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Pitching new funding stream: Places People Play

A new grant aimed at protecting playing fields was launched in May at a series of seminars around England. *The Leisure Review* dropped in on the roadshow to find out about the plans and hear the latest in cutting grass humour.

It was a sense of duty which took The Leisure Review to the newly minted Mint Hotel at the foot of Manchester's bustling Piccadilly station approach rather than any expectation of a diverting afternoon but, credit where credit is due, Sport England's Protecting Playing Fields workshop was a pleasant enough way to wile away an hour or two, and very useful into the bargain. Quite whether, in these austere times, the 20 or so attendees warranted quite such a plush setting and quite so many Sport England officers to explain the minutiae is moot but being cheek by jowl with the station did cut down on the carbon emissions of people travelling from around the north west and prime locations like that are never less than chi chi. Doubtless the mix of local authority aparatchik, governing body officer, back bedroom consultant and club representative who had turned in were impressed by the environs of the former City Inn and the opportunity to see how the other half do business.

The sleek modern lines and fastidious design of the venue may have suggested an upmarket, all-singing, all-digitially-enhanced, slicker-than-slick presentation, and Jennie Price's Sport England might like to promote itself as a modern, thrusting, business entity as it approaches its arranged marriage with UK Sport, but in Brian Whaley, their head of planning, facilities and investment, they have a man of a rather more homely stamp, and with a sense of humour to boot. Whaley's presentation, delivered with real enthusiasm rather than manufactured zeal, took into account the potential aridity of the subject matter, the likelihood that busy people would begrudge him the full two hours stipulated in the invitation and the certainty that every detail of the fund will be available online anyway, along with the presentation slides and, heaven help him, a video recording on one of his forthcoming performances in London. A colleague from Merseyside quietly (and somewhat cruelly we feel) suggested that he had never before "seen a groundsman in a suit" but a kinder analogy would be that if Eric Morecambe had been a senior Sport England planner for twenty years this might be how he would have tackled the task of presenting on the calmative subject of playing fields.

The basic premise of the new strand of funding, which became live on 25 May, is that improving and protecting playing fields will "help retain participants and achieve sustainable increases in participation". The new fund is being claimed as part of the Olympic legacy and, as part of the Places People Play programme, will use lottery income over three years to help clubs, parish councils, local authorities and similar organisations create, develop and improve playing fields (and by "create" they mean buy or lease, not just hack out of the landscape), which gives the funding significant flexibility, although they do draw the line at land decontamination.

As we know, you don't get owt for nowt and there are parameters to be met but these are sound developmental prerequisites rather than bureaucratic hoops to be jumped through. Applicants must have strong written evidence of both the strategic need for a project and for the sports development outcomes it will deliver. The bid must show a partnership approach and the resultant pitch or pitches will have to be "managed, maintained and marketed to underpin sustainability". Priority will be given to projects where there is a threat to the land remaining a playing field, where asset transfer from the public sector to the community is involved and where more than one sport will benefit.

When it comes to erecting bureaucratic hoops our national agency for sports development has been up there with the best of them but this fund breaks new ground: a bad joke, perhaps, but a welcome departure for clubs with genuine aspirations to develop but little appetite for complex forms and byzantine

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application processes. Whaley's assertion to a cynical questioner that "we very much want this to appeal across the board", followed by a bad joke of his own about a "level playing field", is backed up by the application process. The cost for groundworks is notoriously difficult to predict; indeed one member of the audience assessed the potential variation between bid price and actual price to be 100%. Sport England's response has been to include indicative figures for common work in specific appendices sport by sport. Thus, should a rugby club wish to level and drain enough of a field to accommodate two junior pitches the form should be able to indicate for how much they would need to apply. This will be crucial information early in the process as awards will vary from £20,000 to £50,000 and community groups will have to find 30% of any project's total cost as match funding, although they will be encouraged to find "as much in-kind support as possible". As an aside, the discussion which developed around "the additionality test", which forbids mixing Whole Sport Plan money and possibly exchequer money, owed as much to Kafka as it did to playing field maintenance but at least it showed what applicants will be spared if they dip their organisation's toe in this funding pool.

Returning to the application process after our sojourn in the minefield of mixed funding streams, the sheer amount of support available became clear. No need for playing field, sports development or any other kind of consultants – and no provision to pay for them – just a step-by-step application form with the big questions explained in the margin, an online prospectus, an FAQ page and a telephone number to ring if it all gets too much. Whaley also made the point that with five funding rounds over three years there was no need to rush an application. "Be honest," he said. "Get it right. It's not a dash for cash." Clubs can get the right application, linked if needs be to the "inspired facilities" strand of the Places People Play funding, and make sure its properly completed. Once in the system, support will be supplied and if when the digging starts you find "pottery, unexploded bombs, sites of archaeological special interest" or any of the other challenges that are an "inevitable risk" of these sorts of projects Sport England will "take on more of the risk" than they ever have before.

Much has been said about the legacy of the Olympics and this rejigging of the lottery pot may well be a piece of smoke and mirrors designed to boost flagging participation figures but nobody can deny that cricket clubs with drainage problems and football teams in search of a pitch to play on will have every chance of feeling the benefit. That Sport England's reputation for humourless, faceless bean-counting has taken a massive knock will perhaps be of longer-term significance to the beleaguered English sports system.

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