

Minister for Sport speech at International Working Group on Women and Sport handover

Thank you to New Zealand for your generous hospitality.

I am genuinely delighted to be able to attend today's event which starts the official handover of the International Working Group on Women and Sport from New Zealand to the UK.

It is great that the event could be happening at the very same time as Birmingham 2022, which – and this is worth repeating – has the largest female sport programme in the history of the Commonwealth Games and will be the first time a major multi-sport event will feature more women's than men's medal events and I think that is fantastic.

I am absolutely committed to supporting women's sport at every opportunity – pushing for greater participation, employment, commercial opportunities and visibility in the media. The fantastic success of the Lionesses this weekend shows just how far we have come.

The UK has a strong track record and strong history of empowering women and girls through sport. There is a long way to go but we have much to be proud of in this area.

The media profile of women's sport is continuing to rise and recent research shows that two-thirds of UK sport fans currently follow some form of women's sport, and half have attended an event featuring women's athletes.

Our domestic initiatives, like This Girl Can, are inspiring millions of women and girls to get physically active. Something that is particularly important as we recover from the pandemic.

We have also seen the growth in audiences for women's sport.

Recent research published by Women's Sport Trust shows that domestic women's sport attracted a record British broadcast audience of nearly 33 million in 2021, the main drivers being The Hundred and the FA Women's Super League.

And the leadership role of certain media outlets is very important, including the BBC, which made the strategic decision to make sure that many of those matches were on BBC One, peak time. It worked. It showed that there is a mass audience for women's sport. And that is pivotal. If the eyeballs are there, then the money and commercial opportunities start flowing. Instead of just doing that because it is the right thing to do, we will have increasing competition to hold these events and make sure these events are on TV because they are commercially viable and commercially lucrative.

And a record crowd of more than 87,000 attended this year's UEFA Women's

Euros final – the highest attended match at either a men’s or women’s European Championship. I was lucky enough to attend some of the matches including the final and I can honestly say that there was a superb atmosphere. The spectators were evenly balanced and importantly, more than 100,000 children were spectators in those matches. I know the whole nation will have been inspired by the Lionesses.

There have also been record sponsorship deals struck with women’s sports leagues, such as Barclays’ sponsorship of the Women’s Super League, the premier women’s football league in England.

And the UK is due to host a number of high profile women’s sports events this year, including the Rugby League World Cup and the Billie Jean King Cup. Plus Birmingham 2022 of course which is going on at this moment in time.

We are working tirelessly to make the most of these events in showcasing women’s sport, and encouraging more women and girls to get active as a result. But we recognise that we need to go further.

The IWG is a great opportunity to build on this success and not only share the fantastic work we are doing but to learn from other countries too.

The UK Secretariat’s vision for a ‘just and sustainable post-pandemic world where women and girls play a full and equitable role’ is something that I feel passionately about.

It is vital that we continue to strive for greater equality and opportunity in sport.

We have been working with our women’s sport working group in the UK, which many of you have attended, to look at some of the challenges and opportunities that exist and I am really keen that we continue to make progress as a result of these discussions.

I would also like to commend the work of the current hosts New Zealand in sharing, promoting and supporting stories of inspiring change from around the world.

Their development of the world’s first IWG Insight Hub as a home for the world’s best research, insight, case studies, news and interactive programmes such as training and seminars has also been ground breaking.

I believe the IWG can be a catalyst for women’s sport as we recover from the impact of the pandemic.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the role you have all played in securing the IWG secretariat for the UK.

It’s absolutely essential that we work collectively to share the messages behind the bid of inclusivity, equity and collaboration.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure that women’s sport continues to thrive not just in the UK but on the international stage.