

## Hyperbole Unlimited

**In July Sport England published their review of the Sport Unlimited programme which implied it was an unparalleled success. Not sure that this matched up with real people's experiences on the ground, The Leisure Review took a closer look.**

The Latest from the Pitch, Sport England's electronic newsletter, reported the success of their Sport Unlimited programme thus: "177,358 young people have already completed 10-week sports courses", explaining that the "£36 million three-year programme is aimed at youngsters who aren't naturally attracted to sport, and are not yet playing regular sport in the community. Thousands of high-quality activities have already been delivered across a wide range of traditional and less well-known sports including football, climbing, skiing, kayaking and parkour." Clearly, had the Pitch's sub-editor been, dare we say it, on the ball our "national game" would not have been in that list but even passing over this glitch for now there are a significant number of people who would disagree with the impression being given that this programme is the answer to the challenge of "delivering a lasting sporting legacy from London 2012".

Sport Unlimited is part of the core services required by Sport England from each county sports partnership (CSP). That means for part of the £200,000 they each receive annually they must "deliver contracted requirements" against Sport Unlimited targets. Exactly how they do it is up to them but at the end of the year the right numbers must end up in the right boxes overall. And as a competition manager we spoke to admitted: "There is precious little monitoring of quality; it's all about the numbers." Which begs the question if it is in the interests of neither an individual CSP nor Sport England for these targets to be missed and monitoring the level of activity required for quality would cost more than the programme what are the chances that a significant percentage of that 117,358 were double-counted or taking part in an activity that pre-dated the programme or part of an activity that was organised simply to garner publicity or political support?

Not wanting for a moment to imply that CSP managers would deliberately falsify records, there can be little doubt that what records there are could cover a multitude of sins. As one CSP director told us: "We've devolved a lot of the decision-making and money to local levels", with the consequence that "that does give a 'mixed' level of delivery (one of our local areas is at 160% on the numbers whereas another is at 60%!)" That is a refreshingly hands-off approach that speaks of devolved funding being used locally to meet local ends and that the CSP is happy with their response to the Sport Unlimited challenge but how useful is Sport Unlimited to sports development practitioners?

One of our other correspondents, Rhiannon Herbert from Active Gloucestershire, is unequivocal. As their head of partnership and engagement she is perfectly placed to view the programme overall and says: "In Gloucestershire, Sport Unlimited has provided an opportunity to work with a variety of existing and new partners to provide activities that are attractive to young people who are not regularly active outside of school. This enhanced community programme has allowed a large variety of new initiatives and opportunities to be offered which were very much needed." And there are a large number of case studies available that show positive results.

One of the models of good practice being offered by Sport England is from Berkshire where they have been using baseball as a Sport Unlimited vehicle to engage less sporty kids. But have they? In fact the reproduced PDF newsletter makes it clear that in Bracknell some real sports development is occurring but by tweaking the use of the funding. Berkshire Sport has been using Sport Unlimited funding to train several



Sport Unlimited or sport for some?

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young leaders as Level One coaches in baseball. If committed sports-savvy kids are doing more and better sport as part of a sustainable development programme who could complain? Except that if this is happening in a way development professionals might approve in one part of the country what confidence can we have that elsewhere less positive abuse is not occurring?

The Bracknell baseball development project found kids in youth club settings or at least used those settings for the activity. While laudable, that must be a limited practice. The bulk of the nation's young people, active or idle, are to be found in schools and given that we are blessed with a sports system which aims to link quality PE and sport in schools to a robust and sustainable club network it would make sense for the CSPs to work with the schools. Indeed the CSP specification for core service funding makes one of the 'deliverables' against which funding will accrue as: "Support the delivery of Sport Unlimited as part of the five hour sport offer for children and young people". There is only one place where the five hours are on offer and that is in England's schools.

How completely on board are the schools? Suffice it to say the reason this article has been researched and written is that a Youth Sport Trust (YST) worker who did not wish to be identified contacted The Leisure Review and indicated that the scheme in her partnership was being suborned by at least one director of sport to shore up existing school-based activity which essentially recycled the sports-savvy kids. Although those kids doubtless drew huge benefit, it is not what the programme is for. While it is dangerous to draw national conclusions from limited local examples, we have also heard that a very senior figure in the YST was asked to speak at an event on Sport Unlimited and demurred "as it's a CSP target to hit and not theirs". If the YST nationally keeps saying "it's not our target" what is the reaction at ground level? One of the very few people we spoke to who was prepared to go on the record was Ian Jackson, a senior competition manager in Cambridgeshire, who said: "My involvement with Sport Unlimited has been limited and with good reason." His experience of trying to make the scheme work had made him cynical, with his ire directed at "the obligatory reams of paperwork and unrealistic expectations of the programme", all of which meant "it does leave itself open to abuse".

Quite how one might work out if it is being abused remains moot at this point because the people responsible for the programme do not seem to know at whom it is aimed. "It's targeted at youngsters who may have some interest in sport, but aren't particularly engaged with community or club sport", says Sport England's website. The "programme is aimed at youngsters who aren't naturally attracted to sport", says a Sport England press release. "It is bringing thousands of young people into sport who might have thought it was not for them", says Sports Minister Gerry Sutcliffe. It is for "young people from the 'semi sporty population segment' to take part in sport out of school hours in term time", says Cornwall Sports Partnership. Assuming that the people who are dependent on delivering the numbers for their annual payment, let's believe Cornwall and Mr Jackson of Newmarket, who raises another key criticism: "Even where implementation of the programme has been successful according to the measures placed on it by Sport England and partners, you've got to question its ability to engage more 'semi-sporty' types. When asking the target group what they would like to participate in, popular answers tend to include horse-riding and skiing. Even if the funding is allocated to an eight-week block of activity in those activities, how sustainable is participation beyond the original subsidised period?"

Eight weeks? Or the ten weeks that the Pitch speaks of? Research suggests that it takes 25 goes at something to make it a habit. Provide eight, ten or twelve chances to experience something and you are providing a taster, nothing more, and where is the sense of giving kids a taste of something like skiing in East Anglia when the chances of that taste "encouraging them to join local clubs which can help drive lifelong participation", to quote Mr Sutcliffe again, are heavily reduced by lack of opportunity, distance and cost. Sport Unlimited is another high-profile, low-substance, headline-grabbing initiative from Sport England that is motivated by central government's desire to ride the post-Beijing sporting band wagon, an initiative in which ticks in boxes may or may not reflect the quality and usefulness of the real experience of real young people, all of whom deserve better.

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