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A question for sport: is it good for our communities and our society?

Taking up issues raised by Martyn Allison in the last issue of the Leisure Review, Christopher Cutforth offers a critique of current sports policy and some alternative policy ideas, posing some questions for reflection and debate along the way.

I consider myself an experienced and battle-hardened sports practitioner; I have the scars to prove it. Prior to moving into academia in 2007 I spent 22 years working in various development and leadership positions in the sport and leisure industry at local, county, regional and national levels. During this time I contributed to many developments and changes. At Sheffield Hallam University where I now work I teach undergraduate and postgraduate students, many of whom will be the next generation of sports industry professionals. I also serve on various sport and education trusts and boards in Sheffield and South Yorkshire, as well as chairing the European Sports Development Network. This has enabled me to reconnect with the industry I left seven years ago.

So I now wear several hats and have one foot in academia, one in the sports industry. At Sheffield Hallam University I have time to read and think. I am also have the freedom to express my opinions on various topics. Being outside the sports industry looking in has given me some fresh perspectives.

A famous person once said this:

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than Government in breaking down racial barriers.”

Mandela was not saying sport does all of these things – he was suggesting that sport has the power to do these things. There is an important difference between the two. I think Mandela’s words should also remind to us that this does not just happen by chance. As my older brother said to me several years ago:

“Sport has the potential to be a positive force for good – whether or not it achieves this in practice depends much on the quality of leadership which exists in the specific context in which the sport is taking place.”

I’m suggesting that we should keep the role and contribution of sport to our society in perspective. We should ask ourselves and each other questions, such as: is sport always a force for good? Is this the current reality? Where is the evidence? Are we kidding ourselves? Are we being complacent?

There is a policy context within which we are all working. This is how I see it.

I contend that we all live in a society which seems to favour neo-liberal political values – markets over state-run services and institutions, competition over collaboration, limited subsidies and lower taxes over a more proactive, interventionist role for the state. Neo-liberalism dominates our lives, possibly without us fully realising it. These kinds of systems and societies, which exist in other parts of the world (notably www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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the US), generally favour the rich and powerful and have led to a growing differential between the rich and the poor; in other words, they lead to less equal societies. In *The Spirit Level*, a groundbreaking book published in 2009, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett provide compelling evidence that the UK is now one of the most unequal countries in the developed world with one of the lowest levels of social mobility. I have to say this bothers me, so much so that I have recently joined the Equality Trust, a movement dedicated to creating more equal societies.

This is the societal context within which the sports industry currently operates.

How then is our sport policy determined? I would love to say 'through an evidence-based approach' but sadly this is often not the case. The reality is that most policy decisions are still ideological rather than evidence-based. This is one of the subject I teach to students: I teach theory of policy-making and then relate this to the practical realities. I ask the students to identify the policy influences and the connections between the different policy areas. Then they write a 2,000-word essay in which they are required to adopt a critical perspective on these issues. Most of them find it really challenging; it is also very challenging to teach. These are the sport industry professionals of the future...

Recently we have seen sport increasingly being viewed as a commercial product to be bought and sold to 'customers' or 'consumers', and this being reflected more in public policy. While this approach undoubtedly has its merits, it also has its limitations and in my view is not the complete answer, not the complete solution. I believe that this one-dimensional approach devalues other equally valid and valuable sport development approaches.

Another recent trend is the commissioning, payment-by-results culture, an approach which, let's be honest, is largely politically driven. While this approach undoubtedly has its merits and in some cases has been the catalyst for some positive change, I believe that an over-emphasis on short-term impacts neglects the need for longer-term thinking and planning. I'm not sure we have the balance right.

In this context I am interested in the approach being adopted by Sport Wales, which emphasises:

relationship-building and collaboration underpinned by a longer-term perspective and less immediate pressure to deliver short-term results

more investment into local areas and local authorities through the adoption of an outcome-focused approach

a strong focus on building organisational capability with significant levels of funding and staff time devoted to this important work.

Working within this more flexible environment, the England and Wales Cricket Board (Cricket Wales) has established local innovation partnerships involving cricket bodies and other local sport development partners. These innovation partnerships are working collaboratively to reshape cricket opportunities to better meet local needs while also building organisational capability for the long term. The ECB in England has also invested considerable time and effort in recent years into building the capability of their 39 county cricket boards, including the recruitment of a team of organisational development and improvement specialists from outside the sport sector. Sheffield Hallam University's Sports Industry Research Centre has been the evaluation partner in this work and the evaluation reports have been highly significant in influencing the ECB's approach. This is an excellent example of

collaboration between academia and industry leading to evidence-based policy and decision-making.

It is perhaps too early to judge the impacts of these developments but early signs are promising and the approaches are certainly very interesting. I also accept that Wales is roughly the size of a typical English region, so to replicate this approach on a larger scale would be more problematical.

In recent years in England we have seen the emergence of a funding model for community sport which favours national governing bodies (NGB), with nearly 50% of Sport England's funding in the current government funding period going to NGBs. However, when we look at the sports participation trends in recent years it prompts the question as to whether this is the right funding model for the future. And if you dig deeper into the annual population survey data (which I have done) you discover that the vast majority of the participation gains can be attributed to a handful of sports, mainly athletics (running), cycling and football. Furthermore, the extent to which these increases are attributable directly to the work of the NGBs is debatable.

Few other sports have achieved significant participation increases with the notable exception of netball which has exceeded its targets, largely due to the efforts and interventions of the NGB and its partners. At our annual Sheffield Hallam University student conference in 2014 this was the main debating topic. Opinions among staff, students and our industry partners were firmly divided and I sense this will be one of the key policy issues in the lead up to the 2015 general election.

The strong policy focus on elite sport prior to and in the aftermath of London 2012 has also had consequences in other areas. Here the argument for a NGB-centric funding model is, in my view, unquestionable. What is more debatable is the funding model itself (the 'no compromise' approach). In this context UK Sport's consultation process is interesting and encouraging. Even more intriguing was the recent intervention by the sports minister that resulted in Sport England awarding £1.18 million to GB Basketball for its elite programme. The main justification for this decision appears to be the popularity of basketball among young people and the need for the sport to provide opportunities and aspiration for these young people in the future. I wonder if this is a sign of things to come in relation to elite sport funding.

Another key issue for the sport sector lies in the changing role of local government. Here I draw on the observations of Martyn Allison, former national advisor for culture and sport and a member of the ESDN leadership group, who has identified two key drivers for change: the focus on physical activity and health reform, and austerity. [qv article: Sport and/or health: the future of local authority sport and leisure services, by Martyn Allison, the Leisure Review, November 2014]

The opportunity for sport and physical activity providers in this context is to position themselves as integral to health improvement and addressing health inequalities in local communities, aligned to the priorities of local health and wellbeing boards. However, so far the evidence of this happening in practice is patchy to say the least and there is not a general acceptance of the arguments across the country, with a few notable exceptions such as the Birmingham Be Active Scheme. Austerity, Martin argues, is limiting the ability of health service and adult social care to commission or procure sport and leisure services.

Mental health appears to be a growing problem in the UK and some of the political parties are now talking about it more. Sport and physical activity has a role to play here. There are some early signs of relationships starting to form around the links between mental health, sport and physical activity, and as the focus on mental health grows so

new opportunities may emerge.

The traditional role of local authorities in sport development seems to be either disappearing or under threat. Consequently there are far fewer professionals on the ground to connect with local communities. Local authorities would appear to have a choice to make: either they are providers of sport and leisure, in which case they will have to become self-reliant and subsidy-free or they will disappear; or they fundamentally change and become providers of health improvement. The change will be difficult and requires real leadership. There is a broader point here for the sport sector as whole: the need to invest in strong leadership at all levels to enable the sector to shape its own future rather than being a victim of other people's change programmes.

In my ESDN leadership role I have recently initiated a discussion about the nature and purpose of sport development. I view this as an important discussion. A good starting point is a case study provided by a good friend of mine, Steve Wood, who is a valued member of the ESDN leadership group. It comes from his home patch – a rural county in the west of England – and is based on his personal experiences of being involved in local junior football over the past couple of years.

Steve's eight-year-old son loves football and plays in a local junior football league. Steve helps coach the team even though he has no formal coaching qualifications. There is no sport development function in the local authority; it was removed eight of years ago owing to funding constraints. The school sport partnerships in the area have also been decimated by the government's funding cuts and are practically non-existent. Despite the cuts in public funding, junior football is thriving in the area. There are several junior leagues and literally hundreds of teams, all run by keen and enthusiastic volunteers. The only professional support the teams receive is a bit of investment in Level 1 coaches from the county FA but not much else.

The junior football provision is almost entirely competition-based, mostly leagues and tournaments. Every week Steve's son competes against other teams; they win some games and lose some, quite often by big margins. The emphasis placed on winning by the coaches Steve finds disturbing. The winning teams are always smiling at the end of games; the losing teams are often visibly upset. Very rarely, if ever, do the coaches intervene and put winning and losing into perspective for the boys.

Relationships between the teams, the parents and the coaches are often 'tribal'. There are never any opportunities for the teams to socialise before or after games. Steve has suggested this on several occasions but so far it has fallen on deaf ears. Recently he even suggested that at tournaments, instead of playing in their normal teams, the boys should be mixed and matched into different teams. This suggestion was greeted with incredulity by the coaches and managers – they thought he was mad!

Even within the teams there are cliques: the better players tend to stick together and invariably get more game time; the weaker players are often marginalised and spend a good proportion of the time on the sidelines, often in the freezing cold.

There are very few girls playing with the boys despite FA directives encouraging this, nor are there many girls' teams in the local area. There are no disabled participants to be seen and very few from ethnic minorities. The quality of coaching is generally poor – 'excitable', 'competitive' and 'macho' are the words that Steve uses to describe it. Many of the boys who play competitive football are the same boys who can be seen competing at other sports clubs in the area.

There are of course some positives but only really for the boys who are

good or quite good at football, which includes Steve's son who is one of the better players. He still enjoys it most of the time. However, for many boys and girls in the area who may wish to play football but may not be very good at it there is little incentive to get involved. For these children it would be an intimidating and unwelcoming environment.

I am not using this case study to argue against the merits of competitive sport – far from it, I believe competition is a valuable component of sport for children and young people. Nor am I suggesting that it is wrong for children to compete in a variety of different of sports. I also need to make it clear that I am not criticising the volunteers, who are all well-meaning, enthusiastic amateurs operating with the best of intentions and with very little guidance and support.

My point (Steve's point actually) is that there is no underpinning sport development philosophy and approach, and without this it is hardly surprising it is the way it is. With some appropriate sport development intervention youth sport could be so much more inclusive, so much more beneficial for more children in the area and for the local community. Currently it appears to do little to build community cohesion, social capital and a love of physical activity among local children; indeed it could be argued that it is doing more harm than good.

Having critiqued some aspects of current sports policy and practice, I would like to offer some suggestions regarding how it could be improved. I have three specific policy ideas.

The first relates to the current focus on increasing participation. Broadly speaking, I support this policy objective but, rather than simply counting the numbers, I would like to see a much stronger policy commitment towards narrowing the participation gaps that currently exist between different social groups, as well more concerted efforts to address the structural and cultural barriers that still prevail in sport. Greater emphasis could also be given to the wider social role and contribution of sport. We seem to have lost this in recent years in favour of a focus on organised, competitive sport, which is, I suggest, partly an ideological shift and partly a result of the Olympics.

I would like to see the political parties and government agencies saying and doing more about equity in sport. In my view a more coherent and robust policy framework for equity is required, one which recognises that this can have wider long-term benefits for society. For me equity is one of the strongest justifications for continued public investment into sport.

Second, I would like to see greater emphasis given in funding agreements to the building of organisational capability, improved strategic planning and collaborative provision. I would also like to see sports organisations devoting more time and effort to these things (particularly capability-building) for themselves. I would argue that this is likely to deliver more sustained results in the longer term. The alternative is that we keep going round in circles, reinventing the wheel, making the same mistakes and not learning the lessons of the past.

I wonder, are we all too busy to improve? Can we afford the time for systematic, continuous improvement? Can we afford not to? And do we have the skills and commitment as a sector to do this properly?

Finally, I think there is much we can learn from other countries and from other sectors. I have already mentioned Sport Wales' approach and I also understand there is some interesting work taking place in Scotland, notably in relation to equity in sport. We could also learn from and share practice with our European and international partners for mutual benefit. This is an area where I would like the ESDN to play more of a role in the future.

I would like to finish by returning to Nelson Mandela's famous quote. My view is that sport can be really powerful. It can indeed transform communities and transform lives. I have seen some great examples of this recently, notably in my work with Street Games. However, I feel we still have a long way to go before this is the case in all contexts and all communities. For this to occur we need our senior leaders to think strategically, act collaboratively, innovate and work proactively to influence others. Then, and only then, could we say with confidence that sport is indeed a positive force for good in our communities and our society.

Christopher Cutforth is a senior lecturer in sport at the Sheffield Hallam University Academy of Sport and Physical Activity and chair of the European Sports Development Network (ESDN), a professional network of academics and practitioners working together to influence and help shape sport policy and practice. The author is keen to acknowledge the contributions of Martyn Allison and Steve Wood (Steve Wood Associates); this paper was a collaborative effort.

To find out more about the ESDN visit www.ljmu.ac.uk/esdn

Read Martyn Allison's article, Sport and/or health: the future of local authority sport and leisure services, at www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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