

Tanni, Baroness Grey – KEYNOTE address

DEBBIE KAYE, CHAIR CLOA Welcome back to the CLOA Annual Conference Baroness Grey Thompson. Tanni is currently President of the Local Government Association, Chair of Sport Wales, and also on the board of ukactive, and she's on a number of charitable and business boards. Tanni you last kindly spoke at our event at the British Library in 2017 and you had an amazing impact and a huge rapport with our membership. We are really looking forward to hearing you speak again, and very grateful for you finding time to join us. Thank you very much, over to you.

BARONESS GREY THOMPSON: Brilliant thank you very much. Good morning everyone. My plan was I was going to talk for about 20 minutes. About my views on sport, and physical activity and where we are, and what we need to do. Then, open it up to questions, and I'm really happy to answer anything that you have. So, as Debbie said, I am Chair ukactive, and I finish at the end of next month. They have been an amazing organisation to be part of, and very privileged in some of the stuff I do now that I get to work with people I like who are passionate about what they do. If I look back to where we started, it's been about building a coalition of people who care, and the sector the wider physical activity and health sector do care about people being active. It's not just a business, it is about how we change the view of physical activity in our nation.

Now, we quite often here that we are a nation of sport lovers, and I contend we are a nation of people who like watching sport. We don't always like doing it. There are moments after Wimbledon or The Olympics and Paralympics and there's a rush, and then that slips away. One of the challenges we have got going forward is about how we embed it into everyone's life, because it doesn't matter who you are, how old you are, being physically active is really, really important.

I have just finished my first term as President of the LGA, we have got a vote coming up next week at Harrogate to see if I will do my second term. Coming from a political background where we are not voted in, being part of a vote is terrifying I have to say. But the reason I wanted to be or accepted being President of the LGA, was because actually, as a Vice President in the Lords we got really good briefing from them. Then I sat down and had a chat with the team and said OK what areas do you work in that I care about, it's all of it. And there's some areas where I have less day to day involvement than others, but, housing, education, it all matters, and it's the intersectionality if I had a pound for every time I heard we need joined up Government, I would be very rich! We do need joined up Government. None of these things happen in isolation, the reality is the legislation happens in isolation, but solutions to some of the things we need to be looking at don't. Because you know, if people aren't in vaguely decent housing and can't afford to put food on the table then they can't afford to be physically active. I was talking to someone recently, a mum who was saying that summer camp is available for her children, but they came home from the summer camps after being active, hungry and they couldn't afford to feed them. If things like that don't wake up politicians to some of the challenges that we are facing and going to be facing, I'm not sure what will.

The inactivity crisis that we have is not new, it happens, and was happening before the pandemic, but the pandemic has added additional layers of complexity on to

everyone's life. I'm really conscious in my role as Chair of ukactive we have public and private members. The public sector is under huge pressure at the moment and local authorities, and local authorities have been under pressure for a long time, in terms of the good old days when we had Sports Development Officers, and you know, they haven't been around in a lot of places for a long time. But the pressure on how you balance Health & Social Care, and physical activity is a really, it's a tough decision to have to make. Because, do you pay for stuff now or later?

And what we have seen in the last couple of months with the fuel crisis is things like swimming pools, under massive pressure, and hundreds of swimming pools have closed. We have known that swimming pools are expensive. But we also know that swimming pools are really important not just teaching kids to swim, you know, one person a day drowns in the UK. You know, it's not just the safety. But, it's about fitness, and for lots of the women, and swimming is a really important part of staying active. I think if my local pool, my husband is a triathlon coach, and if I think of the pool where he coaches his athletes, the vast majority of the people who go at 7.30 in the morning, which I think is a dreadful time to think about swimming, it's all older women, it's not just the process of them being physically active, it's about the social network. It's the unseen Social Care, and if somebody doesn't turn up one morning, and they are expected, someone will make a phone call, and check them out and go to the house, and will see if everything is OK. So the impact on closures is going to be really difficult, and really challenging. I don't underestimate the pressure on people making really, really difficult decisions about what we do. But the reality is that if we don't do something, we are going to end up with a nation not able to compete. I don't mean elite sport; elite sport will always look after itself because it will find talented young people from the people who come into the system and that's fine.

As a nation, in terms of our global workforce, it is going to be a challenge if we don't think differently about it. The impact on the NHS is going to be huge, and if we don't think about doing something in a different way, during the pandemic lots of people standing on the doorsteps applauding the NHS, and you for me, I would be dead without the NHS, absolutely I would not be here. I have a huge amount to be thankful of. But reform in the NHS again, is not going to solve all the problems that it has. Unless we think differently about how we keep people out of the NHS. Now Sir Simon Stevens when he was in charge of NHS England spoke at ukactive conference, and he stood up and said physical activity is the miracle cure, it can fight type two diabetes and 66% of cancer rehab take place in the activity sector, and a huge amount in Local Authority spaces. We know that people who go into major surgery fitter and healthier come out more able to deal with the surgery that they have. We know figures that are just emerging about the number of cancellations of operations right now because of people not being fit enough is going to have many tens of millions of pounds impact on the NHS. I want the NHS to stay being free at the point of delivery. Unless we do something about that, unless we all do something and take personal responsibility as well, then that might have to change, to be able to you know, to keep going, in the way that we would like it to. So, everyone feels very emotional about this, we call it the NHS, you know, which is quite a complicated system underneath it. But people feel passionate about it. Now more than ever is the time to talk about what we do to have a physically active nation.

Now, for me I have got my own personal experience and one of the reasons I feel passionate is my own experience I was born with spina bifida and became a wheelchair user when I was very young, and I'm missing bones at the back of my vertebrae so my spinal cord isn't protected. As I grew my spine collapsed and it was my vertebrae that paralysed me. There was lots of people around, my parents who told them all the things I would never do with my life as a wheelchair user, actually my Dad looked at what I could and couldn't do and I wasn't very strong. He realised I wouldn't be able to push my own chair unless I became more physically active. He basically, it wasn't about Paralympic things, people don't know about it, but it was about being fit and active. He encouraged me to play sport and then that led me into sport. I had 25 years competing at elite level. Then, actually when I left elite sport, being physically active again was really important.

You know, we are seeing incidences of people hitting frailty in their 40s and people shouldn't be hitting frailty until their late 80s and the reality of what that means of hitting frailty at a younger age is they will have a really uncomfortable life for a very long time. You know, ultimately, they will die slowly, and not in a positive way. It sounds really harsh when I say it, but people getting to frailty in their 80s and having a different end of life, it sounds awful but, we have to be really conscious of a nation of people not being active. I talked about elite sport and it's great and lovely, and you know, many of the things that I got to do in my life I'm very privileged to be able to do. But one of the things I hear a lot is that 2012 changed the world for disabled people. It was an amazing Games if you look at the legacy at Olympic Park, it's stunning! As a bid and Games delivery body they were talking about legacy in a way no other city had ever done. It's had a massive impact on cities bidding and countries bidding for the Games going forward. I really struggle when people tell me it changed the world for disabled people, I don't think you can expect a couple of weeks of two different games to do that, it opened up people's minds, and changed lives of Paralympians and I can still only get on a third of London's tube stations, if you look at the Elizabeth line which is new, and glossy, and lovely, I can only get on unaided in the central portion in the outer sections I need to get a ramp and someone to help me on and off. So, as talking about Games, yes, they do a lot of things and bring money in, and they shift and it allows us to have the conversation. But it doesn't change the challenges we see, amongst disabled people in terms of education, housing, transport, all those different things. If I widen it out to a bigger conversation on transport, trains under the Disability Discrimination Act were meant to be step free by January 21st 2020, that hasn't happened and [Leonard Cheshire](#) has put the figure at 2070 and the Government has said it will be 100 years before trains are step free. So in my lifetime I will not be able to get on a train unaided without begging someone for help in the vast majority of the UK. That's why as much as I look back on 2012 there are loads of things to celebrate from it, we have to be realistic about the things it hasn't done. And, you know, it would be remiss of me to you know, when I talk about elite sport to not talk about the [Whyte Review](#) into gymnastics that came out last week, and it's difficult, and it's really hard reading and it's really unpleasant and shocking. But if you work in sport, this is not unknown things, it really isn't. While we talk about what we do differently for physical activity, we have to take time to think about what we do differently for elite sport, there's loads of really good stuff, and I'm a member of a group called [Laureus](#) where Nelson Mandela was the ambassador, and said sport has the power to change the world he is right. But without us taking a collective responsibility of how we do things

differently it won't change. Physical activity leading into sport is an important part of the pathway. Now is the moment, I quote Levi, "if not now, when?". When are we going to have the very difficult conversations about what we want from elite sport, and how many medals are enough, and what do we want from our nation to be physically active?

And, you know I mentioned about the impact of the pandemic, that has just exacerbated many of the inequalities that we see. So, for me, first pandemic, I have to say, sorry first lockdown, I normally spend a huge amount of my time traveling and I'm away from home, I spent more time from home in 2020 than I had in the previous 20 years put together, and I spent time with my family. Some of it was personally was really lovely. But, conscious that actually for the vast majority of people what the pandemic brought them. So for me, I got to do more physical activity than I would normally do in a working week. What actually I didn't realise until late on into 2020 what I was missing was just the daily pushing round Parliament, and Parliament is a really big building and I can push four or five miles a day around the building between meetings that is what had dropped out of my daily routine. I found at the end of 2020 instead of maybe more fit and healthy, I was less fit and healthy. That was a really big wake up call for me as well because suddenly what I thought I was doing, I wasn't keeping a training diary when I was an athlete I convinced myself I was doing more but it was less.

Some of the wonderful things I saw during the pandemic, and other people being out and about and physically active, and the number of women I saw who were out riding their bikes was just brilliant. I have to say that you know, when I was on my bike I ended up taking spanners out with me, and the number of people who set their seat height correctly isn't great. I ended up being a mad old lady shouting at women on bikes saying "put your seat height up!" I was out with my husband and I made him wear his GB triathlon kit, he is a triathlon coach, and knows what he is talking about. I have to say, people, there was one, two young women when I first shouted at them looked at me and I was like just I won't come near you, and she put her seat up there and then and said this is so much better. Yes tell all your friends! I shouted that Chris Hoy has a really good video on it. It was funny, and lovely seeing women on bikes and I want them to have a good experience of it. You want them to come back, and ride afterwards, and enjoy it.

But the reality is through people's experience through school or personal experience or what they can afford to do and the intersectionality of that is a lot of people don't always have a great experience of physical activity. Now I was a sporty kid at school and I would have done anything, and my sister went to a different high school, and didn't have a great experience of physical activity, me as the next elite athlete, I know how to be physically active. People know, but they don't know, what to do to be physically active. And you know, some of the tough things I have talked about, if we look back to 2020, and then the research that ukactive had before that was that in the six weeks summer holiday children lose up to 74% of their fitness, and the idea they are all running around in the summer holidays is nonsense, not sure we ever did that. In 2020 children were out of school for 29 weeks. The ongoing impact on those children's level of physical activity will be felt for years to come. And the pandemic will be felt for years to come. So this is a big part of my motivation to do something differently, and because I don't want a generation of children dying before

their parents because of their inability to be physically active. So, the one thing I learnt during the pandemic is I know more about ventilation in gyms than I ever thought I would have to know in terms of having robust discussions with Government about opening up spaces because space and place are really important, they are not the solution for everybody but for a lot of people they make a difference.

So, what are we going to do to do things differently? A lot is not new, it really is not new. There's some really good work in Wales on physical literacy, and others worked on it before me and I worked on it a little bit. Sport Wales, not just saying that because I'm about to become Chair, there's some really good videos on the [Sport Wales website](#) about physical literacy about explaining what it is, and what it means. It's basically teaching good skills, because we don't teach trigonometry to children without teaching them the maths, but we expect them to play sport without learning the skills. It's running, jumping, throwing. It's about what you can do as a parent with your child to encourage them to be active. There's simple things you can do. If you start rolling a ball to a child when they learn to sit up, it joins up lots of complicated things in the brain and helps with reading and writing. But it's about knowing those things you can do. I think we have to take a different approach to physical literacy. I think that has to be embedded in schools, the other thing that again, none of this is new Teacher Training. There's several reasons why the independent schools sector does well in terms of Britain's medals. Some of it is about money, and the talent pathway is not cheap for parents, and some of it is about facilities, not every independent school has brilliant facilities. What independent schools do have is trained PE teachers at prep school level. There's loads of people arguing for this and loads of organisations working in the space to change it. But, teaching good skills in Primary School is really important. Head teachers that get physical activity are fab, if you have had a bad experience then you might not get the importance of it. The sporty teacher delivering PE, that might be the teacher who does Zumba outside, and there's amazing work going on out there, but it's not universal. So, I think there's more that we have to do, we need to open up the school gates. In England, 40% of the sports facilities are behind school gates, and a lot of places they are locked in the evenings and summer holidays. There's a cost to opening them up but nowhere near as much as people assume it is. So we have got to do that and be creative about school, and local partnerships. Again, loads and loads of work going on which is brilliant. It's not universal. Then, we have got to have a really open conversation about who is going to pay for physical activity. There will be people who can afford private membership, and that's lovely, and the market is opening up at all different levels. That will bring people in, but we need to have a conversation about tough things like that, and about who pays it, and who doesn't pay it. We have got to have a conversation about the NHS, and it's not a blank piece of paper, and already loads of people who want and are able to contribute to those solutions and we need to find the space to do it, and unfortunately physical activity never gets high enough up the agenda to be able to have a conversation about it. I know in all the work you are doing, you are probably talking about it all the time. It's how we get it on to the political general agenda in Parliament. Myself and ukactive, and LGA are doing work with MPs to get them to understand the impact of the fuel crisis, and we need to have our eyes opened in terms of this. But, it's going to take a lot of work in the next period of time to bring about real change. The final thing to say is that you know, I know the fact that you are on this call means you are interested, and you care about it which is brilliant.

What are we all going to do to bring about change, and there's something that every single one of us can do to make a difference. It's not just being motivated in the moment, and from what is going on today but it's about thinking what we all do to go away and do something differently. I will stop talking there! Apologies for the captioning if I have talked really, really quickly which I know that I do! Sorry for that! But, I'm really happy to answer any questions that you may have, or if anyone wants to follow up afterwards, you can find me on the House of Lords email system and I'm really happy to follow up with you at another time. Thank you very much for listening!

Debbie Kaye: Tanni thank you so much. As always, really thought provoking, and also inspiring, and people on the call are in positions of responsibility within Local Government, and you know, to hear you really clearly articulate some of the issues from a variety of perspectives, really clearly and succinctly, really helps us I think focus on what is important. I just wanted to ask you if you had one thing you could say to us as leaders within Local Government, if you had one ask of us, to take back from today, what might that be?

BARONESS GREY THOMPSON: A caveat with we all know how hard you are working, and really, really difficult, choices and challenges, choice is not the right word and you wouldn't choose to make some of the decisions that are going to have to be made but really difficult things coming up, I think for me, it's keep talking about the importance of physical activity. You know, in the sector we talk about sport when we mean physical activity, and literacy, it's the whole thing. Keep using physical activity I think is really important. As soon as you say sport, you think about competitive sport, and you know, organised sport. Those are important, but, unorganised sport is important. Just keep being passionate about it and keep going. I think that we have got a moment in time where we can have some of these conversations. I would be really interested in listening, and what people think that we need to do in Parliament or what MPs need to do, and I finish at ukactive fairly soon, I'm not going anywhere we have an amazing new chair who comes with a health background Mike Farrar just brilliant. And, he is going to be able to unlock doors that I couldn't. And, it's knowing what we need to do because I can pull different levers to people in the meeting. ukactive can pull different levers to other organisations. What is really important as a member of the House of Lords is knowing what is going on out there day to day, and the stuff you are dealing with is hard, and it's really helpful to understand some of those things so that we can then use it, and even confidentially, and we can use the challenge that you are facing to kind of feed the arguments and discussions that we are having.

Debbie Kaye: Thank you. We will take that away! And, really focus on that and not let our passion to be diminished by the day to day difficulties that local authorities are dealing with, and it is one thing after the other at the moment. So, we will take that away and continue to try and be inspired. I have got a question from Ishbel who works for Wandsworth Council. Do you have thoughts on the cost of living, and what we could do to support ongoing participation?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: It's going to have a huge impact. So you know, young people, I will take it in different sections and start with people, and those who have got families and can afford to ride this out will be able to participate in afterschool

clubs, you know we have known for a long time that the talent pathway costs £10,000 a year, and this has come through the drive for medals and it's pushed the cost down and you have to do more competitions and better equipment. It was probably pre-pandemic I went to a triathlon event, and it was like I was going to say kids' race, and teenagers, and some of the bikes that the kids had, I mean it was definitely like, the bikes that the parents wish they had when they were that age, and you saw kids on eight grand bikes. So you know, does that make you go quicker not particularly, it looks nice! But, so you know the families that can afford to ride this out will ride it out. But, if we look at giving opportunities to probably a significant number of young people, you know, if swimming pools close, they may not have the option of going further. So what would be something where you walk around the corner to go, might now be a bus ride away and you might not be able to afford the bus fare to get there. So, you know, it's going to have a really big impact on, we know a lot of Local Authority provision is in areas of higher deprivation, and where people don't necessarily have the options to do other things, to maybe join a different club or to you know, go to somewhere and drive, and there's lots and lots of impacts this is going to have. We are talking about Levelling Up, and you know, there's a lot of political language around this, and to the person who is struggling to pay the electricity bill, who is struggling to put food on the table, who is struggling to buy uniform for their kids for school, what does Levelling Up mean to them? You know, it's not in their sphere of anything that is important to them right now. I hope it's more than a concept and more than the latest buzz words, and we do absolutely as a nation have to you know, help people and support people. But you know the cost of Health & Social Care on local authorities is not going to make any of these decisions any easier. You know, in my role as LGA President I have met lots of leaders, and they have been really open in a way I think I did expect, but they had been really, really open in talking about looked after children, and you know, some of the complex cases, and you know the Health and Social Care and all these things which really helps me in terms of informing my knowledge. But, you know, it's going to have a massive impact, and it's going to go for years and years. If we start losing facilities then there will be a whole bunch of people who don't have any other options. What can we do to support it? Keeping places open is part of it, absolutely. It's about I think how we educate people to know what to do so, you know, if you give me a couple of hours, I can write a year's outline, and training programme for someone who wants to train, I can sit and talk with someone about how to be active and what to do. A lot of people don't know, so they know they are meant to be active, and they don't know what to do to be active. Now, for example, my sister, you know, I loved my sister to bits and we are incredibly close, but she doesn't listen to anything I say about physical activity. Her GP said do some walking, well like she doesn't like walking because it's hard and she was born with dislocated hips. So you know, it's about finding that connection. I think there's really interesting things in social prescribing that I do work in, and in terms of how we make those connections to individuals. Because, telling people to be active doesn't make it happen! There's a couple of years ago I went to an amazing place [Graves](#) in Sheffield where you have the GP surgery in the leisure provision, it's about being effective with money. When they say in the surgery you need to be active, as you leave, you are in that moment and you say yes I need to be active, and you become less connected to it. In Graves, they walk you across the corridor, and sit you down and give you options and you might even join a class. It's those things. We have to be really creative with the money that we have, and think about doing things in a different way, so co-

location is going to have to be part of the way forward. There's loads over the country. You know, there's lots of things that we can do, and being creative with what we have, and build a network of people to talk to help with where that creativity is yes. It's important.

Debbie Kaye: Thank you Tanni. We have got a question now which I think you are really well positioned to answer, and partly because of your oversight of the whole topic of physical activity from a number of different perspectives. This is from Nigel Lynn are we doing enough for children with disabilities to be active in their community?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Probably not. However, I would love to tell you there's really easy answers to any of this, but there's not, if there are, we will have fixed it. There's sometimes the presumption about stuff with 2012 that solved everything. You know, for a lot of families with disabled children, they are dealing with lots of issues and it might be around education, and care, and it might be medical issues, and parents are expected to be experts in all those things in the system, so it's kind of fairly natural while physical activity may not be the top of their priority, in terms of what they are trying to, where they are trying to get help and support for their child. Also, disability is not homogenous, so what one child may need might be different from another, you know, so I do think generally sports clubs can do more, in terms of being welcoming, and being open. Over the years, you know, various one club I tried to join, and they said we don't you have people like you in our club. What Paralympians? Right now, you don't have anyone who looks like me in your club, OK that was an interesting conversation. I did join! They weren't doing it to be horrible. They just, I think they were having that panic about what to do with me. So, you know, then the cost of competing, if you have got a child who wants to do sport, you have got to travel further. There's a cost to that. Then, there's also an assumption that Every Disabled Child is going to be a Paralympian. One thing we see a lot of now is that you know, parents, oh I was dealing with a case where a child with really complex needs, where somebody in the education system said don't worry about education, your child be with a Paralympian. They didn't have the impairment, and they couldn't move. So it's like, well, they can't be Paralympian! So, sometimes that's being used as a bit of a thing to ignore... so we can do more. Clubs can do more. You know, disabled children shouldn't be sent to the Library, or you know, there can be options where they do sport and physical activity. As a child, and even for me who was very sporty, it was very hard when I was 13 to play tennis with my non-disabled friends, and even the ones who were really poor at tennis could move quicker than me, and I didn't have a tennis chair, and couldn't move around the court. Inclusion is not the answer. So I went to something where they said it's great, we have got child in electric wheelchair, and he is included in football. OK. How. He went on to the muddy field, and where the ball went out, wherever the child was sitting in the chair, he pushed the ball back in off his tray. It was like that's not inclusion, that's just you know, the poor kid was having a miserable time. Again, it's having a discussion about what equality, diversity, inclusion means in reality. That's not inclusion, that was tokenism, they were trying to do the right thing. So I didn't go in all guns blazing and we had a chat about what they could do differently, and it's about knowledge, experience, education. We need disabled children and adults to be fitter and healthier. If they are not, they cost the NHS a lot of money as well and it's not about the pathway, it's OK to be disabled and bad at sport. That's

where I am now. I have started playing basketball, and I'm really bad, I can't throw, catch or shoot, I'm a member of a team. They are all 14 year olds and one of the lads came up to me and said have you ever played sport. Not that you would notice. Bless him, he is sweet. We have to think about disabled people because, we need them to be fit and healthy.

Debbie Kaye: The other side of the spectrum, and we have a question from Ian Jones from Carmarthenshire in Wales, he says what role do you see Digital Technology playing in promoting physical activity, and kids on screens is a cause for much inactivity?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Yes the changes I have seen in digital over the years has been amazing, and I have had a heart rate monitor for as long as you can remember. Now all the different wearables can do loads of things. There's a cost to them, and whether you can get internet access and two million older people, and two million disabled people don't have internet access let alone what we will see going forward. And digital plays an important role. And in terms of tips and devices, the wearable I have got measures pushes for a wheelchair user. It links to how many calories I burn and it's really accurate, which is you don't burn many calories pushing a wheelchair around and there's a cost to that. I think digital can play a really important part in engaging.

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