

# Cross-Party Group on Health Inequalities

Wednesday 4 June 2025, 1- 2.30pm

## Minute

## Present

### *MSPs*

Emma Harper MSP, Brian Whittle MSP, Carol Mochan MSP, Oliver Mundell MSP

### *Invited guests*

Dr David Meir, University of the West of Scotland

Dr David Scott, Abertay University

Andy Hook, Street Soccer Scotland

### *Non-MSP Group Members*

Matt Barclay, Community Pharmacy Scotland

Farid Bardid, University of Strathclyde

Salena Begley, Family Fund

Lauren Blair, Voluntary Health Scotland

Christine Carlin, Voluntary Health Scotland

Judith Connell, Kidney Care UK

June Deasy, British Psychological Society

Helen Forrest, Children's Health Scotland

Virginia Francis, MECOPP

Paula Fraser ,VOX Scotland

Victoria Galloway, Befriending Networks

Cindy Gray, University of Glasgow

Roisin Hurst, Voluntary Health Scotland

Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland

Ian McCall, Paths for All

Barri Millar, St John Scotland

Tejesh Mistry, Voluntary Health Scotland

Esther Moodie, Feniks

Fiona O'Sullivan, Edinburgh Children's Hospital Charity

Nell Page, Mindroom

Jack Prinzel, The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

Sarah Randell, Teapot Trust

Nancy Riach, Arts Culture Health and Wellbeing Scotland

Ruby Shanks, RCPCH  
Kellie Thomson, Voluntary Health Scotland  
Sam Whitmore, Public Health Scotland  
Kirstin Worsley, The Breastfeeding Network

## *Non-Group Members*

Kim Atkinson, The Scottish Sports Association  
Katie Biesty, Active Scotland  
Fraser Calderwood, Active Dundee  
Liz Corbett, Parkrun UK  
Lisa DodS, NHS Forth Valley  
Mark Gaffney, Scottish Disability Sport  
Smita Grant, NHS Lothian, Minority Ethnic health Inclusion Service (MEHIS)  
Stephanie-Anne Harris, Edinburgh Community Health Forum  
David Kennedy, NHS Lanarkshire  
Mairéad Murray, Queen Margaret University  
Joan O'Sullivan, Swimtime UK Ltd / Skilltime Training Academy / DSG  
Fiona Pirrie, East Ayrshire Carers Centre  
Dr Geoffrey Platt, University of Edinburgh Scottish Weightlifting  
Kate Robinson, National Lottery Community Fund  
Lesley Ross, SACC  
Margarita Sweeney-Baird, Inclusive Skating  
Juliana Sweeney-Baird, Inclusive Skating  
Antonella Valbonesi, One Parent Families Scotland  
Heidi Vistisen, LEAP Sports Scotland  
Diana Winfield

## **Agenda item 1**

### **Welcome and Apologies**

## **Agenda item 2**

### **Approve minutes**

Approve minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 December 2024.

Approved by Tejesh Mistry and seconded by Brian Whittle MSP.

## **Agenda item 3**

Approve new members

The following MSP was approved:

**Oliver Mundell MSP**

The following organisations were approved as new members of the CPG:

[Community Renewal Trust](#)

[St John Scotland](#)

[Gilead Sciences](#)

[Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway](#)

[Media Education](#)

## **Agenda item 4**

### **Discussion topic- Barriers to Physical Activity and Health Inequalities**

#### **Presentations from:**

#### **Tejesh Mistry, Voluntary Health Scotland & Sport Scotland Board Member**

Tejesh Mistry delivered a passionate presentation focused on the power of the third sector in breaking down barriers to physical activity and addressing health inequalities. His core message was clear: *“It’s about living well – for everyone, no matter who.”*

He spotlighted a range of impactful community-led initiatives such as parkrun, Paths for All, Men’s Sheds, and Street Soccer Scotland, showcasing how these programs are transforming lives and creating inclusive spaces for physical activity.

Tejesh emphasised the critical role of physical activity in managing and preventing conditions like dementia and Parkinson’s disease, underlining the importance of accessible opportunities for all. He called for greater recognition and support of the third sector’s role in health and wellbeing, urging stakeholders to seize the opportunities already present in communities across Scotland.

#### **Dr David Meir, University of the West of Scotland and Dr David Scott, Abertay University**

#### **Topic: Getting the Inactive Active – Tackling Barriers to Physical Activity**

This presentation explored the deep-rooted social, economic, and cultural barriers that continue to limit participation in physical activity across Scotland. It highlighted how inequalities in income, geography, gender, age, and disability persistently shape who gets to be active and who doesn’t.

#### **Key findings included:**

- Poverty and material deprivation remain major obstacles to participation.
- Structural inequalities in sport and physical activity begin early in life and often persist into adulthood.

- There is a lack of comprehensive data, making it difficult to fully understand and address these disparities.

The review drew on a wide range of evidence, including recent academic research and policy reports, and called for more inclusive, community-driven approaches to physical activity. It emphasised the critical role of the third sector in bridging gaps and creating accessible opportunities for all.

The message was clear: to truly tackle health inequalities, we must rethink how we support and promote physical activity, ensuring it is equitable, inclusive, and embedded in everyday life.

[View the presentation here.](#)

### **Andy Hook, Street Soccer Scotland** **Topic: Sport as a Catalyst for Change**

Andy Hook shared a powerful insight into how Street Soccer Scotland is using football as a transformative tool to engage some of the most marginalised individuals in society. Their approach is rooted in inclusion, dignity, and second chances.

Key highlights:

- Street Soccer Scotland runs 60+ weekly sessions across the country, offering free football, personal development, and education.
- Their programmes support people facing homelessness, addiction, mental health challenges, long-term unemployment, and reintegration after prison.
- The model is 30% football, 70% engagement, focusing on building confidence, community, and connection.
- 70% of staff have lived experience, making the support deeply empathetic and relatable.

Impact statistics from their 2024 census show:

- 73% reported improved mental health
- 95% felt a stronger sense of community
- 92% gained better control over personal issues
- 80% improved family relationships

Andy's message was clear: sport can be a lifeline, and the third sector plays a vital role in creating spaces where people feel they belong and can rebuild their lives.

[View the presentation here.](#)

## Questions and Discussion

**Kim Atkinson, Scottish Sports Association** – Kim emphasised the urgent need for stronger, more actionable physical activity policies. While Scotland may have world-leading strategies on paper, she highlighted a gap between policy and practice.

Key points included:

- One-size-fits-all approaches don't work – we must understand and respond to diverse needs and lived experiences.
- The barriers to physical activity are often the same as those that limit participation in other areas of life – such as poverty, poor health, and social exclusion.
- Prevention must be a priority – not just getting the inactive active, but also keeping the active active.
- She posed critical questions for collective action:
  - How do we remove barriers?
  - How do we reach those not currently participating?
  - Where are we joining voices across sectors?
  - Do we need to amplify the message about the value of physical activity?

Kim also raised concern that the promised increase in the sport budget has not materialised, calling for greater investment and visibility for physical activity as a public health priority.

**Brian Whittle MSP**, a former Olympian and long-time coach, brought heartfelt conviction to the discussion, drawing on his personal and professional experience in sport. He stressed that we already have the mechanisms in place—what's missing is the political and societal will to prioritise physical activity as a cornerstone of preventative health.

He announced that a new paper will be published after recess, aiming to elevate the role of physical activity in national health strategy. Brian urged all sectors to push harder, speak louder, and act faster to embed physical activity into everyday life—not just as a leisure option, but as a vital public health intervention.

His message was clear: *“We know what works. Now we need to make it happen.”*

**Dr Farid Bardid**, from the University of Strathclyde leads the Active Healthy Kids Scotland initiative together with Prof John Reilly. An initiative that provides a comprehensive view of physical activity and health among children and adolescents in Scotland. For over a decade and using a systems approach, have provide state of the nation reports on a range of physical activity and health indicators such sport participation, active play, active travel, family and peer support, and policy. They recently launched a report on the impact of COVID-19 on children and adolescents. Our COVID-19 Report Card found that socio-economic and gender inequalities remain or have gotten worse for many indicators including a widening of gender gap in physical activity between adolescent boys and girls following COVID-

19. They also found positive policy responses such as the Scotland's Play Strategy Review to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. For more information, see <https://www.strath.ac.uk/whystrathclyde/news/2025/activityanddietpoliciesalmostcertainlymitigatedpandemiceffects/>

Dr Meir and Dr Scott referred to policy enactment in their final slide. We highlighted in our [2024 paper](#) that childhood physical activity is a clear priority in Scottish policies. We also indicated that future policies would benefit from clearer plans of implementation, monitoring and evaluation. How do you think policy enactment is hindered or supported?

**Juliana Sweeney-Baird**, raised a critical point about the disconnect between the principle of equality of access and the prevailing culture around sport and physical activity. She questioned how we can truly achieve inclusion when cultural norms and expectations often act as invisible barriers, particularly for underrepresented groups. She also highlighted that as efforts to improve equality of access increase, so too can the complexity of the barriers, especially when budget constraints limit the ability to deliver tailored, inclusive solutions. Julia stressed that the impact of funding cuts is significant, and called for a deeper understanding of how culture, access, and resources intersect in shaping participation.

**Smita Grant**, raised a vital plea for targeted interventions in minority ethnic communities, where rates of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease are disproportionately high. She stressed the need to address access barriers and ensure culturally appropriate support.

**Margarita Sweeney-Baird**, noted that school estates can sometimes create barriers to community access, despite their potential as key venues for physical activity.

**June Deasy**, asked whether the report would specifically address barriers faced by people with mental ill health and learning difficulties.

**Mark Gaffney**, mentioned that a new report with recommendations will be launched soon. He acknowledged that resources are stretched and emphasised the importance of identifying what works and scaling it effectively.

#### **Brian Whittle MSP**

- Called for an audit of the school estate, questioning how accessible these facilities truly are for community use.
- Emphasised the need to ask “*What next?*” and urged collaboration across sectors to implement recommendations.

Reinforced that everyone has a role to play in progressing this agenda

## **Agenda item 5**

Any other items – no time to get to this agenda point

## **Agenda Item 6**

Future meeting date tbc.

Contact Sarah Latta with any CPG questions: [sarah.latta@vhscotland.org.uk](mailto:sarah.latta@vhscotland.org.uk)