



# HOUSE OF LORDS

Unrevised transcript of evidence taken before

## **The Select Committee on Science and Technology**

Inquiry on

### **SPORTS AND EXERCISE SCIENCE AND MEDICINE: BUILDING ON THE OLYMPIC LEGACY TO IMPROVE THE NATION'S HEALTH**

*Evidence Session No. 5*

*Heard in Public*

*Questions 129 - 160*

TUESDAY 26 JUNE 2012

11 am

Witness: Hugh Robertson MP

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### Members present

Lord Krebs (Chairman)  
Lord Broers  
Lord Cunningham of Felling  
Lord Dixon-Smith  
Lord Patel  
Baroness Sharp of Guildford  
Lord Wade of Chorlton  
Lord Willis of Knaresborough  
Lord Winston

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### Examination of Witness

**Hugh Robertson MP**, Minister for Sport and the Olympics, Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

**Q129 The Chairman:** Thank you very much, Minister, for making time in your busy diary in the run-up to the Olympics to come and give oral evidence to us. You will appreciate that we spoke to one of your officials in an earlier session, but there are some questions that we would very much like to put to you and we appreciate this opportunity to do so. Just so that everybody in the room is aware, the session is being webcast live, so sotto voce comments will be picked up by the microphones and broadcast to the world outside. To recap on the purpose of this inquiry for the Minister, it is looking both at the science underpinning the improvement in sporting performance—how scientific are the methods that are used by UK Sport and other bodies to improve athletic performance?—and at, importantly, how the knowledge gained in improving sporting performance of elite athletes can be cascaded down to create a healthier nation as part of the Olympic legacy, and what the link between the two is. Clearly a substantial part of this falls to your department, but also reads across to many other departments. I would like to invite you, if you wish to, to make any opening statement, but then I will move straight into the questions.

**Hugh Robertson:** No, use the time available for any questions you have.

**Q130 The Chairman:** Okay. Following on from that brief preamble that I gave, I wonder if you could give us some examples of the work that your department undertakes jointly with others to promote the sport and health agendas.

**Hugh Robertson:** Yes. The start point in all this should be that there was a fairly major change of policy undertaken by the last Government, when James Purnell was the Secretary of State, to move away from using Sport England—one of the four bodies that the sport side of my department funds—to promote health and exercise, and use it instead to drive up participation in sport. There was a clear policy shift from what quite a lot of sports rather contemptuously called “walking in the woods” to trying to get more young people in particular playing football, cricket, rugby, athletics and all the other things that are part of the sports mix. As a result of that, a new process was born called the whole sport plans, under which half of Sport England’s money goes to support governing bodies specifically to drive up participation in sports. Therefore, in a sense, the key policy objective is not to make the whole nation healthier but to get more people playing sport, which is a rather different thing. That said, clearly the benefits of getting more people playing sport are pretty well established. I think most people now accept that people who play sport tend to stay fitter and healthier longer and they tend to be happier. There is some evidence that I have seen that they perform better at work or academically and that, through the release of endorphins or whatever, it contributes to a happier nation. If you want me to go beyond that and give you examples of where the department works with the Department of Health, I can of course do that, but it is important to understand that the baseline for all of this, under the whole sport plans, is driving up participation in sport; it is not a bigger drive on the nation’s health.

**Q131 The Chairman:** Thank you very much for that clarification. These may be early days, but I would like to ask whether you have outcome measures of whether participation rates are going up and what the scale of the increases are.

**Hugh Robertson:** Yes, there is a survey conducted on behalf of Government called Active People. The most recent results were released last week. If I give you the best outcome figures from this, they show that, since 2005-2006, there are an extra 1.3 million adults who are taking part in sport at least once a week. Therefore, since the bid was won, there has been a noticeable increase in sports participation.

I should put a heavy health warning on that: successive Governments have found this a particularly difficult nut to crack. A good start point was the introduction of lottery funding, which pretty much transformed this whole area. If you look at the period since the National Lottery funding appeared, for a long time the dial did not move at all. There were various approaches—"We'll try to do the nation's health and get them all walking, running and cycling". There was initially an attempt to do it through local authorities by providing more sports facilities. That did not really shift the dial. Then we moved on to this greater health agenda to get people walking, swimming, cycling and running. That did not really shift the dial very much either. That was the point at which James Purnell switched to the new whole sport plan policy, a policy switch that, in opposition, we absolutely supported and have continued in government.

If I am honest, the first four-year cycle of that has demonstrated once again just how difficult this is to do. A lot of sports thought you could crack this by simply laying on extra coaching sessions. That has not proved the case. That very often drives revenue through the turnstiles. If you are Rugby League, for example, and you lay on a series of Rugby League taster sessions, that very often encourages more people to go and watch Rugby League; it does not necessarily encourage them to play it, Saturday in, Saturday out, at a club

administered by the RFL. The Chief Executive of British Swimming, David Sparkes, said to me that there is a whole consumer influencing piece here about how you get families or individuals to go into a swimming pool that is not simply about laying on a breaststroke-coaching session in the local pool. That is part of it.

We also set the bar too high initially by trying to measure this against three separate incidents of exercise a week. When I was playing hockey at any reasonable level in my 20s, we used to train on Tuesday night and play on a Saturday, so I would have failed that measure, even though I was playing in a top hockey league. Then we picked, straight after the Olympics was awarded, this rather arbitrary figure of 1 million, which was never scientifically based at all. Finally, we measured it solely through using fixed-line telephone surveys, in an era when hardly anybody under the age of 30 seems to have a fixed-line telephone any more. We have really made this very difficult for ourselves and, as a result, the figures have taken some time to shift.

**Q132 The Chairman:** Could I, before moving on to other items, just ask one follow-up question? You offered to give us some specific examples of working with other departments. I wondered, particularly in relation to children, about your work with the Department for Education, and how that is encouraging the uptake of sport in schools. I also wonder whether you have any links across to BIS and the research councils, or to the MoD—there are important issues about fitness in the armed services. Are those linkages at all relevant?

**Hugh Robertson:** The first thing I should probably say to you, Lord Chairman, is that—this is going to sound an awful thing to say and I am just turning over in my mind how to put it. Please understand that, for the last six months, almost every minute of every single day of every single week of every single month has been spent trying to organise the world's biggest sporting event. We are involved in the biggest construction project anywhere in Europe, the largest logistical exercise a country undertakes outside a major world war. This

is taking a huge amount of ministerial and departmental time, so we are in a slightly unusual period at the moment. You would understand why for this country it is incredibly important we get this right. To give you an example, we have had to cancel four meetings this morning to find time to do this and take civil servants off the organisation of the London Olympics to prepare for this Committee. I do not say that in any unpleasant or awkward way, but it is just that the department is entirely centred on delivering this massive national event, so many of these things are at the moment possibly not getting the attention they might get if normal traffic were there.

I will give you some examples of things that we do with other departments. The Department of Health is very closely involved with funding many of the school games co-ordinators at the moment. The new youth sport strategy, which will pick up the next round of the whole sport plans, was devised in very close consultation with the Department of Health. They fund the Change4Life clubs, which are specifically targeted at primary schools, where we feel at the moment that there is a particular need to take further action. The Department for Education has, for the very first time, made PE a compulsory curriculum subject, one of four in the curriculum review.

I spent 10 years of my working life in the Ministry of Defence and quite a lot of that, when we were not soldiering, playing sport. There is no particular tie-up between us and the military. From my own experience, the military keeps people fit quite efficiently on its own. In the regiment I was in, every single morning we used to start with some form of physical exercise for about an hour, so they are probably quite good at doing it without any intervention from us.

**Q133 The Chairman:** I wondered whether the flow might be the other way—whether there are lessons from the MoD.

**Hugh Robertson:** It would be lovely to get the entire population out for an hour's physical education first thing in the morning. You can, in a sense, see some of the connections with the number of military training companies. You can now see people who have that sort of background operating in the parks and open spaces of London of a morning. Actually, there is quite a lot of interchange between the military and elite sport; many of the disciplines that you learn in military life are very easily transferable to elite sport. There are of course an increasing number of injured servicemen coming back from Afghanistan who are finding a way forward through Paralympic sport. Probably for the first time since we started the Paralympics in 1948, we will in 2012 see a significant number of injured servicemen taking part in the Paralympics. Those sorts of connections are there. However, do we formally meet once a quarter with our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to discuss this? No, we do not.

**Q134 Lord Cunningham of Felling:** Minister, when James Purnell made this qualitative and quantitative policy shift, which you supported, did it affect the science budget of the department in any way adversely?

**Hugh Robertson:** Of course I was not in the department at the time, so I do not directly know the answer to that, but I would doubt it very much. As a Minister, I fund four bodies: UK Sport, which does the elite high-performance stuff; Sport England, which does the community stuff; and then a relatively small amount goes to UK Anti-Doping and to the Sports Grounds Safety Authority, but the majority of funding goes to UK Sport and Sport England. The majority of scientific research lies inside the UK Sport budget, where it is done not quite in a cloak-and-dagger way, but there are commercial linkages with Formula 1 teams and all the rest of it. We can look at the technology that is used in Formula 1 cars and use it for cycles and all the rest of it. We do not advertise it heavily, for obvious reasons, because

this is a very competitive area and we would not want our international competitors to know exactly what we are doing.

**Q135 Lord Cunningham of Felling:** I understand that point, but how do you then ensure, in so far as it is possible to ensure, that the funding of the science commissioned results in the highest possible quality of research being done?

**Hugh Robertson:** That is really a question you would need to address to the Chief Executive of UK Sport over her particular science budget. It is a live debate at the moment about how we assess the contribution that UK Sport has made. They would argue pretty strongly that they have just about the toughest assessment of any department in government, because everybody looks at the medal table at the end of the Games and they are the agency that funds that. If we are up or down from 47, which was our total in Beijing, people will arrive at their conclusions accordingly. It is a very, very tough figure. The figure you need to remember to understand this is 0.87 of a second, which is the time difference that separated our last four gold medals from their silver counterparts in Beijing. I have not picked four; that was the last four. It is a game that comes down those fractions of a second. So, do we as a department formally assess the quality of the scientific research undertaken by Formula 1 companies that, for example, transfers to British Cycling? No, we do not; that is done by UK Sport and we do not personally assess that in the department.

**Q136 Lord Cunningham of Felling:** Are you content that UK Sport has the competence to be left with making that judgment?

**Hugh Robertson:** Yes, I am. Indeed, you might say the success of the British cycling team in recent years would give you enormous confidence that that is the case.

**Q137 Lord Winston:** You have made, as everybody does, the assertion that sport is good for health and that is where we start, of course, but we are quite interested in the

metrics. We have to look fairly carefully at just how valuable it is. I wonder if you could help us; who advises you on the science?

**Hugh Robertson:** The metrics of the impact of exercise on public health are entirely the province of the Department of Health.

**Q138 Lord Winston:** Why have increasing participation in sport? How valuable is that if you do not know whether the metrics are working and it is not ongoing?

**Hugh Robertson:** Because we believe, as previous Governments have done, that to get more people playing sport is, in itself, a worthwhile objective. I think you are trying to tie me into an academic discussion. The question of whether keeping fitter longer will prolong somebody's life and mean that they are less of a drain on the National Health Service, which I think is where you are heading, is not an exercise that is undertaken by my department, but it is one that is undertaken by the Department of Health.

**Lord Winston:** I do not think fitness has anything to do with the health service actually. What the health service does is treat ill people, which is rather different.

**Hugh Robertson:** As I say, you are having this discussion with the wrong man, because I am not the Public Health Minister, but—this is not something that politicians ever like to get caught saying publicly—I have heard it said that people who are fit stay healthier longer and die quicker.

**Q139 Lord Winston:** If I may just ask one other question, you mentioned the 1.3 million now actively involved in sport. How do you define “sport” in that context?

**Hugh Robertson:** One 30-minute incident of sport a week.

**Q140 Lord Winston:** What would that include? Is chess a sport?

**Hugh Robertson:** No, chess would not be a sport, neither would walking. There are running, cycling and swimming. Indeed, one of the interesting things about the statistic is that there are an increasing number of people in particular undertaking four activities—running,

swimming, cycling and small-sided football—and the participation figures for the big team sports have remained pretty fixed.

**Q141 Lord Winston:** If there were to be an assessment of primary school children, for example, who do you think should do that?

**Hugh Robertson:** The Department for Education. In my department, we have no remit whatsoever. We have crossed this with both the new youth sport strategy and indeed school games, where we have used our position leading on the Olympic legacy to decide that one of the key features of an Olympic legacy should be a—you cannot call it “Schools Olympics” because of the branding and IP rules—UK school games that gets as many children as possible in the school system involved in competitive sport. That is as much about driving a legacy from the Olympics as it is about the wider public health agenda. However, there is this assumption underneath it that, if you can get more people playing sport, that leads to a fitter, healthier and happier nation.

**Q142 The Chairman:** Earlier on you said “we believe” that is the case. I hope it is more the belief that there is some evidence that it is the case. I just wanted to go back to the question that Lord Cunningham asked about UK Sport. You said, as indeed the Chief Executive of UK Sport told us, that their focus is on the outcome of medals, but to me that slightly begs a question. If a scientific approach can help to increase the medal performance at the Olympics, surely science has an important role to play. I just slightly think that going to the medals as the outcome and saying science does not matter or we are not focused on the quality of the science misses a key link in the chain. One ought to ask the question: do the countries that do very well in the medals table have a better scientific basis for improving athletic performance? Is that not a concern to you, as the Minister for Sport, that there should be a sound evidence base to understand how UK Sport is going to achieve its objective?

**Hugh Robertson:** I think you may have extrapolated more from my answer than I intended. If I have misled you or given you the wrong impression, I apologise. There are a number of things in an elite athlete's make-up that give him or her the very best chance of winning a gold medal. If you were to ask this question of Lord Coe, who has of course won two of them, he would say that there are four vital components: structure, money, coaching and mental toughness. The question of science is one of the factors that influences structure—the way that that science is used in the way that the sport is set up—and clearly has arguably a bigger impact on coaching, because a really good coach, among the range of things in his or her armoury, will want the greatest scientific expertise at his or her disposal. He will also want nutritional advice; the very best medical care; mental conditioning to get an athlete's brain right; the right sorts of support mechanisms to look after that athlete's family and those around him; the right conditions; the right post-athletic recovery; and so on and so forth. Science clearly impacts on all of those, and there is an extremely good body that does this for us, called the English Institute of Sport, which brings together the sport and exercise science disciplines.

However, out on the end—which I thought was the question I was asking—there is also this research arm that UK Sport has, which works with others in the commercial world to try to redesign and redefine some of the tools that our athletes use. There is work that is done with the rowing crews; there is work that is done with the cycling squads. When you are dealing with 0.87 seconds over four medals, if you can shave a minute bit off the weight of a cycle by using a less heavy paint, for example, that makes a difference. Without going into it in too much detail—I am not holding out on you, but the Australians would be very interested to have this information—there is a small box of tricks designed by one of the Formula 1 teams that you clip down the back of a saddle, which gives you information that previously could only be collected by two panniers' worth of kit that used to sit over the

back wheel. That allows you to measure very exactly the amount of power that a cyclist generates over the crucial first 10 or 15 yards of a race, which very often determines the end result of it. That sort of very detailed work is done by a lot of our firms. BAE Systems and the Formula 1 teams are very closely involved in this. However, I would be nervous about going into that in too much detail, for reasons I hope you would all understand.

**Q143 Lord Wade of Chorlton:** You have given a very detailed explanation of all the input that needs to go into producing an elite sportsman, so that somebody, as a result of all that attention, becomes a gold medallist, but how does that help the rest of us keep fit? It is not going to do that for me.

**Hugh Robertson:** It may not but, if I might be cheeky, if you were 15 it might. That is a cheeky answer and I apologise.

**Q144 Lord Wade of Chorlton:** Does it make a 15-year-old fit?

**Hugh Robertson:** Again, it is quite difficult to say that the appearance of X or Y athlete in X or Y school ensures that all those 15-year-olds then play baseball once a week. That is quite a big leap, but there is no doubt whatsoever that, if you want to publicise a sports participation scheme, by far the best way to do it is to get some young role model to whom children relate to do it. One of the interesting things is, actually, that that does not always have to be a sports star. Given the nature of society these days, if you get a children's television presenter or a pop star, it can have a not dissimilar effect.

I will give you an example of where this has worked. The Hampshire Cricket Board, when I was in opposition—so this would be two or three years ago—told me they had really struggled to reach out to the ethnic populations in and around places like Portsmouth. They had tried every manner of outreach programme you could possibly devise. The moment they put Wasim Akram, the Pakistan test cricketer, in a park on a Saturday, the thing filled up. That is simply because young children relate to major sports stars.

**Lord Wade of Chorlton:** Great heroes that other people follow—that is what you believe.

**Hugh Robertson:** Correct, I absolutely do believe that. I have seen it time and time again. I took part in a coaching session undertaken by Frank Lampard on a housing estate. There were youth workers standing around saying, “We have never seen this level of interest,” because you get a hero, somebody to whom they relate, and they will turn out to see them. It is part of celebrity culture and all sorts of other complicated things like that, but it does work.

**Q145 Baroness Sharp of Guildford:** You have talked quite a lot about the impact of the Sport England strategy, but their youth and community strategy actually stretches through to 2017, with the aim that “sport becomes a habit for life for more people and a regular choice for the majority”. You have talked a little bit about that already. I wonder whether you could tell us what DCMS is thinking about in terms of taking this work forward. In particular, given that it does stretch through to 2017, how will you use the legacy of the Olympics to make sure that the strategy does not get lost?

**Hugh Robertson:** First of all, the strategy has not yet started. It is out for consultation at the moment. Indeed, the new measurement strategy of concentrating on one week is out for consultation at the moment. It stops in August. We are also under a series of contractual obligations with the sport governing body under the first round of whole sport plans, and that does not work its way out until the beginning of next year. This is a 2013-2017 strategy that we hope builds on the lessons we have learnt in this strategy. Crucially, it includes a much greater element of payment by results. We have started for the first time to take money away from sports that have underperformed, and indeed have done that. I have seen a series of chief executives whose sports have underperformed and then we have taken money off them and reset their targets as a result of that underperformance, so there will be

a much greater element of that. There will be much greater attention on trying to get people out of school and into community sports.

**Q146 Baroness Sharp of Guildford:** So the targets here are set in terms of participation.

**Hugh Robertson:** They are indeed, yes. The targets will be set in terms of absolute numbers of people that those sports have to agree on. The process involves us going out to them and them coming back with what they can achieve. I do not know if you have picked up this debate about the 1 million target, but it is popularly held out there that the 1 million target has been abolished. Actually, that is not quite true. Instead of Government setting a target and then telling sport to meet it, we are trying this time to do it the other way round: to go out to sports and say, “Here is a pot of money. What can you achieve with this?” It may be that the aggregate total of that is somewhere near 1 million, but we will not know that until we have been through the process.

**Q147 Baroness Sharp of Guildford:** Are you working here with the Department of Health and DfE?

**Hugh Robertson:** Yes, we are. Clearly we are going to need a lot of buy-in from DfE to get people out of school. There are two great challenges that British sport has failed in the last 25 years: increasing participation steadily, year on year; and getting people out of school and into sport. People have been talking about the post-school drop-out for all the time I was shadowing this in opposition and all the time I have been a Minister, and it is particularly severe among women, if I am brutally honest. Tackling that is absolutely at the core of what we are trying to do here. People go through a series of cycles of sport in their life—they probably play a lot of it in their 20s, then they get married and have young children and it drops off a bit, then they pick it up when their children start playing sport and so on and so

forth. All that happens, but the hope is that, if we can capture people a bit younger than we have tried in the past, that is going to help.

**Q148 The Chairman:** Can I just pick up on this? As you said earlier, the emphasis is on participation in sport, and sport does not, for example, include walking. If you are looking for health benefits to the nation and to individuals, then the crucial thing may be exercise, as opposed to sport. Walking could yield the benefits you referred to—happier, healthier, longer-living and more gracefully-dying individuals. It does not mean to say they have to play rugby or cricket; they might do it all by walking. Why this focus just on sport rather than on exercise?

**Hugh Robertson:** That would probably be a question you might need to address to James Purnell, but we supported it in opposition and I drove that process, because it did not seem as if this greater policy of trying to get everybody to do three half-hours of exercise a week was shifting the dial in any way whatsoever. The sports were saying to the then Government, in no uncertain terms, “We cannot get our hands on this money. We cannot run schemes that we think will increase participation in sport. This is all too vague and too waffly, and it is not getting us anywhere.” The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is a very small department in spending terms, up against the mighty Department of Health. We were actually spending a tiny sum of money, strewing it all around the place on these various increasing exercise schemes, and it was not really having any impact. To be fair, if you look back, if not at this Committee then at a number of other Committees such as the Public Accounts Committee, in the last Parliament the department was very heavily criticised for this rather untargeted and unfocused approach.

**Q149 The Chairman:** This is slightly odd to me, because we heard from Dame Sally Davies, the CMO, all about the Department of Health guidelines, which are to do 150 minutes of moderate exercise—not sport, but exercise, and that includes walking—or to do

75 minutes of more intense exercise, which might be running. It seems to me that the DH guidelines are not in line with the notion of wanting to make people do more sport; they are in line with wanting people to do more exercise. Does that not slightly jar with your policy objective?

**Hugh Robertson:** Without sitting on your Committee, Lord Chairman, may I ask whether you asked her what policy initiatives she had taken at that point to bring that about?

**The Chairman:** Well, she described a whole lot of things. Yes, she did.

**Hugh Robertson:** In as much as there is a departmental division, it is that I am responsible for getting more people playing sport and the Department of Health is responsible for getting more people active.

**The Chairman:** Okay, but it is about what the objective of that is in the longer run.

**Hugh Robertson:** This comes to the heart of Lord Winston's question: I think they are slightly different things. As a department, we have this objective of getting more people playing sport, which we think is good for a whole number of reasons. There are others that we have not touched on today. The more people you put into the gene pool, the greater your chance of producing elite athletes later, and so on and so forth. That is a subtly—or not-very-subtly—different thing from keeping the nation active for public health reasons, which, up until now, has been the responsibility of the Department of Health.

**Q150 Lord Cunningham of Felling:** Do you have an assessment of the impact of this policy change on individual sports? Which have produced more participation, which have remained the same, and which have reduced?

**Hugh Robertson:** Good question. There are some sports that have done well and some surprising ones, actually. A team sport that has done unusually well is netball, funnily enough, because they have gone about what they are trying to do in a very different way. The four big winners have been swimming, cycling, running and small-sided football, and the

interesting thing is increasingly people are undertaking those activities outside the formal governing body structure. There has not been a giant rise in membership of athletics clubs; it is that more people are taking part in fun runs and community activities of that sort. In my part of Kent, you can see the difference. If I go down to the next-door village to buy the Sunday paper, you get mown down by groups of middle-aged men and women in Lycra, piling around the Weald on their bicycles on a Sunday morning. I have no scientific measure; I have not stood outside the Sainsbury's—

**Lord Cunningham of Felling:** You get mown down every day outside this Palace, Minister.

**Hugh Robertson:** British Cycling will tell you that there are an extra half a million people cycling since Beijing.

**Q151 Lord Cunningham of Felling:** Can I add a brief supplementary to that? Do you take a close interest in the competence of the governing bodies of sports?

**Hugh Robertson:** I say this gently to you of all people: I think I have probably taken a closer interest in that than any of my predecessors. Indeed, the way we have particularly knocked football around in order to get a better governance structure has achieved a level of results that had not been achieved until now. We are also making modern and transparent governance structures a key trigger for funding for both the whole sport plans and the elite athlete funding for the next cycle. There is now a very clear set of guidelines to which sports will adhere. If they have not met those, we will take the funding away.

**Q152 Lord Cunningham of Felling:** What do you think of the governance of tennis?

**Hugh Robertson:** Wimbledon week, isn't it? I was on record some while ago as describing football as "the worst governed sport in this country". To be fair to them, they have taken very considerable steps to address that issue, and now have a much better focused board with more independence. It is the first time we have had a woman on the FA board and it is

the first time we have had somebody from the black and minority ethnic community on the FA board. The FA board will be much the better for it. There is a much better balance between independence and what one could term “vested interests”. Tennis is a sport in transition in terms of that. They have two independents on the board; they are now looking for an independent chairman for the first time. I think the moves they have taken are much to be welcomed and the move they are making about the chairman is a good step forward. If I am honest, I think they also have some way to go.

**Q153 Lord Broers:** Could we change our attention to the Paralympics? What legacy will the Paralympic Games leave? For example, will advances in development of prostheses for Paralympic athletes help members of the public with a physical impairment? It occurs to me that the prime examples are those injured military personnel.

**Hugh Robertson:** In a sense, they are two slightly different questions, if I might be so bold. My sense of this is that there is a read-across between the types of limbs developed for elite athletes but, because of the level of performance that many of these remarkable men and women are trying to achieve, they tend to be extremely expensive to produce and quite specialised. I was involved some years ago in an effort to raise some money for WheelPower, which is the charity based at Stoke Mandeville that seeks to provide sport-specific wheelchairs for wheelchair basketball players, wheelchair rugby players and the like. It is very specialised, top-end equipment. There is a pretty clear read-across between the sorts of limbs devised for injured servicemen. It is not an area in which I am a great expert, but I can tell you that I went with Lord Coe down to Headley Court two summers ago and there followed a fascinating discussion with a young Gurkha, who had had both his legs blown off in an explosion in Afghanistan, about the shape of the shoe and the way the heel was put in. Seb knew quite a lot about it, having been involved in the design of running

shoes. There is clearly a knowledge transfer there, but I am not sure I am the greatest ministerial expert on that.

**Q154 The Chairman:** Can I come back to some earlier comments you made in response to Lord Cunningham about the benefits of increasing participation? We drew a distinction between participation in sport, which is your objective, and exercise more generally, which is DH's objective. You said one of the benefits of increasing participation was not just to get more people out there playing but also to provide, I think your phrase was, a bigger gene pool for the national competition, so we end up with more players getting beyond the first round at Wimbledon and more football teams getting beyond the penalty shoot-out in the quarter-finals. In pursuing that objective, do you learn lessons from countries that clearly seek to do this much better than we do, where they have high participation rates and better outcomes in terms of the top teams?

**Hugh Robertson:** The first point should be that there are a relatively small number of teams that perform better than us at Olympic level. We did come fourth in the medal table.

**The Chairman:** You have to normalise that by population size, don't you?

**Hugh Robertson:** Yes, but if you look at the countries that do better than us, America and China have vastly bigger population bases. It will be quite a challenge to overtake either of those.

**The Chairman:** That is why I say you have to normalise it by population size, so you divide the number of medals by the number of people in the country.

**Hugh Robertson:** Yes, but there are plenty of countries that have not dissimilar population sizes to us and we perform rather better. Quite a lot of people, interestingly enough, are looking at us and how we run sport at the moment, and trying to learn lessons for their own countries. We clearly have things to learn and one of my challenges is to keep pushing sport forward. Actually, one of the things that worries me is that we might be getting a little bit

complacent about how we do this, on the back of Beijing and other things. However, I do not think you should start from the basis that things are not working here.

Clearly if you get more people participating, then you have a better chance of finding elite athletes. There is a very interesting case study at the moment of a young rower who was picked up under a scheme run by Steve Redgrave. I think it is called Sporting Giants. They basically measured people. They sort of have a dynamic for what your perfect rower should look like, so went around measuring people or invited anybody between—I do not know what the exact requirements are—6'0" and 6'4" with thighs over such a size, shoulders thus large and all the rest of it. Surprisingly, they had a huge take-up and then they put them into training and worked this down. One of the young women who came through that programme is part of a pair that has just won a world championship for the first time and stands a very good chance of winning a gold medal in a couple of weeks' time. There is a perfect example of how you might increase the gene pool to give yourself greater success.

All of that said, there is quite a lot of targeting in this game. One of the reasons why some of the eastern bloc countries were very successful—there are a number of reasons why eastern bloc countries were very good at this before the fall of the Wall—is that they tended to concentrate on certain sports and then push people towards this. People were assessed at a fairly young age for their athletic ability. Sergey Bubka, the Ukrainian former pole-vaulting champion, was spotted as an athlete and was then channelled in a rather eastern bloc type of way towards pole-vaulting and became arguably the world's greatest pole-vaulter. There are quite a lot of examples of where this has worked in the past.

**Q155 Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** First of all, can I offer you, both personally and I hope on behalf of the Committee, best wishes for the Olympics? Indeed, it is a pleasure to hear a Minister who is so enthusiastic about the brief—it has been a pleasure listening to you

this morning—and who does not rubbish what the previous Government did. I think James Purnell was a good Minister who did, in fact, set really interesting targets.

My interest here, though, is in terms of your department and indeed science. It is fair to say that we are a little concerned as a Committee about how little what I would call basic science goes on in terms of underpinning, particularly, the elite programmes. In terms of the technology, quite clearly you are right: BAE Systems and others—you have mentioned Formula 1 in particular—are ahead of the world in terms of the way they are developing technologies, carbon fibres and all the rest of it. However, when the Australians had the Olympics, one of the ideas they had—as you have just alluded to—was to have individual athletes' passports, where, at an early stage when they were breaking into junior ranks, you looked at the make-up of an athlete and followed them through, on a longitudinal study, to be able to see what the effect of nutritional programmes and the rest of it was. I just wonder whether in fact that sort of scientific approach to elite athletes, which could then move on into the public arena, is going on. We heard nothing from the Chief Executive of UK Sport. She seemed to be totally oblivious to any science that was going on.

**Hugh Robertson:** It is a very good question and thank you for it. Thank you also for your remarks about the Olympics, and indeed I absolutely share your assessment of James Purnell's move. It was a move I supported in opposition and I have defended it in government, even when the figures have not moved, because I believe that it was the right step to take.

I am surprised that UK Sport did not make more of this, because I would say it is one of the things that has, without doubt, contributed to the rise in our Olympic performance. The body that does this is called the English Institute of Sport. It is based at a number of locations around the United Kingdom, the seven or eight major sports centres. I was with them myself last Tuesday at Bisham Abbey, where they do a lot of the rehabilitation and exercise science.

They have a fantastic group of medical-based expertise, which helps our athletes get on to the start line in the very best possible state. That goes right the way across the full range of core medical skills—doctors and surgeons, the Olympic Medical Institute, physiotherapists who are attached to and remain with the teams, nutritionists and psychologists. There is a huge scientific back-up that goes behind all of this. If you examine that particular area in greater detail, it is impressive.

Indeed, people like the Australians, who set up the Australian Institute of Sport back in the mid-1970s, which I went to visit when I was in opposition, have realised that their systems have got a bit behind the curve now. Bizarrely, we used an Australian to set our system up—Wilma Shakespear. She has gone back. The sense is that our system has now moved ahead of that in Australia, principally because it is lottery-funded and is therefore not dependent on a negotiation with the Government at each and every Olympic cycle. There is a security of funding, and quite a lot of people are now looking at our system.

You would be very well advised, if I might say so, to get the English Institute of Sport in and talk to them about all of this. Talk to their top doctors. There is a fantastic man called Richard Budgett, who provides all the medical advice. He used to work for BOA; he now works for the Organising Committee. There are people like that who are real experts who could give you absolute examples of medical advances that they have used to bring athletes back into training or to help them. When I was down at the EIS at Bisham last Tuesday, they had—it is probably a bit unfair to name them, because they are undergoing treatment—a young sprinter in there. Basically, because he is quite young, his back had stretched and they were helping him back to fitness. They also had a couple of female rowers who likewise had lower-back injuries—a very common injury with rowers—and were helping them back to fitness. They have been doing that work day in, day out for ages.

**Q156 Lord Winston:** How much are they publishing in the peer-reviewed medical literature?

**Hugh Robertson:** I do not know.

**Lord Winston:** Is that not the point of Lord Willis's question?

**Hugh Robertson:** I do not read the peer-reviewed—I have a very full in-tray. I do not spend my time idling around, but I promise you—

**Q157 Lord Winston:** Your record in sport is fantastic. I do not think anybody around this table would question that. However, we are trying to separate sport and exercise. They are different. For example, participation in sport is actually participation in exercise. It is rather different.

**Hugh Robertson:** Sport is participation in exercise; exercise is not always participation in sport.

**Lord Winston:** The people whom you meet cycling around your village are not participating in a sport.

**Hugh Robertson:** Yes, they are.

**Lord Winston:** Are they competing?

**Hugh Robertson:** You can either take a race or you can participate.

**Lord Winston:** I would argue that they are not.

**Hugh Robertson:** If you went out there and, if you spotted somebody on a bike, asked them whether they were taking part in sport, most people would say yes.

**Lord Winston:** When I cycle, the only sport is dodging the buses actually. The exercise is much more important.

**Hugh Robertson:** I am sorry; I have a fundamental disagreement. I think if a young man or woman, or in fact a middle-aged one in Lycra, gets on their bicycle at the weekend and, as

part of an organised ride, goes bombing around the Kent Weald, they are absolutely taking part in sport.

**Q158 Lord Winston:** But in general, it is the component of sport that is exercise that is intriguing with regard to health and the benefits. I agree there are specific advantages in sport as well—for example, the psychology that you mentioned. That is absolutely right; I am quite convinced that the psychology of performance is quite translatable to all sorts of areas of human life. However, the key question we still have is how valuable exercise really is, and I am not entirely sure it is clear. I am also not quite clear how the research that is going on in sport translates into this area. We are not trying to be antagonistic; we are trying to tease this out.

**Hugh Robertson:** You wanted me to appear in front of you today. My responsibility is for participation in sport and for elite and high-performance sport in this country. My responsibility is not for keeping the nation fit and active. That is a responsibility of the Public Health Minister and the Department of Health. I think you are trying to get me to steer into areas that are not my responsibility.

**The Chairman:** I think we will just leave this one for a moment. Lord Willis, do you want to ask a very brief question?

**Q159 Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** I just wanted to finish off my line of questioning. First of all, thank you for that reply, because I do not think we have had that real link between the research going on and what actually happens to it. It would be useful, perhaps after the Olympics, if you would let us know what actually happens to that research, how it gets out elsewhere and, in fact, if any of it is peer-reviewed.

I wanted to ask you another question. Our elite athletes, in all sports, are being tested both in competition and out of competition, and randomly, in terms of taking blood and urine for simple drug-testing. I just wondered whether, at any time, that huge database that appears is

in fact used by any scientific group in order to conduct the sorts of research you can do in terms of following the progress of elite athletes.

**Hugh Robertson:** That is a good question.

**Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** It is a waste if it just simply poured down—

**Hugh Robertson:** If I have understood your question absolutely right, I am not aware that the data collected around the various doping regimes that we have in this country are used and transferred for other means. I am not sure what the legalities of doing that would be. If I could turn the question inside out, there is, however, huge scientific input into the methods by which we test for all these agents. The very best facility of its sort anywhere in the world to do this resides in this country, at the GSK lab, which is going to do all the testing for the London 2012 Olympics. That is a partnership between GSK, our own anti-dopers and academics from King's College London. We opened it six months ago. It is an extraordinarily impressive scientific facility. GSK has put some of their very best research scientists on to that to give us the very best possible chance of detecting anybody who has transgressed in this way. There will naturally, I would have thought, through that process be a read-across from what they learn into what GSK does and, indeed, into what King's College London does. But is there formal transfer? I am not aware of it and I suspect there would be very real data protection issues.

**Lord Willis of Knaresborough:** I accept the point that Lord Winston is making that you have to deal with the Data Protection Act.

**Lord Winston:** You would have to get informed consent.

**Hugh Robertson:** I have never heard of this happening.

**Q160 Lord Winston:** If you wanted to say whether a raised cortisone level is related to the performance of an athlete running, let us say, then presumably, if you were drug-testing them, you would still have to get their informed consent for that to happen.

**Hugh Robertson:** I am sure that is right, yes. We have agreed on something at last.

**The Chairman:** On that happy note, I will draw this session to a close. I would like to thank the Minister very much indeed. You have emphasised to us how busy your schedule is and we all echo Lord Willis's wishes for the Olympics: we hope it all goes very well and is a great success. You will no doubt take the credit for its success, as I am sure it will be a success, as is due. We thank you very much. In due course, you will receive a draft of the transcript and you are obviously free to make editorial comments. Thank you very much for giving us your time. We appreciate it.

**Hugh Robertson:** I would simply urge you to use my remark about the benefit of exercise allowing people to live healthier and longer and to die quicker with some care.