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Country profile: sport and physical activity policy in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the successful devolution referendum in 1997 and the passing of the Scotland Act 1998, several legislative powers were devolved from the Government of the United Kingdom to the new Scottish Parliament including responsibility for sport, health and education. In consideration of this initial constitutional change, and subsequent amendments to taxation and welfare, this country profile provides an overview of how sport is organised and governed in Scotland, including the evolving trends in sport and physical activity policy. The aim is to analyse sport and physical activity policy in Scotland and to explore the wider social, political and economic challenges that impact upon its successful enactment. The profile begins with a historical evaluation of sport in Scotland and the key policy developments that have shaped it across the 20th and 21st century. This is followed by an evaluation of the current politics, structure and funding of sport in Scotland. In building upon those evaluations, three significant and inter-connected contemporary issues in Scottish sport are critically analysed. Whilst there are other relevant contemporary issues worthy of critique, we contend that (1) mega sport event legacies; (2) equality and inequality in sports participation and, (3) health inequalities are the most relevant to the Scottish Governments wider policy agenda and the role of sport and physical activity within it. Finally, a summary of the key findings is presented alongside recommendations for future research in sport and physical activity in Scotland.

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Historical context

For centuries sport has had a presence in Scottish culture and society, with archery, bowls, curling, football, golf, shinty, the Highland Games, and horse-racing, amongst others, engaged in by Scots from the 16th century onwards (Tranter 1989b). From the late 1800s, in line with wider industrialisation and economic growth and development, existing sports communities began to be formalised into clubs with regulations and common rules and systems. The formalisation of sport was led by volunteers with an intention to standardise rules of play amongst the sporting community, rather than through input or steering from government and national policy actors. Indeed, there was little government involvement or direct funding for sport through the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, with the sports community remaining largely autonomous, relying on volunteers and private patronage to fuel development (Tranter 1989a).

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In relation to the autonomy of sport in Scotland, Highland Games and shinty provide important cultural and sporting distinctions within Scotland. Since the earliest documented Highland Games took place at Braemar in 1817, they have maintained an important cultural connection to different groups across Scotland. Their continued existence as a sporting, cultural and community-based event demonstrates the importance of historical links and traditions (Brewster *et al.* 2009). Alongside Highland Games, Shinty is another cultural practice that symbolises a self-conscious Highland cultural community within the Scottish nation, providing a vehicle through which Highland Scots can articulate their cultural image of Scotland (Reid 1998, 2013).

Whilst the Highland Games and shinty are representative of cultural and social distinctions in sport within Scotland, from the early 20th century Scottish sport generally existed within a social and cultural context distinct from the other Home Nations of the United Kingdom (UK). Scottish sport was a sphere that was slow to develop due to a lack of public funding to support development of public sport facilities until the 1960s. Coupled with this, levels of urban poverty, heightened urban and rural distinctions, an alternative physical education (PE) curriculum and teaching methods, and a somewhat harsher climate, meant that throughout their lives Scots experienced and engaged with sport in different ways to their counterparts elsewhere in the UK.

Through the interwar and post-war years, the Scottish population was statistically less 'healthy' than England and Wales, with key developments in health, sport and exercise provision, and participation, moving at a slower pace. Scotland's climate called for reliance upon indoor facilities for much of the year in a more pronounced way than in the somewhat milder southern climates. Yet, apart from local community sports facilities (e.g. tennis courts, bowling greens, playing fields), there was a recognised shortage of running tracks and inclusive indoor multi-sports facilities in Scotland until the late 1960s (Macrae 2013). Scottish schools also had their own physical education curriculum with the Scottish Education Department (SED) informing decisions about school sport, thus the experiences of schoolchildren in Scotland were distinct from those of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Skillen 2013, Macrae 2016). The SED contributed to many of the structural and financial decisions which moulded the way Scottish sports facilities developed. All of this shaped a distinctly Scottish experience of sport in the mid-twentieth century, albeit informed and directed by the policy priorities of the UK Government. From this period on, policy developments in Scottish sport were driven by policy decisions being made by the UK Government.

Politically, the development of community sport became more of a focus in the late 1950s and 1960s, once Britain gained distance and recouped some strength after years of social and cultural austerity during and following the Second World War. Nineteen fifty-seven saw the Central Council of Physical Recreation (CCPR) commissioning Sir John Wolfenden to research the position of games, sports, and participation in physical recreation throughout Britain, to identify areas for improvement. This had been prompted by worries about the poor position of British sport on the international front. Wolfenden's report *Sport in the Community* (1960) and its recommendations were gradually acted upon over the following decade, and for the first time in British history the government made a concerted and, in some cases, financially supported effort to develop the infrastructure of sport (MacDonald 2011). In line with another Wolfenden recommendation, Regional Sport Councils were established throughout Britain from 1965, with an individual Sports Council for Scotland to address local needs and prioritise facility development (Macrae 2016). The Scottish Sports Council (now Sportscotland) was established by Royal Charter in 1972.

Sport in the Community has been recognised as the catalyst for pursuing 'Sport for All' policies in the UK. Through the late 1960s and 1970s this policy drive resulted in targeted programmes and initiatives for 'disadvantaged groups' of traditionally low participation in sport in Scotland (Henry 2001). Around this time indoor multi-sports facility development flourished, benefitting from directed spending and focus, with revamped changing rooms, and creche facilities on some sites like Bellahouston Sports Centre, which opened in Glasgow in 1968 as a prototype sports centre to guide this new inclusive direction. Between 1968 and 1975 the number of indoor multi-sports centres in

Scotland rose from one to 42 as this modern take on sports provision was embraced by private investors and local authorities, alike (Brown 1999).

In terms of international presence and elite sport in Scotland, actual directed government funding and support was fragmentary and limited, but 1970 saw Edinburgh host the British Commonwealth Games, the first of three times the Games would be held in Scotland over coming decades. Skillen and McDowell (2014) have shown how the marketing and delivery of these Games helped emphasise a certain brand of Scottish sport geared towards international tourists. The Games bid and subsequent event branding emphasised not only the athletics and other individual sports which had a presence at the Games, but also the traditional, 'romantic' Scottish sports which had a long-standing presence in attracting elite tourists for hunting, golf, fishing, and Highland Games (Durie 2003). The hosting of the Games was the beginning of Scotland showing itself as a capable host of major sport events, of which more will be noted later in this paper.

From the election of a new UK Conservative Government in 1979, and onwards into the 1980s, the dominant thread in sport policy was a focus on the wider issues of political and social unrest. With unemployment and inner city rioting prominent throughout the UK, sport funding was both gradually reduced and redirected to programmes to foster community cohesion amongst 'troublesome' groups, though focus was on the 'symptoms' rather than causes of this unrest (Green 2006, p. 225). Henry (2001) argues that this resulted in the wider disadvantaged groups of the original Sport for All policy (such as women, older adults, disabled people) being neglected in the realigned priorities. The Sport for All policy objectives limited investment in elite sport. Whilst some funding was made available through the Great British Sport Council, elite sport was not a priority for the UK government at this time. All this made for a patchy and confused landscape of Scottish sport policy pre-1990s.

However, 1994 brought a major shift in the sport development and funding landscape with the introduction of UK National Lottery Funding, some of which could be directed towards sport (as an identified 'good cause'), from community through to elite levels. John Major's UK Conservative Government of the 1990s planned to enhance sport at all levels, with a detailed policy outline of this in *Sport: Raising the Game* (1995), and National Lottery funding was there to bolster these policy ambitions. Yet, 1997 brought a newly elected Labour Government, and following the Scotland Act (1998), the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. As a result, responsibility for sport, health and education were devolved to the Scottish Government. Over the following two decades, a range of sport strategies were published aiming to shape and strategically develop the complex system of Scottish sport. This commenced with *Sport 21: the National Strategy for Sport* in 1998, and an update of this in 2003 *Sport 21 2003–2007*, with a sport participation priority to get more Scots playing more sport more often. Scotland's first national physical activity strategy *Let's make Scotland more Active* (2003) was published simultaneously, with a physical activity emphasis, in contrast to the sport focus of *Sport 21: Reaching Higher: Building on the Success of Sport 21* (2007) set out long-term visions and delivery plans for sport through to 2020, aiming to develop a robust, inclusive culture of sport in Scotland. Aspects of inclusion and equality continued to be strongly emphasised within the subsequently published Corporate Strategy of Sportscotland *Sport for Life* (2019). These key strategy documents continue to shape the direction of Scottish sport and physical activity in the twenty-first century.

Politics of sport in Scotland

Whilst the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 offered greater opportunities for Scotland-specific sport policy, a political and economic imbalance between Scotland and England remained. The imbalance plays out in the political economy of the United Kingdom, with '*England holding a historically dominant position in terms of relative distribution of wealth, resources and political control*' (Whigham 2015, p. 443). For example, the Scotland Act 2016 devolved power to the Scottish Government to set income tax rates and bands but, control over National Insurance, wealth taxes, corporate taxes, VAT, and excise duties remain reserved to the UK Government. These complex financial arrangements within the UK have arguably limited the capacity for long-term core funding

at local and national levels, increasing the risk to sport and physical activity in Scotland (Reid 2018, Congreve 2019, Jarvie 2019). The financial pressures placed on sporting clubs and organisations was acknowledged by the Scottish Government, however, due to the allocation of public budgets, they state that they were unable to commit to longer term funding settlements (Scottish Government 2019a).

The political complexity of funding Scottish sport has been reinforced by two significant political developments since devolution. First, austerity with policies from Westminster reaching the Scottish Government via the Barnett formula which gives a population share of UK spending cuts to Scotland. UK Government austerity policies have been presented as a key factor influencing Scottish Government choices regarding the funding of sport and physical activity (Jarvie and Birnbacher 2018). Second, the European Union (EU) referendum in 2016, where the UK collectively voted to leave the EU, but Scotland voted 62% to 38% to remain (Reid 2018). Alongside austerity and Brexit sits the ongoing constitutional issue of Scottish independence. The Scottish National Party's (SNP) overall majority in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections allowed them to successfully pursue their mandate on holding a Scottish independence referendum (Whigham and Black 2020). The referendum on Scottish independence held on 18 September 2014 resulted in 55.3% of the Scottish electorate voting 'No' to Scotland becoming an independent nation (BBC, 2014).

Despite the failed referendum, austerity and the vote to leave the EU, the SNP continues to dominate in both Scottish and UK elections. This dominance has influenced sport policy in Scotland in two fundamental ways. Firstly, policy for sport and physical activity is driven by the Scottish Government's health and wellbeing agenda. The role of sport and physical activity policy within a health and wellbeing agenda is to support people to be more active more often with the understanding that physical activity is vital to enabling a healthy and active population (Scottish Government 2018b; Sport Scotland, 2019).

Secondly, there is the contribution of sport to the prominence and nature of contemporary Scottish nationalism and national identity (Whigham 2022). Political narratives around national identity, independence and sport in Scotland have at times been well constructed. The utilisation of sport as a focus for Scottish nationalism and identity were evident during the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games and continue to be utilised through current international sporting events, particularly the annual Six Nations rugby union competition. However, these interwoven narratives are not necessarily representative of the current political reality in Scotland. Whilst sport has a role to play in developing national identity in Scotland, the strength of the relationship between sporting nationalism and political nationalism remains questionable (Jarvie 2003, Shenhav 2006, Whigham et al. 2019). Any expression of Scottish sporting nationalism should not be conflated with support for Scottish political nationalism, nor the cause of Scottish independence (Whigham 2022).

Nevertheless, the prospect of Scottish independence remains a salient issue within British politics (Whigham 2019). The SNP state that their continued electoral success in Scotland provides a mandate for a new independence referendum and with those aged 16–24 split 59% to 41% in favour of independence (YouGov 2022), the likelihood of a future reformulation of the political, economic, cultural, and social dynamics of the UK is high (Whigham 2015). As it stands currently Scotland remains part of the UK and this looks likely to be the case for some time yet. Scotland's position as part of the UK inevitably impacts upon the way in which sport and physical activity are structured and funded.

Structure of sport in Scotland

The current structure for sport and physical activity in Scotland has been adapted from Jarvie (2019) and is outlined in Figure 1:

Within the Scottish Government responsibility for sport and physical activity resides with the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport. This ministerial position sits within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. The role of the minister is to

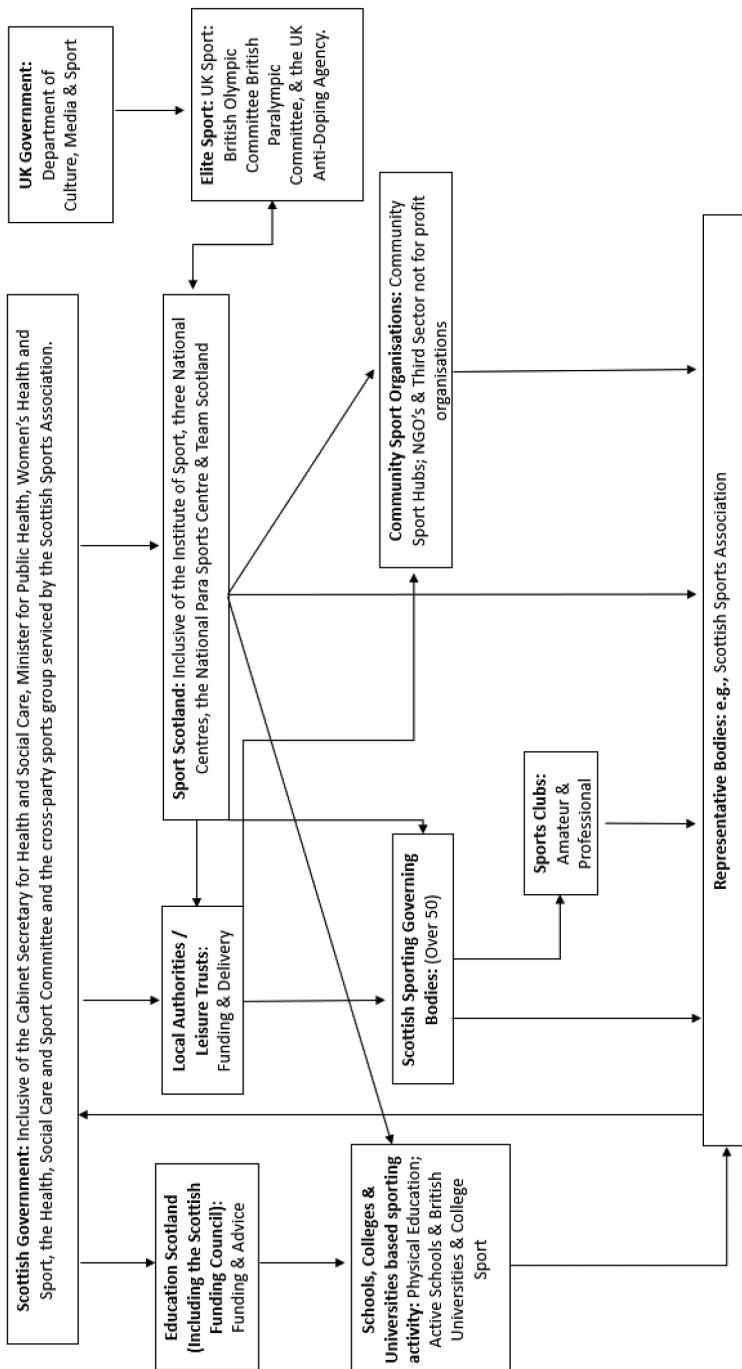


Figure 1. The current structure for sport and physical activity in Scotland.

promote the value of sport, lead on national policy and strategy, act as the primary funding agent and coordinate cross cutting agendas with other government departments e.g. Education. Cross party scrutiny of sport and physical activity policy is undertaken through the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee which was established in June 2021. There is also an active cross-party sports group serviced by the Scottish Sports Association. Their purpose is to support the development of sport and physical activity, raise the profile of sport in the Scottish Parliament, influence Scottish Government policy and liaise with relevant sport organisations (Jarvie 2019).

Currently, the Scottish sporting system is supported by a range of partners across grassroots and elite sport including the national agency for sport, Sportscotland. As an independent non-departmental public body funded by the Scottish Government and the National Lottery, Sportscotland report through Scottish Ministers to the Scottish Parliament (Sport Scotland, 2019). The organisation is inclusive of the Sportscotland Institute of Sport, three National Centres (Glenmore, Cumbrae, Inverclyde), the National Para Sports Centre and Team Scotland. Its aim is to build a world class sporting system in Scotland, within clubs and communities, schools and education and performance sport (Robertson Trust, 2017). The role of Sportscotland is to make sure sport plays its part in Scotland through influencing, informing and investing in the organisations and people who deliver sport and physical activity (Sportscotland 2016). They also provide advice and strategic direction on sports policy, develop programmes to support, implement and monitor policy, invest Scottish Government funding in line with national priorities, distribute National Lottery funding, and provide leadership and support for over 57 recognised governing bodies of sport (SGBs) who represent over 13,000 sports clubs (Sportscotland 2019). Whilst Sportscotland provide support across the sporting system, greater clarity is required for SGBs and clubs to address the growing health and social challenges that exist in Scottish society and to capture their impact in responding to them (Jarvie 2019).

Alongside provision from Sportscotland there are 32 local authorities in Scotland that have a statutory obligation with regards to the provision of sport and leisure. The sporting structure in Scotland also includes community sports hubs, education, the private sector, NGO's and third sector not for profit organisations. In relation to third sector not for profit organisations, football plays a key role. The community programmes of professional clubs address a variety of social issues including mental health, educational disengagement and anti-social behaviour through varied activities and projects. The additional activity that football clubs undertake in Scotland can produce significant benefits, providing community support and connection that many other organisations cannot (McNiven and Harris 2021). UEFA's Social Return on Investment model recognised the positive economic, social and wellbeing impact that football has on the people of Scotland. Football contributes £242.3 million to the Scottish economy, £352 million to the economic impact of social benefits and £762.6 million to health care savings (Scottish FA, 2022).

As a significant aspect of the sporting structure in Scotland the education system includes 15 universities, 3 colleges of higher education, 17 colleges of further education and the school estate. A significant investment is provided for schools each year in support of physical activity and physical education. Sportscotland invested £11.6 million between 2012 and 2016 in supporting schools to meet the physical education commitment of two hours (primary pupils) and two periods (secondary pupils) per week. The percentage of schools meeting this commitment rose from 10% in 2004/5 to 99% in 2018 (*Scotland's Physical Activity Delivery Plan*, 2018). Sportscotland has also increased the opportunities for school pupils to take part in sport through the Active Schools programme of which more will be noted later in this paper.

Funding

In Scotland sport is funded through three streams (1) Grant in Aid from the Scottish Government, which includes both a capital and a revenue stream; (2) General Fund for sport from the Scottish Government that may be allocated or withdrawn from sport and is within the gift of ministers

outwith the Health and Sport portfolio and (3) UK National Lottery Funding allocated to sport in Scotland (Jarvie and Birnbacher 2018). Funds are diverted by the Scottish Government to Sportscotland for distribution across the sporting sector with approximately 95% of sport funding through Sportscotland and local authority targeted at grassroots sport (Jarvie 2019). A more detailed breakdown of funding for Sportscotland is presented in [Table 1](#):

From a high level of investment in 2016–17 of £77,455,000, total funding has decreased in 2022 to £61,131,000. This drop is partly accounted for in capital spend on the Inverclyde National Sport training centre in 2016 and the subsequent drop in funding for places. Further to this reduction, there has been a 23% drop in National Lottery funding between 2016 and 2022. Between 2017–18 and 2022 total funding has remained relatively constant, but this does not consider real term funding cuts associated with increased cost of living and inflation being experienced by sporting organisations in Scotland.

The presentation of funding has been streamlined since 2019–20 with data now only available for schools and education, clubs and communities, and performance sport which reduces the capacity for more in-depth analysis of how the funds are being utilised. Although funding has been streamlined [Table 1](#) shows where this money has been broadly spent. Funding for performance fluctuates year on year depending upon upcoming events and funding for schools and education has risen slightly since 2019–20. Funding for clubs and communities has increased significantly highlighting where the original funds for people, places, partnerships, and the organisation have been allocated to.

Further funding is provided through the 32 local authorities in Scotland. Grant Aided Expenditure (GAE) is the needs-based methodology used to allocate funding equitably amongst the 32 local authorities of Scotland. Funding for parks and recreation across the 32 local authorities for 2022 was £129 million. For sport facilities and swimming pools the total was £86 million (Scottish Government, 2022a). When this spending is combined with the funding for Sportscotland in 2022 the combined total is £276 million spent on sport, recreation and leisure. Overall, the Scottish Government budget for 2022/23 is £56.5 billion. The percentage annual spend on sport, recreation and leisure is 0.49% of overall spending.

In 2020, COVID-19 brought significant challenges to sport in Scotland. In seeking to address these, Sportscotland loosened the criteria for its £32 million planned annual investment for the sports sector during the pandemic in 2020. This allowed sports organisations to protect 1,600 jobs in SGBs and a further 600 with local partners, clubs, and community organisations (Scot Gov, 2020). To support professional sport a £55 million emergency sports funding package was allocated by the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2020). COVID-19 presented new challenges which forced changes to Scotland's sporting landscape. These changes magnified and worsened pre-existing inequalities and issues, especially socio-economic inequalities (Aubin *et al.* 2022). Realising the significance of these challenges the SNP stated in their 2021 Scottish election manifesto that they would double the governments investment in sport and active living to £100 million by the end of the parliament (Scottish National Party, 2021). Whilst the manifesto states the focus of this extra funding should be on raising girls' participation, increasing opportunities for access to the Active Schools programme and reducing inequalities, it remains unclear as to how or where this extra funding is being specifically utilised.

Alongside the funding for sport and physical activity from the Scottish Government there are instances where investment from the UK government is provided. There has been recent grassroots investment from the UK Department of Culture, Media, and Sport through their multi-sport grassroots facilities programme as part of the UK Governments 'levelling up agenda' which aims to end geographical inequality across the UK (UK Government 2022). In Scotland, a £2 m investment is targeting critical 3 G pitch replacement. Eighteen projects across Scotland, delivered by the Scottish Football Association are set to benefit from this investment (DCMS 2022). Most notably, however, is the investment from UK Sport as part of their World Class Programme and Progression Funding. This is currently £77.4 million a year and is a 43% increase from the £54 million a year UK Sport received

Table 1. Sportscotland funding 2016–2022.

Year	Sources of Funding (in Millions)					Breakdown of Expenditure (in Millions)				
	Scottish Government Funding	National Lottery Drawdown	Total	Places	People	Partnerships	Schools & Education	Clubs & Communities	Performance Sport	The Organisation
2016/2017	£43,983	£34,143	£78,106	£19,478	£2,923	£4,185	£12,925	£10,769	£11,885	£77,455
2017/2018	£32,217	£31,640	£63,857	£7,572	£2,695	£5,192	£12,120	£9,088	£11,279	£64,442
2018/2019	£34,900	£24,537	£59,473	£3,859	£2,293	£4,544	£12,339	£9,339	£9,781	£58,338
2019/2020	£32,600	£33,232	£65,832	N/A	N/A	N/A	£16,893	£25,599	£25,407	£68,259
2020/2021	£38,600	£25,925	£64,524	N/A	N/A	N/A	£16,509	£26,081	£15,965	£38,555
2021/2022	£35,470	£26,293	£62,727	N/A	N/A	N/A	£18,330	£26,914	£15,887	£61,131

for Tokyo 2020 (UK Sport 2021). Further to UK Sports involvement, elite sport in Scotland is also supported by the British Olympic Committee, the British Paralympic Committee, and the UK Anti-Doping Agency. These UK wide bodies are integral to Scottish high-performance sport (Jarvie 2019). Scotland makes up 8.3% of the population of the UK but has significantly outperformed this statistic in recent major sport events. At London 2012 Scotland won 21.5% of UK medals, in Rio 2016 they won 27% and in Tokyo 2020 (21) they won 25% of the total UK medal haul. The 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham continued this pattern with Scotland winning 23% of a combined UK medal total. Whilst the success of elite athletes in Scotland can be attributed to funding from UK Sport the continued success of elite Scottish sportsmen and women is significantly above expectation.

Having discussed the history, politics, structure and funding of sport in Scotland we will now explore three contemporary issues that have a significant influence on Scottish sport and physical activity policy.

Contemporary issues in Scottish sport

Major sport events and sport policy

As previously discussed, Scotland's sport policy (and funding) landscape has been informed and influenced by the hosting of major sport events, including the 1986 British Commonwealth Games, the 2014 Commonwealth Games and a range of other smaller sport events (2002 Champions League Final, 2007 UEFA Cup Final, 2018 European Sport Championships, the 2021 European Football Championships and, most recently, the 2023 UCI Cycling World Championships). Bidding for, and hosting, major sport events is not unique to Scotland with countries and cities across the world using these events as drivers of economic (tourism and capital development), social and cultural development. The SNP Government has consistently invested through its arms-length organisation EventScotland in bidding for, and attracting, major sport events as an economic catalyst based on an ideology of trickle-down economics, especially for the tourism industry. Scotland is also committed to improving its soft power ranking through sport events, with Jarvie (2019) recommending that Scottish sport is supported to develop its potential as a soft power asset to advance Scotland's cultural relations. Soft power is concerned with attractiveness as a nation to invest in, collaborate with, and reside in, and major sport events have become a crucial part of that charm offensive.

However, much criticism has been forthcoming over the longer-term impacts of these events, known as event legacy. There is now a growing demand from governments, citizens and sport organisations to show how these events can positively impact broader social outcomes such as empowering disadvantaged groups, enhancing local community infrastructure, and increasing community and sport participation. Moving from the post-hoc language of legacy, in recent years sport events have been asked to demonstrate how they can be leveraged (Chalip 2006) to produce desired outcomes, beyond the event-theme itself. The focus on 'making things happen' using the event as a centrepiece reflects how Scotland has sought to use sport events in recent years to strengthen places, health and the economy.

In the Scottish policy context, investment in bidding for major sport events is reflective of the leveraging literature, with a mixed economy of funders and partners coming together to make the case for the benefits of hosting. For example, when Glasgow hosted both the 2002 Champions League Final and the 2007 UEFA Cup Final, the focus was primarily economic, with both events providing the opportunity for Scotland's largest city to promote itself on the European and World stage through extensive broadcasting coverage and place-marketing activity. While sport participation agendas were mentioned in the rationale for hosting, these events were an opportunity to exploit the marketing and media currency of elite sport (football) to attract tourism.

The largest sport event that Scotland can host, the Commonwealth Games, was hosted in Glasgow in 2014 and provided a focal point for sport and other policy areas (e.g. health, economic development, education) for years in advance, and years afterwards. The Glasgow Commonwealth

Games was funded primarily by the Scottish Government, along with its Glasgow City Council partners, creating a tension over ownership and responsibility for delivery of the Games and legacy ambitions (Misener *et al.* 2015). Sport policy initiatives were catalysed by the hosting of the Games and investment in sport development was (as is often the case) informed by a desire to widen participation, while at the same time winning medals for the nation. However, while the 2014 Games were well received, delivering any major sport event redirects resources away from previous priorities towards those that garner greatest visibility and promotional value (Muller, 2015). While there is recognition that major sport events can produce a festival effect and demonstration effect which can increase the likelihood of sport participation gains, unfortunately there is stronger evidence to suggest that this effect is rarely sustained and translated into long term benefits (Misener *et al.* 2018).

In terms of facilities, travel and transport infrastructures, volunteering and the development of skills and capacities to host other sporting events, the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games can be viewed as a success, particularly for the host city of Glasgow (Rogerson *et al.*, 2021). However, there remain significant questions over the efficacy of investment from the Scottish Government in the Games as a means of improving the health and wellbeing of the nation through increasing sport participation and investment in sport development.

Despite concerns over the outcomes of the Commonwealth Games for sport policy, the trend continued with investment in bidding for and delivering several other major sporting events in the subsequent period. For example, in 2018 Glasgow reinforced one of its legacy ambitions by hosting the inaugural European Sport Championships multi-sport event in partnership with Berlin, Germany. This event was a new concept introduced by European Championships Management (ECM) acting on behalf of individual sport federations, involving seven sports (athletics, aquatics, cycling, golf, gymnastics, rowing and triathlon). Rather than being bid for, it was secured by Glasgow as part of a negotiated settlement with the city and the ECM recognised mutuality. It had an emphasis on maximising media coverage and creating a singular event feel, working closely with broadcast partner EBU. Crucially, Glasgow was looking to host an event which allowed Glasgow 2014 legacy to be sustained. The fluidity of this event concept meant that the city could more easily align the sport programme with its own policy goals than is possible with other, more established major event formats (where most of the sport programme is determined by the event owner). This meant that existing sport pathways could be developed further, and existing venues and facilities could be used without the need for major investment. A large cultural programme helped strengthen ties with European artistic networks at a time when Brexit had made these more difficult. Furthermore, the organising committee was established from within the city rather than being appointed externally. This model strengthened transparency, accountability and responsibility, informing delivery choices and legacy ambitions particularly in relation to reducing inequality in sport participation. The 2023 UCI Cycling World Championships held for the first time across Scotland (with a focus on Glasgow), highlights a greater alignment of major sport events with Scotland's key priorities, including international reputation (more than 120 nations accessed broadcast coverage), tourism (extensive footage of Scotland's urban and rural landscape) and sport participation (the 'power of the bike' slogan to encourage everyday participation).

Equality and inequality in sport participation in Scotland

Sport 21 and the updated strategy in 2003 made an explicit commitment to address issues of equal opportunities and sporting inequity. The intention was that equality and social justice would drive the future development of sport in Scotland. Building upon this intention Sportscotland's (2019) Corporate Strategy *Sport for Life* is underpinned by a commitment to inclusion and provides three equality outcomes. Most relevant to participation in sport is equality outcome 1 which states that young people from Scotland's most deprived areas, girls and young women, and disabled young

people will have access to improved sport and physical activity opportunities (Sportscotland 2019). There are two flagship programmes that aim to contribute to this outcome: Active Schools and Community Sport Hubs.

The Active Schools programme began in 1996 as a pilot school sport co-ordinator (SSC) programme in two secondary schools with a primary programme starting in 2000 (Reid 2009). The intention was to provide more and higher quality opportunities to take part in extra-curricular sport and physical activity in schools, and to develop effective pathways between schools and sports clubs (Sportscotland 2016). Each local authority in Scotland has an Active Schools programme with objectives to (1) impact positively on attitudes to sport and health; confidence; volunteering and leadership opportunities, and (2) contribute to a change in school culture and ethos around sport and health (Sportscotland 2014). The programme has grown through increased investment since 1996 and in 2021/22 nearly 218,000 pupils participated within Active Schools with 3,480,049 visits being recorded to Active Schools sessions nationwide. From 2018 out of almost 23,000 people delivering Active Schools activities, 88% were volunteers (Sportscotland 2019). The annual value of volunteering in Scotland estimated at £2.26 billion (Scottish Government 2019b).

Volunteering is also a fundamental element of Community Sports Hubs (CSHs), which are local collectives of sports clubs and other community organisations that come together to improve the contribution that sport and physical activity has on a community. Sportscotland has been leading the establishment and development of CSHs across Scotland since 2012. A network of CSH Officers provide support to help understand barriers and develop inclusive approaches. They help establish partnerships and develop plans and resources to build capacity and capability in community organisations (Sportscotland 2022a). Whilst community engagement is a challenge, particularly in reaching those not already involved in sport, the focus of CSHs is on sustainable, community-led approaches to facilitate engagement with local sporting and non-sporting infrastructures to meet the needs of local communities (Sportscotland 2014, 2017).

Whilst Sportscotland provide an annual Active Schools report and include data from CSHs in their own annual review, a distinct lack of academic research into these flagship programmes exists. This lack of external scrutiny limits capacity to critically reflect on their impact in promoting equality and engaging the inactive. Future research is required to explore both their success and their limitations particularly as there are significant signs that young people's participation in sport in Scotland is starting to decline. If current patterns continue the evidence points to the next generation of Scots being more inactive and less sporty than their parents and grandparents were with consequences for deteriorating health and wellbeing (Rowe 2019). Alongside this concern is a growing disparity between children and young people who are physically active and those who are not. To understand the issues with, and evolving patterns of, participation in Scotland the following statistics have been taken from Rowe (2019) whose analysis of sports participation in Scotland drew significant conclusions regarding future participation trends.

- The percentage of 13 to 15-year-old girls meeting physical activity guidelines dropping as low as 11% and to 24% for boys
- Between 2007 and 2016 rates of participation for 16 to 25-year-olds in Scotland has declined from 74% to 69%
- People living in the most deprived areas of Scotland are much less likely to participate in sport (42%) compared with those living in the least deprived areas (65%).

Issues of poverty and geography remain significant barriers to sport participation in Scotland. Poverty and material deprivation are experienced widely but unevenly across Scotland with contrasting demands and issues between rural and urban areas (Sportscotland, 2022b). Glasgow accounts for by far the highest concentration of poverty, accounting for 17% of all children in poverty in Scotland (Edinburgh Poverty Commission 2020). Overall, poverty in Scotland was lower in 2018 than it was in 1999 at the start of devolution. From 2009, however poverty rates have started to

shift upwards with levels of child poverty rising by more than 25% from 2015 to 2020 (Congreve 2019, Edinburgh Poverty Commission 2020). To address such concerns the Scottish Government passed the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 making tackling child poverty one of its key policy agendas. Whilst initial projections indicated that child poverty in Scotland could increase from roughly 1 in 4 children in Scotland at baseline to well over 1 in 3 children by 2030 (Scottish Government 2018a), updated modelling predicts that more than 60,000 fewer children could be living in relative poverty in 2023 compared to 2017 (Scottish Government, 2022a). Whilst these improvements are welcome, poverty and inequality remain a significant challenge in Scotland with obvious implications for future trends in sport participation.

In relation to geographical variations in participation it is important to highlight the autonomy of local authorities in Scotland when it comes to the allocation of received funding for sport. The two flagship sport programmes, Active Schools and CSH's, also have autonomy in each local authority to best meet local need. Due to this decentralisation of funding and provision and, despite statutory guidance, access to sport and recreation at local authority levels is extremely uneven (Jarvie 2019). Uneven access creates considerable variations in participation rates in sport across different local authorities in Scotland which can only in part be explained variations in demography and levels of deprivation (Rowe 2019). In the Highland context for instance, rurality, the geographical spread of quality facilities together with the supply and timing of transport remain significant issues (Scottish Parliament 2021).

To widen access to sport across Scotland requires the complexities associated with socio-economic disadvantage and the subsequent exclusion that can be experienced to be addressed (Sportscotland 2015). Addressing this concern would require targeting the most disadvantaged and excluded communities in Scotland with the understanding that social disadvantage seldom occurs in isolation (Kay 2020). There is, however, no quick fix for the circumstances of inequality in Scotland. Addressing the issue of under-representation in sport and getting the inactive active cannot be addressed overnight, it requires an appropriate level of resources and a long-term strategic approach (Sportscotland, 2020). This is particularly relevant when seeking to address health inequalities through sport and physical activity.

Health inequalities and sport policy

Health inequalities in Scotland are often framed as a Scotland-wide health disadvantage compared to others. Scotland has long been dubbed 'the Sick Man of Europe' as its life expectancy trends have failed to keep up with English and Welsh or European trends (McCartney *et al.* 2012). However, there are stark health inequalities within Scotland too. Girls and boys born in East Dunbartonshire can expect to live five or seven years longer, respectively, than those born in West Dunbartonshire, who can themselves expect to live longer than those born in Glasgow, which borders both (NRS 2022). Most of Scotland's socio-economic and health disadvantage is concentrated in its biggest city, Glasgow. Even after adjusting for deprivation, Glasgow's premature mortality remains around 30% higher than comparable cities in England, an additional vulnerability known as 'the Glasgow Effect' (Walsh *et al.* 2016).

Population health policy often tries to pursue dual aims of improving the health of the population generally and reducing health inequalities. Sport and physical activity policy in Scotland has been no different, routinely promoting physical activity and sport participation generally while referring to inequalities as an additional interest or priority. By improving overall population health, or overall physical activity or sports participation levels, inequalities that are framed as comparisons to other countries can be reduced. However, improving overall levels can maintain or widen inequalities within a country if more advantaged groups benefit as much or more than less advantaged groups (Mackenbach 2019).

For example, walking and football have been targeted for government support because of their wide popularity and low costs to entry. The Scottish Government's walking strategy let's Get

Scotland Walking (Scottish Government, 2014) promotes a universal increase in walking, but with little interest in who can walk more. The Football Fans in Training (FFIT) programme – part-funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by eighteen Scottish football clubs (SPFL Trust, 2023) – has proved highly successful at engaging overweight men by connecting physical activity activities to their football fandom (Hunt *et al.* 2020). However, within-Scotland inequalities in health are unaffected as, without targeting, FFIT attracts men from all socio-economic backgrounds.

Following devolution, the Scottish Government was committed to reducing health inequalities. Scottish policy conceptualised health inequalities as resulting from deprivation and other social determinants of health (Smith and Hellowell 2012). The key Scottish health policy White Paper after devolution, *Towards a Healthier Scotland* (Scottish Office Department of Health, 1999), differentiated between specific diseases to target, lifestyles (including physical activity levels), and life circumstances, calling for health inequalities to be an overarching concern for all three. It established a National Physical Activity Task Force to investigate increasing physical activity for all. The Task Force's report, *Let's Make Scotland More Active* (Scottish Government, 2003), made Scotland one of the first countries in the world to have a national physical activity strategy. As one of its aims was to '*use physical activity to reduce health inequalities*', it was cognisant of the need to prioritise getting inactive people active, rather than encouraging the active to be more active, which '*would result in wider health inequalities*'.

Therefore, it set a long-term target that 50% of all adults and 80% of all children should meet the minimum recommended levels of physical activity by 2022: 30 minutes of moderate activity on at least five days per week for adults, or 60 minutes five times per week for children. This target was retained when the SNP replaced Scottish Labour as the party of government (Scottish Government 2007), but revision of the guidelines in 2011 rendered the target redundant. By 2011, a stable 45% of adults in Scotland were meeting the guidelines, while the proportion of children doing so had risen slightly from 71% to 73%. The new guideline minimums were easier to achieve – in 2012 67% of adults accumulated 150 minutes of moderate activity, or 75 minutes of vigorous activity, per week – an immediate jump of over 20% points (pp) (Scottish Government 2013).

The new SNP government, led by Alex Salmond, again tried to differentiate between healthcare, physical activity and other health behaviours, and the '*wider determinants*' underlying health inequalities (Scottish Government 2007). A new ministerial report called *Equally Well* (Scottish Government 2008) attempted to maintain a focus on the latter: the social and economic determinants of health inequalities. Just one of its 26 key recommendations mentioned physical activity – a call for physical environments that promote healthy lifestyles for children, including opportunities for play and physical activity – while two others sought to facilitate it by advocating accessible green spaces for all and active travel opportunities within deprived communities. However, a 2013 review pointed out that universalist recommendations such as for play environments or green space for all '*have merit to improve population health, but are unlikely to reduce health inequalities, and may even risk increasing them*' (Beeston *et al.* 2013). Out of £70bn allocated by the Scottish Government to local governments and NHS boards for health and wellbeing over 2008–2011, only 2.5% had supported actions to directly target the causes of health inequalities (Beeston *et al.* 2013). There has been no specific health inequalities strategy in Scotland since.

Nevertheless, the universalist approach seems to have successfully reduced inactivity over recent years. The most recent data from the Scottish Health Survey (Scottish Government, 2022b) shows the highest levels of population physical activity since the first data was gathered on the new guidelines in 2012. Across four-fifths of the socio-economic gradient, the newest figures were record highs for the number of people achieving the minimum recommended levels of physical activity (only in the lower-middle quintile have levels stabilised, rather than increased). The overall rate of 69% is significantly higher than in previous years, when the overall rate remained between 62–66%. This overall improvement therefore reduces inequalities compared to other countries.

Within Scotland, the gender gap has also decreased, from a 13%-point gap between men and women in 2013 to an 8pp gap in 2021, driven by a sustained increase in female participation.

However, socio-economic inequalities in physical activity have not improved. The gap between the most-deprived and least-deprived quintile remains at 20pp, having been 16pp as recently as 2017. Arguably, the big gap now is between the more deprived 40% - of whom 57–60% achieve the minimum recommended levels – and the less deprived 40%, of whom 77–78% achieve the same levels. This points to a trend reported by Rowe (2019) of 'polarisation' between an economically comfortable and physically active class, and an economically struggling and physically inactive class.

Unfortunately, overall period life expectancy at birth has not risen in Scotland since 2011–2013. It remains the lowest life expectancy of all four UK countries, and of Western Europe. Men in the most deprived areas of Scotland live 13.7 fewer years on average than men in the least deprived areas; for women the gap has risen to 10.5 years (all data NRS 2022). The gap in healthy life expectancy between people living in the most- and least-deprived areas in Scotland has grown to 24 years (Finch *et al.* 2023). The Health Foundation attribute these worsening outcomes to three factors: a cohort of people who have accumulated severe multiple disadvantages over many years; the stagnation of living standards over the last decade; and the fragility of public services due to economic austerity policies. In this context, sport and physical activity policy can only do so much.

Summary and future research agenda

Until the mid-20th century Scottish sport functioned autonomously and was largely distinct from policy and politics. From the late 1960s there was a shift in government interest in sport. Investment in sport in the community and the creation of indoor sports facilities catered to a range of previously disadvantaged and excluded groups within the sport sector. Whilst this interest and investment seemed to signal a turn in policy priorities for sport, it was short-lived. Government funding for community sport decreased through the 1980s, until the creation of the National Lottery in 1994 brought a modest but steady flow of sport funding accessible for sport from community to elite levels. Throughout this time, the Scottish sport system remained complex, and post-Devolution a range of strategies for sport were established to enhance cohesion and encourage collective development of the sector, but with mixed results.

Whilst the ongoing constitutional debate within the UK remains problematic, devolved powers from the UK Government to the Scottish Government have provided opportunities for Scotland-specific policy development and investment in sport and physical activity. The production of this policy has been influenced by a variety of interested parties who seek to exercise an influence on its nature and purpose (Horrell, Sproul & Gray, 2012). The number of interested and potentially competing parties involved in the design and enactment of sport and physical activity policy in Scotland reinforces the complexities involved. However, the positioning of sport within the Department of Health and Social Care in Scotland does provide the opportunity for more joined up policy for the realisation of improved health outcomes. The downside is that sport receives a limited percentage of the health and social care budget. Whilst the political and economic imbalance between Scotland and England remains, the level of investment in sport and physical activity is a political choice by the Scottish Government. We argue that the real terms cut in funding for sport and physical activity since 2016 is evidence of a lack of commitment to sport and physical activity above and beyond the health and wellbeing rhetoric.

One area of significant investment has been the policy drive of bidding for and delivering major sport events since the early 2000s. The Scottish Government has partnered with Scotland's largest cities and sought to prosecute its wider economic, social, political and cultural objectives through hosting sport events like the 2014 Commonwealth Games and the 2023 UCI Cycling World Championships. While in the short term this policy approach generates valuable publicity, investment in facilities, improvements in infrastructures and benefits to the sport system, the long-term impact in terms of sport participation and improved health and wellbeing remains uncertain. This uncertainty is reinforced by the decline in young people's participation and the polarising impact of socio-economic inequalities in physical activity. Counter to these concerns the gender gap within

Scotland has reduced and, physical activity levels have increased across four-fifths of the socio-economic gradient which can be framed as reducing inequalities in physical activity between Scotland and more active nations. In the broader context of Scotland's long-standing health vulnerability, we argue that future developments in national sport and physical activity policy should specifically address inequality of opportunity. The development of policy requires a targeted approach to social disadvantage by (1) developing a greater understanding of the role that poverty and material deprivation play in non-participation and (2) providing greater opportunities for sport participation to under-served groups (Kay 2020).

It is the stated intention of the Scottish Government that equality and social justice should drive the future development of sport and physical activity in Scotland. We support this approach, but the lack of analysis of programmes such as Active Schools reduces the opportunity to critique their impact. To address this lack of external scrutiny, further research is required to analyse their success, or not, in addressing inequality and engaging the inactive. One way of doing so is to build partnerships between the voluntary sector in sport and universities. We support Jarvie's (2019) recommendation that Sportscotland considers the Canadian model where Sport Canada has teamed up with the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to fund sport-related research to better inform sport policy decisions. Prior to any confirmed developments of this nature, we advocate for undertaking research now that will (1) analyse the content of previous and current policy with a specific focus on the position of sport and physical activity within the Scottish Government's health and wellbeing agenda; (2) engage with key stakeholders from the Scottish Government and Sportscotland; and (3) analyse the impact of social, health and economic disparities on sport and physical activity participation.

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