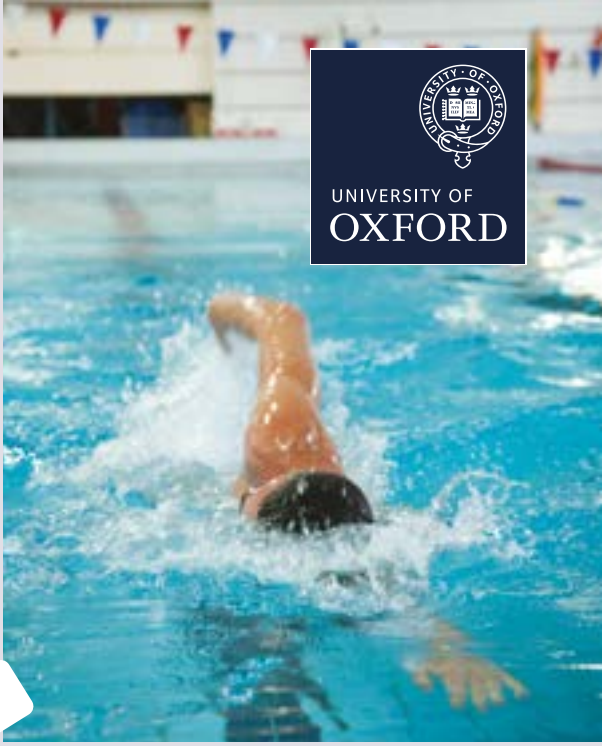




UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Changing the Game

THE FUTURE OF OXFORD SPORT









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Background

The purpose of this review is to reflect on the state of Oxford Sport, and provide actionable recommendations to University decision-makers on how best to strengthen sport and physical activity for the benefit of students, staff, and the wider community.

The review has been commissioned by the University's Sport Strategic Subcommittee (SSSC) and its Education Committee, with the support of the Vice-Chancellor. It builds upon the precedent of previous Reviews of Sport carried out in 1998, 2004, 2009, and 2016. While the 1998 report acknowledged significant under-investment and led to change, subsequent reports have had little impact, due largely to lacking wider institutional reporting lines or champions beyond the Sports Department.

Past reviews have provided periodic insights into the status of facilities, finance, development plans, college sport, and governance, for example. However, they have generally stopped short of outlining a clear vision and bold recommendations for Oxford Sport.

This review aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current sports provision across Oxford, in the context of the resources and capacities that are currently available to sport. It covers inter alia management; governance; coordination between the University and Colleges; the financial model on which sport is based; support and guidance available to sports clubs and societies; the strategic value of sport to the University; the balance of student, staff, and community provision; and the extent to which we are achieving our performance and participation targets.

It seeks to provide a clear roadmap for strengthening the management and governance of sport within the collegiate university, as well as ordering priorities and identifying the resources needed to deliver improvements. Methodologically, the review draws upon around 30 semi-structured interviews with people involved in Oxford Sport, including Sports Department staff, sports club presidents and captains, sports club coaches, sports club senior members, University staff and senior leadership, college domestic bursars and heads of house, and alumni.

The Terms of Reference (TORs) for the review are in Appendix 1, and a provisional review implementation plan, which summarises key recommendations, can be found in Appendix 2.



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Executive summary

Oxford Sport has a remarkable history and is a core part of the University's identity and international reputation.

Each year, approximately 16,500 students (62%) participate in sport or physical activity at the University of Oxford, making it a central part of student experience and a key contributor to wellbeing, community, and institutional identity. However, sports facilities and provision have been consistently underfunded, constraining both participation and performance. Prioritising an ambitious vision for Oxford Sport offers benefits to students, staff, and the wider community, as well as creating opportunities for research and innovation.

A significant reason for past under-investment in University sport is the decentralised nature of the collegiate University. Some colleges invest significantly in their own sports facilities, while others are unable to do so, or have no facilities to develop. University sport relies mainly upon central funding, controlled by academic divisions, for whom sport has necessarily been a low priority compared to research and education.

This report sets out the case for change and identifies opportunities to strengthen the structure, governance, and financial model of Oxford Sport. As well as highlighting key challenges, it takes a solutions-oriented approach, outlining a roadmap for delivering facilities and programmes that are befitting of a world-leading university with an illustrious sporting heritage.

Performance and Participation

Oxford Sport is performing strongly relative to its current level of investment. The University consistently ranks in the top-20 in British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS) for performance (it was 14th in 2024-25). This is despite the University having far lower per capita spending on sport than other comparable UK universities.

The University is punching above its weight relative to investment because of its ability to attract high-performing scholar-athletes from across the globe.

However, this position is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. The deteriorating condition of facilities and limited investment in performance support—including coaching, strength and conditioning, sports science, and rehabilitation—are constraining the ability of Blues athletes to compete at the highest level. As a result, the University's performance programme is losing ground relative to better-resourced competitors, with emerging implications for recruitment as applicants increasingly favour institutions with stronger sports provision.

While Oxford is consistently performing well in Varsity matches against Cambridge (winning a majority across all sports in recent years), the public status of historically high-profile varsity matches has diminished. There needs to be a clearer prioritisation of sports in which Oxford has the potential to excel or that better reflect student interests.

Participation in sport and physical activity at Oxford extends well beyond Blues performance athletes. College sport is a significant asset in enabling high levels of participation. Inter-collegiate leagues and Cuppers tournaments enable large numbers of students to enjoy sport at a recreational level.

> **16,500 students (62%) participate in sport or physical activity at the University of Oxford, making it a central part of student experience**

College and University sport play complementary recreational roles. While college sport facilities tend to focus on the most popular and traditional sports, the University has 83 different sport clubs, including many brought to Oxford by students from around the world. The University also offers facilities that individual colleges cannot deliver, such as a swimming pool, athletics track, and sports hall.

University facilities and programmes are open to students, staff, and the community, although this is not always widely known or communicated. Despite efforts to improve accessibility and inclusivity, such as the 'Active at Oxford' programme, which enables students and staff to sample activities offered by sports clubs, participation remains constrained by limited space, inadequate facilities, and restricted programme funding. Many staff have provided feedback that they would like greater access to sport and leisure facilities through the University.

There is growing recognition across the collegiate University of the link between physical activity and mental health and wellbeing, particularly in a high-pressure academic environment. Both colleges and the central University are struggling to meet demand, and pilot programmes such as 'Moving Minds' have been over-subscribed. Staff also report limited access to affordable and conveniently located facilities, with existing provision often overcrowded.

These constraints also affect the University's engagement with the local community. Access to sports facilities and open spaces plays a central role in supporting partnerships with local residents and schools, but availability remains limited by a combination of facilities and staff capacity, despite efforts to widen access.

BOX 1: PROGRAMME PRIORITIES

- **Strengthen performance pathways and student athlete recruitment**
- **Diversify and strategically prioritise our key performance sports**
- **Jointly develop a collegiate-University participation and wellbeing programme aimed at our students**
- **Build a sport and community engagement programme, with a focus on local schools and sports clubs**

Sport for All

To strengthen both performance and participation in sport, the University must reimagine and reprioritise sport. There needs to be recognition of the close relationship between sport and wider University strategic priorities such as student experience and wellbeing, staff pay and conditions, community engagement, research, and brand and recognition.

A renewed emphasis on inclusion must underpin sport and physical activity. Equality, diversity, and inclusion should be embedded in all aspects of sport, including through relevant training delivered to all student officers and senior members across clubs. Oxford Sport needs to integrate a gender-inclusive approach across facilities, programmes, and communications. It should also continue to strengthen disability inclusion. Diversification of Oxford's highest profile sports beyond those played at British public schools would further support inclusion.

More systematic data collection is needed to build a stronger evidence base linking participation in sport and physical activity to outcomes such as academic performance and mental health and wellbeing. Integrating sport-related metrics into University-wide surveys, supported by analysis from the Student Data Insight (SDI) team and collaboration with the Sports Federation, will enable more informed decision-making and help drive cultural change by clearly showing the positive impact of Oxford Sport on student outcomes.

> **There needs to be recognition of the close relationship between sport and wider University strategic priorities.**

Sport offers untapped opportunities for research and innovation. Although the University does not have a dedicated sports science department, there is a significant amount of sport-relevant research across the University, especially within the Medical Sciences Division, and through the work of the Podium Institute for Sports Medicine and Technology. There is further scope to facilitate internal sport research networks, and strengthen synergies between research and practice, including by embedding research collaboration into the design of sports facilities.



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BOX 2: CHANGING THE CULTURE

- **Build a robust evidence base linking sport, wellbeing, and student outcomes**
- **Embed inclusion, including relating to gender, within facilities, programmes, and communication**
- **Create synergies between Oxford Sport and opportunities for research and innovation**
- **Improve communications, storytelling, and branding relating to University sport**

Progress across these areas will depend on sustained reinvestment in sport and the transformation of facilities, supported by corresponding changes to governance and funding models.

Enabling Success

Delivering the changes outlined in this report will require a fundamental shift in how Oxford Sport is structured, funded, and governed.

The Sports Department has an annual budget of approximately £3.5m, of which two thirds is from the University and around one third from memberships and commercial sources. It generally operates at a notional deficit, although this is conventionally absorbed by the University.

The leadership team within the Sports Department has performed admirably within the context of long-term under-investment and imposed restrictions on staff capacity.

The Sports Department is caught in a chicken-and-egg dilemma: it needs to grow membership and commercial income but cannot do so without substantial improvements to its facilities, and it currently lacks the means to fund such capital investment. At the same time, nearly half of the funding it receives from the University is returned as space charges, which are not hypothecated for the maintenance or repair of sport facilities.

However, there is scope for greater medium and long-term planning. Cultural and organisational change are needed within the Sports Department in order to nurture an environment that rewards innovation, strategic thinking, and talent development.

The Sports Department currently sits within the part of the University that manages student services (the Academic Administration Division). This has advantages but Sport is not only a student service. There is a strong case for strengthening the connections between Sport and other relevant parts of the University such as Estates Services. There is also a need to clarify the overall distribution of governance responsibility for sport policy across different parts of the University, including through a reformed Sport Strategy Committee.

The Sports Department is caught in a chicken-and-egg dilemma: it needs to grow membership and commercial income but cannot do so without substantial improvements to its facilities.

Oxford's sports estate, centred on Iffley Road and supported by provision at Mansfield Road, University Parks, and Marston, has suffered from sustained under-investment. Parts of the estate are now at or beyond end-of-life, with some areas closed on safety grounds. The £7.2m Acer Nethercott Sports Hall, delivered in 2018, represents a significant addition, but the wider redevelopment programme has stalled due to a lack of funding. Nearly all other capital investment over the past decade has been for essential repairs and maintenance.

The recent funding model for facilities development, premised upon joint college, university, and philanthropic,



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is no longer viable. A revised approach is required, centred on a lead philanthropic contribution, supplemented by alumni fundraising and targeted University investment. A phased redevelopment, beginning with high-impact, revenue-generating facilities at Iffley Road and a more recreational city-centre gym, offers a realistic pathway to grow membership and commercial income and unlock further investment.

Alongside this, though, facilities need to be maintained, and predictable capital investment is needed to enable ongoing renewal. This requires the creation of a dedicated capital and maintenance fund for sport. It also requires a mechanism to ensure that if the Sports Department does make a surplus – once it has the facilities capable of driving membership growth – that it should be allowed to retain that surplus and reinvest it in capital and maintenance.

BOX 3: A NEW 'SOCIAL CONTRACT' FOR OXFORD SPORT SHOULD INCLUDE:

- **Increase University investment**
- **Establish a dedicated capital and maintenance fund**
- **Enable multi-year budgeting to support long-term planning**
- **Update the governance model for Oxford Sport**
- **Specify clear, measurable outcomes in participation, wellbeing, and engagement**
- **Create a high-performance organisational culture within the Sports Department**

Colleges contribute to overall sport provision through their own facilities and by subsidising their own students' participation in University sport. They support their students through club grants, BUCS participation, the Blues Performance Scheme, and subsidised membership fees, for example. However, understandably, they make practically no financial contribution to the development and maintenance of University sports facilities.

There is scope to develop stronger and deeper coordination between colleges and the University, including on facilities sharing, joint planning of the overall 'collegiate University sport estate', and identifying areas of mutual interest, particularly where sport intersects with student experience and wellbeing.

> **Many staff have provided feedback that they would like greater access to sport and leisure facilities through the University.**

The future of Oxford Sport will depend not only on investment and governance reform, but also on cultural change. Sport should be more visible and more fully integrated into the life of the University, recognised alongside research and education as a defining feature of the Oxford experience. This will require a more coherent approach to communication, brand identity, and storytelling, alongside initiatives that celebrate participation and strengthen the connection between sport, wellbeing, and academic life.

1 Sport as a strategic priority

Oxford's mission and vision for sport is "to provide Oxford University and the community with the best experience of sport and physical activity – with sport and wellbeing recognised for its positive contribution to student experience and academic performance". However, the strategic case for Oxford Sport has rarely been clearly articulated. Why is sport important and how does it connect to the University's wider strategic objectives?

Beneath this lies a question of how we think about the purpose of a university. For some, the primary purpose is research, and to train the next generation of researchers. Stefan Collini (2013: 12), for example, in *The Purpose of the University* suggests it is primarily about discovery – the "open-ended search for deeper understanding" and "educating someone to pursue the open-ended search for deeper ideas". In this regard, he suggests that other functions are secondary; "no one, I assume, would be likely to claim that football, or any other sport, is centrally what universities are 'for'".

Yet sport has been a key part of what Clark Kerr (1963) refers to as the 'multiversity' since the formation of universities. Aristotle's lyceum was purposefully built on the site of a gymnasium, replete with palaestra. Ancient Greek gymnasia were intertwined with education because they were viewed as spaces for physical and mental training, and the cultivation of virtue and character. The connection between university and sport has endured across the UK and the United States, shaping student experience while also providing opportunities for community engagement.

In Oxford, sport has been documented among students since 14th century, with unstructured ball games, archery, and hunting (Marples 1954). Merton College's real tennis court dates back to 1595. The 19th century saw the emergence of organised university and college sport. Varsity matches began in 1827 when Charles Wordsworth organised a two-day cricket match between the universities at Lord's. The first boat race was held in 1829, and rugby, cricket, athletics, and football became a feature of college life.



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Iconic figures who encapsulated the ideal of the scholar-athlete began to emerge, such as Lord Desborough, who was president of the Boat Club, Oxford University Athletics Club, winner of a silver medal for fencing at the 1906 Intercalated Games where he was the flagbearer for GB, and subsequently President of the 1908 London Olympic Games and a successful politician. C.B Fry represented England at cricket and football, played in the FA Cup Final, and set a world record for the long jump, before a career in teaching, the navy, and politics. Oxford's William Webb-Ellis codified the game of rugby, and the University played a significant part in globalising football.

> **Varsity matches began in 1827 when Charles Wordsworth organised a two-day cricket match between the universities at Lord's.**

The archetype of the scholar-athlete and the Corinthian spirit of sportsmanship and fair play have encapsulated what is unique about Oxford Sport, and have underpinned generations of successful student athletes including Roger Bannister, Matthew Pinsent, Imran Khan, Mara Yamauchi, Chris Chataway, Phil de Glanville, Sue Day, Matthew Syed, and Polly Maton, alongside 283 Oxford graduate Olympians of whom 80 have won gold medals. Stories of Oxford's FA Cup triumph in 1874, breaking the sub-4 minute mile in 1954, and rugby victory over the Springboks in 1969 are central to Oxford's history and global reputation.

However, sport in Oxford has not always enjoyed unequivocal support. In Wenden (1994)'s history of Oxford sport, he highlights how during the 1950s, university dons became more critical of the time allocated to sport by

students, with concerns from the Right that it detracted from academic excellence, and from the Left that it reinforced public school traditions. Vestiges of these concerns endure to the present day, even though both are largely unfounded. A weight of evidence shows that students involved in high level sport are more likely to achieve better degrees (e.g. Brunton and Mayne 2020; Cambridge 2019), while historians such as Curthoys and Jones (2006) have shown how the development of sport in Oxford from the mid-nineteenth century was associated not with the entrenchment of social privilege, but with the expansion of egalitarianism and the institutionalization of academic meritocracy.

In that context, it seems important to articulate the case from first principles for why sport and physical activity are important aspects of university life.

The ultimate purpose of the university is to support human flourishing. We achieve that mainly through knowledge, in terms of both the research we produce and the talent that we nurture. In order to achieve those goals, universities establish residential communities comprised mainly of young people at a formative stage of their lives. We have a responsibility to support positive student experience, physical and mental wellbeing, a sense of belonging and inclusion, and the cultivation of positive habits and dispositions. Involvement in sport and physical activity is able to contribute to these effects, and is correlated with a range of better life outcomes. By extension, many of these same benefits can, with additional support, be made available to staff and the wider community

Sport and physical activity are therefore mainly, but not exclusively, about student experience and wellbeing. They connect to almost all aspects of wider University strategy. Five areas of strategic importance stand out (illustrated in figure 1).

1. Student experience and wellbeing

Extra-curricular activities are an integral part of student experience. They support the development of life skills, boost future employability, improve wellbeing, enable friendships, and enhance academic performance. In Oxford, many of these can be offered through college, but not all can or should be. Some activities require economies of scale, critical mass of interested, or suitably qualified students, and can only be delivered at a pan-University scale. Furthermore, the opportunity to engage in activities that go beyond colleges or academic course cohorts is important for many students' ability to diversify their friendships and find a sense of belonging and inclusion within Oxford. Sport and physical activity are the single largest source of extra- and co-curricular activity within the University, with a majority of students participating in some form of exercise or college/university sport at least once per week.

Mental health and wellbeing outcomes among students and young people have progressively worsened in recent years. 25% of 13-25 year-olds in the UK have been clinically diagnosed with a mental health disorder. There has been a steady growth in student demand on University and college counselling services, with a rise in anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and perceived social ostracism among students. As BUCS research has shown, student participation in physical activity is associated with positive effects on student mental health and wellbeing.

There is growing anecdotal evidence that the inadequacy of Oxford's sports facilities is affecting student recruitment at both undergraduate and graduate level, with prospective applicants choosing to accept offers from competitors with better facilities. One alumnus explained that he had encouraged his eldest child to decline Oxford and attend Harvard instead "because of the sports facilities". Several sports clubs suggested that students are increasingly selecting Cambridge because of a perception of greater investment in sport.

Extra-curricular activities are an integral part of student experience. They support the development of life skills, boost future employability, improve wellbeing, enable friendships, and enhance academic performance.

2. Staff pay and conditions

During the Pay & Conditions Review, many staff highlighted how much they would value access to better sport and leisure facilities. This is something that many universities provide as part of the conditions that they offer staff, and access to gym facilities, classes, a swimming pool, or the opportunity to train with, and join, student and staff sports clubs is an important and valuable part of staff conditions.

3. Community engagement

Local engagement has emerged as an important strategic priority of the University. The University's 2025-30 strategy explicitly highlights the role that sport can play in building bridges with the local community within Oxford and Oxfordshire, including by creating opportunities for schools and children's sports clubs to access University and college sports facilities, or to receive coaching from student volunteers.

4. Brand and reputation

A significant part of Oxford's global brand and international reputation are associated with the history of Oxford Sport. The Boat Race being televised annually, the association of Oxford with Sir Roger Bannister, and the University's historic role in the development of several major sports is central to the Oxford story, and many alumni and members of the public's sense of attachment to the University. Research at other universities highlights the contribution that sporting success can make to alumni engagement and giving.

5. Research

There is a growing body of sports-relevant research at the University, integrated across many departments. It covers areas such as the Podium Institute's research on sports medicine and technology, neuroscience and football, interdisciplinary research on women in elite sport, anthropological work on the role of football in reducing recidivism, engineering research linked to motorsport, and character-based leadership in sport. With the right facilities, networks, and opportunities, much of Oxford's basic research has the potential to shape sport in areas including sports injury and rehabilitation, women's sport science, AI and data science, and character-based leadership.

FIGURE 1: THE FIVE MAIN STRATEGIC DRIVERS OF UNIVERSITY SPORT



2 The impact of under-investment

Oxford has systematically under-invested in its sports facilities compared to other equivalent universities. Part of the explanation is the decentralised nature of the institution. Some colleges have excellent facilities for some sports, but not all colleges can provide at the same level, while the central University has rarely prioritised capital investment in sport.

For some facilities, such as a swimming pool, a sports hall, or an athletics track, there is a clear case for collective action, as no one college would choose to develop such facilities independently and there are clear economies of scale. For other facilities such a gyms, pitches, or boat houses, wealthier colleges are able to provide them independently or in small groups, weakening their incentives to support central sports provision.

Colleges provide some but limited central sport funding. They directly support the Sports Federation's capacity to enable students to participate in organised sport. Allocated through the Integrated Charging Mechanism (ICM), colleges currently provide around £380,000 per year towards grant funding for University sports clubs, the costs of participating in British University and Colleges Sport (BUCS), the Blues Performance scheme, and programmes that encourage student participation. This contribution represents the majority of the Sports Federation's operational budget, although it is a small proportion of the overall £3 million annual cost of delivering student sport. Colleges also contribute indirectly by sometimes subsidising individual student costs (e.g. membership). Furthermore, many colleges make a significant contribution to ensuring Oxford students are able to engage in sport and physical activity through their own sports provision. College provision mainly focuses on six traditional sports (rugby, rowing, cricket, rugby, football, and tennis), as well as their gym provision, while the University offers 83 sports.

> **Investment in sport is possible within a collegiate University, given leadership and political will. Cambridge University made a £15m grant available to support the development of its indoor Sports Centre, opened in 2013.**

On the flip side of the strength of college sport is the weakness of University sport. Richer colleges have strong incentives to invest in their own sports facilities. Poorer colleges lack the capacity to invest in sports facilities at all. As a result, Oxford Sport relies mainly upon constrained centralised funding sources, which are primarily controlled by the academic divisions, for whom sport has understandably been a low priority compared to research and education. The University contribution to student sport is currently around £1,825,000 per year, which mainly covers facility operating costs for organised student sport and salaries related to these programmes.

The current funding model for University sport is part of the overall financial three-year settlement for AAD, derived mainly from JRAM income (the funding received centrally for teaching and research). The Sport Department and AAD agree to the budget in advance, but often face budget shortfalls during the three-year cycle, relying upon AAD discretionary support to cover any unforeseen deficits. For capital investment, funding is even more precarious, relying upon a combination of ad hoc support from AAD, Estates, PRAC, and Vice-Chancellor's discretionary funding.



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Investment in sport is possible within a collegiate University, given leadership and political will. Cambridge University made a £15m grant available to support the development of its indoor Sports Centre, opened in 2013, which has enabled it to expand student and community memberships and become commercially sustainable.

In the past the University has found ways in invest capital in the development of its sports facilities alongside external (predominantly) alumni support. This was the case for the opening of the Rosenblatt swimming pool in 2003 (c.£4.2m covered by 57% University; 28% philanthropy; 15% colleges), and the opening of the Acer Nethercott Centre in 2018 (c.£7.2m covered by 50% University; 43% philanthropy; 7% Sport England). Both benefited from a lead benefactor (with naming rights granted), and from the University's willingness to match and underwrite. However, these sporadic investments are the exception rather than the rule, and generally investment has been made in a piecemeal fashion rather than based on long-term strategic planning. It is difficult to accurately compare Oxford's aggregate per capita sports expenditure with other universities because a significant proportion of investment into sport is at the college rather than the University level. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is systematic under-investment at the University level.

For the BUCSs top-20 universities, BUCS (2024) estimate that average per capita spending on sport was £254 per year, while 5-year investment in sports facilities per capita was £1069 (in 2022). For the BUCs top-60 it was £180 and £748 respectively, with a clear correlation identified between investment and performance.

In Oxford, the current University contribution to University Sport (c. £2.5m) represents the equivalent of £96 per student per year, which ranks outside the average spending of the top-100 BUCS universities. College per capita expenditure is hard to gauge, but the Sports Department estimates that the colleges collectively spend around £3m per year across their sports provision albeit with likely inefficiencies due to under-use and lack of coordination. Even taken together, the College and University contributions leave Oxford below the top-20 universities in the UK in terms of average per student investment in sport.

In order to match the average per capita spending of the top-60 BUCS universities, Oxford could anticipate needing to make an aggregate (collegiate university) capital investment of around £20m every five years, and an operational contribution of around £4.7m per year.



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Even taken together, the College and University contributions leave Oxford below the top-20 universities in the UK in terms of average per student investment in sport.

The vast majority of capital investment in University Sport over the past decade (apart from the Phase 1 project) has been for essential repair or maintenance, simply the continuation of existing services, with roughly £6m invested, mainly in this type of capital investment, over the past 5 years. These include female dry changing room upgrade in 2021 (£140k), the rowing centre extension in 2020/21 (£1m released to secure a £12m benefaction for OUBC), Wallingford Boat House maintenance (£120k per year for 5 years), swimming pool maintenance in 2023/24 (£120k), University Parks pavilion maintenance in 2023/24 (£80k), fives courts repairs in 2023/24 (£105k), cricket school roof and wall repairs in 2023 (£190k), running track replacement in 2024/25 (£2m), performance gym temporary modulars 2025/26 (£1m). Tennis alumni also refurbished the Tennis Pavilion at Iffley Road in the absence of University funding.

In nearly every case, these investments have been based on a 'patch-up' approach to facilities, mending what is broken, rather than upgrading existing infrastructure as part of a long-term vision. The only exception to this has been the £1m of investment in the OUBC gym, provided to secure the benefactor's gift and exclusively for the benefit of the club. Even allowing for the fact that there is indirect investment into sport from college sports provision, and via alumni contributions to our larger and more autonomous sports clubs, notably OURFC and OUBC, Oxford is significantly under-investing in University sport by UK standards, and decentralisation creates inefficiencies. Over time this has meant that existing facilities have depreciated, and many are now end-of-life, unsafe, or unfit-for-purpose. In order to catch-up with years of under-investment, significant capital investment is now needed.

3 Sport for all

Oxford Sport can be broken down into three broad areas: elite performance level, competitive recreational level, and participation for an active lifestyle.

3.1. Performance level

Oxford is over-performing relative to its level of investment in university sport. It regularly places in the top-20 BUCS universities in terms of performance, despite having much lower than average spending per capita on central university sport. In 2024-25, for example, 63 teams competed in league and cup competitions and 667 students represented the University across 53 competitive sports. There were 7 BUCS individual gold medals, 4 BUCS team golds, 4 BUCS league winners, 3 BUCS finalists. More varsity matches against Cambridge were won than lost (24 wins, 22 losses, and 13 draws across all 59 varsity sports). Several of our Blues Performance athletes have also medalled in national championships or represented their countries in recent years, including at the Olympic Games.

There may be several reasons for this apparent over-performance: recruiting excellent athletes as a result of being an academically excellent institution; attracting athletes because of our history and the varsity matches; maintaining generally high standards of coaching; the commitment of student-led clubs and the Herculean efforts of volunteer-based committees; the strength of college sport creating depth of opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity.

Blues Performance athletes, however, consistently highlight the challenges of maintaining high-level performance given the limitations in Oxford's provision and facilities compared to those available at other UK universities, let alone at the elite sports universities such as Loughborough or Bath.

The Blues Performance Scheme supports high performance teams and individual athletes to improve their long-term performance. It offers access to support from a dedicated performance team, and includes support relating to strength and conditioning, nutrition, and psychology. Individual eligibility is based on sporting and academic ability, and team eligibility is based on relative standard at the national level. The scheme receives £127,000 per year, half funded by colleges and half by the University (through AAD service funding), with a small contribution by participating teams. It supports 2 full-time and 2 part-time positions, and several casual positions, across a 3-year funding cycle. It covers athletes and teams at different levels, with tier-1 sports (rowing, rugby, athletics, lacrosse, hockey, and fencing) receiving the highest level of support. In total 500-600 athletes are supported to different extents.

However, there are gaps in the provision. First, injury treatment and rehabilitation has historically been limited, and generally self-financed by students. In the past there was a third party physiotherapy clinic, but since January 2025 there has been an in-house physiotherapy clinic which has had high levels of demand. Some clubs have third party agreements with particular physios; for example, OURFC and OUBC subsidise access to selected providers. Nevertheless, there remains significant scope to explore a broader business model that would enable permanent physiotherapy, soft tissue therapy, and rehabilitation practice to be located at Iffley Road. Oxford Brookes, for examples, has a thriving rehabilitation service. Second, there are significant facilities gaps for performance athletes. The Blues Performance Gym was forced to close in 2025 due to asbestos in the grandstand. Third, in practice, the small performance team is stretched and has limited capacity, with tier-2 and tier-3 teams receiving only limited levels of support in practice.

> **Oxford is over-performing relative to its level of investment in university sport.**

Beyond the Blues Performance Scheme, Blues-level teams face a range of common challenges. These include:

1. Academic flexibility

There is significant variation in the willingness of tutors and lecturers to support student athletes' availability for Wednesday sport. BUCS fixtures are held on Wednesdays and yet many tutors schedule tutorials and classes for University athletes in ways that limit their ability to participate in competitive University sport. This makes many Blues-level and BUCS-competing athletes dependent upon the goodwill and good relationships they build with individual supervisors. While it would be challenging for many degrees to mandate that all Wednesday afternoons should be free from tutorials and lectures, it would be desirable to raise awareness of and reinforce the culture of encouraging sport and physical activity for all on a Wednesday afternoon.

Many colleges have their governing body (and related) meetings on a Wednesday afternoon, and departments might be encouraged to also use them for non-student related activities. Beyond performance level sport, one option might be to create the concept of 'Wellbeing

Wednesdays', supporting a general rule that Wednesday afternoons be allocated for student wellbeing activities, whether relating to sport and physical activity or not.

2. Coaching

There are a lot of outstanding and committed coaches at Oxford. However, many clubs find it difficult to recruit and retain top-level coaches. There are several reasons for this, including: lack of funding creating precarious, low-paid, and part-time coaching roles; autonomous student-led clubs relying upon student committees to make coaching appointments; the lack of wider inclusion of coaches into the University or the provision of coach-development opportunities.

A number of recommendations that could improve this: the creation of a funded 'coaches network' to support coaches' integration into the University, provide peer support, and subsidise opportunities for coach-development; an increased role for senior members (of whom there are relatively few, with only around 7 playing an active role) or advisory boards in the strategic appointment of coaches; clarification on coaching liability and ensuring coaches are fully insured; the opportunity for coaches to take up ex officio positions on club committees. One example of excellent practice in coaching is cricket, which employs a top-level head coach and former first-class cricketer Graham Charlesworth, funded through a combination of sponsorship, student subs, alumni donations, and its trust fund. The Sports Department was historically involved in shaping consultancy contracts for coaches but ceased involvement on the advice of Legal Services. It might find ways to play a greater coordination role in future.

3. Recruitment

Several clubs, notably rugby and rowing, rely upon proactive recruitment of suitably qualified talent. Being competitive at the highest level, especially in the Boat Race and Rugby Varsity, relies upon being able to draw from a narrow pool of applicants who are both academically qualified to study at Oxford and world-class athletes capable of competing in the varsity match. At the moment, OURFC and OUBC have significant concerns that they are losing talent to Cambridge (and other international competitors) as a result of the perception of greater barriers to academic admissions, especially at graduate level, and the lack of sport scholarships covering fees and living expenses.

Oxford cannot and should not compromise its academic admission standards. However, there are steps that can be taken to support the recruitment of outstanding athletes. These include: seeking support from university leaders prepared to encourage applications from suitably qualified elite athletes (e.g. Said Business School has celebrated the recruitment of elite rowers); fundraising for a University sports scholarship scheme; promoting existing foundation year opportunities for athletes from under-represented backgrounds. In the short term, sport scholarships that fund academic and living costs for talented scholar-athletes seem one of the most promising ways to attract elite-level talent. Beyond that, the key to attracting top quality scholar-athletes will be to significantly improve our facilities and programmes.

4. Alumni engagement

Many clubs rely upon alumni engagement to support their running costs and provide students with opportunities to engage in elite sport. However, for many clubs, the year-to-year turnover of student committees makes strategic planning and long-term relationship building with alumni challenging.

This can be addressed through Development and Alumni Engagement (DAE) supporting clubs to develop long-term strategic plans, the recent reduction in the threshold for club endowments (to a minimum of £50,000), and by encouraging clubs to create multi-year advisory boards or equivalent that create continuity and build trust with alumni.

5. Transport

Many clubs report the challenges of travelling to 'away' BUCS fixtures. The Sports Federation has an agreement with Enterprise for car hire, but this relies upon clubs collecting and dropping vehicles in Botley, and travelling in small groups, in vehicles driven by licensed student drivers with the requisite years of driving experience. Some clubs reported travel costs being prohibitive and in a limited number of cases were unable to fulfil away fixtures due to transportation difficulties. The limited support for club travel creates risks for student experience and road safety, and falls below the levels of transport provision available at many other BUCS universities across the UK for team sports such as football, women's rugby, hockey, cricket, and lacrosse.

Oxford cannot and should not compromise its academic admission standards. However, there are steps that can be taken to support the recruitment of outstanding athletes.

A range of solutions should be considered for enhancing transport services. One proposed solution would be to lease 2-4 shared mini-buses from a contractor, which could service the vehicles. It is estimated that mini-buses would cost around £25,000 per year each, which could partly be recharged to clubs, requiring around £60,000 per year in subsidy for 4 mini-buses as well as appropriate staff support. The challenge with this solution is that is would still require student drivers and would give them responsibility for larger vehicles. A more practical solution to improve student experience and road safety might be to provide professionally driven transport on more occasions. The Sports Federation estimates that around £24,000 per annum would significantly improve the scope for third party transport provision, bringing down the threshold journey time for professionally driven coaches and minibuses.

6. Booking pitches and facilities

Several clubs reported facing difficulties accessing bookings for pitches and facilities for BUCS fixtures, or needing to approach colleges or third-party providers themselves in order to identify suitable facilities for 'home' fixtures. Weather-dependent sports faced particular vulnerabilities, with the rowing teams especially affected by the absence of alternative training facilities when the Thames is unavailable. The football club (OUAFC), in particular, has highlighted the inadequate condition of autumn and winter pitches in University Parks. Several clubs report low levels of responsiveness within the Sports Department in relation to pitch and facilities bookings, especially when late adjustments are needed, and the overall condition of University pitches needs significant improvement.

BOX 4: THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES FACING RUGBY AND ROWING

You've got the Boat Race and the varsity rugby match as the two marquee events, and we are at a crossroads. We can either protect and fully support them, or decide we're happy for them to be equal to football varsity or hockey varsity. Unless we decide as a University to support these marquee events, based on what they bring in terms of brand and sense of belonging, they are going to struggle in the future.

– a college Domestic Bursar

Oxford's traditional marquee sports of rugby and rowing have long served as significant 'brand-builders' for the University, with Varsity matches against Cambridge drawing large public audiences. While both sports have been central to the University's sporting identity and heritage, they each face a series of contemporary challenges.

OURFC has identified a series of particular challenges for both the profile of Varsity rugby and for Oxford's ability to compete effectively with Cambridge.

1) declining attendances at Varsity. The Rugby Varsity match was played at Twickenham until 2023. Its attendances have steadily declined from 45,000 in 2008 to 5,000 in 2024. There are a number of reasons for this. It lost momentum during the pandemic, moving from December to March and moving from a midweek corporate event to a weekend event. The future of rugby varsity is likely to be as a home and away fixture held alternately in Oxford and Cambridge. This will require a redeveloped rugby ground to accommodate high-level match day experience. In order to fundraise effectively for ground redevelopment, OURFC will probably need to collaborate closely with the University, and consider making the ground available for multi-sport use, as a means to diversify the pool of prospective funders. It also requires that the University support OURFC to promote fixtures like the Varsity match to a greater extent than in the past.

2) the game is at a crossroads. Concerns about the links between rugby and traumatic brain injury, the decline in the popularity of the men's game, and a financial crisis across many rugby clubs mean that rugby as a sport faces significant challenges. OURFC is responding innovatively by exploring alternative formats, especially at college level, including touch rugby and flexibly-sided games. Women's rugby is also thriving at Oxford, reflecting growing popularity in the women's game following events such as England Women becoming world champions in 2025. Nevertheless, challenges across the wider sport are making fundraising for OURFC difficult, with the club drawing upon its endowment to support its operations, and facing year-on-year depreciation of its facilities.

3) recruitment challenges. OURFC identifies structural barriers to recruitment as a major barrier to high-level performance. The club identifies numerous examples of undergraduate and graduate targets being rejected by Oxford and offered places at Cambridge. Every year, the club proactively reaches out to schools and colleges. It estimates that around 50% of those it approaches apply, around 20% get an interview, and only 1-2% are offered a place.

Oxford's traditional marquee sports of rugby and rowing have long served as significant 'brand-builders' for the University, with Varsity matches against Cambridge drawing large public audiences.

It proposes that the University could do more to support recruitment; for example, by socialising course leaders and tutors about the benefits of sport and providing structured mentorship to prospective applicants.

4) the Iffley Road Rugby Ground. The ground was acquired for use by OURFC in the 1890s having previously been the University cricket ground, and it offered shared facilities to OUAFC until 1921. It was purchased by the University in 2017 and long-term leased back to OURFC. The facilities need significant

investment, with the main West Stand in particular requiring urgent upgrades, including to its changing rooms, gym, and medical room. A recent Bidwell's study suggests around £10.5m is needed to fully upgrade the ground, and the club estimates that even without upgrades around £2m will be needed over the next five years simply in order to maintain existing facilities. There is significant scope for OURFC and the University to work collaboratively to upgrade the facilities to include multi-sport use while fully respecting the ground's rugby heritage.

Despite excellent performances in 2026, OUBC has faced recent challenges in competing with Cambridge in Varsity, in both the men and women's Boat Race. The Boat Race has previously been screened by the BBC, and will be screened on Channel 4 from 2026. Meanwhile, the Boat Race has recently been marred by eligibility disputes between the two universities. In order to improve performance, the following areas need to be considered:

1) access to training facilities. Over recent years, OUBC boats have been able to train for fewer days on the water than Cambridge. This is because the Thames floods, while Cambridge rowers have been less affected by flooding and they are able to train on the River Cam or the River Ouse. While Oxford rowers have sometimes been able to train at Eton Dorney, this has not always been possible and has often involved disruptive journeys or lack of proximity to other key training facilities. Alternative access to water is ideally needed, but there are few immediately obvious solutions.

2) improved governance. In 2025, OUBC commissioned an alumni-led performance review to understand and address the causes of recent underperformance. Since then it has begun to implement several of the recommendations. It has appointed a new senior member, a new CEO and Performance Director, as well as building a highly-qualified and effective coaching team. With a new leadership structure, it is in the process of strengthening club culture, improving fundraising and alumni engagement, and reforming its committee structure. The club is now much better positioned to deliver a competitive and successful elite performance programme than in previous years.

3) clarification of eligibility. The 2025 eligibility dispute was damaging to the reputation of the Boat Race and was as acrimonious as it was avoidable. The Boat Race company, OUBC, and CUBC need to find ways to work together in a spirit of collaboration in order to clarify the principles governing eligibility in way that respects the spirit of student sport, and what constitutes an eligible university qualification. In general, it seems prudent, wherever possible, for all sports to adhere to the Joint Blues Committee eligibility criteria, for which paragraph 2 stipulates that students be "Registered for, and actively studying for, a recognised degree, diploma or certificate of the University where matriculation for all members of said course is compulsory". It is questionable whether, with hindsight, the Boat Race's decision to change eligibility to 'degree-level' may have added an unnecessary source of interpretive ambiguity.

4) funding and resource allocation. Cambridge currently has a slightly larger rowing budget than Oxford (approximately £1.1m per year compared with £800,000), although it is unclear that this has performance implications, and there are likely other reasons behind the performance 'gap' (e.g. coaching, recruitment, and training access). OUBC has a £17m endowment through the Topolski Fund, which provides most of this funding. In addition to its own endowment, CUBC enjoys additional support from the University, notably through subsidising 50% of the costs of a joint fundraising officer who is embedded in the club. The University might consider ways to support OUBC fundraising through DAE and make better use of the Boat Race as a dedicated fundraising opportunity for rowing.

5) links to college rowing. At the moment, University and college rowing exist in largely separate worlds due the significant gap in quality, coaching, and time commitment. However, creating a stronger pathway from college rowing to university rowing may offer a talent pathway for OUBC.

3.2. Diversifying Oxford's marquee sports

Oxford's highest profile sports continue to be those that have traditionally been played in British public schools. Their predominance is partly cultural and partly due to the path-dependency of alumni and philanthropic donations enabling some clubs to accumulate greater resources over time. Oxford should protect and safeguard its excellence in traditional sports such as rugby and rowing. In addition, though, it should diversify the range of sports that it nurtures as marquee sports for the university.

It should give greater focus to nurturing sports that reflect those played by a sizeable majority of the population, and support inclusion, as well as projecting a more accessible public image for the University.

The University has significant opportunity to develop pockets of national excellence in areas such as hockey, athletics, netball, and women's football, for which we consistently attract international-standard athletes. By more strongly foregrounding pockets of excellence in sports that are widely played by women and men, and accessible across our state school system and internationally, Oxford Sport has an opportunity to become more inclusive and to be seen as more relevant to the contemporary world.

To take the example of women's football, it is one of the fastest growing games in the world. Every year Oxford recruits age-group international players who have played in WSL academies or at NCAA Division 1 level in the United States. The women's Blue team plays near the highest level of BUCS, and yet struggles for funding and access to adequate pitches; many of the best players therefore choose to represent local clubs rather than the University. This represents a significant lost opportunity to nurture elite level sport, in a way that can shape Oxford's public image for the better.

3.3. Recreational level

One of Oxford Sport's great strengths is the opportunity for students to participate in sport on a recreational level, whether as part of University sports clubs or within college sport.

Many of the University's 83 sports clubs run multiple men's, women's, and mixed teams, and offer training sessions that are inclusive of all levels. Most colleges, individually or collectively, offer opportunities for students of all abilities to represent the college.

Inter-college competitions are generally delivered in the format of cuppers (knockout and individual championship style events) and/or inter-college leagues. Most inter-college competitions at Oxford are coordinated by sports clubs as part of their sport's Blues status requirements. Those inter-college sports that are not delivered by clubs are often delivered by representative bodies within the University (e.g. OURFU for Rugby Union and OURCs for Rowing) or by individuals or committees (e.g. college grounds staff for the Cricket league, and the Football Sabbatical Officer supporting football) on behalf of a club or sport.

Inter-collegiate leagues include badminton, basketball, football, hockey, lacrosse, netball, rugby, cricket, squash, and ultimate frisbee, while additional cuppers competitions include archery, athletics, cheerleading, cross-country, equestrian, karate, snooker, dance sport, sailing, trampolining, triathlon, volleyball, and water polo.

The Sports Federation provides significant and effective support for College Sports Reps and College Club Captains, including through a 'Casual and College Sports Hub'. The Sports Federation supports college bookings for sport facilities, a Sport Development Grant for colleges to start new activities, means-tested funding to support individuals with up to £100 memberships and equipment, guidance on welfare and club culture, management of fixtures and leagues through the Playwaze platform, and support accessing college club kit.

Overall, recreational level sport in Oxford is extremely strong and well supported. It is estimated by the Sports Federation that around 6,800 Oxford students represent their college in some form of sport, and thousands of others turn out to support, especially at iconic events like Torpids, Summer Eights, and Teddy Hall Relays. A few recommendations stand-out:

1) Recognition

There needs to be wider understanding of the contribution that University sports clubs and the Sports Federation make to supporting recreational sports opportunities for students across the collegiate University. University sport and college sport are inextricably linked, and without financial support for University sport, college sport would not run as effectively, enjoyably, and safely as it does. Leagues and cuppers also depend on large numbers of volunteers, generally drawn from student athletes who represent the University.

The University has significant opportunity to develop pockets of national excellence in areas such as women's football, hockey, athletics, and netball, for which we consistently attract international-standard athletes.

2) Governance and oversight

College sport competition is broadly governed by the Sports Federation. Different college sports are managed in different ways, for historical reasons, based on three main models: 1) the club-coordinated model: in exchange for Blues status, clubs run college sports leagues and cuppers; 2) the representative body model: OURFU and OURCs have been created specifically to manage college rugby and rowing, partly because of the complexity and scale of their activities, and of the safety issues involved; 3) the groundsmen-led model: this is unique to cricket and exists for historical reasons; 4) the sabbatical officer model: because of the scale of activity, football and rowing have a Sports Federation sabbatical officer.



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For the most part, these arrangements work well, even though they are probably not how they would be designed from scratch. Having said that, challenges do arise from time-to-time, and reform is sometimes needed. For example, OURFC recently prepared a paper on college rugby, which made proposals to restructure the league and cuppers (including returning cuppers matches from Wednesday to Saturday to enable University players to be available). Meanwhile, SSSC recently commissioned a governance review of OURCs, based on feedback of the need to improve regulation relating to training supervision and the possible need to replace the Sabbatical Officer with a permanent rowing administrator post, for example.

One way to ensure ongoing reflection on adaptations needed in relation to college sport would be to systematically integrate oversight of college sport into the Sports Federation termly reporting to SSSC.

3) Data collection

At the moment, there is a lack of data and evidence relating to student participation in college and other forms of recreational sport. It would be useful to strengthen data in order to explore participation rates and trends, so that we can adapt provision and support based on student demand and experience.

3.4. Participation – student, staff, community

The appointment of a Sports Coordinator role focusing on participation within the Sports Federation has been an important step forward in opening up opportunities for students to engage in physical activity, with a focus on enjoyment and wellbeing. The aim has been to create "an arena where your skills don't matter…where you are not constantly judged against your peers".

The 'Active at Oxford' Programme has offered an innovative means to open up sports clubs and societies to wider participation. It offers beginner-friendly, low commitment, and social sport opportunities for students, staff and community members, with free taster sessions throughout the year.

Active at Oxford offers the sessions through university sports clubs and societies, generally at Iffley Road at three levels: Simply Active (casual), Active Improver (with a coach), and Active Event (one-off events or trips). Activities have included badminton club night, Australian rules football, canoe polo, croquet, walking, running, and ultimate Frisbee, for example. There are now 14-15 sports and they offer "a good way to get out of the college bubble".

Feedback on the sessions has been positive. They have generally relied upon the willingness of student coaches or activators to deliver the sessions. In some cases, it has been challenging, without significant funding for the programme, to ensure regular weekly commitments by already busy student coaches and 'activators'.

> **The University's Student Welfare and Support Services recognise the huge importance of physical activity in relation to student wellbeing and mental health.**

The University's Student Welfare and Support Services recognise the huge importance of physical activity in relation to student wellbeing and mental health. With increasing rates of mental health disorder diagnoses among student, and growing levels of eating disorders, anxiety, social ostracism, and challenges relating to self-efficacy, there is a weight of evidence that shows the value of participation in physical activity. It can equip students with some of the lifestyle practices they need to thrive, including friendship, and good sleep and nutritional habits.

During 2024-25, the 'Moving Minds' pilot supported 12-20 students from two colleges (St Catherine's and Linacre),

to participate in a preventative student wellbeing programme based in physical movement. It included opportunities for walking, riding, and dance, alongside the broader aspiration to support students to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to manage selves effectively. The challenge is that there remain limited funds and appropriately trained Sports Department staff to support preventative student wellbeing programmes relating to sport and physical activity to build upon and scale the insights of the Moving Minds pilot. This type of welfare referral service for student to access free organised sport and leisure facilities has great potential to grow, and might be integrated into Active at Oxford to avoid the proliferation of separate initiatives.

In terms of staff access, one staff representative explained, "Staff sport provision isn't brilliant, and what there is, is not well promoted and publicised". There were previously a range of staff sports clubs connected with the University Club on Mansfield Road. These included squash, running, cricket, football, and archery, run mainly by staff volunteers, and organised through noticeboards at Mansfield Road and via the University Club website. However, two factors have contributed to the demise of staff sport. First, the pandemic and internal reorganisation of the club's operations disrupted momentum. Second, following the installation of the MPLS modular buildings, cricket, football, and archery were taken away from the University Club, and Mansfield Road lost its focus as a hub for staff sport. There is also dissatisfaction about plans to extend the presence of the science modular buildings rather than immediately restore the space for staff sport.

For many staff, having access to central Oxford facilities is important: "One of the problems with Iffley Road is that it's not in the centre. Staff tend to use at lunch time or after work, and it takes so long to get to Iffley Road". Most staff live outside the city, and so being able to access facilities during or immediately after the working day is important. Other suggestions raised by staff include whether there might be access to college facilities for squash, snooker, pool, or table tennis, for example, especially outside of term time, and whether there might be scope to offer facilities on the hill for those who work in the Medical Sciences Division, potentially jointly developed with OUH.

In terms of the wider community, there is growing momentum towards greater sharing of sports facilities with people across the city and the county. Around half of memberships at Iffley Road are held by members of the local community, who particularly value use of the swimming pool, gym, and classes. University Parks now hosts one of the largest Parkruns in the country, regularly welcoming over 900 runners and creating genuine connection between town and gown. The Young Sport Leaders Programme, delivered in collaboration with Vincent's Club, supports year-8s from 7 Oxford schools to attend weekly whole-day sessions at the University, where they receive sports coaching from students, experience lunch in a college, and hear from academics about how their research connects to sport. Community sports partnerships have been developed with Oxford City FC and Oxford Hoops Basketball, and there are plans to create a wider Sports and Community Partnership to further strengthen how the collegiate University shares its facilities and coaching capacity with local schools and sports clubs.

One of the challenges is how to strike the appropriate balance between student, staff, and community use of sports facilities. During term time, pressure on facilities means that students should be prioritised at Iffley Road. However, for around 25 weeks of the year, most undergraduate students are not resident in Oxford, and there is significant scope to share facilities with the wider community. One option may be a summer camps model, that encourages the Sports Department to book and plan a series of holiday camp activities, on both a community engagement and commercial basis. During term time, there is scope to create complementary activities for local schools and sports clubs, including by encouraging student athletes to volunteer to run coaching or activities for children in Oxford.

University Parks now hosts one of the largest Parkruns in the country, regularly welcoming over 900 runners and creating genuine connection between town and gown.

In terms of participation, several recommendations stand out:

1. Strengthening the Active at Oxford Programme

The Active at Oxford Programme is providing a range of ways for students to get involved in sport and physical activity, regardless of ability levels. It has been successful but so far relies largely upon the goodwill and capacity of student-run University sports clubs. To make the programme sustainable, it needs a relatively small amount of ongoing funding support, potentially from colleges to support coaches and animators' time.

2. Deepening collaboration with Student Welfare and Support Services

It is clear from the Moving Minds pilot that sport and physical activity have an important contribution to make to student wellbeing and mental health. Yet, historically, there has been relatively limited joint planning and coordination between the Sports Federation and Student Welfare and Support Services. Sports participation and welfare referral opportunities could be developed in ways that are evidence-based to support of student wellbeing.

3. Creating a staff sports hub

Access to sport and leisure facilities is an important part of staff conditions. There should be an audit of facilities available to staff, the creation of dedicated staff sport webpage, initiatives to open more opportunities at Iffley Road to staff, flexible sports membership arrangements for staff, and a focus on restoring Mansfield Road/the

University Club as a physical hub for staff sport and leisure activities. The University should fund temporary, additional part-time staff capacity to develop the models for coordination.

4. Building a sport and community programme

The University has recently appointed a Sport and Community Engagement Officer to develop and deliver a strategic plan for community engagement through sport. This plan will include initiatives to deliver student-led coaching in local schools, expansion of the Young Sport Leaders Programme, summer school opportunities for local school children, volunteer opportunities for our students and staff, improved sharing of college and University sports facilities, and collaboration with local sports clubs. Underpinning the programme should be three aims: to increase young people's interaction with the University, their interest in sport and physical activity, and their aspirations relating to education.

5. Finding creative ways to share facilities and coaching

There is a need to build a technology-enabled matching platform that can better enable college and University sports facilities to be shared both within and beyond the University. One of the biggest challenges to developing an app or website to deliver this is that many college groundstaff have yet to integrate technology into their work. Relatedly, there is huge scope to support the development of student and staff coaching capacity and to enable them to volunteer in coaching roles that support participation in sport and physical activity for community, staff, and students.

3.5. Research

Unlike many universities, Oxford does not have a dedicated sports science department, or sports-related academic degrees. However, the University has a significant and growing amount of sports-relevant research across its academic divisions. Furthermore, there is untapped potential to translate some of Oxford's world-leading scientific research into applications to sport. The Podium Institute's research on sports medicine and technology offers a strong core around which to expand and grow sport's related research and innovation in Oxford. Podium's work shows what is possible in Oxford,

> **...there is untapped potential to translate some of Oxford's world-leading basic science into applications to sport.**

and the exciting opportunities to have significant impact, including through the development of sports-related IP. One way to catalyse sports-relevant research in Oxford could be to create informal research networks in key strategic areas. For example, a new 'women's sport research network' has recently been developed to bring together interested researchers from across the University in order to share their work while offering insights into how to improve women's experiences of sport and physical activity at Oxford.



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4 Enabling success

4.1. Governance and Management

Sport within University Administrative Services

First, there is a question of where the Sports Department should sit, organisationally, within the University. There are four conceivable options:

1. Academic Administration Division (AAD), which manages student services;
2. Estates Services, which manages the University's estate;
3. Gardens, Libraries, and Museums (GLAM), which manages some of the public-facing facilities, resources, and collections of the University;
4. As a stand-alone function within UAS (University Services), within which AAD and Estates are based.

There are pros and cons to each option, which are highlighted in the table below.

AAD currently plays a very positive support role for the Sports Department, in areas such as human resources, budget, finance, and estates.

On balance, it probably makes sense for Sport to remain in AAD in the short-term, but it may be more appropriate to relocate the Sports Department once a significant facilities development programme is underway and in advance of the next financial settlement (2029-32). The most viable options are either to move to Estates or to be a standalone service within UAS. Moving to GLAM is probably not viable.

Option	Pros	Cons	Overall view
AAD	• Student-service focused • Has managed to absorb departmental deficit as part of the total AAD budget (now receiving funding reallocation from the Registrar) • Currently working well, partly due to commitment of the current Academic Registrar & AAD team • Provides a range of relevant support to all student services (e.g. finance, HR, estates)	• Sport is also staff and community-focused • Limited expertise for engaging with capital investment and estates maintenance issues that are critical to Oxford Sport's success • Lack of experience of supporting commercial activity	In the short-term, the Department being housed in AAD works well, partly for idiosyncratic reasons
Estates	• Sport's greatest and most urgent needs relate to facilities, in terms of capital investment and maintenance • There is a need to reconsider whether the space charges paid by Sport to the University might be hypothecated to generate ongoing capital investment in Sport • Commercial expertise	• Will place the emphasis on facilities management • Success will depend on the commitment of the Estates Services leadership to Sport, and willingness to mobilise political capital to support capital investment for Sport • Functional and remote from student experience	It is probably the best medium to long-term option for Sport, because the success of sport will be significantly shaped by its ability to ensure adequate capital investment into facilities, and their management and maintenance. However, success would depend on the wider University's strategic prioritisation of sport

GLAM	• GLAM leads a range of services that are both internally and externally-facing • Significant relevant expertise in areas such as community engagement and generating commercial income • Is likely to soon incorporate Lifelong Learning, partly because of its community engagement and commercial dimensions	• GLAM unlikely to see Sport as a 'good fit' because of its very different role compared to other aspects of GLAM and its budgetary precarity • Sport may be a bit too far away from GLAM's current focus areas • Sport probably needs a strong connection to UAS as it connects to a number of other aspects of university services	This is probably not a viable option, as the 'fit' is not ideal
Stand-alone within UAS	• Sport is multi-faceted, cutting across education, research, community, commercial, people, and it does not fit neatly in any one part of the university • It is potentially large enough to be a stand-alone division, and Sport is often a stand-alone part of university org charts • It would be a way to create greater autonomy for the Sports Department and to signal a clear reset in the management of Oxford Sport	• There is a risk Sport would 'get lost' within UAS, and struggle to get traction within the University if it was 'adrift', although, if well networked, it would still be able to draw upon support from different parts of UAS	This is a plausible option (Sport reported directly to the Registrar from 2003-8), although would require restructuring within UAS, and would require a Registrar (or equivalent) willing to champion sport This could also be a viable model should Sport establish itself with more of a cross-college coordination role for all sport activity

Regardless of these options, however, one colleague is right to note that "If the same funding model were to remain in place, it doesn't matter where sport is…it would just be moving deckchairs on the Titanic".

Sport Strategic Subcommittee (SSSC)

Second, the Sport Strategic Subcommittee (SSSC) needs to be reformed. At the moment, it serves a useful information sharing role and offers encouragement to particular events and activities. However, its agenda is mainly operational, and it could serve a more strategic function than it currently does. The committee should be updated in the following ways:

- SSSC should be renamed the Sport Strategy Committee.
- Serious consideration should be given to the most appropriate major University committee for the SSC to report into (e.g. Education Committee or PRAC), given that sport is a cross-cutting issue and that sports governance needs visibility and influence across a wide range of issues and themes.
- The committee's TORs should be updated, including with consideration for the composition of the committee, the most appropriate sources of student representation, and consideration of whether there may be expertise that are missing (e.g. human resources or student wellbeing). The updated TORs should also clarify the governance relationship between the Committee and other parts of the University with sport governance functions, such as the Sports Federation.
- The committee could play a greater role in advising on long-term strategy alongside AAD's role in planning and budget-setting. At the moment, it mainly plays an information-sharing and oversight role, and decision-making is limited.
- The committee should have a problem-solving function, delegating tasks to small working groups between meetings to advance different aspects of recommendations that emerge from this review (e.g. on governance).

- Each meeting might have one or two clear focus topics, with repetitive information-sharing addressed below-the-line.
- There should be a stronger formal connection with college governance, for example, through working more closely with the Domestic Bursars' Sport and Societies Committee.

The Sports Department

The Sports Department operates in a resource-constrained context, which places significant and, in some cases, unreasonable demands on its leadership. The infrastructure, funding model, ambiguous relationship between college and University sport, reliance on commercial income, burden of university compliance, tensions between different parts of the Department, and the influence of autonomous sports clubs and their alumni, make the Department extremely challenging to lead.

Over the past two decades since 2006, the Sports Department's position has become progressively precarious. The 1998 Goudie Review of Sport brought improvement, because it led to new investment in sport, and contributed to the professionalisation of Iffley Road. It led to the construction of the swimming pool, in ways that enabled Sport to expand community memberships. But the Department nevertheless needed to generate commercial income in order to be sustainable. From the late 1990s to 2008-9, the Sports Department made a surplus. At peak, it had 4,000 student memberships, and a growing number of community memberships. However, at that time, the Department operated in a different environment, without competition from commercial gyms like Buzz and Pure Gym, with lower costs and well maintained and more advanced facilities. From around 2006, JRAM-derived services funding for sport tightened, facilities began to depreciate and salary costs began to rise. Sport faced rising costs, restricted funding, and retained the obligation to run a commercially sustainable operation, without the ability to upgrade the building infrastructure to remain competitive.

In order to finance its operations, maintain its facilities, or seek new capital investment, the Sports Department is effectively compelled to operate a 'year-to-year begging bowl', relying upon any available AAD underspend or savings to repair broken facilities, such as grounds equipment, scoreboards, tractors, roads, fences, light bulbs, and pool filters. It has no resources to adequately maintain, let alone replace or upgrade, its facilities. Meanwhile, AAD's ability to continue to subsidise ad hoc needs is now much reduced as services funding is more constrained.

Against this backdrop, the majority of the Sports Department's staff show remarkable commitment to maintaining a strong student-focused service, ensuring business continuity, cutting costs, building new commercial revenue streams, and diversifying the sporting offer to members. Given the low levels of investment in sport (effectively running the service on £700k net per year), it offers remarkable value for money.

Nevertheless, years of under-investment have shaped a Sports Department characterised by limited strategic planning, a culture of short-term problem-solving, and inconsistent staff engagement. The Sports Department requires a 'reset' in terms of strategy and organisational culture and, to achieve that, it needs greater support from the wider University.

In order to support this, the University also needs to offer the Department greater clarity in terms of high-level vision and multi-year resource allocation.

First, in terms of organisational culture, *there is a lack of time allocated to longer-term strategic planning*, partly because of limited staff capacity. Sport is operating at the absolute minimum levels of staffing required to meet health and safety requirements. There is an absence of time for looking ahead and the leadership team are frequently in 'firefighting mode'. Given more capacity, it might be useful to organise more regular reflection exercises and visits to other comparable sports departments. Leadership team meetings are mainly (and necessarily) operational in nature, and leave little time for strategic conversations. There is a lack of time even for tactical and process innovation, and many of the systems have emerged in a piecemeal way driven by individual staff commitment.

The Sports Department requires a 'reset' in terms of strategy and organisational culture and, to achieve that, it needs greater support from the wider University.

Second, there is a *lack of team integration*. The four sections that make up the Department operate in silos and could be better integrated. There are occasional internal tensions between sections. This is mainly for structural reasons; for example, Sports Federation is focused on student experience; Operations prioritises community membership. Greater integration might be achieved with a deeper sense of common purpose.

After years of under-investment, morale is sometimes low among staff. Colleagues would welcome more strategic direction, although it is also clear that any gaps in strategic leadership are significantly the result of long-term under-investment and inadequate staff capacity, rather than any lack of commitment from senior leaders.

Third, there are *inconsistent people management practices*. Some staff at Iffley Road do not see themselves as having a sense of belonging within the Department or the wider University. This is partly because many staff are casual, but others have been in low-grade roles for many years. Roles have also been downgraded as part of an effort to operate within restricted budgets. There is a need to improve career development opportunities for Sports Department staff. Line management training, a mentorship scheme, a dedicated 'learning and development budget', opportunities to work on micro-secondments or for



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shadowing across the wider University might improve engagement and belonging.

The nature of operational staffing arrangements in Sport, with most staff working on a rota spanning all seven days of the week, stands in contrast to the standard 'office hours' model that is typical for staff in professional services. This can result in some difficulty in fitting standard HR practices into such an environment, particularly where there is no 'staffing slack' to release staff time. Added to this is the concern that the department faces some difficulty in recruiting to its lower grade roles – this is felt to be due to limited applicant interest, with the nature of operational recruitment in the leisure industry often reliant on word-of-mouth.

In terms of change, there is a need for the University to provide far greater support to the leadership team at Iffley Road, in order to better manage the considerable workload, and balance strategy and operations. The current Director of Sport is drawn into operational management, with little time to focus on long-term strategy and planning, or to innovate. Options might include the appointment of an Assistant Director of Sport, or the creation of a new COO role. The Head of Administration in AAD serves as a de facto Head of Administration and Finance (HAF) to Sport. The Department itself needs greater administrative capacity, perhaps especially to support stronger and better tailored HR management.

The first step would be to define and clarify the strategic goals of Oxford Sport for the next 10 years and to assess the high-level responsibilities that need to be met to achieve these goals. Throughout the Department, workforce planning and career development need to be shaped by a stronger alignment with organisational strategy.

One likely consequence of organisational constraints is the mediocre customer satisfaction surveys returned by members, which are consistently below average for the sector. There are low levels of customer loyalty with high member churn and declining overall membership numbers. This in turn results in significant time and resourcing going on new recruitment, while little time and energy is spent on creative revenue-generating opportunities, with out-of-term-time provision largely outsourced rather than used creatively for commercial or community opportunities.

The Sports Department works under extraordinarily difficult conditions, and there is widespread praise for the forbearance and long-term commitment of the Director Sport in the face of extreme resource constraint. However, there is also a need to develop a better culture and management practices within the Department. Upgrading sport at Oxford is therefore not just about facilities; it is also about supporting improvement in management processes and creating a greater sense of staff belonging.

University-College Coordination

Colleges contribute to sport across the collegiate University in several ways: 1) through their provision, maintenance, and sharing of their own sports facilities (mainly focused on cricket, rugby, football, rowing, hockey, netball, and tennis); 2) through the culture that they create that encourages and enables their students to participate in college and University sport; 3) through the involvement of grounds staff and domestic bursars in the running of inter-collegiate sport; 4) through per capita funding through the Sports Federation, which supports club grants and inter-collegiate sports coordination; 5) through support for the Blues Performance Scheme; 6) through some colleges subsidising student memberships; 6) through a relatively small assessed college contribution to JRAM funding, some of which is allocated to Sport.

Meanwhile, the University contributes to college sport through: 1) the Sports Federation's and University-level sports clubs' role in the coordination of inter-collegiate competition; 2) the delivery of programmes that encourage student participation in physical activity (e.g. Active at Oxford), with demonstrable benefits for student experience and wellbeing; 3) through the availability of specialist facilities that are otherwise unavailable

to college sports teams, such as the swimming pool, hockey pitches, and multi-use sports halls that facilitate around 30 different sports; 4) governance of sports that necessitate coordination for reasons of safety (e.g. rowing).

As with other aspects of Oxford life, this fragile interdependence is often poorly understood. In the words of one former domestic bursar, 'The relationship with the University is difficult because colleges with decent facilities don't want to give to the University. It's easier in areas like swimming where colleges don't have their own facilities. Colleges want to do their own thing, and the majority of students will be doing sport at college and not University level'. However, colleges really only support six main sports and, with few exceptions, college sport cannot run effectively or equitably without University-level sports provision. It often goes unrecognised the extent to which University-level athletes are involved in facilitating and coordinating college sport.

The Domestic Bursars' Sport and Societies Committee offers an important coordination mechanism for college sport. It has termly meetings and has good interaction with the Sports Federation. Despite having a low turnout, the committee encourages sharing of good practice. For example, the Sports Federation has piloted a community group to enable university, community, or commercial sports teams to book facilities at college sports grounds, with 5 colleges involved in the initial 'enquiry platform' pilot.

With several colleges considering the redevelopment of their sports grounds, it makes sense to think about the coordinated development of the overall 'collegiate University sports estate'.

The sharing of college sports facilities is something that can be strengthened, including through development of a technology-enabled matching platform to share under-utilised grounds. College grounds are frequently under-used. For example, some extremely high value college cricket pitches may only be used a few times a year for matches.

A recent survey of domestic bursars reveals most are 'in principle' very supportive of sharing facilities. However, one of the biggest barriers to more equitable facilities sharing is management practice relating to sports grounds, and how colleges manage their groundstaff.

There is usually an old-fashioned 'just leave the groundsman to it' approach to managing enquiries and bookings, with just a handful (e.g. Balliol and Trinity) instead managing bookings through the lodge or administrative office. Centralising bookings has the benefit of enabling data collection and allowing forward planning on facilities sharing. Another barrier to facilities sharing is groundsmen being poorly incentivised to work overtime or on weekends. With creativity and greater oversight domestic bursars may be able to open up greater opportunities for the wider and more equitable sharing of their facilities. While practice varies greatly, some groundsmen have concerns that community use risks undermining student provision, and cultural associations and incentive structures frequently align towards having a pristine cricket pitch for the college's first XI cricket team in the summer months.

Domestic bursars could work to create a more inclusive and modern culture for groundstaff, with incentives better aligned with strategic objectives. Encouraging greater diversity when recruiting new groundstaff, involving Sport Department representation in hiring committees, and increasing groundstaff's sense of belonging within college and the University (e.g. inviting them to high table or to Varsity matches) could all help change the culture, as could encouraging greater openness to more inclusive and innovative practices (such as automated booking systems).

With several colleges considering the redevelopment of their sports grounds, it makes sense to think about the coordinated development of the overall 'collegiate University sports estate'. Rather than looking at each ground in isolation, could there be a practice of coordination to ensure complementarity rather than duplication of facilities. What does the overall collegiate University require and how could colleges and the University work together on joint planning. Not every college needs padel tennis, a climbing wall, or netball courts, but most colleges would like some degree of access to those kinds of facilities.

There is also a need for improved communication by the Sports Department (and Sports Federation) to convey to colleges that they are trying to achieve and their overall value proposition. The Sports Federation's 'casual sport newsletter' has been extremely welcome. Within this, the student wellbeing angle is one that is of high priority for colleges.

Governance of Sports Clubs and Societies

One characteristic of Oxford Sport is the (semi-) autonomous nature of many sports clubs and societies. Some have long histories, their own facilities or endowments, and strong alumni involvement. There are consistent tensions in several areas: independence v. central support; student-led v. alumni-led committees; exclusive v. shared facilities. Given different histories and backgrounds, there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Nevertheless, several principles stand out.

First, sports clubs should have autonomy to shape their own constitutions, within the boundaries of guidance provided by the Proctors' Office. It is important that the University offers protection and guidance in areas relating to liability, reputation, and principles of effective governance, by, for example, offering template constitutions that can be adapted.

Second, student-led sport should generally be the norm within Oxford Sport to avoid clubs being 'captured' by external interests. Students learn a great deal from running their own club (e.g. in relation to finances, human resources, budgets, managing people, and logistics). However, it is also appropriate that clubs find ways to ensure continuity of strategic vision and cultivate long-term relationships with their alumni by developing alumni advisory boards (e.g. football) or having external/alumni members serve on their committees (e.g. rugby, cricket, and rowing), and that student committee members are able to receive mentorship from alumni. The balance here is extremely delicate, though, and University clubs should not become run in the interests of individuals or groups of alumni. Term limits for all committee members and for Senior Members of, for example, 5-years would be advisable in order to protect the integrity of student-led sport, and to avoid institutional capture. In order to support this, there is a need for more academics to be willing to take on Senior Member roles.

Third, there should be a 'One Oxford' ethos guiding Oxford Sport, as well as the development and management of facilities. Sports clubs carrying the University brand should be expected to work collaboratively as a part of the University rather than functioning as though they are independent clubs carrying the name of the University. This is especially important when it comes to collective action on the redevelopment of sports facilities.

4.2. Facilities

There was a period in the early 2000s when Oxford developed good momentum in relation to facilities development at Iffley Road. From 1998, Oxford has dedicated fundraising capacity for sport, and the University committed to provide a notional 25% matched contribution to match external funding. After several years of work, the swimming pool opened in 2003, with joint funding from the university, all colleges, and benefactors. Every college made a contribution, with some greater than others to total of just over £300,000. Magdalen alumnus, Leaf Rosenblatt, donated £1m in honour of his late wife who loved swimming. The University put in £1m. And a £1.5m bequest via the Rhodes Trust was made, but was not ultimately honoured, leaving the University to contribute further to meet the £4.3 swimming pool costs. The Rosenblatt Swimming Pool created an initial surge in membership numbers, especially from the wider community, bringing the promise of greater commercial sustainability.



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In 2012 Faulkner Browns carried out feasibility work and developed initial architectural plans for the redevelopment of Iffley Road, with University funding. This work was divided between two phases. Phase 1 comprised the £7.2m Acer Nethercott Sports Centre, which opened in 2018. Named in honour of a former Blues coxswain, the centre comprised a glass floor sports hall, cycling studio, new café, remodelled wet changing rooms, and fitness rooms. It was funded with £4.3m of alumni and philanthropic funding (with significant input from the friends and family of Acer Nethercott), £500,000 from Sport England, and the rest supported by University underwriting. The hope was that by demonstrating commitment in Phase 1, the University could attract a lead benefactor to support a more ambitious Phase 2, encompassing a £60m overall redevelopment (which included an indoor tennis centre, a combined rugby and rowing training centre, and a new grandstand incorporating a cricket school). This has not come to fruition due to lack of funding. The notional funding model was a 'one third each' model, with equal commitment by the University, colleges, and alumni/philanthropy. But no lead funder was identified, and the 'one third each' model proved unrealistic.

> **The 'do nothing' scenario is simply not viable. It will involve struggling to sustain business continuity in relation to sport, potentially spending huge amounts on repair and maintenance of end-of-life infrastructure, while compromising student experience and student safety.**

The old Phase 2 plans are now out-of-date, and require updating. The current redevelopment plan is likely to involve five main aspects: 1) the main building at Iffley Road; 2) a gym and fitness class space at Mansfield Road; 3) the athletics stadium and grandstand; 4) the rugby ground with multi-sport provision; 5) an indoor tennis facility. A recent study by Knight, Kavanagh, and Page (KKP) indicates that with the initial phased development of the first two of these, the Sports Department should be able to significantly increase memberships and commercial income. The role of the University in this would be to provide upfront support for architectural designs and to support Strategic Capital Plan funding to partly match external donor funding.

Facilities redevelopment at Iffley Road is absolutely essential to the viability of University Sport, and without it, it is highly likely that facilities will become unsafe, collapse, and need to be closed. In 2025 the Blues Performance Gym, hosted in the upper floor of the Grandstand, was closed after being judged unsafe due to asbestos. Redevelopment is also key to long-term commercial sustainability. There is a need to move beyond piecemeal and iterative upgrades and to create a coherent redevelopment. As one colleague in Estates Services put it, 'the plan needs to be delivered in its entirety, otherwise the backlog maintenance will prohibit use, and we will continue throwing good money after bad'.

The 'do nothing' scenario is simply not viable. It will involve struggling to sustain business continuity in relation to sport, potentially spending huge amounts on repair and maintenance of end-of-life infrastructure, while compromising student experience and student safety. The sticking plaster approach is not working.

There are several challenges to facilities redevelopment that need to be overcome. First, *University commitment*. The Iffley Road redevelopment needs to be prioritised within the Strategic Capital Plan to provide matched funding that leverages donor and alumni funding. Prospective funders have made explicit the need to see the University put 'skin in the game'. The University may also need to fund initial architectural designs, just as it did in the past. This will require academic Divisional heads' support, given that the Divisions shape resource allocation through PRAC. Second, a *lead funder (or funders)*. A major donor will be needed to support and catalyse the redevelopment project. It is likely that there may be different lead funders for some of the elements identified above; for example, the 'rugby ground with multi-sport provision' might attract a distinctive donor profile, with someone strongly interested in rugby or football, for example, and committed to shaping match day experience at Iffley Road. Third, *mobilising alumni*. Alumni, mobilised through sports clubs, DAE, and collaboration with Vincent's Club, are likely to offer an important complementary source of funding for facilities. Sport-specific alumni databases and sport alumni engagement need to be improved. Fourth, *planning permission*. The University will need to liaise closely with City Council planners, and make a strong and credible case for community use. Planning is especially challenging in the context of flood plain, skyline regulation, biodiversity net gain, and local residents' potential concerns. This will require a strong sport and community engagement programme, and a collaborative working relationship with city planning officers. Fifth, *internal politics*. The successful redevelopment of our sports facilities will require all sports clubs to work together within a 'One Oxford' spirit of collaboration. It is important to note that a complex set of ownership arrangements exist on the Iffley Road site, including current Christ Church ownership of the hockey pitch and the majority of the site parking; OURFC long-term lease of the OURFC ground since its purchase by the University in 2017; and complex 'use' arrangements with particular sports clubs relating to, for example, the athletics, tennis, and football clubs.

A key consideration in the design and management of all facilities should be inclusion, enabling people from all backgrounds to participate in sport and physical activity. In particular, there needs to be a stronger focus on gender and a greater prioritisation of women's experiences of sport and physical activity at Oxford.

4.3. Finance

Oxford's sport financial model needs to be revisited. Change is needed on two levels: operational funding and capital investment.

On the operational side, the Sport Department's core budget comes from commercial revenues (around a third) and University (mainly JRAM-derived) services funding through AAD as part of the three-year financial settlement (around two thirds, noting that one half of this sum is returned to the University in space charges). It ran a surplus until 2008-9, when rising energy and staff costs, as well as growing competition for members from commercial gyms, began to affect bottom lines. Since then, it has generally run a deficit, which has usually been 'absorbed' at year-end by AAD (balancing Sports deficit against savings achieved elsewhere in AAD). In 2024-25, Sport will run a breakeven/tiny surplus because AAD has been allocated additional annual funding through reallocation of funds across UAS to AAD. Without this, Sport would otherwise have a deficit of more than £350k. Embedding this additional funding is extremely important for offering a 'reset' that can incentivise the Sports Department to effectively and innovatively manage costs and revenues. However, University allocation to Sport remains low when benchmarked against per capita spending on sport at equivalent UK universities, and there is a need to further increase the annual allocation to Sport. It would not seem unreasonable to set a target equivalent to the average per capita contribution of the other Russell Group universities.



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However, one further change is needed to the operational budget: to enable Sport to retain and invest any surplus it generates. At the moment, any surplus generated by a service department is aggregated at UAS level. UAS, unlike the academic divisions, is not normally able to hold on to any surplus as a 'reserve'. There are some instances in UAS (e.g. Graduate Accommodation Office) where wholly commercially-focused units are permitted to hold reserves. Sport should be governed by the same principles, despite not being wholly commercial, enabling the accumulation of surplus or deficit over a three-year period. This would incentivise good financial stewardship, innovation, and generate funding for direct facility improvements.

On the capital investment side, there are even greater challenges. University sport depends upon consistent and predictable capital investment. Without it, facilities depreciate, and we risk buildings needing to be replaced. The top-60 BUCS universities invest on average around £20 million in sports capital every 5-years. The Sports Department budget does not currently allow for maintenance or capital investment.

Sport should be more widely celebrated and have greater visibility across the University, in order to gradually build a culture within which students and staff recognise and appreciate the contribution of Oxford Sport.

A separate funding pot is needed for capital investment and maintenance. One way to achieve that would be to create some kind of dedicated fund for capital investment in sport. Initially, this might focus on the relatively modest cost of renewing existing facilities across their lifecycle, before expanding to include new capital investment.

The space charge on Sport (and other parts of the University estate) is considered essential to fund Estates Services' capacity to maintain the overall estate, and it would be difficult to justify an exemption for Sport. However, it is worth highlighting that the space charge means that each year nearly half of the University funding allocated to Sport is simply paid back to the University as a space charge. While recognising the importance of this funding to Estates, it creates an absurd situation for a Sports Department without dedicated funding for capital costs. One proposal would be for a limited part of the space charge for Sport to be allocated to support a hypothecated fund, managed within Estates, that would support capital investment (and maintenance) for sport. This would need to be carefully justified as a necessary exception in relation to Estates Services general approach to the space charge.

In summary, the current model contributes to the unsustainability of sport, and is widely seen as absurd. As one colleague put it, 'It is utterly perverse to…tell [Sport] to prioritise commercial income, and then take money away as a space charge in ways that leave it with no capacity to invest, making it less commercially viable, and then we end up with a pool students and staff can't use because it's been rented to schools to make ends meet'. Three reforms could make a significant difference:

- The creation of a dedicated fund for capital investment in sport, potentially derived in part from the space charge paid to Estates.
- Multi-year budget cycles with the ability of the Sports Department to carry-over surplus or deficit over a 3-year time horizon, with management accountability;
- An uplift in in the overall collegiate University contribution to Sport equivalent to per capita investment across the Russell Group.

4.4. Communications

Sport should be more widely celebrated and have greater visibility across the University, to gradually build a culture within which students and staff recognise and appreciate the contribution of Oxford Sport. One thing that we have started to do is award honorary degrees to sports legends as a way to raise the profile of sport. A number of practical ideas might be adopted at relatively low cost, many of which have been developed in some form at other UK universities.

- Identifying dedicated communications capacity within PAD or UAS communications to support story-telling relating to sport. This could also involve supporting improved sports reporting (including of fixtures and events) on websites and within the student press.
- Creating a University-wide campaign to promote sport, and its history across the University, emulating Cambridge's excellent series of photos showing elite athletes playing their sports across iconic labs, libraries, quads, and debating chambers across the University.
- Displaying athlete profiles on the walls of Iffley Road, in the way that has been successfully done at many universities, such as Brunel.
- Improving access to university sports apparel for students, staff, community, and visitors (e.g. by stocking through GLAM).
- Including sport within the Vice-Chancellor's Awards, or identifying alternative ways to recognise, reward, and celebrate commitment to University sport.
- Allocating dedicated spaces for the history of sport within the University, including through temporary and permanent exhibitions, a hall of fame, as a means to improve narrative story-telling relating to the past achievements and personalities associated with Oxford Sport.
- The creation of a unifying brand identity for Oxford Sport, encompassing and connecting all aspects of sport, including different clubs, college sport, and possibly also Vincent's Club.

5 Next steps

This review has tried to provide an even-handed assessment of the good, the bad, and the ugly of Oxford Sport. There is much to praise as well as critique. Through the remarkable commitment of many students and staff, Oxford significantly over-performs in all aspects of sport relative to the current levels of investment. Inter-collegiate sport, which is largely run by University sports clubs, is a unique means to support recreational sport and participation in physical activity.

There is no escaping the fact that Oxford is systematically depreciating one if its greatest assets.

Oxford Sport is a major part of our history, brand, and reputation. It offers a significant return on investment through student experience and wellbeing, as well as mattering for a range of other strategic priorities from staff conditions to community engagement.

There needs to be a step-change in how we invest in sport and physical activity across the University. The most immediate part of this is facilities, with infrastructure now becoming end-of-life and unsafe, as a result of sustained under-investment in capital and maintenance.

But investment in facilities alone will not be enough, as Oxford Sport also needs to be better governed and managed across the University.

The aim of this review is to be solutions-oriented, and to provide a roadmap for change. Box 5 below provides a summary of some of these recommendations, and a guide to how they might be prioritised. Not all of the recommendations will be implemented at once, and so it is important to highlight the most immediate and transformative steps. A full implementation plan will need to be developed once the findings of the review have been considered (a provisional review implementation plan can be found in Appendix 2).

BOX 5: SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

10 Priority Actions

1. **Upgrading facilities** – external fundraising to support the complete redevelopment of the Iffley Road sports centre and related facilities.
2. **Brand identity** – commission work on a unifying brand identity and campaign for sport, aimed at internal and external audiences.
3. **Organisational culture** – outline and implement a plan to support a more innovative, strategic, and proactive culture across the Sports Department.
4. **College ground sharing** – develop a technology-enabled platform for better sharing of college and University sport facilities across the University and with the local community.
5. **Governance reform** – explore the possibility for the Sports Department to be relocated from AAD to Estates Services or as a standalone UAS service in advance of the next 3-year Settlement, and repositioning a new Sport Strategy Committee within University governance.
6. **Capital investment fund** – scope ways to create a dedicated fund for capital investment in sport facilities to ensure ongoing infrastructure maintenance and continuous improvement, while enabling the Sports Department to retain and reinvest budget surplus over a multi-year time horizon.
7. **Coaching network** – create a pan-University coaches network, offering greater opportunities for inclusion and belonging, as well as coach development.
8. **Transport for teams** – invest in alternative transport solutions that ensure safe and reliable transport for sports teams to travel to BUCS fixtures.
9. **Staff sport hub** – strengthen the coordination and provision of opportunities to engage in sport and physical activity for staff.
10. **Sport and community** – improve the sharing of our facilities and coaching capacity with schools and local sports clubs to create opportunities for young people and strengthen the connection between the University and the wider community.

5 Quick Wins

1. **Sport Strategy Committee –** rename the Sport Strategic Subcommittee (SSSC) as the 'Sport Strategy Committee' to raise its profile, and amend the TORs to provide greater clarity on its governance role and to give it a more strategic role in taking forwards the recommendations of this review.
2. **Data collection for sport –** ensure the Sports Federation works closely with the Student Data Modelling and Analytics (SDMA) and the Student Data Insights teams to collect and publish data on the impact of sport on student wellbeing and academic performance.
3. **Wellbeing Wednesdays –** widely promote the importance of Wednesdays for inclusive student participation in sport, physical activity, and other wellbeing related activities.
4. **Collective action on participation –** improve collegiate University collaboration on physical activity and wellbeing across colleges and the University, including by strengthening investment in Active at Oxford.
5. **Leadership within sports clubs –** support sports clubs and societies to be both genuinely student-led and also supported to become capable of long-term strategic planning.

3 Long-Term Goals

1. **Collegiate University Sports Estate –** jointly plan the complementary development of college and University sports grounds.
2. **World-leading sport research –** gradually develop our sport-relevant research and innovation capacity, with connections to our facilities.
3. **Investment in performance –** build a strategic plan to be nationally leading in at least 5 major marquee sports, and supporting elite athlete recruitment through scholarships, in ways that strengthen our brand recognition and reputation.



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The recommendations in the report are a collective responsibility, and have implications for different parts of the collegiate University:

Sport Strategic Subcommittee/Education Committee – to revise the TORs of SSSC to become a more strategic and authoritative advisory board for the Sports Department; to create a series of small working groups to take forward and deepen elaboration, prioritisation, and implementation of some of the recommendations in this review (e.g. student-athlete recruitment, staff sport hub, financial model, creation of a coaches' network, coordinating sport-relevant research) based on an initial implementation plan.

Sports Department – to work with the Academic Registrar and the PVC Sport to develop a cultural and organisational change programme to improve management and leadership practices within the Department.

Colleges – to strengthen links between college and University sport, including through the Domestic Bursars Sport and Societies Committee; to collaborate to improve college sports ground sharing; to update booking models and support innovation within the management of college sports ground; to work collaboratively on an integrated 'collegiate University sports estate' approach to maximise complementarities across sports ground development; to support a culture of recognising and valuing student participation in sport; to further invest in strengthening student participation, wellbeing, and welfare referral programmes linked to physical activity (e.g. Active in Oxford, and Moving Minds).

Estates Services – to explore the potential for the Sports Department to report into Estates Services, and to provide dedicated staffing to support the sustainable development and management of University sports facilities.

SCSG & PRAC – to raise the status of Sport on the strategic capital plan, to support the allocation of strategic capital funding to match external donor support for the redevelopment of our sports facilities, and to create a dedicated fund for capital investment and capital maintenance relating to sport facilities.

Finance Committee – to support the Sports Department to be able to manage its budget over a multi-year time horizon, including retaining and reinvesting future surplus.

AAD and UAS – to establish clear targets for funding allocation to Sport for operating costs and capital investment, benchmarked against Russell Group per capita investment; to ensure student surveys and data collection systematically include data and analysis relating to the correlation between participation in sport and academic performance/wellbeing.

PAD/UAS Communications – to work with the Sports Federation to strengthen communications relating to sport, including the development of a regularly updated strategic communications plan for sport.

DAE – to fully integrate Oxford Sport into the University-wide fundraising campaign; to work collaboratively with Vincent's Club and sports clubs to establish a sport-related alumni database.

Council – to establish an annual space in the agenda to receive a brief update on 'the state of University sport and physical activity'.

Sports clubs and societies – to work within a 'One Oxford' spirit to support the reform of Oxford Sport and the redevelopment of facilities at Iffley Road.

Vice-Chancellor – to continue to champion Oxford Sport, to consider including it within the Vice-Chancellor's Awards, and to consider supporting the creation of a small 'Sport Innovation Fund' to enable new ideas to be tried that can add significant value to the culture and success of sport (e.g. technology-enabled ground sharing, physical activity and wellbeing pilots, communications, transport, evidence-based coaching practices, and community engagement).

In a decentralised university, everyone will need to work together to ensure that Oxford Sport thrives.

Appendices

Appendix 1: TORs for the Review of Sport

The Committee is asked to provide feedback on the draft TORs for a proposed Review of Oxford Sport.

Background

At various points, the University has commissioned reviews of sport in Oxford, including in 2009 and 2016. These have generally been undertaken by a Committee to Review Oxford Sport, and covered a range of areas, providing a status report relating to current facilities, finance, development plans, college sport, and governance, for example. External consultants have also looked at various aspects of the management of sport.

The Vice-Chancellor has asked the Chair of SSSC to undertake a review of Oxford Sport. The aim is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current sports provision across Oxford, in the context of the resources and capacities that are currently available to sport. The review will propose actionable recommendations to strengthen Oxford Sport, including for the benefit of students, staff, and the community. It will set out a clear roadmap for strengthening the management and governance of sport within the collegiate University, as well as ordering priorities and identifying the resources needed to deliver improvements.

TORs

The review will cover, but not be limited to the following areas:

- The management of the Sports Department, including coordination across leisure operations, students sport, and grounds, as well as the role of data, insight, and learning.
- The governance structure relating to sport at the University level, including the position of Sport under AAD, of SSSC as a sub-committee of Education Committee, the relationship between SSSC and the Domestic Bursars Sport and Societies Committee, and broader connections to student experience including the work of the Student Life Committee and the work of Student Welfare and Support Services.
- The coordination of sport between the University and Colleges, including the management of inter-collegiate sport and the sharing of facilities.
- The financial model on which sport is based, current resource constraints, and the scope to consider alternative and more sustainable funding models, as well as the potential role of commercial income sources and links to research and education.
- The support and guidance available to sports clubs and societies, including areas such as committee training, standard-setting, and engagement.
- The strategic value of sport to the University, including the evidence relating to its impact on student recruitment and experience, staff recruitment and satisfaction, reputation and brand recognition, alumni giving, and community engagement.
- The balance of student, staff, and community provision, and make explicit the balance needed to best align with University strategic objectives.
- The extent to which we are achieving our performance and participation targets, and whether there are ways to strengthen them.

Appendix 2: Provisional Review Implementation Plan

Action	Timeframe	Key Stakeholders	Resource Requirement
Reflection and integration of review findings			
SSSC to reflect on findings and consider creating small working groups that can take forward particular aspects of the review	ST (2026-27)	SSSC	n/a
Disseminate review findings to relevant committees & stakeholders	ST (2026)	Conference of Colleges/ Council/PAD/UAS Comms/Sports Council/ Sports Clubs	n/a
Internal panel event to discuss and launch review	ST (2026)	PVC Sport/Sports Department	Modest
Governance			
Review TORs of SSSC and take paper to Education Committee	ST (2026)	SSSC/Education Committee	n/a
Explore options to move the Sports Department from AAD to either Estates Services or as standalone within UAS in advance of 2029-32 settlement	MT (2027-28)	AAD/Estates/Registrar	n/a
Strengthen advice and guidance to sports clubs on leadership and strategy	MT (2026-27)	DAE/Sports Federation/ PVC Sport/OUSU	Modest
Finance			
Make business case for the Sports Department to have multi-year budget cycles and to retain and reinvest surplus	ST (2026-27)	Finance/Finance Committee	n/a
Explore options to create a dedicated capital investment fund for sport	ST/MT (2026-28)	Finance/Estates/Sports Department	Initially the fund would cover maintenance costs, then expand to new investment
Management			
Develop cultural and organisational improvement plan with Sports Department	ST (2026-27)	Academic Registrar/ Director of Sport/PVC Sport	n/a
Consider additional investment in senior Sports Department staff capacity to support balance between strategy, operations, and innovation	MT (2027-)	Sports Department/ PVC Sport/Academic Registrar/UAS	Will rely upon a strong business case to fund sustainably
Facilities			
City Centre sports and leisure centre	MT (2027-28)	DAE/Estates/Sports Department	External donor funding & University support (via SCSG) for initial planning stages
Iffley Road indoor tennis centre	MT (2027-29)	DAE/Estates/Sports Department	External donor funding & University support (via SCSG) for initial planning stages

Iffley Road Rugby Ground redevelopment (multi-sport AGP & West Stand development)	MT (2027-30)	DAE/Estates/Sports Department/OURFC	Joint effort with OURFC, building on initial feasibility work
Iffley Road main building and grandstand redevelopment	MT/LT (2027-32)	DAE/Estates/Sports Department/Sports Clubs	External donor & alumni funding & University support (via SCSG) for initial planning stages
Communications			
Commission development of new brand identity (and campaign) for Oxford Sport	ST/MT (2026-27)	Sports Department/ Sports Clubs/Vincent's Club/VC and Registrar's Office	c.£20-25,000
Review overall communications strategy relating to sport (incl. website/intranet)	ST/MT (2026-27)	PAD/UAS Comms/Sports Federation	Modest
Identify innovative ways to raise the profile of Oxford Sport (e.g. apparel, hall of fame, exhibitions, VC Awards, speaker series, matchday experience)	MT (2026-29)	Sports Department/PVC Sport	Modest; consider creation of a 'Sport Innovation Fund' (c. £20,000 per year)
College-University Coordination			
Develop a technology-enabled college-grounds sharing model	MT (2027-29)	Sport and Community Engagement Officer/ domestic bursars/ college ground staff/Sports Federation	c. £10-15,000 for platform development
Strengthen collaboration through the ICM mechanism, to reinforce college support for areas of support directly related to student experience, safety, and wellbeing (e.g. transport, welfare referral)	ST/MT (2026-29)	Sports Federation/ college finance and domestic bursars	Agree to an annual ICM uplift
Improve the governance link between SSSC and college sports governance (e.g. Colleges Sport and Societies Committee)	MT (2026-27)	SSSC/Colleges Sport and Societies Committee	n/a
Create integrated 'collegiate University sports estate' approach to joint facilities development	MT/LT (2027-)	Estates Services/ Colleges Estates Bursars Committee	n/a
Performance			
Assess options for strengthening coaching culture (e.g. networks, coach development, hiring)	ST/MT (2026-27)	Blues Performance team/ Sports Department/ Sports Federation/Sports Clubs	Modest
Explore options for improving elite athlete recruitment (e.g. through establishment of sport scholarships)	MT (2026-29)	DAE/Sport Clubs/Senior Tutors/Astrophoria Foundation team	External fundraising for sport scholarships
Review options for improving commercial delivery of sports injury rehabilitation and related services at Iffley Rd	MT (2027-29)	Sports Department/Blue Performance team	Modest
Enhance transport services available for BUCS participation	MT (2027-)	Sports Federation	£24,000-£60,000 per year uplift depending on approach

Participation			
Create a campaign around 'Wellbeing Wednesdays'	ST (2026-28)	OUSU/UAS Communications/ College Senior Tutors/Education Committee	n/a
Further strengthen welfare referral programmes (e.g. Moving Minds), as well as Active at Oxford	ST/MT (2026-29)	Colleges (through ICM)/ Sports Federation	c. £45,000 per year (for additional 200 student referrals)
Staff			
Identify opportunities to strengthen staff access to sport and leisure facilities	ST (2026-)	Pay and Conditions Review Board/People/ Sport Department	Staffing seconding from P&C team
Explore options for a dedicated staff sport hub linked to the University Club/ Mansfield Road	MT (2027-)	SSSC/Sports Department/People	Modest (for scoping)
Community			
Deliver Young Sport Leaders Programme and sports enrichment activities to school children across Oxford	ST (2026-)	Sport and Community Engagement Officer; PVC Sport; Vincent's Club	Sport and Community Engagement Officer salary from 2028 (externally funded '26-'28); programme costs
Strengthen collaboration and partnership with local sports clubs and organisations	ST (2026-)	Sport and Community Engagement Officer; PVC Sport; Community Partnership Fund	Encourage Community Partnership Fund applications
Improve sharing of sport facilities with the community, especially outside term time	ST/MT (2026-)	Sports Department; College Domestic Bursars; Sport and Community Engagement Officer	Opportunity cost of facilities use; coordination

*ST refers to short-term, MT medium-term, and LT long-term.

Appendix 3: Acknowledgements

All errors of fact or interpretation are the responsibility of the author. However, the author also wishes to thank several people, in additional to the many people who provided off-the-record insights, for their advice and guidance in preparing this Review, or otherwise shaped my thinking, including: Lynne Adam, Mark Blandford-Baker, Tom Barrett, Holly Bridge, Alisa Brown, Ed Brooks, David Butler, Paddy Chatterton, Ollie Cook, Tiahan Eeles, Callie Kanim, Richard Hull, Sir Mike Jacobs, Ian Kench, Jo Lateu, Jennifer Makkreel, Seb Pearce, Tom Renshaw, Jon Roycroft, David Seale, Gareth Simpson, Saira Shaikh, Dame Sarah Springman, Andrew Taylor, Claire Taylor, and the Vice-Chancellor.

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