

Loneliness Strategy: Call for evidence - Submission by the Sport and Recreation Alliance

The Sport and Recreation Alliance

1. The Sport and Recreation Alliance believes that the power of sport and recreation can change lives and bring communities and people together. Together with our members and in partnership with the wider sector, we make the most of opportunities and tackle the areas that provide a challenge. We provide advice, support and guidance to our members who represent the outdoor recreation sector, traditional governing bodies of games and sport, county sports partnerships, water pursuits, and movement and dance exercise. As the voice of the sector, we work with Government, policy makers and the media to make sure grassroots sport and recreation grows and thrives. Having an active nation is important as it delivers huge benefits to society and the millions of participants, volunteers, staff and spectators.

The value of sport and recreation in tackling loneliness and isolation

2. We welcome the opportunity from Government to input to the call for evidence. The Alliance firmly believes that sport and recreation plays a fundamental role in integration, socialising and the prevention of loneliness across the country, and moreover has the potential to broaden and deepen its impact in these areas if supported in a consistent and joined-up way.
3. Sport and the reduction of isolation and loneliness go hand in hand. Sport clubs and other grassroots sport organisations are community hubs which act as a social 'glue' in people's lives and provide a unique infrastructure through which to unite people and communities. Clubs and organisations traditionally bring people together on a regular basis, thus facilitating meaningful, long-lasting relationships which prevent loneliness.
4. Various studies over many years show that sport is a vehicle for catalysing social interaction and, as such, is an important tool to combat loneliness and isolation. As an example, the Alliance's *Game of Life* report identifies that 1 in 3 people have only 1 or 2 close friends, however a considerable 4 in 5 people say that they make friends through exercising and sport.¹ Many people are attracted to clubs by the social value which they deliver, as much as the well-known physical activity benefits. It is therefore important that the loneliness strategy recognises this social value and supports wider initiatives to develop the sporting 'community infrastructure'.
5. Similarly, research shows that sports club membership has a positive effect on life satisfaction and happiness equivalent to an increase of £3,600 in household income.² Furthermore, the same research

¹ *Game of Life*, Sport and Recreation Alliance: <http://sramedia.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/2d77274e-af6d-4420-bdfb-da83c3e64772.pdf>

² Ibid.

also discovered that sports club members in the UK are more likely than non-members to meet socially with friends alongside other indicators of social capital.³

The importance of a joined-up approach

6. The ability of Government to effectively reduce isolation and loneliness requires a joined up working approach through other existing and emerging Government strategies. For example, *Sporting Future* identifies the importance of delivering against specific outcomes – notably individual wellbeing but also social and community development. Such priorities are also reflected in the development of more recent strategies, namely the Civil Society Strategy and the Integrated Communities Strategy and it is important that these strategies are linked together and supported by coordination across the relevant government departments.

Sport and recreation as a preventative tool

7. More broadly, sport and recreation plays an important role in tackling mental health problems and reducing the associated stigma. The loneliness review identifies certain trigger points at which people are at a greater risk of loneliness. One of these is poor health and sport has a critical preventative role to play in helping to provide an outlet and source of community for people in these difficult life stages, many of whom will suffer from mental health problems.
8. Similarly, sport and recreation can help young people at risk of loneliness where the ramifications for their future prospects and academic attainment can be significant. Research shows that sport and physical activity is an effective mechanism for supporting young people at risk – a study carried out on over 2,500 adolescent students found that depressive symptoms fell by 8% per hour of additional exercise undertaken by participants.⁴ It is therefore important that children and young people are provided a variety of opportunities to be active both inside and outside of formal education settings.
9. In terms of wider examples of how sport and recreation can tackle loneliness, isolation and mental health problems, we would draw your attention to the following:

Rounders England inclusive rounders – Rounders England led a project to provide inclusive rounders sessions that support women to benefit physically and mentally from being active. Over a few years Claire has suffered with anxiety which on occasions has led to depression, which she managed by medication. Claire saw an advert for 'Back to Rounders for Ladies', run by Somerset Activity & Sports Partnership (SASP). She was nervous, overweight, unfit and under confident. As time went by, the group's confidence grew, their fitness improved and it had a marked effect on Claire's moods. She looked forward to Thursday morning. The group became more than a team. They encouraged each other, didn't judge each other and became friends⁵.

The Greater London Authority's London Together Fund⁶ - The London Together Fund is a project which uses sport and physical activity as a tool for social change, bringing together people from a diverse range of backgrounds and combatting loneliness and isolation. The Fund demonstrates how sport and recreation can be used to deliver these wider policy objectives and may provide a scalable model for replication by other local authorities.

Conclusion

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mental Health Charter, Case Study: <http://sramedia.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/a8e6ad47-f44d-452c-b30c-65ce9e36e10c.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/sports/london-together-using-sport-increase-social-integration>

10. Sport and recreation has an important role to play in addressing loneliness and isolation by bringing individuals and communities together. It can also help individuals cope better at high risk trigger points and particularly where individuals may suffer from associated mental health problems. We therefore encourage Government to utilise sport and recreation to help achieve its objectives on loneliness and isolation and to ensure there is a coordinated approach between departments to join up the various strategies covering sport, social integration, civil society and loneliness.

**Sport and Recreation Alliance
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