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Dropping the baton: a decade of Olympic debate

After working with Sport England to create the Use Our School web resource, Wayne Allsopp looks at the latest participation statistics and offers his views on how schools could be playing a bigger part in increasing participation in sport.

A decade on from Jacques Rogge opening an envelope and announcing the host city for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we continue to question the legacy of London's Games.

From Tessa Jowell convincing Tony Blair to the 100-strong delegation led by Lord Coe that travelled to Singapore, an enormous amount of effort was put into our successful Olympic bid that promised to deliver so much. Three years on from the summer of 2012, and with another five years of a Conservative political administration ahead, the Labour party and the media continue to assess the success of London 2012. After all, the Games were secured under a Labour government and only a general election had forced Labour to hand the promise of the Olympic baton to the Conservative party. The key question is whether the Conservatives dropped it.

Legacy will mean so many different things to so many different people but one thing is for sure: an increased interest in sport and sports participation was clearly part of the promise that was made in Singapore. To get more people playing sport after the Games, as all other hosts had failed to do, was one of the ingredients for success. A decade on from winning the right to host the Games, have we inspired a generation to choose sport? The latest Sport England Active Peoples Survey data suggests we have reason for concern. The current statistics (April 2014 to March 2015) show that 15.5 million people aged 14 years and above did some kind of sport once a week, every week – 222,000 fewer than six months previously. In terms of participation in sport for young people below the age of 14 years of age, the picture is not clear. With the lack of accountability and measures behind current school sports policy, no one seems to be able to demonstrate how active our young people are.

The key question is: has the interest generated by the Olympics peaked and have we wasted a golden opportunity? If so, how did we get it so wrong?

Current thinking and policy raises some questions. To ask national governing bodies of sport to increase participation and then suggest that they do that within the parameters of "only people aged 14 years and older" is ridiculous. If we are to create sporting habits for life we need to be inspiring and motivating people much earlier than 14 years of age. Equally concerning is the decision to ask primary school headteachers to improve school sport without any direction, support or measures to achieve. Pressure on heads to deliver results in the core subjects leaves school sport having to fight a battle with other priorities. Even with an additional £10,000 worth of ammunition per year for each primary school, at the moment it is a battle that sport does not seem to be winning.

These two key priority areas are where the bulk of the sports funding is www.theleisurereview.co.uk

“Our current sport system is over-complicated and uncoordinated, with numerous ministerial departments, non-departmental bodies and charities all claiming to play a lead role in improving participation in sport.”

directed and these are the two areas that seem to be failing. It is time for a change and some innovative thinking to reverse what seems to be the current trend of a decline in sports participation. The current sports sector has an enormous amount of experience and needs to play a part but it is time to call on different approaches and ideas rather than just rely on those who have been involved over the last decade

Our current sport system is over-complicated and uncoordinated, with numerous ministerial departments, non-departmental bodies and charities all claiming to play a lead role in improving participation in sport. You need to be wrapped up in the sector to understand your Sportivate from your Doorstep Club, your Sported from your Street Games and your YST from your CSP. The sector is an explosion of acronyms that makes the conundrum on Countdown look easy.

If you can navigate your way through the sport sector's various bodies you will eventually arrive at a local level where the government cuts are having their greatest impact. The non-statutory service of sport within the world of local authorities is in a critical condition. In most cases sport is only able to survive on other agendas, namely health and community cohesion. While there is no debate over the fact that sport can change lives, it is important that sport is protected from becoming a bit part of any health, education or community strategy.

For many, sport is important for being sport and they play it or watch it because they enjoy it. The public and media interest alone in sport demands its own department with a minister with similar clout to that of the education and health minister. An overarching department that governs elite sport, community sport, school sport and sport for social benefit is needed. If health or education want to use sport they should resource sport and the people who know sport to deliver their outcomes. Sport should not be governed by education or health or we will end up with people like Mr Gove, who does not know a rugby ball from a netball, making decisions on something he has absolutely no idea about.

At New College Leicester we have created a strategy that simplifies the sporting landscape and translates what is a foreign language into something that is digestible. The practice we have adopted is recognised by many and we have recently supported Sport England in creating a web resource that will support schools in opening their facilities for community use.

Although this web resource is very useful, it cannot sit in isolation of other sports development practice if it is to deliver the desired outcome of more people playing sport. For years facility management and sports development have never really collaborated to deliver a cohesive sport offer. This was born from the fact that at one stage we had three bodies representing the sector (ISRM, ILAM and NASD) and no one really noticed that the glue between them all was sport.

The approach we have taken at New College Leicester is much more than just effective facility management: it is about using our facilities to enable high-quality sports development, which in turn creates a fit-for-purpose strategy that is generated bottom-up and not top-down.

Our approach is not about political point-scoring or dreaming up interventions, like Satellite Club or Sportivate programmes, and then applying ridiculous criteria to them. It is about providing a needed service for young people, for the public and placing the college at the heart of the community. Our approach is not concerned about whether you are over the age of 14 or not. Our target audience is cradle to grave and we work very closely with our 10 partner primary and infant schools to improve PE and school sport.

Our approach is not about top-slicing the resource. It is about making

effective use of what little resource eventually finds its way to a local level and directing it where it will make the biggest difference. Our approach is not about providing one-off opportunities like the School Games. It is about creating sustainable opportunities for all individuals to reach their potential in and through sport.

We are not hung up on where the sport funding comes from or tied to the ball and chain of any criteria associated with funding. We are a self-sustaining sporting hub that is providing the heartbeat for sports development in Leicester. Some would say we are operating out of our boundaries in terms of responsibility but I would say we are providing a much-needed service within the context of the current fragmentation of the system. We are a school that is making sense of a world that is constrained by politics and we are making it work for local people.

If the sports minister is listening it is time for a shake-up and a rethink. It is time to dip into the transfer market to pull together a new team that is capable of delivering across the entire sporting landscape; a team that strikes a balance between accountability and autonomy, resulting in more sports funding finding its way to a local level. A team whose focus needs to be on making participation in sport easy by not overburdening sports funding with unnecessary criteria.

Schools and our facilities are a very important part of the sports system and here at New College Leicester we take that responsibility very seriously. While we recognise the importance of the Sport England web resource to help schools open up their facilities for sport use, we equally believe that unification of our sport system is needed to truly make us world-leading.

Wayne Allsopp the business development manager at New College Leicester.

Sport England's Use Our School online resource is available via www.sportengland.org

The Leisure Review, October 2015

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