

Sport Minister's SRA annual conference speech

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at today's conference, and for giving me the opportunity to talk about the way COVID has affected sport.

It has been an incredibly difficult year for the entire country – including the whole sports sector. So let me first give my special thanks to Lisa Wainwright and the Sport and Recreation Alliance for organising this virtual conference, and bringing together some of the countless people who have helped the government mitigate the far-reaching effects of Covid.

I want to talk today about what the Government is doing to help support the sector generally. But first I'd like to highlight the cooperation and collaboration that has taken place across sport to get us this far. You've all offered incredible commitment, time, energy and expertise throughout the crisis. We wouldn't have made the progress we have without you.

I've worked particularly closely with the Sport and Recreation Alliance, who have served as a forum for many of our partner organisations on the sport and physical activity side. I know the Alliance will be a unifying voice for the sector going forward, and I'd like to thank them in particular for the role they played in supporting the development of the 'return to play' guidance with my Department. Your contribution has been invaluable.

It's no exaggeration to say that the pandemic has profoundly affected the sporting landscape, and will continue to do so for many months to come.

The irony, of course, is that we need sport now more than ever. Sport is at the heart of our local communities, even in the most challenging of circumstances. And sport and physical activity are crucial to both our physical and mental health – both of which have been tested by this pandemic.

That's why the government has put sport and health at the heart of our coronavirus agenda. We need the country to get match-fit to beat COVID – not just for our physical or mental health, but for the wider socio-economic role that sport can play in leveling up communities across the country.

In fact, for every £1 spent on sport in England, we get £3.28 worth back in terms of societal benefits, according to one Sheffield Hallam study.

That's why we made sure people could exercise even at the height of lockdown. It's why we worked hard to get elite sport back. And it's why sport is broadly exempt under the latest "rule of 6" restrictions.

It's been a huge challenge to get to where we are today. We've taken a detailed, clinician-led approach, working with Public Health England, the Department of Health and you, our sector partners, every step along the way.

We've had dozens of meetings, and published pages of detailed guidance

outlining first how to get elite athletes back into socially-distanced training, and then back into close-contact training.

The elite side was important because getting athletes back for major sporting events, like the Commonwealth Games, can play a huge role in inspiring young people to try sport.

Just take the England Women's football team at the World Cup in France last year. Their heroic performance saw an unprecedented surge in girls wanting to take up football. That was part of a wider and much-needed shift of balance towards women's sport – which will benefit everyone. So it was great to see that momentum.

Throughout all of this, we've put the safety of the athletes, coaches and support staff first and foremost. And by working so closely with the sports themselves, we have made sure this has been a collaborative, consensual effort to create the safest possible environments for everyone involved.

But we're trying to go even further, and get fans back into stadiums safely. We've run a number of pilots and have formed a special Sports Tech Innovation Group to look at technology and other solutions, so that we can get major sporting events running as soon as it is safe to do so.

I know, and I have heard from all of you, that we have to find a way for sports to generate income. It's one of my top priorities.

But we also want to support sport at a community level, through our gyms, pools and leisure centres.

The Government has provided unprecedented financial support to businesses to cope with the pandemic. And from July 25, gyms pools and leisure facilities were able to open their doors to the public once more.

But I know, and my colleague the Communities Secretary has acknowledged in Parliament, that too many facilities have been unable to open since then. We need them to open.

The government has since announced the Income Guarantee Scheme, which aims to support a number of local authorities who have incurred irrecoverable loss of income during coronavirus. We continue to talk across government about further support for the sector, including for those Local Authorities who have outsourced provision of leisure services. And we are working closely with sports to understand any challenges they are facing as a result of the pandemic.

It's so important that exercise facilities remain accessible for everyone, no matter what their background – and gyms and leisure centres play a huge role in that effort.

Of course, Sport England's Community Emergency Fund of £210 million has helped so many community sports clubs and exercise centres remain open during the pandemic. Without this support, they simply would not have survived.

I am sure Tim will want to add more on that when he addresses this conference next. And no doubt he'll also want to mention their excellent online programme, 'Join the Movement,' which helped so many people keep their fitness levels up during lockdown.

In the meantime, I know we are still in a state of flux. We've made great progress, but we face a number of challenges – some of which are still evolving – to get us back on the path to normality.

In the short term, can I first offer my support to the Sport Recreation Alliance in their bid for the secretariat of the International Working Group for Women. You're in a great position to make a tremendous contribution there, so let me wish you the best of luck.

And as Minister for Sport it would be remiss if I didn't mention National Fitness Day, which is in two days' time, and of course the Great British Week of Sport, due to start on 27 September. Let's get behind both of these great initiatives.

In the long-term, though, I know that we can only return to normal with the kind of collaboration that got us through the first stage of the pandemic. Given the incredible commitment, passion and tireless hard work you've shown so far, I'm very confident that we will all pull together as a sector and emerge stronger than ever on the other side. Thank you.