

April 2004

Older people ignored in government plans to increase physical activity

The publication of the Government's Strategy

Unit report, Game Plan, in December 2002, has led to a government target to significantly increase participation in physical activity. Sport and physical activity are quickly moving to the top of the political agenda. The media is taking a keen interest and the Health Select Committee is conducting a review into the alarming rise in levels of obesity. With the London Olympic Bid firmly on the table, sport and physical activity is becoming a hot topic around the Houses of Parliament.

As people get older, there is a significant decline in participation in physical activity and sport, despite the obvious health and social benefits. In his recent speech at the Help the Aged annual lecture, Professor Colin Blakemore, the Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council, highlighted the significant value of physical activity for mental health and well-being, as well as physical health. However, national sport and recreation policy funding has largely, if not almost completely, ignored the needs of the older population, despite the breadth of interest in the issue and action on the part of many individual organisations.

The Government's target is for 70 per cent (currently 30 per cent) of the population to be reasonably active by 2020. However, this has been described by the recent public health Wanless Report (February 2004) as 'highly aspirational'. The report goes on to say: 'In spite of numerous policy initiatives being directed towards public health, it [Government] has not succeeded in rebalancing health policy away from the short-term imperatives of health care.'

In light of all of these issues, Help the Aged and the British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity and Health at Loughborough University will be hosting a seminar in May for a number of key organisations to discuss how older

people's participation in physical activity can be increased and to consider the development of a coalition of organisations working together to campaign on this issue.

Help the Aged welcomes comments from older people interested in physical activity and sport. Please send your thoughts to David Sinclair in the Policy Department at Help the Aged.

David Sinclair