

Sometimes, we just need to give young people a sporting chance

Prof. Msgr Vladimir Felzmann

Crime is pricey – to the taxpayer. In 2019/20, the average cost of a prison place in England and Wales was £44,600 a year, compared with £43,200 in 2018/19. The cost of any life-sentence is eye watering. Sport might help to dry some eyes.

Finally, the government has seen the light. The Alliance of Sport launched the Taskforce on Physical Activity and Sport in the Criminal Justice System on 10th November 2021.

According to Sport England, the UK Government's Beating Crime Plan recognises that targeted and well evidenced sport-based interventions are one of many positive activities needed to cut crime. However, despite a growing body of evidence and recognition, there remains a gap in the leadership and co-ordination of efforts that, at present, inhibits the full and effective integration of physical activity and sport across communities, health and criminal justice.

During meetings of the All-Party-Parliamentary Group on Sport and Physical Activity in the Criminal Justice System (APPG) – with its inaugural meeting on Monday 8th March 2021 – Alex Chalk, the then Prisons Minister, pledged his full support for strengthening the use of sport in criminal justice. Further, Lucy Frazer, the then Safeguarding Minister, challenged the APPG to provide leadership and co-ordination to help build the evidence base.

The John Paul 2 Foundation 4 Sport charity – which I launched in 2011 – showed with its 'Aim High for All' Virtues Programme (AVP) that sport does teach young people positive life skills or virtues. Maybe the APPG will harvest initiatives such as these and convince Rishi Sunak, The Chancellor of the Exchequer, to direct some serious funding towards helping sport prevent – rather than deal with the consequences of – crime.

Now, with support from NHS England and NHS Improvement, and chaired by Baroness Amanda Sater, this taskforce is there to provide strategic guidance and a 'go-to' for government, so that physical activity and sport-based interventions play a more central and co-ordinated role in beating crime and tackling health inequalities for people involved in, and on the fringes of, the Criminal Justice System.

The initial focus is on creating a plan and vision for how the physical activity and sport sector can work more effectively with the Criminal Justice System. The plan will demonstrate how money can be saved and spent more effectively and how partners hips and collaboration can be maximised to support learning and development.

James Mapstone, Alliance of Sport (AoS) Chief Executive, said: "This is an ambitious project, and we thank our sponsors for the trust they have placed in us. Together we will identify priorities and areas for greater collaboration."

Prof. Meek added: "It's no longer enough to have a succession of small research projects in this area. If we want to achieve our ambition of embedding sport and physical activity at the heart of the Criminal Justice System, we need to see comprehensive evaluations of existing programmes, a coordinated approach and we need support from the top-down."

Dr Caron Walpole from Loughborough University's School of Sport, Exercise and Health outlined the barriers to collecting this evidence, including the



complexity of young people's lives, 'the conundrum of prevention' (ie, proving that someone's desistance from offending was directly because of a sport-based intervention) and the lack of resources and expertise available to sport practitioners to gather and evaluate evidence themselves.

Both Dr Walpole and Prof Meek called for a 'central hub' for research

in this area, bringing together impact evidence from the myriad of community sport organisations, and those working in the secure estate, who do such incredible work on the frontline.

The meeting's third guest speaker, Dr Haydn Morgan from the University of Bath, outlined his recent research with colleague Dr Colin Baker on the effectiveness of partnerships in sport and criminal justice.

Clive Efford MP, the group's Chair, highlighted the outstanding work in this sphere being carried out by many football clubs under the EFL Trust. "I have seen with my own eyes what an extremely powerful influence these programmes are on vulnerable young people's lives. It's vital that research is able to capture that impact at scale in order to justify further investment and expand these opportunities to as many individuals as possible."

I am no pessimist but, going on past performance of so many governmental operations, I suspect there will be far too much hot talk before there is the walk – and activities are seen at the coal-face. Where will the research offices be based? What will be its annual budget? Who will be its Chief Operating Officer? I will know it means to walk the talk when it gets in touch with the SWIFT Research

Centre at St Mary's University, Twickenham.

Fingers crossed but, until then, I will not be holding my breath.

The overall proven reoffending rate was 26 per cent for the July to September 2019. The Alliance of Sport for the Desistance of Crime has just completed a project for young offenders inside two secure establishments in Kent. Staff from Charlton Athletic Community Trust (CACT) and Fight For Peace delivered weekly football and boxing 'clubs', offering coaching, personal development and mentoring to young men and women.

"Whether it's football, rugby, table tennis, fitness, boxing, cricket or personal training programmes, the fantastic work of our global network in prisons and communities forms an evidence base which helps us prove that, when it comes to reducing crime, sport simply works." Stated Co-Founder and Chair James Mapstone of the Alliance of Sport for the Desistance of Crime.

He invites you to submit an article telling us your experiences of running sporting clubs focused on this area by contacting hello@connectsport.co.uk.

You can see Fr Vlad on BBC's Songs of Praise on 2nd January, and there's more about him at fathervlad.com



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