

Austerity and sport for health

By Dr Dan Parnell and Dr Paul Widdop

Austerity has impacted upon the real life experiences of communities. Sport and recreation has not been immune from austerity.



Against a volume of evidence citing the rising number of food-banks, homelessness, an increasing inequalities gap and the privatisation of the National Health Service it is hard to place sport in the austerity debate. Yet investment in sport for social agendas has evidence of producing a social return, which is not always recognised.

Sport encompasses physical activity and the relationship between the two has long since established the awareness of the health costs of inactivity (WHO, 2010). The World Health Organisation estimates that physical inactivity is the 4th leading risk factor for global mortality, responsible for 6% of deaths globally. That is 3.2 million deaths per year. Including 2.6 million in low-and-middle-income countries. In 2012, 'The Lancet' medical journal, noted that the impact of inactivity on mortality could be greater still – 5.3 million deaths per year – rivalling tobacco for causes of death.

Promoting physical activity is not just key, but critical in tackling Public Health issues. A challenge for physical activity researchers and policy makers is reducing inactivity levels within hard to reach communities and in a format that is attractive to fit the consumption needs of local people. Ultimately, sport for health has a role in Public Health in making physical activity more amenable, desirable and attractive to many, including those on the margins.

An insight into the sport and leisure industry

Public Sector provision for sport and leisure has changed and in some cases disappeared since the introduction of austerity driven policy measures.

A report by King for the Association of Public Service Excellence

[\[http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/local-authority-sport-and-recreation-services-in-england-where-next/local-authority-sport-and-recreation-services-in-england-where-next/\]](http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/local-authority-sport-and-recreation-services-in-england-where-next/local-authority-sport-and-recreation-services-in-england-where-next/) pre-empted these reductions in services and highlighted that certain parts of England are being disproportionately affected (APSE, 2010). Austerity has contributed to a fragmented landscape of provision.

Much of the report predictions for 2015; including, falling revenue budgets, staff cuts, increased charges, reduced opening hours, facility closures and reduced commitments to parks and pitches utilized for organised and casual participation; have become a reality. A clear example of this is the fight to 'Keep Park Road Baths Open'

[\[http://www.liverpoolconfidential.co.uk/news-and-comment/fight-to-save-dingle-pool-gets-thumbs-up-from-beth-tweedle\]](http://www.liverpoolconfidential.co.uk/news-and-comment/fight-to-save-dingle-pool-gets-thumbs-up-from-beth-tweedle).

In a localised context, Liverpool (UK), which is home to some of the most deprived communities in Britain, evidences high levels of obesity and decreasing fitness levels

amongst children across the city. Despite this, its Local Authority service provision for swimming has been severely threatened. Both the Everton Park Sports Centre (within the deprived L5 area) and the Dingle areas Park Road swimming baths were threatened with closure. Further, radical changes to opening times have been imposed on the Austin Rawlinson centre in Speke.



The reported rationale for closures were related to high operating and maintenance costs, which contributed to the budgetary deficit of £7.3 million in the year 2013/2014. Whilst local councillors have looked for options such as community transfer, the swimming pools remain open and under Local Authority management.

This was due to the campaigners who fought the council at every step, yet the safety of the site remains unclear. Whilst the council have committed to the short term future of the site, opening hours have been reduced and key services have been moved to other sites – all contributing to a more subtle withdrawal by the council and lesser services for local (and severely deprived) communities.

Furthermore, what may happen in communities that have a less cohesive network structure that facilitates mobilisation is that they could ultimately lose essential services in sport and leisure which as noted elsewhere impacts upon society and community social capital.

Austerity is real, observable and experienced

Whilst the rolling back of the state will impact Local Authority leisure centres across England and potentially other parts of the UK, the impact of reduced opportunities for communities, families, people and children to participate in sport and physical activity is not certain. What is clear, observable and experienced is that the consequence of austerity has a real impact on real people, across communities.

Is austerity influencing sports participation?

Participation figures for sport and physical activity across Local Authorities in England shows a significant decrease during a period of austerity (2008-2013). Using a pooled logistic regression model of two waves of the Active People Survey, Widdop et al (forthcoming) found that evidence clearly suggests a statistically significant difference in participation in sport for women, younger people and non-white individuals between 2008 and 2013.

In simple terms, there is clear statistical evidence that women participation rates in sport were significantly lower in 2013 than 2008 – a similar pattern is found for both young people aged 14-29 and non-white individuals. This is a worrying development as during this time period we have had major sporting Mega Events happening across Britain, with a participation legacy in place, a legacy that has been systematically challenged by austerity measures. Local Authorities are bracing themselves for more austerity constraints placed upon them, and with sport not being part of core services, it is likely to face further cuts.

Sports which rely heavily on local authority provision especially in grassroots delivery are particularly susceptible to a change in funding structures and support. Indeed, football is such a sport that is mainly dependent on Local Authority provision. Yet, it is this time of year, that football managers, coaches, players and officials dread, as many matches will no-doubt be called off due to poor weather conditions and unplayable surfaces.

Local Authorities are core providers to grassroots sports, through pitch maintenance, development, facilities and upkeep.

Local authorities are experiencing many problems relating to the current economic climate

[http://www.academia.edu/8813171/Sport_and_austerity_in_the_UK_an_insight_into_Liverpool_2014] and ultimately they have had tightened their spending [theconversation.com/austerity-cuts-to-local-leisure-services-is-a-false-economy-33320], which impacts frontline services and the experiences of people playing.



A result of this is reduced investment in grassroots sports provision and/or increases in pitch fees and the cost of facility hire. This coupled with the closure of sport and leisure facilities will undoubtedly impact upon the opportunities for sport and physical activity, especially football [www.sportsthinktank.com/blog/2015/03/postponed-due-to-pitch-conditions-grassroots-football-and-sport-participation]. Whilst it is difficult to measure the impact this has on society, it will certainly have a negative impact on social capital, belonging, and well-being, detaching communities from each other, and increasing social tensions.

So why is sport important?



So we return to the question set out at the start of the blog, why are we interested in sport for health? Without sport and physical activity we can expect to see an increase in lifestyle related diseases, especially those within our deprived communities. This will have huge impacts on Public Health, none more recognisable to those in government than the financial one. Some politicians could still stand to gain from this, as the privatisation of the NHS will benefit from more people needing support, especially as we know the financial costs inactivity can create.

Whilst, we might struggle to 'make the case' for sport, we do know the cost of inactivity, currently standing at £940million per year, with a serious risk of increasing. It has never been more important to invest in sport, leisure and physical activity. An approach that is both preventative and low-cost.

Perhaps it is time for government, LA and those in Public Health to get serious about the current state of Local Authority sport provision, which is slowly but alarmingly disappearing. As it does, we can expect to lose the subsequent physical activity opportunities and gain the consequences of extended inactivity.

Changing the policy story

Underlying all such policy initiatives relating to sport, recreation and health is that the costs of increasing revenue to support young people will prove an excellent investment compared to the scale of future health costs.

The consequence of cutting funding for Local Authority sport and leisure may be one of the major false economies of our time. The debate should not be about how much it will cost today but how much it will cost if no action is taken.

A fundamental paradigm shift is needed in terms of how sport and recreation provision in local authority areas is played out.