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University of York Management School – Written evidence (NPS0022)

Should there be a national plan for sport and recreation?

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Executive Summary:

1.1

This short report was prepared in response to the Lords Select Committee 'National Plan for Sport and Recreation Committee' call for evidence. We address the broad question: "*Should there be a national plan for sport and recreation?*" which we are able to evidence in relation to association football (soccer) clubs, teams and venues.

1.2

We believe that any such national plan should consider two main strands:

1.2.1

Firstly, elite sport. The profile of the nation as promoted by sporting achievement and endeavour, which could involve investment in (and promotion of);

- elite / world class sport, for example GB performance at Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup and other international sporting events
- the sporting 'product' we export, such as professional football that is consumed globally thanks to broadcast and print media, the internet etc.

1.2.2

Secondly, inclusivity. Consideration should be given to the encouragement of sport nationally in order to promote physical and mental health and wellbeing, foster community spirit, reduce crime, and as a tool for therapy and rehabilitation. In this way sport could provide preventative as well as therapeutic benefits.

1.3

In this report, we focus mainly on the second of these strands. We explain that football clubs can fulfil an important role in terms of sports and recreation, physical and mental health for the communities in which they are embedded. A national plan, if well executed, *could* assist government authorities to coordinate activities and leverage relationships with other institutions, such as the NHS, in

order to achieve best value for money from any assistance given to football clubs (financially as well as in other ways 'off balance sheet').

1.4

We then discuss the role of football's own governing bodies, mega-events, and the limitations of sole reliance to finance clubs/teams outside of the highest echelons of football's hierarchy. We consider in more detail the role and importance of football clubs, their land assets and facilities to local communities, why they are attractive to government (particularly local authorities) and how they have helped historically, and thus how they could be part of a national plan in future.

1.5

The authors have an established track record of historically informed longitudinal research on the topics of sport, finance, and public management. We are active members of the British Academy of Management and are both employed full-time by University of York, part of the Russell Group of research-intensive UK universities.

2.0 Football Clubs and Communities

2.1

Football clubs can be flagship place-marketing brands for their geographies. More tangibly, these clubs and their real estate including grounds and training facilities can be a vital asset for sport, leisure and well-being provision for physical and mental health (and 'well-being') at the heart of local communities. Notably, this is often the case in deprived areas in the North and Midlands.

2.2

Amongst professional sport, association football provides an interesting context because there have been many instances of clubs facing financial difficulty, and local authorities have often responded to assist. Additionally, football clubs often have formal community foundations. Such community foundations are typically operated as arms-length organisations with a not-for-profit mission; owned by, but separate from, the actual football club, and rely on cocktails of funding and goodwill to operate.

2.3

For example, Middlesbrough Football Club has a community foundation which engages in *"sport, health, education and inclusion projects that raise aspirations and change lives amongst the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in local communities"* (MFC Foundation, 2021).

2.4

Elsewhere, York City FC's community foundation *"consists of a team of 10 full-time permanent staff members and numerous part-time coaches and volunteers"* to *"increase participation in sport; encourage more people, especially children, to play and watch football; encourage more people to become interested and support their local football team by forging closer links between them; and"*

improve the image of and the atmosphere at matches..The Foundation's vision is to support the local community by providing sport and physical activity; educational; social and healthy lifestyle opportunities, and ensuring that our contributions have a realistic opportunity of making a positive impact." The foundation offers "a number of initiatives for local schools, junior football clubs and community groups" (YCFC Foundation, 2021).

2.5

In East London, Charlton Athletic Community Trust (CACT) became the first community football trust to be commissioned by a local council to deliver its Youth Service provision. It is now so firmly embedded within its patch of Greenwich, Bexley and Kent that it reaches 10,000 people from the ages of three to 99+ every week, has 84 full-time staff plus 150 part-time coaches, and is the first community football trust to be commissioned by a local council to deliver its Youth Service provision. They deliver breakfast, lunchtime, after-school clubs and PE lessons in 100 schools a week, with workshops on issues such as obesity, behaviour, mental health and the consequences of knife crime. There is a football project aimed at integrating faiths and ethnicities, post-16 football academies, a social club for the elderly, literacy and numeracy programmes, a Down's syndrome squad and much more (alliance of sport, 2021).

2.6

Football clubs can also cooperate directly with NHS trusts to enhance NHS services. Since 2019 Rotherham United FC's Community Trust have collaborated with the Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust (RDaSH) to provide therapy groups for children with mental health difficulties (RDaSH, 2019). In integrated sessions Rotherham United coaches and players deliver football and fitness training while staff from RDaSH's Children and Young People's Mental Health Service provide group therapy exercises. This has the impact of improving the children's physical as well as mental health leading to overall improved mental and emotional wellbeing. Children buy into the project because they see local footballers as role models, while care can take place outside of a clinic setting, reducing the stigma involved with care in the mental health system.

2.7

One of the authors of this report (Dr Gillett) has first-hand experience of the York City FC Foundation. Having survived a brain abscess in early 2019, Dr Gillett, then aged 41 years of age, engaged with the foundation's organised 'Walking Football' sessions. These sessions, just one of several of the Foundation's activities take place several times per week at community football pitches at schools and leisure centres around the town, typically attracting middle- and older-aged players. The York example is more inclusive than other examples around the country because of the mixed ages and genders participating (other schemes target solely the over-50s, for example). At York, sessions are very heterogeneous in terms of the mixture of ages and genders allowed to participate. Some participants are recovering from medical conditions such as heart surgery, brain surgery, or cancer. For others Walking Football presents opportunity to continue their football pastime (some participants have even played professionally or at youth level with professional teams when they were much younger), whilst for others it is a chance to try something completely

new. However, in Dr Gillett's case, his involvement was self-initiated, neither NHS medical nor occupational health professionals dealing with his case were previously aware of the sessions until he mentioned it to them. Their response was positive once he explained to them what it was and how it might help him.

2.8

There is a good case to be made for football's governing bodies, the private sector and other funders such as National Lottery, to continue their support of such initiatives during times of crises such as the Covid epidemic and its aftermath, although it is possible that organisers and sponsors may re-evaluate their continued involvement and sponsorship, let alone consider the growth or enhancement of such initiatives. Walking Football is just one real example, but the point seems relevant to other areas of provision, such as initiatives aimed at youngsters. Therefore, reductions in such services could exclude some of the most deserving cases for community provision.

2.9

Thus, we make the case for considering some degree of national and/or local government intervention, which *could* involve a coordinated national plan. For example, to better coordinate with the National Health Service, so that citizens are aware of the opportunities to participate in activities organised by their local football clubs, e.g. the aforementioned walking football offered by community foundations, or the activities organised by the 'Sporting Memories Foundation' which are aimed at the over-50s age bracket with the mission of "tackling dementia, depression and loneliness through the power of sport" (Sporting Memories, 2021). Sporting Memories initiatives are typically organised through sports centres, libraries and sports clubs, including football clubs and their community foundations, as is the case at York City FC.

2.10

A national plan could potentially consider some degree of direct funding for community foundations so as to cover any shortfall in funding, or to partly finance extend the reach of successful and proven initiatives such as Walking Football. This seems particularly worthwhile for lower-league or non-league levels, where clubs themselves do not enjoy anything like the same revenues as Premier League or even Championship level teams.

2.11

The point is that FCs and their community foundations appear to be a useful vehicle and valuable asset for community outreach, with expertise and facilities valuable to any effort for improving sport, recreation for physical and mental health for a cross-section of society. Thus, there seems opportunity to extend this reach, particularly through institutions such as the NHS that could be used to signpost or refer users towards their services. For instance, Fitness and walking football activities could be included in the NHS Weight Loss Plan (NHS, 2021), or provided as an option for GPs to refer weight loss patients to.

Activities could also be integrated into mental health rehabilitation for patients in residential care. This could be joined up with the government's new Changing Futures initiative (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2020), which aims to help the 363,000 adults suffering from 'combined disadvantage' in England, typically a mix of homelessness, substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic abuse, and contact with the criminal justice system. Sport can

provide people with a meaningful activity to engage with, improving mental health, and reducing overall dependence on the healthcare system. This seems pertinent, given the recent requests to government for financial assistance to football clubs at all levels on the basis of their community function and their heritage (e.g. Sky Sports, 2020) and would give taxpayers an additional return on their investment.

2.12

Our published research (e.g. Gillett and Tennent, 2018) shows that government, local authorities and leisure providers can be an important stakeholder for football clubs. Our research also provides insight regarding the pitfalls of involvement with sports clubs, considerations for business and marketing planning when proposing multi-use and community-focussed leisure facilities, as well as showing some of the things that local authorities can do “off balance-sheet” to successfully assist their local sports clubs and communities, within the constraints to which they must adhere.

3.0 Football Finance & Community Role

3.1

The sport of association football (or *soccer*) is the most supported sport in the world and its consumer base is still growing, observed Boudway (2018). The scope of the soccer industry is demonstrated by the fact that soccer’s global governing body FIFA has more members than the UN (De Bruijn & Leijten, 2007). Arguably the highest profile football events are the mega-events including international tournaments at club-level (e.g. the European Champions League) and national level (e.g. FIFA World Cup).

3.2

It would be easy to extrapolate from these events that there is much wealth within the sport and opportunities for commercial and television broadcasting revenues. Football mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup may seem attractive to governments. However, such mega-events include only the highest-ranking clubs and players, and the main financial beneficiaries appear to be the sport’s governing bodies:

3.2.1

FIFA (a non-profit organization which describes itself as an international governing body of association football, fútsal and beach soccer) and;

3.2.2

UEFA (The Union of European Football Associations is the administrative body for association football, futsal and beach soccer in Europe, although several member states are primarily or entirely located in Asia).

3.3

Both FIFA and UEFA are Swiss domiciled and derive their revenues principally from the ownership of global and European tournaments respectively. They do this by extracting a levy on ticket revenue together with retaining broadcasting and global sponsorship rights. This is protected to the extent that the bodies will indemnify themselves against the financial risk of hosting a tournament, expecting it to be taken on by the government and football association of the

host nation (Even when the World Cup was held in England in 1966 the English governing body, the Football Association, signed a contract with FIFA which indemnified the world governing body against financial losses (Tennent and Gillett, 2017).

3.4

Whilst football's national governing bodies (e.g. The Football Associations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) offer financial support to their member organizations (particularly during times of crises), the reality is that any such aid is:

3.4.1

Often targeted at the 'full members' at the elite end of the game to maintain and further football as a commercial phenomenon

3.4.2

Faced with delays in 'trickle down' below the upper tiers to the levels of 'Associate Membership', and perhaps may not reach some clubs at all – i.e. community, non-league or so called 'grass roots' clubs that are not even members of their national football associations.

3.4.3

Often insufficient on its own. Clubs and their community initiatives often require 'cocktails' of funding to supplement FA grants or loans. In particular, football clubs have appealed directly to UK government during the present Covid-19 crisis.

3.5

Football clubs mix familial loyalty with corporate legitimacy in the sense that an organization driven by communal identity wraps itself in a framework intended for the profit-making corporation. This means that football clubs superficially take on the identity of the limited company with a Board of Directors giving the club authority over its supporters (although it should be noted that some Directors might themselves be supporters, and some clubs have support collectives represented on the board, although the role of director requires a different dynamic to that of the supporter on the terrace). Since the late Victorian era football clubs have derived their sense of identity from the local community, reinforcing a sense of place and local identity, sometimes reinforced by ties to local churches or employers, amongst the supporter base (Bale, 2000; Hindley and Williamson, 2013).

3.6

Following several instances of professional football clubs becoming insolvent (Beech et al, 2010) by 2014, the House of Lords noted the high number of administrations in a debate on the role of football supporters in club governance, running concurrent with Coalition government policy to encourage the ownership of football clubs by supporters, itself consistent with that government's "Big Society" agenda, pursuit of "social value" and the introduction of community interest companies (Conservative Party, 2010; *Localism Act*, 2011; Hansard, 2014; Gillett, 2015, 2016). National and local government had come to accept that football clubs could provide an important focal point for communities.

3.7

This sense of place and local identity was evidenced within the case of Middlesbrough FC about which we have published research (Gillett and Tennent, 2018) – the local authority together with local businesses assisting, sponsoring and investing in the club during the 1980s. Since our case, English soccer has increasingly globalized and there is an apparent increase in investment and sponsorship from abroad however the importance of the local economy and government remains, particularly in lower tiers of the professional league (Partridge, 2017). According to the business consultancy Deloitte and Touche (2004, p. 55), “a strong relationship between club and community is [...] good for business.”

3.8

Where local authorities and NHS Trusts have collaborated with football clubs this has tended to be on an ad hoc and entrepreneurial basis. While this approach can encourage innovation, successful schemes are not disseminated across the country, and provision can quickly end when funding pools run out, losing potential gains from successful initiatives. A national framework could spread good practice.

3.9

Thus, a national plan for sport could be useful for coordinating efforts towards achieving a fair and joined-up approach that would emphasise participation alongside spectating. Such a plan may well offer best value-for-money, should substantial amounts of public money be distributed to football governing bodies, clubs, or community foundations directly. This approach seems pertinent given aforementioned recent requests to government for football clubs to receive financial assistance in response to the Covid pandemic. Cf. other recent policy briefs, specifically DCMS committees’ ‘Sport in Our Communities’ Inquiry: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/647/sport-in-our-communities/>

4.0 Conclusion

4.1

This report has provided evidence in response to the broad question ‘*should there be a national plan for sport and recreation?*’ from the perspective of social inclusivity and sport as a vehicle for public health and well-being. (Other perspectives exist, such as elite sport as a vehicle for achieving national prestige, soft-power etc but that is outside of the scope of this report). Our conclusions can be summarised as:

4.2

Sports clubs at all levels from professional to ‘grass roots’ have made a case for funding, particularly in response to the Covid pandemic. An argument in favour of awarding such aid is on the basis of the important role that such clubs play in the health and wellbeing of their communities.

4.3

The majority of clubs outside of the Premier League cannot rely on sport governing bodies FIFA, UEFA, FA alone due to timing and also difficulty of ‘trickle-down’ to where the money is needed most urgently, to clubs outside of

the Premier League - i.e. to Football League and non-league clubs and community facing sports facilities.

4.4

Football clubs can be flagship place-marketing brands for their geographies. More tangibly, these clubs and their real estate including grounds and training facilities can be a vital asset for sport, leisure and well-being provision for physical and mental health / well-being at the heart of local communities. Gillett (2015) demonstrates that local authorities may better achieve their societal objectives by working relationally with service providers. Football clubs may be considered service providers in that they provide representation for local areas and networking opportunities for local businesses but their ability to provide more formal services such as recreation and leisure to the public is more constrained. Thus, football clubs and their community foundations could perhaps play an important role in any national plan for recreation and sport, in exchange for help from local or national government.

4.5

Thus, in the event of any public sector intervention and assistance to football clubs in future, a national plan could help, in terms of the proposed societal benefits, to better coordinate, and to achieve some degree of accountability demonstrate the value-for-money of doing so.

4.6

In addition to formal partnerships and measurements that could be associated with any direct funding, we suggest that government, local and national, may also be able to influence the governance of these important local institutions by working relationally with them outside of formal partnership structures, rather than through formal partnerships or governance models which may be difficult to justify within the institutional expectation of government.

4.7

Thus, a national plan for sport and recreation should strike balance between formal and informal collaboration. Sports clubs should be allowed to do what they do best. The emphasis of a national plan should include efforts to coordinate or join-up public service elements of sports clubs/facilities, such as:

4.7.1

Ensuring that there is capacity for provision, and awareness of successful existing initiatives such as sporting memory, walking football, or other community outreach work more consistently across the UK. Publicity could be through schools and NHS existing networks.

4.7.2

Assisting the extension of existing provision to encourage take up by other groups such as:

- encouraging more availability and take-up of walking football amongst the under-50s (some initiatives are currently only available to specific age groups)
- providing provision to nurture physical activity in people with mental and physical health difficulties. Rehabilitation should not be

overlooked in this regard, with potential benefits to individuals, the NHS and society in general.

4.8

Publicity could be low cost if channelled through Sports Clubs, Sporting bodies schools and NHS existing networks.

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