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More sport for all: vision or dream?

The Labour party's policy review of the state of UK sport is titled More Sport for All and responses have been invited from interested parties. With considerable experience in the fields of both sport and consultation, Wayne Allsopp is happy to offer a few thoughts on school and community sport, along with some suggestions on improving the structure of specialist sports coaching.

Following the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games a number of parliamentary select committees conducted reviews of sport policy. New College Leicester Learning and Sports Village has itself taken part in reviews on Olympic and Paralympic legacy, school sport and women in sport, all of which are very important areas in creating a world-leading sports system, so we were happy to contribute to this consultation in the hope that it will inform policy that in turn will create a more coordinated, cohesive and improved sports system for all.

Under the heading More Sport in Schools, the first question posed by the consultation is how to ensure that children are encouraged to participate in sport and physical activity with a view to instilling 'a sporting habit for life'. While there might be best practice out there regarding children's participation in sport and physical activity, there is no organisation with an overview of what that looks like. Current policy and strategy leaves a void in any strategic lead for school sport, which is an opportunity missed, not least because while at school most young people can be encouraged to participate. Sport England's strategy (A Sporting Habit for Life) does not go far enough and is a contradiction, given that a high percentage of their remit is for young people aged 14 and over. Habits are formed much younger than this and the primary sector is a more suitable environment to lay the foundations of habits for life.

While current school sport funding is correctly focused on the primary sector, the system is fragmented and uncoordinated with poor accountability for large amounts of public money. Funding through three ministerial departments to various sporting bodies and directly to schools are not the ingredients for success: it is more like a recipe for disaster. While the current resource (£150 million per year via primary school sports premium funding) is focused on the root cause of the problem, this resource now bypasses a lot of expertise and there the accountability placed of schools through Ofsted is poor.

If we want to increase the amount of sport and physical activity that young people are doing the lessons of best practice are there to be seen. We need a government-recognised lead body and a long-term strategy for school sport that connects effectively to the community and elite sport sectors. Sustained participation and competition need to be recognised as equally important and we need to sustain a heavier distribution of funding to the primary sector, where the main issues regarding sports and physical activity participation lie.

Because there is less expertise in the delivery of sport and physical activity in primary schools, a support mechanism is required. A clear directive is needed for schools rather than a recommendation on the amount of PE that young people should be exposed to. It is important that current financial commitments towards school sport are sustained and ring-fenced for the intended purpose. This funding needs to be used to create a system that is led effectively without any unnecessary bureaucracy.

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The issue regarding young people's participation in any form of physical activity is at a stage where a stronger approach is required to ensure that schools are playing their part. Physical education is a statutory requirement of a child's education and the advocacy needs to continue to encourage an equal standing alongside numeracy and literacy. Guidelines and recommendations are there for schools to ignore and a clear directive needs to be issued but any directive needs to link to a recommendation or guideline that young people need to be physically active for five hours a week for any health benefits. This will only work if the rest of the sporting landscape are working in a coordinated way.

Schools have a major part to play in the health and wellbeing of their students and they should be delivering an appropriate amount of effective physical education. The fact that the question of how we improve school sport is continually asked demonstrates that we do not have it right. National indicator 57 (children's participation in high-quality PE and sport) did not go far enough and a stronger directive is needed to encourage schools to deliver at least two hours of physical education. Building on any such directive, the quality of delivery needs to be assessed through firm inspections, either by an independent body or Ofsted.

School sports partnerships (SSP) were shaken up considerably in 2010 when the secretary of state for education announced that he was ending their ring-fenced funding. Without any real thought or indication as to what would replace them in the future this was nothing short of mindless. Lord Coe's promise and the Olympic and Paralympic legacy was immediately at risk way before the games even commenced. The backlash of the disbanding of SSPs was understandable given their reputation across the world. A small reprieve meant that some of the structure was sustained for a short period but the slow dismantling of the systems would result in a slow death for school sport.

To the trained eye the suggestions that young people were not sufficiently engaged in competitive sport and that the systems under Labour were too bureaucratic did not stack up. A political rebranding of competition, namely the School Games and the school sports premium funding announced in March 2013, have put school sport in the unfamiliar territory of no longer being coordinated. The autonomy provided to schools may have created freedom from any prescriptive targets but the majority of primary schools require support. While the SSPs were not perfect, they were in most cases a network of people that were keen to see PE and school sport improved. The current policy of autonomy will not improve PE and school sport in primary schools given that primary schools are where the most support is required. This will result in some poor practice along the way and some young people missing out. After all, you wouldn't ask a GP to be responsible for brain surgery.

We need a system that is driven top-down and bottom-up. Accountability is not to be feared as with accountability comes belonging. If SSPs are to be reborn and reach all children accountability needs to be addressed. Awash with public funding for a decade, the SSPs did have an impact but did not go far enough. Secondary schools (via school sport coordinators) and primary schools (via primary lead teachers) claimed thousands of pounds of funding to improve PE and school sport but all were hosted by their individual schools for a limited time and their work was often diluted by other pressures. Hub sites did not have the ability to manage the performance of the system closely enough and this created a system that was connected in theory but not in practice.

Owing to the limited time available, the roles of SSCOs and PLTs were focused on facilitation rather than delivery. The model we have in Leicester at the moment – of a full-time primary PE specialist supporting

five primary schools in delivery and upskilling staff – is resulting in primary school improvement and buy-in towards the importance of PE and school sport. This more frequent presence from an outside body professionally trained in physical education over time will create sustainability within schools. Key to this concept was influencing the primary heads that this was good use of their school sports premium and excellent value for money. Getting headteachers on board is fundamental to a school sport system.

How we break down the barriers between sport in schools and sport in the community is a fundamental question. The sports development continuum is a simple model to ensure sport is catered for at all ages, stages and abilities and, if serviced properly, it covers all elements required. Current ways of working have seen little understanding of this basic principle and sport has been lumped into elite, community or school sport with no flow or connectivity. There needs to be recognition of the difference between physical education and sport. PE needs to remain as a core part of the national curriculum and recognise every young person's right to be physically literate. This becomes less of an issue at secondary school age where it becomes less about PE or physical literacy and more about sport. While recognition of the difference in expertise for the different sectors is required, the joining up is fundamental.

If we are looking at building a world-leading cohesive sports system, the jigsaw is not complete yet. While many of our sports are getting the elite aspect right, and NGBs and Sport England are starting to have an impact on community sport participation for people over the age of 14, the concerns regarding school sport remain. Reinstating the Youth Sports Trust as the lead body for school sport with clear parameters on the definition of school sport is required, along with an overarching department of sport to ensure vertical integration and prevent horizontal integration of strategy. Only when we have a cohesive approach at national level will we see the rigid barriers of school sport and community sport broken down. The current elite success is time-limited and the foundations need to be strengthened. Urgent collaboration is needed to prevent the empire-building that is damaging our sports system and our status as world-leaders in sports development.

Schools require help to deliver specialist sports coaching and Sportscoach UK should have some say in how this help is delivered. Outside the elite level coaching is often done as a hobby by people involved in their respective sports. The result of this is that the majority of coaches are volunteers who also have full-time jobs and are not generally available during school hours, although there are commercial coaching companies providing services to schools. Ultimately when we are talking about sport-specific coaching we are less inclined to mean physical education professionals and the delivery is better coming from a qualified coach. The key here is 'qualified' and that is where schools need support. The majority of primary school teaching staff will not know a Level 3 coach from someone with a community sports leadership award so schools need to be helped to recognise what specialist sports coaching looks like.

The coaching community, whether voluntary or paid, is alive and operational but it can and must be improved if we are to grow participation. Many years ago Sport England stumbled upon the community sports coach scheme which went some way to professionalising coaching. Had the focus for this initiative been on providing school sport coaches we could have created an army of qualified specialist sports coaches to be shared among schools. Given high-quality coaching, schools would have been more likely than community sport to sustain these coaching roles beyond the limited life of the funding. A revolutionary step would be to create coaching positions that could be shared across schools and community clubs with funding from local authorities and schools. There are many paid roles

involved within the administration of sport but very few in the actual delivery. A new approach to create meaningful coaching positions would in turn create a career pathway that would be the chosen career of many in the sector.

Wayne Allsopp is business development manager at New College Leicester Learning and Sports Village.

This article is an edited version of the New College Leicester response to the Labour party policy review. The full text of the NCL response can be downloaded here. [pdf]

The full text of the Labour party policy review document can be found via www.yourbritain.org.uk/agenda-2015

The Leisure Review, November 2014

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