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In retreat: the legacy of London

With fewer than ten months left in the diary before the Olympic flame is ignited in London Jonathan Ives casts an eye over recent pronouncements on the efficacy of legacy planning.

It seems that a consensus has been reached regarding the legacy of the thirtieth summer Olympiad. Promises of a transformation in participation in the host nation, upon which rested a sizeable part of the Games' legacy in the London bid book and with which the government largely justified its sizeable investment, have, according to a number of those individuals and organisations closely involved with the delivery of this legacy, already come to nought.

“quote 10b”

The original aim had been to use the world's most prestigious sporting event to inspire a nation to become sports participants. It was, as many acknowledged at the outset, an ambitious target. One million people were to be moved from armchair to sports field by the Olympic message and the impact on a new generation was to have a significant impact on the health of the nation. With London 2012 as a focal point, this message was to be taken around the world to inspire young people of all nations. However, as the London 2012 organising committee and the Olympic Delivery Authority set about transforming 500 acres of east London and delivering the necessary facilities well in advance of the Games' critical dates, the legacy of participation began to drift. As the Olympic stadium, the velodrome and the aquatics centre began to transform the Stratford skyline, concern continued to build from those who were hoping to be part of a participation boom.

Richard Caborn, a man closely associated with bringing the Games to the UK and the minister for sport in 2005 when the bid to host the Games was successful, recently became the latest politician to add his name to the list of those decrying a lost opportunity. Speaking at a meeting of the Sports and Recreation Trusts Association (Sporta) last month (September 2011) Caborn spoke of disaster in the offing. “The Olympics will be a spectacular success but we are not capitalising on that,” he said. “We are in danger of failing completely on the long-term sporting legacy of the Games. There needs to be a major change of direction in the strategy on this if the disastrous decline experienced by many of the sports is to be reversed.”

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Another former sports minister (and former Olympian), Colin Moynihan, now Lord Moynihan and chairman of the British Olympic Association, took the opportunity of Caborn's speech to reiterate his concerns. “The reason the BOA looked to bid to host these Games originally was in part because it would lead to a step change in sport throughout the whole country,” he told the BBC. “We are a long way from delivering that step change.” He suggested that the nation is being inspired by the Games and that “bricks and mortar” would provide the tangible sporting legacy but was measured when it came to apportioning blame. “It's been a matter for governments and it's been difficult because of the economic difficulties. It's been easy to focus on an extra £50 million or £100 million for security or transport. It's been more difficult to persuade governments and politicians that just as important is the sports legacy and raising the bar.”

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With the project spanning both Labour and Conservative-led administrations, the issue of the London 2012 legacy is problematic for politicians mindful that they or their party have been involved with either the conception or delivery of a project that is not meeting its targets. Caborn managed to be critical of his ministerial successors in both Labour and Conservative governments by blaming the Sport England Whole Sport Plan approach, which gives significant responsibility, and the commensurate funding, for participation growth to national governing bodies of sport. The current secretary of state with responsibility for the Games is Jeremy Hunt, who, with the practised manner of the experienced political operator being handed the political equivalent of a hospital pass, has sought to move the goalposts and change the subject.

Having already dropped some participation targets and hinted at dropping the rest, he has recently turned his attention to offering the International Olympic Committee some advice on how the Olympic Games following London 2012 might be improved, apparently placing the legacy of his own yet-to-be-staged Games in the out tray.

The response of Sport England and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to Richard Caborn's presentation to Sporta seemed to confirm that those closest to the delivery of the main plank of London's legacy recognise that this particular game is all but up. Sport England's chairman, Richard Lewis, commented: "The number of people playing sport is increasing but the pace of change needs to increase significantly over the next twelve months and beyond." The DCMS confirmed that it is already relegating the importance of the Olympic legacy within government policy, while trusting to a long-established school sport initiative and luck. "Creating a sporting legacy from London 2012 is a key pillar of the government's sporting strategy," a DCMS spokesman was reported as saying. "A national School Games sporting competition... together with the very real prospect of significant British success in the Games next year, will create a springboard for a fitter, healthier and more confident nation in the years to come."

Barely a week later the Hunt was with David Cameron in New York explaining that the Olympics will bring a £1 billion boost for British business and announcing a global investment conference in London next July on the eve of the Games. "This campaign is simple," Cameron told his audience of bankers and business leaders. "We want to send out the message that Britain is a great place to do business, to invest, to study and to visit."

The Sport England participation statistics have been widely reported but they suggest the DCMS are right to recognise that their only hope is to close their eyes and hope for the best. The figures show an increase in participation of some 110,000 after years of legacy investment, with 17 sports showing a decline in people playing once a week or more and only four (mountaineering, athletics, netball and table tennis) showing growth. However, a survey offering numbers that are perhaps even more damning emerged only a week before Caborn's speech. The Sport and Recreation Alliance (the former CCPR) sports club survey found that 84% of clubs "do not see the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games as an opportunity". In addition the 2011 figures for membership of clubs is down by 11% for adults and 8% for children since 2008.

For many involved with the sport, leisure and culture sector who had high hopes of London 2012 bringing a new energy to their efforts to develop and promote participation in sport and the arts this attitude among sports clubs might feel like most damning of all, a final nail in the coffin of planned and managed legacy. If sports clubs do not recognise an Olympic Games on home territory as an opportunity – an opportunity note, rather than an anticipated benefit – one is left to wonder who ever thought it might be.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of *The Leisure Review*.

***The Leisure Review*, October 2011**

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