THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING IN BRITAIN: REPORT

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the Group.
This Report was researched by Danny Stone MBE and no funds were spent in its production.

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This All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry was commissioned by Alex Davies-Jones MP and Mark Fletcher MP, Co-Chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wrestling.

The terms of reference for the report were:

To inquire into the current status of British wrestling, the contribution the industry makes to Britain and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its success.

To review whether the current law and regulations governing the industry are fit for purpose and to uncover models of good practice.

To make recommendations, rooted in good practice where possible, for frameworks to improve, or measures to support, the industry.

The parliamentary team that undertook the policy review and authored the report included:

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Whilst all the members of the investigatory team were parliamentarians the investigation held no official powers and the report is not an official parliamentary report. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wrestling is an informal collective of parliamentarians connected through their shared passion and support for professional wrestling.

Though we have referenced evidence submitted to us in the report that follows, we had a number of requests from individuals and others that their names be redacted. In order to protect these identities and others, we have anonymised the names of most witnesses except in certain circumstances, for example where it is appropriate to highlight someone’s work.
Foreword

Wrestling is a passion of ours. There are many responsibilities one has as a British parliamentarian, but it is not always possible to marry duty and joy. This project is one such endeavour.

We joined together to try and help British wrestling because of our love for the industry, our enjoyment of its various products and our admiration of the stars that make it what it is – both behind the scenes and in the ring.

Whether it be athletic prowess, storytelling, bright lights, music, colourful tights, or sharing anything from a room to an arena full of fellow fans all chanting in unison in support of or opposition to your chosen talent, we all have our reasons for loving wrestling.

Independent British wrestling is at somewhat of a crossroads. Having been unregulated for decades it faces a number of significant challenges. It appears to have been held back, often through mismanagement or poor practice.

From our initial conversations with the UK Government it is clear that should the industry – and the sector as a whole – pull together, we can find ways in which to support and better regulate it. If the industry cannot or will not do so, the status quo will prevail.

There are then three options. It can continue as it is, successful but not realising its potential, sometimes mired in controversy, rising as far as it can before falling again. Alternatively, unable to rebound post-pandemic, it could sink lower, as promotions struggle with responsibility, fail to address the Speaking Out movement’s concerns and succumb to financial pressures or otherwise fail to deliver. Optimistically, it can build and prosper, gaining newfound respect and confidence in the process. However, realising this vision requires a change in culture.

There are many facets to wrestling in Britain – promotions, training schools, merchandisers, fans, all are a part of it and no one part is perfect. Our role has been
to seek to show leadership. To put aside the specifics and to look at it holistically. In truth, we have found that the culture can be toxic. On the one hand, as volunteers sitting through hours of evidence we listened to blame, finger pointing, unhappiness and in some cases bravado, which was certainly not what we had hoped for. However, on the other hand, there are wonderful examples of good practice, very good people seeking to improve the industry and for the talent, glimmers of light. In order to cultivate these positive aspects of the business, and shape it for good, will require a change in the conversation. It will require teamwork.

If British wrestling is lacking anything at present, it is that shared vision. Unity. Rather than grudging acceptance of change, we would like to see shared determination for it. Rather than looking to pull things apart, efforts to build them up. We have set out some of what we think might be possible for the future, but it will require buy-in from across the industry, from promoters, fans, schools and others to make a change. Not what can be done for the individual, but for the collective. Not ‘I’ but ‘we’. It is our sincere hope that together we can begin a conversation that will shape British wrestling for many years, that will see it boom as we believe it can, and that will deliver the industry the future it deserves.
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Overview

Though it has been the subject of documentaries, academic papers, Government commissions and news reports, British Wrestling has never been the subject of a parliamentary report of this nature. This is the first time that the British professional wrestling world can be seen in the round from a policy perspective and as such, much of the thinking requires a back-to-basics approach. We received evidence from wrestlers, promoters, ring crew, announcers, managers, fans, academics, medical professionals and others. We have drawn on that evidence to try and map where the problems exist and where the solutions may be found.

The aims of the inquiry were modest. These were to understand the wrestling industry, its contribution to Britain and the impact of the pandemic on its success. We sought to review current regulations and identify good practice and then to make recommendations based on those findings. We wanted to begin a conversation.

In the introductory chapter, we seek to provide a wide and thorough overview of British wrestling in order to add context for the chapters of the report that follow. We discuss what we call a major data deficiency in relation to the industry and set out to establish what we know, anecdotally, about British wrestling’s impact on the UK economy and provide facts about its history. We make recommendations for data collection and appropriate memorialisation of the past. We then provide details on wider aspects of British wrestling including academic inquiry, charitable activities, diversity and discrimination and seek to highlight helpful resources. Finally, we turn to competition both domestic and international, globalisation, Brexit, TV rights and emerging markets, at least in a pre-pandemic context.

Though some have weathered the global COVID-19 pandemic to an extent, the unparalleled harm it has done is explored from both a practical and theoretical standpoint in Chapter two. We set out details of cancelled shows, training schools unable to educate, anxiety about the future and the impact on mental health. We relay some detail relating to the impact on self-employed workers and make a recommendation for a recovery fund. We also talk to the difficulties experienced by many in understanding which guidance to follow and this speaks directly to the complexities in classifying wrestling.

In chapter three, we discuss the different understandings and perspectives on how to classify wrestling. We provide detail on both the theoretical understanding of whether wrestling is artistic or sporting, and the practitioners’ views on the same. We explain some of the historic efforts to classify British wrestling and the position of key stakeholders outside of
the industry. We also detail the problems with current uncertainty surrounding the status of professional wrestling and make what we consider to be the central recommendation for this report in respect of how to classify wrestling for the future, in Britain.

Having sought to bring clarity to the definition of wrestling, we examine and make recommendations relating to UK wrestling promotions. We raise concerns about the limited guidance, absence of risk assessments and low bar for entry to the industry. We discuss the different types of UK promotions that exist and concerns that were raised with us relating to business arrangements, financial stability, tax and fraud. We also highlight concerns about the wider impact of malpractice on the reputation of the industry. We then examine in detail concerns about pay and employee rights including contractual arrangements, unionisation and the gender pay gap, making a recommendation about research relating to the latter. We discuss contracting, overseas working, professionalism and general standards, making a number of related recommendations.

In chapter five we consider expert evidence on the state of Health and Safety in the British wrestling industry. Though all sections of the report are important, we highlight several changes we believe need to be instituted with urgency. We highlight numerous concerns relating to injury with a specific focus on concussions and head injuries. We also consider ‘blading’ and the use of blood, ring safety and physical fitness and make a series of recommendations pertaining to these issues. We then discuss mental health and highlight resources and the role and future responsibilities for social media companies. Finally, we evidence good practice before making several significant recommendations about minimum standards for the industry.

The Speaking Out Movement provided the impetus for some of the most recent changes in the wrestling industry. In chapter six, we review and address the Speaking Out Movement. We place this in both a historical and wider context of abuse of wrestlers, particularly women, and the struggle against violence and harassment, for equality and fair treatment. We provide an overview of the appalling treatment revealed by the movement, the reach of the abuse, the
impact on talent and fans and talk to the cultural issues that exist within wrestling. We then look at the wider issues in relation to sexual abuse, legal protections and the responses to the movement, including good practice. We provide details on a pledge of our own. We then focus on responses to those that had accusations levelled against them and return to the dangers presented by social media before discussing so-called ‘customs’ matches, alternative media and our response to concerns raised about these, making a further recommendation.

In chapter seven, we turn to training schools, providing some background and setting out current requirements and challenges for establishing a training institution. We discuss the growth in number of schools but the failure to achieve a commensurate increase in standards. We review troubling cases of bad training experiences and make a recommendation about data handling. We review and make recommendations about the legal loophole relating to coaching as a position of trust for 16-18-year olds specifically and discuss age appropriate training. We then consider student safety in other areas and look towards joint working and the sharing of good practice.

In the final substantive chapter, we review efforts to govern the industry in the past, highlight the numerous proposals and expectations from stakeholders across British wrestling about what would be expected from a governing body and make proposals for future governance.

The UK has a fantastic, well-deserved and hard-earned reputation for wrestling excellence. This is despite many of the problems that have been raised or that we have unearthed through the inquiry process. If Britain is to continue to enjoy its status as a jewel in the wrestling crown, we must invest now to ensure the training grounds and the performance platforms for wrestlers, amongst other aspects of the industry, match the quality of our greatest stars and most promising talent. We must ensure professional wrestling gets the respect it deserves. We hope that this report – which is the beginning of a process and not the end - will change the conversation from what has gone wrong in British wrestling, to what it has to offer and how we can, together, further build an industry of which we can all be proud.
1. Introduction and Background

1.1 The Report

1. On 24 September 2020 the co-chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wrestling, Alex Davies-Jones MP and Mark Fletcher MP, announced their intention together with colleagues to instigate a parliamentary inquiry into the successes, challenges and potential improvements that could be made to the professional wrestling industry in Britain. In the process of compiling this report we have examined evidence from various sources and have determined that there is an urgent requirement for action on many fronts.

2. The terms of reference of this report are as follows:

- To inquire into the current status of British wrestling, the contribution the industry makes to Britain and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its success.
- To review whether the current law and regulations governing the industry are fit for purpose and to uncover models of good practice.
- To make recommendations, rooted in best practice where possible, for frameworks to improve, or measures to support, the industry.

1.2 An Overview of Professional Wrestling in Britain

3. It would be fairly standard practice in a report of this type for us to begin with a dataset. Indeed, it would be fairly standard for that information to be provided by a professional body which in turn might be the secretariat to the APPG on Wrestling. Such a dataset could inform readers how much British professional wrestling contributes to the economy. It might inform readers how many wrestling training schools exist, their size, the number of registered performers in the UK and so on. However, despite being told there is “more wrestling in UK per square mile than any other country in the world.” and that there had been “peaks and troughs in wrestling’s contribution to culture and the UK economy” there is a major data deficiency when it comes to substantiating these claims. No-one that we spoke to throughout the inquiry process was able to detail, in full, how many wrestling promotions exist across the UK (one guessed 120), how many people pass through wrestling events in a year, how much wrestling generates for the UK economy each year, what level of investment there has been in the industry over a decade, the volume of trade UK wrestling companies do overseas and so on.
4. We were made aware of only one national survey carried out, at undergraduate level, to assess British wrestling audiences and focused on marketing strategies to support fan attendance and retention. Though there was no benchmark for comparison, at the time, the largest demographic consisted of males up to the age of 25, and audiences were said to decline from that age onward. Fans were also said to travel short distances to shows. The survey has not been repeated and is now several years out of date. This lack of data neither helps the industry promote itself, nor to grow.

5. In respect of the industry’s impact on the economy, witnesses suggested that with attendees at live shows visiting key entertainment venues, offering patronage to local restaurants and spending in local pubs the impact was positive, particularly where shows fall on days of the week which would not normally be busy. This was said to be especially true for so-called touring companies which visit smaller towns and venues.

6. Fans that spoke to us suggested they could spend as much as £875 per year on tickets alone and might also book hotels for overnight stays and so on. Meanwhile, one of the larger UK promotions, Progress wrestling, talked to us about the significant financial gamble it had engaged in over booking a show at London’s Wembley Arena, giving a sense of the reach some promotions now have. The wrestling industry’s wider positive impacts on the economy through training schools, including crime prevention, reduction in self-harm and hospital admissions were also brought to our attention and would need to be considered as part of any future economic impact assessment.

7. We are aware of academic projects and studies to assess various elements of wrestling but data about the industry remains sparse and we recommend this as an area of investigation for academics, statisticians and the industry itself.

8. Most of the evidence about the industry’s apparent growth in recent years was anecdotal. One submission suggested the internet had helped break barriers, facilitate access, improve equality, and diversify audiences. We were also told British wrestling had been seen to “drastically evolve” from 50 people to 1000 attending events. The progress the industry had made over the past two decades
was described to us as a “phoenix rising from the ashes”, having reportedly declined in popularity following the decision in 1985 to remove World of Sport from ITV.10

9. We have a firm sense of British wrestling history thanks to historian and author Bradley Craig. We are indebted to Mr. Craig, who has a remarkable knowledge of the history of British wrestling, for his submission. We reproduce much of it below as it helped to frame our understanding of the modern industry.11

10. Professional wrestling in the United Kingdom has its origins in various parts of the country, stemming from legitimate ‘shoot’ [not pre-determined] wrestling contests, localised forms of people grappling and other combat sports that have steadily grown their appeal. To sustain audiences, professional wrestling veered away from legitimate fights and towards predetermined bouts that focused on crowd entertainment, but this was generally a close-guarded secret from the dawn of the 20th century. By the 1930’s, most forms of pro-wrestling adopted the term ‘all-in’ wrestling, to acknowledge the fact that it was very much a hybrid style.

11. Following the Second World War, it was estimated that over 120,000 spectators attended professional wrestling events each week. Due to public concern and increasing media pressure regarding controversies on this growing ‘bloodsport’, together with a dearth in quality wrestling talent, a governmental enquiry about the industry was launched. A 1946 commission, led by Admiral Lord Mountevans, Maurice Webb MP and other consultees within the profession resulted in the establishment of unified rules that were then, despite the commission having no formal authority, adopted by the majority of professional wrestling promotions throughout the United Kingdom.

12. By 1952, there was a major overhaul in British professional wrestling with the establishment of Joint Promotions, a cartel of wrestling promoters with offices throughout the country. This however also created a monopoly environment for performing talent and competing promoters. Len Ironside CBE, himself a wrestling veteran with over two decades experience, also provided us with details of British wrestling history. He explained that Joint Promotions created seven weight divisions and most matches consisted of six, eight or ten rounds, five minutes in length and in which competitors battled to win the best of two out of three pinfalls.12

13. Three years later, professional wrestling secured regular coverage on British screens, forever changing the industry once again. Throughout the 1960’s and
1970’s, Mr. Ironside told us, between 11-14 million people used to tune in to watch the shows. The pinnacle of televised wrestling, according to Bradley Craig, occurred on 25th May 1963, during a return contest between ‘Mr TV’ Jackie Pallo and Mick McManus which immediately preceded the FA Cup Final. There are reports that the 1963 rematch between McManus and Pallo drew 3 million more viewers than the Cup Final itself, at least on ITV, which aired the football in competition against national broadcasting giant BBC. Some claimants insist that the match attracted a total of 16 million viewers. It is now accepted as a historical fact that this contest drew the highest viewing figure of any bout in British wrestling history. Around this time, wrestling continued to be a hugely popular spectator attraction. According to memoirs from industry insiders, Joint Promotions were running as many as sixty shows per week, across the breadth of the United Kingdom. This figure excludes smaller shows being presented by independent promoters across Britain, so the actual number of weekly shows would likely be significantly larger in size.

Joint Promotions failed to adapt to changing tastes, and pro wrestling faced a steady decline in the 1980s. Though the likes of Giant Haystacks and Big Daddy were household names, amidst falling ratings, Independent Television (ITV) ceased production of its weekly pro wrestling content, ending a tradition of 33 years of its weekly terrestrial television coverage. Despite this, there remained a demand for professional wrestling on television.

Imported shows from international wrestling organisations, particularly American brands, resulted in strong viewing figures across the country and helped bolster the expansion of satellite and cable television in the United Kingdom. Among the companies that were broadcast via these methods, the World Wrestling Federation found an avid fanbase on Sky, and the United Kingdom became the key foreign market for the promotion. Meanwhile, the popularity of American professional wrestling was also embraced by a number of regional franchisees within the ITV network, which led to recurring broadcasts of content produced by World Championship Wrestling on terrestrial television. The action-packed shows provided by the WWF and WCW, with their updated production values, would explode in popularity and eventually lead to a series of UK tours from both brands. The apex of this boom was realised by the WWF as it presented its annual SummerSlam pay-per-view spectacular to a record-breaking crowd of over 80,000 people at Wembley Stadium on 29th August 1992, the largest assembly of spectators to ever attend a professional wrestling event in the United Kingdom. Spectators saw the now appropriately titled Hall of Famer, the British Bulldog Davey Boy Smith defeat Bret ‘the Hitman’ Hart for the WWE’s Intercontinental Title.
16. The American promotions featured rules that were different than the traditional regulations that were formed by the Mountevans commission. Due to the popularity of these promotions, a number of British promotions phased out traditional wrestling with rounds and time limits in favour of a transatlantic-influenced product. However, domestic pro wrestling still faced a massive decline into the new millennium.

17. In the early 2000s, a growing number of small start-up promotions were established, which emulated the American-style promotions and eventually helped usher in a resurgent pro wrestling boom in the early-2010s. The new style, known as BritWres, continued to attract a rapidly growing fanbase to various promotions that now operate throughout the UK. Some of these promotions, including Revolution Pro Wrestling, Insane Championship Wrestling, Progress and others, have capitalised on the digital streaming and content sharing opportunities to attract an audience throughout the globe. It was put to us that the growth of social media had also facilitated the creation of continuing storyline narratives for these and other promotions “more akin to prominent American promotions than the more traditional one-night spectacles” and that there were other related consequences.13

18. Mr. Craig set out some concern that with the apparent Americanisation of the UK wrestling sphere, a once-thriving domestic industry has perhaps lost its connection to local history and heritage and suffered a form of cultural assimilation. This has led to a number of initiatives taken to preserve the history of wrestling in Great Britain, not least Scotland’s own Hall of Fame which Mr. Craig founded.
19. The Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame for Scotland is a non-profit entity founded in 2015 to preserve the heritage of the Scottish professional wrestling industry. It was established with the mission to celebrate and preserve the rich history of the performance art, science and sport of the professional wrestling within the cultural fabric to the nation of Scotland, and to honour the achievements and significance of its key contributors. It achieves this mission through a series of annual public ceremonies dedicated to the celebration of each nominated inductee. Typically, these services occur at historic wrestling venues which were relevant to the career of the selected recipient. Each ceremony is hosted by the figurehead of the local authority relevant to the induction location and culminates with the presentation of a commemorative plaque. These plaques contain imagery and information on each inductee and are permanently located in the building which has held the ceremony. Interestingly, this domestic initiative is said to have influenced the formation of the International Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame in the United States, which aims to open an attraction in New York.

20. The Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame for Scotland is an excellent initiative; one we recommend the Scottish Government should officially recognise and support. We hope that with support from across Great Britain this might be expanded further, preserving and appropriately memorialising great British wrestling talents and will engage the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about this.

21. Whether it be our history, industrial confidence or otherwise, wrestling in Britain is aspirational for some. One witness, for example, told us: “I wanted to relocate to a country where the wrestling scene is thriving and there are greater opportunities. That’s why I chose the UK.”¹⁴ Despite this perceived growth of British wrestling over the past few years, to which we previously referred, the current state of the industry is less certain. It was described to us in one evidence session as undergoing a “rebuilding phase” which might take “months or longer”; “the industry is waiting for people with drawing power to come through” we were told. This rebuilding was said to only be possible because, despite known talent being signed to major promotions, the audience had remained loyal to UK promotions. The Insane Championship Wrestling (ICW) promotion which claimed a significant part in revitalising British wrestling, suggested that in the last five years wrestling had been “saturated”, that the “bubble had inflated to a point where it could not be sustained” and that quality not just quantity was required and so this rebuilding phase for talent was also one of renewal for promotions.

22. The foundations for this renewal are strong. Britain’s wrestling industry can certainly claim to be rich in its variety. During the course of our discovery, we were
impressed and, in some cases, surprised to learn just how diverse the industry can be. Some of these wider aspects, trading posts and conventions for example, will be familiar to readers whilst others, like virtual reality initiatives and wrestling scholarship, perhaps less so. We heard, for example, from ERA Film Studios, creators of what its owner claims to be the ‘First British Virtual Reality feature film, Once Upon A Time In Britain’¹⁵ which sounded like a very promising initiative.

23. Wrestling scholarship and academic study is enjoying a period of growth and significantly assisted our consideration of several wrestling-related matters. Dr Claire Warden helpfully provided some detail on the background of wrestling scholarship, explaining that it was not until the 1950’s when French semiotician (an expert on the creation and discussion of meaning) Roland Barthes wrote about ‘The World of Wrestling’ that the industry featured in academic works. It was a further four decades until significant papers were published on the subject, in 1998¹⁶ and 2002¹⁷ respectively. She told us that, mirroring the growth of wrestling, many new publications had emerged “especially in Britain”. Whilst there are some concerns about quality and standards, Dr Warden told us there are numerous scholarly works of merit, some of which she recommended to us.¹⁸ Dr Warden has produced papers on wrestling history and the question of whether wrestling is a form of art or sport¹⁹, in some cases seeking to draw this out in practice.²⁰ This is a critical question, to which we will return.

24. As well as brains, wrestling in the UK has been shown to have a big heart. We were impressed at the number of promotions that had sought to engage in charitable work. Ultimate British Wrestling (UBW) told us “we are partnered with a charity called Spectrum who are based in Cambridgeshire. We have raised thousands of pounds for the charity over the years offering our services free of charge.”²¹ A former owner of Sacrifice Pro Wrestling, established to help revive an autism group that had diminished funds, told us “in three years, we helped everyone from the Samaritans, Dogs 4 The Disabled, Homeless Leighton Buzzard and more”. Another promotion, Aspire wrestling, had a wide range of partnerships and funding arrangements in place including with Children in Need and the National Lottery, and has been recognised both locally and nationally for its good work. There are numerous other examples of giving and volunteering.

¹⁵ A1
¹⁶ Mazer, S., 1998, Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle
¹⁷ Sammond, N., 2002, Steel Chair to the Head
¹⁸ For example, Litherland, B., 2018, Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity and Audiences
²⁰ https://radar.lboro.ac.uk/contexts/wrestling-and-embodied-knowledge-reflections-on-a-workshop/
²¹ A46
We also received several submissions speaking to both the wonderful provision and opportunities wrestling can deliver for people from a range of diverse backgrounds, and sadly also about the discrimination people suffer both through structural and other barriers in the industry. For example, one witness told us that “wrestling is particularly inclusive for the disabled community, with most shows I attend having a large learning disabled or physically disabled audience”\textsuperscript{22}. We were also given details about Wrestling Resurgence, a company run by academics and arts professionals in the Midlands which promotes wrestling within the wider culture sector and works to “promote diversity and inclusiveness”. This included facilitating the “first all person of colour wrestling show in the world supported by the Arts Council”\textsuperscript{2}. 

This good work was sadly balanced by evidence including that “of course there is” racism in the British industry. “Someone screamed at me to go back to my country”, said someone of a Scottish bout, “I’ve become so immune to it I thought they meant England!”\textsuperscript{23}. Some considered that there was a general lack of representation and diversity: “I think the industry still has a long way to go in terms of including and involving people from a range of different ethnic backgrounds, genders and sexual orientations. I would like to see more diversity in the ring and in positions of responsibility in wrestling organisations” said one witness.\textsuperscript{24} Some submissions were hopeful as we are, about the potential for the industry “there are a lot more promotions than even ten years ago and more work (though room to grow) for female and BAME wrestlers.”\textsuperscript{25} 

This varied practice and approach to equality is said to be true of the UK historically. The aforementioned historian Bradley Craig pointed out that though in 1992 WCW had crowned Ron Simmons as its first Black World Champion, it was in the 1950’s that a British Champion was declared, Black Butcher Johnson. BB Johnson was a crowd favourite, as were Asian stars including Japan’s Yukio Tani, a major UK star between 1904 and 1933, at a time where negative cultural stereotypes were not uncommon in America. However, given the perception that black wrestlers were ‘novel’, and the carnival mindset of some promotions, it was not unknown to have black vs white bouts to draw crowds. This applied to others, for example English wrestler Stefan Milla, who was presented as Danish owing to his name. Whether exploitation, discrimination, or simply crude marketing it helps
frame the environment that previously existed and from which we are seeking to distinguish ourselves.  

28. Those facing discrimination need not suffer alone. There are expert groups that can help. The LGBT+ anti-violence organisation GALOP drew our attention to its Hate Crime Quality Standard which includes some useful tools and the organisation maintains some specific resources on tackling biphobia and transphobia which we would recommend to those working within the wrestling industry. So too, resources for learning about and tackling anti-Muslim, anti-Jewish, anti-Black racism and other forms of abuse are easily discoverable online. We hope wrestling promotions and others will maintain and promote details of such facilities, including the excellent wrestling safely resource.

29. We would hope that those schools, promotions and other wrestling institutions working to enhance and incentivise diversity would prosper in a wrestling marketplace which is effervescent.

30. “Competition is rife” in British wrestling, we were told, “especially in certain areas of the country”, though there were said to be both benefits and disadvantages to this. One witness provided a specific example from the North West of England. In 2012, one promotion ran three shows in central Liverpool and was alone in doing so. By 2015, there were 6 promotions and 15 shows, and WWE also visited. This over-saturation was said to lead many local promotions to simply withdraw from the market in Liverpool. Having a fixed locus in a town or city is, according to some, now reportedly unsustainable given the levels of competition. This then speaks to the aforementioned renewal taking place in the industry with companies re-assessing how best to operate to maximise profitability.

31. As promoters increasingly move, and cross perceived territorial boundaries, rivalries develop. One submission claimed knowledge of “several instances of underhand tactics of promoters running shows to damage another promoter’s show, stealing venues or taking down posters advertising a future show”. This is of course deeply disappointing. We would prefer healthy competition to be a hallmark of British wrestling, and happily were told that co-operation does occur,

28 https://tellmamauk.org/resources/
29 https://antisemitism.org.uk/resources/
30 https://blacklivesmatter.uk/
31 https://blacklivesmatter.uk/
33 https://www.wrestlingsafely.co.uk/further-resources
34 A69
35 A52
especially in relation to sharing costs for visiting overseas talent. This and other international aspects of the business were raised by several witnesses, particularly in relation to competition from large global companies.³⁶

32. We did receive some, albeit limited feedback on the impact of what was said to be increasing globalisation on the British industry.³⁷ Certainly, witnesses were aware of the role WWE has played in partnering with (or ‘swallowing up’ as one submission characterised it) large UK independent companies. There were differing opinions on the extent to which the WWE partnership benefited the industry in the UK. Some thought standards, particularly at shows featuring WWE-contracted talent had been raised, that there were more opportunities for UK talent both in training and career prospects and that WWE and others had helped draw fans from TV to independent live events.³⁸ Others thought the perceived or real prohibitions on talent performing across the UK, including in certain types of matches (e.g. inter-gender); or on streamed shows which draw money for UK promotions; or supporting brand promotions at odds with WWE, alleged to be in breach of previous guarantees to the contrary, were detrimental to the industry.³⁹ However, this alleged talent grab did allow, said one witness, for rising prospects⁴⁰. For ICW which works with WWE, the partnership benefits were significant. We were told the company has enabled full time jobs for 30-40 people in the UK, who were paying off mortgages and saving for pensions, this was “unthinkable when we started”. There was also previously no “direct route from Glasgow to WWE. Now there is”. “From the GPWA [Glasgow Pro Wrestling Aslyum] to ICW to NXT:UK where you get trained by the greatest professionals, they [Scottish talent] then train the locals – how can that be deemed a bad thing?!”.⁴¹

33. Away from WWE, some pointed to the relationship between UK independent company Revolution Pro Wrestling and New Japan Pro Wrestling. This was said by some to be ‘deserving’ of mention but ‘very self-contained’, helping each company in their respective national markets.⁴² For RevPro, we were told. the New Japan deal is hugely important and WWE’s efforts in the market disadvantageous.

34. Beyond these high-level reflections on globalisation, we had little feedback about what we might have considered significant concerns relating to international television rights and internet streaming. One submission was concerned that there be sufficient local provision and TV events “so wrestlers can make a living in the UK

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³⁶ A24, for example
³⁷ A45
³⁸ A51
³⁹ A24
⁴⁰ Ibid
⁴¹ A64
⁴² Ibid
instead of having to leave for Japan or America.“ Another told us there was “little in the way of TV rights in the UK“, save for some short runs on satellite TV channels. However, internet streaming and subscription services were said to supplement promotion incomes to the point that losses on live events could be recouped through streamed shows. Furthermore there is, we were told, a “growing tendency” for UK promotions to sell their content libraries to the WWE network, now that many of their former talent have found global success there” – which then feeds further interest in UK wrestling and the success of films like ‘Fighting with My Family’. With YouTube and FITE TV providing new avenues for publicity, it gives us some cause for concern that wrestling promotions are not well-engaged, if at all, in discussions about digital services in the UK, EU or elsewhere, something a professional association would be well placed to facilitate.

Beyond streaming, we were told, there are emerging markets. These were said to be in social media monetisation via subscription platforms and elsewhere, in wrestling-centred tourism as the emergence of ‘Wrestling Travel’ points to, and with spoken word events, like those which the company Inside the Ropes is well known for. The lack of a point of contact or expertise within Government to help further propel some of these UK initiatives overseas is something to which we return in this report.

These and other international components of British wrestling are interesting and complex. Though we discuss it in later sections, one international issue raised surprisingly rarely with us, but which will likely be a financial consideration for the industry, was the impact of Brexit. It is perhaps too early, especially in a context in which live shows are all but impossible, to judge the full impact of Brexit but we were informed that promotions in the UK should be watchful. They “had often used visiting wrestlers from abroad to boost audiences and one big source of them was Europe – and visiting Europe was also a source of work for British wrestlers. The end of freedom of movement will damage this trade by making the visit more expensive. Some wrestlers will probably benefit from the open slots, others may lose out on a source of revenue from EU matches.“ Others suggested previous cost-sharing arrangements with European promotions would be difficult and situations in which talent were based across 4-5 promotions a month, to allow them

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to reside in the UK, might also be impacted. This is something promotions will need to work together on into the future as the real impacts are better understood.

37. We took evidence from practitioners, promoters and professors and have sought to outline just how rich, vibrant, diverse and interesting British wrestling is but also the depth of thought one must give when considering the industry in the round. Solutions will not be simple. One submission suggested that the biggest challenge for wrestling was that despite recent progress wrestling is “traditionally looked down on by the mainstream media and isn’t taken seriously”. This may be a fair assessment. It is only in the past few months since the All-Party Group launched that we have been able to have serious discussions with Ministers and others about the industry, albeit discussion in parliament has underlined some of the issues about the perception of the trade amongst colleagues. To unlock wrestling’s potential the industry will need to be taken seriously but this will require a collective, industry-wide drive for professionalism.

38. In the next sections we set out some of the major challenges facing the industry and our views on how these might be met, with a view to improving the UK independent wrestling scene, enhancing its reputation and growing it as an industry. It is our belief that in beginning to unlock the solutions to these challenges, the industry can, step-by-step, build for the future. This then will assist in providing both data and progress in relation to some of the issues we have set out in this first section. It is our hope that if another report is issued in ten years’ time, any introduction reflecting on the aspects of wrestling we have commented on in this section will demonstrate a marked difference, not least as we will hope to have been a decade away from what has likely been the most damaging era for British wrestling since its inception; the COVID-19 pandemic.

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49 https://twitter.com/AlexDaviesJones/status/1324325066176385025
2. The Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

39. The COVID-19 pandemic is, to a degree, all encompassing. Though we focus here on its impact, some of the wider questions about the government’s response and the guidance for training schools is contained in other sections in this report, as are our recommendations for assisting the industry as we emerge from the pandemic.

40. The response of those giving evidence to the committee about the impact of COVID-19 on the wrestling industry was unanimous. It has been devastating. For an industry that centres on live events and close physical contact, it was perhaps inevitable that the pandemic would hit hard but for wrestling, there is a particular harm.

41. This stands as much from a theoretical standpoint as a practical one. Dr Tom Phillips of the University of East Anglia, wrote to us about the collaborative performance of pro-wrestling, that is the interaction between fans and wrestling talent. He informed us that the importance of fans to live wrestling “cannot be underestimated”. He explained that fans have been expected to assume the role of ‘active contributors’, suspending our disbelief in order to enjoy the spectacle of wrestling. That role and experience, he said, helps to define wrestling and therefore the economic and artistic impact of the virus should be understood through that lens.

42. Dr Phillips’s work is interesting in other ways, drawing on comparative research in relation to immersive theatre and describing the power relationship between the fans and talent, who are both ‘performers’ of a type. He points out that, unlike ‘pure’ sport, the audience brings meaning to a wrestler’s action and perhaps vice-versa which is why ‘winning the crowd’ forms part of the training elements of wrestling. He explains that despite fans being framed as ‘smart’ (having knowledge of wrestling’s pre-determined nature) or ‘marks’ (following the writer’s intentions) and perhaps lacking in agency, the line between the two of ‘kayfabe’ or storyline, is often being carefully managed to keep fans shocked and engaged – and fans for their part enjoy being ‘taken in’. To that end, fans are not just spectators but essential to the business, without them “wrestling – as a performing art – fundamentally cannot function”.

43. This is a similar message to those we were given both formally and informally throughout the inquiry process by promoters, talent and fans. “Mass cancellations have deprived talent and fans the joy and electric intimacy that professional
wrestling brings” explained one submission. We were told that whilst online streaming and merchandising sales had been a source of income, the lack of government or other funding had been a significant burden, particularly on promotions: “At the start of the year we had 20+ shows scheduled to take place across 2 venues in Liverpool. We managed 5 events before having to cancel the rest of our dates” .... “resulting in thousands of lost income”. Additionally, a number of international shows run by UK-based promotions were cancelled.

The UK wrestling industry’s own ticketing company, Ringside World, which had to deal with more than 40 cancelled or postponed events and more than £1,000 of refund transactions, explained that the pandemic had helped to expose the professionalism of promoters. Organised promoters, it told us, had communicated their plans, and set out how fans were to be accommodated. Others simply cancelled events, leading to unhappy customers. Some of the same promoters, we were told, have been asking for advance payment for postponed events despite venue closures and no new dates having been booked.

One promotion, WAW, spoke to us about what it considered to be hundreds of thousands of pounds lost revenue. Owners told us that they had hired an expert nurse to run some of the COVID-19 response, used a Health and Safety expert in planning and decision making, and implemented social distancing, table service and contactless payment at shows reduced to one-fifth capacity. Other precautions it had put in place including the use of masks, the MC not entering the ring and protocols for sharing its own venue with other promotions. WAW also explained that the insurance company it used had been forced to close owing to the pandemic, meaning an increase in insurance expenditure.

The ICW promotion said the pandemic had affected its ability to deliver content as part of a media rights deal, hampered its ability to pay for staffing and rent, had impacted on practical measures when running shows (such as the absence of a ‘gorilla position’) and was leaving management concerned about the lack of certainty about future events and their viability.

The owner of Revolution Pro Wrestling, Andy Quildan, explained that the impact of the pandemic had been “very tough” on his business, as a full-time promoter. The company, he explained to us, was trying to do the best it could under the circumstances but had lost tens of thousands of pounds in ticket sales and had only managed to retrieve flight credits (as opposed to refunds) for talent that had been
due to visit. The protections it was putting in place in respect of physical health (including lengthy planning calls with medical experts), mental health, brand awareness, talent pay, bubbles and private testing for shows were very dear, as were measures at its training school where non-contact sessions were taking place for limited numbers of students in bubbles of people, twinned with track and trace programmes. RevPro had reviewed both the sporting and performing arts guidance from government and told us it adhering to both sets.  

48. The impact of COVID-19 was of course global. We spoke with Gibraltar Pro Wrestling (GPW), run by two business partners, one of whom is a professional events organiser and former nurse. In the absence of any wrestling representation in the British Overseas Territory, they established GPW in September 2019, seeking to launch with a tournament. Regrettably, after more than a year’s planning the launch event was pulled owing to the pandemic.  

49. As we will come to explain in the next section, there was significant confusion amongst wrestling promotions about which guidance to follow, and we heard claim and counterclaim about the manner in which various promotions were conducting themselves. A number of these discussions played out in public fora or led to complaints being issued about company protocols. Some were so uncertain and concerned about the financial impacts of running even no-fan shows that they instead opted for entrepreneurial initiatives including new commentary tracks on existing content.  

50. One promoter went so far as to describe the industry as having been “on its knees”. “Many athletes have no idea if or when they’ll ever be able to entertain live crowds again, despite restrictions”. There is not a huge profit margin, we were told “so when a venue that used to sit 200 caps attendance to 30, there is just no way you can run shows”. So too, “Bodies will be out of conditioning, injuries will no doubt happen as people try and rush themselves back”.  

51. It wasn’t just a physical impact we were warned about but a psychological one too. “Mental health of performers and fans alike have certainly taken a huge hit due to the pandemic and not having that sport entertainment field to turn to they usually would”, we were advised.  

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56 A75  
58 A46  
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For training schools, the situation was similarly fraught. A number made contact with the APPG on Wrestling during the pandemic. One enquiry probed the manner in which schools could be considered ‘similar to gyms’, how full contact might be allowed, what cleaning systems to implement, how breaches of guidelines would be enforced and more besides. We address the question of guidelines and their suitability further in the next section but needless to say, even with clarification, it took too long to issue what were ultimately insufficiently detailed guidelines, and the industry as a whole suffered from the absence of a centralised body to provide guidance.

The Knucklelocks training school submitted several concerns about the general conditions for wrestling under Covid-19 conditions. It contrasted yoga and high intensity interval training (HIIT) which were permitted after the first UK lockdown, with wrestling which requires paired learning and close contact. Its owners raised concerns about limited space in training locations, and about any shows going ahead given generally inadequate backstage changing and bathroom facilities and pooled transport arrangements around events.

There were however some institutions that did find ways through the pandemic, albeit imperfect. One wrestling school, House of Pain, reported that “as a not-for-profit and micro entity business, we have felt an almost 50% drop in the expected turnover of the business”. House of Pain believed some training institutions would collapse; this school however was weathering the pandemic through trainee and fan fundraising initiatives, and a Small Business Grant Fund allocation from its local council. The particular circumstances in this case – not relying on shared facilities for the school and having an ‘elite’ training programme - had been instrumental in receipt of the grant, details of which would usefully have been shared on a national basis by a relevant authority, if one existed, as the school made clear. Outside of the financial impact, House of Pain had been prevented from launching a community engagement programme, a scholarship programme for disadvantaged trainees and a mentoring programme in and around the local community.

For the Love of Wrestling (FTLOW), a large wrestling convention and one of the largest UK event organisers under the wider Monopoly Events banner, has not been able to hold an event throughout the pandemic. We were told that, as with most convention events across the world, given the restrictions on travel for both overseas fans and talent and the personal ‘meet and greet’ elements of such

60 From the Government’s guidance
61 A34
62 A70
63 *See the next chapter for details of support offered by Sport England
64 A54
gatherings, proceeding as planned was impossible. Our attention was drawn to the wider economic consequences of such cancellations, including on the traders that usually exhibit at these functions and the venues that draw rent and other income from them. For the Love of Wrestling has previously hosted 15-20,000 people over a weekend and though the company was seeking to operate virtual events and arrange sales of signed merchandise, it was reluctant to run ‘covid compliant’ events given the disappointment voiced by fans where these had taken place in other territories. For a company priding itself on high quality customer experiences, the space for social distancing, option for invisible Perspex screens in photographs and other measures were possible but not optimal, we were told. In addition, the organisers had some concern that fans might wish not to return to public events beyond the end of the pandemic through anxiety about personal safety, or perhaps the understandable deterrent effect of the Speaking Out movement.

The Equity Trade Union told us that it feared, even should a return to ‘normal’ be possible, that there will be “far fewer promotions for wrestlers to work” and “less talent available for promoters to book”. The union had some data based on an inquiry it ran to assess the live performance sector, and priorities for change when recovering from the pandemic. The initial data from nearly 3000 respondents revealed that 17% of union members were working outside of the entertainment industry, and a further 20% were actively looking for other work outside theatre. Though not specific to wrestling, Equity told us “there is an inevitable loss of talent as performers are obliged to migrate to other types of work in order to sustain an income. There will also be an impact of upcoming talent whose professional development will be arrested during this period and whose creativity and talent may be diverted to other parts of the economy. To the detriment of the UK wrestling scene.” Equity suggested talent seeking stability in wrestling might look to the major companies, where they might not otherwise have done so, specifically given WWE’s UK focus. The result would
be that talent retention would likely be reduced – this appears to have been somewhat born out in reality. Meanwhile others voiced their anxieties about stars having to return home where normally based abroad, and the impact on connected workers including photographers, graphic designers and wrestling costume makers.65

57. Equity also pointed to the precarity of the current employment status for wrestlers. “As self-employed artists wrestlers could not access the Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) but also it is reasonable to surmise, even if properly registered as self-employed with the HMRC, that very few were able to qualify for the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS)”, similar to more than 50% of Equity’s other members.

58. In light of the difficulties in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, the danger posed to the industry and the lack of available support, we recommend a special covid recovery fund(s) be established, in line with our other recommendations in this report, to be overseen by relevant Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

59. There is also perhaps some merit to other recommendations made to us, including the facility for wrestlers to train in production or televised entertainment which again might be something a trade body or similar could assist with, or that an academic institution might see some merit in pursuing within the industry.66

60. We were particularly struck by one well-known talent’s words that if the right steps aren’t taken to protect it, “the independent wrestling scene could have irreversible damage done”67 and as another submission put it “as a close contact sport performance, wrestling needs to consider how venues can be made safer, rings cleaner, people more protected.”68 This long-term planning and investment is where we hope the conversation about wrestling’s future will head.

61. Those steps, as we have come to understand, and as Alex Davies-Jones MP made clear in parliament69, must include immediate resolution of the categorisation of wrestling.

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67 A39
68 A34
3. Sport or theatrical entertainment

62. One of the defining problems in respect of British professional wrestling, is quite literally definitional. Whether wrestling should be classified as theatrical entertainment or as a sport is a debate which remains unresolved. Indeed, wrestling is known colloquially as ‘sports entertainment’ despite being “a sport that is not, in the literal sense of the word, sporting; a theatrical entertainment that is not theatre”.\(^\text{70}\) Though this might appear a superficial problem at first, the consequences are significant and wide ranging, with implications for licencing, medical and other best practice, COVID-19 regulations and access to funding.

63. As the aforementioned Dr Claire Warden and historian Bradley Craig pointed out to us, we are not the first parliamentarians to be addressing this question. In the 1930’s one former Home Secretary was debating wrestling’s various supposed demerits including whether it was ’dangerous’ because it posed a physical risk or because “it lies to us”.

64. We received a number of submissions, ranging in detail, about how best to define professional wrestling, indeed it was suggested that such a determination would be important in relation to any legislative or regulatory framework. We would say it is critical.

65. One doctoral student\(^\text{71}\) pointed to the different existing examples of categorisation for wrestling, including contrasting experts defining it as theatre\(^\text{72}\) performance art\(^\text{73}\) and then the broader category of entertainment used by top-flight promotions. In countries where wrestling is regulated to a degree, for example in America, the lack of a proper definition can and does lead to patchy regulation which brings uncertainty and bureaucracy for national companies which must adhere to vastly different standards across internal borders.\(^\text{74}\)

66. The doctoral student was emphatic ‘professional wrestling is not a sport’, preferring instead to label it a ‘pseudo-sport’ with its own rules, used to elicit audience reactions. The result of wrestling being considered a sport, as was pointed out in relation to top-flight promotions in the US, included fines for

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\(^{70}\) Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle, Second Edition
By Sharon Mazer 1998

\(^{71}\) A26

\(^{72}\) Laine, E, 2019, Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage, Routledge

\(^{73}\) Performance and Professional Wrestling, Chow, B., Laine, E., Warden, C., 2017

\(^{74}\) https://knowledgecenter.csg.org/kc/content/states-grapple-professional-wrestling-regulations
contravention of sporting rules, including ‘unsportsmanlike’ conduct\textsuperscript{75} which are perhaps ill-suited to an entertainment genre.

67. Amongst those with experience of the industry, including former ring announcers, ring crew and fans, we were told in no uncertain terms that wrestling was not a sport. “It’s theatre”\textsuperscript{76} said one, “wrestling is a form of theatre that demands the same amount of respect and discipline as sport, that can be as spontaneous as improv comedy or be as planned and choreographed as a West End musical.” said a second\textsuperscript{77}, a third said to think of it as a sport is “insulting to actual sportsmen”\textsuperscript{78} with another suggesting the biggest challenge for wrestling was that so long as it was not respected as an art form, it would struggle with legitimacy.\textsuperscript{79} One witness went so far as to say that comparisons to physical competitive pursuits such as figure skating and synchronised swimming were no more appropriate than to ballroom dancing and that:

“If dance troupes and stunt workers can fill their careers with intense physical training for impressively choreographed feats of athleticism, fraught with the risk of personal injury, and not be half categorised as sportsmen and women, then I see no reason to treat pro wrestlers any differently.”\textsuperscript{80}

68. There were other variations on this theme. One submission suggested wrestling fell under ‘TV production’. “Live shows have in essence become televised experiences” we were told. “Like theatre, opera or other live events in the UK and across the world, they are in a state of audience decline and technology must be used to increase audiences. Therefore, wrestling should be considered a performance art such as film or TV, not sports as it is after all predetermined, and cannot be classed as theatre, because it is most often filmed and distributed as a tv show or PPV. Another example of the way industry is changing is the advent of cinematic wrestling, showcasing the merging of wrestling into as a short or feature film experience.”\textsuperscript{81}

69. The de facto union for wrestling, Equity, said that it considered professional wrestling “to be a performance discipline. The work is highly skilled relying on great physical talent, a keen sense of improvisation and storytelling. Traits common in other disciplines the union represents including dancers, stunt performers and


\textsuperscript{76} A9
\textsuperscript{77} A24
\textsuperscript{78} A61
\textsuperscript{79} A62
\textsuperscript{80} A5
\textsuperscript{81} A1
circus artists. Professional wrestling may, at times, present itself as a sporting experience yet this is just another aspect of the performance.”

Equity told us it had successfully organised insurance benefits for talent, having successfully argued its case that wrestling was a performance discipline.

It might therefore appear to be most straightforward to label wrestling as artistic, theatrical or performance based. However, in correspondence with Alex Davies-Jones MP about potential industry support during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chief Executive of the Arts Council stated:

“I do not dispute the creative or artistic elements of wrestling, however I’m afraid that it does not fall within our supported artforms, and wrestling promotions would therefore not be eligible to apply for any of our funding streams.”

I understand that Sport England funds British Wrestling to support the governing body to increase participation and deliver talent pathways. I would therefore advise wrestling promotions and organisations to reach out to Sport England in the first instance, to understand what funding would be available to help them cope with the short and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.”

This is contrary to the facts, as we were informed that one promotion had recently registered with the Council, and that Arts Council funding has in fact been awarded to the Wrestling Resurgence promotion for ‘Art and Wrestling’ (2018) and Everything Patterned (2019). However, this lack of institutional knowledge highlights the confusion about wrestling’s status in the arts field.

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82 A33
83 https://www.wrestlingresurgence.uk/our-team
The demarcation of wrestling as a sport was supported by one submission we received from a promoter and in-ring talent who suggested that wrestling suffered from venue-related scepticism through its inclusion in the Temporary Event Notice (TENs) licence scheme and that being classed as a sport would “save promotions a lot of money and stress in the long term”, and also help in respect of securing grants and with government schemes. We were also told that categorisation as a sport would help in respect of training, and in particular with safeguarding measures.

We are aware of at least one previous effort to have wrestling recognised as a sport, at least in respect of training schools. This centred on a unique idea, with significant merit, that had nearly come to fruition. The witness explained to us that “Disney on Ice is still figure skating, the only difference is at the Olympics there is a panel of judges deciding on your technical merit.” The resultant effort had been to organise judged competitions for matches based on criteria including technical difficulty, showmanship, suitability to card spot, character, teamwork, storytelling and so on. The wrestlers together with any managers, valets or referees would be scored as a team, competing against other matches on a card. However, three year’s practice was required before any consideration could be given to recognising this effort as sporting by Sport England. This competition is an idea we return to later in the report.

Despite a number of submissions that related Sport England’s apparent disinterest in regulating professional wrestling, including word that it had allegedly turned down a proposal for wrestling to join its Martial Arts code (or that a martial arts body had refused to regulate wrestling), we were given evidence from Derby’s Aspire Wrestling Alliance that it had in fact received significant support from Sport England to sustain the company. Aspire has not only been registered as a fitness entity but purports to be assisting with Sport England’s future strategy “as the only registered wrestling group in the UK”. Aspire has also undertaken work with the police on how wrestling can support people both creatively and physically. This is clearly excellent news for Aspire but more broadly an unviable position for the industry falling between the gaps in categorisation.

In an oral evidence session with promoters, trainers and talent that we held, we were told that such confusion can be used to advance individual or organisational agendas, and that it was “convenient” for some to push one or the other narrative.
We were also warned that though it had improved, the lack of definition had been “a minefield” in respect of insurance and licencing several years ago.  

77. The prevailing view amongst fans and talent is that wrestling is theatrical and yet according to the key Arts body in England, it is evidently viewed as sport. The major sporting body in England is considered within the industry to be hostile but has in fact sought to embrace at least one company which organises wrestling events. The situation is muddled to the extent that institutions in both sectors remain unclear on their wrestling remit.

78. Unfortunately, the historic difficulty in classifying professional wrestling meant that when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Government, through no fault of its own, found itself in a difficult position having to advise promotions and training schools what to do. APPG Co-chairs Alex Davies-Jones MP and Mark Fletcher MP wrote on numerous occasions to Ministers seeking clarification. In the first instance, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP referenced both entertainment performance shows, and sports shows at the grassroots level in respect of the guidance.  

Subsequently, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Nigel Huddleston MP, explained that professional wrestling was ‘tricky to define’ and a final letter from Minister for Culture Caroline Dinenage MP appeared to suggest straddling both sporting and theatrical guidance depending on a given context.

79. According to Scottish promotion ICW, the position in that devolved administration was similarly unhappy. Despite contact with SportScotland (the national sports agency for Scotland) and communication through other networks there was little detail on which guidelines to follow, until the company was ultimately told it was considered to be under the ‘performance art’ bracket.

80. The reality is that the matter is deeply complex, and the evidence supported this view. Dr Thomas Alcott counselled caution in a simplistic approach. His research, based on extensive discursive and textual analysis, indicates that perceptions of ‘authenticity’ in wrestling are highly important. He explained that fans categorisation of wrestlers - as actors, comedians, circus performers, ballet dancers and even politicians – belied a mixed view of ‘live’ and ‘staged’ professions. Therefore, despite Kayfabe (pretence of legitimate competition) being perhaps outdated, authenticity is still crucial– with the focus on skill and endurance. Fans therefore react to wrestlers’ perceived authenticity or credibility, and promoters

89 A55  
90 https://twitter.com/appgwrestling/status/1321048836853424129/photo/1  
91 https://twitter.com/appgwrestling/status/1321052365265473537/photo/1  
92 https://twitter.com/appgwrestling/status/1331198714560606210/photo/1  
93 A64
market accordingly, against a delicate and constantly re-negotiated backdrop of acknowledged inauthenticity. This then has an impact on economic capital. Dr Alcott also explained how the limited space for top-flight stars lends itself to a competitiveness amongst wrestlers, seeking to out-perform one another to draw crowds and enhance their position (he references Chow 201494). This, together with a behind the scenes narrative second to the scripted one, provides further authenticity for fans who are often told their particular passion is ‘fake’. Alcott therefore considered wrestling to be viewed as a “unique” hybrid form of entertainment, beyond sport and acting. “This makes it difficult, if not impossible when trying to make a direct comparison to another entertainment form” he told us95.

81. Another scholarly interpretation was advanced by Dr Claire Warden, who suggested the question had driven much of her work. Dr Warden was part of the team that developed the term ‘sport-art’. It is both and neither, she suggested, contrasting the athletic body, training physically and of a particular physique, with the body as acting, costumed and a theatrical spectacle, comparing shows as scripted but participatory hybrid events. However, Dr Warden took the discursive and theoretical elements of this debate and through Loughborough university’s RADAR arts programme, ran the ‘Bodies of Knowledge’ project which brought dancers and wrestlers (in this case UK talent Tom Dawkins (Cara Noir) and Sadler’s Wells choreographer Joe Moran) together to assess ‘sport or art’ through practice. Her conclusion was that professional wrestling “is a liminal form that sits right on the intersection between sport and art; it cannot be fully understood as a sport (despite its appearance on Sky Sports and BT Sport in the UK, its physicality, and its use of sporting tropes – rules, referees, the ring etc) or theatre (despite its characterisation, storylines, and spectacle).” This then allows for all of the problems which we outline to occur – unavailability of funding, poor health and safety and other concerns. Dr Warden continued “this is exacerbated by the negative connotations of wrestling: that it is ‘less than’ sport, that it is fake, that it is popular (even, “working class”) and therefore not ‘real art’, that it is somehow not tasteful. All of this emanates from this initial question about whether wrestling is sport or theatre.”

82. Despite her concerns to the contrary, we considered this a helpful exposition. We do not think that a new category would be viable for regulation but if wrestling is neither wholly sport nor entertainment it can also be a combination of both. Some of the submissions we referenced earlier concurred. “It is our opinion, as a training institution for Professional Wrestling, that the training…is a sporting activity, however the performance or Wrestling Promotion side of the business should be

95 A26
considered part of the entertainment industry, as they require differing emphasis when discussing policies and procedures.” Similarly, the Wrestling Resurgence promotion, itself an Arts Council grant recipient recommended that training be designated a sport because “sport aligns closest with the physical demands wrestling requires” and “has the expertise and infrastructure to provide safeguarding and health and well-being for wrestling coaches, schools and trainee wrestlers.” Meanwhile that “the wrestling event itself, the live performance for an audience, the companies that stage events, and the performing professional wrestlers, should be considered theatrical performance and performers.” This they told us allowed for support from relevant bodies, and accounts for wrestling usually taking place in cultural venues. That is the view at which we have also arrived.

83. In summary, the position is not simple but resolving this question of sport, theatre or art is imperative if the industry in Britain is to advance. We will come to discussion about a governing body, but our considered view is that certainty is required. We therefore strongly recommend that wrestling training schools be considered as ‘sporting’ and shows, promotions and associated activity be considered ‘theatrical’ or ‘artistic’ or ‘performative’. This is our recommendation to Government for future guidance, legislation and regulation. We recommend the relevant Minister write to the Arts Council and Sport England accordingly and ask that Ministers in devolved administrations do the same with their respective bodies.

84. We see this as the first step in what may be a three-stage unlocking process. This is step one and key to most of our other recommendations including the aforementioned COVID-19 recovery fund(s). Defining training schools as sporting might allow a second step, namely a form of governance or at least representation. It would, for example, enable schools or a collective thereof to join the Sport and Recreation Alliance, secure funding from Sport England and find more competitive insurance. In respect of safeguarding, for example, it would enable contact with Sport Resolutions UK which has a disputes process. For promotions, definition as theatrical entertainment opens up conversations about licencing, representation and governance and then the third step which would be improved policies and procedures. One of these steps does not necessarily prevent the others from being explored simultaneously but it is our belief that our recommendation will help guide and shape future reforms. In other words, schools or promotions can commit to stage three reforms whilst awaiting confirmation that step one is being implemented. We hope many will grasp the opportunity for change.

96 A50
97 A72
98 https://www.sportresolutions.co.uk/services/national-safeguarding/service-overview-safeguarding
4. UK Wrestling Promotions: Business Practices

85. Resolving the question of whether wrestling is theatrical, or sporting will go some way to paving the way for appropriate industry regulation, but it is resolutely clear that some form of oversight is required. Of the more than 70 pieces of evidence we received, where an opinion was expressed, it was in favour of some form of governance. We will first review some of the issues that support this contention, and detail some of the interim steps that might be considered before any representative body can be established.

4.1 Benefits and Risks for UK Promotions, Businesses and for the UK Government

86. At present when establishing a wrestling entity, there are no rules. Anyone can start a company, hire a ring and talent, and put on a show. There is little to no guidance for start-ups, no point of reference and no official body to advise on minimum requirements, policies or best practice. There is no industry kite mark or other reliability indicator. We were told that there is a complete absence of guidance on the legal documentation and licences required of each promotion when running a show, and that specific, regular and annual risk assessments should be in place but are usually ignored.

87. There are obvious advantages to there being a low bar for entry, as some submissions made clear. “It’s easy to start up a new company, it creates more opportunity for upcoming talent to gain experience in front of a live crowds, allows fans to engage with the entertainment form they love more easily” and we were informed, allows for a larger potential profit. However, the disadvantages, according to one submission included inexperienced promoters being unable to pay talent for work, booking talent on shows when they are not ready to perform, problems with tickets and capacity, poor show quality and more.99 This is of course not to mention inadequate health and safety provision, insurance and safeguarding. “Terrible and unsafe” promotions have abused this lack of regulatory control, said one witness.100 In short, the risks are both to individuals, the industry as a whole and its reputation.

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100 A46
It is important perhaps to note that there are at least two different types of promotions in the UK, and some that straddle the divide. There are the independent companies that run perhaps 15-30 events per year, sometimes less, based in cities and towns across the country, ranging in size from the small and nimble to the higher profile showcase companies. There are then those companies, sometimes referred to as the ‘holiday camp’ style promotions or ‘touring’ as we referenced in an earlier section. One such organisation provided evidence to us claiming to run as many as 170 shows per year, including some overseas, in the towns “neglected” by the big companies. For this many shows, we were told, talent can work 10-14 days in a row but work a “safer style”, so much so that “panto is higher risk than our events”. Indeed, preliminary information from Loughborough university’s Health and Wellbeing project found there were profound differences between these types of companies, with differing ideas about Health and Safety, responsibility to wrestlers and so forth. This then points to questions about appropriate or differentiated governance, to which we will return.

We heard from a number of companies about the good practice they seek to employ. For example, Revolution Pro Wrestling told us travel was agreed in advance with talent, it had various policies in place, accommodation requests and hotel bookings for shows that finished late, the company is also one of the few to pay talent via bank transfer and sell tickets through a licensed platform. We heard about food and water supplies and pre-paid expenses from Wrestling Resurgence and a host of good practices from Progress, Pro-Wrestling: Eve, and WAW to name a few.

Despite good practices in places, levels of compliance and professionalism across the industry, as it stands, are seemingly low when it comes to the fundamental business requirements and practices. Dr Carrie Dunn shared a perspective offered from one interviewee in her 2013 book describing an “us-and-them culture - rather joining for the greater cause, you have people trying to sabotage”. In other words there is, as we have already referenced, territorialism and bad faith. As more than one submission made clear, there are also only a small number of registered businesses across the wrestling world, and where businesses are registered, ownership models – and indeed liability - can be unclear (though many may be sole traders and therefore not required to register). We were told there ought to be “concerns about tax evasion and laundering in the sector, given the high volume of cash changing hands and the low volume of official reporting about high turnover.
businesses”. Tax and national insurance contributions were raised by others as were concerns about music licensing for shows. Some suggested malpractice, including fraud, might be taking place and that promoters were obfuscating enquiries from the public.

91. Ringside World (RW), as we referenced earlier, is a ticketing company which has been operating for nearly 10 years. Registered with the official ticketing association, the Society of Ticket Agents and Retailers (STAR), it tells us it has listed some 3,000 events and sold approximately 53,000 tickets since inception. The company gave examples of both good and bad practices, with the latter reportedly more commonplace. These included promoters threatening the company, or harassing its owner if funds, contrary to the stated Terms and Conditions, were not delivered in advance of an event. RW told us that though it has an insurance policy which protects each ticket sale and guards against event cancellation, the lack of sufficient contracts (or even contact) with venues has led to difficulties in lodging claims given the difficulties in proving the events were genuine. Any hiring deals undertaken without the proper paperwork raise further questions with regard to safeguarding, licensing and insurance. Furthermore, RW detailed instances in which poor cancellation procedures and communications had left customers angry or stranded, and blaming RW for the promoter’s failures. A fine introduced by RW for such behaviour has led to some seeking to game the system by ‘postponing’ their events.

92. The financial instability of promotions was raised with us more than once. “Wrestling may look glamorous from the outside” we were told “but the majority of UK promotions are struggling financially, even more so now during COVID-19”. The aforementioned promotion Sacrifice told us that it was “truly heart-breaking to know we can’t raise more money for charity because it costs too much to get us off the ground”. “Our business model meant we would sell tickets to our shows and use 10% of it to pay for things we needed to run - ring hire, venue and appropriate licencing. Over the course of three years, I would find myself putting in my own money as venue prices and ring hires increased in cost”. Another witness told us that “promoter is a clever way of saying gambler”. The industry is apparently risky but “online, it balances out” for promotions – as we have already learned - through streaming matches and online sales (now decimated by the pandemic and a lack of content). Simply relying on the gate was not sustainable, we were informed, especially if bringing in talent from overseas. It was put to us

105 A34
106 A45
107 A10
108 A53
109 A15
that in a 200-capacity building with visiting talent, a cast of 16 and then crew, the costs were disproportionate.\footnote{110}

93. The inadequacies of the current UK independent wrestling arrangement can in fact rebound on the industry itself. For example, one witness described how they had seen how “the venues took advantage of the promoters – asking for a cut of any merchandise sold at the venue ten minutes before doors open. Not displaying posters that had been provided the previous month despite agreeing to do so. Not informing fans a show was taking place – on the day of one show while the crew were in the hall setting up the ring, several of the trainees rang the venue box office posing as customers only to be told that there was no show or that they had no knowledge of the show”.\footnote{111}

94. We do not wish to paint all venues in a negative light. We were told, to give one example, that the Attenborough Arts Centre had reacted positively to a different demographic visiting its premises not to mention the increased bar spend.\footnote{112} However, so too we were told there had been occasions in which promoters had “encountered a definite sneering attitude towards wrestling”. “For example, I have tried on multiple occasions to book the Roundhouse in Camden”. “Each time I was knocked back with “we don’t do wrestling, we’re an arts venue”. The suspicion was that this related both to the failure of wrestling to be appropriately defined and that “promoters could not guarantee the hire cost”. “This suspicion is borne out by the same venue programming Mexican Lucha Libre “Lucha Future”, a production which was backed by the Mexican tourist board”.\footnote{113} The comparison was made to mainstream Mixed Martial Arts fighting. “UFC/Bellator sponsorship is massive”, one witness said, suggesting it was more acceptable to the public, and explaining that photoshoots and social media influencing could be lucrative if wrestling was more mainstream.\footnote{114}

95. Ultimately poor practice and reputation can have an impact on promotion’s bottom line. As we have already outlined, we were informed that financial stability for promotions was rarely guaranteed (except on occasion where there is support from local government\footnote{115}) and so too “workers are often left without pay when promotions fold and following up on lost finances is rarely successful.”\footnote{116} This is of particular concern to us.
4.2 Pay and Employee Rights

It is important to note that, as one witness made clear, “the British wrestling industry has created many jobs for aspiring wrestlers, tech and backstage people, promoters and others. There are many positives that come out of being a part of the industry and there is a world of potential for what the industry could become and what it could represent”. Many people have begun or maintain illustrious careers thanks to British Wrestling.

However, there is very little protection for wrestlers across the UK independent promotions, from signing up to perform at a show all the way through to the journey home. “Most promotions book talent with no formal contract”, we were told. Deals are often struck via social media or verbal agreement. “There is no guidance on contract writing or when a contract would be advised. This has caused many incidents where talent have been underpaid or not paid, promotions have been let down by talent on the day of their shows, and arguments have arisen from lack of formal agreement.” We were told the shark practices can cut both ways with instances of talent having sought to double their pay to perform. Employment law and worker’s rights appear to be poorly understood across the industry and in many different contexts. One performer, Shauna Shay, made the extraordinary revelation on social media that she had been charged for footage of her own performance by a promoter. Another submission stated that many wrestlers are “unaware of volumetric capture and artificial intelligence and how that pertains to intellectual property ownership of characters”. This then underlines one of the many issues that can arise by not agreeing in advance conditions of booking, including use of one’s likeness.

Equity, as we have previously referenced, is a trade union representing over 48,000 people from various professions and which boasts decades of experience representing wrestlers, some of which reportedly joined for stunt or acting work that arose from their wrestling career. Since late 2015, the union has sought to organise and support wrestlers, this includes the aforementioned accident insurance benefit. However, the union said that there was no collective bargaining and “a reluctance from promotions to offer formal recognition.” This chimes with what we were told by one promoter about Equity’s efforts: “Some promoters said
we won’t work with you, if you’re a member of equity.” However, in the case of Pro-Wrestling: Eve, it did offer to provide access to the union (and in fact, commendably, covered the costs of joining), agreed a Code of Conduct including terms and conditions, a template contract and a Dignity at Work Policy on a trial basis with a view to revising it in early 2020. Other promotions Riot Cabaret and Revolution Pro Wrestling followed suit, but these are now all on hold owing to the pandemic. This most certainly constitutes good practice, and we congratulate these promotions on their forward thinking.

99. We were however sorely disappointed to note that there is a bar to entry for Equity membership and so trainees are unlikely to qualify for representation and insurance benefits, reducing the safety net for injured performers. One talent alleged that Equity had “gendered” the problem of abuse and was failing to protect trainees who the talent argued were the most vulnerable people within the industry. We know that from Equity’s perspective, it has engaged with non-members towards the aforementioned policy development with a number of promotions, and we will seek further discussions with the union about how to resolve this issue.

100. There is some overlap in questions of worker’s rights with the SpeakingOut movement which we cover in detail in a later section. We were told that rates of pay vary widely in the industry and though there are discussions taking place within British wrestling about wage levels that these vary with experience and demand. This can however lead to a clear gender gap in earnings. Equity suggested that ‘the sexual exploitation of workers arose from a culture of economic exploitation. In summary, with great competition for fewer opportunities to work, lack of representation of women in leadership roles in the industry and lower fees, women were underpaid, and have poorer prospects of fair and equal treatment. The perceived gender gap is something that requires proper analysis and investigation and we would strongly recommend that scholarly work, or research by a respected NGO would be helpful in this regard, to inform debate and make recommendations for change. In the meantime, we would recommend that promotions and other wrestling organisations consider the gender imbalance in the management and leadership of their promotions and seek to redress any that exists.

101. Generally, wrestlers across the UK independent scene are self-employed. Though some wrestle full-time, others have different primary sources of income. There are those contracted to major or large independent promotions for whom the

123 A58
124 A62
125 A46
126 Ibid
employment status might be different. We were told that for UK talent working for WWE, based in the UK, and who work in the UK for WWE, they are being issued US (Connecticut) contracts and paid in dollars. This will involve transaction fees in relation to currency which is obviously sub-optimal but regardless of the contract, UK employment law presides.

102. Dr Karen Corteen, a senior lecturer in criminal justice at Liverpool John Moores university and member of professional wrestling studies association, has researched the lack of regulation and harmful business arrangements in wrestling with a particular focus on the US. This includes the potential abuse of independent contractor status and the wellbeing of a corporation over staff and talent. She suggested there were specific tangible harms occurring and that the absence of unionisation or collective bargaining was having a negative impact on rights or protections.127

103. In a recent and well publicised case, the ride hailing app Uber was considered to have had responsibilities to drivers whose ‘subordination and dependency’ the company commanded.128 This raises very obvious and pressing questions for wrestlers across the UK with major companies. We will be seeking to engage with government to get clarity on this issue and we recommend that wrestlers press their union to seek legal advice as to the position of UK talent seeking contracts with major companies.

104. It is not just in relation to larger companies or US contracts that workers may run into difficulty. It is apparent to us that certainly any UK wrestlers seeking to work in the EU will likely be considered third-country nationals and so will need to consider securing work permits. The requirements will differ across EU member states. If, as some promotions told us, they seek to develop their own homegrown talents, work experience across Europe will at least in the short term be more complex. To that end, it is surprising that not more promotions were engaged in the debate about visa-free work across Europe about which parliament was petitioned.129

105. The lack of engagement in relation to visas speaks to a wider problem for talent which we explored with one witness. When individuals leave the UK to work overseas in Germany, France, Japan, America or elsewhere there is “no help from anyone to wrestle anywhere”. This can impact both talent safety but also make tax-returns more difficult, especially where there isn’t necessarily proof of earnings. Furthermore, as one submission put to us “if you want to attract the best talent, there should be a clear process for international wrestlers to apply for status to

127 A44
129 https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/563294
work here.”130 Another suggested that wrestling be better defined in respect of visas for visiting talent in respect of the ‘Tier 5 Creative and Sporting licence’.131

106. Infrastructure to support talent working overseas would be welcome and we recommend that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Department for International Trade introduce training for relevant cultural and trade attaches about wrestling, both to help promote the UK overseas but also to give talent a point of contact for future visits, and that the Home Office help to ensure the immigration infrastructure can more readily accommodate visiting talent.

107. Outside of those contracted to large companies, and despite the gender pay gap, the general rates of pay in wrestling are poor. One submission gave details of the protection of workers in Japan. We were told that wrestlers tend to be salaried employees of companies with sponsorship, and this was considered secure and honourable employment. By contrast, the freelance UK talent can receive just tens of pounds to perform, despite significant travel and days that can be more than eight hours, meaning they earn far below the national living wage for their work. There is, as outlined above, no collective bargaining, no industry benchmarking and this led those providing evidence to allege that it is “fundamentally exploitative, and if permitted to continue raises significant questions about child labour and modern slavery.”132

108. We were also informed that, in Japan, there was a flat payment rate for crew members and specific arrangements for minors on the crew. Again, by contrast, we were informed that UK crew members, including children, are viewed as outside the remit of any promotion’s responsibility. In many cases, crew are expected to show up in advance, construct rings, secure them, and perform other functions, suffering long days in roles for which they may be unqualified, for little reward and no pay, sometimes in the hope of securing future bookings and subject to various power dynamics.133

109. Concerns about broader working conditions, outside of pay, contracts and status, were raised by several witnesses. We were informed that not all venues can have separate locker rooms as should be expected, and that in some cases talent were expected to warm up in cramped spaces. One witness said they had seen events in “ice hockey arenas and town halls” “abandoned arcades and warehouses that have no running water, internal power sources or designated changing areas”,

130 A51
131 A71
132 A34
133 Ibid
“nightclubs, shabby working men’s clubs with damp running up the walls”, “circus tents in a muddy field and even a cave in the Peak District with freezing temperatures and water dripping from above”. Though these venues were said to be “fun”, “exciting”\textsuperscript{134} and helped to draw different audiences, there must of course be some standards in place to protect talent.

110. Pro-Wrestling: Eve told us that it had tried to institute a contract, including expectations that the company had (for example in relation to so-called ‘hardcore’ matches) but that this was far from an industry standard.\textsuperscript{135} We were told that, for example, Progress Wrestling provided water, had masseurs, mental health support, agents for shows and so on. OTT in Ireland apparently handled travel arrangements professionally, providing details in advance and provided food and water, and WXW in Germany had excellent COVID protocols, including a governing body present at each taping day. These good practices were contrasted with the bad, including poorly run backstage areas in inadequate venues. This was compounded by allegations of controlling and abusive, hypermasculine, homophobic and sexist promoters, who would allegedly seek to control and abuse individuals, blacklist them for seeking employment in other promotions and even seek to induce real violence between competitors.\textsuperscript{136} At present, there remains little place for talent subjected to such behaviours, especially younger talent, to turn to for advice or support.

111. Across the many submissions we received, not only was bad practice evident but it appeared to be commonplace. As described, there were efforts particularly after the Speaking Out movement, towards instituting good practices, at least in the case of some of the larger promotions, but there appears to be industry-wide cultural problems and levels of risk that require address. This will benefit not just the talent working shows but the wider industry. As one submission put it “jobs in
the industry can become more sustainable and the social profile of professional wrestling will become more respected and more popular because it will be a safer place for people to be involved in.”

Progress Wrestling gave us its view that “The level of professionalism within the industry will dictate the ability to sustain, in term grow, and be taken seriously by the mainstream press and therefore brands, investors and other exposure platforms. We tick so many boxes for government and industry to support. We should be a proud export and ultimately earn back for this country, but the perception of the industry is let down by a lack of regulation leading to a reduced desirability of investment, less pressure to be cared for (physically, mentally and financially) and increased anxiety and mental health issues for those within who run the risk of being taken advantage of.”

The Progress team are right. It is clear that change will bring multiple, residual benefits across the industry.

There are some organisations from which the Wrestling industry could learn. Both No Fit State circus and National Theatre Wales were recommended to us as useful benchmarks. It might also be possible that the Independent Theatre Council or Council for Dance, Drama or Musical theatre (CMDT) might be of some assistance. So too, we believe local councils have an enhanced role to play in respect of licencing, and the use of their own venues. In the following sections of this report, we consider insurance and licencing elements of wrestling in further detail given our belief that these can significantly impact some of the poor practice we outline above. Our firm recommendation, given the extent of the issues that need addressing is that a new association be established for the promotion, support and regulation of wrestling promotions. We have given further details about this in the final section of this report.

137 A14
138 A42
139 https://www.nofitstate.org/en/about
140 https://www.nationaltheatrewales.org/
141 A14
142 https://www.itc-arts.org/
143 https://cdmt.org.uk/
5. Health and Safety

114. The absence of any proper governance and oversight in the British independent wrestling circuit, and the failure to designate wrestling as either a sport or theatrical, has particularly serious implications for the mental and physical health, safety and wellbeing of performers and others. This requires immediate attention and remedy.

115. We received a thorough and detailed submission and additional evidence from Doctor David Bevan, a practicing GP with specialism in pre-hospital critical care, who had assisted the Brighton-based promotion Riptide wrestling. Dr Bevan noted that it quickly became apparent to him that contrary to the structure, investment, expertise and rehabilitation measures in place for contracted performers in large multi-national brands, “medical cover in wrestling was a mess with vastly variable arrangements”. This provision ranged from nothing to fully equipped professionals in attendance.

116. Dr Bevan rightly paid tribute to the wonderful first aiders, paramedics, ambulance technicians and nurses “who often work for free or for very low fees”\textsuperscript{144} However, he explained, “there are no shared training or care resources and no system to support them, develop their personal practice or exert pressure on promotions to provide a proper level of care”, “there is no properly enforced acute concussion policy or standard return to activity protocol such as exists in rugby, football, or sport martial arts”. Furthermore, Dr Bevan explained there was a tendency against a precautionary approach, in which matches continued, and paramedics can be ignored.

117. Drawing from both her scholarly and practice-led work, Dr Claire Warden at Loughborough university added to the concerns outlined by Dr Bevan and has concluded that “wrestlers put their bodies under significant physical strain”.\textsuperscript{145} She highlighted numerous issues raised through the work she is undertaking. These included:

- Wrestlers receiving small-scale bumps and bruises that can mount up
- Talent suffering muscle injury and the demand for ice packs at “every show I have ever been to”
- Talent managing pain and the dangers of drug dependency
• A general lack of concussion protocol
• The dangers of fictionalised injury, in which in-ring activity relies on referees, many without training, to identify real injuries despite performers possibly continuing to their detriment/the promoter's benefit
• Other conditions, including real-life context which might include rushing from a job to the ring without warm-up and returning home late without rest, increasing the chance of traffic collisions.

Dr Warden and colleagues including Dr Dominic Malcolm, referenced emerging findings from their health and wellbeing project which again highlighted concerns about referees, including disparity in training, health guidance and confidence. They have also found further evidence to suggest an absence of concussion protocols in wrestling, and a culture in which concussions are not taken seriously both for fear of losing one’s ‘spot’ or being seen as ‘not tough enough’, practices long outdated in comparison to other high-risk competition like Rugby. There may also be some difference, they found, between wrestlers in respect of their in-ring performance, whether they consider themselves an athlete or performer, and in particular generational perspectives on taking kicks or other blows to the head. It was suggested that a growing number of younger talent may be willing to take risks, and that there may be a sense of ‘upping the ante’. To this end, in our view, the responsibility on insurers in respect of weapons and head-related injuries increases.

Fear of concussion was something raised with us by performers too. We were told that especially younger performers, including children aged 15 or 16, were putting themselves in “athletically dangerous situations” which would not be allowed in other disciplines including in the WWE where education is offered, and policies must be followed.146

We were given one example of “a well-known British wrestler in his thirties” who had signed with a major US wrestling company and informed colleagues that “the baseline SCAT5 testing (the medical standard for evaluating and diagnosing concussion in sport) and cognitive assessment that accompanied it had shown “his brain to be “completely destroyed” as a result of his career in British wrestling”.147 This points to the urgent need to get better information and education across the wrestling industry, potentially from other industries with more experience, as witnesses told the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in

146 A62
147 A31
parliament when questioned by APPG Co-chair Alex Davies-Jones MP\textsuperscript{148} and joined up thinking as MP Chris Bryant pointed out in a House of Commons debate.\textsuperscript{149} Certainly the International Boxing Association (AIBA) has a useful guide\textsuperscript{150} and the House of Commons Library debate packs are helpful\textsuperscript{151} and as Dr Michael J Grey pointed out to us, the Canadian Judo protocols are excellent.\textsuperscript{152,153}

121. Failure to act immediately is a high-risk strategy for wrestling. It was also pointed out to us that much of the awareness and activity relating to concussion protocols followed a class-action lawsuit a decade ago brought by players against National Football League (NFL) which resulted in a settlement for hundreds of millions of dollars.\textsuperscript{154} The same witness told us the British Wrestling scene’s failure to “auto-correct its culture around concussion is a tragedy waiting to happen”.\textsuperscript{155} We concur.

122. We had further evidence about concussion and brain injury specifically from Dr Hollin, a medical sociologist based at the University of Leeds. Dr Hollin undertook hundreds of hours of observation across nearly 100 events and conducted interviews predominantly in the North of England in his efforts to better comprehend different communities understanding and response to the risk of concussion and brain injury as part of their sporting practice. With some caveats, Dr Hollin outlined his belief that “head injury and concussion is reasonably common in independent professional wrestling” and pointed to evidence suggesting there is likely under-reporting, possibly through lack of knowledge of concussion symptoms.

123. Drawing on his experiences with wrestling promotions across the North of England, he too stated his belief that health and safety provision was inadequate, explaining that expertise to identify and treat injuries “was only intermittently present”. Though numerous individuals were first aid trained, some to an advanced level, he witnessed occasions where no first aiders were present, including at training schools. He noted that qualified first-aiders would often be in-ring talent and so had to divide their concentration and that at no show he attended did any of the ‘team talks’ in advance of an event include details of medical procedures, named first aiders and so on. In fact, he told us, few people could identify the first aider on duty and despite assurances that referees were first aid trained, a number were not.
Meanwhile, at training he witnessed inaccessible or incomplete first aid boxes or an absence of ice to treat muscle injuries. So too, it appears that incident logbooks are rarely maintained. As another performer put it: “No-one asks if you’ve had an injury”. “They ask in Yoga classes”, “but you’re worried you’ll look like you’re trying to get out of performing if you speak up”.156

124. We acknowledge that there is serious risk involved in professional wrestling and that even with trained professionals executing well-practiced moves, mistakes can happen. However, there are injuries that once they occurred could and should have been better managed. We discussed with talent some of the injuries they had received and the circumstances surrounding them. This included someone having broken their ankle and carried on regardless because “the show must go on”157 was the “industry standard” and a well-known case of a broken back in which the individual suggested that a lack of medical knowledge may have led to mistakes being made.158 This was despite a previous UK example of paralysis from wrestling, which seemingly did not lead to any significant changes.

125. We are particularly concerned at the lack of proper supervision outlined above, especially where children have been involved in matches. One submission we received159 referenced a match at Kamikaze pro wrestling in the Midlands in which a then 15-year-old wrestlers took a ‘piledriver’ move from a well-known American star outside of the ring, on top of a car.160 Whilst reports indicated adults had given their consent, there is a safeguarding element which cannot be ignored or excused,

particularly in respect of children’s safety and there should be additional measures and protocol in place in such cases.

126. One issue that was not raised during the evidence sessions but of which we are aware is the practice of ‘blading’ in which a wrestler cuts themselves to let blood and increase the intensity of the wrestling spectacle. This, together with the unintentional loss of blood, and mix of bodily fluids sometimes present in a ring have led British wrestling star and WWE talent Nigel McGuinness to campaign for change. Mr. McGuinness has spoken out strongly against the practice of blading but also called for regular testing, vaccination for Hepatitis B and to have a protocol that can be implemented inexpensively.\(^1\) We support this position in full.

127. Similarly, in discussing wrestling instruments, or tools of the trade, we heard that in some instances talent had been forced to plan where they could fall safely in the ring given the poor quality of the materials. This, once again, speaks to the requirement for a minimum standard and random checks.\(^2\) The ICW promotion explained that as shows scale-up and larger venues are secured, there are additional checks and balances, including from local councils. This might include firework licences. The Glasgow council section 89 form related to Erection and Use of a Raised Structure, meant ICW had to provide technical drawings of its ring which was inspected and passed.\(^3\) Having a ring standard kitemark is a sensible precaution.

128. At present, wrestling (and boxing) rings do not appear to be covered by a United Kingdom designated standard, and so do not need to be UKCA or otherwise marked to be placed in the market of Great Britain. However, some gymnastic equipment does meet the criteria for General Product Safety.\(^4\) We recommend that wrestling rings be specifically recognised by Government as requiring a designated standard and adopted by the British Standards Institution.

129. Lastly, as we referenced in an earlier section, we were told that the Health and Wellbeing project’s emergent findings included indications that getting older was a problem within wrestling circles, in so much as older wrestlers might push themselves too hard to perform in certain ways (though also have more authority in saying no to certain moves) whereas younger people might feel pressured to take a ‘bump’ because they sense doing so will advance their careers. This then suggests some form of fitness standard such as the Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire

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\(^2\) A62

\(^3\) A64

or PAR Q might be a reasonable requirement for UK promotions. We further recommend that a signed PAR Q or similar be required by UK wrestling promotions and be tied to conditions of insurance.

130. In addition to better understanding the medical procedures in place in the UK, we sought to explore whether there was good practice we might adopt from overseas, in particular from US promotions. Our initial enquiries determined that the position was similar if not worse in many cases. In some of the US states, a wrestling licence is required and mandatory blood pressure and sometimes pregnancy tests are required but there is little uniformity.

131. We have further recommendations in relation to physical wellbeing, but these overlap with concerns about mental wellbeing which we address first.

5.1 Mental health

132. We had a number of witnesses talk to us about mental health. This ranged from a perceived lack of understanding and support for mental health concerns, or the impact of various activities or behaviours on mental health – from abuse outlined in the Speaking Out Movement to the conduct of trainers or promoters. Conversely, the positive impact that wrestling can have on individual’s general wellbeing was raised in several submissions. “Wrestling has played a huge part in my life for as long as I can remember and working on shows has had an enormously positive impact on my mental health and wellbeing”165, one witness told us.

133. We were asked to specifically consider social media bullying and harassment. This is something that the group itself was subjected to online, and which many of the parliamentarians involved in the inquiry have experienced in other areas of our work. Specifically, it was claimed that campaigns of harassment, often without evidence, can lead to significant real-world harms. More than one submission highlighted tragic cases of such behaviours including a 22-year-old Japanese wrestler, who herself had performed in the UK, Hana Kimura166 and British wrestler Ryan Smile, a talented performer who took his life in late 2020. Smile had spoken publicly about his mental health and had also suffered online abuse. We were also told in painful detail about the impacts on mental health of running promotions that felt under relentless attack, in spite of instituting what they considered industry leading models for addressing problems in an unregulated industry.

165 A52
166 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJ0QI-tnqVQ
The wrestling community on social media can be incredibly important. We have seen first-hand how people have entertained and supported one another through the pandemic. It allows those that are lonely or anxious to develop friendships in order that they might go to events, it allows for collectors to discover treasures and can keep fans fingers on the pulse when it comes to their favourite promotions. However, the online wrestling community can also be toxic. A culture of blame, intimidation and bullying exists and is fostered by some.

As one submission put it: “In real terms, the wrestling fandom must be assumed as a responsible stakeholder in any future for professional wrestling in the UK, and must be engaged to participate and accept efforts at best practice and safeguarding without entitlement, and without launching campaigns that have already ended lives.” Holding promotions and others to account through asking searching questions is important, launching relentless trolling campaigns is quite another, and there should be consequences for such behaviour.

There are a number of resources which exist and which we recommend should be made available to talent, including for example the Centre for Countering Digital Hate’s ‘Don’t Feed the Trolls’ report. There are sessions freely available online concerning mindfulness but so too, promotions instituting social media policies would be a helpful step forward, and possibly relieve the mental toll both they and talent undergo on social media platforms. Examples of such policies and related considerations are available online.

However, others pointed to more systemic change requirements for social media and in other areas, for example one witness talked to the “possible limitations and issues concerning the monitoring of social media and other such sites” and that “mental health and domestic abuse services are hugely underfunded and at times overwhelmed”. In the midst of the pandemic, the pressures on the NHS have increased exponentially and we understand the critical importance of our health infrastructure. Parliamentarians across the house have detailed their support for continued investment in the health service through and beyond the pandemic.

As for social media, there is cross-party consensus that more must be done, and the Online Safety Bill is due to be brought forward in the coming months. Members of the APPG will work to ensure these and other matters are voiced as part of the move towards regulating sites which host user-generated content and

167 A34
168 https://www.counterhate.com/dont-feed-the-trolls
169 https://archive.acas.org.uk/socialnetworking
170 A47
will encourage everyone who posts about wrestling to consider the impact this could have when engaging in toxic discourse.

The impact of the pandemic on mental health was also raised with us by some. Wrestling was compared to a ‘drug’ being ripped away without choice, and we were told by one talent that there had been limited support during the past year or so. There were some examples of good practice, including from Progress wrestling which offered mental health counselling to any current or former roster members, and it is this and other good practice which we seek to highlight in the next section.

5.2 Good practice

There are a number of actions or processes in place across the UK which we believed might constitute good practice. For example, having identified that relevant briefing materials were restricted to subscription-based services, Riptide wrestling (through Dr Bevan) produced a magnificent resource: https://www.riptidewrestling.com/medical-resource. This free material constitutes an excellent guide to what any promotion should be thinking about when it comes to instituting safety standards in wrestling and we know that, for example, Wrestling Resurgence has already drawn on this guidance. Similarly, the wrestling safely group website: https://www.wrestlingsafely.co.uk/ which we have already highlighted, contains numerous helpful resources, including details on first aid training, for example.

Though concerns were raised about various promotions with us, and whilst problems might exist, there was evidence of good practice in certain areas. WAW, for example, exhibited good practice in respect of its policies around COVID-testing. These were thorough, and an individual with extensive experience of developing and implementing such policies had been brought in to manage them. This is a particularly good idea, and the development of such templates is something we would hope that in the absence of a regulator, any responsible company would be sharing widely with other promotions.

Pro-Wrestling: Eve had taken it upon itself to discuss concussion protocols with referees and instructed them that should they suspect a concussion to have occurred, to stop the match irrespective of a talent’s wishes. Similarly, the Eve academy held sessions on empowerment and aspects of mental health.

Progress Wrestling explained that for everything it did to expand the professionalism and safeguarding aspects of the company, the costs and scrutiny it was under increased, which has led to other organisations seeking to avoid this
route. The company “is happy to” be paying for the mental health counselling for talent who have competed for it in the past and promised to offer this service to incoming talent in the future too, albeit there was concern that failure to adopt good practices on an industry-wide basis would lend itself to a greater burden on particular companies. This would be deeply unfair on those already trying to show industry leadership. Positive actions should not result in punishment.

144. Both Dr Hollin and Dr Claire Warden from Loughborough university explained to us the absence of qualitative or quantitative data on the impact of wrestling on physical and mental wellbeing. Dr Hollin surmised and, in our view, rightly cautioned a judicious approach to drawing absolute conclusions about injury frequency given that there is “very little information available on rates of injury and death in professional wrestling”. He explained that existing evidence is anecdotal and predominantly related to elite professional wrestlers, with several contributory factors including travel, size, dangerous activity and drugs. However, having recently been awarded a British Academy grant for the aforementioned project on ‘Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling’ Dr Warden is working with medical experts and others towards educational and policy driven efforts to address this deficiency which we welcome and strongly commend.

145. Whilst the data will be gathered and processed, our considered view is that whilst there is some good practice which we have sought to highlight, there is presently an unacceptable level of risk and provision in relation to the health, safety and general welfare of British independent wrestling talent.

146. Some of those we reference above made recommendations for improvements. Dr Bevan estimated the cost of proper medical cover being £300-500 per show but suggested that at the least, training costs should be part of any promotional budget in respect of health and safety. We understand that some promotions will find the former unaffordable but ensuring the application and adoption of basic medical competency should be mandatory.

147. We recommend therefore that any promotion operating in the UK immediately adopts the following measures:

   i) All promoters, trainers and referees be physical and mental health first-aid qualified and trained in concussion awareness and protocols.

   ii) Any pre-show address must make clear who trained first aiders are, what the signal for injury is and the process for reacting to it, including authority to stop a match, and where the local hospital is. Incident report books should be maintained as standard.

iii) Talent and promoters should familiarise themselves with and adopt protocols where free resources are available including the aforementioned Riptide open resource\textsuperscript{172} and the rugby or Football Association concussion measures\textsuperscript{173}, for example.

iv) Rings should be safe to use, only set up by qualified individuals, checked regularly and renewed after a set period.

v) All shows should be risk-assessed.

vi) A fully stocked first-aid kit should be maintained.

vii) Medical professionals should be in attendance at any show.

Any promotion without such measures in place should be, in our view, considered disreputable and to be failing its fans, talent and the industry as a whole. However, there are further measures that can be implemented with haste that can make a significant difference in enhancing health and safety, these include:

i) Hiring individuals with expert knowledge of Health and Safety Protocols.

ii) Provision of or access to counsellors

iii) Introduction of waivers or disclaimers

Finally there are measures which might be more difficult to implement but would exemplify excellent practice, including:

i) Offering vaccinations to talent for Hep B and other Hepatitis

ii) Requiring or providing facilities for regular blood testing for talent

\textbf{148.} We further recommend that changes to insurance arrangements be sought whereby liability should transfer to a promotion or promoter should it be proven they prevented medical professionals from intervening appropriately on safety matters, if ring equipment was not fit for purpose or to performers if they do not declare a serious injury. We believe insurance companies should review their schedules to include further requirements on promotions or promoters in respect of health and safety in general. However, we also recommend that specialised insurance should be more readily available to UK wrestling talent and will be engaging the insurance industry about both aspects of this recommendation.

\textbf{149.} Optimum practice in our view would include every promotion in the UK following not only the measures outlined above but having at least one (but ideally two, so that one can remain if another has to travel with an injured party) qualified and properly paid paramedic on hand, appropriate medical equipment including a

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{172}https://www.riptidewrestling.com/medical-resource
defibrillator and ice, fully stocked first aid kits, and with proper risk assessments and procedures in place for injury, not to mention these and other measures at training schools and crowd safety measures for live events.

150. There are decidedly mixed approaches to safety across the UK, and this includes in the Overseas Territories. With the majority of the country’s population now vaccinated, Gibraltar is considering its return to live events. Before the pandemic, a ‘Safety Advisory Group’ (SAG) had been established, seeking to regulate live events and consisting of police, fire, culture ministry and other representatives. There were varying requirements to notify SAG in advance of a planned event depending on its size, in order to secure a licence. In addition, Gibraltar would in any event require a medic to be present at any wrestling event, and the Royal Gibraltar Police would have to identity materials before shows given Gibraltar “places high importance on the security of family and children”.174

151. Wrestling Resurgence, a Midlands-based promotion detailed the requirements it meets when licenced by Nottingham City Council, specifically that a medic to be present. The company argued that “some form of ‘fit and proper persons’ test of prospective promotions along the lines of the ownership tests carried out in football” should be in place and that “certainly, companies should be required to provide evidence that they have measures in place before a licence to run an event is granted”. The example was given that “in Nottingham where we run events, it is a requirement that wrestling event organisers ensure a medical professional is present at all times during a performance. This is something that is not required in Leicester. A national approach to licencing would be very welcomed.”175 We concur.

152. For any sized promotion, having even limited safety measures in place should be part of the key requirement for running an event, either through requirements to use council property, the TENs licence or governing body and in the absence of the latter, we recommend that the Home Office brings forward proposals to broaden TENs licence guidance to include health and safety and other minimum standards protocols for wrestling suppliers.176 We recognise that the legislation is different in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but we request that both devolved administrations assess whether their current licencing rules adequately cover wrestling promotions.

174 A75
175 A72
In lieu of governance, there might be some tightening of minimum standards through the law. The Health and Safety Executive issues guidance, for example in respect of steeplejacks. This is intrinsically high-risk activity, occurring frequently, and sufficiently specialist that it requires its own regulations on top of the statutory duty of care in the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, though these hinge on an employer/employee relationship. As readers will find, the repeal schedule at the end of the regulations points to a number of other special rules that had been in place. The Health and Safety Executive has issued guidance for amateur sports clubs and we believe should be sufficiently concerned to release regulations for wrestling schools and promotions. We recognise that the governance is different in Northern Ireland, but we request that the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland consider this recommendation also.

177 https://www.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/the-law.htm
178 https://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/leisure/amateur-sports-club.htm
6. Speaking Out

154. We wanted to preface this section with our strong recommendation that any crime should be reported, and any victim supported. Issues clearly exist in wrestling but we, as an all-party group, are not a court of law and believe strongly in the process of natural justice. What follows must be read in that context.

155. It wasn’t until the summer of 1979 that a ban on women’s wrestling in London was lifted. Sue Brittain, alongside the Equal Opportunities Commission, was victorious following a two-day hearing against the Greater London Council to defend her BWA title (something she later did successfully) against Jane St John. The ban was re-introduced and then lifted again in 1987. In summary, brave women have had to fight for their rights in wrestling over many decades.

156. There are many brilliant, inspiring and smart women across the UK talent pool. Now famous names like Kay Lee Ray, Jinny, Millie McKenzie and Nixon Newell sit alongside burgeoning prospects like Mercedes Blaze, Kanji and Gisele Shaw. As women in wrestling have increasingly been given more respect for their skills, to the extent that they have headlined the WWE Showcase event Wrestlemania, so too there has been a reckoning for what came before. Women have been making themselves heard.

157. Though the phrase ‘Me Too’ had been used for over a decade on social media, the #MeToo Movement came to prominence in 2017, marking a watershed in international discourse, politics and action to address sexual misconduct, abuse and assault. Many women bravely came forward to share stories of individual attacks and cultures of harassment, rightly shaming those that had ignored, tacitly accepted or encouraged sexual misconduct. The Olympics, American football, gymnastics, theatres, movie studios and parliament too rightly came under scrutiny.
The wrestling industry had long been the focus of allegations of misconduct, with women taking to court their reports of locker room intrusions, grope and physical assault. British professional wrestling is no exception. We are aware of a number of public allegations dating back to 2017 which led to, in effect, alleged blacklisting of certain individuals and police investigations, though the submissions to our inquiry highlighted abuse and misconduct having been a regular phenomenon for well over a decade. Presumably this could be decades. One witness, herself a victim of alleged sexual assault, said that over her time in the early days of the British industry “I certainly witnessed and was subject to instances and a culture of sexism, misogyny, bullying, abuse of power and an overly sexualised atmosphere towards women in general.” She said she had heard of, or witnessed, wrestling gyms being used for “prostitution, paedophiles.. insurance fraud, tax evasion, benefit fraud and steroid abuse”. Her submission includes the following:

“I was regularly told how I’d have to work twice as hard to gain half the respect simply because I was female. I was told that in addition to this I’d get no respect from the lads because at the end of the day I wasn’t a wrestler. I saw how female wrestlers and trainees were treated and it was accepted as part of the business. Women, in whatever capacity, were constantly made aware that they were joining the boys club and that if they had a problem with any behaviour it was their problem and maybe the industry wasn’t for them. British wrestling has a long history and an assortment of traditions and cultural norms that go along with that. The behaviour of men in the industry and the reverence that is given to ‘the old school’ are a powerful force against change and the evolution of attitudes. Mixed with the inherently private nature of wrestling going back to the days of kayfabe, it is a dangerously secretive industry. In my post wrestling years, I have even referred to British wrestling as cult like.”

The British wrestling scene has a “culture of toxic masculinity that literally pushes women in the wrestling scene to its edges, leaving them with very few opportunities in any shape or form” was how another submission characterised it. Going on to explain that “I have 30 years’ experience in elite spot competing at a national level in five different disciplines… I was part of UK Sport funded national squads, world-class talent identification programmes…. And I never experienced the kind of misogyny, sexual harassment, sexual objectification and difficulties accessing basic sexist free coaching as I have while trying to learn to wrestle”.

Dr Carrie Dunn, a writer and researcher, described the industry as having been “riddled” with sexism, sexual discrimination and sexual harassment. She referenced

179 https://theovertake.com/~alpha/sexual-harassment-wrestling/
180 A60
181 A73
the negative reaction to a prominent female talent blogging nearly a decade ago about unfair treatment, spoke to her knowledge of reports of “disrespect…from fans, workers, bookers and promoters”, and also highlighted concerns about reduced fees for female workers on shows. She indicated that there is an expectation from some promoters that there will be sexual favours in return for bookings, and of “terrifying” training experiences for lone females. She was certainly not alone in highlighting long-standing industry-wide problems, most of which remain today.

162. In the summer of 2020, amid the pandemic, the Speaking Out Movement known as #SpeakingOut was born and became a viral phenomenon online, highlighting sexual abuse and harassment, emotional and physical abuse and bullying in wrestling both in the UK Independent scene and in relation to contracted talent in major promotions. Public allegations, including many with evidence of wrongdoing, led to resignations, company shutdowns, job losses, titles being stripped or individuals entering rehabilitation. In some cases, at the time of publication, legal disputes are ongoing. Some reports suggest more than 70 wrestlers, promoters, referees, trainers, and fans have been called into question and more than 100 cases of abuse, harassment and sexual assault have surfaced.182 The campaign was given voice in parliament by Alex Davies-Jones MP, particularly in respect of lack of regulation and the absence of a regulatory body able to take action.183184

163. We believe that in all of this it is critically important to recognise that many women, and some men, were deeply affected by their experiences, and in many cases felt powerless – something that can be lost in discussion of the need for industry change. Each case of harassment or abuse can have, and we know did have for some, lasting impacts for individuals. We therefore make no apology in providing details of the evidence we received so that the breadth, specificity and the impact of what happened, and the related concerns can be properly understood.

164. As one of the co-founders of the Speaking Out Movement, know colloquially as Sierra Loxton, told us, there were no rules, no one was in charge, people were groomed, abused and then ‘gaslighted’ or victimised. She spoke to the difficulties in particular for young people in making informed decisions and the barriers to speaking out. She underlined, therefore, the importance of the movement in giving

182 Sohttps://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/other-sports/wrestling/brave-women-wrestling-spark-change-22241858
183 https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-09-16/debates/C03C1EE3-3568-46DD-B36F-779C8771BB47/MisogynynSport?highlight=wrestling#contribution-A2A6F201-0446-4A1F-AB3C-B65710911363
184 https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-10-20/debates/3A92BEA6-2E92-4F9F-8E05-EC99C35B8C1/HistoricalDiscriminationInBoxing?highlight=wrestling#contribution-5BBA2802-31B9-45D2-943E-46894A361C5A
voice to the disenfranchised. Ms. Loxton was keen to point out that it wasn’t just at wrestling shows where problems occurred but at other locations including at post-show events and after parties, and in the online sphere.\footnote{185}

The numerous other submissions explaining and exploring these and other problems in detail made for painful reading. These included allegations of emotional abuse, manipulation, grooming, bullying, harassment, unwanted attention and even sexual abuse and assaults, twinned with efforts to discredit and intimidate those seeking to speak out.\footnote{186} There was one particularly shocking allegation that fans had been promised merchandise in order to buy their secrecy in connection with sexual assault.\footnote{187}

Concerns around secrecy and cultural silencing were raised by others, for example one talent who said they had read of incidents at shows on which they had performed but had no idea about. “That is not to question the validity of the accusations, but to say that the alleged perpetrators hid their behaviour well, which is a common characteristic of this type of offender”.\footnote{188}

So too, we received allegations from talent that their training prospects were impacted through speaking out\footnote{189} and that others would not speak out through fear for the future careers.\footnote{190} “Nobody knows who to contact and victims are often left silent and afraid.”\footnote{191} said one witness. “In my short three months working as a safeguarding officer one of the key things I have noticed is the culture of not speaking up in case it affects your bookings” said another.\footnote{192} We were told of a case of ‘revenge porn’ which had “an impact on my mental health and reputation”\footnote{193} and of fans discussing the private affairs of individuals, including domestic abuse, and the subsequent effect this has had on said individuals. The problems, in a word, were cultural.

This general acceptance and toleration of abuse was repeated in a number of the testimonies we received. “He openly flirted and touched up other female wrestlers as well, which apparently was ‘normal’, though I never saw it that way.”\footnote{194} said one who continued that they had seen “many wrestlers discussing encounters with female fans which they labelled ‘rats’, with each sharing which ones were an easy
target.” Someone else said “I would go as far as to say everyone in the business, at all levels, knew someone who spoke out, and someone who had been named in the many allegations.”. We were again told that the cultural issues centred on a “boys club mentality”.

169. This mentality may lead to community-wide comeuppance. We are aware of cases in America focusing on the enablers and bystanders of sexual abuse. The Ann Craft Trust and others are following this work, and similar to concussion protocols, we suspect that if the industry does not get its house in order voluntarily, it will be forced to at significant, and perhaps critical expense.

170. There is some academic research which points to the ‘boys club’ mentality being statistically and anecdotally accurate. One piece of work shared with us included responses to a questionnaire about the industry, the respondents to which were almost entirely (87%) male, white and 18-40, whilst a focus group including three women was unsurprised by this gender imbalance which fitted with the women’s experiences as fans attending events. This statistic, we were told, is also corroborated by the findings of two further audience studies focused on wrestling in the UK which found the audience to be male centric (Dobie and Wober 1978 and Cragg et al 2001). There is an obvious business incentive to attracting more women to attend wrestling events, as has been proven in other territories.

171. The consequences of this so-called ‘boys club’ environment included complete disengagement from wrestling, impacts on mental health, work, and in one case someone informing us “I became suicidal”. However, the speaking out movement was said to have helped this individual to “unburden” themselves and understand they were “not alone”.

172. The movement also provided an awakening for some. “I had a wrestler on the show, who had abused another member of the show. I had no idea about this, the abuser was well respected and even signed by WWE, so the victim felt unable to tell her story due to fear of not being believed or fears of losing bookings. At my show, she spent the entirety of it, avoiding this man, feeling uncomfortable and she wouldn’t be alone. I only found this out after SpeakingOut, and this has put a dark

195 A28
196 https://shepowersport.com/the-duty-to-act-enablers/

198 A26
199 Ibid
memory on what was a fantastic day. I have apologised however I had no idea that this man was an abuser.”

173. The ‘boys club’ mentality also extended to training, including for male wrestlers. “It’s normalized for wrestlers” we were told, with a suggestion that some under 18 will have been “inappropriately touched” by a male wrestler backstage, or in one case a coach. “It was ‘hazing’” said the witness, who was 15 at the time of some of these incidents. “I don’t think he got sexual pleasure. What he was doing was sexual though. It’s across senior wrestlers, promoters, fans.”

The witness suggested that with no process involved, promoters or schools do not have the tools to deal with this kind of behaviour. This prompted another talent to suggest that “it should be treated like a workplace” and accompanied by the legislation that protects individuals at work. Something to which we return below.

174. It was not just from the talent at the heart of the SpeakingOut movement that we received evidence. We also received thoughtful submissions from fans, for example that “It’s hard to have fun at a show if you feel there might be abuse going on behind the curtains, or if a wrestler performing is someone with allegations against them.” Of course, as we have said, allegations can be untrue but this speaks to the importance of fan confidence in appropriate protocols and enforcement measures being in place. This includes in respect of fan-talent interactions. One male fan recalled for us his discomfort at non-consensual in-character antics from talent towards adults and the abuse, including threatening behaviour, he received for raising this.

175. A number of concerns about the international aspects of wrestling were also brought to our attention. This included one story of stalking of a female talent, including pursuing her overseas, an allegation that a wrestler from abroad had effectively been held hostage and in particular allegations surrounding the behaviour of overseas talent towards women at UK promotions. We were interested to note that there are few conditions placed on visiting international talent in respect of their behaviour and linked to any contract or pay agreement, something which could be considered.
Though there are obvious measures that require urgent attention, to which we will return, there are more long-term, systemic issues that will also require significant pressure from within parliament and elsewhere. Dr Flowe, a reader in Forensic Psychology at the University of Birmingham, who studies memory in the legal system, advised us on the use of statements and testimony about assault, explaining that myths surrounding sexual violence and abuse, together with media amplification, can impact negatively on victims. 

“Because we know that many sexual assaults are committed by repeat offenders, there is great value in improving the methods by which memory evidence is gathered and used in the legal system to increase prosecution rates. Currently, the UK only prosecutes 6% of reported rapes, for example.” thus the requirement for high quality investigations is clear, she told us. She also talked to “a seismic disconnect between our legal system’s understanding of memory and the actual science of how victims remember sexual offenses.” This highlights both the importance of the testimony from victims and the specific challenges to witness credibility levelled in these cases which can, she said, lead to repeat cycles of violence.

Dr Flowe argued that the justice system must match the science around memory and there are further practical recommendations that stem from her work, namely the requirement for industry wide cultural change, and the provision of accessible support and resources including how coaches or managers can have helpful conversations with victims when they are first contacted. This is a sensible and obvious first step which promotions could and should employ.

Professor Bradbury-Jones, also at the University of Birmingham, has researched these matters and made clear that training for first responders, including health professionals, is vitally important. There is, it was suggested, “serious inconsistencies in how people first discuss the incident with a victim” across available guidance. Standardised training would “both better support victims and help with improving the quality of witness accounts” we were told. These are particularly important should such consistent and accurate reports be required in legal testimony. The work of Bradbury-Jones and colleagues has led to the production of an online training resource: https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/helmopen/rlos/safeguarding/gbv/ This, we were told, could “readily be utilised in healthcare curricula and adapted to meet the need of other services/responders”.

Having a practical guide to how to engage with survivors of abuse or victims of sexual misconduct, especially for first responders, would be a useful tool for the
wrestling industry. We hope to work with stakeholders in academia and elsewhere to see whether a wrestling-specific guide might be developed.

180. Speaking to Professor Bradbury-Jones and Dr Flowe, they made clear the importance of having industry-backed, evidence-based interventions that are survivor centred and that take into account both safeguarding and accountability. This, in other words, means delivering change in ways that do not create further harms either through trauma to survivors with implications for recovery or through deterrence and therefore access to justice. The “fundamental starting point” we were told, is a mechanism to allow awareness-raising at the individual and community level. This may allow some that are experiencing unacceptable behaviours, subjugation or objectification, but have not yet recognised them as such, to begin what can be a slow process of realisation and understanding. The preference we were told, was that this come from survivors, to draw on lived experience and give them an appropriate platform. We believe this is one small way in which the Speaking Out Movement could have lasting impact.

181. We recommend that wrestling organisations, including promotions, and in particular training schools provide regular platforms for survivors of abuse to talk to their experiences and to educate others that might be experiencing abuse about the impact of Speaking Out.

182. Before the #SpeakingOut movement, address for the issues raised at the independent level, if any, has been informal. One anecdote related to us involved humiliation of a young talent which was only resolved when a well-known wrestler came in to stop the abuse. That wrestler was Pete Dunne, who deserves credit for his attempts to assist the industry through this period but also what has evidently been a long history of facing down inappropriate, bullying conduct.

183. In relation to the major companies - and WWE, AEW, Ring of Honor, IMPACT, New Japan Pro Wrestling and Chikara were all host to individuals named in the Speaking Out movement – those that remain say that they have appropriate safeguards in place. WWE, for example said the responsibility fell to individuals for their conduct, that the company had ‘zero tolerance for domestic violence, child abuse and sexual assault’ and arrests would lead to immediate suspension, whilst conviction would lead to contract termination. However, WWE stated its absolute right to fine, suspend or terminate talent based on ‘incontrovertible evidence’ and did release a number of contracted talents.

184. The Equality Act 2010 includes laws pertaining to discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Discrimination based on protected characteristics, arising from disability, direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation are prohibited in different contexts, including provision of a service, in work and so on.
It is possible that a volunteer, for example, can fall within part of the act if they are under a contract to personally do work, and contracted workers likely do fall under the act. Conditions of work is but one aspect of the Act and equal pay another. Harassment, as defined by the act, specifically includes unwanted sexual conduct. This conduct ‘of a sexual nature’ can cover verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct including unwelcome sexual advances, touching, forms of sexual assault, sexual jokes, displaying pornographic photographs or drawings or sending emails with material of a sexual nature. Unwanted conduct it taken to mean the same as ‘unwelcome’ or ‘uninvited’. Sadly, as a result of many talent being self-employed they might not be protected by the act.

185. Whether protected or not, it is our view that too few wrestlers know their employment status and rights in respect of wrestling. To that end, we recommend the development of a legal guide for wrestlers, and will be consulting with the Citizen’s Advice Bureau on its development.

186. The Ann Craft Trust (ACT) which is cited at Nottingham University, has expertise in safeguarding for adults. The organisation which is funded by bodies including Sport England, was approached by individuals and groups from within the wrestling industry, including to its credit PROGRESS wrestling. ACT offers advice on safeguarding policies and procedures and has sought to support those within the industry seeking to broaden their understanding. Whereas in some industries ACT is able to upgrade existing practice there was notably no industry standard, or indeed any minimum standards for wrestling.209

187. Safeguarding, ACT explained to us, is not simply a case of appointing an officer or having a complaints process, it is a way of thinking, tied to universal principles of human rights. The right to attend an event free from hate or abuse, and so forth. To that end, organisations in the wrestling industry should have safeguarding ‘threaded through’ their activities. “It’s cultural” we were told.210 This means the whole organisation being bought into safeguarding and willing to change. ACT does have template policies which companies can adopt but this is not a ‘rubber stamp’, companies need to consider safeguarding as a whole, appoint officers, have them attend training so as to understand wider concerns and so on.

188. There is another requirement, as we will come to discuss, for a trusted case management system. This would likely require legal and other expertise and independence, and therefore sit beyond the current industry. There are

209 A76
210 Ibid
organisations that offer such case management systems, including Sports Resolution, and we return to this in the governance section.

189. The response from the UK industry was decidedly mixed. Some promotions appear to have sat on their hands or to have done nothing. However, in other cases, organisations sought to seize the initiative. High profile promotions like Pro-Wrestling: Eve, Revolution Pro Wrestling and Progress told us they worked with the Equity Union, the Ann Craft Trust and others to institute procedures which they hoped would build confidence in their brands. So too had the well-respected Wrestling Resurgence promotion. A submission from someone with close knowledge of the northern English promotion TNT Extreme wrestling explained that it had stripped two of its top champions of their belts and a commentator, and had been working to introduce safeguarding measures. The Knucklelocks School of Wrestling set out its attempts to address a specific case of alleged misconduct, protect a talent who had been named despite wishing to remain anonymous, and said that it had undertaken a “full assessment of operations” including joining with schools, fans, commentators and wrestlers “in an effort to share knowledge and develop some best practice guidelines for the entire wrestling community.”

190. One of the most impressive resources emerging since the SpeakingOut movement to which our attention was drawn is the Wrestling Safely Working group, and we make no apology for drawing attention to it again. This website highlights key concerns regarding safety in the industry and its authors should be commended. Anyone – promoters, schools, talent should bookmark this site and reference it regularly. We hope the site will build on the content available with examples of good practice.

191. However, there is scepticism, even amongst those seeking to improve the industry about the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of the measures these various promotions and others are introducing, without independent oversight from an agreed regulatory body. We were told some could not have faith in a process in which their abusers were considered part of the solution. We were also told that when wrestling schools, promotions and groups made efforts in the immediate aftermath of #SpeakingOut to improve documentation and share knowledge, some felt that they were vigorously attacked online by those refusing to accept any efforts to make legitimate improvements.

211 A24
212 A34
213 https://www.wrestlingsafely.co.uk/
214 A40
192. One example proffered to us related to merchandise tables. The free access at many shows to such tables had been raised as a high risk for female performers, who “could easily find themselves at the mercy of over-zealous fans or other performers without supervision”. When promotions announced plans and policies to more strictly regulate merchandise tables, some fans online protested that this was a violation of their ‘rights’. The emergent findings of the Loughborough health and wellbeing research also appear to point to this issue as being of concern – fans feeling ownership over the wrestler’s body. This is something which organisations like the ‘For the Love of Wrestling’ convention might be able to offer assistance with. The team told us that it ensures handlers with every guest and has protocol for checking with guests what they will and will not be comfortable doing or signing.

193. Again, the contrast to Japanese methods of working was used to highlight poor practice across the UK. There is, we were told, a ban on engaging with fans on social media until supervised training was completed, safeguards in place for fan engagement at merchandise tables, a disclosure and reporting process, a culture of protection relating to wrestler’s personal lives and in some cases, contracts bind stars not to engage in direct messaging with the fans.

194. There were a number of efforts, many of them valiant, at establishing educational resources or good practice tools for the industry outside of the known wrestling promotions and schools. We took evidence from Trust Wrestling, for example, a collective from both within and external to the industry seeking to improve it and using their various expertise to do so. The organisation had hoped to advise on safeguarding, to establish a helpline and mentor scheme but did not survive its launch. In fact, we were told that even within the planning communications for the group, messages had become toxic and abusive though allegations were also made about Trust by other parties. Similarly, other voluntary efforts have not survived lending support to the call for some form of regulatory oversight. There are however still some projects which remain.

195. Erin Marshall, a thirteen-year wrestling veteran known to some by her stage name Erin Angel, wrote to us detailing allegations of grooming and abuse and her determination to improve the industry, including calls for a change in the law regarding sports coaches which we discuss in further detail in this report.

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215 A34
216 A54
217 Ibid
218 A29
219 A45
Marshall is seeking to develop a Professional Wrestling Association, based on her experience of a similar Association but with appropriate amendment for the wrestling industry. She has designed a Code of Conduct and four categories of membership and associated requirements. For example, in order to register with the association, any instructor must have a recognised first aid certificate, have taken training in child safeguarding and maintain an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. In summary, the Association enables a route to enhanced DBS checking and seeks to equalise standards.

196. We know of one other effort, the safe wrestling collective, which has promised to offer related services including in the UK but appears to be still in the early stages of organising.

197. A number of the submissions we received sought to make recommendations for industry-wide change. These were often either high-level or repetitive and included: safeguarding guidelines, DBS checks for all authority figures, independent reporting processes, anti-bullying policies, a governing body with independence and that accountability was required.

198. Our finding is that there is insufficient pro-active work in place. Moreover, the lack of joined-up effort means that where good practice exists, it is not readily shared or replicated.

199. Though it is not a panacea, the introduction of Dignity at Work Policies, Safeguarding Policies (particularly in relation to training schools – though the next section contains further detail on this), provision of appropriate training facilities and proper travel and accommodation arrangements are a bare minimum of what we would expect any promotion to have in place, and following the Speaking Out movement, there is no excuse for any promotion not to have this.

200. The Equity trade union worked with several promotions to institute a 5-point pledge which it says was intended to set a basic benchmark of professionalism, seeking to cut avenues of abuse. This then led to discussions about other measures, including, for example, a booking form and “a Disciplinary & Grievance policy based around the ACAS procedures but adapted to reflect the employment status of the talent” by Revolution Pro Wrestling. As Equity made clear, the major issue now will be enforcement, especially against a backdrop of limited training and/or resources and a change of culture.

220 www.prowrestlingassociation.com
221 https://www.safewrestlingcollective.org/
222 A28, for example
223 A20
201. Of course, promotions can go further. For example, there is the potential to create ‘banned’ lists for shows, to halt events at which sexist insults are shouted at female talent, and much more besides. As we outline below, there should be due sensitivity shown towards those reporting misconduct, training for first responders in relation to sexual abuse and sensitive handling of any allegations. Until a regulatory body exists, these matters will be in the hands of promotions.

202. Some were understandably concerned about shows taking place before or until a governing body for professional wrestling had been created. However, many witnesses told us that shows must go ahead if the industry is to survive. To that end, it was suggested to us that promotions adopting a gold standard should be given the greatest support. Taken together this left us in somewhat of a conundrum. We want the industry to facilitate and demonstrate change but also to prosper. We have made recommendations about promotions and will make further recommendations about training schools. Some promotions are beginning to adopt good practice, but the efforts are the least that we would expect given the lack of action in the past. Therefore, we have decided, drawing from the evidence we received and taking our recommendations together, to develop a checklist, or APPG pledge, found in the appendix to this report, that we would like all promotions in the UK to adopt going forward. Though we have no way of enforcing this, we hope it will establish some basic expectations that talent, fans and others can demand.

203. We call on promotions, training schools, and other wrestling institutions to commit to the activities outlined in the APPG pledge and call on fans to consider your custom of any promotions or schools unwilling to follow what we consider minimum standards for the industry. We are not naïve, shows will go ahead without these measures in place, but they can at present, only be enforced by patronage until any form of oversight is in place. This then is our contribution to the Speaking Out Movement, a tool for fans and talent to use to demand better. Having heard from a wide range of sources what must change, we are seeking to create a difference.

204. Of course, beyond the pledge, readers should be aware and share knowledge that anyone can report a sexual offence or pass on information about sexual abuse, by calling the police on 101 and asking to speak to a specially trained officer. You can also pass information to Crimestoppers, anonymously, on 0800 555 111.
6.1 Alleged Perpetrators

There is, of course, no excuse whatsoever for abusive, coercive, inappropriate, sexualised behaviour or unwanted contact. Illegal activity must be reported to the police, and as we do nationally with hate crime, we should approach allegations of sexual misconduct according to the Macpherson principles, that is to treat those making allegations with appropriate care and understanding and investigate their concerns and allegations thoroughly and with due diligence. It must be a victim-led process. That is our unequivocal approach and should be the approach adopted by the wrestling industry which, generally speaking, it appears to be.

However, being found guilty in the court of public opinion is not the same as a court of law and the inquiry panel viewed it as a duty to hear from those with various perspectives, to put questions and hear responses. To reiterate, the APPG did not work with any individuals but spoke to various parties, including both those that had made allegations and those that had allegations made against them. These were addressed without fear nor favour during the evidence sessions. People were given an opportunity to have a say, irrespective of whether group members disagreed with an individual’s particular views. The representations we received from those on the other end of such allegations do merit some review. For example, in one case, an individual accepted their wrongdoing and had apologised. They accepted that the result was the end of a career and reputation. However, they also reported death threats, threats of violence, harassment, threats against their family and fear for personal safety. This is clearly unacceptable. The one wrong does not beget the other. So too, we reviewed cases in which allegations were subsequently unproven. Though understandably painful and sensitive, these matters do require proper inquiry. Social media has played an important role in bringing the stories of many brave women to public attention but so too, it has fed a toxic and abusive atmosphere, with consequences for the victim’s mental health, as well as facilitating the above hateful conduct against alleged perpetrators. Such conduct also makes more difficult, if not negates, the possibility of rehabilitation when someone is found guilty of criminal or unprofessional conduct including for example restorative justice – a process proven successful in certain cases and which we believe has a place in wrestling as elsewhere.

This point, amongst others, was well made in a submission by a partner of one of those accused in the Speaking Out Movement. Her testimony is striking: “I feel silenced. I was tolerating being talked about online in grotesque ways” she said. “I
am an empowered woman, I have a strong mind, I’m capable of making my own decisions, and I too deserve to be listened too”. “We all feel that the abuse spoken out about in this movement needs addressing and that it was wrong, yet what we fail to condemn is the onslaught of abusive tweets, hurtful ‘memes’, and messages encouraging foul and violent behaviour to those involved.” “Not only do we fail to condemn these malicious communications, but we often champion them. The inconceivable amount of likes, retweets, and humorous replies to malicious tweets was perplexing considering this is a movement trying to rid the scene of this kind of behavior”. The submission further suggested that the right to a fair trial, as required by the Human Rights Act may well be impeded by such behaviours not to mention future employment subject to a social media review. This is far from the only case of social media abuse of which we are aware.

209. This was a concern raised in another submission we received which suggested that on the one hand the presence of allegations of criminality on social media might subvert the process and perception of the justice system, and on the other, Speaking Out might be misused by some and indeed had been, giving the example of a photographer of “being rude to them at a show”.226

210. Regulation of social media, as we outlined in an earlier section of this report, is already on the horizon. Harassment, bullying and hateful pile-ons should not be permissible under the duty of care that platforms have to their users. Appropriate reporting mechanisms should be in place to address the disgraceful messages we were shown.

211. Anyone accused of misconduct has a right to personal safety. To this end, they should obviously report to the police any illegal conduct. However, we also recommend that any promotions applying a social media policy – and as per our other recommendations we believe all promotions should maintain one – should ensure that it is followed in respect of such cases when they arise and that there are consequences for contravening it.

212. Social media companies have a particular responsibility to protect their users and a trade or industry body would be well placed to engage with these companies towards better understanding of and responses to abuse, specifically within the context of the wrestling industry. As we outlined earlier, we also believe anyone posting about wrestling must consider their comments and the impact of toxic discourse.

226 A69
6.2 ‘Customs’, Alternative Social Media and the Sex Industry

213. Across many of our meetings with wrestling talent, we discussed the concept of ‘customs’. That is matches ordered, or rather purchased by an individual who defines the parameters of the bout. In some instances, this can cross over with what some term the sex industry.

214. The testimony we received from the Knucklelocks school of wrestling, which states that it is “pro-sex work and sex positive” argued that a lack of financial security twinned with easy access to social media lent itself to custom – or what they termed fetish – wrestling. We were told that whereas performing on a show might earn someone £50, they could earn five times that amount from a customs arrangement in a day, for less work. This form of wrestling, they reported, had continued throughout the pandemic and alleged that safeguards had not been put in place. We were also asked to consider concerns about the recruitment of young children and teens, the risk of grooming and lack of parental supervision. The recommendation made to us was that support, guidance and advice from experts for sex workers should be sought.

215. We were given evidence that supported this perspective. For example, we were told that one now high-profile international talent, on arriving to the UK at 18 years of age, was discreetly invited to perform ‘customs’ work in front of a small group of men in the North of England.

216. This is, of course, one take on the ‘customs’ arrangement but not the only one. One of more than four women we talked to, all of whom had been involved in customs work, suggested that customs wrestling meant different things to different people. The term “gets a bad rep” we were told because it “often” includes sexualised matches – “but not necessarily”. “I wouldn’t do something in one of those that I wouldn’t do in front of an audience” the witness told us. “You don’t know why they order that match though”. In some cases, we were informed, a wrestler might agree a customs match because they hadn’t faced someone in real life but of course the booker’s true intentions are outside of the wrestler’s control. Though this was said to create a blurred line, the witness said, it was a “legitimate source of income”. Moreover, “men do this” we were told. “It may not be public but they don’t get the hassle”. “There are issues with wrestling full stop, but women bear the brunt of it”. “I don’t see a problem with it – each to their own” said another, who made the comparison to “wearing a short skirt”.

227 A34
228 A39
229 A49
This latter perspective was echoed by another witness who saw customs wrestling as a reclamation of power. “Girls can say no to a customer”, she told us. In the past, we were told, it was female wrestlers posing in lingerie to make money for individuals or corporations whereas now “we’re doing the same thing but on our own platform, we’re making the money for us. We’re taking control, doing what we want with our bodies. It isn’t a man or a corporation taking it”. We were also told a number of high-profile wrestlers had engaged in customs work.230

The question of customs wrestling was also linked in many submissions to the use of alternative media platforms to post sexualised or erotic content. One witness suggested that the OnlyFans platform and others which talent use was not much different from some of the nineties and noughties ‘lads mags’. “OnlyFans, Patreon, people are adult and consenting. Go wild. Have at it. Sex work is work” said another.231 A third suggested that OnlyFans material was not far from what one might encounter in a magazine, going into or walking past a shop. “It’s in your everyday life” we were told, “and you have to be over-18 and enter card details to access the majority of content in any case”.

However, we were told that nudity was one red line and as we touched upon earlier that in general, wrestling personas can create blurred lines. “If I meet Toby McGuire, I’m not meeting spiderman. But if I meet [WWE superstar] Alexa Bliss? Maybe in wrestling we should be a little more careful as the line is a bit more blurred”.232 We were told because it is a world in which belief is suspended, “people think they can say anything to people”. This, again, leads back to the question of theatrical entertainment and whether an audience perceives wrestling as such. One witness talked about the way in which they differentiated their performance from their interviews and suggested, for example, that wrestling live or recorded should have credits roll at the end, so as to make the point.233

In general, there was agreement that inappropriate conduct on a family show was a separate concern to choosing to do customs wrestling but that proper boundaries were required between the two. We were sufficiently concerned about the lack of proper distinction between some of the more sexualised elements of wrestling and family shows.

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231 A58
232 A54
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There are several ideas that then flow from this and how to make improvements to the current arrangements. For one, some further clarity or even official classification, similar to the British Board of Film Classification’s film ratings, of wrestling shows. Perhaps as family, adult and then customised. This would enable consumers to make a choice about the type of show they are booking for and to understand what it consists of. Second, the potential to introduce stricter guidelines for merchandising at family shows. We were informed that the American promotion Shimmer, for example, ran an image approval process. Third, though fundamentally, there must be a level of parental oversight, some recognition from talent that their social media accounts might be seen by young fans. To which end, being conscious about messaging on the day of a family show at the very least or holding separate social media accounts for different types of content might be advisable.

We recommend that promotions introduce mutually agreed formal classification for shows: Adult, Family, Custom and that appropriate quality controls be introduced for family shows including in relation to merchandising. We further recommend that any show should include audience announcements to remind fans about the performers and their role as actor-athletes, and to consider this if and when afforded the opportunity to meet them and recommend that all merchandise tables should be appropriately staffed.
7. Training Schools

223. Britain can boast to have trained and inspired some of the greatest wrestlers in the world. As many reading this report might know, leading talent across major promotions learned their trade at home, with names like Drew McIntyre, Kay Lee Ray, Will Ospreay and Jamie Hayter synonymous with top-tier action. Famously, William Regal trained under Marty Jones before debuting in Blackpool. Meanwhile, Liverpool’s Robbie Brookside leads training efforts at WWE’s performance centre in the US whilst in the UK English talents like Johnny Moss are offering their knowledge to developing talent.

224. We had some, albeit limited evidence, about the history of training schools. Len Ironside CBE highlighted problems arising as far back as the mid-1980’s in which schools without any qualification would set up on their own, seeking to capitalise on interest in American TV products.234 Another submission suggested we consider the Mid-1990’s and the introduction of “the first pro wrestling specific training camp in the UK (Hammerlock).” “The advent of pro wrestling schools and the move away from the traditional ‘apprenticeship model’ we were informed, “was a critical point in the development of the domestic scene”.235

225. The Knucklelocks training school, which trades as Turnbuckle Training Ltd, provided a very helpful overview of a number of the key issues for businesses operating in the modern context this sector. It explained that in relation to schools and promotions, some exist as private limited companies, some as sole traders and others as informal partnerships. In some cases, schools and promotions are twinned. For schools alone, we were told capital investment for start-up can be in the thousands with the ring, in particular, costing up to £4000. The high ceilings and space required generally necessitates rental of large spaces (and many were said to be inadequate and potentially unsafe), with business rates payable too. Income from training, once wages, rent and rates are accounted for usually means premises must be rented out to others to make up the difference. The lack of financial viability also lends itself to freelance working rather than full-time permanent employment which then can be (and has been) taken advantage of, as we set out in an earlier section.236 The cost of running the school Knucklelocks school, twinned with an overall lack of support for the company through a very troubling case it detailed for us, leaves it dormant and speaks to the requirement

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for small business support for the industry, something raised with us by other witnesses.  

226. Square One outlined its belief that government funding, perhaps through localised grants, would be merited given it “provided an outlet to members of society who are often anxious and feel less able to try conventional outlets.” The school promotes, it says, self-confidence and creativity, helps with fitness and lets some blow off a “bit of extra steam”. The school is also inexpensive and so a genuine alternative to other perhaps more costly extra-curricular clubs and courses. If the sport versus theatrical question can be resolved, as we hope it will be, it might be that further funding opportunities are available through a number of bodies.

227. Despite these difficulties and the luck of sponsorship to date, the story of wrestling training schools is one of growth. Over the past twenty years, British wrestling has grown, we were told, “from there being fewer than five schools in the entire country, to there being facilities for wrestling training in or near most major towns and cities in the UK”, and from one class to eight classes per week. This growth would be welcome were it twinned, across the country, with a commensurate expansion in training standards. However, evidence we received indicated this was not so. “I was never officially made a trainer” said one witness who worked at a school twinned with a well-known national promotion. “I wasn’t in a paid position nor did I sign any official paperwork”. There were, we were told, no rules or regulations, a lack of knowledge, professionalism and transparency upfront.

228. We received submissions from and about training schools which demonstrated a wide disparity in approach, standards and competence. There was a shared belief from a core of witnesses that schools required urgent attention “due to the greater prevalence of vulnerable young people there, with little to no knowledge of how the business works. The owner of a school is the absolute authority, and therefore an abusive trainer currently has nobody to answer to”. Furthermore, as the Health and Wellbeing project team at Loughborough University pointed out, students finding regulations too stringent at one school can in fact go and find another with looser rules.

229. This question of trainers and training processes gave us particular cause for concern. We were provided with numerous examples of bad practice. “Trainers were incredibly hard on students, which is always seen as a path of acceptance and paying your ‘dues’.” This was said to mean, “use your own money and potentially
be taken advantage of”. There are, we were told, “a lack of professional training qualifications leading to injury”.241 We heard about unsupervised training, ‘mates’ turning up to run classes and schools set up by those without any significant experience.242 “I remember impromptu visits from men wrestlers who, for example, ended up crudely commenting on the female trainees’ bodies while they were executing exercises, loud enough for all to hear.243

230. Being hard on students is one thing but we were also briefed on concerns relating to “favouritism, lack of professionalism, bullying, inappropriate sexualised conduct, manipulating and abuse of power, cocky, unprofessional, not safe, abusive, and traumatic” behaviours.244 “There was overly aggressive instruction bordering on physical abuse” said one witness. Another who had interviewed numerous trainees relayed stories of “awful”, “shoddy” schools “run by people who haven’t even had proper training themselves” and applying “drill sergeant” methods excused because they were “traditional” but in fact trainers were “overly physically aggressive” “causing genuine pain and injury”.245 Moreover, “Exposure to unsafe environments overseen by ill qualified instructors, are a commonplace occurrence”. To this end, we were told, school policies were all very well, it was about their implementation.

231. We were told that one area in which schools were allegedly failing to implement the rules related to the misuse and abuse of data covered under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules, including lack of care with privileged information and allegations of underage trainees signing official forms.

232. We recommend that the Information Commissioner’s Office prepare a guide for wrestling promotions and schools outlining their responsibilities under the GDPR regulations.

233. Abuse of trust in wrestling schools is a major and pressing concern for us, and we consider it of the gravest significance that cases of abuse are addressed. The Sexual Offences Act 2003246 makes clear that abuses of trust happen, and where they do these can be illegal. Regrettably, a legal loophole exists. In 2020, Tracy Crouch MP introduced a Private Member’s Bill that would amend the Sexual Offences Act 2003, to make sports coach a position of trust for the purposes of child sex offences. In speaking to the Bill, Ms Crouch explained that as Sports Minister, and since her time in that post, she had suffered ‘sheer frustration’ that

241 A8
242 A24
243 A63
244 A12
245 A32
sports coaches were excluded from positions of trust. She explained that despite the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and others having raised this in the late 1990’s, their words were not heeded. It was then little surprise that hundreds of cases of abuse, most of them in sport, were found in the relevant data relating to 2014-2018. The legislation, according to Tracy Crouch, adds a layer of protection beyond DBS checks for those over the age of consent but not considered legal adults (16-17 year olds), who could be abused given power balances in their coaching relationships, including as one submission pointed out, where coaches travel around the country to competitions with a child.247 The burden at present is on the young people to resist the advances of those not on the proscribed list of positions of Trust. Concern about widening the scope of that list is, as Tracy Crouch said, unfounded. The loophole must be closed and the list amended or removed. Subsequent to the Ten Minute Rule Bill, the Government brought forward similar proposals as part of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill and we will be working to develop cross-party consensus on delivering against the Government proposals on this issue whether through that Bill or another means, as both co-chairs made clear in the debate on it.248

234. We recommend that the law be amended to make sports coaches a position of trust for the purposes of child sexual offences, and that wrestling coaches be explicitly recognised as being in such positions of trust.

235. We recognise that we do not have enough information on the current situation in the devolved nations, but request that this recommendation be considered by the devolved administrations also.

236. Despite the absence of this legal protection for sports trainees, efforts to maximise protection, including from the NSPCC’s Child Protection in Sport Unit and Sports England have sought to widen safeguards. Tracy Crouch’s view was that wrestling would be covered under her proposed legislative change.249 We are concerned however that unless, as we have previously made clear, government officially recognises wrestling training schools as sporting institutions any legal change may not apply. We will therefore press, with urgency for Government to accept our earlier recommendation so that this further safeguard might be unlocked, and we can have full confidence in the legal change.

237. There are, in the interim, steps that training schools can take to improve their offering. For example, UK Coaching provides services from networking through

247 A68
248 https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-03-15/debates/3F59B66E-E7A1-484B-86E3-E78E71D0FE0F/PoliceCrimeSentencingAndCourtsBill?highlight=wrestling#contribution-906CE509-02F6-41E4-B3CE-671009E58A75
249 https://twitter.com/tracey_crouch/status/12785732535301350403
to advocacy and legal support. The organisation has numerous resources including a Code of Practice for Sports Coaches\(^{250}\). There are also coaching courses, codes of conduct, safeguarding and other materials available through British Wrestling. We are well aware that British Wrestling’s remit is different to that of the Professional Wrestling industry but there are obvious overlaps particularly in relation to coaching safeguards and we recommend that schools seek to engage both organisations to improve their policies and procedures where applicable. Schools might also consider the gender balance in respect of positions of training authority, something we were told was badly skewed towards men.\(^{251}\)

238. Consideration must also be given to age-appropriate training. Numerous witnesses raised concerns with us about training for those under the age of 18. “No one should learn to wrestle under the age of 18 – if they are, then it should be non-contact”\(^{252}\) said one witness. We were told that individuals can walk into a training school at age 14, have full contact training and be struck by someone in the 30s. We were also given the example, witnessed by some, of a circle in which 12-year-olds allegedly have to receive strikes to prove their ‘toughness’. The comparison was made to other disciplines, in which training would be age appropriate, or grouped according to age, if permitted at all. One former coach told us that classes ranged in age from 16–45-year-olds and that across schools there was little continuity of policy in respect of trainee age, safety measures, insurance, health and safety, COVID-19 policies and more. Clarity and boundaries was the recommendation for the industry.\(^{253}\) This is clearly the case, and we were taken by another recommendation which was that the proper precautionary approach must be applied in respect of age segregation and that continuous professional development for coaches should be required. Furthermore, recommendations were made to us about essential, immediate improvements to social media protocols including the befriending of trainees, particularly those under the age of 18 on such platforms, something unconscionable in a schooling environment.

239. We recommend that trainer-trainee relationships with those under-18 on social media be expressly prohibited by schools with immediate effect, that appropriate age segmentation be instituted for all training and continuous professional development be offered to coaches.

\(^{250}\) [https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/guides/code-of-practice-for-sports-coaches](https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/guides/code-of-practice-for-sports-coaches)

\(^{251}\) A62

\(^{252}\) A49

\(^{253}\) A2
We were also given information specific to the Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) checks. The preference of one witness was that trainers, referees and other individuals be required to obtain an enhanced DBS check (this includes relevant information from local police, details of spent or unspent convictions, cautions, reprimands or warnings). This is usually very difficult given many trainers are self-employed, working on a freelance basis and organisations must apply for the check which come through local authorities. Therefore, the applicability across the country is important as trainers can move around.

Again, should we be able to unlock the status of training schools, this opens up options for discussions with Sport England (Scotland, Wales) and others about housing a DBS clearance system, and we recommend that this be an urgent priority once wrestling’s status has been agreed. In the interim, we recommend schools immediately adopt NSPCC safeguards as standard.

Concerns about other manipulation or mistreatment of students were raised with us too. For example, the manner in which students progress through the school is something which needs address. We were told about the potential misuse of gradings to control students, including requiring repeat payments to take grading exams and policies of only paying some talent for performing once they achieved a certain grade. Allegations of school owners ‘stealing’ bookings from their trainees were also levelled as were accusations about trainee’s intellectual property being stolen, or students being induced to perform extreme wrestling stunts (use of lightbulbs, for example), leading to permanent injury. So too, coercion and power over trainees in general was raised as a concern, seeking to claim ownership or even seeking to ‘pimp’ trainees to older wrestlers.

The health and safety of students was also raised with us in respect of suitable provisions for the schools. For example, one witness explained that “A show took place days after an important fire happened at the school grounds and training carried on in the following months before any proper professional cleaning took place, resulting in us finding soot every time we would blow our noses after a class.” We were told, this twins with concerns raised about cleaning, especially related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in general about the lack of council inspections and fire risk safety assessments. So too, we were told that schools should check the injury status of trainees before a session.

254 https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service
256 A49
257 A11
258 A62
244. We were pleased but simultaneously concerned to learn about training that had continued through the pandemic. One submission referenced “small bubble training classes” for “elite athletes and pros”\textsuperscript{259} where others said any training was likely impossible.\textsuperscript{260} As we outlined in an earlier chapter, the lack of clarity is, in our view, strongly connected to the lack of definition for wrestling and we have already made a recommendation in this regard. More broadly, details from witnesses including that: “medical arrangements in training schools are insufficient and there are no set standards either for clinical provision or a requirement that injury recognition and self-care is part of the teaching” are worrying.\textsuperscript{261}

245. As outlined in the previous section, we have designed an APPG pledge and have made a number of recommendations within it, relating to these concerns about training schools.

246. As in other areas of the sector, we were given a number of recommendations about improving the offering from and for training schools. These ranged from requirements for coaches (fitness and safety certificates, safeguarding trained, personal training or other qualifications, DBS checks), to appropriate supervision (safeguarding officers, first aiders, injury log books, inspections and certification), from policies (trainee communications, whistle-blowers, rules on contact, anti-bullying, training by age), to calls for a governing body, and from minimum standards for schools (cleanliness, insurance, running water, separate changing rooms, safe rings, safety equipment, stocked kit, protective headwear, ICO licencing, up to date accounts, kitemarks, set capacities) to appropriate modifications for special learning requirements or trainees under 16 years old including the installation of cameras.\textsuperscript{262} We also had it suggested to us that there should be a remedy to concerns about ‘talent poaching’ such as a development or ‘finders’ fee in response to shark like business tactics.\textsuperscript{263}

247. In some cases, it appears pathways to good practice are already being established. One school told us: “We took it upon ourselves to install a safeguarding officer and have our trainers DBS checked, we also got our organisation affiliated with a local sports trust”. “These were small, easy to implement measures that all academies should be doing”.\textsuperscript{264} Another school owner evidenced that they had “used my own professional skills and understanding of teaching, learning and pedagogy to discuss ways to improve the tracing and training of Wrestling as a sport.”

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{259} AX
\bibitem{260} Ibid
\bibitem{261} A20
\bibitem{262} A8, A3, A16 and others
\bibitem{263} A74
\bibitem{264} A19
\end{thebibliography}

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school had instituted grievance handling procedures and the owner was versed in
difficult conversations, mentoring and coaching. The concerns this particular
professional raised and had been seeking to address in their own institution,
related to the lack of curriculum, of evidence of progression of skills and also of
skills relating to lesson delivery, structuring feedback and improving morale
through lesson content and vocabulary. This point about skills was echoed by the
owners of the only women’s training school at Pro-Wrestling: Eve, which said it had
to change the language it used in training to avoid wrestling references because
some trainees were entirely new to the industry (and similarly, its fan base at live
events was often not a ‘wrestling crowd’). We were also told by the
aforementioned Knucklelocks that following the Speaking Out Movement, it
performed a full assessment of its policies, designed an improved code of conduct
and planned to have it displayed at all sessions. Knucklelocks provided us with a
number of its codes, including complaints and social media guides. We would
hope that these can and will be shared for other schools to replicate.

A shared resource bank for schools would be a smart and easy measure to
establish at speed, from pedagogy to professionalism and the APPG commits to
holding a school’s summit at which we hope such a measure will be implemented.
An inspection regime and industry-wide pro-card for graduates would also be
advisable, and is something we would seek to discuss at the summit.
8 Governance

There was, as we have said, broad support across the industry for some form of governance. It is first, however, important to contextualise concerns about governance in the UK wrestling sphere with the history concerning previous arrangements.

One former trainee and promoter explained that for a time there had been a system of self-governance employed by Joint Promotions, to which we referred in the introduction. This, we were told “worked because everyone had the same business ambitions and because live-entertainment attracted sufficient audiences in the pre-satellite television era that it could be profitable”. “The booking of talent was centralised and the promoters’ principle aim was to make money. Those promoters outside of the Joint umbrella did not have access to the name talent as if you wanted to work for Joint you couldn’t work for those outside. Nowadays a model like that would not work. Promoters all favour their own booking and the creative element and narrative construction is one of the things that promoters get into promoting for”. “There is no distinction drawn between the role of “promoter” and “booker”. Moreover, in terms of expertise, those most experienced, and in my view qualified to contribute to a governing body, may not be well received by those recently entering the job. A values clash exists about what wrestling is supposed to be.”

The British Wrestling Council (BWC) is another example. This was established with a view to organising the British wrestling industry and there appears to have been general good will towards its creation. Despite an alleged lack of interest from Sport England, the Council started as a voluntary advisory body, and developed into a kitemarking organisation with criteria for shows including a requirement for insurance, risk assessments, first aid and for schools DBS checks and safeguarding policies. The council then sought to develop a curriculum, syllabus and grading measures to standardise training in schools, thus fostering longevity and potentially expanding interest in wrestling. Trainers would have been BWC recognised and visited other schools for gradings. The proposed not-for-profit was garnering interest from across the UK and overseas and beginning to consider how change might occur, especially for students already advanced in training that might be resistant to grading. It had also organised for specialised insurance which could be purchased through its website, had 100 students following its syllabus and ran an inter-school training convention. Unfortunately, through alleged mismanagement, including falling victim to individual interests, the Council fell apart. Certainly, the
history of the council gave witnesses to our inquiry little faith that any form of governance might be possible. “It was a pyramid scheme to make money” one claimed, “a false promise” said another, and various individuals told us their concerns that any attempt at regulation which was not compulsory would simply not enjoy the confidence or compliance from across the industry.

Apart from a lack of confidence, as one submission put it, having discussed the idea of governance with well-known British talents, the idea is good but in practice it has always felt impossible. There were a multitude of reasons given for this: the differences between promotions; wrestling’s alternative or marginal positioning meaning the industry was set against it; the relative unavailability of funds and costs of subscription; the potential damage to smaller companies, which play an important local role, which might be forced out of business by costly governance; the lack of trust and prevalence of grievances being inconducive to representation by particular individuals; and so on.

This point was echoed by the Equity Trade Union which set out its belief that it was hard to identify ‘honest brokers’ given many people are considered to be – or perhaps are – compromised, and credibility is important in what is a fragmented industry with low levels of trust. We were told that amongst wrestlers there had been anxiety, with individuals worried that would have to expose unionisation to their bosses, and with people seeking to work for WWE, worried that they will lose opportunities from the choices they make, given the WWE’s position on unionisation. More broadly, we were told that there is fear of a change of culture and loss of tradition and indeed of rules and regulations being applied to an ‘outlaw’ industry. The result is a push back.

These are significant issues and there are others. We were presented with a vast array of ideas about how the industry should be governed and what issues ought to be considered by a presiding organisation. This included numerous pro-forma policy documents which set out requirements for promotions and schools, some of which we have already covered. Many of these ideas were sensible and some we would consider to constitute bare minimums as regards what should be in place for any public event. Taken together, it became clear that there is likely a need for a governing body, it would be broadly welcomed but there is no clear consensus on a specific model. Many different people want different things from a governing body. To give some examples:

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267 A40
268 A71
269 A27
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Independent of wrestling&lt;br&gt;• Independent but with relevant backgrounds&lt;br&gt;• Include those involved or experienced in the industry willing to forfeit their position&lt;br&gt;• Trainers, promoters, wrestlers, fans and independent elements&lt;br&gt;• An executive council with regional representatives&lt;br&gt;  Elected members with term limit&lt;br&gt;• Mirror other representative bodies like the Personal Manager’s Association&lt;br&gt;• Run by the British Martial Arts and Boxing Association with a role for fans&lt;br&gt;• A review panel for disciplinary procedures&lt;br&gt;• Run an applicant assessment and review process contingent with a code of conduct and penalties including censure, suspension of membership revocation.</td>
<td>• Oversee a Duty of Care placed on promotions&lt;br&gt;• Consider the history and heritage of the UK scene&lt;br&gt;• Act as a promotional body for wrestling&lt;br&gt;• Provide benefits like insurance&lt;br&gt;• Ensure standards – including appropriate changing facilities, DBS checks, payment conditions, health and safety (crowd and performer), child protection, good business practice, risk assessments, licencing, social media conduct, interpersonal conduct, bullying and discrimination&lt;br&gt;• Run a licencing regime and oversee penalties and disputes, training and inspector certification&lt;br&gt;• Work with local authorities to licence wrestling schools, annually.&lt;br&gt;• Oversee minimum standards for training schools including safeguarding and CPD&lt;br&gt;• Develop or enforce policies on procedures for reporting concerns from those suffering abuse or discrimination including anonymity, in conjunction with relevant stakeholders&lt;br&gt;• Run an inspections system for promotions&lt;br&gt;• Run educational programming&lt;br&gt;• Provide support for mental health&lt;br&gt;• Run a grading system for schools&lt;br&gt;• Equalise standards</td>
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270 A30, A24, A60, A28, A69, A13, A16, A44, A47, A31, A45, A50, A68 and many others
• Provide a legal advice service, a centralised information hub, an accreditation programme, provide guidance for start ups
• Perform equality and diversity reviews published and regularly reviewed
• Audit safeguarding paperwork to ensure compliance
• Organise working groups on specific issues.

Considerations

• Be aware that any activity may have consequences in respect of international promotions operating in the UK
• Address individuals or groups using membership to prove their credentials when they may behave unethically
• Appreciate that people need an incentive to be involved given, particularly, the lack of funds.
• Support for small companies which this might disproportionately effect but the potential upside of removing risk or danger which can occur with small promotions (especially where big name stars lend credibility to unproven events).
• Whether the same rules apply to regular roster members compared to visiting talent.
• Note that governing bodies can fall short in their duties of care with significant consequences.

255. For any official regulator to be established requires significant thought, investment and infrastructure. The remit needs careful consideration, as does staffing and financing. It was suggested to us that any regulator smaller than the industry it is regulating will struggle to survive. Therefore, other approaches to regulation might be more successful – such as through insurance (including regulations to compel promotions to purchase insurance), duties of care on individuals or groups, through compulsory qualifications in competency or through inspections by, for example, the Health and Safety Executive.

256. As one renowned international talent put it to us, the nature of the industry is that change being promised but not delivered, means that people think change cannot come. “We must change that”. We hope this report is a start. We must be honest though, a fully functioning governing body cannot just be imposed on wrestling. There are however, in our view, three broad categories into which the various demands fall that is:

1) Setting minimum standards across the board
2) An arbitration process for disputes or allegations below the criminal threshold
3) A requirement for someone to speak on behalf of the industry and represent it to outside bodies.

Taking these in reverse order reflects the difficulty in successfully satisfying each element.

257. The Equity Trade Union suggested that rather than a governing body per se, a Professional Association would be a helpful body for it to engage with, as at present it does not have a central institution to engage with on behalf of employers. Comparisons were made to UK Theatre or the Association of Circus Proprietors. These are membership based and provide practical benefits, accreditation and good practice assurance. It was even suggested that different associations might be required for differing size promotions, or those operating different business models. Equity hoped that evidence of cross-promotional good practice sharing emanating from the pandemic and speaking out movements might be arbiters of future cohesion around an association.

258. Certainly, the lack of any central committee means that capacity building, sharing of good practice, legal support, lobbying, support for business and so forth is fundamentally absent. However, the lack of trust to which we have spoken, lack of funds and bad experience likely means that getting something akin to UK Theatre of the ground would be extremely challenging. We therefore return to where we started and the need for the industry to pull together.

259. We consider that it would be beneficial to the wrestling industry in the UK to establish two trade bodies, one for independent promotions and a second for touring promotions.

260. For example, RevPro, Progress, Eve, Riptide and Fight Club Pro would be part of the one and LDN, All Star and perhaps WAW though it told us its status is less certain, in another, liaising with relevant holiday camps. Some role for talent, fans and independent voices.

261. There are obvious benefits to such an arrangement. The sharing of good practice is one, particularly in respect of policies (though one submission suggested this would require a quid-pro-quo of oversight of implementation), it might also provide a point of communication for safeguarding officers across promotions to share knowledge and information. Such a body might also operate as a purchaser.

271 A67
272 https://uktheatre.org/
273 https://circusgb.com/
274 A31
co-operative, securing reduced costs for key wrestling products. One of the immediate steps it might take, could be to purchase a case-management system to bring confidence in reporting, in respect of cases of sexual abuse, and create an advisory board of survivors. Police, academics, wrestlers and others in respect of the Speaking Out Movement.

262. Longer term, if companies can demonstrate an ability to work together, recognition as a professional body and the accompanying tax relief or other measures might not be inconceivable. Investment in research, shared guidelines, and other capacity building measures might also be possible. Again, this is a process of unlocking. A group of companies engaging with government or others will be far more effective than disparate voices. Working together to establish key priorities might lead to effective governance but that cannot happen without companies working together in the first instance, despite what we were told would be an “endeavour to get the cartoon characters that are the promoters to work together”.275 That is where we believe the starting point should be and the APPG is willing to facilitate the initial conversations with promotions across the country, if there is a will.

263. In relation to setting minimum standards, as we hope has been clear throughout the report, in the absence of an existing standards body, we have looked to alternative means to improve standards. As one talent told us, “feeling safe” isn’t the key issue but rather having measures to keep people safe is what is important.276 To that end, we will be working hard to seek updates to the local licencing guidance, with the Health and Safety Executive, and will work with the insurance industry to seek changes there too. We will also be urgently seeking to work with Government towards the appropriate classification of wrestling which in turn, will open up funding and other opportunities and associated leverages on standards. We have also sought to provide some broad standards by way of the pledge we have crafted which we hope may be used by fans or talent to ensure that promotions or schools are doing what we consider to be the bare minimum to ensure shows or lessons are taking place safely. The issue that arises with standards is that they must be enforced. Licences and insurance are mandatory incentives, grant funding agreements too. Unless and until a governing body is established, and a proper licensing and enforcement system can be put in place, we will try to ensure that every legal lever available is pulled and the bar to enforcing standards is lowered. As we stated earlier in the report, unlocking the definitional aspects of wrestling would enable schools, at least, to subscribe to organisations like Sports Resolutions UK in respect of safeguarding disputes.277

275 A64
276 A39
277 https://www.sportresolutions.co.uk/services/national-safeguarding/service-overview-safeguarding
There are two specific ideas which deserve consideration, and which we will seek to raise with promotions. These are instituting a central booking system for talent – which would allow for last-minute replacements to avoid inappropriate stand-ins, and consideration of an age limit for wrestling on UK shows.  

There was one recommendation which we would like to explore further. We were told that in America, State Athletic Commissions require competitors to be licenced. Unlicensed wrestlers would be fined, as would the promotion using them and a suspension for licence applications would be applied. This is also sometimes referred to as a ‘pro-card’ system which might require an exam or various qualifications in order to become accredited, and allows revocation of a licence. It might be this is something that could be instituted by training schools in due course but would likely follow a re-classification of wrestling, as outlined above. Comparisons were drawn for us to the stunt register for stunt performers and certainly a qualified wrestler list, learning from the issues that arose with the stunt performer register might be something to be considered on a cross-industry basis.  

Gibraltar Pro Wrestling, to which we have previously referred, is planning to launch its promotion so that there is something aspirational for local citizens, including from minoritized communities. So far as GPW is concerned, it is in a unique position to deliver a governance system for the country which can embed good practice, demonstrate this for visiting talent and therefore set an example for others for how a promotion can work. The company is open to test-running a system of governance, and wishes to help the industry at wide. We will be
engaging with GPW about this report in the hope it can be a standard bearer for good governance.\textsuperscript{281}

\textbf{267.} As is clear from the various recommendations, the APPG itself is seeking to play a facilitative role. We have not absolved ourselves of responsibility and will continue to champion British wrestling. However, for the long-term sustainability of the industry, it must organise to help itself. We have therefore set out recommendations which seek to address urgent matters – for example in relation to health and wellbeing – and will be immediately working to facilitate change but so too we have made recommendations that are import, to begin conversations and try and change some of the cultural mores in the British industry.

\textbf{268.} Throughout, the process we have been determined to seek to change the industry because we love it. To that end, we return to our foreword, and what we sought to keep in mind throughout this process which is the joy and excitement of wrestling and our shared love for it.

"At its best, British Wrestling can lead the world in terms of creativity, diversity, and inclusivity"\textsuperscript{282}

"I’d always been a fan of concerts and live events but this was on another level. The show, the spectacle, the pyro, the complete madness and over the top craziness of live stunt work in a pantomime setting with thousands of fans clapping and chanting in unison to fire up their favourites or boo the bad guy - I was completely hooked."\textsuperscript{283}

"I have met and still have some of the best friends I will ever have in my life, so I have a lot to thank the industry for."\textsuperscript{284}

\textbf{269.} This then, painful in places, meaningful, always honest, but driven by passion and a desire for us to succeed together, is our love letter to British wrestling. We hope it is well received.
9. Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations:

Professional Wrestling In Great Britain: Introduction and Background

1. We are aware of academic projects and studies to assess various elements of wrestling but data about the industry remains sparse and we recommend this as an area of investigation for academics, statisticians and the industry itself.

2. The Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame for Scotland is an excellent initiative; one we recommend the Scottish Government should officially recognise and support. We hope that with support from across Great Britain this might be expanded further, preserving and appropriately memorialising great British wrestling talents and will engage the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about this.

3. Those facing discrimination need not suffer alone. There are expert groups that can help. The LGBT+ anti-violence organisation GALOP drew our attention to its Hate Crime Quality Standard which includes some useful tools and the organisation maintains some specific resources on tackling biphobia and transphobia which we would recommend to those working within the wrestling industry. So too, resources for learning about and tackling anti-Muslim anti-Jewish, anti-Black racism and other forms of abuse are easily discoverable online. We hope wrestling promotions and others will maintain and promote details of such facilities, including the excellent wrestlingsafely resource.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

4. In light of the difficulties in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, the danger posed to the industry and the lack of available support, we recommend a special covid recovery fund(s) be established, in line with our other recommendations in

287 https://tellmamauk.org/resources/
288 https://antisemitism.org.uk/resources/
289 https://blacklivesmatter.uk/
291 https://www.wrestlingsafely.co.uk/further-resources
this report, to be overseen by relevant Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

**Sport or Theatrical Entertainment**

5. In summary, the position is not simple but resolving this question of sport, theatre or art is imperative if the industry in Britain is to advance. We will come to discussion about a governing body, but our considered view is that certainty is required. We therefore strongly recommend that wrestling training schools be considered as ‘sporting’ and shows, promotions and associated activity be considered ‘theatrical’ or ‘artistic’ or ‘performative’. This is our recommendation to Government for future guidance, legislation and regulation. We recommend the relevant Minister write to the Arts Council and Sport England accordingly and ask that Ministers in devolved administrations do the same with their respective bodies.

**UK Wrestling Promotions: Business Practices**

6. The perceived gender gap is something that requires proper analysis and investigation and we would strongly recommend that scholarly work, or research by a respected NGO would be helpful in this regard, to inform debate and make recommendations for change. In the meantime, we would recommend that promotions and other wrestling organisations consider the gender imbalance in the management and leadership of their promotions and seek to redress any that exists.

7. In a recent and well publicised case, the ride hailing app Uber was considered to have had responsibilities to drivers whose ‘subordination and dependency’ the company commanded.292 This raises very obvious and pressing questions for wrestlers across the UK with major companies. We will be seeking to engage with government to get clarity on this issue and we recommend that wrestlers press their union to seek legal advice as to the position of UK talent seeking contracts with major companies.

8. Infrastructure to support talent working overseas would be welcome and we recommend that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Department for International Trade introduce training for relevant cultural and trade attaches about wrestling, both to help promote the UK overseas but also to give talent a point of contact for future visits, and that the Home Office help to

ensure the immigration infrastructure can more readily accommodate visiting talent.

9. Our firm recommendation, given the extent of the issues that need addressing is that a new association be established for the promotion, support and regulation of wrestling promotions.

**Health and Safety**

10. At present, wrestling (and boxing) rings do not appear to be covered by a United Kingdom designated standard, and so do not need to be UKCA or otherwise marked to be placed in the market of Great Britain. However, some gymnastic equipment does meet the criteria for General Product Safety.²⁹³ We recommend that wrestling rings be specifically recognised by Government as requiring a designated standard and adopted by the British Standards Institution.

11. We further recommend that a signed PAR Q or similar be required by UK wrestling promotions and be tied to conditions of insurance.

12. There are a number of resources which exist and which we recommend should be made available to talent, including for example the Centre for Countering Digital Hate’s ‘Don’t Feed the Trolls’ report²⁹⁴. There are sessions freely available online concerning mindfulness but so too, promotions instituting social media policies would be a helpful step forward, and possibly relieve the mental toll both they and talent undergo on social media platforms. Examples of such policies and related considerations are available online.²⁹⁵

13. As for social media, there is cross-party consensus that more must be done, and the Online Safety Bill is due to be brought forward in the coming months. Members of the APPG will work to ensure these and other matters are voiced as part of the move towards regulating sites which host user-generated content and will encourage everyone who posts about wrestling to consider the impact this could have when engaging in toxic discourse.

14. We recommend therefore that any promotion operating in the UK immediately adopts the following measures:

²⁹⁴ https://www.counterhate.com/dont-feed-the-trolls
²⁹⁵ https://archive.acas.org.uk/socialnetworking
i) All promoters, trainers and referees be physical and mental health first-aid qualified and trained in concussion awareness and protocols.

ii) Any pre-show address must make clear who trained first aiders are, what the signal for injury is and the process for reacting to it, including authority to stop a match, and where the local hospital is. Incident report books should be maintained as standard.

iii) Talent and promoters should familiarise themselves with and adopt protocols where free resources are available including the aforementioned Riptide open resource296 and the rugby or Football Association concussion measures297, for example.

iv) Rings should be safe to use, only set up by qualified individuals, checked regularly and renewed after a set period.

v) All shows should be risk-assessed.

vi) A fully stocked first-aid kit should be maintained.

vii) Medical professionals should be in attendance at any show.

Any promotion without such measures in place should, in our view, be considered disreputable and to be failing its fans, talent and the industry as a whole.

However, there are further measures that can be implemented with haste that can make a significant difference in enhancing health and safety, these include:

i) Hiring individuals with expert knowledge of Health and Safety Protocols.

ii) Provision of or access to counsellors.

iii) Introduction of waivers or disclaimers.

Finally there are measures which might be more difficult to implement but would exemplify excellent practice, including:

i) Offering vaccinations to talent for Hep B and other Hepatitis.

ii) Requiring or providing facilities for regular blood testing for talent.

15. We further recommend that changes to insurance arrangements be sought whereby liability should transfer to a promotion or promoter should it be proven they prevented medical professionals from intervening appropriately on safety matters, if ring equipment was not fit for purpose or to performers if they do not declare a serious injury. We believe insurance companies should review their schedules to include further requirements on promotions or promoters in respect of health and safety in general. However, we also recommend that specialised

296 https://www.riptidewrestling.com/medical-resource
insurance should be more readily available to UK wrestling talent and will be engaging the insurance industry about both aspects of this recommendation.

16. For any sized promotion, having even limited safety measures in place should be part of the key requirement for running an event, either through requirements to use council property, the TENs licence or governing body and in the absence of the latter, we recommend that the Home Office brings forward proposals to broaden TENs licence guidance to include health and safety and other minimum standards protocols for wrestling suppliers. We recognise that the legislation is different in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but we request that both devolved administrations assess whether their current licencing rules adequately cover wrestling promotions.

17. The Health and Safety Executive has issued guidance for amateur sports clubs and we believe should be sufficiently concerned to release regulations for wrestling schools and promotions. We recognise that the governance is different in Northern Ireland, but we request that the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland consider this recommendation also.

Speaking Out

18. Having a practical guide to how to engage with survivors of abuse or victims of sexual misconduct, especially for first responders, would be a useful tool for the wrestling industry. We hope to work with stakeholders in academia and elsewhere to see whether a wrestling-specific guide might be developed.

19. We recommend that wrestling organisations, including promotions, and in particular training schools provide regular platforms for survivors of abuse to talk to their experiences and to educate others that might be experiencing abuse about the impact of Speaking Out.

20. Whether protected or not, it is our view that too few wrestlers know their employment status and rights in respect of wrestling. To that end, we recommend the development of a legal guide for wrestlers, and will be consulting with the Citizen’s Advice Bureau on its development.

21. We call on promotions, training schools, and other wrestling institutions to commit to the activities outlined in the APPG pledge and call on fans to consider your custom of any promotions or schools unwilling to follow what we consider


https://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/leisure/amateur-sports-club.htm
minimum standards for the industry. We are not naïve, shows will go ahead without these measures in place, but they can at present, only be enforced by patronage until any form of oversight is in place. This then is our contribution to the Speaking Out Movement, a tool for fans and talent to use to demand better. Having heard from a wide range of sources what must change, we are seeking to create a difference.

22. Anyone accused of misconduct has a right to personal safety. To this end, they should obviously report to the police any illegal conduct. However, we also recommend that any promotions applying a social media policy – and as per our other recommendations we believe all promotions should maintain one – should ensure that it is followed in respect of such cases when they arise and that there are consequences for contravening it.

23. We recommend that promotions introduce mutually agreed formal classification for shows: Adult, Family, Custom and that appropriate quality controls be introduced for family shows including in relation to merchandising. We further recommend that any show should include audience announcements to remind fans about the performers and their role as actor-athletes, and to consider this if and when afforded the opportunity to meet them, and recommend that all merchandise tables should be appropriately staffed.

Training Schools

24. We recommend that the Information Commissioner’s Office prepare a guide for wrestling promotions and schools outlining their responsibilities under the GDPR regulations.

25. We recommend that the law be amended to make sports coaches a position of trust for the purposes of child sexual offences, and that wrestling coaches be explicitly recognised as being in such positions of trust. There are, in the interim, steps that training schools can take to improve their offering. For example, UK Coaching provides services from networking through to advocacy and legal support. The organisation has numerous resources including a Code of Practice for Sports Coaches. There are also coaching courses, codes of conduct, safeguarding and other materials available through British Wrestling. We are well aware that British Wrestling’s remit is different to that of the Professional Wrestling industry but there are obvious overlaps particularly in relation to coaching safeguards and we recommend that schools seek to engage both

300 https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/guides/code-of-practice-for-sports-coaches
organisations to improve their policies and procedures where applicable. Schools might also consider the gender balance in respect of positions of training authority, something we were told was badly skewed towards men.\textsuperscript{301}

We recommend that trainer-trainee relationships with those under-18 on social media be expressly prohibited by schools with immediate effect, that appropriate age segmentation be instituted for all training and continuous professional development be offered to coaches.

26. Again, should we be able to unlock the status of training schools, this opens up options for discussions with Sport England (Scotland, Wales) and others about housing a DBS clearance system, and we recommend that this be an urgent priority once wrestling's status has been agreed. In the interim, we recommend schools immediately adopt NSPCC safeguards as standard.\textsuperscript{302}

A shared resource bank for schools would be a smart and easy measure to establish at speed, from pedagogy to professionalism and the APPG commits to holding a school’s summit at which we hope such a measure will be implemented. An inspection regime and industry-wide pro-card for graduates would also be advisable, and is something we would seek to discuss at the summit.

**Governance**

27. We consider that it would be beneficial to the wrestling industry in the UK to establish two trade bodies, one for independent promotions and a second for touring promotions.

\textsuperscript{301} A62

\textsuperscript{302} https://thecpsu.org.uk/help-advice/putting-safeguards-in-place/
10. Appendices

A: The APPG Pledge:

Fans, Wrestlers, Promotors, Trainers, Ring Crew and all those engaged in wrestling have rights and responsibilities. There are models of good practice and minimum requirements that should be in place. We commit to:

Establishing Good Business Practices:
- We will register our organisation as a company where appropriate
- We will keep records of income and expenditure and deal properly with our tax affairs
- We will licence music which we use, pay for music created for us and deal fairly with those whose images we are using
- We will behave responsibly, and not engage in shark tactics to damage competitors
- We will work to eliminate any gender pay gap, paying according to experience or drawing power
- We will enter into contracts with venues, maintain contact details and have cancellation processes in place
- We will maintain appropriate GDPR information safeguards.

Running a Wrestling Show or Training School:
- We will make clear whether our shows are for adults, families or custom audiences
- We will follow the minimum safety standards outlined in the APPG report, and maintain an injury logbook
- We will provide appropriate changing facilities, not limited to provision of two changing rooms
- We will maintain banned lists and apply strict liability for audience abuse
- We will only use trained referees
- We will put appropriate safeguards in place at merchandise tables and have appropriate backstage protocols, including restricted guest lists
- We will contract talent, including visiting overseas wrestlers both for business purposes, to agree match formats, travel and expenses, and in respect of personal conduct
- We will use a quality ring and regularly inspect it
- We will follow any COVID-19 protocols and clean our ring regularly
- We will maintain appropriate insurance and only run licenced events
- We will promote equality and other standards like the wrestling safely resource
- We will maintain and administer concussion protocols, following best practice
• We will maintain safeguarding policies, dignity at work policies, social media polices and maintain disciplinary and grievance procedures
• We will operate fan codes of conduct
• We will maintain a set of minimum standards for the treatment of ring crew
• We will provide food and water to performers and crew
• When training, we will ensure coaches are fit to teach, including high standards of personal fitness, and trained in safeguarding
• As a school, we will maintain rules on physical contact, anti-bullying policies, social media contact and we will train in age appropriate groups.

Fans
• We will engage respectfully with wrestlers online or at merchandise stalls
• We will not engage at abusive behaviour at shows and will follow any fan codes of conduct.
## B: Ownership of the Recommendations:

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<td>Wrestling organisations, UK Wrestling Promotions and Training Schools</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>The APPG on Wrestling and the Citizen’s Advice Bureau</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>UK Wrestling Community</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>UK Wrestling Promotions</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>UK Wrestling Promotions</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Information Commissioner’s Office</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>UK Government</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>UK Wrestling Training Schools</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>The APPG on Wrestling and UK Wrestling Training Schools</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>UK Wrestling Promotions</td>
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</table>
Thank You

A number of people contributed to the panel deliberations but did not submit formal evidence. We are grateful to them all. We would also like to thank the House of Commons library for its support.

We would like to thank Rosanna Rafel-Rix for designing the report.

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The All-Party Parliamentary Report into Professional Wrestling in Great Britain was instigated by the Co-Chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wrestling. That group will hold all the relevant documents pertaining to this report. For further details of copies of the report please email appgwrestling@gmail.com