

COVID-19

29 July 2020

Restarting play

Sport plays a vital role in the culture and psyche of the nation and fans everywhere are celebrating the recent return of elite level sport, eagerly anticipating the opportunity to go and see their favourite team again.

The professional clubs face a dilemma as revenues from attendances plummeted to zero overnight in March, but most have made it through so far at least and with the return of test cricket and Premiership football, albeit in empty stadia, it does at least feel like things are beginning to get back to normal – or at least some sort of ‘new normal’.

But sport in the UK is about much more than the elite professionals. It’s about the millions of us that enjoy physical activity and competition, whatever the standard. Increasing participation in sport and in physical exercise has long been a goal of government policy due to its well-evidenced positive impact on physical and mental health and wellbeing. The recent announcement of a government initiative to reduce obesity can only add to the drive to get the nation more active.

For all sports clubs and organisations then the challenge is clear: restarting play while remaining COVID-19 secure and adhering to government guidance on physical and social distancing, as well as hygiene.

The government has released some guidance for the public on the phased return to sport and recreation. It includes clear information on the current rules for the number of people allowed to meet, what facilities can be used, and what measures must be in place to return to sport. Government guidance differs slightly as lockdown restrictions lift at different speeds across the home countries, of course.

Duty of care challenge

This duty of care challenge for governing bodies of sports organisations cannot be ignored and meeting it successfully will be crucial to their survival. Fundamentally, clubs have a duty to take all reasonable measures to ensure participants will be safe taking part in a sport or physical activity. They also have a responsibility to safeguard volunteers, staff members and employees. It is, in other words, their duty to ensure the health, safety, well-being and welfare of all participants.

So it is a governance challenge – setting standards and policy, ensuring and being assured on compliance – that they face in this time of recovery and restoration.

Sport England has created a [Return to Play](#) section on their website to help organisations plan for reopening as restrictions ease. They also have a [How can we help?](#) section, which offers support, guidance and business advice to help organisations stay connected, support their communities and maintain facilities.

The [NSPCC](#) has also produced some invaluable resources and advice in relation to safeguarding that is a must-read for sports organisations and their leaders. Then there is the specific guidance that has been made available through the national governing bodies, such as the [Football Association \(FA\)](#), The [Rugby Football Union \(RFU\)](#) and the [England and Wales Cricket Board \(ECB\)](#), all of which have done a great job in supporting the grass roots of their respective sports.

“The practice of good governance is the key to a safe return to play”

Grass roots focus

Most sports clubs and organisations are small community affairs often run by volunteers with small budgets and limited resources. For these organisations, the focus must be on risk management and demonstrating, with evidence, that all reasonable steps are being taken to implement the guidance and secure the safety of the participants.

This means writing down how you expect training, games, changing rooms and preparations to work and how you will be monitoring what is actually happening. Then observing and documenting how it is working on the ground, for example, through video. These are the basic disciplines of risk management – set policy, monitor compliance, intervene to make improvements and gather and share learning.

Guidance for sport leaders

So even for the smallest sports club these are times when the practice of good governance is the key to a safe return to play. The following questions will be helpful to those in leadership positions:

- Have we set out our expectations for COVID-19 compliance across all our activities?
- Are our expectations in line with the national guidance and have we drawn upon the advice that is available from Sport England and others?
- Have we communicated what is required to our members and participants and are we assured those messages have been received and understood?
- Have we made the necessary changes to our facilities such as signage and are our coaches and volunteers appropriately trained?
- Can we show that we are observing the rules and that if there are breaches, we are aware and can intervene?
- Are we sharing learning about what works and what does not across our club or organisations, and across our sport and other sports?

Playing and watching sport brings joy to millions, doing it safely is both perfectly possible and also arguably more important now than ever to the nations' health.

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk