

Outdoor Sport and Recreation

[Mrs Anne Main *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): It is good to be under your stewardship this afternoon, Mrs Main, for this debate. It is wonderful to see so many people turning out for it. There has been a great deal of interest in the topic of Government policy on sport, outdoor activities and recreation. It is really good to see that so many Members want to speak, so I will keep my remarks fairly short, although given the nature of what I will say, they will be slightly rambling. [Hon. Members: “Oh!”] Sorry—that is my only joke of the afternoon.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): He is Welsh.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Indeed.

I am an absolute evangelist for the great outdoors, which may come as a bit of a surprise because earlier in my career I was a sports facility and arts facility manager. My job then was to encourage people to come indoors, into sports centres, to get the gym mats out, do the aerobics sessions, get into the gym itself and so on; I was bringing people indoors. However, the greatest free gym that we have is when we step outside of our homes; we do not even need to get in a car. It is what we do when we step out into London or elsewhere, leaving our homes and turning left or right, before going up into the hills, as I am fortunate enough to be able to do when I walk out into the uplands of south Wales.

The great outdoors is a tremendous asset and I guess that my argument today is that we parliamentarians, the Government and the organisations that are involved with the great outdoors—of which there are many—all need to do our utmost to encourage people to get out there, because of the wide range of benefits of going outdoors. There are definitely health benefits, not only physical health benefits but benefits for people’s mental well-being. Encouraging people to go outdoors can also help to drive activities such as GP exercise on prescription, or GP referrals as they are sometimes called. Such methods are not appropriate for every individual who sits in front of a GP, but increasingly the evidence shows that a very good prescription for many people, whether they have mental health issues or physical health issues, is to do what they can within their abilities to go out and walk or cycle, and enjoy the great outdoors beyond them.

I really am an evangelist for this: in fact, I am a walking testament to it. As I said, early in my career I was in sports facility management, but later I was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, which for many people is a severe condition that will progressively get worse, eventually confining them to very restricted mobility, and so on. Yet the fact is that I simply walk out from my house on a Sunday afternoon, stretch my legs, go with the children and the rest of my family in my immediate neighbourhood; I cycle to work, even though it is only five minutes back and forth; and occasionally I go and do what I love, which is to get away from this place and get into the wide open spaces. That is the gospel I want to sing to a lot of people, and in a moment I will give

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some examples of where these recreational activities are happening and talk about areas where we can perhaps do more.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing an important debate. I, too, am a very enthusiastic walker and I noticed the way he was going when he talked about a “rambling” speech and being a “walking testament”; I could see the direction he is taking.

About a year ago, I secured a debate on childhood obesity. This approach—getting people outdoors—is the biggest way to combat childhood obesity in our times. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we, as a society, and the Government need to address that issue for the sake of this and future generations?

Huw Irranca-Davies: I entirely agree, and perhaps the most cost-effective way that we can do that is through a coherent strategy, involving the Welsh Government, the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Assembly and so on, that makes use of this great asset that we have literally outside our doors.

Such a strategy could certainly have a major effect on combating childhood obesity. Studies that have come out only this year, building on studies going back to the 1960s, show that if someone gets out of their car and walks or cycles to work, it has a major impact on their mortality, their length of life and their likelihood of developing serious medical conditions later in life. It is as clear as day now; there is no scientific argument about it. So let us make sure that we have such a strategy, which percolates from the national level right down to the local level, and into the voluntary sector as well; we should use the groups that are already in place to get people up and going.

Mr Sheerman: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said so far. I made a jibe about his being Welsh, but he knows that I started out as a Welsh politician in his very own village of Gowerton, and he knows that my father also suffered from ankylosing spondylitis.

Will my hon. Friend concentrate a little bit of his speech on the importance of getting children into the countryside? He knows that I am the chairman of the John Clare Trust, which has a campaign, Every Child’s Right to the Countryside. In this country, 35% to 40% of kids do not see the countryside at all, and if they do see it, they only see it on a school trip. So please let us do something to get schoolchildren into the countryside.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Interventions should be quite short. They are becoming mini-speeches.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Thank you, Mrs Main.

My hon. Friend is right, and the John Clare Trust and so many other organisations do such good work. When I was an Environment Minister, one of the most inspiring projects that I saw in the national parks was the Mosaic programme, which dealt not only with children but with people from different ethnic backgrounds—people who typically did not go out, and felt that there was some sort of psycho-perceptual barrier that stopped them going out into the countryside—and encouraged

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them to go out. Then what we saw was the intra-generational effect of children taking their parents and grandparents into the great outdoors.

I am focusing on strolling, but I have enjoyed some of the most adrenaline-filled times in my life outdoors, including hanging by my fingertips from cliffs in north-west Wales, which was scary and exhilarating at the same time. I have broken bones on mountain bike paths; I do not do that anymore, as I am getting on now and have a more sedate approach. I have thrown myself off the cliffs in west Wales and swung from them, while coasteering, which is a tremendous activity. And I have swum in the sea off west Wales, through waters full of jellyfish, bottlenose dolphins and so on, which was absolutely phenomenal.

Such activity is an education as well as being good for people's health, and it is good for the economy. Locally, we have some amazing initiatives along that line. We have a striders group—the Ogmere Valley Striders. What does it do? It works with existing groups on the ground that bring together older people—third-age people—and it says to them, “Come out. Let's do some mild walking along the cycle paths that we have. Then maybe one day, we'll go a bit higher,” and so on. I now see people from those groups sitting in the café halfway up that cycle path, and there will be 20 of them together. They are also spending money in that café, while they have a sit-down and a chat, before they go out and get the health benefits of walking as well.

We also have the Love 2 Walk festival. Labour-run Bridgend county borough council supports it every year, and it is growing every year, with a long list of places for people to go and walk to, ranging from easy walks to very challenging and rigorous walks in the south Wales valleys. Recently, we have had an Elvis walk in Porthcawl, which broke the record for the number of Elvises walking along the all-Wales coastal path—who can say more than that?

Mr Sheerman: There is nothing to say about that.

Huw Irranca-Davies: However, there is not only walking. I pay tribute to the work that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) does in this area with several all-party groups, including an event that he pulled together in June last year where a range of organisations came together, which deal with canoeing, mountaineering, open access, open spaces, national parks, walking in London and other cities—all of that activity. Out of that event came a very good piece of work called Reconomics, which pulled together in a comprehensive way all the data—a mountain of data—that show just how beneficial outdoor recreation is; not just walking, but all the types of outdoor recreation. It showed that outdoor recreation is the UK's favourite pastime, with all these diverse activities from potholing to caving, to simply strolling outside or going on a bike with the family.

Interestingly, women are just as likely as men to take part in outdoor recreation. As a former sports facility manager, I can tell hon. Members that, in terms of women's participation in sports centres, we still have to break down some of the barriers to people doing indoors activities. We work hard on that. Outdoors, there is no differentiation; people do outdoor activities regardless of gender, and that is great.

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More female than male staff are employed in outdoor activities. How many sectors can say that? Some 55% of employees in outdoor recreation and sport are women, not men. That is a great thing to celebrate. I know from my background that the industry employs a higher proportion of young people aged 16 to 24, giving them great opportunities.

Let us go for the hard cash and the hard sell. We see time and again, as reports come out, just how much this does for local economies and the national economy. The Reconomics report said that walking tourism alone was estimated to generate up to £2.76 billion for the English economy; that is quite staggering.

Let me turn for a moment to Wales and go back home to the Wales coast path—the first, the landmark and ground-breaking all-Wales coastal path. In its first 12 months, up to September 2013, the path generated 2.82 million visits and added £32 million to Wales's economy. Some 94% of those visitors were walking for leisure, with around 40% of them visiting the path as part of a longer holiday. The impact of the path on the local economy helped 5,400 tourism-related businesses and led to an extra 120, and more, jobs created within 2 km of the route. I can see this for myself in my own area. Going down to the Glamorgan heritage coast, a tremendous piece of coastline—around Southerndown and so on—people will see the new businesses springing up. I particularly recommend the Barn at West Farm, just outside Southerndown, which is a fantastic place to stop when on a walk, have a nice coffee and listen to the guitar music being played—and on you go then.

The coast path has led to exposure for Wales on the BBC and ITV, in *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, and on Fox News, because it is an all-country, all-nation coastal path. People can hit the coast in Wales and turn left or right without stopping; it is phenomenal. The Wales coast path was included as one of the nominees in VirtualTourist's campaign to find the "8th Wonder of the World", alongside spots such as Yellowstone national park in the United States of America. *National Geographic* magazine named the Pembrokeshire coast section of the path in its top 10 places in the world to visit. In Lonely Planet's 2012 "Best in Travel" guide, the Wales coast path was voted the greatest region on earth.

It is brilliant that recently, within the past few days, we have heard that the England coastal path will now be delivered by 2020. We were previously lacking a timetable for that. As the Minister who took the Marine and Coastal Access Bill through Committee, I can say that we were a little bit worried that the path was going to get kicked into the long grass, but it has now been said that there will be an all-England coastal path by 2020. People will be able to walk from the top north-east of England, all the way round England, through Wales, all around the coastal path, and right up the other side, then they can carry on up into Scotland, as part of a Great Britain walk.

Mr Sheerman: I am being carried away with nostalgia as my hon. Friend talks about coastal paths in Wales and elsewhere, but we in Yorkshire—in Huddersfield—have wonderful countryside, although we are bit far from the coastline. In terms of his Clare Balding tours, will he think about coming to Huddersfield and Yorkshire for wonderful walks with us, too?

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Huw Irranca-Davies: Definitely. I would love to visit and walk there with my hon. Friend and, as time allows, visit the whole of these paths. Of course, I am only talking about coastal paths; we now have a long distance trails network in the UK, which is tremendous. Two years

ago, I walked with my whole family, carrying rucksacks, along the Hadrian's Wall path in seven days. It was brilliant. What an experience. We need to encourage more of this.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield held a brilliant reception at which a six-point strategy was launched, and it is not just to do with walking. Organisations including the Wild Network, the Sport and Recreational Alliance, the Youth Hostel Association—I am a member of that association, so my apologies because I should have declared that at the outset; I am also vice-president of Ramblers Cymru and president of the Glamorgan Area Ramblers—Living Streets, Putting People First, the British Mountaineering Council, Britain on Foot, Ramblers GB, the Open Spaces Society, the Campaign for National Parks and the English Outdoor Council were pulled together.

Those organisations are asking the Minister for six things that I will mention in headlines, because I am sure that other hon. Members will speak to them in detail. They would like cross-government support for a long-term strategy on outdoor recreation and improvement of access to coast and countryside, because of the challenges for local authorities in maintaining simple rights of access that allow people to get up on to the high hills or to long-distance paths. We need to find a way to keep those routes open for cyclists and people on horseback and on bikes, and so on.

Those organisations want to increase opportunities for young people to get outside—mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman)—because young people will drag their whole families and the generations with them. They want to maximise the economic contribution of outdoor recreation. Some people pooh-pooled the idea that the England coastal path would provide economic benefits, but the evidence from Wales is that it certainly will; businesses will shoot up along that path and make the most of it.

Those organisations want to strengthen planning guidance and protect the outdoors. We know about the pressures and that we have to ensure that this is a living countryside, but we also need to make sure that what people go to the countryside to enjoy is still there as well; getting that balance right is critical.

The sixth ask is for better public transport in rural areas, for a number of reasons, and not only for cross-modal approaches to transport so that people can get to where they want to go. For example, people might want to do the Taff trail on their bike, so on a Sunday they go on a bus that will drop them in Brecon and then they can cycle all the way back to Cardiff. However, it is not just about that. Study after study is now showing that better public transport in rural areas—in Wales, England and everywhere else—encourages people to walk more. They take the bus and then walk and stroll, and the pounds fall off and they feel better in themselves, and so on.

That is all I am going to say, because so many hon. Members want to contribute. I welcome the chance to have this debate. This is far from being an attack on the Government; this is positive and encouraging. Let us do

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our utmost to make the most of our country's great outdoors. We are a beautiful island nation and sometimes we forget it too easily. Let us get out there and use it a heck of a lot more.

2.47 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. Having lived in St Albans, I know that there are some wonderful walks around the city and elsewhere in Hertfordshire.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies)—my hon. Friend—on securing this debate and making a terrific speech, with real enthusiasm and a clear sense of purpose and direction. It was clearly grounded in his experience in the world of work before coming to the House and as a Minister. I congratulate him on what he said and agree with just about all of it, except for his comment that Pembrokeshire and that part of the world is the best, when, clearly, other hon. Members would feel that Yorkshire or Cheshire, or other parts of the country, were better. But there we go.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): And Kent.

David Rutley: Kent, I hear, too. However, we will see. Hon. Members will have their chance to make those points in due course.

I declare an interest up front, as the co-chair of the all-party group on mountaineering. I refer hon. Members to the register of all-party groups. I am also a vice-chair of the all-party group on mountain rescue and a secretary of the all-party group on national parks. Most importantly, I am the Member of Parliament for Macclesfield, one of the great constituencies of this country. It is a beautiful constituency where the Cheshire peak comes together with the Peak district. It is well worth a visit, and I encourage everybody to come along.

I thank the Sports Minister for attending. She is passionate about sport, having been a prolific sportsperson herself in the past, and appreciates the importance of outdoor activities. We were fortunate enough to meet Andrew Denton, the chairman of the Outdoor Industries Association, to talk about many of the things we are discussing today. I hope that, given that enthusiasm, at a future meeting the Minister will change her title from Minister for Sport to Minister for Sport and Outdoor Activities. That would only be appropriate.

Positive progress has been made in recent weeks and months. The creation of the England coast path is a major step forward and positive development and there is a clear timetable to make that happen. I am delighted that that is moving forward; it is a key element of the six key proposals that have been put together by the outdoor organisations, which the hon. Member for Ogmore has already discussed. Furthermore, it is good news for walkers across the country and for climbers.

I know that representatives from the British Mountaineering Council are here. It is important to recognise that the spreading room—the margin between the path and the sea itself—is vital for outdoor activities and, in particular, climbers. The important thing for the communities on that route is that footfall will increase, which will help boost the rural economy in those areas. The key ask today is for an overarching strategy for the

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outdoors—a sense of direction and a clear plan of action, co-ordinated by a body that can not only fine-tune the shaping of that, but go out and work with the Minister and Sport England to deliver it. There are many other things that we will talk about today, but that is the key ask.

I will put things into context, because the issues we are discussing are vital for our nation and critical for the rural economy in several ways. First, on participation, the Olympic legacy is absolutely critical to this country, and there is more we can do—perhaps in ways that the originators of the Olympic bid did not envisage. There are other ways of getting people to be physically active. We have to tackle physical inactivity; it is putting pressure on our health services and threatens the health of multiple generations. Secondly, as we have already said, there is the importance of tourism, particularly to these rural areas.

I am co-chairman of the all-party group on mountaineering, and we have been working hard with a wide range of MPs and, for that matter, peers in taking the agenda forward. As we look for how to bring about greater success, it is important to reflect on the success that cycling has seen in recent years. It has been an incredibly well articulated campaign that has engaged the public, not just with the elite sport itself, but with mass participation.

I saw that this Sunday at the Bollington BikeFest. Some 300 people turned up to do cycling events, which ranged in length from 20 miles to 75 miles. It was organised by Macclesfield Lions club. We have to build on the success of cycling, because organised sport, as far as I can see, is only one element of the equation, and we have to go beyond that. The focus should not just be on sports, but on a much wider range of outdoor activities. As the hon. Member for Ogmores said, it is often easier and cheaper to participate in outdoor activities, so we should promote them. Walking is a great example. In east Cheshire, our ramblers group has 700 members, and we can do even better in building that membership base.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): First, I apologise to you, Mrs Main, for being late; I forgot that the debate was in this Committee Room. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Ogmores (Huw Irranca-Davies). I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) on his work on the APPG, of which I am proud to be an active member. Does he share my concern about how the participation figures are calculated by Sport England? That has a big effect on funding. We know that there are thousands and thousands of people out walking, yet that is not reflected in the figures or the funding.

David Rutley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to capture robustly the activity levels that are already there and then build on that success. It is clear that more people are getting involved. The increases in outdoor activities are far greater than in other organised sports. Let us capture that and then get what funding we need—we do not need the same as many organised sports—to help move things forward.

I recognise the great work that my hon. Friend has done, notably in highlighting some of the well-being issues involved in outdoor activities, not least his work

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with veterans groups in the sponsored event that went up Cotopaxi earlier this year. Other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), went too. That set a high standard. She did a fantastic job, and I hope we will hear more about that later.

There is growing evidence that more has to be done. A Government-sponsored paper, “Moving More, Living More”, sets out that the costs associated with inactivity in the UK are some £20 billion. It is clear that those involved in a lot of physical activity reduce their risk of dying early by 30%. It is astounding that 30% of the UK population are physically inactive, compared with 8% in the Scandinavian countries. Quite simply, something more needs to be done.

This is a clear spur and a clear call of action for Public Health England, our local health and wellbeing boards across the country and all public bodies. We have to wake up and take clear action to ensure that we move the agenda further forward. Let us not try to reinvent the wheel and come up with fancy options. It is straightforward—walking works and many of these outdoor pursuits work; we just have to get more people active outdoors.

We have already heard about the important report “Reconomics”, which is being taken forward by the Sport and Recreation Alliance. Figures have already been put forward, but one thing that amazed me was that the visitor spend associated with outdoor activities is £21 billion across the nation. That is a huge opportunity and more can follow, if we get it right. One tremendous quote from that incredible report states that the outdoors are

“a vast blue and green gym with no membership fee, and a sporting arena like no other.”

How true!

Locally in Macclesfield, as in Ogmere and other parts of the country, we are seeing such events as the Bollington walking festival move forward and countless fell races. I was able to survive the Wincle Trout race last year. We have the “Walkers are Welcome” scheme and other initiatives, and with all these things, people are seeing that we need to move further forward.

In the Peak district, they are taking forward fantastic activity in promoting cycling. Quite simply, the ambition is clear. We want a step change in participation in physical activity. We want to take 1 million-plus people out of physical inactivity so that lives can be saved. We want to see a real boost to the rural economy, too.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): There is absolutely a desire to create more trail, walkways and bridleways. In my area of north Lincolnshire, our local council is investing millions in the River Ancholme trail, the Isle of Axholme greenway and the Crowle to Guinness cycleway, among many other schemes.

One problem we have in trying to open up such trails is land ownership. There are supportive landowners who see the benefit to the economy and the population generally, but others, unfortunately—generally those who own the land in the middle of the trail—are not quite so supportive—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I think the speaker, who has a limited amount of time, has got the point you were making, Mr Percy. A lot of Members wish to speak.

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David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend; I know that he is keen and passionate about these issues. Access can be a challenge, but the way to deal with such things—we saw evidence of this with the Deregulation Bill—is through collaborative coalition building among landowners, ramblers and other outdoor organisations and local councils putting forward the case positively and providing the right levels of support.

Progress is being made, and it is not just the English coast path that is going forward. It is good to see No. 10, as well as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of Health, getting behind the great outdoors campaign. Recently, my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) and I were able to welcome the Minister responsible for public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), to the Goyt valley, in the wonderful constituency of High Peak but close to the border with Macclesfield. We were able to walk and talk. We discussed the importance of getting people out from their community and into the countryside. As we arrived at the trig point at the summit of Shining Tor, we met a huge church group out for a walk. With their actions, they were making the point that we have been trying to make in words. It was a memorable summit meeting.

We are looking to build on the work done so far by building awareness through parliamentary away days in the hills and through working with such outdoor legends as Alan Hinkes and Sir Chris Bonington. We should ensure that we build on the great campaign we launched last year, “Britain on Foot”. Its aim is to help more people get off the sofa and get outdoors.

Given what happened with cycling, what was coming ahead with the general election and the need to get all parties involved in this debate, 10 leading outdoor organisations came together to create six key proposals for Government action on the outdoors, which have already been referenced. That coalition was, in itself, a landmark activity, and a wide range of interests are represented within it. The fact that those organisations have come together highlights the need for change and action, and I hope that that agenda is taken seriously. I am sure that Opposition Members are busy getting those proposals to their manifesto-creating groups. I am doing the same with other Members here in the Conservative party. However, seeing this agenda shaping up and getting so much support from so many different outdoor organisations is a landmark.

We can learn from other countries that are doing a good job, such as the United States and its work with its national parks. There is a Cabinet-ranking Secretary of the Interior whose job it is to ensure that the agenda is furthered. The Scandinavians have also clearly done a fantastic job in improving physical activity levels. Within the United Kingdom, Scotland and Northern Ireland already have clearly articulated outdoor strategies, so we are asking today that the Minister consider creating a strategy for the outdoors for the entire United Kingdom. We also hope that, following Thursday’s referendum, it will continue to include Scotland for many years to come.

Last year, we had an Adjournment debate, attended by many of the Members present today, that led to three small requests: to recognise outdoor activities; to meet outdoor organisations; and to support the “Britain on Foot” campaign. I am delighted that the then Sports

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Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Sir Hugh Robertson), took that agenda seriously and that all those things have been achieved.

Now, we are asking for just six things and have a much clearer agenda of what we want to accomplish. I hope that we will see the same impact and enthusiasm from this Minister and others to move the process forward. I will not go through all six points as time is limited with others wanting to speak, but they are clear and set out a long-term strategy and a clear economic contribution. The point about access, inclusion and getting young people involved is key, but this is cross-generational and young and old alike should be considered.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I have come to this debate because I am deeply worried about a specific matter. Although people should be outside enjoying the countryside and the fresh air, more than 600 people have been hurt or worse by cattle. Does my hon. Friend agree that until we get a proper understanding of how to handle access and farming of large, potentially dangerous animals, ramblers will continue to be hurt? We need to do something about that and cannot pretend, as ramblers have done to date, that it is not a problem.

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Public safety is paramount. We must educate about the benefits and the associated risks, but that is what makes opportunities in the outdoors so exciting. It is that mix of learning and new experiences while also being aware of the risks and working out how to deal with them. My hon. Friend makes an important point that I am sure will be noted by the outdoors organisations represented here.

In conclusion, the debate has been positive. On a day when many minds are concerned with the state of our Union and with conflicts in other parts of the world, it is tremendous to see so many people here to take this agenda further forward. I know that the Minister is a keen walker and has been to Cumbria, so I ask her to reflect on the amazing, stunning views from the tops of Blencathra and Skiddaw. They are worth the climb and the hard work, and the same is true for promoting the activities that we are discussing today. I hope that the Minister agrees that it is time to get more people moving outdoors.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I will call the wind-ups at 20 minutes to 4, so each speaker has around six minutes if there are not too many interventions.

3.3 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on securing a debate on this important subject today.

In 2012, London successfully hosted the Olympic games and Glasgow successfully hosted the Commonwealth games this summer. I was in Glasgow for a week and have to say that the fans in places such as Hampden Park were not partisan. It was good to see crowds, containing many Scottish people, cheering on athletes from all the home countries, which says something

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about sport as a unifying force for the Union. Those events helped to showcase a great variety of outdoor sports. This summer, Yorkshire proudly hosted the Grand Départ of the Tour de France, and the success of that event provided a boost to the sport of cycling. We can take pride in recent successes, but we must also explore new ways to encourage people to participate in sport throughout the UK.

I am co-chair of the all-party group on women's sport and fitness and want to talk about the issues and the barriers to the participation of girls and women in sport, to which my hon. Friend has already referred. Last week, along with other Members present, I went to an event in Parliament on women and girls in rugby. The event also celebrated the success of the England women's team in winning the IRB world cup. It was wonderful to talk to some members of the team, who are still elated at their victory. Their win was even more remarkable given that the women held down various jobs, including plumbing, working for a vet, lifeguarding and teaching, at the same time as training for their national team. A squad of 20 of the women's team have now been put on professional contracts in the run-up to the rugby sevens at the Rio Olympics. The women told us that the contracts will mean that they can train each day and have some rest and recovery time between training sessions and matches. At Rio, the teams they will be competing against have been training and playing full-time for a year or more. I wish the team well, because they are remarkable role models.

The situation of our elite women athletes still having to hold down jobs while trying to train to the highest level that they can achieve is not always well understood. The recent inquiry by the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport into women in sport highlighted that as one of the problems that have remained since the Olympics. At the elite level, women's sport gains much less sponsorship and media coverage, and the pay and prize money is lower. A report published this year by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation found that women's sport accounts for less than 0.5% of all commercial investment and only 7% of sports media coverage. When women are not paid for their achievements in sport, it is extremely difficult to encourage girls and young women to aspire to a career as an athlete.

The other issue, perhaps of more relevance to today's debate, highlighted by the Select Committee inquiry was that women's participation in grass-roots sport is still much lower than men's. The most recent figures from the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation show that only just over 30% of women in England aged 16-plus take part in sport or fitness once a week, compared with over 40% of men, which is a difference of 2 million. Worryingly, in my local authority area of Salford the gap is even greater with 39% of men participating in weekly sporting activity but only 24% of women. I find that really concerning. Members have already discussed the health benefits of activity, and I am impressed by the range of activities that hon. Members take part in, although I must say that mine is limited to running. It is concerning that 76% of women in Salford are not active at such a level.

Research by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation found that 12 million women wanted to play more sport, half of whom were inactive at the time of the survey. The participation gap persists because of practical,

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personal and social barriers for women and girls. The Government, together with the sport sector, local communities and the media, must do more work on removing the gap. We must ensure that any Government policy on outdoor sport and recreation helps to address the

barriers that currently prevent girls and women from participating in sporting and other physical activities.

While the overall gender gap in participation is of great concern, the lack of growth in participation rates among young women aged 16 to 25 is also worrying. It is clear from many surveys and reports that young girls see sport as not for them. That perception often stems from negative experiences with PE and sport at school, which is a point that is supported by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's report. A survey carried out by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation found that 51% of girls were deterred from physical activity by their experiences of school sport and PE. Many girls described it negatively, citing a lack of choice, overly competitive environments, a lack of confidence in their ability and a concern about body image. Changing young girls' perceptions of sport and being active is essential if we want them to take up sport at school and get the health benefits. As has already been discussed, we should be concerned that girls and young people more generally are not taking up sport and activity at a young age. Government should do more to ensure that pupils are given the opportunity to participate from a young age in a wide range of sports and activities—wider than they are currently—to try to suit all interests.

There is an issue with funding. In the United States there is gender-balance in sports funding due to title IX legislation, which requires schools and other bodies receiving public funding to ensure that expenditure on sport benefits boys and girls equally. Since this legislation was passed, the number of girls participating in secondary school athletics in the US has gone from 7% to 41%. I argue that we should adopt similar legislation, because I feel that change here will be minor until there is more equality in funding.

We must consider how we can inspire women to participate in sport throughout their lives. If we look at the figures, it is interesting that many of the sports that are most popular with women are done informally, such as running and swimming, and are therefore outside the formal funding structures. Women take part in running events such as Race for Life and will train up to run 5 km or 10 km, but then, sadly, not enough people persist in taking part in the activity after the event is completed. I did the Salford 10 km last Sunday. There were 3,500 participants. Very impressively, 1,500 were women and 2,000 were men. That is a very good balance, as we tend to see more men than women jogging on the street.

Some good work has been done by sports organisations to encourage more women to participate. Since 2008, British Cycling has led a highly successful campaign to get more women cycling. It wants to inspire 1 million more women to ride, to race and to be part of British cycling by 2020. In the first five years of its campaign, it has achieved significant gains, because it has given guidance on routes, which is important when people are starting, and on safety. It has also created clubs to introduce young people to cycling. That type of guidance and support is vital. I commend British Cycling on its campaign. I look forward to seeing and hearing more

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progress on that in the future. Given the facts I have touched on, Government and other sports organisations must do more to ensure there is a similar push to help increase women's participation in other sports and fitness activities.

These campaigns will not work unless we tackle issues such as the funding imbalance, which I touched on, and the lack of coverage of women's sport. Hon. Members have talked about people getting involved in the outdoors, particularly women. If women are taking part in activities in informal ways, but not in sport, then we have to change the perception that sport is the preserve of men. I am afraid it is not surprising that girls and young women see things that way while elite male sports take up the vast majority of media coverage, sponsorship and funding. To ensure outdoor sports and all sports thrive, we must push for women's sport to be more adequately represented in the media and to be better funded.

3.12 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I start by drawing Members' attention to my declaration in the register. I thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies): his enthusiasm for this topic, and for Wales and everything it has to offer, is contagious. It is great to debate this topic—in this Chamber at any rate—as it joins so many people together in a common cause.

Much as I am delighted to see the Minister in her place, this debate could have been answered by the Department of Health, the Department for Education, the Treasury or a number of other Departments. Each has a real interest in this, both economic and social. I hope the Minister will acknowledge that this subject is inter-departmental. Every Department should look at this as an opportunity to improve its performance, rather than as something it needs to acknowledge in a token fashion.

I will concentrate on the benefits of outdoor education and learning for children in particular. It worries me that only 10% of children ever get to play outside these days, whereas 40% of their parents used to. One in three of our kids has never climbed a tree; one in 10 has ever ridden a bike; remarkably, 42%—including me—have never made a daisy chain. That may seem an irrelevant contribution, but it demonstrates that we are talking about not just fitness, but culture, heritage and opening the eyes of people who might not have a daily opportunity to have their eyes opened to the extraordinary enrichment to their lives that just a few short hours out in the open air and the countryside provide.

A few Members might read that great magazine *Country Life*. A wide-ranging survey it carried out—a few years ago now, it must be said—asked questions of a number of schoolchildren aged between about six and 12. In answer to the question, “Why is it important to close gates when you go into the countryside?”, a worryingly large number replied, “To keep the elephants in.” When asked a question about what the greatest advantage was about living in rural areas, the answer came back, “Because there aren't so many coppers.” This should demonstrate to us that, despite all the progress that has

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been made, there is still an awful lot we need to do to normalise life outside our urban areas.

Other Members have touched on the health benefits of outdoor activity. I like statistics, but it is still a very worrying situation that 28% of children are obese or suffer from obesity at some stage in their early years. That is partly because of the relatively small number who do one hour of vigorous exercise a day. That is all that is needed: one hour of vigorous exercise a day.

A number of excellent organisations have been mentioned so far. I will touch on the work of the Field Studies Council, not necessarily because it is better than other organisations, but simply because I learned an important lesson when I visited its centre in Stackpole in my constituency. It demonstrated to me something that I had not registered before. One of the values of outdoor learning to a lot of the children and young adults who go to that institution is that it teaches them that they can be good at something. If they do not function or perform to their best ability in a traditional classroom situation, there is often something they can do out there on a beach, in a forest or whatever it might be that they can suddenly excel at. When they discover there is something they can excel at outside, it is remarkable how they discover they can excel at things inside as well.

One of the things the Field Studies Council at Stackpole told me was that part of the problem was the attitude of the teachers who go with these kids. The teachers arrive on a Sunday night with no mobile phone reception, wondering what they are doing down there, wishing they were back at home, arms folded, slightly inclined to think, “Good luck. I haven’t been able to do anything with these kids, so I don’t suppose you will either.” At the end of one week at one of these institutions, they are already booking their trip for next year because they have seen, in such a short space of time, an absolute transformation in the self-confidence and ability of children who, to some extent, they had written off as failures in the classroom. Suddenly, someone who was good at identifying stars, or who learned about seashells or something like that went back to school and their performance in English, maths or history improved as a consequence. That is why I said that a Minister from the Department for Education could just as easily be sat on the Front Bench for this debate, soaking up the benefits for that Department that this kind of activity offers.

We of course hear about obstacles that present themselves; I am afraid that some of them are genuine. There is always some health and safety excuse for not doing these things: we hear long lists of reasons why “we can’t”, or “we won’t”. That is not very helpful either. There has been some progress by the Government—probably not enough—to sweep away what are, in some cases, completely unreasonable and impractical health and safety considerations that get in the way of these projects.

That is as much as I want to say. There are a few activities out there in the countryside that other Members will touch on that have social, economic and ecological benefits that are free to the taxpayer. When it comes to the departmental response—whether it is this Department or others—I hope Ministers will look at outdoor activity and recreation not as a cost but as an investment in the future health and happiness of young people in particular.

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3.19 pm

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): September is the month of fruit, foraging and field sports. As someone who represents the most rural and sparsely populated constituency in the country, I welcome the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) and I briefly put forward everything from Kielder forest, Northumberland national park, Hadrian’s wall, the coast-to-coast cycleway, the Pennine way, the various other cycleways, the Haltwhistle walking festival and the wild heather moorlands. I could eulogise for ever—and that is just a small part of my constituency. I could mention the 50 angling groups that fish the Tyne, the red squirrels that have sanctuaries throughout Northumberland

and all the individuals who make such a difference. We have not mentioned the organisations that support the rural way of life, such as *Country Life*, *The Field*, or the Moorland Association, but they should be supported in the House.

I cannot stress enough the economic impact, eloquently set out by the hon. Member for Ogmore, that country life makes. In my constituency, we have the best cycling, fishing, shooting and hiking in the country, and three of those activities provide the rural economy with hundreds of jobs, while shooting brings thousands. It is impossible for people living in southern Northumberland or north Durham, or the Tynedale and Weardale valleys, to survive without the thousands of jobs that the relevant organisations bring.

I want briefly to focus on fishing. There are more than 50 angling clubs, and the Tyne is probably the most successful salmon fishing river in the country at present. It is a matter of concern that the Environment Agency has authorised north-east coastal net fishery licences. In the past year, 56,000 fish were taken off the coast of the Tyne, and that is having a massive effect on the angling industry and support for fishermen. I urge the Minister to take that point up with the appropriate Environment Minister. I am grateful to the Northern Farmers and Landowners Group for making me aware of the problems.

Shooting is a sport that brings in £2 billion to the British economy. Anyone in doubt about it should read the excellent research of Public and Corporate Economic Consultants, which put out a massive questionnaire in the past year that showed more than £2 billion a year going to the UK economy, with 74,000 full-time jobs. That should be supported.

I am a massive supporter of the work of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. For example, I very much support its campaign on lead shot. However, its chief executive was woefully wrong when he called for moorland regulation. I take issue with that and the rather surprising approach of Marks & Spencer, which decided not to stock grouse although it will happily stock farmed salmon, battery chickens and driven pheasants. That seems illogical and wrong. In reality, the people who look after our moorlands—the owners, keepers and people who work there—are the custodians of the countryside.

I welcome the new chief executive of Natural England and hope that his new broom will bring a change of approach. It is embarrassing that a Government quango such as Natural England has so little comprehension of the countryside and the way moorland is supported by its custodians.

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The Sport and Recreation Alliance report that the hon. Member for Ogmore has referred to cites parts of Northumberland where one in five people are directly involved in outdoor sports. I disagree; the figure is more like one in every two or three. Without them, the rural economies of my area would wither and die. We all know that tourism is the sixth largest industry, and we welcome many people to south Northumberland to enjoy its pleasures. We need to make the case for what is an opportunity for the taxpayer, rather than a cost to the taxpayer, and we should support and encourage it.

3.23 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): It is a pleasure as always to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on securing this important debate. My interest in the outdoors and sport goes back to my childhood. I am part of the pre-console and pre-computer generation, who spent their entire time outside, playing in the fresh air. In fact, I had to be dragged back inside, most evenings, to do my homework or eat my tea.

I grew up in Hythe, near the Kent coast. On one side of the house, there was a canal that we constantly tried to cross using items from the garage. An area of hills called the Roughs was an adventure ground for us. It is also a military training site, so we spent most of our time picking up empty shells and wondering whether they were dangerous. We were close to the sea, and the entire estate where I lived was a huge playground. I learned to play football, cricket and American football. In fact, I was a happy, healthy tomboy.

The upside of being part of a pre-computer generation was that we were outside all the time. The downside was that many of the clubs and organisations that exist today to support youngsters did not exist when I was growing up. As many hon. Members know, I am the manager of a girls' football team. I am proud to have been involved with Meridian girls football club for the past eight years. That kind of network of grass-roots support was not there when I was growing up, and we should be grateful for the important investment in sporting facilities that we now have. It is a fantastic legacy of the national lottery started under John Major's Government and expanded under the Labour Government. It is important to protect such investment in sporting facilities.

The freedom of the outdoors lies not just in the fact that people can go out and explore their environment, but in the fact that it costs little to do so. I was interested in the comments of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley). She will know that I agree with much of what she said, not least because I serve on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which produced the report on women in sport. However, women are as likely as men to take part in outdoor recreation. Getting out into the environment, exploring villages, paths and hills, is an activity accessible to everyone, and it should be encouraged.

I am proud to be a Kent girl, and now represent an area of Kent quite far from the coast but that has a wonderful river running through it. It borders the Minister's constituency. We have an excellent pathway, which will be upgraded thanks to a recent South East local enterprise partnership decision. We will have a full cycle path from Aylesford to East Farleigh. That will be a brilliant opportunity for people to get out along the river and see

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the fantastic wildlife. We also have a project called Medway Valley of Visions, which has opened up the entire Kent area of outstanding natural beauty for people to walk or cycle in and experience the benefits of the outdoors.

We have an excellent Ramblers Association, with 115 members in my constituency, and they have invited me to go out on many occasions. Unfortunately, they go out on a Sunday when—guess what?—I am standing at the side of a football pitch with my young girls, so it is not always possible for me to accept. However, the North Downs way and Pilgrims way run through my constituency.

When I was in training for the expedition—one that has nearly killed me—that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) mentioned, in which I participated with the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), going up Cotopaxi, one of the world's highest volcanoes, I got into training by just going out of my door and hill walking. Hill walking is very different from mountaineering, and I intend never to do the latter again, despite what I am sure will be the best efforts of my colleagues. I will stick to football, rather than mountaineering.

There are nevertheless many opportunities out there, and we must protect and invest in them. That is why I wanted to speak today. I was touched by the key proposals sent to us for Government action on the outdoors. I do not think that they are necessarily politically controversial. As someone who grew up outside, the idea of increasing young people's opportunities to get outside seems to me a no-brainer. Being outdoors, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) said, enables people to concentrate in class and gives them educational opportunities.

The hon. Member for Ogmore set out the six principles well, and I want to talk about planning. In my constituency, we have a planning application to build 500 houses over the Capstone valley. The valley is an area of outstanding natural beauty; it is a green lull between the Medway towns and Maidstone. It would be a desperate shame if we start to build on that and interfere with our wonderful outdoor environment, which serves our ramblers and conservationists, people who are interested in the wildlife and those who simply want to go for a run around the perimeter. We need to look at planning guidance to ensure that we protect areas that actually bring in an income through the fact that people are getting out there—tourists and people spending in the local economy—because they are using what is in essence a free asset for society.

I am sure that the Minister is aware of such issues. It is important that she takes a co-ordinated approach across central and local government. If we do not do something to protect things, the £91 million that the NHS spends every 24 hours on lifestyle-related chronic conditions will merely increase. The health and economic benefits are obvious. Not everyone wants to do sport—I get that. I want to do sports; I am a sports fanatic, but outdoor recreation is something that is open to everyone and something that they should have access to now and in future generations.

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3.31 pm

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on securing the debate.

I am the Member of Parliament for High Peak, which, as I often say, is the most beautiful constituency in the country—that will be disputed, but I have not had an intervention yet—and the outdoors is what we do. I am a little older than my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), but I echo what she was saying. I grew up before computers and—

Tracey Crouch: TVs.

Andrew Bingham: Not quite before television. I might look that old, but I assure the Chamber that I am not. I was going to say that we were the “jumpers for goalposts” generation, when we were always outside, playing football in winter and cricket in the summer. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) that I have indeed made a daisy chain as a small boy, but I will not embarrass the young lady I gave it to by naming her. We used to do so much outside, whether collecting frogspawn or climbing trees and things like that. Consequently, we were healthier for it. That is why the outdoors is so important.

High Peak is a beautiful area. In many respects, we can be the playground of the nation. I am lucky; I live in Chapel-en-le-Frith; I open my front door and I see hills and green fields. Custodians of such fields were mentioned earlier, and they are incredibly important. Fields and outdoor areas do not simply happen; we have to thank the custodians and the farmers for doing what they do. It is a huge playground that people can use and that is completely free. That is such a benefit.

Among the outdoors pursuits that take place in High Peak was the Tour de France, which touched my constituency recently, creating a huge increase in cycling, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley). On the subject of my hon. Friend, he accompanied me down a pothole in my constituency recently. I proceeded to get stuck briefly, but having lost a bit of weight, I am sure that we could go down again and I will slither easily through that tight gap. Potholing and caving also bring huge numbers of people into High Peak. They come to High Peak; they spend their money; they benefit the economy; and more than that, they benefit themselves. Anyone who takes part in outdoor pursuits is the main beneficiary, because of the health that they bring.

Two weeks ago, I undertook to hike around the boundary of my constituency, which is approximately 65 miles, which I did over a few days. The highest point that we got to was about 1,700 feet above sea level; the highest point in my constituency is Kinder Scout at 2,088 feet, so we were not quite at that height. We crossed the Pennine way, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) walked last year or the year before. The scenery and the fresh air are so good for people, but they also bring them to my constituency. I go to areas such as Castleton and the Hope valley in the summer and everywhere there are people with maps around their necks, the big boots and

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what I call the speckly socks, all coming to the Peak district and High Peak to get exercise. That is the important thing.

We hear so much on the health agenda about obesity, particularly among young people. I understand the attractions of Facebook and various computer games, but we need to encourage people to get out and about. We live in a beautiful country, so let us use it and get the benefit. As I said, when doing so, we are also benefiting our local economies. We all talk about deprivation in the inner cities and so on, but I prefer to talk about rural deprivation. As a result of the remoteness, we have to suffer certain things, such as not getting the same number of buses and so on, but we have that fantastic facility on our doorsteps. We should use it to get people back to exercising. The hon. Member for Ogmores mentioned exercise through prescription by doctors and, when I served on the local authority, we used to advocate that where we could. The Government should look at the health benefits.

As has already been said, the debate could have been held under the heading of health, education or the Treasury, but we are having it under sport. There are so many benefits. I am conscious that we are running out of time, so I will not go on too long, but the benefits are immeasurable and the people who benefit the most are those who take part. As Members of Parliament representing seats that all have the benefits of outdoor pursuits, we can encourage people to take part in them.

As I said, my walk last week took me four or five days and touched most parts of my constituency. The interesting thing was the difference in the scenery and the terrain, whether the steep hills coming up over the Snake pass and down into Glossop or the valley of the Goyt. Everywhere we looked was a photograph in the making. As others have said, the air was clear and the weather was reasonably good, which was quite helpful, because we can get a little rain in High Peak. The benefits were immeasurable, and we should try to share them with as many people as possible. The Government should do what they can to encourage people to use what I described before as the playground that we live in. It is there; it is healthy; it is beneficial; and it is free. No one can be excluded from using it; we need only encourage them to do so.

3.36 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I reiterate my congratulations to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) on his excellent speech, which framed the debate. I want to add my thoughts. Part of what we need to do and what we are trying to achieve is to bring everything together. There are such wonderful initiatives going on and I, too, have wonderful areas in my beautiful constituency. The Leeds country way, the Meanwood valley trail and the Ebor way all run through my constituency. I have bouldering on the Chevin and walking in Golden Acre park or Woodhouse ridge in the south.

We must not forget about urban walking, and I tabled an early-day motion in support of Living Streets national walking month, including the walk to school week and the walk to work week—important initiatives. I also support the Britain on Foot initiative, which I am sure has had a huge impact since its launch, with all the organisations behind it.

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I have had an interest in the outdoors for a long time, through my father and mother taking me out for walks. I joined the Long Distance Walkers Association when I was 15, although it took me all the way until 2009 before I finally did its 100-mile walk, which is quite a challenge to do in one go. That organisation, for example, has 1,400 trails and paths—78,000 miles—all downloadable as a database from its website. Other organisations are the same.

I am extremely grateful to the people who supported the Cotopaxi expedition, which has been mentioned, for the Royal British Legion's Battle Back centre. That was a remarkable thing to be part of, with my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). We learned an awful lot through our experience in the outdoors with servicemen and former servicemen who were injured and have become ill through their service to our country. We saw how they were rehabilitated through the Battle Back centre and its incredible work with adventurous training and outdoor activities.

I pay tribute in particular to the Carnegie Great Outdoors faculty of Leeds Metropolitan university, or Leeds Beckett university as it is becoming, in my constituency. Dave Bunting, who led the Army's west ridge of Everest expedition, was a wonderful leader, but the three former and serving soldiers, Lyndon, Paul and Luke, really made the team. That is what it was about; that is the power of the outdoors.

In my constituency, the Otley sailing club does wonderful work with sailing for the disabled. I was delighted that Norman Stephens from the club got the Leeds sports awards volunteer of the year award this year for that amazing work. The constituency also has the Yeadon sailing club. That is an outdoor pursuit that I have not yet tried, although I am sure that I will. We also have cycling, with the incredible Tour de France and the local hero in Otley, Lizzie Armitstead, who has just won a gold medal at the Commonwealth games to add to her Olympic silver medal. She is an inspiration to local people, especially young women, and it is important to get more young women involved in sports. Triathlon is a wonderful sport. This is not all about walking: it is sometimes about running, swimming and cycling all together. Locally, we have the Brownlee brothers as inspiration. It is a matter of pulling all these great initiatives together. I hope that we hear from the Minister that we will have a national strategy. Let us all urge all parties to have something about the outdoors in their manifestos.

3.40 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, for what I think is the first time. I congratulate all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Ogmere (Huw Irranca-Davies) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and the hon. Members for Macclesfield (David Rutley), for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), for Hexham (Guy Opperman), for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) and for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland). They all raised similar issues, which I will try to deal with as I go through my notes.

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My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere made a passionate opening speech, entreating all of us to get out there and enjoy the countryside. He has a great deal of experience in sports and physical activity: he has been employed in the industry and is an enthusiastic participant and organiser. It is a tribute to his work that we have had this debate and that so many people have taken part.

My hon. Friend talked about the benefits that people can easily derive from outdoor activities. The "Reconomics" report points out that outdoor activities are often free and easily accessible, and that many of the barriers to taking part in physical activity are removed when enjoying the outdoors. He is absolutely right to highlight the benefits of investing in outdoor activities, and the report demonstrates that there is a payback.

Although such investment creates jobs, benefits businesses and is an extremely good way of bringing economic activity into rural areas where it can otherwise be difficult to generate—many Governments have struggled with that—that payback is not just economic; as my hon. Friend said, there are also benefits to the individual, including health benefits. Outdoor activity helps people be healthier and feel better in themselves, and an increasing amount of

evidence and research is demonstrating that investing in outdoor activity and encouraging people to become more active has a positive impact.

Many hon. Members spoke about the cost to the economy of inactivity. People refer to obesity, but that is not the only issue. It is possible for people who are overweight to be in better physical condition than someone who does not seem from their weight to be suffering from the consequences of inactivity. It is important to encourage people to be aware of that and to be more active.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire said that we should encourage young people to get involved in one hour of physical activity a week, and I would like to achieve that goal, starting with my own children—believe me, I consider myself a complete failure in that regard. My wife and I have run the London marathon and recognise the importance of staying active, but we are not successful in getting our children to be active, so are not great examples.

I am aware that nagging people does not work and so we need to be aware of other ways in which we can encourage people to be active. Inactivity is an issue, so we need to make sure that we focus on that first, from the very earliest age. I passionately believe that we need to equip young children, from the earliest age, to have confidence in their bodies, their core physical strength and their physical literacy, so that they can access not just sport but the sort of recreational activities that hon. Members have spoken about today.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I have a suggestion for my hon. Friend: I found locking the children out of the house and pointing them in the direction of the hills worked. On a serious point, will he also speak up for the importance of spreading room on the coastal paths that we have talked about? That is important for people interested in mountaineering and so forth. We need not just tracks and trails—the narrow two-metre paths—but wide spreading room, albeit with due attention to the needs of landowners, so that people can do other activities.

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Clive Efford: Absolutely—that is important. Many benefits come from investment in coastal pathways and the kinds of pathways that the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford talked about, which link up through her constituency. Many other hon. Members made similar points. The rural economy benefits from people being able to access the countryside more easily.

I have a couple more points, which I will move on to. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South is a doughty fighter for women's participation in sport, and made some important points about the lack of commercial investment going into women's sport. Rugby is pointing the way, with full-time contracts for the women's rugby sevens squad building up to the Rio Olympics.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to underline that we have to keep pushing: the current participation rates are not acceptable. I go back to the point I made about instilling confidence and consciousness about activity in young children at an early age. That is demonstrated by the fact that, sadly, as women get older and make choices for themselves, it is often clear that sport has not been a good experience for them, and they lose interest in it. We have to challenge that.

Several hon. Members called for a cross-Government strategy, and I agree with them. I commend to everyone the Opposition consultation document, “More Sport For All”, which we published in July. Under the heading “Why sport matters”, we refer to the “Reconomics” figures and discuss the importance of rural tourism and walking, and the need to recognise those sectors as part of not just a sports strategy but an economic one. I welcome comments from hon. Members and the Minister on that document.

Our consultation document recognises that virtually all Government Departments have a role in promoting sport and physical recreational activity. The Department of Health has a role, for example; the Ministry of Justice could, in terms of trying to divert young people from antisocial behaviour and provide them with the opportunity to experience something they might not get many opportunities to experience otherwise.

Greg Mulholland: The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is clearly another of those Departments. I was lucky to join the Upper Wharfedale Fell Rescue Association during its new Wharfedale three peaks challenge. The mountain and cave rescue services have not been mentioned yet today, but we must ensure that they are part of the thinking, because without them we would not have the freedom we do on the hills.

Clive Efford: Reference was made during the debate to safety in the countryside; that is an important issue and one we should all remember.

New technology was referred to, but in a negative way, as something that discourages people from getting involved in sport. We need to look at it as a challenge and a way to provide people with information, to enable easier access for them, whether that be to sports facilities or other services. That technology is an important tool that we need to develop.

I have one last point to make. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmores for securing this debate. Some points have been made about sports facilities;

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they are not necessarily anything to do with countryside recreational activities, but I would also like to raise them. We need to ensure that the sports that are bigger money spinners put money back into facilities. I am thinking of football in particular—we need to make sure that the premier league lives up to its promises about putting money back into grass-roots sport. If such investment goes into facilities in our communities, all sports may benefit, not just football.

There was a story in the papers today about Queens Park Rangers perhaps having to pay a £40 million fine because it broke its financial fair play rules. If that is the case and that money must go to charity, I urge the authorities to put it back not into grass roots facilities in football, but into grass roots facilities in our communities so that people can become active in sport.

In conclusion, I am grateful for this important debate to discuss all aspects of outdoor recreation and activity, and I urge the Minister to respond to the six points on the agenda of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmores.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mrs Helen Grant): It is a great pleasure, Mrs Main, to serve under your chairmanship. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) for securing this debate and for his contribution, and I thank other hon. Members for theirs. I have always been very lucky when it comes to the outdoors. As a child growing up on the edge of the Lake District, I was spoilt for choice with walking, kayaking, climbing and the views from Blencathra to which my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) referred. It is a stunning part of the country. I then went on to become an MP and found myself in the heart of the garden of England in the beautiful Kent countryside. I drew the long straws there.

As the Minister for Sport and Tourism, I want to ensure that everyone has the chances I had to participate in a diverse and interesting range of sports and activities. Many Departments and many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), work closely together to ensure that we are all playing our part in supporting this important sector.

There is little time available and a lot to say, but I will do my best to cover the points raised. Today, many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Ogmore and my hon. Friends the Members for Macclesfield and for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), called on the Government to create a strategy for outdoor recreation. I am happy to look at that and at how we can bring together in a strategy all the good work already being done throughout the Government in different Departments.

Many hon. Members acknowledged that good work is being done, but asked for more to be done and for the Government to keep their foot on the pedal in relation to recreation and outdoor activity. That is certainly happening. VisitEngland has made a substantial investment in campaigns such as the Coastal Escapes campaign, the English Countryside campaign, the Rural Escapes campaign and the Active Outdoors campaign. Sport England has recently put £3 million into the British Mountaineering Council and there is ongoing cross-departmental ministerial involvement in campaigns in

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the health context such as the “Moving More, Living More” campaign, which confirms genuine support, interest and commitment in dealing with inactivity and benefiting from the various pluses of health, fun, sport and the resulting economic benefits.

The hon. Member for Ogmore, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield and many other hon. Members spoke about the six key manifesto points. I have looked at them and they are all very interesting. We are already providing a lot of support for the outdoor recreation sector, but we will give all the six points due and proper consideration. Clearly, the matter is also for numerous other Departments, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport and the Department of Health.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) referred to the Active People survey and various concerns involving the calculation of the participation figures. I will be happy to talk to Sport England and the Department of Health about how to measure some of the recreational activities in the Active People survey.

The hon. Member for Ogmore, the shadow Minister and others referred to the “Reconomics” report and I agree that it is very good and detailed. In a good way, it pulls together existing research. Sport England and VisitEngland will certainly build on the various reports.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) raised the important issues of women in sport, participation by women and girls, lack of commercial sponsorship and investment in those important sectors.

Barbara Keeley: In the limited time, I did not mention that there are some informal initiatives that could do with better support. In Blackburn, the Couch to 5K initiative is getting many people running. The wonderful person who runs the Twitter account, #fattymustrun, is on a mission to get 1 million larger people running. Such initiatives should receive more support.

Mrs Grant: The hon. Lady has made some good points. The issue of women and girls in sport is an absolute priority for me. It has always been a priority, even before I came to this place, and it will remain one, mainly because of what it did for me when I was growing up. It provides not just health and fitness, but self-confidence, self-esteem and the important life lessons of leadership, teamwork, discipline and respect. We all know that and I am determined to get as many young people as possible, not just women and girls, doing sport.

There is good news because 600,000 more women are doing sport than when we bid for the Olympics in 2005. However, there is no room for complacency and I accept that there is still an irritating gender gap of about 1.9 million between the number of women and the number of men doing sport. I want that to diminish. There are some excellent projects at the moment, including Sportivate, Satellite Community, sports clubs and the school games in which more than 60% of schools are participating. Interestingly, at county sports festival level, more girls than boys are competing. The school sports premium provides the opportunity to ignite an interest in sport among our children at an early age.

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In half an hour, I will meet the Woman in Sport Advisory Board. It is working hard on the lack of media coverage and commercial investment. The board includes people such as Judy Murray, Karren Brady, Helena Morrissey, Clare Connor and others who are working hard to deal with the lack of commercial involvement and media coverage, although I believe there have been improvements in what Sky and the BBC are doing. That is partly due to great leadership by Barbara Slater and people such as Clare Balding.

I know very well the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), having spent a considerable time there when I was little. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) on his major marathon walk during the recess when he raised a phenomenal amount of money for charity. Both my hon. Friends referred to the economic benefits of recreational activity. I agree that the great outdoors is hugely important for tourism and the country’s economic well-being. Interestingly, according to VisitEngland, overnight trips in Great Britain last year, including walking, hiking and rambling, resulted in a spend of £2.6 billion.

This has been an important debate and for me a very enjoyable one to respond to. Some excellent points have been made and I assure hon. Members that I take the issues seriously. Outdoor sport and recreation are key not only to our personal well-being but to the nation as a whole. I want to maintain the good progress that has been made by encouraging even more participation in outdoor sport and recreation with all the benefits that brings: a fitter, healthier and economically stronger nation.