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Carrots and sticks: a new understanding of sport

The new government strategy for sport presents some significant challenges along with real opportunities to the sport, leisure and culture sector. Carl Bennett assesses the size of the carrot being offered but fears that for some organisations only a really big stick will do the trick.

So there I was delivering a presentation to 30 or more leisure managers at a national conference and during a Q&A pit stop a point was made that confirmed something for me: keeping pace with change is often challenging, especially when the language spoken is different from yours and your approach does not contribute to the priorities of others.

I have written many times for the Leisure Review and for a number of other sector-related publications. My articles are often developed to encourage discussion, debate, explore opinion and press home a message. Over the years my articles have discussed the need for the sector to consider how it might change; they have presented ideas and evidence of why we need to reshape interventions so they match local needs.

I began talking about change and matching needs many years ago. I can recall presenting at the ISRM [Institute of Sport and Recreation Management] national conference at the English Institute of Sport in Sheffield back in the early noughties and at an ILAM [Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management] conference at a similar time where my ideas about matching needs and local drivers for change were probably a little fresh for those attending. However, I believed these ideas were important enough to identify, explore and address. They have fed my career so far, encouraging me to move from facility and events management to health improvement and public health, a period now covering more than 30 years.

Refraining from “I told you so...”, it appears the latest iteration of a national strategy for the sector is about to reshape the rules of play for many who deliver sport, physical activity, recreation and leisure services. The new DCMS strategy has defined a number of outcome-based performance indicators that mean we, as a sector, will be expected to measure the differences our interventions make rather than simply counting how many people do stuff. I hear a few whisper “about time” and there is an underlying welcome for the change in tack but I do note a number of people who are in positions to shape the landscape scratching their heads and wondering how they might transform their offers to match the new-world expectations.

At the local level there are many, many priorities and drivers for change and I can see how the majority of the new outcome measures located in the later pages of Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation [DCMS; December 2015] can be used to match these. The worrying thing for me is that many current sport and physical activity providers deliver things at scale for those who are already active. The key shift within the new strategy will require providers to be more focused on those who are inactive, or least active, and working with these in their own backyard, in smaller numbers and at a more intensive level. This will require a significant change in programming, delivery and skills.

“It now looks as if those principles that have been in situ for many, many years are about to be tested. Being paid to deliver activities to those that are already active is not the expected future.”

Recently I attended the Basil Ashford memorial lecture at Staffordshire University, which was delivered by Jane Ashworth, the chief executive of Street Games. Taking full advantage of my visiting fellow status at Staffs Uni, I attend as many such sessions as I can because more than anything it helps feed my hunger for learning and adds to my personal CPD. One of the key points Jane made really well was the need to change how we deliver activities. She spoke about how 'coaches' require social understanding, social skills and flexible approaches to match the needs and expectations of those who the sport and physical activity sector have traditionally failed to engage effectively. While Jane spoke about young people, similar approaches are required to engage inactive and the least active adults.

Those who have got to the end of the new DCMS strategy (it's only 82 pages long) will have read the vision and the expectations of a clear reshaping of the landscape and shift in delivery. There is a real emphasis on the inactive and those populations that are either not thinking about activity or those who are teetering on the edge of making a decision about becoming active. These groups are quite different from those the sector has supported for the past 30 years and certainly the biggest change in approach since compulsory competitive tendering.

I truly believe that the new strategy presents two things really well: the provision of sport and physical activity for wellbeing and social good. Over many years working as a public health commissioner, I often developed and invested in interventions to address these issues. I also engaged many providers who expected me to develop special payment structures for these interventions because this is what 'health' does, not what 'we' do. Providers often expected to be paid for things that delivered health improvement or for engaging those least active or experiencing significant social issues because they as delivery agents were not set up to deliver activities for these populations. This attitude often encouraged me to write articles and share my world view.

It now looks as if those principles that have been in situ for many, many years are about to be tested. Being paid to deliver activities to those that are already active is not the expected future. After all, if all that is happening is active people are remaining active and these people are a very small proportion of your local population then there are very few outcomes that will be met. In the future it is likely that you will be expected to deliver activities to those who are inactive/least active and those who come from a number of target populations who are most likely to record greater impact on the strategic drivers for change at the local level.

I celebrated when Tracey Crouch commented: "I want to make sure that the sports sector gives everyone – no matter who they are and what their ability – the chance to take part. However, public funding is a privilege not a right and has to go to organisations that can make a real difference".

I celebrated because this is the first time I have read such a bold statement of intent and it hinted at the real difference sport and physical activity participation could make. I did question whether the sentiment would actually seep into the DNA of the emerging strategy but my initial concerns have been reduced by the tone and direction that the strategy is clearly encouraging.

My only concerns now are whether the sector can meet the objectives and opportunities Sporting Future presents.

This brings me back to my most recent presentation, the one I introduced at the start of this article. Some believe that the resources to help organisations change have been lost to austerity. I would say that there have been many years where resources have been available to help organisations change. My experiences have demonstrated quite

clearly that if you invest in a way that develops competencies as well as capacity, those often tasked with delivering sport and physical activity will change. What I have also witnessed is a simple failure of some to grasp the concept of change; when resources were available they simply took the cash and failed to invest in their own organisational transformation. While outputs were delivered, there was a failure to embed the new practices into the normal delivery of programmes and organisational personality.

It appears these organisations will simply continue doing what they have always done. For me the evidence is clear: if the sector continues to do what it has always done we will get what we have always got. And what we have always got is not increased participation. Doing what we have always done will not produce the outcomes now expected and it will definitely not engage those the new strategy presents as important to change at the strategic level.

Going back to the Basil Ashford lecture, I will share something with you that I believe helps press home my argument so far: “Organisations with reach will be those fit for the future delivery of sport and physical activity”.

If you can't prove you have reach and you have not begun exploring – under your own steam and without any special payments – touch points with those populations the DCMS are now discussing, you probably won't attract the resources to match the new world order.

For some a carrot will suffice. For others a big stick might not be enough.

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Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation is available via www.gov.uk/government/publications

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