



Answering
tomorrow's
challenges
today

From Policy to Experience: Sport and Physical Activity

Interviews with experts

October 2021



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01

Our report



This report brings together seven interviews with experts, providing reflections on sport and physical activity based on recent Ecorys projects. Each interview uses our projects as a launching pad to examine the challenges facing the sport and physical activity sector and how evaluation and research can help meet these challenges.

02

The kick-off



Everyone knows physical activity is not just about Olympic athletes leaping incredible distances, doing aerobatics on a BMX, or sprinting up climbing walls.

Physical activity is often about those of us waking up on a Saturday morning with memories of the previous night's festivities, psyching ourselves up to jog to the local park. Or those of us wondering whether there is time between finishing work and picking up the kids to get in a few lengths at the pool. Or those of us recovering from illness and finally joining the local bowls club. No-one needs to be reminded that sport, physical activity, and health affect us all.

We have been working hard at Ecorys, running evaluations and research about sport and physical activity over many years. We have worked with governments, charities, private sector organisations, European institutions, academics, and small-scale local organisations.

Our research and evaluation projects have covered the full range of sport and physical activity policy issues from local walking for health schemes through to the impact of global sporting events such as the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. We have worked in the UK, across Europe and further afield. We've used new ways to find out what people really think so we can help develop approaches that make a difference to people's lives.

Our wide range of work gives us a rock solid perspective to look at the sport and physical activity challenges facing society. How do we develop and implement laws against steroid misuse? How do we encourage adults to get back in the habit of physical activity? What needs to be done to safeguard children in sport? Our work has given us the opportunity to answer these questions and many others.

This report looks at vital questions around physical activity and sport, taking a deliberately broad approach to highlight the range of key challenges and work being undertaken. We take an initial step beyond the simple reports, instead collecting together seven interviews with experts where we discuss our work, how it has been used, and how it fits with other research. We sprint forward, looking at current challenges and the issues that are not getting the focus they deserve. We go on a rewarding detour into the relationship between politics and sport. We then take a deserved rest and reflect on what we can learn as evaluators.

Finally, thanks to everyone who spoke to us, and all the many people who have helped us over the years in our evaluations and research, whether you are the primary school children who have told us about healthy eating or the international sport federation director who spoke to us about the values of the European Model of Sport.

We hope you all enjoy reading this report as much as we have enjoyed producing it.

Ecorys is an international provider of research, consulting, programme management and communications services. Our mission is to help our clients make decisions, build capacity to implement and communicate change, and deliver bespoke services. We aim to make a positive impact on society by tackling the issues that affect communities around the world through our work. For more information: [**www.ecorys.com**](http://www.ecorys.com)

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03

**Spreading the evaluation
message – working with
Sport England**





Since 2018 Ecorys has been Sport England's evaluation partner for its Core Market portfolio of programmes. The Core Market portfolio includes programmes aimed at people who already have a sport and physical activity habit or where being active is a big part of their lives and identity. Sport England distributed funding through Sport National Governing Bodies to develop participation programmes for their core markets. Sport England also provided funding to a wider range of organisations, including many within the voluntary sector, to test new approaches so people who are experiencing life changes such as health conditions could stay active.

James Sennett, Associate Director at Ecorys, recently took an opportunity to catch up with **John Harrison**, Head of Partner Performance at Sport England and responsible for managing Sport England's investments into the National Governing Bodies, to reflect on the progress of the Core Markets evaluation work to date →

James: Our recent work together focused on evaluating Sport England's Core Market programmes. What are the key priorities for you with your Core Markets work?

John: There are broadly three objectives. First of all, we would like to understand the impact that the funding we provide, channelled through key partners, has on the Sport and Physical Activity system, such as national governing bodies, clubs, coaches and individual participants. We want to learn about what works well, but also about what works less well, especially around inclusion in sport, breaking down barriers to participation, and tackling inequalities. These are really important areas for us. Finally, we would like to distil and share insight and learning in a useful and engaging way that supports meaningful change and improvement across everyone working in this area. We've got lots of learning and we're keen to make sure this is used.

We've been working with you on the Core Market evaluation work for almost three years now – seems like only yesterday when we started! When your new strategy Uniting the Movement came out earlier this year, it suggested a move away from target driven approaches towards greater focus on understanding the ongoing impact of your work. As evaluators, we were already moving towards supporting your work and your partners in learning along the way. Obviously, a fair bit of time has now passed, so I'd be interested to hear your reflections on the scope of the evaluation and how it has fitted with Sport England's changing priorities?

The original evaluation work focused heavily on understanding the impact of Sport England investment in partners against a set of numerical targets linked to our previous strategy. The types of things we were doing were very much around targeting and tracking increases in regular participation and underrepresented groups. This process developed over time to capture and evaluate impact in other more qualitative ways alongside the numerical data, such as trying to understand the stories, the learning, and the change that we're seeing on the ground.

This was linked to our need to understand why numbers were changing and from an appreciation that numbers alone don't tell the whole story. We needed to unpick what it was about certain activities and interventions that had a positive impact, and just as importantly what didn't work so that we and our partners could learn from both.

That's interesting. We've seen a similar move in towards ongoing learning, often as a recognition that real-time learning helps to support delivery of complex programmes. What other key evaluation challenges have there been in the Core Markets work?

My view is that there are really two fundamental challenges.

Firstly, there was a challenge around collaboration. Many of our partners are working on addressing similar challenges. The evaluation work is helping us to understand some of these areas of overlap, to make connections, and to look at ways of supporting the sector to address inequalities in a collective way through improved collaboration.

Secondly, there was a challenge around national governing bodies' capability and capacity. So, for example, you and your team at Ecorys have supported us and our partners in developing approaches to social outcomes evaluation. This has been really helpful as we've been able to look more broadly at the impact that Sport and Physical Activity can have on people's lives more generally. We're now getting a solid picture of how our funding helps improve the lives of people across lots of areas, like mental wellbeing, social and community development, individual development.

One of the key things we have found is that the national governing bodies are at very different stages on their evaluation and learning journeys. Any reflections on this?

The sector has developed tremendously over the last few years in terms of insight and evaluation capability, understanding, and recognition of its importance. More than ever, we are seeing data and insight led strategies, as well as programmes and interventions that look to address really specific issues, barriers and inequalities. This has been a big change.

However, it's also right to say that National Governing Bodies are at different stages along this journey. Whilst they have many similarities in terms of the governing role that they play, they come in many different shapes and sizes, and with varying needs, capabilities, and capacities. What's important is that we have seen collective improvements across the sector. We also have more data and insight than ever. The key will be how we support the sector to develop a stronger culture, capacity, and capability to enable the confident use of data, insight, learning in decision making and particularly to tackle inequalities.

How does the evaluation work fit in with current issues that you and your partners are facing?

Unsurprisingly, a significant proportion of the recent evaluation work has focused on understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the sector. In the early days this helped us to support our partners navigate some very challenging times, and helped the public find new and alternative ways to stay physically active. We've since moved into recovery phases as society began to open back up, and as time goes on we'll use learning and evaluation to help the sector to reinvent to come back more inclusive and more relevant.

That's definitely a common theme across lots of our work recently. Out of interest, how do you think your evaluation priorities will change in the next few years?

We will likely see a greater need for evaluation and evidence that advocates for the value of sport and physical activity as not only an essential tool to improve lives and strengthen communities, tackle inequalities, and create great places to live, but as a tool that both national and local leaders can use to confront other issues such as mental wellbeing. Also, we will likely see more demand for sharing evidence in increasingly relevant and compelling ways – we know we need to win both the hearts and minds of those who could strengthen policies, messaging, delivery, or investment in support of sport and physical activity.

I also imagine that there will be a greater emphasis on working collaboratively to continuously improve sport and physical activity messaging, experiences, and opportunities, so they're inclusive, irrespective of whether you live with a health condition or what age you are.

Finally, I also expect to see continued improvements and innovations in how we evaluate and generate data, insight, and learning. We know we always need to improve our methods, tools, and approaches. This might include increased 'test and learn' experimentation to tackle inequalities in health or participation in communities, and an even greater drive to share learnings from these.

Definitely one to keep an eye on. The whole question of how best to use evidence to make sure 'test and learn' actually works seems to me a key question. Actually being nimble enough to really learn and develop and then get positive feedback loops in place is always easy on paper. Lots for us both to keep on thinking about! Thanks again for your thoughts John and speak again soon.

04

**COVID-19 and the
economic challenges for
sport and physical activity**





In 2020, Ecorys led a study on the economic impact of COVID-19 across the sport sector, working with our study partners at SportsEconAustria and KEA European Affairs, to provide hard figures on the economic impact of the pandemic, look at the various actions that the sport sector had taken, and recommend actions to help the sector recover. Our report was published at the end of 2020 and can be found [here](#).

This was the first report to highlight the huge financial hit taken by the sector. Our analysis estimated the direct overall impact of COVID-19 across the EU-28 at between 45,569 and 56,930 million EUR GDP and between 883,912 and 1,099,526 employees. Additional modelling of the indirect impact led to even higher total figures including both direct and indirect impact.

We took the opportunity to speak to two different stakeholders on this evaluation, with **Arthur Le Gall** providing an overview across the sport and physical activity sector and **Jérôme Pero**, focusing specifically on the sport retail sector →

Arthur is a Director at KEA and plays a leading role with Ecorys in the **SHARE initiative** which promotes the role of sport in regional development across Europe, working across the sport movement, including cities, regions, universities, SMEs and business support organisations.

Jérôme Pero, the Secretary General of the Federation of the European Sporting Goods Industry (FESI), provides his views on the Ecorys research and the challenges being faced by sports retailers.

COVID-19 across the sector

One of the benefits of this study was that it let us look at the financial impact on the whole sport sector including vital elements such as construction, sports tourism, and transport. Diarmid Campbell-Jack, Associate Director at Ecorys, spoke with Arthur Le Gall to hear his reflections about our research, how the sport sector has responded to the challenges of the pandemic, and the challenges it still faces.

Diarmid: Our research only finished a few months ago, but things have moved on so quickly since then in the world of sport and physical activity. Was our research on the economic impact of COVID-19 needed or did the sector not have a fairly good understanding of this anyway?

Arthur: Looking at the impacts of COVID-19 for the sport sector was definitely really important and very much needed. Sport and physical activity were hugely affected by the various measures put in place to deal with the pandemic, and the study really helps to understand the actual macro-economic impacts across Europe. The report meant we could confront initial intuitions with cold, hard facts. And, importantly, the sport sector is quite diverse and fragmented when compared to other sectors so I am not sure this type of research could have been produced or commissioned by the sport sector itself. The report is a good example of the value in pulling all this information together in one place and then sharing it widely.

Agreed – hopefully the report will give various parts of the broad sport and physical activity sector the economic data they need to make a case for support. Thinking about it now, what are the main vital issues our research helped answer?

That's a lot to cover in just one answer! I would say the analysis of support measures set up to help the sector withstand the COVID-19 crisis is particularly interesting as it really shows that the sport sector is not like other sectors in terms of its employment structure. Of course, the report also shows the various challenges in catering adequately to the needs of the sector during this period.

Obviously, the most vital issues relate to the macroeconomic analysis, but there were some other key findings and thoughts in the report that could get lost. One that I'd like to flag is that the role of volunteers is invaluable in the sport sector. Another is that one of the hidden impacts of COVID-19 may be that more and more people practice sport outside clubs and organised structures. While this is generally a positive thing, it may mean many sport clubs stop or can't be sustained in the same ways. This obviously could have knock-on effects in people having less long-term engagement with sport, and the loss of some of the networks and relationships that participants really appreciate. That all relates to both participants and volunteers. Further analysis and research is needed over the next few years to understand the impact of any decline in organised sport, but the study already helps to pinpoint this as a possible issue.

I feel slightly as if I'm putting you on the spot here, but I've got another couple of big questions. What do you think practitioners could get out of this type of research? What challenges do you think the sector is facing at the moment?

Of course, we should always ask ourselves what practitioners can get out of the research when we start any project! While the research is particularly helpful for policy-makers and researchers, the sport sector itself can make great use of the study, especially when working out how they want to advocate for support and how they can advise and input on recovery plans for sport. Beyond the hard facts, the study also identifies great examples of initiatives across Europe that can strengthen the resilience of the sector over the long run.

When it comes to challenges, I think the main issues are around how sport and public policy relate. Looking back across our work at KEA, I think sport has always had a special place when it comes to public policies – the sport sector is organised in a certain way, and has a lot of autonomy. This means it is often quite far away from traditional public policies. On the one hand, this autonomy can be really beneficial as it empowers organisations to react quickly and develop based on local needs. On the other hand, it means that the sector can fall slightly off the policy agenda and when there are major issues, for example, a major global pandemic, those working in the sector sometimes feel it gets ignored.

Another of the lessons learnt from the pandemic is that we need healthier and more resilient societies. Sport is one of the obvious solutions, but we also know that it is not the only solution and possible spending cuts in Member States may affect how much the sector can contribute towards any recovery.

Moving slightly away from challenges onto something more positive, the COVID-19 crisis and its repercussions highlighted that more than ever, cooperation between public authorities and sport organisations really matters. There is a lot to gain from more dialogue and more opportunities for the two worlds of public authorities and sport to come together. Talking is good! As you know, this is something I try to do in my role as part of the [SHARE initiative](#), where we develop partnerships for sport to better contribute to local and regional development.

Yes, we've definitely found SHARE a valuable forum, particularly as researchers and evaluators don't often get the chance to have these type of discussions. I'm not sure though you'd say talking is good if you've ever had to endure me going on about Scottish football!

Finally, you've done lots of work on sport and physical activity across Europe. In your experience, what else is there that in this area researchers should be thinking about?

Looking forward, I strongly believe that we need to look more closely at the way sport and physical activity permeates or should permeate our daily lives. Of course, researchers are already looking at this in various ways, most notably about embedding educational approaches. However, there are lots of other approaches that don't get the attention they deserve. As one example, the way we design our public spaces should consider physical activity. What can we do in urban planning to encourage people who don't take part in formal sports activities to get more active? On a similar track, how can we nudge people to be more active in their daily lives? How do we then think about linking all this up into an overall system to meet everyone's needs?

Anyway, before I go, I can't help but notice you've been the one asking the questions. What do you think about those areas I've mentioned that researchers can focus on?

I'm not sure that was part of the plan for the interview! The question of nudges is an interesting one. I suppose there's one part which is about whether we can make taking part in physical activity follow behavioural science principles and make it easy, attractive, social, and timely. There's also a more complicated part which is whether you can incorporate physical activity into regular life without it going against those same principles or competing policy objectives. We've seen it happen though, with cycle lanes and the pedestrianisation of city centres over here in the UK and, of course, elsewhere on the continent. They haven't always been implemented perfectly, but there is much to learn. Lots to think about as well – the life of a researcher is never dull!

COVID-19 and the sports retail industry

Our [report](#) also looked at sports retail, showing the extent COVID-19 affected retailers, and modelling different future scenarios depending on the possible severity of the pandemic. Diarmid Campbell-Jack spoke to Jérôme Pero, the Secretary General of FESI to get his views.

Diarmid: Our research only finished a few months ago, but things have moved on so quickly since then in the world of sport and physical activity. Was our research on the economic impact of COVID-19 needed or did the sector not have a fairly good understanding of this anyway?

Jérôme: I think the study was very useful for sports retailers, as it gave us strong evidence showing that COVID-19 had a considerable impact on retail, right from the start of the pandemic. The figures showed a very clear drop in retail trade volume in all countries from when various protective actions were taken in March 2020, and allowed us to see the effect of shops being closed and the resulting drop in demand.

Getting data from all Member States gave us a solid overview of where things stood and let us compare the situation between different countries, as well as showing us how sports retail differed from other sport-specific sectors. This has been very useful for a European federation such as FESI, as it helps us advocate for the interests of the sector in the face of the crisis. This is the first and only study to provide a clear and precise picture of the economic impact of COVID-19 on the sport retail sector and so it's been very useful.

What do you think people in sports retail could get out of our research?

From our perspective, one of the key bits of added value for professionals from the sports retail industry is to get a precise mapping of the different support measures adopted in the Member States. The different case studies included in the report are also useful for everyone in the sector as they give detailed information in a user-friendly way and can be useful to help mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.

There was a lot of detail in the case studies and report, in particular on the challenges faced by sports retailers around liquidity and social distancing. How have retailers been adapting since our report was published?

Good question! Things have moved on a bit. We've just finished our own survey which we published in June, and which shows that sports retailers still face the same difficulties as in your report but to a lesser extent. The reopening of physical shops, the boom in e-commerce and the increased demand for outdoor equipment, have allowed retailers to slowly get back afloat. While social restrictions still make certain things complicated, most sports retailers have now pretty much adapted to the new ways of working. As an example, 81% of the companies responding to our survey told us that they had fully implemented teleworking.

One of the key concerns now is the winter sports sector, which has had a completely blank season and has not been able to benefit from the reopening of shops like other sports retailers due to the closure of ski resorts. Even though there has been a boom in the sale of cross-country skis, this has not covered the losses caused by the decline in sales of alpine skis.

What challenges do you think the sector is facing at the moment about dealing with COVID-19?

There are quite a few challenges around at the moment. Our new survey shows that the sporting goods industry is still facing many difficulties, in particular due to the closure of brick-and-mortar shops and the travel restrictions in 2020-2021. These are making things difficult financially for many retailers. The sector had a loss of turnover of up to 30% in 2020 compared to 2019. Plus, there's the challenge around the winter sport industry we mentioned a moment ago. Winter sports have lost almost half its activity due to ski resorts being closed during the last season. Unfortunately, our survey showed that financial help given to winter sports hasn't been enough to cover a reasonable amount of their losses.

A few challenges being faced, for obvious reasons, and clearly some concern, particularly for certain retailers. What do you think the future holds? How do you think things will change for the sports retail industry in the next few years?

There are a few trends we are already seeing that we expect to continue. There's been lots of talk in the industry about how the digitisation of retail that started before COVID-19 will definitely accelerate. First of all, shopping online will continue to gain market share compared to shopping in stores. COVID-19 has shown the benefits of e-commerce, and we've seen people who were reluctant to use e-commerce, mainly older people, become converts. We think technology in stores and online will be increasingly essential and expect that virtual and augmented reality will be used even more to enhance the customer experience.

We also think that sustainability and recycling will become more important. The sporting goods industry is increasingly moving from a linear to a circular economy. There are lots more companies looking into and adopting approaches like recycle and reuse, durability and repair, and end of use processes. Legislation in this area is coming and the retail industry needs to be aligned and even ahead of the game. This is really important as we know younger generations of consumers are increasingly sensitive to environmental and sustainability issues and want the companies they use to show the same type of commitment that they do.

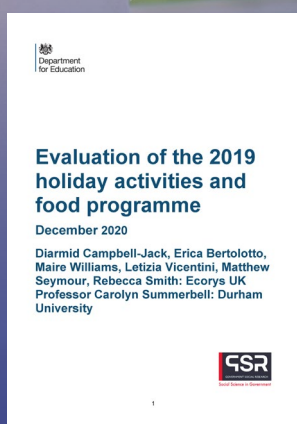
Very interesting. No-one wants to talk about a silver cloud to COVID-19, but the way technological developments have been pushed as a result of the pandemic will definitely make for some fascinating research.

Anyway, thanks very much for your time. Before you go, is there anything else about sports retail that researchers should really be thinking about? Anything that researchers are missing out on?

There are always things in sport retail that people should be thinking about. One really key question at the moment that is not on people's agenda as much as it should be is around the global nature of sports retail and the pandemic. At the time we're speaking, the rest of the world outside Europe is still facing new waves of COVID-19 at alarming rates, mainly as developing countries do not have enough access to vaccines. A growing number of factories in sourcing countries, such as Vietnam, are closing because of high infection rates. We need to show solidarity and support these countries because it is the right thing to do. We also need to research these issues and do what we can so we don't face major disruptions in important supply chains for many sectors and products. If researchers or economists have any spare time that's a definite area where more work would be incredibly valuable.

05

Public health and interventions – Learning from Holiday Activities and Food 2019



Ecorys are currently leading on the major evaluation of the 2021 Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme for the Department for Education (DfE), working with our study partners at Kantar. HAF is a programme delivering £220 million to local authorities across England so that they can co-ordinate free holiday provision to young people, providing young people with physical activity, enriching activities, and healthy food.

Clubs have been asked to provide moderate to vigorous physical activity lasting at least 60 minutes each day, with some specifically sport or physical activity clubs getting involved.

We also delivered the 2019 evaluation of the programme for the DfE. Our 2019 evaluation focused on the extent that young people attended, and the main factors that contributed to the programme working. Our **report** showed that a wide range of organisations were involved in running the programme, that young people reported enjoying their experiences, and that the support and training offered to staff were vital.

Diarmid Campbell-Jack, Associate Director at Ecorys, recently took the opportunity to talk about the 2019 evaluation with **Dr Carolyn Summerbell** of Durham University, who has provided academic expertise as part of the evaluation team on the 2019 and 2021 evaluation. Carolyn is one of the UK's leading experts on nutrition, childhood obesity and child health systems. She is a professor in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, and Deputy Director of Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health →

Diarmid: Hi Carolyn! We're working together on the evaluation of the current 2021 Holiday Activities and Food programme for the Department for Education, but we first worked together a couple of years evaluating the 2019 programme. What do you feel was the key findings from our work?

Carolyn: One of most important findings was confirming that existing holiday activity provision was low in most HAF areas before the programme started. I guess that may not be a surprise to some people, but we were quite shocked at the lack of existing provision. Things that were normally in place is school term time just seemed to stop in the summer holidays in some areas. Often, summer holiday opportunities for children seemed to be restricted to those who could and wanted to pay for them.

As in many other studies, it was good to get a solid understanding of the views of those involved. The HAF co-ordinators did a great job. Those staff who ran the programmes said that they felt supported, learnt new skills, had fun, and enjoyed being part of a new network. Importantly, they said they would be keen to run their programme again. It will be fascinating to see if the current programme builds on these strengths.

I suppose that raises a question around exactly what the current programme can learn from what happened before.

Definitely. One of the questions the 2019 research helped answer was, simply, whether this sort of programme is feasible. We know that programmes like this often rely on a lot of passion and goodwill from those working on the ground in local areas – people who know their community. The research proved that this goodwill exists, and we saw the voluntary sector in local areas was really important in getting many of the programmes up and running. So, we know that this workforce is out there, but it needs support to bring it all together.

The need for support was where the HAF co-ordinators played a vital role. I think the training arranged by co-ordinators for the people running the programmes was important – they certainly seemed to have appreciated it. For me, as a nutritionist, I was really pleased that this training was part of the overall project. Lots of people – I'd guess most people – think they know what a healthy diet is and how to turn a tight budget and limited cooking facilities into a healthy meal. The training would have 'levelled up' all of the programme staff in terms of nutrition knowledge and skills. This is really good for communities, providing longer-term benefits. Programme staff are engaged in lots of projects all year around, and hopefully they will be able to use their new knowledge and skills in a variety of community settings.

I know we saw lots of clubs providing physical activity sessions, sometimes using outside providers to fill gaps. We saw some of the challenges we'd expect around getting all young people to take part, regardless of gender, age, or interest in physical activity, and possibly some new ones around embedding sustainability.

Moving slightly away from 2019, obviously we're spending a lot of time at the moment on the current HAF evaluation. What questions do you think there are around evaluating this type of programme?

This programme is a great initiative. To use the current phrase, it is an important part of the overall effort that is needed to help children from poorer families 'level up', and for this to work there needs to be long-term change. There is always a challenge around evaluating the sustainability of a programme at a single point in time, simply as it is easier to talk definitively about what has happened than what will happen. Future research should focus on whether it is sustainable without the same level of input, for example, resources, support from the DfE and others, without an evaluation taking place.

Future research also needs to look at how these programmes work within the whole system – alongside everything else that is going on or not going on, in the summer holidays. That's a really important part of my academic work. We know that communities are resilient, but we know that programmes are often not. Finding a long term feasible and sustainable solution is needed.

Definitely. Sustainability is always a key question, and I think it is one that evaluators sometimes take for granted. For me, it's got to go deeper than staff thinking a programme was good and saying they want to run it again. When we look at sustainability, we've got to look in detail, moving beyond a generic satisfaction to really understand how processes and protocols are being implemented that will support serious, long-term change.

On that note, what's happening in public health research that the wider research community should be learning from?

More and more public health research now actively involves the individuals who they hope to reach and help right from the outset – by working in partnership to co-produce the intervention or programme. This is obviously part of an important wider trend in evaluation and research, with implications for how individual studies are conducted, but is something that public health is really keen on. For example, in thinking about how we could improve the delivery or content of HAF for next summer, I think it's important to go back to those for who this really matters – the children and their families – and ask them how they think we could do this better, next time.

You're doing lots of incredibly valuable work at the moment on food, and everyone knows about the links between nutrition, health and physical activity. What are the main questions that academic experts like yourself are dealing with at the moment?

Food insecurity and health inequalities are a hot topic in nutrition at the moment. We think the pandemic has increased health inequalities, with an increasing gap between rich and poor children in terms of having a healthy diet. The data we have shows that food insecurity has increased during COVID-19. This is a real worry, and one of the reasons why I was so pleased when I found out that the programme would be running again this summer. Food insecurity is related to levels of childhood obesity. Cheap food is often high in fat, sugar and calories, and is 'nutrient poor' – it is low in some of the essential nutrients that are so important for growing children. So, how do we improve food security and embed long-lasting change? There aren't any easy answers, but then there rarely are!

That's definitely something we should discuss in detail when we've more time if that ever happens! Anything else before we go?

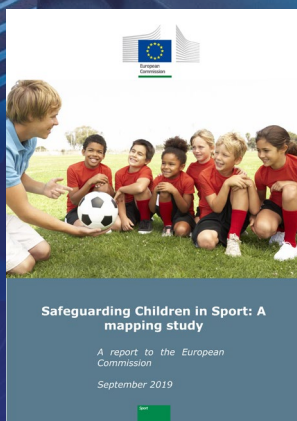
I suppose it's worth kind of officially saying that we enjoyed working with you. Particularly appreciated the speed at which Ecorys was about to turn things around, and make things happen. Within a University context, we aren't able to be that agile normally due to our processes and systems. It was really impressive. I remember DfE came back with some comments and timescales were tight, just before the school holidays were about to start, and Ecorys were able to adapt the project in what seemed like a heartbeat.

I would remember that, but I think at that precise moment I was on holiday in the USA watching baseball, so it was all down to my colleagues! At risk of making this too congratulatory, thanks for all your work and support as well – has been great to have your expertise available 24/7.

06

**Mapping and measuring
complex issues – child
safeguarding in sport**





Ecorys recently led a European Union (EU) wide mapping study on safeguarding children in sport, involving a rapid review of empirical evidence on physical and psychological violence against children in sport across the EU. Our study paid particular attention to the legal and political approaches taken to safeguarding children in individual Member States and internationally. Our report was published in October 2019 and can be found [here](#).

The research required a quick turnaround to help the European Commission focus its efforts in this area. We completed systematic desk reviews of available evidence across fifteen countries, then carried out further desk research and additional interviews with policy officials to examine key issues. We then developed 10 detailed case studies highlighting particular good practices in to address safeguarding issues. This was one of several similar mapping studies Ecorys has recently conducted for the Commission, including a systematic review of good practice workplace physical activity initiatives, a review of programmes to address inactivity amongst people with disabilities, and a review of legal approaches in the fight against steroids.

James Sennett, the Project Director, spoke with **Tine Vertommen**, an academic expert in safeguarding issues at Thomas More University in Mechelen, Belgium who worked with Ecorys on the study, to reflect on the research and key issues in this important area of sport policy →

James: One of the reasons why the European Commission commissioned this research was that they were interested in finding out how policy developments on this important issue compared across the EU. How do you think our research did in answering this question?

Tine: Well, I suppose the first thing to say is that research into safeguarding children in sport is an absolutely vital task. Our study showed that there are significant differences in the progress made on safeguarding children in sport by different Member States. It confirmed what some may have suspected, namely that some Member States have a much longer tradition in developing and implementing safeguarding initiatives in sport, while others are just at the start.

Absolutely. Ideally, you'd hope that everyone had long histories of dealing with this issue, but, on the positive side, it provides opportunities to learn from what has been tested and worked elsewhere. I know one of the really interesting points in our research was about how Member States defined the issue in the first place. What are your personal thoughts about that?

Yes, our study definitely showed that Member States had different views on what safeguarding children in sport should cover. Safeguarding should be more than just prevention of physical and psychological violence, however, some countries tended to have a narrow view of safeguarding based just on prevention.

Personally, I see a safeguarding approach as including child protection measures, but also incorporating a comprehensive, positive view on children's rights within a sporting environment. This would include elements like the need to be treated fairly or to avoid training methods that aren't appropriate given a child's stage of physical development.

As you'll remember, we spent a lot of time developing and carrying out a rapid review of evidence across the EU. What strikes you as the key points coming out of this evidence?

The findings of this review showed that there is a growing body of research into the prevalence of violence against children in sport. It also highlighted the prevalence of psychological abuse towards children in sport (including bullying and emotional abuse). This is positive though evidence on the specific risk factors associated with psychological violence were less well covered. The study also showed that analysing trends or comparing results from these studies is difficult and can be limited by the use of different survey instruments, methodologies and the way people define violence against children. It was also clear from the review that the coverage of studies is very limited, and that data is available for certain countries.

So, how do you think policy-makers and practitioners can benefit from this type of mapping research?

This kind of mapping study is extremely useful for policymakers because although the client requires answers very quickly it helps them to understand the current situation at European and Member State level. It gives everyone a baseline or benchmark that policymakers can look at and build upon. As the research is supported by the European Commission, policy audiences across the EU will engage with the research findings and take note of its recommendations.

Understanding the current state of practice can also serve as an impetus for those countries that are about to begin a journey to improve their safeguarding. For practitioners, this kind of study can be inspirational, showcasing good practice that could be translated into their own context.

You've been doing a lot of work on safeguarding issues in sport, how does our research study link in with your wider work?

This study was helpful for my own research as it made it clear to me that research on safeguarding in sport is growing across the EU and that there is more and more interest in understanding what works in addressing safeguarding issues.

I think the study also confirmed to me that more professionalisation in the field is urgently required. We saw that initial research studies focused on measuring the prevalence of violence against children and analysing survivors' narratives, but we lack a really solid arsenal of reliable and valid instruments for measuring and understanding the prevalence and effectiveness of specific interventions. The next steps in our research should be focussing on developing reliable and valid measurement instruments and studying more rigorously the effectiveness of safeguarding interventions that have been delivered.

Very interesting. From our experience in other areas, getting stakeholders involved in developing and agreeing measurement instruments can be complicated but is worth the effort.

Before we go, one last, big question. What are the other questions around safeguarding children in sport that you think researchers should be helping answer?

There are many unanswered questions that researchers could help answer! A few off the top of my head. What exactly are the interventions that are most effective in safeguarding children in local sport organisations and why exactly do they work? How do we scale up effective interventions, so that they reach as many children as possible? How can we effectively and sustainably change people's behaviour concerning perpetrating and bystander harassment and abuse in sport? What can we do to make it easier to report cases of harassment and abuse in sport to the judicial or disciplinary system?

So, lots of important questions, and hopefully lots of research studies to give us the answers we need!

Thanks, Tine. Best of luck, and hopefully some more research will be done to build on our work.

07

**Conducting
cross-Europe
research – anabolic
steroids in sport**



From October 2020 to June 2021, Ecorys led a study for the European Commission on the fight against anabolic steroids, human growth hormones and prohibited methods in sport within the EU. It mapped the legislation in place in the EU (both at national and EU level) regarding such substances and prohibited methods. It also looked at the actors involved in the enforcement, investigation, and implementation of the legislation.

One of the benefits of the study was that it let us look at the facilitators and barriers to the enforcement of the legislation in practice, and provided the opportunity to put forward important recommendations on how the EU and Member States could better address the problems identified. Our report was published in June 2021 and can be found [here](#).

Gillian Kelly, Senior Research Manager at Ecorys, spoke with **Dr Aaron Hermann**, International Integrity, Development and Good Governance Consultant and an expert in anti-doping policy and law, to gather his views on the Ecorys research and the challenges in stopping doping in sport →

Gillian: Hi Aaron, many thanks for taking the time to speak with me on the recent study we worked together on the fight against anabolic steroids, human growth hormones and prohibited methods in sport within the EU. I wanted to begin by asking you why do you think this is such an important issue?

Aaron: Well, I must firstly state that doping in sport is one of the major challenges of the modern sporting world. I firmly believe that doping not only contributes to inequalities amongst athletes but can also impact the long-term health of people. Athletes are role models for youth and children, and actions by athletes can and are mimicked by their fans. Doping also has far more widespread societal and community consequences and is not limited to the sporting world.

I must also highlight that the use of doping agents by athletes is just part of the story, the agents must get to the athletes and therefore this means that other actors are involved. Therefore, in order to combat the issue of doping in sport, it is important for us to look beyond just the athletes and usage but rather also incorporate a far wider view and target the other actors involved. I think that our study will help make this possible as it provides a more encompassing image of the current situation with regards to the wider sporting world.

I hope so! What strikes you as being the most important issues our study helped to answer?

One of the most important issues it helped to bring attention to are the barriers impacting not only the creation of legislation targeting the wider doping infrastructure but also the barriers to implementation. I think that the study really helps to demonstrate some of the difficulties which exist when law enforcement and sporting officials try to combat the scourge of doping. For instance, the lack of resources, differences in Member State approaches and legislation, the fact that some Member States do not place any importance on the issue, and more. Through highlighting these differences in our study, I think that one is better able to understand the intricacies of the complex system that is anti-doping.

Agreed – many people will already know that approaches to drugs can really differ across the continent, and that's definitely the case with drugs in sport. Whenever we work on similar mapping studies there is always more divergence across Member States that you initially suspect. Having finished the study, how do you think policy makers and practitioners can use our results?

Interesting question! First and foremost, I think the study is useful for policy makers and practitioners as it helps to provide an overview of EU wide legislation and implementation. This 'one stop shop' will streamline the preparation and potentially reduce the amount of time and resources that policy makers and law enforcement may otherwise spend on some of the initial preparation. I also think that the study helps to illustrate the issues and barriers faced by law enforcement, sport officials and others in the fight against doping. This, one hopes, will help bring to the fore some potentially previously unknown issues.

So what do you think are the other questions on the fight against doping in sport that researchers should be helping to answer? What would you say are the most important questions?

From my perspective, there are a number of different unanswered questions and areas when it comes to the fight against doping in sport that could be further expanded upon. I think the most important ones are why the barriers to effective implementation exist and what can be done to reduce them, what the possibilities are for the creation of EU wide homogenous legislation and how can this be achieved, and how law enforcement can be further supported in this fight

Thanks a lot Aaron this is really useful. I have one final important question for you. On a really practical level, how do you think researchers can help develop learning and add value in this area?


Well, I think that one of the most important elements is cross-cultural communication and understanding. Research has shown that some of the barriers that exist between transnational cooperation are due to a lack of understanding of other cultures, laws, language, and general sporting approaches. Researchers, along with policy makers, law enforcement agencies, governments and sporting organisations should therefore take steps to reach out to other Member States and try to better understand each other, how to work together, how to interconnect investigations, create more encompassing widespread research etc.

Sport is the perfect medium to help ensure international understanding, and given that doping is a worldwide issue, I believe that it provides the perfect avenue for researchers and policy makers to come together and combine their resources to work towards their mutual interests in fighting doping. By enhancing the international cooperation and understanding, doping can be better tackled, something which will bring significant value to all those involved.

So, lots of important ways that researchers like us can help add value in this vitally important area. Thanks a lot Aaron for your time, this has been really helpful.

08

**The political context behind
sport and physical activity**



One of the challenges we face as evaluators and researchers is that sport and physical activity do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they are heavily influenced by the surrounding political and social context. In the 1980's we argued about boycotting the Olympic Games. In the 1990's it was selling school playing fields. Since then, we've debated lottery funding for elite athletes, the link between physical activity and preventative health, and how to increase sport participation for underrepresented groups.

The extent that politics shapes the context within which we evaluate programmes is often taken for granted. As a result, we've taken the opportunity to get the views on this context from one of the UK's leading academics working on this issue.

Samuel Greet, Research Assistant at Ecorys spoke with **Dr Stuart Whigham**, Senior Lecturer in Sport, Coaching and Physical Education at Oxford Brookes University, to hear about the current political context that is influencing sport and physical activity, and how researchers should approach their work in this field →

Sam: Hi Stuart – really good to get the chance to speak to you. We’ve been doing a lot of work at Ecorys across our studies on physical activity and sport and thought you’d be the ideal person to give us a view on how it all relates to the current political context.

I suppose the best place to start is that there’s been a lot of political change over the last few years. What are your thoughts as to how might this be affecting sport and physical activity? Are we seeing anything new or different?

Stuart: Interestingly, in my opinion there is very little in the way of ideological differences between the major parties in terms of how they envisage the role of sport and physical activity, and its importance to the nation. All the parties seem to coalesce around the idea that the state should continue to provide funding for elite sport in order to maintain the UK’s international reputation at major international sporting events, and should continue to provide funding for grassroots sport and physical activity in order to tackle physical and mental health problems.

Furthermore, there seems to be a shared belief across parties in a ‘trickle-down’ approach to funding which prioritises funding at the elite level, with a ‘role-model’ effect whereby elite sport success inspires participation at a grassroots level. There’s an important question about the lack of hard evidence to support this argument.

If I was asked to sum it all up, I’d say that changes in governments have had little impact on the overall approach to sport, so the only main thing that has changed is the amount of available funding. That amount of funding largely depends on the overall approach to public sector spending from each government.

I know you’ve been doing a lot of intriguing work recently on the links between sport, politics, and nationalism. What have you found out?

Firstly, it is clear that politicians are explicitly acknowledging the political and symbolic importance of sport and sporting events - a position that us academics working on the sociology and politics of sport support. We argue that it is important to confront the ‘sport and politics do not mix’ fallacy as this helps us shed light on the political and ideological impact of sporting events. We use empirical evidence from past sporting events to back up our position wherever we can. As a quick example, I’ve done some detailed work in the past looking at how both pro-independence and pro-union campaigns exploited London 2012 and Glasgow 2014 in the debate over the Scottish independence referendum.

One of the interesting things is that there is a double-edged symbolism of international sporting events in relation to national identity in the UK. We see that past sporting events have offered the potential for unifying symbolism, but the same events can simultaneously provide the potential for the growth of distinctive national identities - and to a lesser degree, political nationalism. Our evidence argues that sport can act as an additional marker of difference between the ‘home nations’, underpinning a sense of distinctiveness within British identity politics.

There’s definitely a lot to think about in terms of national identity. To take a concrete example - there are obviously different views among different people in each of the four nations around how much a UK identity should be promoted. If policymakers were trying to use sport to create a sense of, for example, Britishness, what would they need to consider?

I think policymakers would need to start by being wary of the dangers of conflating Britishness and Englishness at international sporting events, as has been seen at some international sporting events. This type of conflation often leads to the alienation of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish population. We see something similar happen with broader political communication, with the risks around the recent increase in symbolism of the

United Kingdom, such as the promotion of the Union Flag in public communication and government buildings. If repeated at major sporting events this could undermine the potential to use such events to bring people from all four nations of the UK together.

I would stress that a sensitive and respectful approach to the use of sport and sporting events to bring people from all four nations of the UK together, mindful of the arguments presented above, does indeed possess potential benefits which make the pursuit of sporting events worthwhile. There is the potential for harnessing intangible 'legacies' of sporting events, such as image promotion, diplomatic goodwill, reconciliation, and 'feel-good factor', for achieving broader cultural, social and economic goals.

That's really interesting. So much of the discussion of the legacy of events seems to focus on economic arguments which are difficult to evidence and don't always show the positive results many assume. Taking this narrow economic focus misses out the other aspects of legacy that you're mentioning and that are harder to translate into cashable savings.

On an important tangent, one of the main Government agendas at the moment is around levelling up. What are your quick thoughts about how levelling up relates to sport and physical activity?

That's an interesting question. There is a sense of disenfranchisement within the English electorate in terms of perceived and real disparities around public sector funding and investment in England in comparison to the other 'home nations'. We see that the Conservative Party have successfully tapped into this sense of disenfranchisement through their rhetoric around 'levelling up'. However, as such rhetoric needs to be matched by action, policymakers should be aware of the potential role of sport as a driver of tourism and events strategies to encourage economic growth in the regions of England – this is a strategy which has been used to some good effect in Scotland through sports such as golf, winter sports, climbing, cycling, and water sports.

I know we're running out of time, so one final question. What do you think researchers working on sport and physical activity need to do differently?

I think that researchers working on sport and physical activity need to endeavour to act as 'critical friends' to the government and policymakers, providing constructive and realistic appraisals of the potential impacts of sport and physical activity policy. At times, there is a tendency for researchers to over-emphasise the potential benefits of investment in sport and physical activity, as is often seen in the hosting of major sporting events. Often, researchers don't want to burn their bridges with government, national governing bodies, or sports organisations by undermining their work.

However, we've seen that independent researchers have an important role in ensuring that the investments made with public funds are as efficient as possible in terms of their impact. For me, making public funds efficient means focusing investment at the grassroots level, both in terms of boosting childhood sports and physical activity participation. It also means supporting local government in funding sports facilities and opportunities for disadvantaged and marginalised groups within sport and society.

Avoiding leaping to conclusions about potential benefits of sport is definitely a challenge. It's a particularly relevant question because so much thinking around sport is emotional and driven by narratives that we've grown up with and often take for granted. I suppose one of the challenges as well is that questions about sport funding are complex and only really cut-through in the media when certain elite level teams have their central funding cut or increased. Definitely a conversation for us to continue later!

09

The final whistle



Our expert discussions have taken us on a marathon through a huge variety of topics and issues, showing that the world of sport and physical activity never stops spinning.

The never-ending nature of our work means that new challenges lurk round each corner, waiting to trip up the unsuspecting runner. Good quality evidence is needed in lots of different areas to support the sport and physical activity sector: to help the sector recover in a post-pandemic world, to help improve accessibility for all, to keep participants safe and engaging positively, and to develop good governance practices and integrity in sport.

Three key challenges for researchers

While there are clear challenges to those directly working in the sport and physical activity sector, the interviews in our report also clearly challenge those of us working in evaluation and research. Our report highlights three particular challenges.

Firstly, the more we understand about the interrelationships between sport, physical activity and society, the murkier the picture gets. Evaluating in this area requires getting your hands dirty in genuinely complex issues. There are different levels involved and a wide range of actors to consider, from the individual or sports club through to national and international federations and national funding agencies. There are complicated feedback loops. Governmental decisions, people's lived environment, and individual motivations all play roles in encouraging or discouraging physical activity.

This complex situation requires evaluators to develop cost-effective approaches that provide real insight. Our experience is that it is better to develop genuinely new knowledge in a small number of areas than cover too much and risk merely repeating what everyone already knows.

Secondly, we know that sport and physical activity has knock-on effects across a range of outcomes. This makes it a challenge to capture the breadth of impact from projects. It also makes it a challenge to provide clear, full evidence of the economic value of physical activity. This is a difficult task in itself, as linking subjective data to objective financial values is never easy. The research and evaluation sector needs to continue developing thinking in these areas.

Finally, there is often a challenge in international comparative studies in getting a reliable picture across and within different countries. Concentrate too much on the overall European picture, for example, and you may miss valuable examples of best practice in individual countries. Concentrate too much on individual countries and you may miss vital pieces in the overall jigsaw. Spending limited evaluation resources means difficult decisions have to be made to provide value where it matters.

This is a Gordian knot that cannot be easily untangled, at least until the day finally arrives when sport-obsessed lottery winners start ploughing their money into evaluations rather than their local non-league football teams. There is no single way to sever the knot, but our experience suggests having the right networks and checkpoints where evidence can be triangulated by experts can make a huge difference.

These three challenges promise to keep everyone working in evaluation and research in this area incredibly busy. Our interviews show how Ecorys and many others working in this field are meeting these challenges and adding value to sports policy and interventions. We look forward to continuing to work with our interviewees and other experts to meet new challenges in the years to come. As we repeatedly are told in any sporting competition, we'll take it one game at a time.

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