

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

[advertise](#)

[subscribe](#)

[about us](#)

[contact us](#)

[back page](#)

Back to the future: a new strategy for sport

Martyn Allison was pleasantly surprised by the contents of the government's new sports strategy but here he explains why we must not achieve financial sustainability to the detriment of access for all in society.

Back in the autumn I wrote an article for the Leisure Review in which I suggested to the minister eight steps she could take to improve participation. Given the other policy changes being introduced by the government at the time, I was not hopeful that my suggestions would be heeded and my cynicism rose further when the spending review announced funding increases for medals and a virtual standstill for participation.

So you can imagine my surprise when reading the strategy I saw far more synergy in thinking than I expected. As I tweeted on the morning of the publication, "Right words, now we need the right actions".

While some of the ideas are new, much of the underlying thinking is not but applying new, more radical approaches to stubborn problems is certainly worth a try.

The things I like about the strategy are:

- a clear, unequivocal commitment to addressing under-representation in participation
- a clear recognition that the sport product and the provider market must be more flexible, adaptable and responsive to the needs of individuals, and that we must dilute the current distinction between sport and physical activity
- a clear focus on delivering local solutions to local problems and recognition that councils are central to the planning and creation of these solutions
- a commitment to developing and improving the measurement of the social impact of sport and physical activity based on the contribution it makes to specific outcomes
- a recognition of the need to make the delivery system more sustainable by professionalising management, improving leadership and strengthening governance.

There is little I would fundamentally disagree with or challenge, although the key is how the vision now transfers into action when previously we have failed to address inequality in participation.

Addressing under-representation

As the minister says in her introduction: "There are several demographic groups whose engagement in sport and physical activity is well below the national average. The benefit of engaging those groups that typically do little or no activity is immense."

Over recent months there has been mounting evidence that the pressure to replace subsidy with earned income is starting to squeeze out these very groups, particularly the poorer sections of society. If we are to use physical activity to generate long-term financial savings in

The sector has not had a history of being able or willing to measure performance so it will be a big step from where we are now to where the strategy expects us to be. Since a great deal will rest on the sector's ability to now demonstrate it has made a difference to people's lives, getting this part of the strategy right from the start will be 'mission critical'.

health and social care services we have to realise that it is the less well-off where the needs are greater. We cannot improve their health or prevent their ill-health without addressing issues of price, accessibility and mobility.

So it is pleasing to see the strategy say that “To achieve the changes we seek, we will need to be strategic in how we use public investment. In the past, much of the action and funding has gone to support people that would probably have met our targets for taking part in sport and being physically active anyway. While we need to ensure these groups are catered for and do not slip into inactivity, the biggest gains and the best value for public investment is found in addressing people who are least active.”

Also that in the future we will “prioritise work done to engage those who do sport less than the population as a whole. We will make most progress by focusing on particular sections of society that face common barriers to taking part and who take part in sport and physical activity at below average levels at the moment (for example, those from lower socio-economic groups, women and disabled people). We will ensure that investment is specially set aside for this purpose.”

My fear, given the final comment, is that we will as before simply look to creating specific funding streams and specific programmes to meet these needs rather than challenging providers to deliver fully inclusive services, if necessary by cross-subsidising those who are excluded from those that can pay but in a way that does not stigmatise them or leave them feeling unwelcome. We will have to think and manage very differently if we are to make major inroads into this long-standing problem.

Designing services round community and individual need; bringing together sport and physical activity

The tone of the whole strategy feels very different to past efforts because it does finally seem to put to rest former arguments about sport for sport's sake and sport for social benefit. Instead of focusing on defending and selling a product called sport it focuses on using sport and physical activity to meet the needs of the customer and, more importantly, those who are not customers.

It is good to see the strategy recognise that “a range of different factors are responsible for the under-representation of different groups and it is important that the sector understands the breadth of causes in designing solutions. For example, recent research on the relationship between poverty and access to sport for young people highlighted not just practical barriers like cost and availability of the right informal activities but also emotional barriers around perceptions of safety and ownership of local space as well as wider social circumstances.”

Those involved in sport development have known this for many years and have sought to address these issues by targeted interventions. However, austerity has seen many sports development teams disappear and councils keen to reduce costs have allowed facilities to drift away from these target audiences in order to generate greater earned income. The latest National Benchmarking Service (NBS) annual report highlights the fact that while the efficiency of facilities has improved markedly, the effectiveness in terms of access for target groups has worsened.

I welcome the recognition that “Sport must become more demand-led, recognising the different motivations, attitudes and lifestyles of its potential customer base. The system must be more flexible and actively reach out to those who do not get involved in sport, whether because of practical, social or emotional barriers.” However, as we have already seen, this will continue to be a challenge for many working in the sector

who are simply passionate about their sport. As the strategy says, “The sector must also adapt to suit how people want to engage in sport and physical activity. For some this will mean a social game of ultimate frisbee or skateboarding with friends, but others won’t want to take part unless it is fiercely competitive and they are able to push themselves to their full potential.”

It has been less than ten years since we were first able to seriously evidence the benefits of greater physical activity on health improvement and health inequality. However, my recent work with Sport England and cCLOA on commissioning has clearly shown that the very word ‘sport’ is a real barrier to better working relationships between sport and health. Public health and clinical commissioning groups (CCG) want us to focus on making physical activity accessible to those in greatest need and want to see the inactive active rather than the active more active. It is therefore good to see the strategy recommend that the current distinctions between sport and wider physical activity in terms of the activities that are relevant to Sport England’s objectives and funding will be removed. The strategy recognises that “projects that feature activities such as dance, utility cycling and walking can be extremely effective in reaching inactive people, who might not consider themselves at all ‘sporty’, and help them to get moving.”

The transfer of responsibility for public health to local authorities has helped improve this relationship in some areas but in others there are still huge divides between the two professions. At least now there are many good examples of the two sectors working together and co-producing or co-funding interventions that work. For example, “in places where medical professionals are well-informed about local leisure services and other opportunities to be active and are confident that these will be delivered effectively by suitably trained staff, they are prescribing physical activity”.

However, the recent and planned reductions in public health budgets and the financial pressures across the wider NHS means it will be harder to create and sustain these relationships. Simply saying “we want the health and sport and leisure sectors to work more closely together to reduce inactivity across the country, not just in areas of good practice” is easy; doing it will be major challenge.

It is equally right that the strategy does not focus only on traditional venues to improve physical activity. The maintenance of leisure centres, pools and major sporting infrastructure will continue to be a challenge for many councils over the next five years and they may in fact offer only limited value in terms of increasing activity among many hard to reach groups. Simply keeping open worn-out, unattractive venues in the wrong location when they drain valuable resources will not make sense but closure will continue to be politically difficult. Transferring them to trusts or private contractors may solve the funding problem in the short term but without on-going subsidy, a strong contract and effective governance this approach may do little to improve physical activity for those who will benefit most.

The focus in the strategy on workplace activity is welcome as is the focus on parks, the countryside and outdoor space. However, it is obvious to me that with limited and declining resources the new focus on these venues and on physical activity rather than sport will undoubtedly suck funding away from more traditional sporting offers. We may soon see new tensions appear between those wanting traditional sporting activities and the new markets.

For many years now the sport and leisure sector has focused on its supply side, building facilities that have depended on subsidy to survive and using sports development to deal with equality. Austerity means that this approach is no longer viable. Our colleagues in the health sector work to a demand- or needs-led model and the difference lies at

the core of the tensions between the two. If we are to address inequality in sport and health we all need to be on the same page and this means a radical rethink on many levels.

I find the policy's section on children and young people to be one of the most interesting in that it appears to dance carefully round a dilemma. The lowering of the Sport England funding threshold to age 5 from age 14 is quite a radical step when resources are limited. Does this bring into question the future role of the Youth Sport Trust?

The strategy recognises that “[a] positive experience of sport and physical activity at a young age can contribute to a lifetime of participation. Unfortunately, a negative experience may narrow perceptions of sport and put someone off forever. This is why we need to ensure that the sport and physical activity ‘offer’ is right for children and young people. This is particularly true for under-represented groups, such as girls and disabled children, where drop out rates in childhood are high.”

Does this directly challenge the previous focus on competitive sport? “After five years of competition and with the changes this strategy will bring, the time is right to consider the future priorities of the School Games. It is important to understand whether it is still delivering on its original purpose, whether that purpose is still relevant, if there is anything else it should be focused on and how it can be delivered most effectively.” I suspect this may be one area where the traditional sporting lobby may feel most uncomfortable and I suspect it is here where the press and media may start to open up old debates about competition and school sport.

Local solutions to local problems

On the face of it this government appears to have a strong commitment to devolution and localism so it is not surprising to see this echoed in the sport strategy. It is warming to see “sport is a key part of local communities but it looks different in different places – there is no top down approach that works everywhere. Some outcomes can be commissioned nationally, but markets vary locally and many responses to our consultation stressed that different places require their own strategies which respond to local need and demands and need partnerships locally.”

It is even more warming to see that councils are recognised as central to developing these local solutions: “Local authorities are the biggest public sector investor in sport and physical activity, spending over £1bn per year, excluding capital spend. Their understanding of communities enables them to target opportunities and encourage mass participation. Councils also have an important leadership role to play, bringing schools, voluntary sport clubs, National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs), health and the private sector together to forge partnerships, unblock barriers to participation and improve the local sport delivery system.”

The strategy goes on to say that “local authorities have, and will continue to have, an absolutely crucial role to play in delivering sport and physical activity opportunities. Since the devolution of public health from the National Health Service (NHS) to local authorities in 2013, many councils have taken the opportunity to integrate physical activity into public health policy as part of a wider shift from a system that treats ill-health to one that promotes wellbeing”. However, given the level of funding councils have already lost and expect to lose, convincing them all to take on this leadership and coordinating role will not be easy. Many have already chosen to opt out completely from both sport and cultural services and focus on so-called ‘statutory services’.

The strategy points out that “getting national organisations to work

together to support what happens at a local level has been a challenge.” Once again my work with cCLOA and Sport England on commissioning has shown that the sport and physical activity voice is rarely heard round the strategic decision-making tables, whether it is on strategic place partnerships or on health and wellbeing boards. The downsizing of councils has greatly reduced their strategic management capacity, with many having no senior sport and leisure officer and some not even retaining a client management function where they have externalised; externalisation itself has helped further separate them from strategic service planning functions. Local trust managers or contract managers are often unknown to council leaders, let alone welcome to join strategic discussions. The same is true for trust boards many of which fail to include local influencers. Finally we see many smaller trusts getting swallowed up by the bigger companies and trusts with their own strategic management often located miles away from local decision-making structures.

As we see new planning and decision-making structures form on a sub-regional basis, perhaps with new elected mayors, there is a danger that the voice of the sector becomes even more isolated from the key decision-making processes, particularly those round health, social care and economic development. Reversing these trends and enabling this voice to be heard in these strategic discussions will not be easy without providing some element of reinvestment and also raising the leadership quality across the sector.

The county sport partnerships (CSP) were originally conceived as a strategic vehicle to pull together the various parts of the delivery system and enable it to talk, plan and deliver collaboratively locally. As the strategy says, “Much local partnership work in sport has for many years been organised by the national network of County Sports Partnerships. They play an important role across the country in promoting sport and physical activity, working closely with local authorities, schools and others. Many do an excellent job and are rightly valued by local stakeholders, but their role varies from place to place.”

It has been recognised for some time that the quality of CSPs is variable. Some add real strategic value to a place but others have gone in very different directions; some have even become competing delivery vehicles to councils, trusts, and third-sector providers. The strategy clearly recognises this and we must welcome the proposed independent Review, along with the opportunity to take stock and perhaps rethink their role. As the strategy says: “As local government evolves, we need to think about how best to get local organisations to work together to deliver the priorities in their areas so that local people can get the most value from sport.”

Delivering and measuring our impact on outcomes

For more than a decade the sector has struggled to fully embrace the need to measure its performance and demonstrate its value and worth more clearly. Much of my time with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) was spent on this thorny question, starting with the national performance indicators, going on to achieve a position for sport and culture in local area agreements and finally the comprehensive area assessment. The Active People survey was born out of this era and while some see it as flawed it has been a valuable way of demonstrating our progress (or lack of it) in terms of increasing participation and addressing inequality.

It would appear that the known dissatisfaction with Active People was reflected in the consultation where it was argued that the measurement framework should change to more accurately reflect the true breadth of activity that people undertake. The strategy states: “Thinking about sport and physical activity has tended in the past to focus too heavily on traditional outdoor sports like football or rugby and indoor sports like

swimming or badminton. This has partly been driven by a narrow interpretation of what is counted."It would appear that the new survey, titled Active Lives, will capture more of the types of activity that people do, and their contribution to the outcomes of the strategy. We must remember though that in changing the survey we may lose the ability to track progress for some time to come.

Our failure to deliver the expected improvements in participation levels post Olympics directly led to this new strategy so it was to be expected that the government would want to ensure that ways were put in place to measure whether this time it was working: "In any new strategy, the outcomes that we are seeking to deliver through government investment need to be crystal clear and widely shared. Only then can all organisations, whether publicly funded or not, unite in striving towards a common set of goals."

One of the most important developments in this strategy is the proposed focus on the broader outcomes that sport and physical activity can deliver. The strategy confirms that: "From all the available evidence, five areas stand out as where sport can make its greatest contribution – physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development[,] and economic development. We have defined a high level outcome in each area that is measured at a national level and making a positive contribution to these is what organisations will receive funding for in future."

The new performance framework will underpin not only the funding decisions of Sport England but accountability for the performance management of delivery. "All new government funding for sport and physical activity will go to organisations which can best demonstrate that they will deliver some or all of the five outcomes in this strategy."

However, it goes on to say that: "We are open-minded about what type of organisation should receive this funding, it is likely that organisations which show that they can work collaboratively and tailor their work at the local level will be best placed to access this funding." This perhaps explains the much-expected intention to reduce Sport England's direct funding relationships with their traditional partners, particularly the national governing bodies (NGB) in order to invite new relationships with a broader range of partners who are perceived as being best equipped to deliver these outcomes by working collaboratively.

The proposed framework of outcomes, outputs and performance indicators is a fairly traditional approach for modern public service management but the framework needs to be further investigated in terms of how it will function on the ground. While contributing to outcomes is the right way to go, outcomes by their very nature tend to be longer term and difficult to measure. If funding agreements are to be short-term, say up to three years, success is more likely to get measured against the outputs or indicators, thus to some degree defeating the objective. We now have the opportunity to consider how the new framework, in conjunction with a further-developed Quest and the National Benchmarking Service, can ensure we have fit-for-purpose organisations that continually seek to improve.

The sector has not had a history of being able or willing to measure performance so it will be a big step from where we are now to where the strategy expects us to be. Since a great deal will rest on the sector's ability to now demonstrate it has made a difference to people's lives, getting this part of the strategy right from the start will be 'mission critical'.

A sustainable delivery system

The strategy recognises that "we must put in place the foundations of

sport on a more sustainable footing to be able to free the resources necessary to tackle under-representation and ensure sport's impact beyond its current participants. This also means that we must not achieve financial sustainability to the detriment of access for all in society, including balancing inclusive pricing policies with revenue needs.”

To achieve this the strategy suggests organisations need to be less reliant on single funding streams and look to alternatives, including sponsorship and selling media rights, philanthropy, fundraising, crowdfunding and partnerships with the private sector. Further, we need to look for back of office efficiencies, co-location and shared services among sporting bodies, particularly (but not limited to) NGBs.

Alongside the more traditional sources of private income, it is also suggested that there are other types of financial support that have not traditionally been explored or used effectively by the sport and physical activity sector, including various types of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity and social impact bonds.

In terms of facilities it is suggested that greater efficiency can be created by greater multi-sport activity and co-location with other public services. Many councils have adopted bold approaches to facility rationalisation, replacing old stock with new modern facilities that are better located and more efficient to run. This, along with new management options, has been the driving force behind reducing or removing public subsidy and in the best even generating a financial return for the operator and the council. But as the NBS report shows this has often come at the detriment to access, particularly for hard-to-reach groups and the less well-off. The provider sector will need to seriously consider with their council partners where the right balance lies between financial sustainability and meeting community outcomes.

Finally, the strategy recognises the importance of creating “the leadership and administration that is fit-for-purpose and able to deliver the outcomes set out in this strategy.” It calls for a new workforce strategy that addresses a range of issues, including diversity in particular. The government also wants to “see increased professionalisation in the wider sport workforce, via the Chartered Institute of Management for Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA)” but we know how difficult the creation and maintenance of CIMSPA has been. Creating a single professional institute was a long and painful process and, as a member-led and funded body, it has struggled to sustain itself ever since it was awarded its charter status. Individuals remain unconvinced about why they should join and employers have been reluctant to take the bold step and insist on professional membership when they recruit. This now has to change. Overall management quality across the sector needs to improve considerably if it is to survive let alone deliver this strategy. Funding the level of skill development required when resources are scarce will be a challenge and can only be done if the thousands of people working in the sector join CIMSPA and pay their subs so that a comprehensive training and development programme can be delivered for them.

A key part of taking action to professionalise the sport workforce will be ensuring we have strong leadership. Increasingly organisations are looking outside the sector to get the quality of leadership and management they need. We can and must develop our own future leaders but this will take time and will need resourcing. The strategy proposes that Sport England will develop a new sports leadership scheme to provide high-quality professional development for future leaders in sport (at both national and community level). For the sector to perform collaboratively this leadership offer must be developed and owned across the sector. The new leadership offer must be able to accommodate future leaders working in councils, trusts, private operators, CSPs, NGBs, voluntary organisations, further education and

maybe even include others from public health and social care.

But leadership at a management level is not the only area requiring development. Many of the organisations involved in delivering this strategy will have their own governance Arrangements, including trustees and boards. Good leadership is essential here alongside good governance. Ideally any leadership development programme should include those responsible for governing as well as managing.

What next?

So there we have it: an extensive and wide-ranging set of proposals which appear at first sight to hang together very well. As a vision or set of aspirations they can be easily understood and welcomed by many, although I am sure some of the more traditional sport enthusiasts will be nervous about what this might mean to them. The next stage will involve Sport England consulting on its own strategy that will be required to implement many of the proposals. However, this is not a strategy for government or Sport England: it is a strategy for the whole sector and we will see in coming months how it responds to the challenges presented. I am sure that if we fail again to deliver on the key demands round inequality of participation and fail to demonstrate real social benefit we may have no future to go back to.

Martyn Allison has worked in and with local government and its partners for over 40 years, serving as a director of leisure, an assistant chief executive and a national adviser for culture and sport with the Local Government Association. He is a fellow of CIMSPA and chair of the Quest advisory board.

A New Strategy for Sport: a Consultation was published by the DCMS on 31 July with a deadline of 2 October. The consultation document is online at www.gov.uk/government/consultations

Read Martyn's letter to the minister in issue 79 of the Leisure Review: Dear minister... We need to talk about sport.

The Leisure Review, February 2016

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.