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Grix, Jonathan , Widdop, Paul  and Brannagan, Paul Michael  (2024) Counting the 'capital' cost of the UK's elite sport funding focus. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*. pp. 1-12. ISSN 1940-6940

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2024.2408298>

**Publisher:** Taylor and Francis

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/636259/>

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**Additional Information:** This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* on 15 October 2024, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2024.2408298>.

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**Counting the ‘Capital’ Cost of the UK’s Elite Sport Success and Grassroots Policy Failure**

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## Counting the ‘Capital’ Cost of the UK’s Elite Sport Success and Grassroots Policy Failure

### Purpose

The aim of the study is to evidence both the success (at elite level) and the failure (at grassroots level) of UK sport policy.

### Methodology

We draw on both UK Sport and Sport England data to evidence the investment in elite sport and the limitations of UK Government policy in cultivating a culture of sport participation and physical activity, discussing the impact of this policy on individuals’ physical, social, human and cultural capital.

### Findings

The elite-to-mass model implemented by the government to increase the population’s physical activity has failed, and the UK’s enviable elite sport success has glossed over a failure of grassroots sport policy. The policy choice mis-understands how social and geographical contexts impact on behaviours.

### Practical implications

The findings debunk the ‘trickle-down’ policy of participation and open up new research fields for scholars with an interest in increasing sport participation and physical activity in society, especially by noting the impact of inactivity on the social, human and cultural capital costs.

### Research contribution

This study investigates the failures of UK Government sport policy and reveals the darker side of exceptional elite sport success, while signalling the need for a new approach to addressing growing physical inactivity.

**Key words:** elite sport policy; UK sport policy; elite sport success; sport and physical activity participation

## Counting the ‘Capital’ Cost of the UK’s Elite Sport Success and Grassroots Policy Failure

### *Introduction*

The primacy of elite sport investment by governments would appear to be gaining ground with the inclusion of key countries from the Global South joining those from the Global North in bidding for large-scale sporting events, and investing in elite sports athletes and teams. All of the so-called BRICS<sup>i</sup> countries have hosted a major sports event in the past 15 years and an ever-growing number of states are investing their resources in both large-scale sports events and national elite sport programmes (Authors, 2023a). The reasons for the increasing involvement of governments of all political hues in elite sport policy are well documented and range from international prestige (Haut et. al. 2017), soft power acquisition (Authors, 2021; Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018), nation branding (Anholt, 2020; Kramareva et. al. 2021), the ‘feelgood’ factor for citizens, and inspiring sport and physical activity among the wider population (hereafter grassroots sport; other terms include ‘sport for all’ and ‘community and school sport’) (Weed et. al. 2012; Coalter, 2007). The latter claim is important, given the fact that physical inactivity has become a major risk factor for premature mortality and several non-communicable diseases globally (Katzmarzyk et al., 2022).

The global crisis of rising obesity rates, which have almost tripled between 1975 and 2016 (WHO, 2022), has been driven by a *lack of exercise, physical activity and sport participation* (Booth et al., 2012; Garber., 2019; *Authors’ emphasis*), with over ‘80% of adolescents and 27% of adults not meeting WHO’s recommended levels of physical activity’ (WHO, 2022).<sup>ii</sup> Those countries who have recently hosted an Olympic Games, (apart from Japan), all have problematic obesity levels. For example, Brazil has 35% of the population classified as obese (as of 2018), whilst ‘The Health Survey for England 2021’ estimates that 25.9% of adults in England are obese and a further 37.9% are overweight (Baker, 2023) – a similar figure to Greece, the 2004 host (WHO, 2022). High levels of obesity and a lack of sports participation is not confined to the wealthy ‘West’, but rather it is a global phenomenon, impacting citizens in such diverse states as Australia, China, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. That is, physical inactivity is not just a by-product of advanced capitalist states, but is also high in democratic, authoritarian and monarchic states, crossing religious divides too. Physical inactivity and low sport participation are not equally distributed within societies, instead, the issue is further compounded by inequalities among gender (women tend to be less physically active than men), race (ethnic minorities in the UK, for example, tend to be more inactive), class (activity

levels rise with wealth and social class standing) and age (young girls, 12-19, tend to participate less) (Sport England, 2023).<sup>iii</sup> The impact of inactivity extends beyond the prevention of diseases and includes deleterious effects on mental health, wellbeing, educational attainment, social ties, and community cohesion (Authors et al., 2018; Putnam, 2000). Thus, overcoming physical inactivity in society is both a physiological necessity and increasingly a political and sociological one: physical activity and sport participation are crucial for public health, education, social reproduction and mobility in society and impact on a person's and country's stock of social, human and cultural capital, and civic engagement. This is particularly true among youth populations, with research indicating that poor health can be correlated with lower skill and knowledge attainment in children, which can negatively impact their prospects across the lifecycle (Palermo and Dowd, 2012). There is also an economic argument to be made about inactivity: it is estimated to cost the UK around £7.5 billion annually (UK Government, 2022), money that could be invested in the promotion of healthy living.

In this paper we draw on a case study of the UK to show how one of the most successful elite sports systems has been built on the back of an increasingly failed grassroots sport policy, manifesting itself in plummeting participation figures and a lack of, or crumbling, public sports infrastructure, and in doing so, we set out to critique the trickle-down economic theory of sport investment. The UK case study is a useful addition to the literature on the inspirational effect of elite sport, which to date has only a patchy and fragmented collection of examples of where elite sport has led to an increase in sports participation, usually, however, at the level of club memberships, in specific sports and not the general public (see De Bosscher et al., 2021). The usefulness of the UK case lies in the fact that *both* long-term elite sport success (as measured by Olympic medals) and sports mega-events (Olympics, Commonwealth Games, also Rugby League World Cup etc.) have failed to boost participation rates among the population between 2004 (the start of GB's upward trajectory in elite sport success)<sup>iv</sup> to 2023. As the UK continued to pour funding into elite sport, it faced several economic shocks, which directly impacted upon physical activity and sport participation. The impacts of austerity and sport are well documented (see Authors et al., 2018), as sport facilities and local councils struggled to allocate resources to facilitate provision. The Covid pandemic also hit hard (Authors et. al., 2021; Parnell et. al., 2022), as grassroots sport ground to a halt. Finally, the global energy crisis has severely hit sport facilities as they have buckled under the weight of increasing costs, while citizens struggle with the cost-of-living crisis.

This paper makes two key contributions to the literature on the role of elite sport in society: first, we present the UK case as a stark example of how a focus of resources on elite sport can bring unprecedented success, yet cannot prevent a failure of grassroots sport development; second, we argue that the unintended impact of an elite sport policy approach on citizens extends beyond a lack of participation and also impairs growth of their social, human and cultural capital. The paper unfolds as follows: first, we provide a concise literature review on the link between elite sport and mass participation before turning to a discussion of the impact of inactivity on social, human and cultural capital development and how all are interdependent. The first main section evidences the unprecedented elite sport success of the UK's sports system, while the second section evidences the simultaneous decline in sport and physical activity and the decline in public sports opportunities over the same period. We conclude by investigating what is not working in the UK context in regard to participation and look at an example of what does work, suggesting that there is a need for a radical re-think of grassroots sport policy and the use of sporting events to reverse the decline of citizens' 'capitals' that impact both their individual lives and society as a whole.

### **Literature review**

Elite sport success and large-scale, one-off, major sports events are often thought to produce several clear 'legacies' for a state or government. A key early legacy was thought to be an increase in economic revenue for cities and states through increased employment opportunities for the host citizens, tickets receipts and a rise in the number of tourists visiting. This, and the notion that elite sport events aid urban re-generation, has been problematised by several authors (Zimbalist, 2015; Maennig and Zimbalist, 2012; Gold and Gold, 2023). Indeed, Vigor et al., (2005), in an IPPR/Demos report on the Olympics, revealed that there is no guaranteed beneficial legacy from hosting an Olympic Games, and importantly, there is little evidence that past Games have been successful in benefiting deprived neighbourhoods. More recently (since 2003) the notion of an Olympic 'legacy' has been enshrined into the Olympic charter as a prerequisite for a bid. This has led to several sought-after legacies, including the fuzzy notion around national pride generated by elite athlete success and major sports events (cf. Black and Van Der Westhuizen, 2004; Tomlinson and Young, 2006), international prestige and the acquisition of 'soft power' (Nye, 2008; Authors 2012, 2023a), and the marketing concept of nation-branding. This area too has spawned a cottage industry of claims, critiques and counterclaims on the veracity of elite sport and events to produce the hoped-for outcomes in international relations and inter-state politics (Van Hilvoorde, et al., 2010; Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016).

A popular legacy category is the assumption that elite sport success and sports mega-events can inspire and boost sports participation among the masses in the host country (cf. Authors, 2012; 2017; Frawley et al., 2013; Weed, 2012; De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2019). This literature looks at a perceived ‘trickle-down’ effect on citizens from viewing star athletes and role models to undertaking sport or physical activity as a result of this and a major event taking place (see Van Bottenburg 2002; De Bosscher et. al., 2021). The London 2012 Olympics was the first SME to explicitly focus on ‘...high levels of participation amongst the masses’ as its core legacy aim (DCMS, 2008). Prior to the London Games there was little evidence to suggest that an SME had had a direct causal impact on widespread sports participation (Weed et. al., 2009), and, as we set out below, this remains the case. The Sydney Games (2000) are often held up as the catalyst for change in the local population activity levels, but as Veal et. al., (2012, 155) state, ‘...while some estimates suggest that participation did increase, the failure of relevant organisations to maintain an adequate and consistent data collection regime makes this conclusion extremely speculative’.

Lion et. al.’s (2023) large-scale systematic review revealed what most authors have known for a long time: the fact that elite sport success and one-off, expensive sports events do not have an impact on physical activity levels nor increased sports participation of the population. Their review clearly mis-interprets the ‘virtuous cycle of sport’ model put forward by Grix et. al. (2012), even going on to ‘revise’ it (Lion et. al., 2023, 89) and stating, boldly, that:

....the “virtuous cycle of sport” is not likely to increase the pool of PA/sport participants in the general population, at least not through hosting elite sport events, elite sport success, or elite sport role modelling.

The original ‘virtuous cycle of sport’ model built on and embellished the ‘double pyramid theory’ as described by Van Bottenburg (2002). The ‘double pyramid theory’ simply states that ‘thousands of people practising sport at the base lead to a few Olympic champions and, at the same time the existence of champion role models encourages thousands of people to take up some form of sport’ (Van Bottenburg 2002, p. 2; see also Hanstad and Skille, 2010). The ‘virtuous cycle’ model took this further to suggest that the majority of (western) advanced elite sport systems appear to be based on the (flawed) premise that elite sport success and one-off sports mega-events would lead to all sorts of positive legacies, including an increase in participation among citizens. This cycle was an elite policy discourse with a convincing logic of circularity to it that appears

commonsensical. The paper clearly stated that the philosophy underpinning this cycle acted as the chief justificatory discourse behind investment in elite sport by states, stating that:

If we understand elite policy discourse as a virtuous cycle of sport, it helps explain governments' over-emphasis on the ability of elite sport success to effect so much change (domestically and internationally) (Grix et. al., 2012, 5).

The 'virtuous cycle' of sport effectively questions all the so-called 'legacies' that are thought to derive from elite sport success and SMEs, given the evidence does not support these claims. Since the publication of this work (2012, prior to the London Olympics), the UK has gone on to enjoy unprecedented success in elite sport (see below), but with no discernible uptick in levels of sports participation or physical activity among the masses.

De Bosscher et. al., (2021) point to the complexities of unpicking what influences sports and physical participation in a given setting, rightly flagging a number of studies that have sought to highlight the causal relationship between elite sport and mass participation. Such studies of specific sports are usually linked to the number of club memberships in that sport, which is clearly different to sports and physical activity habits of the general population. In a well-known study, Feddersen et. al., (2009) found little evidence of a 'Boris Becker effect' on rates of tennis club membership during the rise and after the retirement of tennis greats Becker, Stefi Graf and Michael Stich. Tennis, like many sports, suffers from a time dimension paradox, whereby during an event there is a spike in participation, but this is temporal and quickly flatlines when the event ends. For example, the Lawn Tennis Association identify that in 2017, during Wimbledon fortnight, there was a 30% increase in the number of tennis court hours booked (BBC, 2017); yet evidence from Sport England's 'Active Lives Survey', show that participation in tennis has systematically decreased year on year since 2015 (6.8% to 6.0%), despite the yearly championship and ephemeral spikes in participation.

Bauman et. al., (2021, 8) came to a similar conclusion in their study of the impact of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics on Canadian children and adolescents, concluding that the event itself will not change participation habits, rather much longer pre- and post-event strategies need to be implemented to see any behavioural change. These results are in line with the literature on 'leveraging' impacts from sports mega-events which could be understood as a 'cultural turn' in event studies away from legacies and towards actual strategies and tactics to effect change (see Chalip, 2014; O'Brian, 2007; Authors, 2013; Misener et. al., 2015; Potwarka and Wicker, 2020).



Misener et. al. (2015) were able to evidence empirically that simply hoping an event will produce participation effects without leveraging tactics does not work. The shift of focus away from ‘legacies’ to ‘leveraging’ has been followed by literature that attempts to get away from the macro-level of the inspirational effect of elite sport on participation by either focusing on specific sports in specific settings (Field Hockey in Belgium, for example, De Bosscher et. al., 2021) or by looking at regional or particular sports events and how they impact on specific cohorts in society (e.g., surfing in Noosa, Australia, O’Brian, 2007 or the Rugby League World Cup 2021, see Authors, 2023b). Potwarka and Wicker’s (2020, 13) systematic review revealed that:

elite sport events, role models, and sporting success are not the panacea to increase sport participation and PA everywhere and for everybody, but that TDE [trickle down effects] occur under specific conditions in particular regions and for particular population groups.

Such a nuanced leveraging strategy was employed by the team hosting the recent Rugby League World Cup in England (postponed from 2021 to 2022). They implemented a unique strategy of pre-event ‘legacy’ or social impact funding by making funds available early before the event had even taken place (see Authors, 2023b), targeting not just sport, but a wider series of initiatives, including a choir and facility development (ibid.).

We now turn to a discussion of ‘capitals’ that are inextricably bound up with, and impacted by, physical activity and sport participation, to indicate why this topic is not just related to physical health.

## **Capital Development**

A lack of sport and physical activity participation is detrimental to a person’s physical capital and mental health. We argue further that a concentration on elite sport risks damaging a host of other ‘capitals’ people need to develop for a healthy and equitable life. Sport participation should be viewed as a lifestyle choice, one that structures life chances and is impacted by who we interact with and where we live, as much as our ability, talents and exposure to elite sports on television. It is imperative to debunk the myth of wholesale, broad-brush elite sport inspiration on citizens (this allows for *some* cases where under specific circumstances, in specific sports, people may be inspired to take up a particular sport). This is important because physical activity is linked to a

number of benefits, including public health, the economy, and education, which not only improves the life chances of individuals, but can also have an impact on wider communities.

The benefits of citizens possessing higher levels of social, human, and cultural capital have long been recognised with social capital understood as a resource embedded in social networks (Becker, 1962; Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1988). Indeed, Coleman maintains that ‘social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors...’ (1988, 16). He also points to the importance of access to social networks for the individual, including the information channels they provide, and the context in which the network itself is embedded (Authors, 2001). Studies have shown that social capital has a significant impact on the propensity and intensity of an individual’s willingness to take part in sport and be members of sport clubs (Authors et. al., 2017).

Human capital is defined by Keeley (2007, 29) as ‘the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being’. Both social and human capitals are seen to work together whereby the richness of social networks a person is embedded in will enhance the chances of accruing the ‘personal, social and economic well-being’ described above (see: Teachman et. al., 1997, 1344). Sport has long been understood as a vehicle through which human capital is able to be generated and exchanged for social capital (Putnam, 2000; Authors, 2016).

The final capital, cultural capital, refers to those social assets that make up a person and impact their ability to be socially mobile, for example, a person’s accent, education, knowledge, tastes and ideas that can ‘be strategically used as resources in social action’ (Bourdieu, 1984). A common example of ‘cultural capital’ is the cultural and linguistic competences passed down by (usually middle-class) parents through socialisation to their children to enable them to succeed at school and University. It would appear that there has been a shift in how sport participation is consumed in recent decades, with the better-off parents and families able to financially support children. As Smith et. al., (2013, online) point out:

more middle-class families [who] are often better able to invest significant amounts of time, money, energy and socio-emotional development in their children, and reinvest their offspring with symbolically significant forms of social, cultural, physical and economic capital to support participation when young in the context of family leisure.

The investment in ‘significant forms of .... capital’ is important, as all are interconnected and, similar to economic capital, can grow, are interchangeable, and can change into other (social) assets and diminish or change over an individual’s life course. As all forms of capital, there is an exchange value in the market-place, which can generate inequality. This is why physical inactivity is a burden on society beyond just the physiological aspects noted above and why the emphasis and focus of Government funding and initiatives ought to be on grassroots sport and not elite sport.

### The UK’s rise as an elite sport powerhouse

Governments like elite sport, because it is exciting, it captures the (national) imagination, boosts morale and it is seen as representative and symbolic of a ‘nation’. Three types of elite sport policy are depicted in Table 1. below – the third, and most comprehensive - is the one the UK has pursued and it consists of: government funding for elite athletes and an elite sport system *and* the pursuit of multiple events to showcase these athletes globally, enhance a state’s image and increase a state’s international prestige and ‘soft power’. The UK has hosted over 100 international sporting events since 2012 (UK Sport, 2023). In terms of its impact on grassroots sport, this third type of elite sport policy promises the most, as it is assumed that high investment in athletes and an elite sport system, plus a major sports event strategy, hosting multiple large-scale events over a sustained period of time, and sporting success would naturally lead to growth in grassroots sport.

Elite Sport Policy	What?	How?	Why?
<b>1. Elite Sport System</b>	State-funded athletes; integrated approach to elite sport success; investment in facilities	Funding strategies; investment in coaches; sport science; ‘joined-up’ system geared towards international success	National pride; ‘feelgood’ factor; international exposure, prestige and ‘soft power’; inspirational effect on masses
<b>2. Sports Mega-Event (SME) Hosting Strategy</b>	One-off spectacular events of first, second and third order	Medium-term investment in logistics, infrastructure and organisation of event(s)	Enhance national image; increase international prestige and ‘soft power’; trigger ‘legacies’
<b>3. Elite Sport System and SME Strategy</b>	Combination of above; ‘home’ success of host state	Heavy investment in athletes, sport system,	All of the above

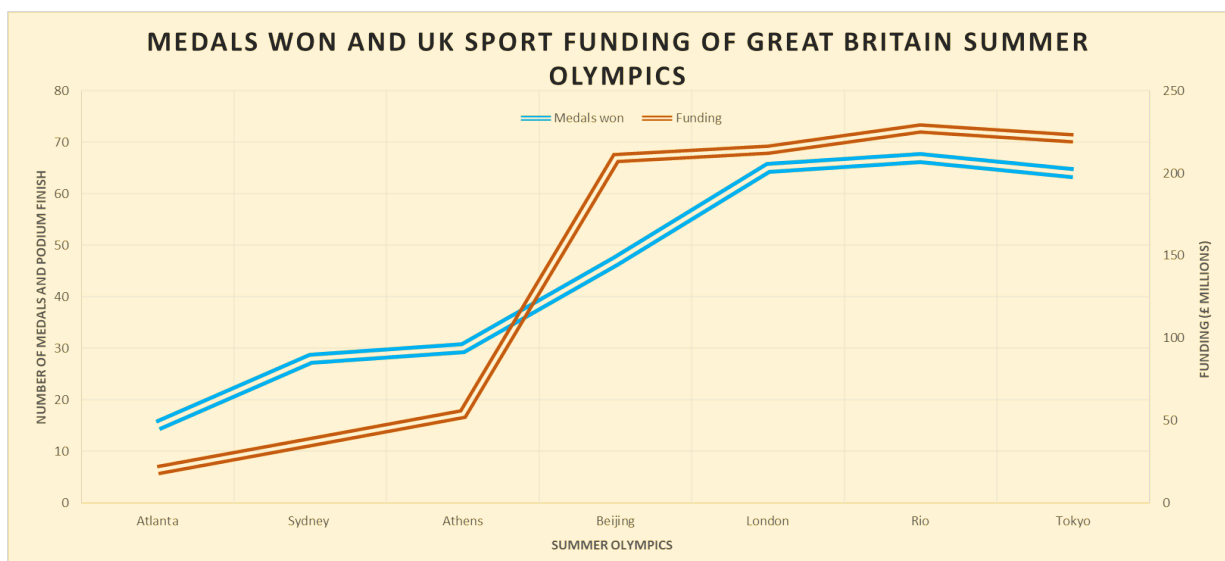
		international sports events and facilities	
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**Table 1: Elite sport policies**

Table 1 sets out in summary form the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind the three elite sport policies introduced. The UK’s unprecedented success in publicly funded sports is apparent in the upward trajectory of its Olympic medal tally following the GB team’s poor performance at the 1996 Atlanta Games, which triggered a change in sport policy (Phillpots, 2014). Since 2000 the UK Government has invested heavily in elite sport and sporting events with the express purpose of achieving global success, a policy that has had stunning results, culminating in record Olympic medal hauls from 2012 (London) through to 2020(1) (Tokyo). As illustrated in Table 2, the greater the level of investment in elite sport, the greater the returns in relation to medals won.

Olympics	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Funding (£ mil)	Ratio (m/£)
Atlanta	1	8	6	20	0.75
Sydney	11	10	7	37	0.76
Athens	9	9	12	54	0.56
Beijing	19	13	15	209	0.22
London	29	17	19	214	0.30
Rio	27	23	17	227	0.30
Tokyo	22	20	22	221	0.29

**Table 2: British Olympic Success and Financial Cost**

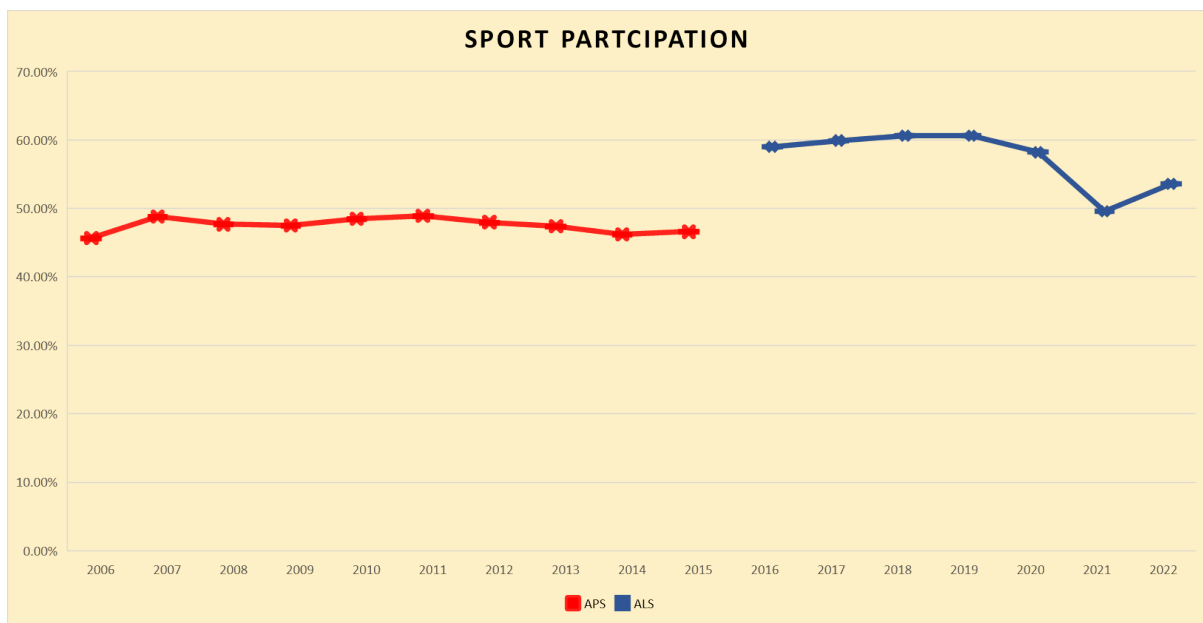


**Figure 1: Olympic Medals and Investment**

In many ways the policies of elite investment outlined in Table 1 are correlated with success and high podium finishes. For example, Figure 1 above depicts the unprecedented elite sport success of the GB team from its low point in 1996 (ranked 36<sup>th</sup> overall on the Olympic medal table with just 1 gold medal), via London 2012 (ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> with 29 gold medals), to Tokyo 2020(1) (ranked 4<sup>th</sup> with 22 gold medals). The positive consequences of the UK's elite sport funding philosophy, termed a 'no compromise' and 'winning at all costs' approach, are the development of one of the best performing high performance sports systems globally (this stretches beyond the Olympics to excellence in football, cycling, badminton, rugby, cricket etc. competitions). At first glance, this policy appears an unmitigated success; however, it has failed to take the grassroots part of sport along with it.

## Increasing success and declining participation

As investment in elite sport was turning Britain into a global force during this period, grassroots sport was stalling, as illustrated graphically in Figure 2, which documents sport participation measured by two survey sources, 2006-2015, through the Active People Survey (APS) and 2016 to 2022 via the Active Lives Survey (ALS), both administered by Sport England.<sup>v</sup> The theoretical underpinning of trickle-down effects necessitates that participation should be positively correlated with funding levels and success at the elite level. Yet, the evidence demonstrates no discernible positive correlation between elite sport success and sport participation (see Figure 2). Further, the trajectory for sport participation is flatlining, and on a slight decline, all within this golden age for elite sport funding and unprecedented success for Great Britain.



**Figure 2: Sport Participation 2006-2022 (Sources: Active People Survey; Active Lives Survey)**

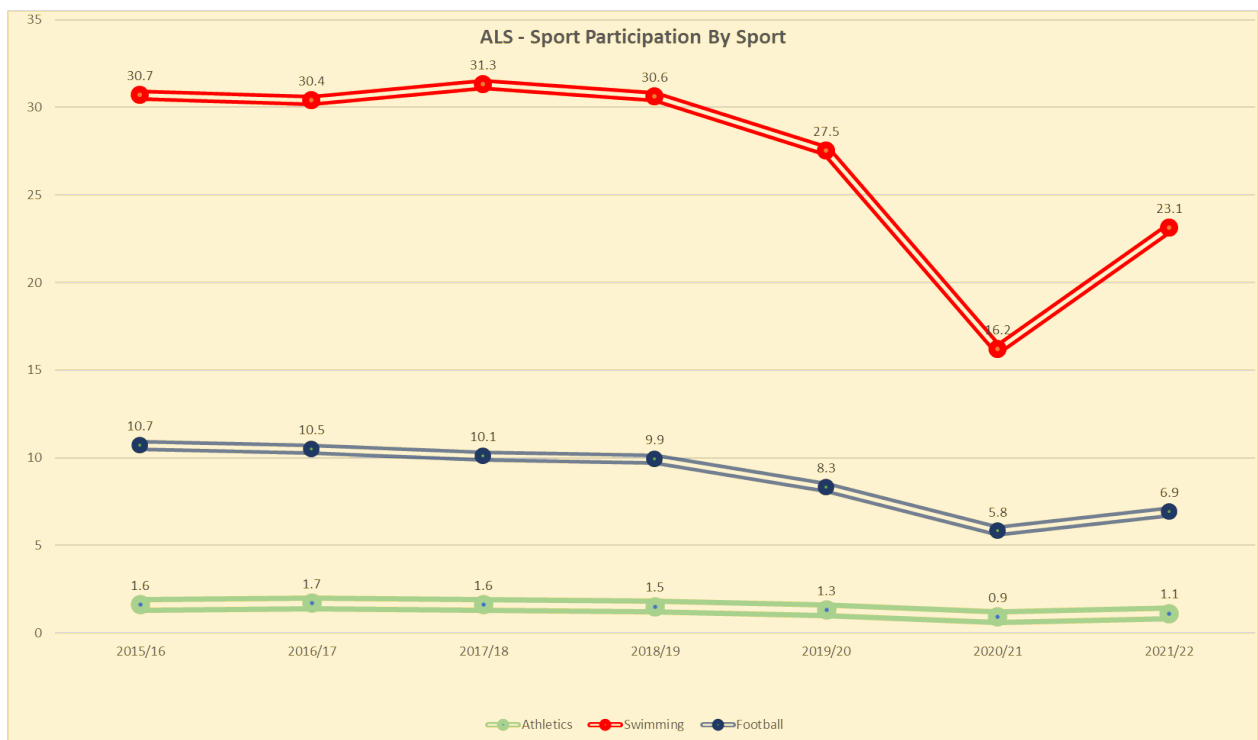
To add to the complexity, there is a spatial dimension to sport participation and physical activity, with pockets of inactivity, that dramatically undermines an elite to mass model. Table 3 illustrates these spatial anomalies, identifying the highest and lowest areas in relation to sport activity, measured against the Index of Deprivation. For sport activity, under this policy, it does not pay to be poor, as inactivity is concentrated in the very poorest of the country's local authorities, while the highest levels of participation are found in the affluent South East (the wealthiest region in the UK outside of London; ONS, 2019). The trickle-down policy offers very little understanding of geographical differences and the inequities that are entrenched within them.

Average Participation in Sporting Activities (2015-2022)							
LAD	Highest Sport (%)	IMD Rank	Rank Least Deprived (LD)	LAD	Lowest Sport (%)	IMD Rank	Rank Most Deprived (MD)
Wandsworth	46	173		Sandwell	21	8	10% MD
Richmond upon Thames	46	297	10% LD	Blackpool	22	1	10% MD
South Hams	45	219		Boston	22	85	
Waverley	44	313	10% LD	South Holland	23	144	
Guildford	44	296	10% LD	Hartlepool	23	25	10% MD
Elmbridge	44	310	10% LD	Barking and Dagenham	24	5	10% MD
Oxford	43	189		Stoke-on-Trent	24	15	10% MD
Hammersmith and Fulham	43	96		Doncaster	24	41	20% MD
St. Albans	43	306	10% LD	Bolsover	24	58	20% MD
Islington	43	28	10% LD	North East Lincolnshire	24	66	
Cambridge	43	205		Great Yarmouth	24	24	10% MD
Winchester	42	293	10% LD	Walsall	24	31	10% MD
Cheltenham	42	237		Thurrock	24	116	
Derbyshire Dales	42	265	20% LD	Wolverhampton	24	19	10% MD
Exeter	42	193		East Lindsey	25	30	10% MD
Windsor and Maidenhead	42	304	10% LD	Hull	25	9	10% MD
High Peak	42	202		South Tyneside	25	26	10% MD
Mid Sussex	42	311	10% LD	Dudley	25	104	
Bristol	42	82		Nuneaton and Bedworth	25	101	
Mole Valley	41	294	10% LD	Mansfield	25	56	20% MD

**Table 3: Participation in Sporting activities by Local Authority. Key: IMD = Index of Multiple Deprivation LAD = Local Authority District**

The concentration of sport participation in affluent areas is well documented (Authors, et. al., 2017), with underlying mechanisms of social class (cultural capital) an important factor. This appears to chime with recent findings that report citizens who fall within the higher socio-economic status, managerial, admin and professional occupations, are most likely to participate in sport (70% against 49% for people unemployed; see House of Commons Library, 2017). At the time of writing, Sport England have announced ‘one of the biggest shake-ups of funding in decades’ to combat physical inactivity in deprived areas (BBC, November 2023). However, £250 million is unlikely to impact on the declining state of leisure facilities, the drop in school sport and the cost of living crisis, all of which present barriers to participation.

To counter the argument that aggregate figures make us lose sight of local level increases in different, individual sports, Figure 3 maps two key Olympic sports, athletics and swimming, among the higher funded Olympic sports (UK Sport, 2023), from 2015 to 2022. In addition, we include football – the most popular sport in the UK and known to be among the most lucrative sports globally, one which very much sits within the elite to mass funding model. It is evident, as with wider data on sport participation, that during the period of sustained elite success and investment in these sports, participation was negatively correlated, suggesting the ‘trickle-down’ effect that drives UK elite sport policy has failed to deliver.



**Figure 3: Sport Participation by individual Activity**

### UK grassroots policy failure

Part of the failure of grassroots sport policy is, paradoxically, *because* the UK has been so successful in elite sport. A key by-product of the focus on elite sport – apart from many cases of abuse and bullying that have surfaced because GB athletes were pushed to the limits and beyond (see *The Guardian*, 2017) - is the skewed development of some sports’ grassroots and pyramid structures. Take, for example, athletics in Britain. It is one of the most popular sports among the viewing public, yet, as leading coach, Malcolm Arnold, suggests, in reference to coaching and sport



development, it is struggling in all areas (Guardian, 2020). Membership numbers of English Athletics are down (data from ALS show a 2.5% decrease from 2017-2021) and the governing body, despite years of excellent elite performances at global championships, is currently fighting to stave off bankruptcy (Guardian, 2023; Athletics Weekly, 2023). The development of the sport at grassroots level has little relationship with the glamour of the elite events; many athletics clubs have dwindling numbers of members and facilities are deteriorating as councils cut budgets to public recreation and sports (Local Government Association, 2022), contributing to the decline in ‘Urban green space in England .... from 63% to 56% between 2001 and 2016’ (Friends of the Earth, 2023).

2023 heralded the publication of not one, but *three* different reports on participation in sport and physical activity in the UK. First, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (January, 2023) offered a scathing summary of the failures of Sport England to raise participation levels in England, citing in particular London’s staging of the 2012 Olympics, and so too the UK’s spend of £323 million each year since 2015 on sport participation-related programmes. The three key findings from this report are as follows: that the legacy aims for the £8.8 billion London Olympics failed to materialise, adult participation in sport fell in the years after the 2012 Games and Sport England doesn’t know the destination of two-thirds of £1.5 billion grants it paid out (House of Commons, 2023). Astonishingly, Sport England:

....distributed £1.5 billion in grants in the five years starting 2016–17, but only knows which local authorities this funding went to for £450 million of this spending. It does not know where in the country the remaining two-thirds of grants awarded were spent, as it does not track the distribution of grants issued to national organisations. Sport England therefore cannot fully assess whether it is meeting its objective to target spending at less active groups, including lower socio-economic groups. The share of the £450 million received by the most deprived local authorities has fallen since 2016–17. Sport England could not explain this fall and we would expect it to have a far better grasp of where its money is spent. In recent years, spending on grassroots sports has been disproportionately concentrated in areas hosting major sporting events, rather than according to local need.

Arguably, the dismantling of the Physical Education Sport Strategy for Young People (PESSYP) in 2011 by the new UK Coalition Government could be seen as instrumental in the subsequent decline of school sports in the post-2012 Olympics era. This policy, introduced by the Labour Government in 2003, was one of the most successful interventions in sport policy seen for decades

and had led to over 90% of children taking at least 2 hours of ‘quality’ PE per week. Following a backlash against the proposals from athletes, academics, Olympians, sports bodies, sports journalists and volunteers alike (Phillpots, 2013), the Coalition Government hastily cobbled together a much-reduced package for school sports. According to Phillpots (2013, 207) this ‘represented an attempt to reinvest in selected elements of school sport policy, despite a 60% reduction in government spending’. The reduction in funding was part of the Coalition Government’s ‘austerity’ politics (Authors et. al., 2018) that had a profound impact on many aspects of society including sport.

The period between the reduction in funding for school sport (2011), the London Olympics (2012) and the present day (2023) is marked by a rapid decline in levels of sport participation and physical activity across all cohorts. A report by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts on grassroots participation in sport and physical activity shows evidence that the London Olympics delivered ‘£14.2 billion in economic value by 2014 against a spend of £8.8 billion. But national participation in sport declined in the three years following the Games’ (House of Commons, 2023, 5). As Randell and Griggs (2022) point out:

Despite a direct investment of more than £2.2 billion into primary PE since 2012 – making it the highest-funded subject at primary age – most PE lessons in the primary sector are outsourced to sports coaches and instructors who often possess “limited qualifications [and] a minimal knowledge of the pupil recipients”, according to a high-profile cross-party group of MPs and experts called in to investigate the funding.

Sport participation has been a central component of all major political party’s policy concerns in recent times; ever since the publication of the Government sports policy document, *Game plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002), the approach adopted has been based on a flawed trickle-down elite to mass model. *Game plan* made clear that international sporting success ought to be strived for, a notion that continues in the second sport policy document to be published in 2023, an eagerly awaited, wide-ranging treatise entitled *Get Active: a strategy for the future of sport and physical activity* (August, 2023). *Get Active* touches on a range of issues from the need for elite level sporting success, over ensuring that marginalised groups are supported to participate in sport to the role that facilities play in ensuring participation. However, it is short on information about *how* this strategy will be implemented (see Guardian, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2023). The third sport policy document of 2023 was launched just days after the Government’s (September) and – as Cath Bishop rightly points out (Guardian, 2023) – differs greatly in tone and is bristling with new ideas. Published by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), the document, entitled ‘GAME CHANGER. A plan to transform

young lives through sport’, opens with Lord Nash, the Chair of the CSJ Advisory Board, suggesting that:

Sport has the power to transform lives. Of course, it keeps us fit. But so much more. For the young people of this nation, sport unlocks life-long friends, introduces mentors, provides purpose, builds confidence – and keeps us out of trouble. It boosts academic prospects, combats mental ill health, and gets us ready for the world of work.

In this short statement, Lord Nash has summed up the interlocking relationship of capitals impacted by involvement in sport, emphasising the wider importance of sport beyond ‘keeping us fit’. The CSJ ‘plan’ is full of evidence about the positive impact of sport on young people and relevant questions, such as: ‘Why is it that a nation that can proudly host elite international sporting events to the tune of £9 billion allow its own, local, facilities, clubs and youth centres to fall into disrepair?’. The latter is not discussed at length in *Get Active*, but the deterioration of sports facilities, clubs and skills is likely to prove one of the main barriers to the ambitious attempts by the Government to increase active participation by 1 million more adults and 2.5 million more children by 2030 (*Get Active*, 2023). Just as the incumbent Conservative Government were part of the coalition that dismantled the most comprehensive and successful UK post-war school sport strategy in 2011, so too are they now desperately trying to stem the dramatic decline in sports participation we are witnessing today.

### *Discussion and conclusion*

At the heart of this paper is the argument that despite the UK’s unprecedented success in publicly funded sports, culminating in record Olympic medal hauls from 2008 (Beijing) through to 2020(1) (Tokyo), participation rates have not benefited from a trickle-down effect. The importance of sport participation and physical activity is indisputable, given its ability to develop attributes crucial to growing social networks and realising opportunities, (Putnam, 2000; Pawlowski and Schüttoff, 2019); and academic achievement (Youth Sport Trust, 2022). Therefore, logically, if policy for grassroots sport is failing, it is not just the health of the nation and the burden on the health system that is the problem. Rather, over time, it will impact an individual’s ability to access and benefit from social networks, hamper social mobility and educational attainment. At a state level, diminishing levels of all three capitals will impact health services and workers’ productivity, efficiency and innovation output, thereby damaging the economy (Weymouth and Feinberg, 2011). It is clear that elite sport success and the hosting of sports mega-events are merely blunt instruments to attempt to effect change in rates of participation. In summary, three core reasons can be put forward to explain why the UK’s sport and physical activity strategy does not work:

1. First, it is clear that there is a tenuous link at best between elite sport success, hosting major events and inspiring mass participation. Apart from some overlap in the area of ‘talent identification’, the UK effectively has two, separate systems of elite sport and grassroots sport development.
2. Second, there is a failure to understand the wider impact of participation on citizens’ ‘capitals’, for example, human, cultural and social (e.g. confidence building, meeting mentors, socialising, academic ability, improved mental health and so on).
3. Third, vested interests and elite sport advocates work to keep elite sport on the agenda, including International Governing Bodies of Sport, National Governing Bodies of Sport, large sections of the media, ‘booster coalitions’, the sports industry and the UK Government (i.e. there has been a pro-active strategy of attracting and hosting major sports events in the UK since the 2012 Olympics, because of the associated ‘soft power’ gains thought to derive from them)(see Standard, 2018).

It is worth briefly considering what does work and why. The UK Government strategy document *Get Active* (2023) dedicates a page to the sport participation phenomenon, Parkrun, which offers weekly, measured and timed 5-kilometre events open to anyone for free every Saturday morning at 9am at 812 venues throughout the UK (there are 2-kilometre runs for children too at 409 venues; Parkrun, 2023). It is left unsaid that this is an entirely independent, not-for-profit organisation, which has no links to any Government Department or funding whatsoever. Parkrun is cited, however, because it works. The origins of Parkrun were humble, organic and small, with 13 people gathering in Bushy Park, London, on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004 to run the very first event (Parkrun, 2023). It has since grown to around 350, 000 participants every week throughout the UK (Runner’s World, 2022). It is worthwhile considering this success story in relation to the three reasons why UK sport policy does not work for participation:

1. There is no link between ‘elite’ and ‘mass’ sport in Parkrun, apart from a few ‘elite’ athletes who use the weekly events as training runs. It is a ‘bottom-up’ organisation, with local events run by volunteers, the vast majority of whom are also participants in the event (i.e. they take turns volunteering).

2. Parkrun appears to have the ability to tap into and enhance individuals' social, human and cultural 'capitals'. A 'family' atmosphere with strong bonds develops between volunteers; volunteering aids the development of crucial human capital life skills, and the event offers similar benefits of a club but without the joining fees; the event builds and facilitates community spirit and an enhanced sense of place.
  
3. Vested interests appear to reside with the volunteers and participants who run and participate in the event; the chance to mingle with like-minded people in a non-competitive environment does away with the pressures of a formal running club and the duty to 'represent' it in competitive events. There is a special appeal to being able to turn up (or not) every week, at the same place, the same time and run the same distance with no pressure and no charge.

Currently the trajectory of sport policy in Britain reveals two separate developments. The first demonstrates the outstanding success of elite sport funding on athletic performance at a global level; the second reveals a failing grassroots policy with declining levels of sport participation and physical activity. It appears to be a zero-sum game, that is, the more invested in elite sport, the greater is the negative impact for sport participation, equating to a sporting paradox. It is our belief that in search for a better, healthier and civic society, we need to focus attention on increasing sport participation. To that end, we signal the need for a new approach to addressing growing physical inactivity. Despite the failure of the trickle-down sport policy, funding continues to flow to the top of the sporting pyramid, with little evidence or research of how this will improve participation. Continuing with such a policy - with no account taken for a nation recovering from a pandemic and cost of living crisis – will result in further skewing sport participation towards those who can afford it. Those stemming from lower socio-economic backgrounds are likely to be doubly disadvantaged, for it is wealthier families with the resources to support their children who will participate in sport and gain the physical, social, human, and cultural capital associated with it. Poorer families – including the 1.8 million households (3.8 million people; Buttle UK, 2023) currently destitute in the UK – will have physical activity low down on their list of priorities. There is a need for a bottom-up approach to participation, one that embraces the cultural approach of organisations such as Parkrun, to put communities first and focus funding on grassroots among the cohorts that need it most. It is also vital that we reject the current crude measures of participation and physical activity, and embrace sport participation as a symbiotic process and interdependency of human, social and cultural capital. The relationship between sport participation and the levels

of capital(s) individuals and society possesses is mutually reinforcing: more sport participation equals higher levels of capital(s); higher levels of capital(s) equate to more equal societies and the greater likelihood of sport participation.

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<sup>i</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

<sup>ii</sup> WHO recommends adults aged 18–64 years should do at least 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity a week.

<sup>iii</sup> Sport England is the Government’s arm’s length body for distributing grass-roots funding and is funded through the Government Exchequer and lottery income.

<sup>iv</sup> GB (Great Britain) is used as a proxy for the UK in this article, especially when referring to the Olympics.

<sup>v</sup> The results of both surveys are not directly comparable, chiefly because the ALS now includes walking, cycling for travel and dance in addition to the previous indices, however, overall trends do point downward in the number of people participating.