

Written Evidence Submitted by Dr. Claire Jenkin at University of Hertfordshire (HAP0137)

Health and Social Care Select Committee Inquiry – Healthy Ageing: Physical activity in an ageing society

Submission by Dr. Claire Jenkin

Overview

I am a Senior Lecturer in Sport Development at the University of Hertfordshire, with nearly 20 years of global experience in sport development. During this time, I undertook a PhD focusing on understanding the determinants of older adult participation in community sport. Concurrently to my academic role, I am the Co-Chair of the Sport Development Network, a national network dedicated to supporting knowledge exchange between different parts of the sport development sector.

This commentary is given in a personal capacity and reflects my opinion as an academic researcher.

In this submission, the following questions are considered:

- 1. What are the opportunities in public health to promote physical activity to prevent physical and mental ill health at a population-level as people begin to age and help them remain healthy into older age? How can this be delivered?*
- 3. What are the key barriers to older people increasing their physical activity and how can they be encouraged and supported to do more?*
- 7. What could the Government learn from examples of best practice that exist in local authorities, the third sector, NHS Trusts, or internationally?*

There are many different ways that people can stay/become active in their later years. One type of activity that often is not considered is sport, especially for community dwelling older adults.

Much of the evidence submitted below utilises research conducted in Australia but with a similarly ageing population and a culturally comparative nation, it is also relevant to the UK setting.

1. What are the opportunities in public health to promote physical activity to prevent physical and mental ill health at a population-level as people begin to age and help them remain healthy into older age? How can this be delivered?

Global populations are ageing, including here in the UK¹. To support the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, physical activity, in partnership with other sectors, can support healthy older ageing. However to do this, there needs to be a more joined up, systems approach, including input from older adults themselves.

There also needs to be a better appreciation of what activities different types of older adults want to do. This is an extremely heterogeneous group, ranging from those in their 50s who are likely still working and can be extremely active to those needing extensive support in care homes with nursing. As such, we need to ensure that a variety of physical activity options, not just age stereotypical activities, are developed and provided, to enable this population group to access an opportunity they enjoy². This can include sport in various guises. For example, traditional sport or modified sport such as walking sports, and competitive or social versions of sport.

This can be delivered by working in a systems approach. Firstly to engage those in community sport, including informal local organisations and networks, community sport clubs and those who support such clubs throughout the sporting ecosystem. Additionally, to engage with other relevant stakeholders, including those working at all levels (from government departments to local services) in health and social care, transport, communities, planning and the environment. In practice, this would help ensure that in addition to having suitable activities, the other mechanisms needed for these activities to be accessible, such as appropriate transport options and accessible locations, would also be in place. Having this joined up approach can help mitigate some of the barriers described below.

3. What are the key barriers to older people increasing their physical activity and how can they be encouraged and supported to do more?

Research has shown that older adults are a group with many context specific barriers. These particularly relate to varying physical, social and mental health capabilities across this diverse population group. However there are some common barriers reported in research. For example, a lack of appropriate playing opportunities, specifically that traditional sport formats are unsuitable for some older adults; limited physical capabilities, linked back to a lack of appropriate playing opportunities; societal expectations and stereotypes, in that sport is seen as an activity for younger people and is not deemed by many to be appropriate for older adults; and time constraints, particularly for those still in work and/or who have caring responsibilities for partners or grandchildren³.

¹ World Health Organisation, 'Ageing and health'. October 2024, viewed on 06 August 2025, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>

² C. Jenkin, 'Developing Sport for Older Women', in *Developing Sport for Women and Girls*, E. Sherry & K. Rowe (eds), Routledge, 2020, pp. 45-56.

Some of these barriers can be mitigated. For example, the rise of modified sport such as walking sports, have been useful. A Basketball Victoria report on walking basketball suggested that participants found the sport fun, that it reduced social isolation, was a good opportunity to be physically active and kept their brains active. They further enjoyed the competitive element of it, as it enabled them to reminisce about participating in sport in their youth⁴. Similarly research on walking football suggests that older adults can derive physical, social and mental health benefits from participating, particularly if they had a previous sporting background⁵.

Sport is a space where community dwelling older adults can be physically active. For example, it can provide them with an opportunity to re-engage with a sport that they may have dropped out of at a younger age, it may enable them to continue engaging in a form of physical activity they enjoy and/or they may use sport to be active with their younger family members⁶. Furthermore with more opportunities and awareness of sporting opportunities, older adults playing sport will become more normalised and accepted, mitigating the societal expectations barrier. However this requires more local opportunities and access to participate in various forms of community sport.

7. What could the Government learn from examples of best practice that exist in local authorities, the third sector, NHS Trusts, or internationally?

There are many examples nationally and internationally of informal and formal adaptations of community sport that older adults already enjoy. Therefore learnings can be drawn from these.

The next step would be to provide greater national structure and guidance for other organisations wishing to be involved. As part of this, a national funding system should be embedded for support. An example would be the Australian 'Move it AUS Better Ageing Grant Programme', which provided grants to organisations to encourage inactive older Australians to become active through specific sport and physical activity programmes⁷.

³ C. Jenkin, R. Eime, H. Westerbeek & J. van Uffelen, 'Sport for Adults Aged 50+ Years: Participation Benefits and Barriers'. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 26, 3 2018 pp. 363-371.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/japa.2017-0092>

⁴ C. Jenkin, R. Eime & T. Hilland. *Walking Basketball Program: Evaluation Report for Basketball Victoria* 2018.

⁵ L. Fitzsimons, S. Dogramaci, A. Bennie, T. Rossi, N. Taylor, A. McInerney, C. Young, & R. White, 2024. Participant experiences with a community-based, "Older adult" walking Football initiative in Australia: a qualitative exploration. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 33, 2 (2024) 142-150.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/japa.2024-0060>

⁶ C. Jenkin, R. Eime, J. Van Uffelen & H. Westerbeek, How to re-engage older adults in community sport? Reasons for drop-out and re-engagement. *Leisure Studies*, 4, 4 (2021), 441-453.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2021.1888310>

⁷ L. Reece, C. Rose, B. Foley, and K. Owen. *Move it AUS Better Ageing Grant; A national evaluation report*. SPRINT Group, 2021. The University of Sydney.
<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/27493/Better%20Ageing%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>