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Active Lives: a never-ending story

With the figures now revealed, Martyn Allison considers the lessons from the Active Lives survey and charts the history of participation data. His assessment offers some fundamental challenges to sport and leisure professionals, their employers and their communities.

My Twitter feed announced the arrival of the first Active Lives report. Could I resist the temptation to delve into Sport England's latest attempt to measure activity and inactivity? Well no, but I quickly realised there would be no surprises. My response on Twitter was: "New data but same old problem."

In the late 1970s as a keen new local government officer I helped establish the first Action Sport project in Coventry. My inspiration was the lack of opportunities to play sport in the inner-city communities and outer estates despite a shiny new leisure centre and 50m pool. Sport for All was the banner under which sports development was born to address inequality in participation among women, disabled people, ethnic minorities and the unemployed.

Nearly 50 years later in 2017 the same inequalities can be seen in the Active Lives data. In effect, nothing has changed.

Let us briefly look at the intervening years and chart what has happened.

The 1960s and 70s had seen a massive investment by councils in sport and leisure facilities. However, according to Mrs Thatcher, councils were incapable of running public services efficiently. Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) would sort them out, forcing them to hand over their leisure centres to the private sector or run them profitably themselves. While CCT may have improved the management, it did little to improve effectiveness in terms of addressing the equity challenge; in fact, many would argue it made things worse. Facilities would deal with the haves and sports development would deal with the have-nots. However, some councils did not relish the idea of the private sector taking over and found a defence in the form of leisure trusts to circumvent the legislation. Trusts would be run to social objectives and, through charity status, protect communities from the ravages of profit. But have they addressed equality?

In 1997 the election of Tony Blair heralds a new dawn. Public services were still viewed as outdated and in need of modernisation. However, now they would be required to demonstrate "best value" and their performance would be judged against not just cost but a mixture of efficiency, effectiveness and overall value for money. If they could not demonstrate best value then inspection and possibly intervention would follow; if necessary services would be transferred to the private sector. While sport and leisure was not exempt from the best value challenge, it was not important enough to face intervention. As a result, performance did not really improve and little happened to address the equity issue in terms of participation.

But the wider public service reform programme put pressure on councils

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to improve other key services, particularly education and social care. A heavy focus on measurement, inspection and intervention quickly forced councils to redirect resources to those services being measured from those not being measured. What got measured got done! Without suitable performance measures and clarity on outcomes and impact, the sport and leisure sector was again under pressure to defend itself. When asked what difference we made to people's lives, we could neither evidence it nor evidence how we were improving either our efficiency or our effectiveness.

How could we make our case? The sector had long promoted the view that sport and leisure changes lives, but our case was in many ways anecdotal. Luckily Sport England uncovered the key link between levels of physical activity and health. If we could then show that we can increase the numbers participating in sport at a level that will improve their health, we can show that we make a difference; we can show that we make an impact on health outcomes. So the national performance indicators were created. By measuring the percentage of people who participate regularly we can go on and measure improvement and impact. By investing in the Active People survey we can get invited to the party. We can get ourselves in the national indicator set, be part of the comprehensive performance assessment and become part of local area agreements. We will then be seen as important by central government and local government.

But as the data emerged it showed that not only was overall participation low but it also varied between places. Above all it showed that the same old issues of equality in participation were still rife. So now we could not only show how we were improving participation rates and therefore health outcomes but we could show how we were closing the equality gap, particularly in communities where health inequality was greatest.

Unfortunately, towards the end of the Blair era it was becoming clear that we were failing. Overall levels of participation had improved only marginally and the equality gaps remained. Our response was not to double our efforts but instead to put our faith in the Olympics. We would use the Olympics in 2012 to create a legacy of increased participation and address equality. But by 2015 the Olympic legacy had also failed and Sport England's belief that governing bodies of sport would be the main providers of this legacy had been seriously dented. A new approach was again being called for.

By now a new challenge had confronted the sector. Austerity had eaten into public services and councils, which provided the majority of funding for sport and leisure, faced up to 50% cuts in funding. Subsidies to leisure facilities were being curtailed. Operators who could not break even or deliver a profit were gradually replaced by those that could. Sports development functions disappeared. Significant improvements in facility efficiency were welcomed and, to achieve this, new modern facilities appeared in some places replacing old outdated ones. But, as the national benchmarking service data showed, while efficiency was improving effectiveness was deteriorating. Equality in terms of who used the facilities was once again getting worse. We were getting more efficient at squeezing out those that could not afford to pay.

However, at the same time the role of physical activity in health improvement and addressing health inequality was gathering a pace. Finally the public health sector was getting the message about prevention. The funding crisis in the health sector made addressing prevention even more critical. Childhood obesity was a national disaster. Suddenly opportunities emerged for health commissioners to work with the sport and leisure sector to use physical activity to improve health. However, their focus was on those in greatest need: they were interested in making the inactive active, not the active more active. So just when the sector got its opportunity to make the case for activity and

deliver it, austerity was making it harder to work with those in greatest need.

Up steps our new minister. With a personal passion for sport, Tracey Crouch saw the opportunity to set a new direction. The challenge she set was one of improving physical activity and addressing the inequality in activity. Sport England was commissioned to produce a new strategy and challenged to produce a new measure of performance based on a wider definition of participation. This was welcomed because the old one, Active People, was now discredited within the sector. It measured the wrong things, it came to the wrong conclusions, and it exposed weaknesses that the sector did not want to face up to. Also a new strategy was required that would switch resources from governing bodies that had "failed" to increase participation to a new range of partners who could address the equality deficit; such a strategy needed a new focus, not on individual organisations but on collaborative working in "places".

So now we are up to date. The first Active Lives survey report has been published. We now have a baseline that establishes once again where we start from and against which we can measure our progress in terms of improving physical activity and narrowing the differences in activity levels across communities and across places.

What does it tell us? Well the headline is that, excluding gardening (not that I have anything against gardening), 22% of adults over 16 are inactive and a further 12.6% are not yet active enough to get the full health benefits. With 65.4% active, the challenge is to get a third of the population more active.

However, as with the historical perspective outlined above, equality is still the major challenge.

The poorest socioeconomic group is more than twice as likely to be inactive than the richest group – 34% compared to 14% – and when we look at those that are active the gaps widens by another 2%. When you look at the regional data inactivity is higher in the north than the south. At a local authority level inactivity is higher in the major cities and in poorer districts. The picture mirrors every other socioeconomic data set and is no different to what Active People told us a decade before.

As you would expect, levels of inactivity increases with disability and inactivity is higher in black and ethnic minority communities than in white communities and higher among women than men. However, what is interesting is that because the new survey includes a wider definition of activity, specifically including walking, the gap between men and women is only 3.4%, less than it was in Active People and showing, I think, the benefits of a switch from a sport-focused policy. However, the gender gap among the active doubles to nearly 6%, suggesting the same challenge remains. Let's hope the next This Girl Can campaign works.

As you would expect, inactivity increases with age with marked increases at 24, 55 and 75. With social care now in crisis alongside the NHS, keeping people out of hospital and out of care will be a key shared priority.

When we look at how people are active we see some well-known perspectives. Sport is more popular with men than women but fitness is equally popular. Walking is more popular among women and cycling more popular among men. Dance is more popular with women and gardening more popular with men. Now that's a surprise!

So what does this all mean for Sport England and more importantly the sector as a whole? Here are three suggestions.

First, inactivity is a major challenge for society and is an area where sport and leisure services can make a huge difference to people's lives. The emerging recognition in the health and social care sectors of the importance of prevention and the role of physical activity means there is a climate and context where new relationships can, and will need to be, formed quickly. Taking this opportunity will be an immense challenge given the environment in which austerity will limit available resources for another five years at least. Rising to the challenge will take some real leadership.

Second, while traditional sport still has a huge part to play in keeping people active and attracting some new people its role is clearly limited and partial. The role of walking, cycling, fitness, swimming and even gardening are equally, if not more, important. This brings real challenges to Sport England and traditional sport providers, particularly when resources both from Sport England and councils move away from traditional sport to other activity areas. Sustaining sporting infrastructures will need new approaches. Once again it will take some real leadership to address the emerging tensions between sport and physical activity.

Third, above all the sector has to acknowledge that it has fundamentally failed in terms of addressing equality in participation levels and that the challenges are as big now as they were 50 years ago. The underlying problem, however, lies not just in the sector but also in society as a whole. We alone cannot address people's lack of income and austerity will limit our ability to subsidise price. This must not be an excuse for not trying. In our business plans and in our club development plans we can seek to cross-subsidise to create opportunity for those who are excluded by price. We can prioritise where limited resources go and who gains and who loses. We can make better policy choices and management choices. In terms of women, black and ethnic minorities and disabled people, we can stop discriminating against them and make much more effort to address the imbalance in the usage patterns in our facilities and in our clubs. We can strive harder to ensure all the services and opportunities we offer are representative of the communities they purport to serve. These too are challenges of leadership: nothing more and nothing less.

Active Lives for many in the sector will be a beginning of a journey. For some it will be a new beginning but for me it is, I am sorry to say, just another blip on a journey that has yet to successfully lead anywhere.

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.

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