

## Government Sports Strategy – Is this the green light for real service transformation?

By Toby Kingsbury – The Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy

The publication of the government's new strategy for sport signals new levels of recognition and commitment to the sector. The first formal strategy developed by government for a decade has got us all talking and has been generally well-received. Particularly welcome is the realisation (finally!) that more effort should be focused upon engaging the inactive and that this approach will reap the most rewards in addressing long-term health inequalities and provide best value for public investment.



At a recent Sports Group event, I listened to James Radford, Strategic Lead at Sport England and key contributor to the strategy, talk eloquently about the positioning of the strategy. He was clear in emphasising that its role is to provide a policy framework based on required outcomes but not be prescriptive on the actions required to achieve these outcomes. Those actions have to be determined on a local level by those who best understand the needs of their communities. He was also unequivocal in admitting that yes, it is challenging, yes it will be difficult to achieve, but then so it should be!

The strategy recognises that *“local authorities have and will continue to have, an absolutely crucial role to play in delivering sport and physical activity opportunities.”* Nothing new or unexpected here - we know that Councils are the biggest public funders of sport and physical activity and have the best insight into their local sporting landscapes. However, with Sport & Leisure teams being increasingly squeezed through austerity measures, there is a widening black hole in capacity, and more importantly leadership, to play this *‘crucial role.’* Those leaders that are left may well have read the strategy with interest but will no doubt have let out a collective sigh when trying to think of the tangible actions and resources required for its delivery.

So just **how** are local authorities supposed to contribute to the new outcomes which are now properly focused upon the inactive in society?

The strategy talks about Councils having a leadership role in bringing together partners from health, education, sports clubs, NGBs and the private sector to break down barriers to participation and improve the delivery of sport and physical activity. A sound principle but difficult to achieve in practice. I actually think that Councils have the power to do more than just broker these relations in a way that the strategy fails to properly recognise. Here's how.

Over 70% of local authorities have contracted out the management of their leisure facilities to an external operator or set up an 'in-house' trust model to deliver these services. That percentage is growing year on year as authorities seek ways to deal with

continued budget cuts. However, the financial benefits of this approach should only form part of the rationale. The **real** benefit lies in how the contract can be used in a different way to achieve the wider outcomes set out in the new government strategy but focus on achieving locally identified targets.

Councils who are embarking upon the externalisation of leisure either for the first time or through a re-tender process have a golden opportunity to completely re-shape their service over the long-term. 10-year leisure management contracts are now the norm, some are even longer and they provide a chance to set a framework for delivery which is contractually binding, outcome-focussed and measurable. This opportunity is staring authorities squarely in the face but not all are geared up to take it.

I think there are **three** main reasons why they're not.

Firstly, my own experience of local authority leisure provision supports the view of a disconnect between leisure and public health. The benefits of sport and physical activity in contributing to improved long-term health and wellbeing are now firmly established and yet how many Health & Wellbeing Boards have genuine representation from our sector? One way of getting health commissioners to sit up and take notice is by getting them to engage early in the process of procuring a new leisure management contract. They need persuading that the service is not all about facilities, fitness memberships, swimming lessons and vending machines selling snacks and fizzy drinks. They need convincing of the opportunities for the service to promote outreach, inclusion and innovative programming that reaches the inactive in society. They need to know that their leisure management contract can make a genuine contribution to addressing health inequalities in local communities providing it is structured in the right way. And they need to know that operators are more than just key holders of our facilities and a vehicle upon which to transfer risk. With the right support and direction, they are actually well placed to really help deliver the outcomes of the new strategy and deliver a sustainable financial return.

The second major obstacle is that some authorities do not have a clear enough understanding of the needs of their communities and the role that sport and physical activity can play in meeting them. I therefore welcome the government's approach to the piloting of sport and physical activity strategies in selected areas. Any new leisure management contract must be founded upon the priority outcomes of a clear, evidence and needs-based, inclusive local sport and physical activity strategy. This is something The Sport, Leisure & Culture Consultancy has been focusing on over the last few years through its work with councils including Worcester City Council, Suffolk County Council, Corporation of London, East Northamptonshire Council and North Kesteven District Council as examples.

Thirdly, the recent trend of new contracts moving from subsidy to surplus has caught the attention of officers and Members frantically trying to plug holes in major budgets such as adult social care and children's services. The easy option is to design a contract which maximises an operator's surplus and results in the best management fee to the Council. This, for some, will always be an incentive that they can't resist. The good news, however, is that the more insightful authorities are using the strength of the market to ensure that

the contract provides revenue savings but also helps deliver the wider outcomes set out in the government strategy.

The Sport, Leisure & Culture Consultancy is currently supporting a number of such authorities by designing outcome-based service specifications which widen the operators' role beyond simply the facilities that they manage. Outreach services are being specified, forcing operators to think creatively about how they can integrate better with communities that are harder to reach. Operators are being challenged to deliver against a more complex set of KPIs which are not just about numbers but about reach and most importantly, impact - something which public health colleagues are much more aligned to.

But it's not just local authorities that need to be smarter about procuring leisure management contracts. The operators themselves need to step up to the mark and demonstrate that they do much more than pay lip service to ideas around inclusivity, health inequality and accessibility. They need to seriously up their game if health commissioners are to take them seriously and view them as genuine partners. They'll need to go way beyond delivering the odd GP Referral scheme, or providing women only sessions or discounts for disabled groups. The traditional mantra of 'our sessions are inclusive to everyone' simply won't cut it with health professionals and they'll need to completely rethink their approach to programming both inside but more importantly, outside of their facilities.

Another way they'll need to improve is in the collection, analysing and reporting of data to provide the all-important evidence to local authority clients that they are making a difference. Operators have sophisticated systems to track the behaviour of their health and fitness members to help with retention and identify cross-selling opportunities. They're good at that and rightly so – it's crucial to their bottom line. But how many of them measure the impact they are having in getting more people from deprived communities actively engaging in physical activity? How many of them have a meaningful understanding of the level of engagement from their BME communities? How many can provide robust evidence of the service extending its reach year on year?

Operators will need to shift the focus of their IT innovation to include the capturing and measuring of this data so they can better prepare themselves to meet the new, more intricate KPIs set by Sport England and subsequently by local authorities through their contract specifications.

The new government strategy has laid down the gauntlet. It's up to local authorities to be smart, think differently and challenge their leisure operators in a way that they haven't been before. And it's up to operators to re-position themselves as genuinely capable deliverers. It won't be easy, but as James Radford said, that's how it should be!

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**February 2016**

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