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Creating a legacy in an information age

With the Paralympics building on the success of London's Olympic Games, Carl Bennett wonders whether the most effective legacy of London 2012 could have been the data it collected rather than the feelings it inspired.

It is becoming clear that those who made the Games the success story reported so positively worldwide were the 'Games makers'. They were the people who made the experience a positive one for the many who travelled to London and the Olympic satellite venues. They must be thanked. Their humour and exemplary dedication to their task of rallying the crowds (I cite the loud hailer people in particular) meant a positive, once-in-a-lifetime experience for the vast majority of Olympic ticket-holders.

I can recall the legacy chatter after Commonwealth Games (CWG) in Manchester. There were promises made that the volunteers who had dedicated their time to making that event a success would be further engaged to support future events and maybe, just maybe, contribute their time and efforts to bolster the volunteer-reliant sport delivery infrastructures. I wonder how many of those 17,000 volunteers, who were well-motivated to remain engaged, were ever re-engaged? I have not seen any legacy documentation that has conclusively claimed a legacy for this 17,000-strong cohort. There is the Manchester Event Volunteer's register, but not all people who volunteered lived in Manchester. As with London 2012, the CWG brought people from all over the British Isles to offer their support and I am hoping someone somewhere has devised a clever algorithm that captures measurable outcomes for these volunteers, one that captures the spark that leads to the flame.

While I do not want to dampen the highly flammable post-Games mood, I am already hearing, and beginning to question, legacy claims. Let's take a breath. Let's wait and see if we can identify and clearly measure legacy-based impacts, outputs and outcomes. By all means build on the interest and motivation that the Olympic Games have provided but let's see if outcomes are measurable in five or ten years, and then only after they have been assessed via a rigorous and independent evaluation. A cycle ride once a year is not a legacy. The first Hovis Freewheel Ride in London started in 2007 and, following a sponsorship deal with Sky in 2008, the GoSkyRide events have been held every year in many big cities since then. Change in school sport policy is not a legacy. A change in political policy is at best a response to common sense and at worst a pressure-driven u-turn.

So, let's relax. I hope all those whole sport plans have an Olympic participation strategy and when I call my local synchronised swimming club they have room for me. Let's hope the physical activity pathways, the local sport clubs and cultural infrastructures are capable of capitalising on the interest generated by the Olympics. Let's hope the oft-cited legacy plans work. I cannot bring myself to hold my breath but I am prepared to be shown the evidence when it appears, to celebrate it and use it to power the work I do in public health. Until then, I am happy to use the evidence and information I have to inform my work.

Information is the key to effective policy and I have to ask the following: will the Games-maker database ever be shared? Or – and this is me being extremely cynical – will McDonalds, the company commissioned to train the Games makers, keep the data to themselves?

No doubt some data protection bod will say that sharing this information is impossible; or, in other words, they forgot to put a simple line in the Games maker agreement saying that your information will be shared with organisations who will benefit from your experience and support post-Games legacy – please tick the box if you do not wish this to happen.

In the NHS the sharing of information is of massive importance. Infamous data

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breaches and losses have emerged over recent years leading to widespread investigations that have never really found the culprits of the losses or even the data that has been lost. I am not sure which of these is worse but I do know data and information are valuable; valuable from a financial perspective and valuable because the right data leads to the right information, which can help you achieve the right outputs and outcomes. We are data-rich and we need systems in place to manage that data to ensure its integrity and security but also to enable data to be translated into useful information.

The now-infamous DVDs that went missing, the ones that contained millions of personal data relating to those who were in receipt of child benefits, led to a directive within the NHS to bolt down data-sharing so that it became systematic and reliable with a mechanism to identify responsibility and accountability. Remember the loss of a laptop by the MOD on a train? The loss of a data dongle on the tube by a senior political aid? How about the now laughable 'Bingate' stirred up by Oliver Letwin when he put personal documents in the bin in a park. In the NHS we introduced systems and processes to manage data flows between parties. We have information sharing agreements (ISA) which are formed between parties so that each know and understand the processes involved, their roles, their responsibilities and ultimately who is accountable for the data shared.

How many leisure organisations use ISAs to assist their data- and information-sharing? I am not sure the requirement for an ISA is as systematic as one might expect. Here is a question for you: do you operate an exercise referral system, ie one from clinicians to the gym? Yes? You will be requiring an ISA then. Fact. My industry sources tell me some organisations have never heard of an ISA and many still think it is a savings account.

Now that we have come to the end of what is being celebrated as a national success, what are we going to do with the information held about all those who volunteered to be a Games maker? Many of these people were unemployed. Many will have been inspired and rightly proud of their involvement in an international success story that has been celebrated by the public, the participants, the officials, the politicians and the ancien régime that is the IOC.

If there is ever going to be a legacy it is with this 70,000-strong group of well-trained (so it is claimed by McDonalds), well-engaged, enthused and motivated individuals. And, of greatest value, we have their details on a database somewhere. But 'somewhere' is the crux. I wonder who has the access rights to this gold mine of information? I wonder how clubs, local authorities, voluntary groups/networks will be able to access these details to bolster their ranks for events, coaching support, time bank systems and so on. The potential is endless. No doubt the clip board carrier will say it cannot be shared but there is no doubt that there could have been an information legacy.

At the time of writing, I understand that applications to become a Paralympic volunteer are increasing rapidly. Were the information of those who have offered their time for so many events over recent years readily available on a database somewhere we could contact them. We could call them, email them, text them, Skype them even, and ask if they want to help. We could be far more proactive and joined up on this agenda.

The Olympic Games have been delivered on a miniscule diet comparable to war rations: a bottle of water, a piece of fruit, a roll and bag of crisps for each Games maker. All this has been achieved through the industrialisation of the volunteer role but also through pure hunger to help. During austere times goodwill is one of the most difficult things to generate but here is a legacy that is easy to achieve, a legacy of information about the already engaged.

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