

Nadine Dorries speech to ukactive Conference

I'm so glad I get to speak to you all so early in my new role – particularly as I know it's been an incredibly challenging 18 months for the sector.

If COVID taught us anything, it's the fundamental role that sport and exercise play in our lives.

It's crucial for our general wellbeing – and it was a real wrench when parts of it were taken away from us for months at a time last year.

And it was such a relief when gyms reopened; when people were reunited with their five-a-side football teams or their basketball or netball teams; and finally when our stadiums began to fill up with fans again.

That's why we prioritised sport and physical activity throughout the pandemic. More than £1 billion has gone into supporting the sector through COVID: from the grassroots all the way to the elite level; from South Shields to Penzance.

That was during the height of the pandemic.

Now comes the recovery – and we'll be putting sport and physical activity at the heart of that, too.

I want to use our experiences over the last eighteen months as the trigger for a new generation of physical activity and exercise. Improving the nation's health and wellbeing is vital to reducing the pressure on the NHS, and being physically active is central to that.

And I know that this ties in with UKActive's own mission for growth. We all have a shared goal, which is to get as many people as active as possible.

We launched our strategy to achieve this, Sporting Future, in 2015. And we've achieved a huge amount together since then.

Since the launch of the strategy, Sport England has allocated over £1.5 billion to nearly 5,000 organisations within the UK.

Wherever we can, we've looked to broaden participation, to get people active and moving, to open up physical activity to underrepresented groups.

But as we come out of this pandemic, now is a prime opportunity to refresh this strategy. So right now, officials in my department are looking at ways we can make sure it continues to be relevant in the coming years.

We're in the very early stages of this process, and of course our primary focus remains helping the sector recover from the pandemic. We understand the importance of this.

That recovery can mean many things:

It might be tackling barriers that make it harder for people to stay active.

Or making sure sports remain financially sustainable.

Or promoting the uptake of facilities in schools and beyond.

But throughout the whole process, we will constantly be looking for opportunities to work with the sector to level up facilities, infrastructure and the support we provide.

That's one bit of work going on at DCMS right now.

But there's something in particular I want to focus on while I'm Secretary of State.

It's going to be the thread running through everything I do.

And that's improving access.

I want every person, no matter where they're from or what stage of life they're at, to have the chance to participate and to rise to the top of all of the industries DCMS covers – to the top of the arts, of tech, and, of course, sport.

Who among us wasn't inspired by the success of our athletes at the Olympics and Paralympics this summer in Tokyo? Who among us is not already looking ahead to building on the fantastic opportunities which will be provided by the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham next year?

Our role models come from all over the UK – they're not confined to London, or to only wealthy areas. Just look at Tom Daley, Kadeena Cox or Sir Andy Murray.

But while talent is evenly spread, opportunity isn't.

It can be so much harder for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to make the most of their potential – whether that's because they can't afford the equipment, can't get on the court or pitch they need, or the lessons that other children have.

Children should be competing on a level playing field from day one.

And so we must work together to open up access on every rung of the ladder. And we're already making interventions in this area.

Earlier this month the government announced an additional £30 million for PE teacher training and opening up school facilities to provide access to the wider community.

And alongside that funding, we announced a £30 million package with the Lawn Tennis Association to renovate 4,500 park tennis courts up and down the country.

You all know that some of the tennis courts which are available now for young people are unusable, but the point of this funding is to refurbish those courts so people do have access to them.

We were all so delighted to watch Emma Raducanu triumph at the US Open.

I don't want to wait another four decades for us to find our next Emma Raducanu – and I don't want a budding young sports star from a council estate in Leeds to be held back because they can't afford a racket, let alone coaching, or because they're forced to play on a shabby old tennis court.

I want our next tennis champion to be just as likely to come from Burnley as Bromley.

So we're making sure our new tennis funding can be delivered in the most deprived areas with the most dilapidated courts.

The same was true when we announced a £50 million investment in grassroots pitches over the summer. That money was targeted at left-behind communities.

The same was true when Sport England launched "Studio You" – a new digital resource designed to help teachers engage less active teenage girls with their PE lessons. I was one of those girls.

And this is only the start.

Whatever I'm working on, whatever the department is investing in, I want it to go towards opening doors for people who have been shut out from success.

To me, that's the true definition of leveling up. It may be about places, it may be about growth or it may be about economics. But most importantly, within my department, it is about people.

And I look forward to working with you all on that mission.

Sport England's £20 million Tackling Inequalities Fund is a great example of how we can work together to improve access to those most impacted by the pandemic, including people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

So this is my challenge to you today: to use your businesses and your networks and your channels to do all you can to broaden the sector's reach and lift up those in need.

That way, we can tackle health inequality at its roots, so that everyone has the same chance to live a happy and healthy life, no matter where they come from.

Thank you.