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Olympic Legacy Failure, Sport and Leisure Cuts, Dwindling Participation Figures: Can Universities Help?

Posted: Mon, 23 Nov 2015 10:48



Participation in sport once a week is down to 35.5% of adults ([The Guardian, 2015](#)), local authority spending on sport and leisure has been cut from £1.4bn in 2009-10 to £1bn in 2013 ([The Guardian, 2015](#)). There is no wonder that the UK media are beginning to challenge the value, impact and legacy of the £9.3bn London Olympics.

The dismantling of the structures concerned with community sport, spearheaded by austerity-driven policy measures, have without doubt contributed to this demise in participation. This includes the obliteration of the School Sport Partnerships ([Sports Think Tank, 2015](#)) and the decline in community sport facilities and activities (Parnell et al., 2014). Even those that do survive, such as those supporting our national game, football, are in need of greater care and investment ([Parnell and Widdop, 2015](#)).

As noted, by King (2012) ([who has written extensively on local authority sport and recreation](#)), the financial cut-backs on services delivered by local authorities has left a gap in delivery across key areas of sport and leisure. As further financial cuts

are made, and as the gap widens, community sport organisations, both private and voluntary, have emerged in support of service needs.

Despite this, community sport organisations have also felt the pinch of austerity. Whilst many community sport and local authorities appear proactive to the Big Society agenda, there remains concerns of the capacity of organizations to genuinely deliver tangible outcomes (King, 2012).

These community sports organisations are no longer operating in the cozy environments (and support) of a New Labour Government. Amidst the ongoing economic austerity, many of these organisations have faced greater scrutiny from funders and grant-givers (Parnell et al., 2015).

As such, community sports organisations have begun to reach out, to establish greater links with Universities and academic institutions to access support beyond traditional work placement students and align closer to strategic research and evaluation support (Parnell et al., 2015).

At the same time, universities across the higher education sector are facing their own challenges. The national economic climate has resulted in less financial support for universities who are experiencing reduced access to research council funding (Larkin, Richardson and Tabreman, 2012).

Moreover, many within higher education have felt a growing need to develop "impact" via their research activity (Parnell et al., 2015) and at the same time ensure such work reaches the right people through exchanges, platforms and networks (Fieldhouse, Widdop and Bunglawala, 2015).

There appears to be an opportunity for those within universities seeking to make a genuine impact. Through the development of real world, civically responsible research partnerships, universities and community sports organisations may be able to find common ground. This could be particularly important for community sports organisations within the third sector and those in need of support with research and evaluation.

In a recent study, Parnell and colleagues (2015) described a current example of a university and community sports organisation partnership. Burton Albion Community Trust (BACT), the community arm and registered charity of Burton Albion Football Club deliver a range of community-based sport initiatives where themes include: women and girls, health, social inclusion and disability (BACT, 2014). BACT is a community sports organisation that is growing, despite the current economic climate, through the development of key partnerships that support the urgently needed and impactful programmes that deliver value for money (BACT Annual Review, 2015).

The development of the research and evaluation partnership whereby BACT enacted the support of a local university concerned the evaluation of BACT's football/sport-based, youth social inclusion project, "Albion 2 Engage" (Parnell et al., 2015).

The evaluation utilises an intervention mapping framework that works across three key areas: Evaluation Needs, Evaluation Planning, and Evaluation

Implementation. The partnership seeks to support BACT, commissioners and funders to develop a better understanding of the impact and social value of the Albion 2 Engage project (Parnell et al., 2015).

At present, policy-makers need more evidence to understand what works for sport if we are ever going to convince them to invest more seriously and strategically. Both universities and community sports organisations have complementary and potentially overlapping needs (i.e., research "impact" and research and evaluation skills).

In order to counter the financial decline in investment for sport and leisure (alongside the participation decline and increasing ill-health), universities and community sports organisations have a real opportunity to collaborate, to gather evidence, make a difference and make an impact.

Without this, and multiple extended research partnerships of this ilk, we cannot expect to see much real, articulated, measured return on the £9.3bn Olympic investment.

This post is based on a recent open access published article for the peer reviewed journal Social Inclusion:

Understanding Football as a Vehicle for Enhancing Social Inclusion: Using an Intervention Mapping Framework

Dr Daniel Parnell, Dr Andy Pringle, Dr Paul Widdop, Dr Stephen Zwolinsky

The link to the article is here: <http://www.cogitatiopress.com/ojs/index.php/socialincludi>