel less safe simply walking to work and girls feel less safe walking to school. The issues around that are very complex. There are a lot of issues around perceptions of safety and actual safety, and the way that, as women and girls, we are trained to take responsibility for our safety and to be blamed for any lack of safety.

196. [Living Streets Scotland](#) noted that safety concerns disproportionately deter women and girls from participating in active travel such as walking or cycling:

” There are structural barriers in the way of women and girls building walking into their lives, and those include public transport designed around the single-trip commute, the perception and reality of lack of safety – both from motor traffic and from interpersonal violence – and street harassment.

197. Similarly, [Sustrans Scotland](#) emphasised the gendered nature of safety concerns regarding cycling:

” Perception of safety is a major obstacle to women and girls taking up physical activity. In Scottish cities, 39% of women think cycling is safe in their area vs 45% of men (walking and Cycling Index, 2022). Women cycle on average slower than men, and report a higher rate of near misses than men: they report around 50% more close passes per mile than men (Aldred, 2015). In cities and towns, this feeling of safety is also linked to lack of general maintenance, especially in the winter months.

198. To overcome this barrier to participation, [Glasgow Life/Glasgow Sport](#) suggested "Physical infrastructure including street lighting and infrastructure design should consider personal safety issues to enable girls and women to exercise freely whenever they wish without fear of violence or harassment."

199. Some respondents argued that a failure to address the safety concerns of women and girls when creating and improving infrastructure to support active travel might be partially attributed to the male-dominated nature of the transport planning profession. To address this issue, [Sustrans Scotland](#) suggested:

” It is also important for the transport and planning sectors to include women's views in their decision-making process. Only 13% of UK transport professionals report they always consider gender in their day-to-day work, whereas 46% never consider it and 41% somewhat consider it. In Scotland, transport has the lowest proportion of women (6.25%) represented in senior positions within the public sector. Planning needs to not only account for commuting journeys but also school trips, care journeys, etc.

200. In support of this view, witnesses argued there is a need for more females in leadership roles in the design and delivery of infrastructure and that this would help to create the structures necessary to enable and encourage women and girls to feel safe and therefore to participate more regularly in sport and physical activity. Kate Joester, from Living Streets Scotland told the Committee:

” It is important to see more women in the places where we talk about planning and transport planning and that sort of thing, because our transport and places are, broadly speaking, planned by male-dominated professions, which is sometimes very obvious...It is also about the ways in which we see paths being planned, for example. Women pay closer attention to safety, and we often see that that is not supported by the places that we are walking through.²⁰

201. Some respondents to the Committee's call for views, including the Scottish Women's Convention, suggested that a feminist approach to town planning, such as [that adopted by Glasgow City Council](#), could create suitable conditions for improvements to be made to facilities and infrastructure that help to make women feel safe when exercising:

” As stated, women do not feel comfortable exercising in public places, greatly limiting their ability to stay fit and healthy. By ensuring that towns and cities have good street lighting, public transport hubs within town centres and better paths, women and girls will have improved opportunities to partake in exercise... Therefore, it is vital that the Scottish Government implement feminist town planning Scotland-wide and improve walking paths for rural communities.²¹

202. Living Streets Scotland shared recommendations from their ["Tools for Inclusion: Equality Impact Assessment in Local Authority Streets Practice" report](#), arguing that the particular needs of women and girls need to be more fully integrated into the policy development process:

” At a high level, policy such as the [National Walking Strategy](#) and the draft [National Planning Framework 4](#) should provide the framework for improving structural support for improving everyday walking rates among women. However, the NWS's stated commitment to equality is not broken down into specific areas or targets around gender and participation or provision. Implementation of these strategies needs to happen with equality awareness designed in from the earliest stages. Funding, strategy and infrastructure should be subject to equality impact assessment at every level to make sure that it is fit for the whole of Scotland's population.

203. Kate Joester from Living Streets Scotland also raised concerns about the inconsistent application of equality impact assessments. Based on prior research, she suggested that whilst national guidance was good, there was often far less certainty whether adequate equality impact assessments would have been undertaken in practice in individual cases:

” We looked at 20 examples, including plans for snow clearing and plans for specific developments, and we found four equality impact assessments that were available for those 20 projects. For example, a project had gone to a...regeneration committee—and although the answer to the question whether the required equality impact assessment had been done was no, the project went straight through the committee.²²

204. The Committee has been concerned to hear extensive evidence of the

harassment and abuse girls and women can be subjected to while exercising and believes there needs to be a zero tolerance approach towards tackling such unacceptable behaviour.

205. In particular, the Committee calls on the Scottish Government to set out what guidance it is providing to sport organisations and governing bodies to ensure they have robust policies in place to tackle instances of harassment and abuse of all kinds, including those which are directed towards female participants. Above all, the Committee concludes that the governing bodies responsible for all types of sport and physical activity must be required to have in place clear, transparent and easy-to-navigate processes for receiving, handling and dealing with complaints about harassment or abuse.

206. The Committee also calls on the Scottish Government to set out what guidance it has in place, or any plans for the development of future guidance, to ensure considerations around personal safety are properly integrated into decision-making around the design, construction and maintenance of infrastructure and facilities that support physical activity including active travel such as walking, running and cycling.

207. The Committee further recognises the potential for feminist town planning to make a positive contribution towards improving the safety of basic infrastructure for public transport and active travel and making it better suited to the needs of female participants. It calls on the Scottish Government to set out what steps it will take to encourage the systematic use of feminist town planning in the design of future active travel and transport infrastructure.

Facilities, including changing rooms

208. The inquiry identified the design and availability of facilities including changing rooms as another area where women and girls face additional multiple barriers to their participation in sport and physical activity.

Facilities primarily catered to men

209. Many individual respondents to the Committee's call for views felt that they had fewer opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity as a result of more restricted access to facilities and infrastructure compared to men and boys . [One respondent](#) said:

” Traditionally there are fewer opportunities in the community for women and girls to take part in team/group organised and structured activity. Many clubs have been set up to cater for male team sport participation, and while many now cater for female groups, the structure is geared more towards men/boys, in terms of venue, time, facilities.

210. One [individual respondent](#) echoed this view, arguing that facilities and infrastructure tend to be primarily catered to the needs of boys and men:

” One of the main issues with taking part in sport as a female is that sport is set up for men. I have been involved in a variety of sport as a youngster and still now as a Scottish Masters hockey player. I am also a PE teacher and a hockey coach.

- changing facilities which provide no privacy and space
- shower facilities built for men
- outdoor pitches and facilities which have no toilet facilities close by (what happens when females unexpectedly have a period)

211. In its written submission to the inquiry, the [Scottish FA](#) acknowledges this issue and informed the Committee that it has now taken a position that, when facilities are being created or upgraded, they must be designed with female use in mind.

212. The importance of upgrading facilities to suit the needs of female participants was reiterated by representatives of sports governing bodies during the Committee's engagement event in Dunfermline on 13 March. However, Members also heard that a lack of funding for the development and improvement of facilities presents a significant barrier to addressing this challenge.

213. Patrick Murphy from South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture a noted: "In some cases, the estate is not fit for purpose for certain groups or for certain diverse elements of the community. I think that we face a real challenge in that area with regard to funding and finance." ²³

Unequal access to facilities

214. Many individual respondents to the call for views felt that men and boys were often given priority use of community sports facilities, with activities and time slots for women-only activities planned around the preferences of male participants. Several respondents offered the example of football pitches which are often pre-booked for use by men and boys, leaving female football teams having to accept very early or late kick-off times.

215. However, Patrick Murphy from South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture suggested this experience did not correspond to his own, arguing:

” ...if you are talking about club lets and casual bookings, it is very equitable. Anyone can book online to do that, so I do not see that as an issue. I think that I know what you mean about the traditional bookings...but they still need to try to book that on an annual or a 12-week basis....I do not think that people being able to get the slots that they would like is an issue for accessibility. ²⁴

216. Kirsty Garrett from Glasgow Life advised that her organisation has a community of venue programmers in Glasgow who try to resolve such issues:

” ...if an organisation such as a women's sports club came to us and was looking for a particular time slot, the programmers would look across the estate to try to find a suitable venue at a suitable time. That might mean that we move somebody else from one venue to another, because that space would be better used by another group or organisation. We might say that if young men are playing football at peak time but that means that the kids are going to be playing at 9 o'clock at night, that is not a good use of the space and time. There would be negotiations and conversations with organisations to try to programme our venues more equitably. We have people who look at that, as it is important. ²⁵

Access to the school estate

217. During the Committee's evidence session on 30 May 2023, witnesses raised the issue of expanding the use of the school estate as a venue for community sport and physical activity. Kim Atkinson of The SSA highlighted the need for collaborative working across Committee remits to understand the barriers affecting the use of the school estate for sport and physical activity in the community. Kim argued that opening up access to the school estate in this way would be particularly beneficial for women seeking to participate in sport and physical activity:

” ...there are safety challenges related to accessing facilities, including in relation to late-night travel and whether women are able to take part in active travel as they would like... ...What is the solution? It might be to have a local facility—a facility that women know, that is in their local area, and which is welcoming. A school might seem like a specific solution... ²⁶

218. The Health and Sport Committee held its [Sport for Everyone inquiry](#) during Session 5, which identified a number of challenges affecting use of the school estate by the community, including access to school facilities outwith school hours, and the cost of accessing facilities. The report concluded:

” Approaches taken by schools and local authorities vary greatly, suggesting to us there is a role for the government to work with local authorities and schools encouraging a more flexible approach to using the school estate. Access requires to be widened and there needs to be better support for the objective of increasing participation in sport.

219. Evidence submitted to the current inquiry suggests these issues have yet to be satisfactorily addressed and access of community sport and physical activity to the school estate remains inconsistent and, in too many cases, difficult.

220. In relation to the school estate, the Minister told the Committee that the Scottish Government has "lots of policies in place to enable its use, and it is seeing lots of use. More could happen and we could go further, but we have made a great deal of progress in the past years." ²⁷ Andrew Sinclair, Head of Active Scotland added:

” ...it has been a while since we have done any research on that; I think that 2014 was the last time that sportscotland did a formal study, but it speaks regularly to local authorities and raises the school estate as a continual issue. In many cases, it comes down to scheduling more than facilities not being open but, again, it is just a case of working through all those challenges. ²⁸

Changing facilities

221. The Committee heard evidence that sportscotland provides guidance on the design and build of changing spaces with the more modern approach being the provision of changing villages that are open to all, with the intention being that these facilities should be as inclusive as possible.²⁹
222. A 'changing village' typically has no gender specific areas and instead provides private cubicles where individuals or families can change.
223. The mixed sex nature of many changing facilities and sport environments was highlighted as a concern, with many respondents expressing discomfort, self-consciousness, and safety fears when sharing exercise facilities such as gyms or swimming pools with men. Mixed sex changing villages were noted as not offering sufficient privacy or safety.
224. The impact of communal facilities on young women's participation in sport and physical activity, even when they are single-sex facilities, is also addressed in the YWL Committee report. The report found that many communal female changing rooms both within and outwith schools are open-plan, creating feelings of insecurity and self-consciousness for young women, particularly those going through puberty. To address this, the report recommends improving changing facilities to increase privacy.
225. The Minister supported this, noting:
- ” With regard to communal changing spaces, I note that women tend to have a preference for privacy, so changing the changing rooms so that it is possible for women and girls to change privately rather than in a communal space will help.
30

226. The Committee recognises widespread concerns that facilities and infrastructure for sport and physical activity tend to be catered primarily to the needs of male participants and opportunities for female participation are more restricted as a consequence. While acknowledging the commitment of many organisations to take greater account of female requirements in the future design of facilities and infrastructure, the Committee would advocate much more consistent use of equality impact assessments to ensure this commitment is effectively delivered in practice.
227. The Committee is concerned that, since its predecessor considered the issue as part of its inquiry into Sport for Everyone, little progress seems to have been made towards improving access to the school estate for sport and physical activity at a community level. It is firmly of the view that improving this access would make an important contribution to increasing female participation in sport and physical activity. It would therefore encourage the Scottish Government and local authorities, as a matter of urgency, to revisit the issue and to develop a targeted action plan to improve the accessibility of the school estate as a valuable community resource.
228. The Committee acknowledges concerns that the more recent shift in design of

changing facilities towards the creation of "changing villages" has prompted concerns from many women that these lack adequate levels of privacy. The Committee calls on sportscotland and the Scottish Government to investigate opportunities to update guidance on changing facilities in a way that maintains the goal of improved inclusivity while providing enhanced privacy for those women who desire it.

Funding

229. The Committee heard evidence throughout the inquiry that access to and availability of funding can also be significant barriers to female participation in sport and physical activity. During the Committee's evidence session with representatives of sports governing bodies and other high-level organisations on 30 May 2023, a number of concerns regarding funding for sport were raised.
230. Kim Atkinson of the Scottish Sports Association emphasised the importance of viewing sport and physical activity as an investment, rather than a cost. She stated that a key challenge for sports funding at national level is that it is allocated annually by sportscotland, because sportscotland also receives its funding annually. The short-term nature of this funding creates challenges with recruitment and retention of staff, and longer-term planning and this has a particular impact on programmes aimed at supporting female participation.³¹
231. This point was reiterated by Robert Nesbitt from SAMH:
- ” Some of the challenge for programmes is the short-term nature of that funding. We continue to advocate for longer-term funding to allow us to reach people and engage, and to ensure that we are creating a real participation pathway to enable young women and women to be involved in physical activity and sport.³²
232. Flora Jackson of Public Health Scotland stated that reduced investment in sport and leisure facilities, and a focus on providing "adequate provision" of services rather than increasing engagement, disproportionately impacts women and girls as they are less likely to be physically active. Flora argued that funding should be targeted towards increasing the participation of women and girls, and other inactive groups, in sport and physical activity.³³
233. During the Committee's [evidence session with representatives of community sport and physical activity](#) on 21 March 2023, Euan Lowe from Scottish Swimming outlined the financial challenges facing community sport and leisure facilities:
- ” Sport and leisure at all levels are facing a challenge with upkeep maintenance and the ability to run a good-quality service, given the funding situation and the problems that we face with rising energy costs and the workforce issues that we have, which many of our partners are contending with. Those financial burdens make it a challenge for any council or trust to provide as good a quality of experience as they would like to.

234. The inquiry received evidence that swimming is one of the most popular forms of physical activity undertaken by women. The [Scottish Household Survey 2021 reported](#) that 12% of female respondents had been swimming in the previous four weeks, compared to 10% of male respondents. By comparison, the percentage of men participating in most other identified categories of sport and physical activity, including cycling, running, football and golf, was significantly higher than the corresponding percentage of women. On this basis, many contributors to the inquiry argued that the closure of swimming pools is likely to have a disproportionate negative impact on women and girls and their participation in physical activity compared to the closure of most other categories of sporting facility.
235. In England, the UK Government recently announced the [Swimming Pool Support Fund](#) which will provide a total of £60 million to local authorities in England as a support package for public leisure facilities with swimming pools. Revenue grants totalling £20m will be made available to support facilities with swimming pools that are currently facing increased cost pressures that leave them more vulnerable to closure or service reduction. Meanwhile, £40m will be made available for capital investment to improve the energy efficiency of these public facilities in the medium to long term.
236. Kim Atkinson from the Scottish Sports Association pointed out that 90% of investment in sport in Scotland is delivered through local authorities, and questioned how much of that investment actually goes into sport. She suggested more work should be undertaken to hold local authorities accountable for the level of investment they are making to support participation in sport and physical activity.
34
237. The [National Benchmarking Overview Report 2021-22](#) showed that local authority expenditure on leisure and culture services decreased by 23.6% between 2010-11 and 2021-22. Over this period, statistical evidence suggests that local government funding has increasingly focused on priority areas such as education and social care, in line with Scottish Government policy commitments.
238. Kim Atkinson from the SSA cautioned that the current monitoring and measuring requirements associated with government funding for sport and physical activity may not lead to the desired outcomes. She suggested incorporating a more qualitative approach to better understand people's experience of participating in sport. Kim also argued that the level of monitoring and measurement required is sometimes disproportionate to the amount of funding received, and suggested that a greater balance between monitoring and delivery of funded projects is needed.
35
239. The Committee learned that some sporting bodies have explored alternative approaches to evaluating the impact of their investments, such as [Social Return on Investment](#) (SROI) analyses. The [Scottish Football Association](#) completed an SROI analysis in 2018 to determine [the social value](#) of football to Scotland. The analysis concluded that grassroots football provides over £1 billion of value to Scottish society.
240. Some contributors to the inquiry argued that exploring alternative approaches to monitoring and measuring the impact of projects could potentially support Scotland's transition to a Wellbeing Economy. The Scottish Government describes a [key objective of Wellbeing Economy Governments](#) as being to "collaborate in pursuit of innovative policy approaches aimed at enhancing wellbeing through a

broader understanding of the role of economics."

241. Baz Moffat from The Well HQ made the case for a "carrot and stick approach" towards directing funding. In this context, she noted that, in order to qualify for funding, Sport England has required organisations to demonstrate progress towards a goal of having 30 per cent female representation on their boards. As a consequence, this goal has now been achieved. In the field of research into sport and physical activity, Baz highlighted a similar approach in America whereby organisations would only qualify for research funding if they made a commitment that their research would focus on females as well as males.³⁶
242. Maureen McGonigle from Scottish Women in Sport expressed regret that sports that are represented by boards that continue to lack diversity still receive funding, arguing: "If we have the strength to change things—financial strength—we have to use that for benefit, because until we get diversity and inclusion on the boards we will not solve the problem." However, Kim Atkinson, SSA disagreed with the premise that greater diversity on the boards of sports associations should be achieved by the introduction of quotas, arguing: "Quotas will not be helpful; they will push things back". Instead, she argued that the focus should be on supporting women to feel more confident to put themselves forward to sit on the boards of sporting associations so the field of potential candidates becomes more diverse.³⁷
243. Giving evidence to the Committee, the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport reiterated the Scottish Government's commitment to double funding for sport and physical activity during the current term of the Scottish Parliament. This commitment was included in the Scottish Government's [Programme for Government for 2021-22](#). The commitment is to "double investment in sport and active living to £100 million a year by the end of the Parliament " and the Scottish Government has further committed that, in implementing that funding increase, "More participation and visibility of girls and women in sport is a priority".
244. The Minister also acknowledged the significant challenges local authorities currently face with funding but argued there are no easy short-term solutions to these challenges. At the same time, she indicated that work was underway to put the sport and leisure estate on a better footing. Andrew Sinclair, Head of Active Scotland at the Scottish Government indicated there are regular discussions with local authorities and Community Leisure UK (umbrella body for leisure trusts) to understand the current status, and that sportscotland is commencing a full facilities review to understand the condition and maintenance requirements of physical activity infrastructure throughout Scotland.
245. In relation to local authority funding, the Minister was asked whether there was more the Scottish Government could do to ensure that funding is effectively targeted, and to hold local authorities accountable for their investment in sport. In response, the Minister argued it is not the Scottish Government's role to interfere in local government spending decisions and she would not be in favour of ring fencing local government budgets for sport and physical activity.³⁸
246. *TO BE ADDED: Some background context to sources of public funding for sport and physical activity, including from local authorities and including reference to the Verity House Agreement.*

247. Asked about the UK Government's Swimming Pool Support Fund, the Minister advised that the Scottish Government would receive approximately £6 million in consequential funding from implementation of the policy in England. The Minister indicated that this money would be included in the general allocation of the Scottish Government budget and was therefore unable to guarantee that these funds would necessarily be used for a similar purpose in Scotland. The Minister concluded:

” Just because it was spent on swimming and swimming pools in England does not necessarily mean that it will be spent on swimming and swimming pools in Scotland.³⁹

248. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to double investment in sport and active living to £100 million per year over the current term of the Scottish Parliament. At the same time, the Scottish Government must recognise that there will be many competing demands for this increased funding. In this context, the Scottish Government should set out how funding will be suitably targeted to ensure the goal of increased participation and visibility of women and girls in sport and physical activity is made a key priority.

249. Given responsibility for the overwhelming majority of public funding for sport and physical activity lies with local authorities, the Committee acknowledges the significant financial pressures they and the Scottish Government currently face. Nonetheless, it is concerned by the extent to which local authority funding for sport and physical activity has been cut over recent years and the particular negative impact this will have had on female participation.

250. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government, in responding to this report, to address the possibility of introducing multi-year funding for sportscotland with a view to improving certainty for the sector. In particular, it calls on the Scottish Government to address to what extent a multi-year approach to funding of sport and physical activity might improve rates of, and break down barriers to, female participation.

251. The Committee believes more work needs to be done to measure the broader impact investment in sport and physical activity can have as a preventative measure that improves health and wellbeing while reducing the societal costs of poor health and wellbeing. The Committee would also be interested to see more sporting bodies being encouraged to undertake analysis of the social return on investment in their sport, including the wider benefits to female health and wellbeing.

252. Drawing on best practice examples from other countries, the Committee would support an element of conditionality being introduced to the allocation of public funding for sport and physical activity, whereby recipients would need to demonstrate that an appropriate proportion of that funding is being directed towards increasing female participation.

253. In the context of statistical evidence showing a comparatively high proportion of those regularly participating in swimming are women, the Committee is concerned to hear evidence of the particularly intense financial pressures community swimming pools are currently under. Before reaching future spending

decisions in this area, the Committee would urge central and local government to give careful consideration to the disproportionate negative impact any decision to close community swimming facilities is likely to have on rates of female participation in physical activity.

Intersecting barriers to participation

254. As part of the current inquiry, as well as looking at barriers to participation in sport and physical activity faced by women and girls generally, the Committee wanted to look at intersecting barriers to participation faced by marginalised groups of girls and women such as those with a disability, those from the LGBTQ+ community, those from minority ethnic groups and different religious backgrounds and those facing socio-economic inequality.
255. To this end, the Committee's call for views asked a series of questions regarding the additional barriers to participation in sport and physical activity faced by people from marginalised groups.

Disability

256. The Committee's call for evidence received evidence that women and girls with a disability face additional barriers to participation in sport and physical activity. A lack of appropriate opportunities and facilities, inadequate equipment, and a lack of understanding of support needs were identified among the key barriers to participation facing women and girls with disabilities.
257. Evidence submitted to the inquiry indicates that female disabled athletes are likely to face additional barriers to participation in sport at an elite level. Respondents to the Committee's call for views expressed concern that the issues affecting participation in community sport for disabled people, such as inadequate facilities and a lack of understanding of support needs would also affect disabled athletes at an elite level.
258. The Committee heard evidence that discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, creates a further barrier to participation in sport and physical activity for women and girls with disabilities. A lack of visibility of elite female athletes with disabilities was also highlighted as a barrier to participation.
259. Respondents felt that disabled women and girls faced additional barriers to participation in physical activities such as walking as a result of poorly designed and inaccessible infrastructure as well as potentially facing greater instances of harassment and abuse when participating in such activities in public places.
260. The [Scottish Women's Convention](#) pointed out that girls with disabilities already start to face additional barriers to participation in sport and physical activity at school:
- ” ...current physical education is not facilitative of children with additional needs, or physical disability, instead those that fall within these categories are separated from their classmates. This can lead to a sense of isolation and does not encourage these young people to live healthy lifestyles.
261. During the [Committee's evidence session on inequalities in female sport](#) on 23 May 2023, Lynne Glen from Scottish Disability Sport emphasised the importance of listening to disabled women and girls who want to participate in sport and physical activity in order to understand their needs:

” We need to get to a place where we listen, hear the voices of young people and use more imagery and more explicit language around encouraging young females to participate in physical activity and sport. It is about working in partnership with other agencies to spread the word and encourage more young girls. That goes from the local level, with local authorities and trusts, to the governing bodies at the national level and other third sector partners, some of which are on this panel.

262. To overcome the additional barriers to participation faced by disabled women and girls, respondents to the call for views suggested there should be greater provision of accessible sports facilities, and training for coaches and teachers to help them understand the needs of people with disabilities. Some respondents also suggested raising the profile of elite female athletes with disabilities would provide role models that would inspire others to participate. The Committee heard evidence of the importance of explicitly including women and girls with disabilities in materials and imagery used to promote physical activity and sport. Lynne Glen from Scottish Disability Sport concluded: "if they do not see people like them or images of women with disabilities doing physical activity and playing sport, it is not relatable and they do not think that it is for them".⁴⁰

263. Lynne Glen also made the case for a collaborative, cross-sectoral approach to the inclusion of disabled women and girls in sport:

” I think that we need to work across sectors: we do not need to look at sport only but should include health, education, local authorities, trusts and third sector organisations. To achieve Scottish Disability Sport's vision of—to paraphrase—a welcoming and inclusive Scottish sporting society, we need to work across all sectors and we need education across them. We also need policy and strategy to back that up.⁴¹

264. A [2021 Observatory for Sport in Scotland report](#) found that disabled people are more likely to participate in individual activities rather than team sports. This applies equally to those with long-term illnesses, visual impairment, and hearing loss. The report stated that improvements to social structures were necessary to improve participation in team activities among disabled people and those with health concerns, to enable them to benefit from the social interaction associated with team sports. In their written response to the Committee's call for views, [Parkinson's UK Scotland](#) suggested that providing more opportunities for women with Parkinson's to exercise together would be likely to encourage them to become more physically active by reducing their concerns about being judged when exercising alongside able-bodied participants. It would also create opportunities for group coaching by coaches who understand their condition.

265. The Committee also received evidence that, in comparison to their male counterparts, elite female disabled athletes are often under-represented. In the [2022 Paralympic Winter Games](#), 25.2% of competitors were female which was a modest increase from 23.6% of female competitors who took part in the 2018 Games. Out of 46 countries, 16 delegations did not send any female athletes to compete in the 2022 Games at all. Certain respondents to the Committee's call for views made the case for the visibility of elite female disabled athletes to be improved as a way of breaking down barriers to participation by disabled women and girls at all levels. [Robert Gordon University](#) said:

- ” [There is] less visibility of elite athletes with disability. There are additional barriers faced by disabled athletes, including increased negative attitudes, the requirement to prove themselves as an athlete and misconceptions from spectators.
266. The benefits of participation in sport and physical activity for those experiencing mental health challenges were highlighted by a number of contributors to the inquiry. The [Scottish Association for Mental Health](#) (SAMH) raised concerns that, despite these benefits, women and girls facing mental health difficulties were less likely to be physically active, due to factors including lack of confidence, a perceived lack of support, and fear of stigma and discrimination. SAMH also shared details of their leadership and mentorship programme, developed with Scottish Women in Sport, to tackle issues of self-confidence and lack of support as additional barriers to participation in sport and physical activity for girls and women experiencing mental health challenges. The organisation also recommends that these barriers could be further addressed by providing training for professionals and volunteers working in sport to enable them to better support people experiencing mental health challenges.
267. The Committee heard evidence that SAMH's [Mental Health Charter for Physical Activity and Sport](#) encourages sporting organisations and governing bodies to express their commitment to removing barriers to taking part in sport for anyone with a mental health problem. Participating organisations are expected to commit to developing inclusive policies and practice, collaborating with other network members to share learning, and reflecting on their practices to celebrate their achievements and identify opportunities for improvement.
268. The Minister told the Committee she would be particularly keen to encourage greater participation in sport and physical activity by disabled people and to create additional opportunities for this to happen. The Minister highlighted a training course developed by sportscotland's young people's sports panel which seeks to challenge participants to consider adaptations that would encourage greater participation in sport and physical activity by people with disabilities. The Minister further reflected:
- ” When I speak to people participating in sport who have disabilities, almost all of them talk about how challenging it was to get involved in school; they were told to sit at the side in PE classes. As those education sessions amply demonstrated, it is really easy to make adaptations that enable everybody to be included, and my plea is for every possible opportunity to encourage inclusion and participation to be taken.⁴²

LGBTQ+ participation

269. Respondents to the Committee's call for views discussed a variety of barriers affecting the participation of LGBTQ+ women and girls in sport. Some respondents felt that homophobia persists in sport at community and elite level, and can deter women and girls who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer from taking part in sport and physical activity. A majority of respondents (68.3%) to the BBC's 2020 Elite British Sportswomen's Survey said they felt that sportswomen could be more open about their sexuality than their male counterparts. Despite this comparatively

welcoming culture, the Committee heard evidence that barriers to participation by lesbian and bisexual athletes still persist

270. [LEAP Sports Scotland's](#) written submission highlighted the value of participation in sport and physical activity for lesbian, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LBTI) women and girls, and expressed concern that enduring homophobia in sport may create persistent barriers to this:

” LBTI women have told us participating in community sport and physical activity often acts as a driver and vehicle for change. It is a way to get out of dark places, it provides a social space but it also gives women a sense of bodily autonomy alongside the physical benefits of staying active.

...there is a general consensus among LBTI women that sport is less progressive than wider society, that sport has failed to move forward at the same pace as other aspects of public life. This has meant that homophobic 'banter', lesbian tropes and stereotypes; much of the homophobic sentiment often considered to a thing of the past, have endured within sport. This is an area which has seen some progress, however 'locker room banter' remains and is harmful to women and in particular LBTI women.

During the [Committee's evidence session](#) Heidi Vistisen of LEAP Sports Scotland further addressed the impact of homophobia and negative stereotypes on the participation of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in sport and physical activity:

” We hear from women in the groups that we work with that they were not out when they were younger because they did not want to be branded a lesbian. They were worried that people would assume what their sexuality was or that it was because they had been turned: that if they joined their team knowing that there were lesbians in it, they would also become a lesbian. There are some clear barriers in the stereotypes that follow physically active women in that sense, and that does not just affect lesbians and bisexual women; it potentially also affects those who are on the teams of those women.

271. Heidi Vistisen also argued that the gendered distinction between sports clothing prescribed for men and women creates particular challenges for non-binary and trans people:

” I recommend that people should be able to wear what they want to wear. In particular, we should ensure that non-binary and trans people have something that they can feel comfortable wearing. They can be more likely to wear clothes that are baggy and they may not want to wear specific colours. It is really about having the flexibility to do all of that within different sports and settings.⁴³

272. The Committee heard from people with a range of viewsⁱ. Many individual respondents to the Committee's call for views expressed reservations regarding the inclusion of trans women in female sport and physical activity. Some respondents were concerned that the presence of trans women in female-only spaces may lead to some women feeling unsafe, and may affect some women from faith communities who hold beliefs regarding modesty. In their written response, [LEAP Sports Scotland](#) addressed the impact of this debate on trans women and their participation in sport:

- ” Transgender people face various barriers to access and continued participation in sport. These include bathrooms and changing facilities, policies, doping regulations, a general lack of an inclusive environment, being a strictly sex segregated environment, sexism and hegemonic masculinity, overt homophobia / transphobia, and poor or dated designs of sport facilities.

Subsequently, research suggests that overall transgender people, especially transgender women, are less physically active and report lower social support and physical self-perception than their cisgender peers, alongside reporting feeling "less safe in school" and sports facilities.

273. [sportscotland's](#) written submission to the inquiry advised that, in 2021, five UK Sports Councils, including sportscotland, [published updated guidance](#) in relation to transgender participation in sport, which it said had "the aim of supporting sports in better understanding the needs and challenges involved in ensuring that everyone can take part." It continued:

- ” The guidance emphasised that we want sport to be a place where everyone can be themselves, where everyone can take part and where everyone is treated with kindness, dignity and respect. While our consultation found that there was widespread support for ensuring that sport was a welcoming place for everyone in society, including for transgender people, it also highlighted that there were concerns relating to safety and fairness in relation to transgender inclusion, particularly in female sport, and that there was no consensus on a single solution as to how this should be addressed. It was clear too that a wider range of solutions than those that are currently on offer needed to be identified so that everyone taking part could do so in a fair, safe and inclusive way.

274. Respondents to the Committee's call for views suggested that greater education for sports teams, coaches, and teachers regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people would help to address some barriers to participation. [LEAP Sports Scotland](#) also offered a number of suggestions for creating more inclusive sporting environments for LGBTQ+ people:

i It should be noted that the Committee's call for views included no direct question about trans participation in female sport. Views on this topic were scattered across responses to each question by different respondents. Expressing concerns about the inclusion of trans women in female sporting environments did not necessarily mean that all respondents were altogether opposed to the notion. Further information about the methodology used in preparing the Committee's call for views and analysing responses can be found in the introduction to this report.

” Empower staff/ players to challenge incidents of discrimination in sport, both on and off the field. Having strong anti-discrimination policies that protect people from all backgrounds makes women feel safer and included. Allyship requires actions and deeds, not just words and flags. Supporting staff to do the proactive work and outreach within the wider community will allow more women from all backgrounds to take part in sport. This allyship can be as simple as having details on the website of what bathroom and changing facilities are available (gender, accessibility, childcare).

The solutions that have been trialled and are the most effective are changing rooms that are accessible and provide privacy for its members. Changing villages that are family friendly, that contain cubicles, curtains and communal and single sex areas, allow space for everyone without the need to ostracise or to challenge individuals.

275. [Sustrans Scotland](#) noted anecdotal evidence indicating street harassment is also a particular concern among members of the LGBTQ+ community, but suggested more research is needed to gain a clearer understanding of LGBTQ+ people's perceptions and experiences of safety in public space.
276. Lynne Glen from Scottish Disability Sport felt there was a need to take a participant-centred approach and consider these issues through an intersectionality lens instead of simply looking at different protected characteristics individually. She concluded: "...we do not want to get into some kind of pecking order situation, or a bun fight over status, or whatever. We simply use our activity inclusion model." ⁴⁴

Ethnicity and religion

277. Responses to the call for views revealed that many women and girls from particular religious and cultural backgrounds face additional barriers to participation in sport and physical activity, including experiences of racism and stereotyping, and being unable to participate in certain sports due to clothing rules. [Glasgow Life/Glasgow Sport](#) said:

” In general terms the intersection of identity features increases discrimination and barriers to participation. In sport this is particularly the case with regard race, ethnicity, gender, faith and belief. A number of research studies continue to identify Muslim women and girls as having amongst the lowest participation rates for sport and physical activity. In addition disabled women and girls experience multiple barriers, as do women and girls from the most economically disadvantaged and deprived communities. LGBT+ women and girls also experience additional barriers to participation as do trans people. Participation varies with age. It drops off during teenage years and for those over 45 years of age. Life stage factors, including caring responsibilities, impact directly on participation.

278. [sportscotland's](#) written submission shared the findings from a recent review into racism and racial inequality in sport, which found that women and girls from certain ethnic and religious backgrounds are deterred from participation in sport and physical activity by experiences of racism and stereotyping:

- ” Participants discussed negative stereotypes, how these had an impact on confidence and motivation from an early age, feeling that they didn't fit the expectations of their coaches and team leaders, how in school they were directed into sports that would "suit them", how they felt sexualised and objectified, how cultural expectations of communities and families compounded these experiences, how they experienced microaggressions, casual racism and sexism, how they were overlooked for team sports, and how the media's negative representation of women of colour across all sports reinforced a negative culture. Muslim women spoke of experiences of negative innuendos, micro aggressions and exclusionary practices.
279. Some respondents to the Committee's call for views expressed concerns that women and girls from ethnic minority communities are under-represented in elite sport and may face discrimination and disadvantage when participating.
280. Eilidh Doyle suggested that one underlying cause of this under-representation may be a lack of diversity amongst coaching staff:
- ” One limitation, however, is coaching, which, to be frank, is dominated by white, middle-class men. We also see a lot of that in the staffing. Things are getting slightly better, but young athletes from ethnic minorities come into teams and see no one in the staffing or coaching group to whom they can relate. That is probably one of the barriers with regard to staffing and coaching.⁴⁵
281. In their written response, [sportscotland](#) emphasised the importance of viewing sport as a system and acknowledging that the barriers to participation of women and girls from marginalised groups in sport and physical activity at a community level also impact on their potential participation at an elite level.
282. Respondents noted that women of some faiths, including Islam and Orthodox Judaism, held beliefs concerning modesty that would prevent them from participating in mixed sex sport, or sharing mixed sex changing facilities.
283. Some respondents also felt that clothing rules associated with some sports, such as wearing revealing clothing or being forbidden to wear a hijab, would potentially prevent women and girls from some faiths from participating. Offering single sex activities and spaces and alternative clothing choices were suggested as potential solutions that would help to overcome these additional barriers to participation.
284. Priyanaz Chatterji, international cricketer highlighted the importance of offering greater freedom of choice, stating "Women and girls must have the choice to wear what they want, whether it be a crop top or long-sleeved top to run in, or a hijab."⁴⁶
285. In its written evidence, [Sustrans Scotland](#) highlighted that women and girls from minority ethnic and religious communities equally face barriers to participation in physical activities such as walking and cycling:

” Research in England shows minority ethnic groups face specific barriers to take part in active travel. Lack of culturally accessible provisions, such as appropriate clothing, can also limit access to physical activity. Social perceptions also play a role in the low take up of walking and cycling. Having a car can be seen as a sign of success, meaning that active travel is seen as an activity for the ‘disadvantaged and poor’.

286. Responding to a question on racism in sport during the [Committee's evidence session with elite female athletes](#), international cricketer Priyanaz Chatterji emphasised the need for long-term cultural change to overcome these barriers to participation:

” I do not think that there will be any quick fixes. There is a need to have processes in place, and part of the solution is simply having the right people who will act with integrity. Sometimes, acting with integrity means having difficult conversations. I guess that there also needs to be an accountability process or a way for people to challenge things if they do not think that that is happening. In addition, we need to try to encourage cultures in which people feel comfortable speaking up about things that are not acceptable or appropriate.

287. As part of its recent scrutiny of institutional racism in Scottish cricket, the Committee received a [letter from campaign group Running Out Racism](#) on 24 May 2023 which, beyond withholding funding to sports governing bodies, calls for sportscotland to be able to sanction sports governing bodies as a means of tackling racism and discrimination in sport.

288. During the [Committee's evidence session on 23 May 2023](#), Robert Nesbitt of SAMH argued for greater use of co-design and co-production to overcome these barriers:

” One of the best solutions involved having community leaders and champions coming in to help to influence and shape our approaches. We must do much more of that kind of work, in which the co-design and co-production of projects involve people who recognise such barriers, so that we can find solutions that lead to participants being far more engaged.

289. [Women in Sport](#) suggested that Government should look for creative opportunities to encourage more girls and women from minority ethnic and religious communities to participate in sport and physical activity:

” As well as ensuring a robust legal framework exists to tackle discrimination, and that it is enforced, governments can consider how to use their resources to support efforts to help more marginalised women and girls into sport and activity. Initiatives like the culture, heritage and sport stream of the Welsh Government's Anti-racist Wales Action Plan show that there are creative ways to do this.

Socio-economic inequality

290. Socio-economic deprivation was acknowledged by many respondents to the

Committee's call for views as a barrier to women and girls' participation in sport and physical activity. The cost of participation in sports clubs and activities such as gyms, a lack of availability of sporting facilities in deprived areas, the cost of sports equipment and the time commitment associated with participation in physical activities were all considered to have created barriers to participation for women and girls experiencing socio-economic disadvantages. In 2020, the [Observatory for Sport in Scotland](#) identified socio-economic deprivation as the main barrier to participation in sport in Scotland.

291. During the Committee's evidence session with the Young Women's Movement on 14 March 2023, Katie Heath outlined the scale of the challenge in this area:

” ...we were shocked by how much someone's socioeconomic background impacts their ability to access sport. We assumed that there would be an impact, but 81 per cent of the people who responded to our survey indicated that that was a key barrier for them, which was disheartening. Although we thought that there would be an impact, we were surprised by how big it was. ⁴⁷

292. Robert Nesbitt from SAMH highlighted three factors that are significant in relation to poverty as a barrier to participation in sport and physical activity:

” One was the lack of affordable childcare that was available at a time to enable women to engage in sport and physical activity. Another was the affordability of sports equipment and memberships for clubs and gyms, which was a big area. Transport—particularly its safety—was another factor...There is a correlation between poverty and those areas. ⁴⁸

293. The [Young Women's Network Dumfries and Galloway](#) noted that young women in rural communities may face additional barriers to participation in sport and physical activity as a result of costly or non-existent travel options:

” There are not many accessible sports groups for young women in our local communities. Because we are a rural local authority, so for many young women accessing physical activity either means significant travel or accessing from home. For those struggling with the cost-of-living crisis this is compounded by the cost of travel which isn't free for all. This only works if buses are regular and offer services at night when most gym classes / sports groups run, which in our area they are not.

294. Respondents to the call for views argued that people facing socio-economic deprivation would derive comparatively greater benefit from taking part in sport and physical activity than those in less disadvantaged circumstances. On this basis, they argued that investment should be targeted towards increased provision of opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity for people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, including women and girls.

295. The Fighting Chance Project, a judo club based in Dunfermline, which offers a programme to remove cost barriers in judo for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds outlined the nature of cost-related barriers to participation in their sport, and shared details of their work to encourage participation in judo of girls experiencing socio-economic deprivation:

” The cost-of-living crisis is also clearly a barrier to participation. Many families need to balance household budgets along with the cost of judo suits, licenses, training, and grading fees. "We know that girls from poorer households and more deprived areas are less likely to walk into the dojo. But we also know that these are the children to which our sport can make the biggest difference."

The Fighting Chance Project removes some of the barriers to starting judo. We have limited funds available to us and help the most financially needy. They will receive free membership to JudoScotland and free grading(s) up to yellow belt. To beat the Yellow Belt Challenge each candidate needs to attend regular judo sessions and commit to learning the skills needed to pass the JudoScotland syllabi for red and yellow belt grades.⁴⁹

296. The Committee heard evidence that socio-economic deprivation can also exacerbate other barriers to participation faced by women and girls from marginalised groups. According to a [2021 Observatory for Sport in Scotland report](#) on disability and sport, socio-economic deprivation presents an additional barrier for disabled people who wish to take part in sport and physical activity. In their response to the Committee's call for views, [Women in Sport](#) highlighted the additional challenges faced by women and girls from ethnic minority groups who experience socio-economic deprivation:

” By comparing UK Government statistics on the activity rates of people from different ethnic groups with poverty rates for those same groups we can see that amongst some of the least active ethnic groups, poverty rates are particularly high, including Bangladeshi (53%), Pakistani (48%) and Black (40%), making it harder for girls and women in these groups to be involved in sport and physical activity. The cost-of-living crisis of course exacerbates issues like this.

297. Through this and other recent inquiries, the Committee has received evidence that socio-economic inequality [disproportionately impacts women](#). The [Women's Budget Group has described](#) women as "the shock absorbers of poverty", often shielding children and other household members from the impact of financial difficulties by themselves choosing to go without food, clothing, or participation in leisure and recreation activities. As already addressed earlier in this report with respect to those with caring responsibilities more generally, many respondents to the Committee's call for evidence argued that, for socio-economically disadvantaged women with children, the cost of childcare will be a direct barrier to their participation in sport and physical activity, and that this barrier is likely to have been further exacerbated by the current spiralling cost-of-living.

298. The relative lack of financial support available for women and girls' community sports, particularly in deprived areas, was considered by respondents to the Committee's call for views to be an additional barrier to participation. The Committee learned that some clubs in deprived areas are attempting to address this issue by reducing fees as much as possible but that high fees charged by local authorities for the use of sports facilities make this increasingly unsustainable.

299. With regard to overcoming this challenge, [one respondent](#) suggested:

- ” Consider support or grants for those who are disadvantaged to enable them to access a range of different sports. Consider the demographic of each area. Has each area access to a range of sports?
300. Kirsty Garrett from Glasgow Life advised it has put in place concessions for individuals on universal credit, income support, jobseekers allowance, a pension or carers allowance. It also offers certain activities such as health walks for free and the majority of regular participants in these are female: "We have 54 health walks each week. They are run by volunteers. The majority—73 per cent—of the walkers are female, and 74 per cent of the volunteers are women." ⁵⁰
301. The Committee heard evidence that socio-economic disadvantages can impact upon female participation in sport at all levels, including limiting an aspiring elite athlete's ability to progress through professional pathways due to the costs of training, competition, and kit. [The Fighting Chance Project](#), emphasised the importance of supporting people facing socio-economic disadvantages at all levels of sport:
- ” Additionally, the distinction between 'community' and 'elite' sport may itself pose a barrier to participation among girls and young women. Our coaches work with young women to achieve their Dan Grades (black belt) and compete at national level competitions, but we also work with girls and young women to work towards the positive outcomes (set out above) improving each individual's academic, relationships and general fitness, health and wellbeing.
302. Addressing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on female participation in sport and physical activity, the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport acknowledged a "pre-existing inequality in participation across the board". At the same time, she reiterated the Scottish Government's commitment to doubling the funding for sport and physical activity in this parliamentary term, and expressed a determination to focus this additional funding towards tackling inequalities. ⁵¹
303. The Minister suggested that nearly all sports are subject to a socio-economic divide that favours wealthier participants. The Minister told the Committee this is an issue the Scottish Government is raising with all sports governing bodies as breaking down socio-economic barriers to participation in sport and physical activity is integral to one of the Scottish Government's "core missions", namely tackling poverty, particularly child poverty. She concluded: "It is important that we do not lose sight of that whole-system approach." ⁵², but the Minister noted one of the basic things that the Scottish Government can do to help this inequality "is to encourage those sports where money does not matter and make things such as participation in the daily mile integral to the school day in Scotland." Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report. 6 June 2023
304. The Minister suggested that the Scottish Government could also encourage participation in "those sports where money does not matter" and by making "things such as participation in the daily mile integral to the school day in Scotland." ⁵³

Addressing intersecting barriers to participation

305. Addressing the needs of girls and women facing intersecting barriers to participation in sport and physical activity, [Glasgow Life/Glasgow Sport](#) shared what they believe to be key factors in creating inclusive sport and physical activity opportunities, namely:

- Providing access to training around gender and equalities issues to enable coaches to better understand attitudes, behaviours and discrimination
- providing access to funding to specifically promote the recruitment and retention of female coaches, disabled coaches, BAME coaches and coaches from social and economically disadvantaged communities
- building links between voluntary clubs and associations which encourages participants to expand their involvement to other clubs, attracting a new profile of members
- developing programmes in partnership with voluntary and community organisations working with under-represented target groups
- marketing materials which show positive role models.

306. In its written response to the Committee's call for views, [sportscotland](#) outlined the support it offers to club and community sport to encourage female participation:

” In club and community sport, we work with and invest in Scottish Governing Bodies of sport (SGBs) to support their clubs and community organisations to deliver participation activities. To ensure that SGBs are embedding equality, diversity and inclusion within their sports, considering all protected characteristics including sex, we support them to progress against the Equality Standard and implement the action plans that are developed through this. The Equality Standard for Sport was launched by the UK sports councils in November 2004 to help address the inequalities that exist within the sector. The Standard is owned by the 5 Sports Councils through the Sports Councils Equality Group (SCEG). A comprehensive review of the Equality Standard for Sport framework is currently being undertaken by SCEG to ensure it is progressive and fit for purpose. Independent consultants have been commissioned to conduct this review.

307. The Committee acknowledges that girls facing intersecting barriers to participation in sport and physical activity will encounter these barriers from an early age. Just as it has recommended improved education in schools around menstrual health, the Committee believes work is needed to improve equalities education related to participation in sport and physical activity. This should improve understanding amongst teachers and fellow pupils of the importance of creating a friendly and inclusive environment for all participants, about any additional support girls facing intersecting barriers to participation may need to enable them to participate and to actively tackle stigma and discrimination, be that conscious or unconscious.

308. The Committee recognises the importance of positive role models to encourage more girls and women facing intersecting barriers to participation in sport and physical activity and to give them the confidence to aspire to progress into elite sport in the future. The Committee strongly encourages the Scottish Government, local authorities, sports governing bodies and schools to work together to identify and promote positive role models who properly reflect diversity and inclusion. Recruitment policies and strategies should encourage and support diverse applicants for coaching and leadership roles.
309. Similarly, imagery and messaging used to encourage participation in sport and physical activity should reflect a culture that is as welcoming and inclusive of diversity as possible.
310. The Committee recognises the particular barriers to participation in sport and physical activity faced by disabled girls and women, related to a lack of accessible and suitably adapted facilities and infrastructure. The more systematic use of equality impact assessments will help to ensure the design of facilities and infrastructure meets the particular needs of disabled participants.
311. The Committee has been encouraged to hear evidence of the success initiatives such as the culture, heritage and sport stream of the Welsh Government's Anti-racist Wales Action Plan have had in encouraging greater participation in sport and physical activity by girls and women from minority ethnic backgrounds. The Scottish Government should explore what lessons it can learn from such initiatives and the potential for similar initiatives to be rolled out in Scotland in the future.
312. The Committee welcomes suggestions made by contributors to the inquiry of ways in which community sport venues can be made more welcoming and inclusive of a diversity of participants, including those from the LGBTQ+ community. In particular, as advocated elsewhere in this report, it recognises the opportunity for changing villages to cater to a diverse range of participants by being family friendly while at the same time offering single sex spaces and options for individual privacy for those who desire it.
313. Related to the Scottish Government's commitment to double funding for sport and physical activity over the course of the current parliamentary term, the Committee notes the Minister's subsequent commitment to this inquiry that she would seek to target this additional funding towards tackling inequality. The Committee highlights evidence submitted to this and other recent inquiries which demonstrates that women tend to be disproportionately impacted by socio-economic inequality. In light of this evidence, it would urge the Scottish Government to make increasing participation in sport and physical activity by those women and girls experiencing intersecting inequalities an overriding priority for investment of this additional funding.

Key barriers to female participation at an elite level

Funding and pay

314. A lack of funding for women's and girls' sports, particularly in comparison to men's and boys' sports, was identified as an important barrier to female participation in elite sport by many respondents to the Committee's call for views. Respondents felt that female athletes were poorly compensated with regard to pay, sponsorship, and prize money. The [LGB Alliance](#) said:
- ” There is a relative lack of funding for women's and girls' elite sport, although this has improved in recent years. Promotion and sponsorship remain lower, and remuneration for female elite athletes is considerably less than for men. In large part, this is a result of sexist ideas about women's sport being inferior and less entertaining than men's sport. Despite the success of the England women's football team, the Lionesses, girls and women continue to experience attitudes regarding female sport as 'not as important' as male sport.
315. Respondents also highlighted that female athletes are often expected to pay their own transport costs to travel to competitions and training. The Committee heard evidence that this challenge particularly affects women and girls in rural areas, who often have to travel to the central belt for competitions. Funding for support such as physiotherapy and high-level training was also considered to be lacking in comparison to men's sport.
316. The inquiry also heard that, due to the lack of funding available, many female athletes have to hold full-time jobs, affecting their capacity to train and compete.
317. During the Committee's [evidence session with elite female athletes](#) on 18 April 2023, international cricketer Priyanaz Chatterji said:
- ” Cricket has largely been amateur for a long time. Things are slowly starting to change but, from what I have heard from other witnesses, I would say that we are probably still quite far behind. This month is the first time that any of the women have received contracts, which are part time—most of them are for one day a week. We obviously have to work in other jobs to support ourselves... I went part time at work to fit in my training, but that was at a cost to myself.
318. Of the 537 elite female athletes from 39 different sports who responded to the BBC's , 84% felt that sportswomen were not paid enough, and that the financial rewards offered were inadequate. 34.5% of respondents earned no money from sport, be that in terms of grants, funding, prize money, salary or sponsorships. A further 25.3% of respondents reported an annual pre-tax income from sport of less than £10,000, suggesting that, overall, a majority of respondents would not be in a position to make a living from sport alone.
319. The found that 83% of sports surveyed offer equal prize money to male and female competitors. However, it is also the case that, [in some sports](#), there are fewer women's tournaments, and therefore fewer opportunities to win prize money.

Research also indicates that female athletes have [fewer opportunities to earn additional money](#) through sponsorships and appearances.

320. The lack of sponsorship money in female elite sport was raised as a barrier to participation by retired Commonwealth Judo player Connie Ramsay who told the Committee:
- ” There is not really a sponsorship side to judo. If someone receives a medal at the Olympics or the worlds, they might get something but, apart from that, there is no sponsorship in judo. We do not ever hear about it or see it, which is quite scary when you consider the success of judo at the Rio Olympic games, where we got a bronze medal, and in London, where we won a bronze and a gold. ⁵⁴
321. The inquiry received evidence that some sporting teams and associations, such as the [Football Association of Wales](#), have introduced equal pay structures for male and female players. In November 2022, Cricket Scotland announced plans to offer [paid contracts to international women's team players](#), following its move in 2021 to pay equal match fees to men's and women's team players. In December 2022, the Scotland national women's football team launched [an employment tribunal against the Scottish Football Association](#), seeking equal pay and conditions.
322. During oral evidence on 18 April 2023, the Committee heard evidence that the majority of funding for women's elite rugby and football is sourced from revenue generated by the men's game. ⁵⁵
323. Retired professional footballer Gemma Fay told the Committee that this creates an inherent challenge and inevitably puts the female sport in a precarious position:
- ” That is the balance that we have to strike. I would like us to get to a place where the women's side of the game can pay for itself. It does not have to make a profit, as long as it can pay for itself, so that it is not under threat if anything happens on the male side of the game...The male game is paid for by broadcasting, sponsorship and investors. We need to get broadcasters, sponsors and investors on the same page for the women's game. ⁵⁶
324. Gemma Fay argued that it would be beneficial for Scotland to explore following the example of the Women's Sport Trust in England which, as an independent body, has done a lot of work to explore the potential for growth in women's sport. She noted that no such body currently exists in Scotland. ⁵⁷
325. The inequality of development pathways between men and women was also raised by some respondents to the Committee's call for views as a further barrier to female participation at an elite level. [Scottish Student Sport](#) said:
- ” Unequal pathways into performance sports still exist, especially within male-dominated sports. From a young age, sports clubs treat young girls and boys differently from girls; kit, coaching, facility access & more.
326. Several respondents to the Committee's call for evidence suggested potential actions to improve long-term financial stability and career viability for elite female athletes. These included funding retired athletes to become coaches or mentors, and developing career pathways that would offer female athletes additional opportunities to bolster their income alongside participation in the sport itself, such

as sports promotion and delivering talks in schools.

327. The Committee welcomes evidence of significant progress in terms of pay and prize money for women in elite sport over recent years but acknowledges there is still much more to be done to achieve anything approaching parity with elite men in sport.
328. The Committee calls on the Scottish Government to explore whether the creation of an independent Women's Sport Trust for Scotland, comparable to the existing body in England, could support the growth in women's sport in Scotland, including growing the revenue generated by women's sports and reducing reliance for funding on the men's game.
329. The Scottish Government should also commission research to explore options for the development of sustainable career pathways for women in elite sport that enable them to pursue their sport at an elite level while earning a sustainable income.

Clothing and equipment

330. The Committee heard evidence that most equipment for women in elite sport is still developed to suit default male proportions and preferences. Lee Craigie, retired professional mountain bike racer suggested the overriding goal of advertising for women in her sport was around superficial appearance rather than the practical functionality of equipment and clothing with the effect that women would view an advertisement and conclude:

” "Oh, she looks good in that," and then go to an online shop where they can buy that item of clothing. If you look at what those brands are selling, you will see that they are selling bikes that are too big for us, equipment that we cannot use because it is unsuitable for our hands, and a range of clothing that is any colour between pink and purple.⁵⁸

331. Giving evidence to the Committee, retired elite athlete Eilidh Doyle recalled that, historically, there has been pressure on female athletes to wear impractical, small and revealing outfits and that, while there have been improvements to the situation in recent years, these problems persist and have yet to be fully addressed. Eilidh noted:

” We need the people in the governing bodies and organisations to be aware that this is an issue. We need a safe space where we can talk about what we can wear, what the options are and how we can make everybody comfortable.⁵⁹

332. The Committee calls on all sporting organisations and governing bodies to ensure that any guidance they produce regarding clothing and equipment for women's sport and physical activity adheres to the principles of practicality,

functionality and freedom of choice.

Women's health in elite sport

333. A lack of understanding of the impact of periods on athletic performance and training at an elite level was raised by a number of respondents to the Committee's call for views. This concern was reflected in the BBC's Elite British Sportswomen's Survey 2020, in which 59.8% of respondents said they felt their period affected their performance while 39.9% of respondents said they felt uncomfortable discussing their period with their coaches.
334. During the Committee's [evidence session with a panel of elite sportswomen](#) on 18 April 2023, Gemma Fay outlined the performance challenges associated with managing periods:
- ” ...we need to normalise talking about not just periods, but the impact that they have on sport and performance. I was a goalkeeper, so hand-eye co-ordination was very important. As I am sure that you will appreciate, when you are on your period, that sometimes goes out the window.
- ...It is important to understand the impact that menstruation has on an elite female athlete's ability to perform their daily tasks. I know that we monitor that more now—we did some great work in rugby to collect data on that—but the data and research on female sports in general are really light.
335. Connie Ramsay highlighted the impact periods can have on younger female athletes aspiring to progress to the elite level of their sport:
- ” You need to look at the stage just before elite athlete, too, because that might be having an effect on why people are not pushing into the elite level. You might have a teenager competing at a high level, and then their period comes and it puts them right off. We train in white judo kits; it is a little bit different from what people have been saying about pinks and purples, but this is a very traditional sport. You have your jacket and your trousers, but everything is in white. As in cricket, it puts teenage girls off coming on to the mat.⁶⁰
336. According to some respondents to the Committee's call for views, training programmes and competition schedules for elite athletes are often based on the "default male" approach. Many felt that better support could be provided to address the impact of the menstrual cycle upon elite athletes' ability to train and compete. More research into the impact of periods on training regimes and injury prevention, and education about periods for coaches working with elite female athletes, were identified by respondents as potential solutions to these challenges. [Fair Play for Women](#) said:

” The physical issues to be managed as a woman in sport, which do not affect men, such as managing the menstrual cycle, are poorly understood and receive little funding or research attention. Research has shown that some injuries occur more among women than men, or are more serious when they occur, e.g. concussion in rugby. The menstrual cycle also plays an important part. Some injuries occur more at certain times of the month, e.g. ACL tears, because ligaments are affected by variation of female hormones through the cycle.

337. In a [written submission](#) to the Committee, Dr Laura Forrest, Senior Lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland, highlighted two key studies in this area which she has published. These studies highlighted both the impact that the menstrual cycle could have on performance and the need for better education on menstruation for coaches and elite athletes.

338. The Committee also heard evidence about the impact pregnancy can have on the careers of elite female athletes. During the [Committee's evidence session on 18 April 2023](#), Gemma Fay called on sports governing bodies to provide the best possible support to female athletes who choose to have a family:

” We have only recently begun to talk about this issue within professional women's sport. Everyone is on a journey. If the governing body of a sport is not on that journey, too, why not? That is what it needs to do. The governing bodies on that journey should collaborate to ensure that they share best practice and support female athletes in allowing them to become the best athletes that they can be and, indeed, the best parents that they can be, if they choose to become parents during their sporting career.

339. Some respondents to the Committee's call for views felt that there was little provision in elite sport for pregnant and post-partum athletes. There was also a perception that elite female athletes were expected to retire following pregnancy and parenthood, forcing a choice between their career and parenthood. [Fair Play for Women](#) commented:

” Older female athletes have to decide whether to start a family, and whether their career must end as a result. There is no practical solution to this biological reality, but better funding options might help such athletes to both have a career and be a mother.

340. 25.5% of respondents to the BBC's Elite British Sportswomen's Survey 2020 said that they felt supported by their club or governing body to have a baby and to continue to compete, and 34.3% stated that they had delayed starting a family due to their sporting career. Greater support for pregnant and post-partum athletes, including maternity leave and pay, and improved provision of childcare, were suggested by respondents as potential actions to address this issue.

341. At the same time, the Committee heard evidence of good practice such as work by Scottish Rugby to develop a policy on pregnancy, parenthood, adoption and egg storing. Meanwhile, the Committee also learned that UK Sport has started to put policies in place to support female athletes who are considering starting a family. Eilidh Doyle told the Committee:

” I had a baby in 2019. When I decided to get pregnant, I was still an athlete, and there was no policy in place at that time. Since then, UK Sport has put in place a policy that says an athlete who decides to start a family cannot be taken off funding—she will still get funding for another year. That is a big step.

342. The Committee also heard that New Zealand cricket is seen as the "gold standard" in this area, with its athletes being supported through a comprehensive four-year pregnancy and parenthood policy.

343. During oral evidence, the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport noted:

” I have never before known a time in my life when elite athletes have talked openly about issues such as menstruation, contraception, pregnancy and sport or menopause and sport. It is really healthy that this debate is finally happening.⁶¹

344. The Committee believes there is an urgent need for further research to gain a better understanding of the impact of menstruation and women's health conditions on training and performance of women in elite sport. It calls on sports governing bodies to prioritise investment in this type of research and on the Scottish Government to explore what more it can do to support and encourage research in this area.

345. The Committee similarly calls for the development and implementation of a targeted programme of education across all sports to give coaches a better understanding of how women's health conditions can affect performance and training and to foster a culture of greater openness between female athletes and their coaches about how certain conditions may affect them and how these can be effectively managed.

346. The Committee is concerned by evidence that many women in elite sport are forced to make a choice between starting a family and continuing their career with a general expectation that women in elite sport will have to end their sporting career when they choose to become pregnant. The Committee believes that, with better support, women in many sports should be able to continue their sporting career post-partum. It has been encouraged by examples of good practice in a number of different sports and different countries where women receive appropriate support to be able to continue their sporting career after becoming a mother. We would urge action by sporting bodies to disseminate best practice in this area more widely across all fields of sport and physical activity at an elite level.

Sexism and abuse

347. Responding to the BBC's Elite British Sportswomen's Survey 2020, 64.6% of elite female athletes reported experiencing sexism in their sport. Of those respondents, 75% said they had not reported the sexism they had experienced.

348. The sexual harassment experienced by some female athletes in elite sport was identified by some respondents to the Committee's call for views as a barrier to female participation in sport and physical activity at all levels. [The Scottish Women's Convention](#) said:

” Women have explained that the masculine culture surrounding elite sport is a major barrier to them. They have stated that the higher levels of sport have fewer girls and women due to poor retention at a young age, meaning they are more likely to be the sole woman within these classes. This can be off-putting, with some women experiencing loneliness and bullying. Women have explained that this culture can also be aggressive and misogynistic, with sexual harassment and assault not being uncommon. They also explained that the culture within elite sports is toxic, harnessing microaggressions, with some women likening it to rape culture. This issue is further worsened through a lack of clear regulation surrounding sexual harassment in elite sport, with women calling for change.

349. Some respondents referenced recent international reports of sexual misconduct and abuse committed by coaches against elite female athletes and called for action to protect women and girls in elite sport from such behaviour.

350. [Women in Sport](#) called for "the creation of an independent non-departmental body committed to tackling misconduct and abuse in sport":

” By introducing an independent body with expertise in the areas of safeguarding, welfare, and duty of care, with no conflicting interests, athletes, volunteers, coaches, and management would be able to have full faith that its findings would be fair and beyond reproach. In short taking this approach would make the sports sector safer for everyone involved and build back trust in the sector, not least amongst female athletes and parents.

351. The Committee has been saddened to hear substantial evidence of women in elite sport and female sports journalists being subjected to sexism and abuse and reiterates its view that there needs to be a zero tolerance approach to tackling such unacceptable behaviour.

352. The Scottish Government, in responding to this report, must provide an update on progress towards implementing the recommendations of the 2019 "Levelling the Playing Field" report and in particular, what impact it expects these measures to have in tackling instances of sexism and abuse towards women in elite sport.

353. The Scottish Government should consider whether an independent body should be set up to tackle misconduct and abuse in sport and, if not, what alternative strategy it has to tackle instances of sexism and abuse towards women in elite sport.

Media coverage and reporting

354. Many respondents to the call for views felt that the perception of women's elite sport

as second best, and the comparative lack of media coverage surrounding women's elite sports, contributed to an overall lack of available funding and sponsorship.

Sexism in the media

355. The inquiry received evidence that elite female athletes can also experience sexism from the media. The Council of Europe's [report on Gender Equality in Sport and the Role of the Media](#) found that female athletes are often portrayed in a "stereotyped, comical, sexualised, and sexist" manner in the media, and noted that this portrayal impacts negatively on female participation in sport. The Scottish Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board's 2019 Levelling the Playing Field report found that 22% of online news articles pertaining to women's sport contained what could be perceived as sexualised reporting or images. The report emphasised that sexualised reporting of female athletes devalues women's contributions to sport.

356. The sexist and sexualised portrayal of women's sport and female athletes in the media could have a negative impact on women and girls more generally. [The Scottish Association for Mental Health](#) (SAMH) said:

” Research published in 2019 by the Scottish Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board found the way that women in sport were publicly portrayed in the media – which was found to often reinforce gender norms and was often sexualised – had a negative effect on self-confidence and esteem. We support the recommendations made by the advisory group to tackle unhelpful media representation and increase women's participation. This includes increased media representation of women's sport and creating more gender balance in executive, management and non-executive (Board) roles across Scottish sport.

357. During oral evidence, Bobby Hain from STV told the Committee he did not recognise any description of the channel's output as stereotypical, sexualised or sexist. He went on to say:

” We carefully consider feedback and analysis, particularly of specifically Scottish output, whether it is ours or anyone else's...We have the Ofcom code, which is a very detailed set of responsibilities that apply to broadcasters generally, and to public service broadcasters in particular. We have a sense of impartiality and fairness that stems from that code and which also goes back to our values, as STV, over 60-plus years.⁶²

Under-reporting and lack of coverage

358. The Committee received evidence that women's sport is commonly under-represented in the media. A [2018 Women in Sport study](#) found that, across the UK, women and girls' sport accounted for 10% of all TV sports coverage during periods involving large international events such as the 2018 Euro football tournament. This declined to just 4% outside the window of these large tournaments. Similarly, coverage of women's sport in print media accounted for 12% of all sports coverage during large tournaments, declining to just 3% at other times. The report also found that coverage of women's sport is inconsistent, and drops considerably between large international events, making it difficult for audiences to follow women's sport on a regular basis. The report suggested that free-to-air channels such as the BBC have an important role to play in increasing visibility of women's elite sport, and that actively scheduling broadcasts of women's sport during gaps in the sporting

calendar may help to improve visibility.

359. On a positive note, evidence suggests public interest in media coverage of women's elite sport has increased in recent years. A [2022 Women's Sport Trust report](#) showed that 36.1 million people watched women's sport on TV between January-July 2022, an increase from 17.5 million during the equivalent period in 2021. Viewing time also increased, with audiences watching for an average of 403 minutes in January-July 2022, compared to 140 minutes during the same period in 2021.
360. However, the BBC's Elite British Sportswomen's Survey 2020 found that although 93.4% of respondents felt that media coverage of women's sport had improved in the previous five years, 85.1% said that the media still does not do enough to promote women's sport, and 86.2% agreed that the media reports differently on men's and women's sports.
361. The view that women's elite sport is inadequately covered and reported by the media was supported by witnesses at the [elite sport evidence session](#) on 18 April 2023. Retired track and field athlete Eilidh Doyle, who is also a member of the board of directors of Scottish Athletics, told the Committee: "The coverage all happens in the two weeks that a championship is on and then athletics is forgotten about". Connie Ramsay, retired Commonwealth judo champion noted a similar situation with Judo, advising: "In the Commonwealth games in Glasgow, Scotland got 13 out of 14 medals, and the coverage was pretty good. However, following that, there was nothing—that was the end of that."
362. In their written response to the Committee's call for views, [Robert Gordon University](#) suggested this lack of consistent coverage and visibility may act as a further barrier to women's participation at all levels:
- ” Often sports and competitions featuring male competitors dominate broadcasting and media channels. There has been an improvement nationally and internationally in the recognition of and appreciation for, and interest in, elite female sports, including in sports typically associated with men, including football and rugby. There does, however, remain a challenge in terms of accessibility to watching and celebrating the successes of many elite female athletes. As a consequence, females may not realise that there is a place for them within elite sport, which can, in turn, contribute to disengagement in sport at earlier stages.
363. [One individual respondent](#) to the Committee's call for views supported a widely expressed view that the comparative lack of coverage of women's sport deters young women and girls from participation in sport and physical activity:
- ” A huge issue is the representation of women's sport. Many television channels will show the male competitions like football and rugby. There are rarely female games on the big channels unless they are doing well (The Lionesses at the Euros for example). Young girls do not get encouraged to play sport the same way boys do and it is very obvious in the media.

Under-representation in sports reporting and broadcasting

364. The Committee heard evidence that female journalists are [more likely to write about women's sport](#) than their male counterparts. However, evidence also indicates that

women remain under-represented in sports broadcasting and print media reporting. Women in Journalism Scotland's 2022 report '[The Sexist Shame of the Beautiful Game](#)' found that, of the 95 permanent staff positions covering sports reporting in Scotland's print media, only three were held by women.

365. A [2018 Ofcom diversity report](#) found that, while women delivered only 6% of BBC One's sports broadcasting, women outnumbered men in major presenting roles on BBC Two by almost 3:1 but that this was drawn from a pool of just three individuals: namely, Clare Balding, Gabby Logan, and Eilidh Barbour. The report expressed concern that the burden of female representation is apparently being shouldered by such a small number of individuals.
366. The [National Council for the Training of Journalists](#) (NCTJ) found that 14% of people applying for NCTJ-accredited sports journalism courses in 2022 were women. This figure represents an increase from 7% in 2021, but is still below the NCTJ's target of 25%. To encourage more applications from women, the NCTJ is currently campaigning to highlight [the importance of gender equality](#) in sports media.
367. We also heard evidence that it is not just female athletes who experience harassment and abuse but also other women working in sports, including sports journalists. 75% of women working in journalism who responded to [a 2023 Women in Journalism survey](#) reported that they had received threats to their safety online or in person in the course of their work. In addition, a quarter of respondents reported direct experience of sexual harassment or sexual violence during their work. Evidence suggests that, although this issue is not unique to sports journalism, the male-dominated nature of the sports reporting has meant that some female sports journalists and broadcasters receive unequal treatment and experience discrimination from colleagues and the public.
368. Surprisingly, when asked, witnesses from the media and broadcasting panel said they were unable to identify any specific barriers faced by women seeking to become sport journalists. Catherine Salmond from The Herald newspaper responded: "The problem is that when we advertise sports reporting jobs, very few women apply...very few females who wanted to be reporters ever wanted to go on the sports desk. To me, in my newsroom and on my sports team, the barriers are not there. I have an incredibly enthusiastic head of sport who is desperate for more women and is actively trying to seek them out, but they are just not coming. I therefore do not think that there are barriers."⁶³
369. John McLennan from the Scottish Newspaper Society told the Committee he was similarly unable to point to any specific barriers to women who may wish to pursue a career in sports media or broadcasting but went on to acknowledge:
- ” ...it is true that sports desks in the print sector are dominated by men. That is still the case...Therefore, if someone who is already in the industry asks themselves where they want to go next and they look across the room and see a phalanx of blokes at the sports desk, that perhaps makes it a less attractive place...That apart...there are no barriers.⁶⁴
370. At the same evidence session, Members of the Committee put it to witnesses that women considering a career in sports broadcasting might be deterred by the prospect of working in a male dominated environment with a particular associated

culture. Catherine Salmond from The Herald did not support this view:

” It is clear that having a gruff, macho culture does not mean being mean to women and putting them off. A lot of women can hold their own quite comfortably among gruff, macho men, so it does not mean that they cannot see themselves having a job there. That point needs to be established. I really do not think that there are some weak female trainee journalists out there who are thinking, "I'd love to join there, but I am scared of all those men".⁶⁵

371. However, this viewpoint was challenged by Margaret Mary Murray from BBC Alba who suggested it wasn't necessarily helpful to refer to an environment of "gruffness" in sports journalism and that, to attract a more diverse range of reporting staff, media organisations should be striving to be supportive and inclusive in their approach.⁶⁶

Improving coverage and reporting of women's elite sport

372. Giving oral evidence to the Committee, Connie Ramsay pointed out the existence of TV programmes with titles such as "SportsScene", which seem to be almost exclusively dedicated to covering men's football. Connie suggested TV coverage should be broadened out to offer highlights and results from a range of sports, including female sports, such as athletics, judo, mountain biking and cricket and that this would help to make these sports more visible.⁶⁷

373. Witnesses at the media and broadcasting session were asked about media coverage of women's elite sport, and whether broadcasters would be willing to broaden their TV offerings to include sports packages that would give viewers the opportunity to see women excelling in a variety of sports. Louise Thornton from BBC Scotland responded that the BBC "absolutely can" do this and is already offering such coverage via online streaming platforms which includes sports such as netball, judo, gymnastics and female boxing.⁶⁸

374. During the same evidence session, the Committee heard evidence that broadcasters are keen to increase the visibility of women's sport on TV. At the same time, witnesses argued that this would require long-term commitment, a strategic approach and appropriate resourcing to be achieved. Louise Thornton from BBC Scotland advised:

” We have seen how women's sport has grown and flourished during the past decade, and a lot of that has to do with the fact that we can offer big-moment, free-to-air coverage...The lesson for the BBC relates to the importance of free-to-air coverage and of having a listed system that is future-fit. We need long-term commitment, because being able to commit to coverage when growing an audience for certain sports is preferable to dipping in and out of things...Obviously, with the growth and success of sports comes an increased commercial cost for rights, so in some ways we are victims of our own success in relation to that.⁶⁹

375. Lee Craigie from The Adventure Syndicate argued there was a need for greater diversity in media coverage to appeal to a broader cross-section of women and inspire more to get involved themselves:

” ...we need to address the issue of our commercial partnerships and ensure that those brands understand the importance and the power of diversity. Usually, there is a huge range of stuff for men and a small women's section. There needs to be a similar range for women, so that all different types of women can look at all the different ways of being in sport, particularly in male-dominated sports such as mountain biking, and say, "I belong in this space." ⁷⁰

376. Catherine Salmond from the Herald told the Committee that, in her view, women's sport does not have a big enough audience to "justify the volume of attention that we give to other sports". She suggested that, in this context, a degree of Government intervention was needed to improve the financial viability of covering women's sport over time:

” For that exposure to grow in order to allow the sporting world of female events to grow, we need a sustainable financial model. If I was to throw everything that I had into covering female sports, it still would not yield the financial returns for our business model...What would help would be a robust financial situation similar to the local democracy reporting scheme that we have in Scotland. That would involve some sort of support from the Government to fund reporters who cover female sports in order to allow the exposure to grow and to enable us to be in a commercially viable situation. ⁷¹

377. On numerous occasions during the inquiry, the Committee has heard many witnesses describe a key barrier to female participation in sport and physical activity as being "you can't be what you can't see". This applies not just to increasing the visibility of women in sport but also to making sure a diverse group of women are visible. Many submissions to the inquiry emphasised the importance for all organisations, particularly media organisations, to have an inclusive culture and recruitment policy. The BBC, STV and ITV all told the Committee that they already have such a culture and policy in place.

Scottish Sport Media Summit

378. In order to "significantly improve and increase the visibility of women's sports, athletes and participants", the Scottish Government gave a specific commitment in its [2021-22 Programme for Government](#) to create a Scottish Sport Media Summit as recommended by the [Levelling the Playing Field report](#) published by the Scottish Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board in 2019. . However, this event is yet to take place.

379. During oral evidence, the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport acknowledged ongoing challenges with the reporting of female sport, including a lack of coverage for sports other than football. Andrew Sinclair, Head of Active Scotland at the Scottish Government suggested that print media was still particularly poor at covering female sport and went on to set out the planned timetable for the Scottish Sport Media Summit:

” ...because the column inches that women's sports get is not good enough. Often, the women's news stories do not focus on their sporting performance but on something in their private life—what they have been up to, who they are married to and that kind of thing. Shifting that dial is what we are looking to achieve through the media summit, which we hope to hold by the end of this year.⁷²

380. The Committee is firmly of the view that improved media coverage of women's elite sport is vital to encouraging greater female participation in sport and physical activity. It is therefore encouraging that the level of media coverage of women's elite sport has increased substantially in recent years. Nonetheless, a great deal more remains to be done. There should be a particular focus on increasing routine coverage of women's elite sport outside the window of major international tournaments and on broadening coverage to include a wider range of different sports and a greater diversity of women in elite sport, including those with disabilities or from minority ethnic backgrounds.

381. The Committee notes evidence suggesting a need for increased Government investment to enable media coverage of women's elite sport to be further expanded in the future. The Scottish Government should consider whether further investment is required and how this might be targeted cost-effectively to maximise the return in terms of expanded media coverage of women's elite sport.

382. The media themselves must also take proactive steps to encourage greater diversity and inclusion within sports journalism, particularly as this relates to organisational culture and recruitment practices.

383. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to organise a Scottish Sport Media Summit during the course of 2023. It should update the Committee by December 2023 on the outcome of the Summit and any particular conclusions or recommendations likely to have a bearing on future media coverage of women's elite sport and how it intends to take these forward.

Impact of social media on female participation at all levels

384. The influence of social media in either empowering or deterring girls and young women from participating in sport and physical activity was reflected in a number of responses to the Committee's call for views. The submission from [Public Health Scotland](#) argued:

” A focus on body image created by social media can also make girls and young women feel worse about sport and physical activity. By placing an emphasis on the 'ideal body' or a specific look which is often unobtainable, image-based platforms depict that participation in physical activity is about physical appearance, seldom emphasising the benefits to health.

385. This was also a key theme in the YWL Committee's report. Their research showed that although most young women engage with fitness-related content, these accounts often make them feel worse about sport and physical activity because they present the ideal of a specific look that is not always healthy, safe, or obtainable.

386. During the Committee's meeting on [14 March 2023](#), Katie Heath of the Young Women's Movement underlined the importance of positive role models on social media:

” It is really important for women to have role models who are accessible to them, especially in social media, but it is also important that they are not being sold ideas that are completely unattainable, for example really controlled ideas around eating or exercise. Exercise should be portrayed as something that is positive, and not as a punishment or a way of changing your body. The messaging is really important. There is such a great role for people who are doing that positively, and there are many wonderful examples of that.

387. Jenni Snell of the Young Women's Movement also noted an increase in misogynistic social media content directed towards women and girls who participate in sport:

” ...we are seeing an increase in misogynistic content on social media. There is a bit of a backlash against young women and girls who are participating in sport, and a lot of potential role models for young women and girls are being targeted by online misogyny and toxic behaviours.⁷³

388. A number of respondents to the Committee's call for views pointed out that elite female athletes receive disproportionate levels of online and social media abuse. A [2022 study by World Athletics](#) found that during the 2022 World Athletics Championships, female athletes were the targets of 60% of social media abuse directed towards competitors, and that most of the abuse was sexist in nature. 29.9% of athletes surveyed by the BBC's Elite British Sportswomen's Survey 2020 had experience of being targeted by social media trolling.

389. Louise Thornton from BBC Scotland suggested that social media can be a

particularly misogynistic environment - with certain platforms being worse than others and women often facing treatment on social media that men simply do not experience. Louise emphasised that BBC Scotland has a duty of care to its staff and that this will typically begin with a conversation around the potential ramifications of posting things on social media. Louise noted:

” We also monitor our output and take action. We will block people, ban people and remove people from our platforms if they break social media guidelines. We were part of a campaign, in partnership with Sky, called "Hate won't win," which was all about supporting female talent in the sports world. It is sad that we have to do that, but it is a matter of fact that we do. ⁷⁴

390. In addition to the impact of social media abuse on current elite female athletes, some respondents to the Committee's call for views expressed concerns that aspiring young female athletes could be deterred from pursuing a career in sport after witnessing this online abuse. The Committee understands that organisations such as the BBC have [reporting and monitoring processes](#) in place for online comments that are intended to identify and remove abusive content.
391. Many respondents to the Committee's call for evidence said they believed sporting bodies should step in to support female athletes facing online abuse and should be doing more to put pressure on social media companies to prevent this abuse. As a potential solution, one respondent suggested introducing fines for social media platforms who fail to address abuse. The Committee learned that, during the Women's Euro 2022 football tournament and as part of a [wider Respect programme](#) to address online abuse in football, UEFA [introduced a platform to monitor and report online abuse](#) and track whether abusive posts were removed from social media after being reported.
392. During oral evidence, Rona Blackwood from the Children's Parliament argued that social media has the potential to be used as a force for good, as distinct from a force for bad. In this context, she felt the focus should be on positive story telling, positive apps and positive messaging around physical activity and sport and body image, with the aim of increasing girls' confidence. ⁷⁵
393. In their 2022 [Gender Equality in Education and Learning report](#), the Children's Parliament highlighted the potential positive role of social media influencers in raising awareness of gender inequality among young people. One female pupil suggested famous influencers should be incentivised to "spread the word that this isn't ok."
394. A group of male pupils who contributed to the 2022 report agreed that boys would be more likely to listen to influencers and celebrities about sexism, particularly if the topic was discussed by male celebrities who are respected by boys and young men.
395. In their report, the YWL Committee expressed support for implementation of the Scottish Government's Advisory Group on Healthy Body Image recommendations, which include addressing body image related concerns regarding health and fitness in future public information campaigns. The Committee also recommended that the Scottish Government consider how it can work with the UK Government to develop and issue new codes of practice to social media companies as part of its strategy for addressing Online Harms.

396. The [UK Online Safety Bill](#) is described by the UK Government as "a new set of laws to protect children and adults online". The intention behind the Bill is to "make social media companies more responsible for their users' safety on their platforms". Under the terms of the Bill, the regulator Ofcom will be given responsibility for checking that platforms have processes in place to protect internet users from harm and how effective these processes are. In particular, the Bill will make social media companies legally responsible for keeping children and young people safe online. It also seeks to protect adults by requiring social media companies to introduce measures to prevent their services being used for illegal activity and to remove any illegal content as well as any content that is banned by their own terms and conditions. Once it becomes law, the legislation will apply throughout the United Kingdom.

397. The Committee recognises the huge influence social media can exert - both positive and negative - on girls and women and their attitudes to and engagement with sport and physical activity. The Committee would encourage sports organisations and governing bodies to consider the development and implementation of proactive social media strategies that seek to amplify the voice of positive role models and to disseminate positive messaging around the health benefits of regular participation in sport and physical activity as well as challenging misogynistic behaviour and attitudes.

398. The Scottish Government should set out what support and guidance it can provide to sports organisations and governing bodies with the development and implementation of their social media strategies.

399. The Scottish Government should work closely with the UK Government to ensure that, through implementation of the UK Online Safety Bill, social media companies can be issued with suitably comprehensive guidance and codes of practice that address the harmful impact of negative body image content on social media. This should include strong sanctions against those companies that persistently fail to regulate such content on their platforms.

Research and evaluation

400. A common theme of a lot of the evidence submitted to the inquiry relates to the importance of research and evaluation in measuring the impact and effectiveness of different policy interventions to address barriers to female participation in sport and physical activity. The Committee heard that a lack of research means there is currently a lack of accurate data on rates of participation across different demographic groups and this in turn makes it more difficult to identify the precise nature and extent of barriers to participation and to what extent particular actions are effective in breaking down those barriers.

401. The Committee received evidence from the Observatory for Sport in Scotland (OSS) that sports in Scotland currently rely heavily on UK research carried out by Sport England and England-based research organisations, many with a primary or exclusive focus on England. To address this, the OSS recommends:

” ...that the Scottish Government commissions new independent research using Scottish organisations and involving key stakeholders at national and local levels in Scotland to shape an up-to-date, informed and accurate Scottish picture. This would create solid foundations for improved understanding and wider evaluation and monitoring of modern trends, changing demand and Covid impact, and inform nationwide interventions to increase girls' and women's sport participation sustainably in the 21st Century. Specifically, there is a requirement to launch a survey of the Scottish population (credible cross-sectional cohort size) to understand the full extent of participation levels both as club members and casual participants, across ages and gender as well as socioeconomic backgrounds, disability, ethnic minorities and other inequalities.

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402. In relation to elite sport, the Committee heard evidence that, currently, only 6 per cent of sports science research is done exclusively on females. Baz Moffat from the Well HQ told the Committee:

” The 6 per cent of research that is done exclusively on females, which covers everything to do with females—pelvic health, breast support, hormones, all the life stages that we go through and our injury risk—is a really small amount of research from which we can start doing stuff, but we are not even addressing that research at the moment. We are not even using the research that we have. Therefore, we could do a huge amount.”⁷⁷

403. During [oral evidence with sport and public health organisations](#) on 30 May 2023 the Committee heard that where advice and research does exist, it is being done in isolation and lacks an integrated approach. Maureen McGonigle from Scottish Women in Sport suggested: "We need to look at how we can pull those things together so that everyone can benefit from the knowledge that is gained."

404. The Committee also heard evidence that this lack of data and research creates challenges in addressing the needs of women and girls facing other, intersecting barriers to participation in sport and physical activity. Heidi Vistisen from LEAP Sports noted there is no centralised system that shows how many athletes or participants have a mental health impairment, who might be LGBTIQ or who might

have a physical disability. She suggested this means current rates of participation in individual sports remain unknown.⁷⁸

405. The Committee heard similar evidence of a failure to systematically capture data on rates of participation amongst women and girls from different ethnicities, making it difficult to target policy interventions effectively to tackle barriers to participation amongst different minority ethnic and religious communities. South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture provided evidence of a varied picture related to the collection of data in this area:

” In a number of health intervention programmes that are co-produced by health and social care, we have everything from which Scottish index of multiple deprivation zone people are in right through to their protected characteristics and so on....with casual users of the gym or swimming pool—we will not have that information. Any approach in that respect would be based on the pretty simplistic theme of removing barriers to access, which would mean that, as a result, you would not be asking reams of questions—not even the most basic health questions, never mind anything on diversity. We therefore do not have that breakdown for our entire estate.⁷⁹

406. Meanwhile, Ewelina Chin told the Committee that, alongside other key indicators, her organisation, HTAR Scotland, has processes in place for the systematic collection of data on ethnicity:

” Gathering basic information is key for providing the right response. An intake assessment process is part of our work. Through that, we gather basic information to provide a safe service. Getting to know someone's ethnicity is an integral part of a trauma-sensitive and person-centred approach. Not only does the intake assessment give us information about family status, social inclusion and ethnicity but it identifies individual needs.⁸⁰

407. Ailsa Wyllie from sportscotland also told the Committee that her organisation collects data on ethnicity through its Active Schools programme and regular surveys of sports governing bodies. Andrew Sinclair, Head of Active Scotland at the Scottish Government confirmed this to be the case, concluding: "Sportscotland collects a lot of good information, particularly around its major programmes such as the active schools programme".⁸¹

408. Andrew Sinclair also advised that, as part of national governing structures, Active Scotland has a data and evidence group comprising BAME partners from across Scotland. When asked whether collated data would be centralised to enable others to research and interrogate it, the Minister responded:

” We will certainly be able to interrogate it to an extent with the individual sports governing bodies. However, as I said, it is a challenging area in which to coalesce all that data and to draw conclusions, because there are so many individual aspects to the sport and to the ethnicity. It is really important that we do not make assumptions, but I am absolutely open to conversations about how we improve BAME participation.⁸²

409. During the Committee's evidence session with representatives of sports governing bodies and other high-level organisations on 30 May 2023, witnesses discussed

measures that might be taken to improve evaluation of policy and funding interventions to increase participation in sport and physical activity. In response, Kim Atkinson of The SSA advocated the introduction of a new National Outcome related to sport and physical activity, which includes acknowledgement of the associated mental health benefits. Scotland's [National Performance Framework](#) will shortly undergo its next five-year review, including scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament.⁸³ The Scottish Government [recently held a public consultation](#) seeking views on the current and potential future National Outcomes, which closed on 5 June 2023.

410. When asked if the Scottish Government would consider introducing a specific outcome for sport and physical activity as part of the National Performance Framework, Andrew Sinclair, Head of Active Scotland at the Scottish Government replied:

” Physical activity features in the NPF, which talks about being healthy and active. Therefore, I feel that we are quite well represented in that space. We also have the active Scotland outcomes framework, which sits below that and which talks about our whole-systems approach to physical activity and how we implement things in Scotland.⁸⁴

411. The Committee acknowledges the existence of data on participation in sport and physical activity by people from different ethnic backgrounds through the Scottish Government's Active Schools and Active Scotland programmes. Nonetheless, it has been concerned to receive evidence of an overall lack of sufficient research and data to inform policy-making in this area, whether that is aimed at understanding the impact of certain women's health conditions on sporting performance at an elite level or capturing an accurate picture of current rates of participation in different sports by women and girls, including those facing a range of intersecting inequalities.

412. The Committee highlights the critical importance of creating an accurate and comprehensive benchmark to measure the effectiveness of future policy interventions aimed at increasing female participation in sport and physical activity. It therefore urges the Scottish Government, as a matter of priority and as recommended by the OSS, to commission a population-level survey to measure current rates of participation in sport and physical activity, broken down by age, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, disability, sexuality, ethnic and religious background and other inequalities.

413. The Scottish Government should also explore ways of incentivising research organisations in receipt of public funding to direct more of their resources towards sports science research specifically focused on women.

414. While accepting there is already an existing focus within the National Performance Framework on being active and healthy, the Committee would welcome a debate, as part of the forthcoming five-year review, as to whether a more specific National Outcome on rates of participation in sport and physical activity could act as a positive driver of future policy to increase rates of female participation.

Annexe A - Extracts from the Minutes of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Meetings

9th meeting (Session 6), 14 March 2023

4. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—

- Katie Heath and Jenni Snell, Young Women Lead Committee, The Young Women's Movement.

6. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 4.

10th meeting (Session 6), 21 March 2023

3. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—

- Kate Joester, Policy and Influencing Coordinator Scotland, Living Streets Scotland;
- Cecilia Oram, Head of Behaviour Change, Sustrans Scotland;
- Patrick Murphy, Senior Manager, South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture;
- Kirsty Garrett, Sports Development and Physical Activity Manager, Glasgow Life; and
- Euan Lowe, Chief Executive, Scottish Swimming.

7. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 3.

12th meeting (Session 6), 28 March 2023

3. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—

- Dr Mairi Stark, Scottish Officer, Royal College of Paediatrics & Child Health;
- Rona Blackwood, Head of Programmes, Children's Parliament; and
- Eilidh Paterson, Inclusion & Culture Development Coordinator, Scottish Student Sport.

6. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 3.

[13th meeting \(Session 6\), 18 April 2023](#)

3. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—

- Priyanaz Chatterji, International cricketer;
- Lee Craigie, Retired professional mountain bike racer and Director, The Adventure Syndicate;
- Eilidh Doyle, Retired track and field athlete and Board of Directors, Scottish Athletics;
- Gemma Fay, Retired international footballer; and
- Connie Ramsay, Retired Commonwealth judo champion.

5. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 3.

[14th meeting \(Session 6\), 25 April 2023](#)

3. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—

- Bobby Hain, Managing Director of Broadcasting, STV;
- Catherine Houlihan, Managing Editor, ITV Borders;
- John McLellan, Director, Scottish Newspaper Society;
- Margaret Mary Murray, Head of BBC Gaelic Language Services and Inclusion and Louise Thornton, Head of Commissioning, BBC Scotland;
- Catherine Salmond, Editor, The Herald.

4. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 3.

[18th meeting \(Session 6\), 23 May 2023](#)

3. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—

- Robert Nesbitt, Head of Physical Activity and Sport, SAMH;
- Heidi Vistisen, Policy Manager, LEAP Sports Scotland;
- Ewelina Chin, CEO, HSTAR Scotland, representing BEMIS;
- Lynne Glen, Pathways Manager, Scottish Disability Sport;
- Baz Moffat, CEO and Co-founder, The Well HQ.

5. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 3.

[19th meeting \(Session 6\), 30 May 2023](#)

2. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—

- Kim Atkinson, Chief Executive Officer, Scottish Sports Association;
- David Ferguson, Chief Executive, Observatory for Sport in Scotland;
- Flora Jackson, Health Improvement Manager, Public Health Scotland;
- Maureen McGonigle, Chief Executive Officer, Scottish Women in Sport; and
- Ailsa Wyllie, Lead Manager, sportscotland.

5. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 2.

[20th meeting \(Session 6\), 6 June 2023](#)

3. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee took evidence from—Maree Todd, Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport and Andrew Sinclair, Head of Active Scotland, Scottish Government.

5. Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity:

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 3.

Annexe B - Official Reports of meetings of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

- [14 March 2023](#) - evidence from the Young Women's Movement
- [21 March 2023](#) - evidence from stakeholders
- [28 March 2023](#) - evidence from stakeholders
- [18 April 2023](#) - evidence from stakeholders
- [25 April 2023](#) - evidence from stakeholders
- [23 May 2023](#) - evidence from stakeholders
- [30 May 2023](#) - evidence from stakeholders
- [6 June 2023](#) - evidence from the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport

- 1 [Health, Social Care and Sport, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 2 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 3 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 4 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 5 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 6 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 7 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 8 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 9 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 10 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 11 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 12 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 13 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 June 2023](#)
- 14 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 15 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 June 2023](#)
- 16 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 17 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 18 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 14 March 2023](#)
- 19 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 20 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 21 [Scottish Women's Convention written submission](#)
- 22 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 23 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 24 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 25 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 26 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 May 2023](#)
- 27 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 28 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 29 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Female participation in sport and physical activity, 7th Report, 2023 (Session 6)

- 30 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 31 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 May 2023](#)
- 32 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 33 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 May 2023](#)
- 34 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 May 2023](#)
- 35 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 May 2023](#)
- 36 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 37 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 May 2023](#)
- 38 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 39 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 40 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 41 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 42 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 43 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 44 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 45 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 46 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 47 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 14 March 2023](#)
- 48 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 49 [Fighting Chance Project written submission](#)
- 50 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 51 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report. 6 June 2023](#)
- 52 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report. 6 June 2023](#)
- 53 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report. 6 June 2023](#)
- 54 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 55 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 56 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 57 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 58 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)

- 59 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 60 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 61 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 62 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 63 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 64 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 65 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 66 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 67 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 68 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 69 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 70 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 18 April 2023](#)
- 71 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 72 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 73 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 14 March 2023](#)
- 74 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 25 April 2023](#)
- 75 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 28 March 2023](#)
- 76 [Observatory for Sport in Scotland written submission](#)
- 77 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 78 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 79 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 21 March 2023](#)
- 80 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 23 May 2023](#)
- 81 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 82 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)
- 83 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 30 May 2023](#)
- 84 [Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Official Report, 6 June 2023](#)

