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Date: 11th October 2018

Dear Mr Mayor

I am writing in response to the proposals that you have set out in your draft Sport Strategy, published in July 2018.

Firstly, I'd like to welcome the opportunity to comment on this strategy, but question why it has taken so long to go out to consultation, given the 'Sport Unites' programme was first launched back in March.

I also welcome the fact the Sport Strategy has been presented in a separate document – though closely aligned to – the Culture Strategy. I believe this allows it to be given a greater focus, which is appropriate as we try to uphold and strengthen the 2012 Olympic legacy.

Social integration

Your strategy rightly focuses on sport's value as a tool to bring communities together. Improving social integration through sport participation is a key strand of this strategy and I welcome the launch of a new partnership with Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, to carry out three place-based pilots using its 'Model City' approach. Initiatives have historically been too focused on inner London, and so I am pleased to see that the London Boroughs of Haringey, Hounslow and Barking have been selected for these pilots.

I welcome the £3 million in ring-fenced funding made available from the Young Londoners Fund for initiatives that engage young people in sport or physical activity, but I believe you have missed an opportunity to explicitly highlight the role sport, as part of a wider public health approach, can have in tackling violent crime. Encouraging young people to participate in sport can help deter those at risk of engaging in violence and this deserves more than just a cursory mention in the foreword of your strategy.

Affordability and accessibility

Those that are less well-off are known to have a lower activity rate so it crucial that this strategy makes a lasting impact in helping to increase the affordability of sports participation.

Additionally, poorer Londoners are increasingly disenfranchised from spectator sports, with many of London's premiere league football clubs charging astronomical prices for match day tickets. I would like to see a commitment in your final strategy, to work with London's large sports clubs to open up access so that taking a family to watch a match becomes more affordable.

The World Cup screening in Hyde Park this summer was a fantastic initiative, allowing fans to come together to cheer on England in a safe and family-friendly environment. Future events such as the Cricket World Cup in 2019 and the UEFA Euro 2020 – particularly as seven matches will be staged at Wembley– present fantastic opportunities for communities to come together and celebrate, and more of London's parks should be opened up to host screenings of these events.

Community sports infrastructure

One of your two main objectives for this strategy is to focus on community sport, and I welcome the launch of 'Sport Unites' as the main vehicle which will help to deliver this work.

Earlier this year I expressed disappointment that the draft Culture Strategy failed to recognise sports infrastructure such as football grounds as important cultural assets, yet was hopeful that the Sport Strategy would seek to correct this omission. Regretfully it has not, and while you pledge to support community sport, your strategy makes no mention of the vital importance of local sports infrastructure in enabling such activity to take place.

Grassroots football clubs, for example, are often the cultural epicentre of local communities yet the ongoing development dispute in which Dulwich Hamlet Football Club finds itself highlights the challenges often faced by non-league clubs as they fight to retain their grounds. In recent years, Edgware Town, Hendon and Enfield Town football clubs have all lost their historical homes, largely at the hands of greedy speculative developers.

While I recognise that your limited community sports funding won't go far enough to cover sports infrastructure, what your strategy lacks is a concrete commitment to strengthen protections for local grounds, in recognition of their role as vital community assets. You should lobby the Government to afford greater protection to league and non-league football grounds and encourage local councils to protect stadiums. Indeed, the delivery of Sports Unites will only work if grassroots community organisations have the facilities to host sporting activity.

Olympic legacy

Turning to elite sports infrastructure, London is proud to possess some of the best venues in the world. The London Stadium is a fine example of this, though ongoing disputes between LLDC and West Ham threaten to tarnish the Olympic legacy, with London taxpayers footing an enormous annual bill to keep the venue open. Better partnership working between the two parties is needed if issues such as those surrounding a naming rights sponsor and retractable seating are to be resolved.

I also believe there should be a more joined-up approach between LLDC and Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, working together to deliver the Olympic legacy and ensuring we fully utilise the five different Olympic sporting venues hosted in Olympic Park.

Improving the commercial performance of these major venues is vital, and this should go hand in hand with the strategy's aim of ensuring that London remains the sporting capital of the World – hosting some of the biggest and best sporting events.

It is also important that this sports strategy links up with the Olympic legacy in order to continue to drive it forward, and I look forward to seeing a firm commitment to ensuring this in your final draft.

Conclusion

I hope you will take onboard the points I have raised above in order to enhance your strategy, and I look forward to seeing them incorporated into the final version.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caroline Pidgeon', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Caroline Pidgeon AM
Liberal Democrat London Assembly Member