

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee: Inquiry into women's sport

Evidence submitted by Intelligent Health & Rounders England – February 2023

Introduction

1. Intelligent Health was founded and is led, by Dr William Bird MBE a practicing GP and an honorary professor at the University of Exeter. Predominantly achieved through our flagship programme Beat the Street, Intelligent Health has engaged 1.6 million people in the UK from the most deprived communities to enable them to be more physically active, help them to connect with their place and their community and in turn, improve their wellbeing. We work across all demographics and ages; half of our participants are children and over 70 per cent of our adult participants are women. The benefits continue well beyond the intervention, lasting at least two years and possibly longer. Intelligent Health's mission is to create resilience and improve health by connecting people to each other, their communities and their environment. We do this through engagement of communities at scale, sharing knowledge of the foundations of good health, and by using data and evaluation to deliver actionable insight. The vision is simple; to transform people's health through small changes that make a big difference.
2. Rounders England is a non-profit national governing body for sport (NGB) in England. Rounders England provides a structure for the sport from the Board, local deliverers and teams right the way through to individual members and volunteers. It is responsible for the development of a talent pathway that leads to representing England at national level. Rounders England provides a pathway, competitions and opportunities for aspiring players to progress to whatever level of play is right for them. In addition, Rounders England provide information about the game, run coaching and umpiring courses, sell resources and promote the sport at all levels. Rounders England's Rounders: Reconnected is a 10 year strategic vision with a purpose to grow and develop the Nations much loved game into a thriving, modern, inclusive sport that can be enjoyed by everyone.

How can the growth in domestic women's football be accelerated?

3. The growth in domestic women's football can be accelerated through the continued enhanced investment into the sport from grassroots teams, infrastructure, workforce and pathway development all the way up to elite talent. We know that through enhanced funding up to date, women's football has been propelled into success, but this did not happen until funds were specifically directed.

4. This came from 30 years development from The FA starting to fund from 1993 when there were only 80 girls' teams up to scaling up the sport on a world stage. It is clear that the Premier League is continuing to take steps in the correct direction with 2022's package of financial support (£3 million for a new strategy, extra £1.75 million annually for three years invested into talent etc.).¹ We would argue however, that investment across the football nexus needs elevating to create recreational opportunities to play up to the elite level. This could include funding into the grassroots clubs (investment into future talent and provision) and the Women's Super League (WSL). To be truly impactful this should rely on a whole host of funders as we have already witnessed in 2020 with Weetabix and The FA through the Weetabix Wildcats a grassroots football programme for girls aged 5 to 11² and Starling Bank's grants to emerging talent and grassroots clubs.³ As the women's game develops there is an opportunity to learn from the inequality in the men's game when considering funding⁴ and to instead, embed better community ownership, with fan engagement as opposed to replicating the unsustainable model which we currently see operating in men's football.

5. However, investment into women's football versus their male counterparts is still completely worlds apart, this is despite arguably better and more consistent performance from the England women's team. The playing field is skewed on gender lines for most sports but the difference in income and opportunity for the between the men's and women's professional game in football is especially stark. This gap in funding is blindingly obvious in domestic women's football, with players in the WSL earning on average an annual salary of £30,000 (salaries range from as low as £20,000 to

¹ <https://footballfoundation.org.uk/news/premier-league-announces-increased-funding-for-womens-football>

² <https://www.madfestlondon.com/insights/the-story-behind-the-weetabix-sponsorship-deal-with>

³ <https://www.finextra.com/pressarticle/93701/starling-bank-donates-28000-to-womens-football-movement#>

⁴ <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/sports-business-group/articles/deloitte-football-money-league.html>

approximately £300,000 for the top players),⁵ and comparatively according to the Professional Footballer's Association (PFA) the average salary for a Premier League football player is an astronomical £60,000 a week.⁶ The gender pay gap described here is so vast, that the average top male player earns double the annual salary of their female counterpart in the space of seven days. Understandably, this is far from a lucrative enticement for women wanting to pursue a career in domestic football from a monetary perspective and clearly, something needs to change in the way of investment to even bring a marginal increase in salaries for women. It can be noted that this level of pay disparity is a symptom of the Premier League's commercial model, and The FA should choose to lead by example here by providing equal pay at an international level. Where some steps have been made in international games, with the men's and women's team being paid equally for international outings (circa £2,000 a match), the disparity between domestic players' salaries remains vast.⁷ In 2022, US Soccer committed to providing an equal rate of pay for the women's and men's national teams including World Cup bonuses.⁸ As a result of this equal pay agreement the United States Women's National Team earned more from its male equivalent reaching the knock out stages in the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar than it did from its winning victories in the 2015 and 2019 Women's World Cup.⁹ Rather than seeking to replicate the model adopted in men's football, we should instead be advocating for a more sustainable model to be built upon where players are paid fairly and supporter engagement is central to operations and in turn, operations are central to their community.

6. We are all aware of the motto "we can't be what we can't see," and the Lionesses winning performance in last year's Euros provided thousands of girls and young women inspiration for the next generation of elite players, it also showed existing domestic women footballers an example of what they too could be. Enhanced investment into the sport will only grow this. This must include investment into grassroots provisions, as this will mean directly funding the next generation of our elite domestic players. It was encouraging to see that in honour of the Lionesses 2022 Euros victory,

⁵ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/how-much-womens-footballers-paid-24633693>

⁶ <https://www.onaverage.co.uk/money-averages/average-premier-league-salary>

⁷ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/how-much-womens-footballers-paid-24633693>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/feb/22/us-womens-team-reach-landmark-24m-settlement-in-equal-pay-battle>

⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/30/football/us-women-soccer-pay-deal-qatar-world-cup-spt-intl/index.html>

the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) committed to £230 million of investment into grassroots football and multi-sport facilities, and naming them in honour of the squad in July 2022.¹⁰ By platforming role models within the women's sport, young girls certainly can see what they can be, but they also require the resource and facilities in order to realise their potential.

What should other sports be learning from the growth of women's football leagues in the UK?

7. As an NGB, Rounders England has an aspiration to develop a national league structure and will take learnings from both the development of the WSL and the county league structure. The creation of both structures has enabled the growth of women's football, the Women's Super League enabled unique brand growth and brought a new fan base to the sport and county leagues have provided an accessible option for structured grassroots women's football. Rounders England would like to understand the best practice from each and take from this in order to develop its own league structure. From a rounders perspective we would also like to see how to take inspiration from the social media engagement we have witnessed within women's football leagues and how better to capitalise on this from a growth perspective.

8. From 2011 to 2016, the WSL broke the mould by holding its games during summer months (March until October), enabling it to develop its own brand and build new fan base (amongst other objectives) uniquely different to existing football leagues. Following the 2017/18 season, the WSL now runs during the traditional winter league from September to May. These initial years are what established the Women's Super League fan base and brand, particularly when considering that it replaced the FA Women's Premier League National Division. Considering that the development of the WSL was in addition to operating within an existing structure, the WSL was adapted during this period to include a second division in 2014 and also connected the overall women's league structure to the WSL by enabling teams from the previous FA Women's Premier League to earn promotion to

¹⁰ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/england-women-honoured-government-spending-27624299>

WSL 2.¹¹ Looking at these 2011 to 2016 seasons for Rounders England, is of significant interest as we also seek to develop a new competition structure alongside an existing system.

9. Additionally, Rounders England would look to learn from the creation of the women's football county league structure which was developed in the early 2000s. This structure provides local playing opportunities for new teams and players, which are affiliated with the respected county FA for that given area. For Rounders England, this league structure is something we want to build on in the development of community place-based rounders offers, we already have existing grassroots teams but are looking to implement a new structure at that county level.

10. We also believe that other sports should not underestimate the power of social media in building a brand, established and engaging fan base and most importantly the visibility and public accountability of the public profile. Going further, campaigns such as Sport England's 'This Girl Can,' have indicated the impact of properly researched promotional campaigns in building a brand and maintaining participants.¹² Designed to address the physical activity gap between women/girls and men/boys, the campaign focussed heavily on brand, advertisements and social media campaigns to encourage more women and girls (mostly targeting inactive groups) to get more active. In the consideration of women's football, historically traditional media has paid little attention to women's football, a 2013 study by the University of East Anglia found that in 2008/09 five UK national Sunday newspapers dedicated just 3.6% articles to sportswomen, compared to 93.8% devoted to sportsmen, and these were mostly of a misogynistic nature than about their athletic ability.¹³ Whilst this may have increased slightly in recent years, mostly due to the success of the Lionesses, there is still a coverage disparity. Where traditional media lacks, social media has the opportunity to capitalise on with women being the dominant group utilising social media platforms, whilst there remains issues surrounding online abuse, social media can enable commentators, supporters and

¹¹ <https://www.onherside.co.uk/fa-women-s-super-league>

¹² <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/case-study-this-girl-can-16-million-women-exercising/1394836>

¹³ https://www.uea.ac.uk/about/media-room/press-release-archive/-/asset_publisher/a2jEGMiFHPhv/content/women-under-represented-and-sexualised-in-weekend-sports-reporting

clubs to change the discourse around women's football and moved the focus from misogynistic comments to athletic aptitude.¹⁴

What is needed for women's sporting organisations to grow audiences and revenues?

11. To grow audiences and revenues for women's sporting organisations, private sector sponsors and partners will play a considerable role. Sporting organisations must identify the right private partners to join them on their journey rather than just being an affiliated and paying name. For example, Barclays has sponsored the WSL since 2019 and this climactic partnership enabled the league winners to receive prize money for the first time in its history.¹⁵ Barclay's sponsorship goes beyond prize money in the WSL, the bank also invests in the Barclays Girls' Football School Partnerships (BGFSP), which was established to solely focus on ensuring girls in England have equal access to football in schools by 2024. In 2021 Barclays also became a lead partner of Barclays Game On, a programme which was developed by the Youth Sport Trust that is delivered in secondary schools across England, using football as the tool to develop and teach key life skills to young girls. in secondary schools.¹⁶ As discussed in Paragraph 3 of this response, we are also now seeing larger corporates invest into grassroots sports, and this investment is needed at all levels of a sport to enable growth.

12. We believe that there could also be a role for the elite and established sports across England in order to uplift other sporting events by taking a multisport approach. We recognise the impact of smaller sports having the opportunity to capitalise on the platforms of larger more established sports and mass participation sports events. Ideas that could be considered include shared stadiums, whereby for example an elite rounders match is showcased before an international cricket test match.

What action is needed to tackle sexism and misogyny in sport?

¹⁴ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/social-medias-role-promotion-womens-football-daniel-holman-cfa/>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/47605807>

¹⁶ <https://home.barclays/who-we-are/sponsorship/barclays-and-grassroots-school-football/>

13. It is a question of what actions are needed to tackle sexism and misogyny in sport as opposed to a single silver bullet that solves it. The following could go some way in bringing real change: addressing deep seated attitudes towards women's sport, changing the face of decision making, positive media representation and by shining a light on sports that are showing best practise by engaging those from the most underrepresented communities.
14. To tackle sexism and misogyny in sport there needs to be a societal shift in the attitudes towards women in sport, this will require education. Both sexism and misogyny have a deep-seated place across women's sport. Nearly all sport in modern circulation was founded as a recreational activity for men in the Victorian era. Of course, we must recognise anomalies such as rounders which has been played by all genders since the Tudor era in England¹⁷ and netball which was first played in England during the late Victorian era and was exclusively for women. However, the vast majority of sports were male-designed with the intention to be played by boys and men. As such, this institutionalisation of male-led sport, including successive bans from women playing, has led to embedded behaviours and attitudes from those within sport and the wider community in terms of what an athlete looks like and how sport is structured. The century head start for male-focused sports has led to a global industry that allows little space for women and girls, and particularly in sports that are not deemed as "feminine" and in turn, sexism and misogyny comes with this. This needs to be tackled through an educational piece and can be addressed as early as in the school system so that young people can understand the history behind women's sport and know about the decades of exclusion, we would hope that this would provide the tools for a world where misogyny and sexism in sport is called out as a standard. On a wider scale, much of the misogyny and sexism in sport is directed from individuals who tend to come from an older generation and how to educate this demographic as a whole requires serious consideration.
15. Representation in decision making has also been an issue and for real and lasting change structures need to be reviewed. Katherine Knight, Director at Intelligent Health and Chair of Rounders England

¹⁷ <https://www.collegesportsscholarships.com/history-rounders.htm#:~:text=The%20game%20of%20rounders%20has,her%20book%20%E2%80%9CNorthanger%20Abbey%E2%80%9D.>

describes her experience as follows: “I have worked in sport for over 25 years and traditionally many sports organisations have had boards which are ‘predominantly stale, male and pale’ and do not represent the wider community. We must ensure all women’s voices are heard at all levels of sport. I became Chair of Rounders England in 2018 and have been able to structure a board which has both male and female equal representation along with representation from marginalised groups and a focus on diversity and inclusion. Along with engagement with our members and wider audience, I believe this puts us in a strong position to understand how to attract and retain women and girls from marginalised groups and build a healthy vibrant sporting community.” Katherine was also interviewed in her role as Chair of Rounders England for the GESPORT+ programme in the 2022 publication ‘Women and National Sport Governance: a European Approach Interviews Guide.’¹⁸ This Guide is of particular significance as it endeavours to advance knowledge about the female presence and perspective in strategic decision making within the sport and physical activity sphere. Aims of the wider project are to increase the visibility and voices of women operating within this field at a senior level to improve corporate governance practices in this area, showing that a concerted multi-national effort is being made to give women greater representation across sport decision making roles.¹⁹

16. In both the more traditional forms of media and social media women in sport face major disparity in coverage and reaction in comparison to their male counterparts, such as unfavourable coverage that reflects more on the gender of a female player than their talent as an athlete and also includes online abuse received from spectators in online newspaper comment sections and social media. Considering the existence of press freedom, banning misogynistic headlines and comment is unlikely, so we should instead place more focus on positive news stories about female athletes and shine more light on role models across sport, where talent is celebrated and gender is not even a consideration in the matter. It is promising that the Online Safety Bill is currently in legislative process and will look to fine or block services that do not enforce their own terms and conditions which

¹⁸ <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/118691/files/BOOK-2022-024.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

generally bar misogynistic abuse, however, as recently highlighted in the House of Lords it could go further in tackling misogyny on online platforms.²⁰

17. Finally, and as an addendum to positive media coverage, as a sector we should also celebrate and provide more of a platform for sports that are showing best practice by engaging with women of multiple protected characteristics, i.e. ethnically diverse women from groups that tend to be more inactive (such as South Asian, Black African and Black Caribbean women and girls²¹). Rounders England is currently developing a new evaluation framework in partnership with Ready Steady Active to understand what difference rounders makes for the women who take part in it. Ready Steady Active is a small organisation based in Kirklees, West Yorkshire providing community-based sports, health and physical activity opportunities for women and girls with a focus on increasing participation and health amongst those of South Asian and Muslim background. Every week it works with more than 200 people of all ages attending exercise, health and multi-sport sessions including sports such as football, basketball and rounders as well as players competing in a community Rounders league.²² Ready Steady Active has been using rounders as a tool to get women moving more. This initial nudge to get women, from different cultural backgrounds, to think about playing rounders has contributed to competitive rounders teams forming across West Yorkshire. Sofiya faced a multitude of barriers to participation, including health and culture, but became involved in rounders after taking her children to sessions at Ready Steady Active, and now she is the captain of her rounders team the Batley Ninjas and participating in many other sports as result of her engagement despite perceived barriers.²³ It is stories like Sofiya's that we need to hear more about.

What needs to change at a regulatory level to facilitate more parity between men's and women's sport?

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/feb/04/online-safety-bill-needs-tougher-rules-on-misogyny-say-peers>

²¹ <https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives>

²² <https://www.connectsport.co.uk/organisation/ready-steady-active#:~:text=Ready%20Steady%20Active%20is%20a,South%20Asian%20and%20Muslim%20background.>

²³ <https://www.yorkshiresport.org/2022/02/09/the-ysf-podcast-engaging-women-from-diverse-ethnic-backgrounds-in-sport/>

18. To facilitate more parity between men's and women's sport, funders should set requirements for NGBs in ensuring that funding is distributed fairly between men's and women's sport. This may not necessarily equate to equal funding, but instead look at monies according to the need, i.e. redistributing monies from the established men's sport to upscale growth within women's sport. We are aware of the level of sponsorship and in turn private investment men's sport gets in comparison to women's and could argue that due to this the men's sport is in less need of central funding such as through the NGB.

19. We would like to note that although there is much we can learn from the growth of women's football, there is also a reality that most sports in the UK do not have the infrastructure and resources that football has or had (with exception made to other "major" sports such as rugby, cricket and tennis). A consideration for the future should be to really consider how disparities between sport funding, and in turn the men's and women's versions of that sport (if gendered, as most are), can also be uplifted.

Further comments

20. Intelligent Health and Rounders England are both System and Delivery Partners for Sport England. Katherine Knight is a Director for Intelligent Health and the Chair of Rounders England, an avid footballer herself, she has spent over two decades helping to grow the women's game including stints working for both The FA and UEFA. Natalie Justice-Dearn is the Chief Executive Officer of Rounders England and has a career of over 20 years in sports development including the growth of women's football, women's cycling and triathlon. Whilst Intelligent Health and Rounders England do not directly operate within the footballing field, this evidence submission takes on the perspective of those who have worked within the sport and physical activity sector for over 20 years, including within women's football. The above paragraphs consider these learnings, with a particular focus to rounders as a sport in the latter questions.

21. Both Intelligent Health and Rounders England would be open to discussing this response further, please contact [Emily Carter](#), Head of External Affairs at Intelligent Health for more information.