

Local authority cuts loom large over community sport

December 15, 2015

Original article on Connect Sport found [here](#).

In this article Dr Dan Parnell, Dr Paul Widdop and Dr Neil King take a look at the potential implications of the recent Spending Review, provide a number of predictions and deliver a rallying call to policy-makers, practitioners and researchers, as the community sport sector seeks to navigate the next five years.

The past five years has seen real change in budgets which has reduced funding for the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), and Department of Education, amongst many other departments (including budgets for Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales) ([Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2015](#)).

This month's Spending Review will pave the way for further funding cuts across departments including local government, which through cuts to the DCLG will receive another sharp blow – falling by 56% by 2019/20, which equates to £6.1billion from their annual £12.8billion budget. This means funding for local authorities will fall by 6.7%.

This falls hard on an already depleted DCLG that had previously had funding cut 51% since 2010, which resulted in grants to local authorities falling by 27%. Whilst the laudable aims to balance the books are clear, continued delivery upon an already depleted state as a result of the 2010 spending review is highly contentious.

Whilst such cuts are seen by some as necessary measures, many others view cuts to local government and social welfare as a huge blow to society – especially given the growing financial pressures on education and health.

THREAT

There have been a growing number of commentators on the threat the cuts pose for sport and in turn society, due to the social impact of sport can have ([Parnell, Millward and Spracklen, 2014](#)). The Conservative Manifesto did outline a commitment to elite and school sport ([Jarvie and Widdop, 2015](#)),

therefore it is no surprise that sport has been treated kindly by the Chancellor who appears supportive of the importance of elite sport and the social impact of sport.

Some of the highlights from the spending review for sport include:

- DCMS administration budget cut by 20% (annual budget of £1.5billion)
- UK Sport, who are responsible for elite sport, will have a budget increase of 29%
- The schools budget will be protected
- The Sport England grant in aid budget will increase and 2017-21 budget will be very similar to 2013-17 ([Sport & Recreation Alliance, 2015](#))

However it is again important to provide more context by summarising the cuts the DCMS received between 2010 and 2015. These included:

- Funding cut by 30.7%
- Mainly cuts to administration
- 30% cut to the budget for the Arts Council (England) ([DCMS, 2015](#))

The protection of elite sport is excellent news on the road to the Rio Olympics in 2016 and, further ahead, to Tokyo 2020. Many within UK Sport will be delighted at the Chancellor's continued and growing support for sport. With national lottery contributions set to increase to support our elite sporting endeavours this should be an exciting time for all involved.

Of course some cynics might suggest that cutting funding for local government will not attract the potential media backlash associated within cutting funding for elite sport performance. Is it an easy target? Furthermore recent evidence would suggest that there seems to be little legacy from elite sport. It begs the question: would money be more wisely invested in grassroots sport in order to achieve broader impacts for society?

Sport England will receive £325million from the Exchequer and lottery funding, which is primarily invested in grassroots sport. There will no doubt be greater competition, higher expectations and scrutiny of funding for national governing bodies and programmes (a pressure recently highlighted by [Parnell and Lansley, 2015](#))

BURDEN

The Chancellor also called for more strategic working and greater contribution from local authorities. This was echoed by the Sports Minister Tracey Crouch on an interview with BBC radio ([BBC Radio 5 Live, 2015](#)). Yet, we already know local authorities are dilapidated thanks to the 2010 spending review and it is clear they will carry a further deficit-reducing burden, making their contribution seriously limited.

Commentators such as [Owen Gibson](#) of the Guardian have begun to narrate the level and extent of such cuts to local authorities – 40% in some cases ([Gibson, 2015](#)). Similarly research pre-empted these cuts ([APSE, 2010](#)), as a result of sport being a discretionary spending area. This is something that avid football fan and shadow home secretary Andy Burnham has recently championed ([Burnham, 2015](#)).

Moving forward there is much to be buoyant about in sport, especially elite sport and the potential acclaim attached to elite sporting success. However, policy makers must seriously reflect on the merits of elite sport during times of austerity – we note with interest the residents of the city of Hamburg, Germany saying ‘no’ to hosting the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games ([see link](#)).

There is no evidence that investment in elite sport results in increased mass participation. In fact, quite the opposite. Research by Widdop et al (in press) demonstrates that participation has not risen despite legacy promises and it is likely that this is because of the impact of austerity measures on community sport, most notably cuts to local authority finance.

Whilst the administration budget of the DCMS will reduce, the amount of total public investment appears to have grown during this parliament. This additional funding from the Exchequer will crucially provide the DCMS with some breathing space to develop the new sports strategy.

RESEARCH

There is a growing amount of content emerging about sport and austerity ([Parnell et al., 2015](#)), and the Sport and Recreation Alliance delivered a commendable social media campaign [#GetYourKitOn](#) to encourage those in grassroots sports to raise awareness of the impact of austerity directly to the Chancellor.

The concerns and criticisms regarding the cuts made under the banner of austerity is not confined to the sports industry. Indeed, Professor Mark Blythe warns of the dangers of austerity based on lessons from history ([see link](#)). Despite this, there is still little research and some would argue interest, in the impact of austerity – especially in sport.

More research and literature is appearing on blogs and sites like [ConnectSport](#), the [Sports Think Tank](#) and University sites such as the [Academy of Sport](#). These organisations and platforms are leading the way in bridging the gap between academic rigour and journalistic content on sport to the wider populace. Evidence suggest that public-facing blogs and online material which sit outside of peer review can play a useful role in shaping

policy ([see link](#)). Yet, we must also accept that more research and more thorough research is needed. The challenge, unsurprisingly, is funding.

Another key challenge is finding a way to measure sport participation which is more robust than the Active People Survey. Without meaningful data, policymaking is made on a set of assumptions such as the London Olympics inspiring a generation to take up sport, when it clearly does not. Neither has any other previous Olympic Games, which is especially important information in a context where governments remain fixed on unworkable and counterproductive austerity measures.

As we look to the future, we know welfare spending will fall sharply, and that both education and health will come under financial pressure, with repercussions for state investment in sport and consequently local communities. As Sports Minister Tracey Crouch finishes her final, pre-maternity touches to her grassroots sports review and subsequent strategy we must rise above the fact that sport is the little fish in a big pond when it comes to funding cuts. Sport has a vital role to play in society – even more so in times of austerity.

CHALLENGE

Although the recent Active People Survey pointed to a small but welcome increase in participation (especially amongst women), we can expect grassroots sport to continue to face serious challenges to getting more people active. Local authorities will have to reduce services and sell major assets. This will no doubt have impacts further impacts on [swimming](#), [golf](#) and [football](#) participation; sports which rely heavily on municipal facilities.

Following the Spending Review, the Sports Minister said: “This settlement recognises the wider value of sport in society and how it plays an important role in boosting the economy. The increase in funding will support our elite athletes in the run up to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, grow the grassroots to get more people involved in sport and promote clean sport in the UK and beyond.” ([Sports Think Tank, 2015](#)). This will be a major challenge given that sport and leisure opportunities provided by local authorities and has been gradually depleted year on year since 2010, with more cuts to come.

If the emphasis lies in elite sport rather than community sport, perhaps we should instead be thinking about the value of sport and physical activity to those people living in relative poverty, who are dependent on basic state services such as a local leisure centre or community programme for their children.

It is incumbent on us to collect, collate and disseminate what the real value of sport is, and what the real impacts of the cuts to sport and leisure are and who is experiencing them. By 'us' we mean academia, practitioners, managers and policy makers. Funding will be key to evidencing the impact of austerity on sport and similarly the true value of sport for society.

We must wait and see who can help take this forward. However, we at [ConnectSport](#) and a growing team of academic researchers are committed to providing evidence. For those interested in, and willing to join and support our endeavours, to shed some light on the real impact of austerity on sport, please contact Dr Dan Parnell at d.parnell@mmu.ac.uk

Dr Dan Parnell is an active researcher and senior lecturer in Business Management at Manchester Metropolitan University. His research interests cover the sport and leisure sectors within the UK and he works globally on a number of projects, in particular the social role of sport. This includes the Football League Trust, the English Premier League, the Football Foundation and Barclays Spaces for Sports. Contact d.parnell@mmu.ac.uk or follow [@parnell_daniel](#) on Twitter.

Dr Neil King is an active researcher and publish in sport, recreation and physical activity. His research interests include policy and management, particularly in public sector sport and leisure contexts. He works with leading organisations concerned with the management and delivery of sport and leisure across the United Kingdom. Contact Kingn@edgehill.ac.uk

Dr Paul Widdop is a research fellow at Leeds Beckett University. His research interests are in the consumption and production of sport, especially in relation to social networks, geography, and neighbourhood effects. Contact P.Widdop@leedsbeckett.ac.uk or follow [@Fire_and_Skill](#) on Twitter.