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# **Local authorities and the implementation of sport policy**

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## **Abstract**

Local authorities in the United Kingdom are key providers of sport and recreation opportunities, and therefore important contributors to the implementation of sport policy. However, these services are non-statutory (not required by law), in addition to which the policy landscape is constantly changing according to the preferences of the current national government. As a result, individual local authorities have had to move with the times, adapting their delivery models in order to maintain the provision of sport and recreation at a local level. This chapter thus explores how local authority provision has changed in recent decades, focusing on how sport policy and other external influences such as austerity measures and the Covid-19 pandemic have shaped and reshaped service provision. The impacts of successive governments are considered, illustrating the often stark differences in attitude and approach as well as the similarities. The chapter closes by considering the challenges facing local authorities as implementers of sport policy in an uncertain future.

## **Introduction**

Local authorities make a significant contribution to the implementation of national sport policy through the delivery of sporting opportunities. Sport England (2015) estimates they are the largest investor within the broader sporting landscape, contributing over £1bn per year for facility development and management, sport development programmes, sport events, and outdoor recreation. Many authorities also provide essential support (including small funding grants) to voluntary organisations such as sports clubs and community groups, who in turn provide crucial opportunities for local residents to engage in sport and recreation. However, despite this investment, the provision of sport and recreation by local authorities remains non-statutory and is therefore provided at the discretion of individual local authorities (Houlihan & White 2002; King 2009; Harris & Houlihan 2014). Consequently, sport and recreation policy and provision can be described as “inconsistent” (Harris 2013:85) and “ambiguous” (Harris & Houlihan 2014:114) often depending on the political support and buy-in from locally elected politicians as to the quality, scope, and level of investment in provision across different authorities. Furthermore, the discretionary nature of provision means that whilst central government and national stakeholders “can set out policies for local authorities to follow... [they] only have limited powers to see that they are carried out” (Bell, 2009:79). As this chapter will illustrate, this has resulted in a complex relationship between local authorities and key stakeholders within the sporting landscape. Whilst

traditionally viewed as significant players in the implementation of national sport policy, Houlihan and Lindsey (2013) argue that local authorities had become the 'forgotten partner' with their contribution being under-valued in relation to other stakeholders.

The fluctuating position of local authorities within the sporting landscape is reflective of the turbulent relationship that exists between local and central government. This has involved attempts by central government to exert control over local government and influence how public services, such as sport and recreation, are delivered. whilst This ongoing "institutional tinkering" (Painter, 2012:6) by successive administrations has involved changes to the structural configurations of authorities and to financial arrangements with central government, with the austerity measures implemented by the Coalition government in 2010 having particularly significant repercussions for local authority sport and recreation provision. For the majority of authorities, the culmination of top-down pressure from central government has been a shift from being direct deliverers of services to 'enablers', with many outsourcing delivery of sport and recreation provision to external organisations such as leisure trusts. Continuing financial pressures on local authorities, not helped by 'shocks' such as the 2008 financial crash and the Covid-19 pandemic, place discretionary services such as sport and recreation under continuous pressure to demonstrate their 'value'. This chapter will explore how and why local government sport and recreation provision has changed from the Conservative government of the 1980s through subsequent administrations. The chapter will highlight those aspects of policy change we feel are particularly significant to the current position of local authorities and will finish by commenting on the challenges facing local authorities in the provision of sport and recreation in the future. Before this, however, we start by providing a broad overview of local government, specifically, the basics about its statutory role and relationship with central government.

### **What is local government?**

Local government is a system of elected representation, based on the division of a country into geographically defined jurisdictions, that provides services to the local populace. In the United Kingdom, local branches of government are generally referred to as *local authorities*, whilst in many other territories the term 'municipality' is more commonly used. The publication of the Wolfenden Report on Sport in 1960 proved significant for local authorities. The report made several recommendations about the role of organisations including local authorities and established the need for greater state involvement and investment in sport as part of broader welfare policy (Coghlan 1990, Houlihan & White 2002, Bergsgard *et al* 2007, Jeffrey 2012). The recommendations of the Wolfenden Report were still implemented slowly, although there were indications that local authorities had become more proactive in the provision of sport and recreation opportunities. The publication of the Local Government Act in 1972 initiated a reorganisation of local authorities (establishing a

uniform, two-tier system of local government at county and district level), creating larger authorities with additional financial resources which thereby enabled the development of new public leisure facilities (Bloyce & Smith, 2010). Combined with additional funding from the Sports Council for capital development projects, this resulted in the number of indoor facilities trebling between 1973 and 1977 (Houlihan and White 2002, Jackson 2008, Bloyce & Smith 2010).

Further structural changes have led to a less consistent approach in England with many *unitary* authorities being established in another reformation exercise in 1996. Unitary authorities are often seen in bigger cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool, with some disaggregated counties such as the former Cleveland (Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar & Cleveland, and Stockton-on-Tees) also operating on this basis. Two-tier local government is still present in many areas, with responsibility for service provision distributed between the county council (eg Nottinghamshire) and district authorities (eg Bassetlaw District Council) and in the case of Nottinghamshire, a single unitary body (Nottingham City Council). Some areas additionally have a smaller, third tier in the form of parish or town councils, which may also have responsibility for localised sport and recreation provision. Each unit of local government has a four-yearly electoral process to determine the political make-up of the council, with paid employees carrying out the wishes of the local electorate under the scrutiny of the elected council members. This is an obvious cause of tension when the controlling political party at local level is not the same as that of the national government, such that local authorities are expected to contribute to the delivery of national policy objectives but without the existence of a codified constitution that outlines the specifics of this relationship. The complexity of these structural and political arrangements can make service provision challenging, and it is therefore unsurprising that sport and recreation provision as a discretionary service can vary significantly from one area to another.

Regardless of the structure of local government in a given area, the local authority(ies) is/are responsible for a range of statutory (compulsory) public services such as social care, schools, housing and planning and waste collection. In all, more than 800 different services are provided by more than one million members of staff working in English local government (Local Government Association 2021a). Local authorities are funded from a range of sources. As well as central government grants, they impose local taxes known as council tax (paid by households) and business rates. In the first five years of the UK austerity era, commencing in 2010, English local authorities cut spending by 27% in real terms due to reductions in the central government grant, yet were still expected to deliver core services. Unsurprisingly, discretionary services are particularly vulnerable during periods of financial strain with services such as sport and recreation often being realigned, restructured or reduced, directly impacting most local authorities' ability to implement national sport policy. The remainder of this chapter deals with this challenge,

examining the history of local authorities' connections to national sport policy from the late 1970s to the present day.

### **Local authorities under threat (the Conservative Government 1979-1997)**

Reform of local government was a recurring policy objective throughout this period justified by the perception that local government was financially inefficient and outdated with measures such as the Poll Tax and later the Council Tax introduced to control local government finances (Atkinson & Wilks-Heeg 2000, Stoker 2004, Chandler 2007, Wilson & Game 2011). So-called 'market forces' were deployed to drive efficiency and to improve quality in public services via the requirement for services to be put out to tender as part of a Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) process (Stoker 2004) - with sport and recreation services becoming available for tender in 1988. This approach aimed to "cap, limit and control local democracy" by breaking local authorities' monopoly on local service delivery (Murray 2015:4). CCT marked a shift towards the marketisation of leisure services with external companies invited to bid for contracts to deliver these services on behalf of local authorities. Pressure to cut costs and increase income levels meant that many local users were priced out of local facilities whilst capital investment in the refurbishment and general upkeep of facilities reduced (Jackson 2008, Jeffreys 2012). Subsequent government investment into sport development programmes such as Action Sport with its emphasis on social outcomes, therefore appeared somewhat contradictory to broader policy objectives (King 2009).

Partly influenced by inner city riots in the early 1980s triggered by a dissatisfaction with social, political, and economic conditions (Scarman Report, 1981), the Action Sport programmes aimed to engage unemployed young people in sport leadership activities. Although marketed as social welfare programmes, the programme emphasised notions of social control and illustrated the utility of sport as a relatively cheap way of engaging disaffected youth in urban areas (Houlihan & White 2002, Collins 2010). The programme was mainly delivered by Sport Development Officers (SDOs) employed within local authorities, which not only acted as a catalyst for the creation of specific teams of SDOs within authorities, but also emphasised the value of undertaking outreach work within communities to extend sport and recreation opportunities (Lentell 1993, Houlihan & White 2002, Collins 2010). This approach was captured in the Sports Council strategy 'Sport in the Community: The Next Ten Years' (1982) which signalled a shift from the facility development strategies of the 1970s towards mass participation and the targeting of under-represented groups (Houlihan & White 2002, King 2009, Collins 2010).

However, following publication of 'Sport: Raising the Game' (DNH, 1995), the focus of development work within local authorities shifted towards sport specific development and away from community recreation and concerns with equity. Concurrently, increased emphasis was being placed on local government to act as

'enabling authorities' as opposed to service deliverers. CCT was extended, and the Private Finance Initiative introduced to encourage public-private sector partnerships and further contracting out of public service delivery (Atkinson & Wilks-Heeg 2000, Chandler 2007). Local government finances remained tight, with Jackson (2008) noting that many sports facilities were becoming increasingly dilapidated and in desperate need of investment. The creation of the National Lottery in 1994, plus funding opportunities via the European Union provided welcome opportunities for local authorities to bid for additional funding. The inclusion of sport as one of the five 'good causes' to be supported by the National Lottery generated (by 1999) an additional £200-250m per annum to be spent in support of sport policy and provided an opportunity for cash-strapped authorities to access much needed capital and revenue investment (Jackson 2008, King 2009). This, for Houlihan and White (2002), meant a more positive policy environment for local authority sport despite the ongoing challenge of CCT.

### **New beginnings for local authorities? New Labour 1997-2010**

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 marked further attempts by central government to reform and modernise public services. The passing of Local Government Acts in 2000 and 2001 outlined the government's Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA) which proposed significant reform to improve the effectiveness of service delivery. This marked a shift away from cost effectiveness to concerns about the impact of services particularly in relation to New Labour's focus on social inclusion. The agenda promised a 'joined-up' approach to tackling social and community issues with partnership working as the preferred method of service delivery (Lowndes & Pratchett 2012, Painter 2012, Lindsey 2014). Collaborative working was further endorsed in New Labour's sport policies, 'A Sporting Future for All' (DCMS 2000) and 'Game Plan' (DCMS/ Strategy Unit 2002), and also featured in accompanying strategies from Sport England, such as the 'Framework for Sport in England' (Sport England, 2004). This unveiled a new delivery system for sport predicated on joined-up working between agencies, both vertically and horizontally. Local government was identified as the "preferred delivery partner" for the creation of sporting opportunities and the extrinsic benefits of sport, particularly in relation to the potential contribution of sporting activities in tackling social exclusion (Harris & Houlihan 2014:114). SDOs in local government seized the opportunity to integrate sport across wider policy objectives such as community safety and neighbourhood renewal. In addition, partnership working coupled with access to external funding such as the Single Regeneration Budget and Sport Action Zone funding, led to the growth in the staffing levels and scope of sport development teams.

Whilst New Labour elevated the role and status of local authorities, Atkinson and Wilks-Heeg (2000) argue that authorities effectively became a partner in the delivery of national policy rather than an autonomous actor. Local authorities were expected to fully embrace the role of 'enabling authorities' – albeit not in the sense of tendering

service delivery as under the previous Conservative administrations, but by coordinating delivery across a range of stakeholders (Wilson 2003, Stoker 2004, Chandler 2007, Blanco *et al.* 2011, Stewart 2014). Although central government claimed that ‘what matters is what works’, the introduction of performance management tools such as Best Value and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment enabled the comparison of performance across authorities - an approach that was argued to be contradictory to the rhetoric of localism and which extended centralised control over the activities of local government (Atkinson & Wilks-Heeg 2000, John 2014). Sport England also adopted a more interventionist, top-down approach with the creation of the ‘Active’ Programme – a series of national schemes such as Active Sports designed to create pathways for young people to progress in sport (Houlihan & White 2002, Houlihan & Lindsey 2013). Active Sports was implemented via Active Sport Partnerships (later known as County Sports Partnerships, now Active Partnerships) who filtered programme funding to local authorities against agreed outcomes but with limited flexibility to adapt programme delivery to local needs (Charlton 2010). Local authorities were also encouraged (via the promise of additional funding from Sport England) to develop Community Sport Networks (CSNs) that were tasked with undertaking strategic coordination of sport and physical activity across a local area. This was a further attempt to force closer working relationships between the different stakeholders involved in sport locally and to emphasise local authority’s role as strategic leaders, not service deliverers (Houlihan & Lindsey 2013, Baker *et al.*, 2016).

The removal of CCT legislation in The Local Government Act of 1999 and its replacement with Best Value which emphasised the need for continuous service improvement, was largely viewed positively. Sport England (1999:2) suggested that Best Value in sport and recreation services could be demonstrated “through sport” by both promoting its value in other policy areas, and “in sport” by evaluating the effectiveness of current service models. This triggered increasing numbers of local authorities to outsource delivery of sport and recreation services to leisure trusts, with some so called ‘super’ or ‘mega’ trusts such as Everyone Active and Greenwich Leisure Limited, operating across local authority boundaries, winning contracts to take over the management of facilities in geographically diverse areas from Preston to Cornwall (Pamben, 2016 & 2017). For many authorities, this model was considered to offer ‘better value’ than in-house delivery due to the ability of trusts to access additional external funding denied to local authorities, and their eligibility to receive tax breaks due to their charitable status (ASPE 2012; King 2013). Whilst financially attractive, adopting the trust model often created a separation between sport development services (which often remained in-house) and facility management (undertaken by the trust), the latter emphasising cost effectiveness rather than ‘sport for all’ and widening participation – which, at that time, were key aspects of government sport policy (ASPE 2012). However, such was the perceived success of the leisure trust model that by 2012 it was estimated that it had been adopted in over a quarter of English local authorities (King, 2012).

Although the availability of external funding for local authority sport increased under New Labour, King (2011 cited in Houlihan & Lindsey 2013) argues that core budgets did not, highlighting the relatively precarious position of sport services within local government. The Carter Report (2005) commissioned by the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) also provided a somewhat damning verdict on local authority sport arguing that it had been de-prioritised politically within authorities, whilst also highlighting inefficiency with the estimated average local authority subsidy per facility being cited as £262,000. Furthermore, the report also raised significant concerns about the lack of coordination and alignment of central and local sport policy, suggesting the local delivery system was not best placed to drive up participation levels. Continued governmental dissatisfaction with a lack of control over local sport policy, led to local government falling “out of favour” as primary deliverers of local sport services (Harris and Houlihan, 2014:114). Responsibility for mass participation was instead passed to national governing bodies (NGBs) via the funding of Whole Sport Plans. This represented a shift from ‘sport for good’ to ‘sports for sport’s sake’ (Collins 2010) and was cemented in the new ‘Playing to Win’ (DCMS 2008) strategy which outlined how the government aimed to seize the opportunities offered by the successful London bid to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. As such, external financial resources such as National Lottery funding, available to local government sport were reduced. For discretionary services such as local government sport, the omens were not good.

### **The marginalisation of local government (the Coalition administration 2010-2015)**

John (2014:697) argues that the election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government marked “a new era for local government”, highlighting election promises to decentralise and increase the accountability of public services. Further, the 2011 Localism Act sought to grant increased flexibility and freedom to local authorities, whilst “lifting the burden of bureaucracy” on them (HM Government 2010:2). However, although the Act contained powers for local authorities to shape their own service priorities, it also contained over one hundred powers for central over local government, suggesting that this was decentralisation within centrally imposed limits and restrictions (Lowndes & Pratchett 2012; Stewart, 2014). The Coalition government also retained elements of New Labour’s target-driven culture by continuing to publish comparative data across local authorities, holding local authorities to account on the success and failure of services of which they were not always directly in control (Painter 2012, John 2014).

Local authorities continued to be marginalised within national sport policy. There was little mention of them in ‘Creating a Sporting Habit for Life’ (DCMS 2012) with NGBs being retained to lead on driving mass participation and community sport until 2017. In addition, the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010 (triggered by the global economic crisis) was to prove significant for local government sport and recreation



provision. Local authorities were faced with core budget cuts of 27% (amounting to £81bn of cuts by 2014/15) (BBC 2010; Parnell *et al.* 2015). In addition, Sport England was faced with a 33% cut in funding with repercussions for its funding programmes (Guardian, 2010). The Coalition's localism agenda, built on the principle that increased community involvement reduces the need for state involvement, was thus viewed as a "convenient rationale for fiscal retrenchment" and an underhanded attack on local government (Painter 2012:11). Inman (2014:np) suggests that the impact of cuts amounted to a "fundamental re-imaging of the state". Discretionary services within local government such as sport and recreation were severely affected. In 2019, Harris *et al* estimated that spending on sport and recreation by local authorities had reduced by 70% compared to 2009-10 whilst spending on the maintenance and provision of open spaces was estimated to have reduced by 40%. In many authorities, reductions in funding for sport and recreation resulted in the closure of sports centres or reductions in opening hours, staff redundancies, and withdrawal of sports programmes, often in the most deprived communities (King, 2013, Parnell *et al.* 2015, Conn 2015). Grant aid provided by local authorities to voluntary sector organisations reduced, whilst reductions in external funding for community sport outreach work created an increasing dependency on central government funding streams to support 'sport for all' activities. Only 20% of local authorities were able to support this provision through their core budgets (CLOA 2012, King 2013). In addition, declining capacity within local authorities meant there was often little support available to community groups undertaking asset transfer (taking on responsibility for the management of a facility) or taking on responsibility for service delivery – a somewhat unanticipated consequence of the localism agenda which had aimed to enable community involvement in service delivery (King 2013, Finlay-King *et al.* 2017).

### **New challenges for local authorities: The Conservative administration 2015 onwards**

Despite the eroding of local government capacity through continued austerity measures, there remained an expectation from the Conservative government that local authorities would "spend less, but deliver more" (Lowndes & Gardner 2016:358). It therefore appeared ironic that after being largely ignored in previous government sport policies, the new government strategy for sport, 'Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation' (DDCMS 2015) emphasised a more prominent role for local government as a deliverer and strategic coordinator of services (Allison *et al* 2016, Ives 2016). Local authorities were to encourage mass participation, facilitate partnership working, provide multi-use open green spaces for physical activity, and seek to integrate physical activity into public health systems. The policy also promoted the potential economic impact of sport on local areas stemming from the hosting of mega events. Government ambitions to secure a 'decade of sport' following on from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games provided opportunities for local authorities in large cities to benefit from this investment, with

many events lined up for future delivery e.g. the 2019 Netball World Cup in Liverpool and 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham.

The tonal shift in policy represented by 'Sporting Future', with its emphasis on 'sport for good', proved unexpectedly prescient due to the social issues brought to the fore during the second half of the 2010s and beyond. Despite local authorities having been identified in 'Sporting Future' as a key partner in its delivery, austerity measures were not reversed and in some ways hardened, thus authorities' ability to contribute to the delivery of 'Sporting Future' continued to be compromised. The onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic created further challenges for local authorities. Lockdowns during 2020 and parts of 2021 led to the extended, and in some cases permanent, closure of public sports facilities. In addition, many facilities were repurposed as vaccination centres, whilst sport development staff were often re-deployed to provide support to individuals deemed in need. There was also a significant impact on the finances of leisure trusts, with many in danger of becoming insolvent and requiring additional financial support from local authorities to 'bail them out'. Community Leisure UK, the national umbrella organisation for Leisure Trusts, estimated that 50% of its members experiencing severe cash flow (Hill 2020). Indeed, some trusts, such as Inspiring Healthy Lifestyles (which managed leisure provision in Wigan and Selby), were taken back in-house ('insourced') to protect services and staff employment. Against a backdrop of ongoing austerity measures the challenges brought about the pandemic proved almost insurmountable, with the delivery of national sport policy far from the minds of local authorities' elected members and senior managers who were simply trying to maintain essential services to the most vulnerable.

A further trend in this period was a shift towards 'whole systems change', a process intended to "align and connect" physical activity with a range of other systems and services aimed at tackling obesity and other health issues across defined geographical areas (Public Health England, 2020:6). This was exemplified by Sport England's funding of twelve Local Delivery Pilots (LDPs) to pilot the development of whole-systems approaches to physical activity, some targeted at individual local authorities (e.g. Calderdale) and some (e.g. Essex) operated across partnerships of local authorities. The LDP programme represented an investment of £130million in local physical activity and sport with the funding awarded via a competitive bidding process. Whilst this was undoubtedly welcome in the recipient authorities and provided a direct opportunity to implement national sport policy, it also signalled a fragmentation of the resources available to promote local authority sport and physical activity in general.

On the back of extensive consultation conducted during the pandemic, Sport England published a new strategy; 'Uniting the Movement: Our 10-year vision to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity' (Sport England 2021). The explicit focus of this national strategy was not on mainstream

sport participation but on the contribution of sport and physical activity to creating a “nation of more equal, inclusive and connected communities... a country where people live happier, healthier and more fulfilled lives” (Sport England 2021:7). The strategy was not accompanied by a new national sport policy document although there were indications that the government was working towards producing a refreshed strategy to update/replace ‘Sporting Future (DDCMS 2021)’. The inquiry by the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (UK Parliament 2021) also attempted to identify how to secure the future of sport in the community, tacitly acknowledging the financial difficulties facing community sport providers, many of whom were facing extinction even before the pandemic. Covid-19 magnified the challenges and exacerbated the precarious position in which many local authorities found themselves. For example, Swim England (2021) reported a “looming shortage[s]” of pools, emphasising the need for urgent replacements for those facilities built in the 1960s and 1970s that were coming to the end of their lifespan (Swim England 2021). Furthermore, although the government had provided £100m in emergency funding to ‘prop up’ local authority sport and recreation facilities during the pandemic, rising energy prices led to a significant increase (estimated at 150%) in costs associated with operating public swimming pools with some authorities threatening pool closures without further support (Weaver 2022).

Structural changes within Whitehall meant that the oversight of local authorities became the responsibility of a newly-branded Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. ‘Levelling up’ was a key Conservative manifesto promise in the 2019 election which outlined plans to tackle long-standing regional inequalities - the aforementioned Local Delivery Pilots could be said to be a manifestation of this. However, the ability of local authorities to continue providing facilities and sport and recreation opportunities for residents, particularly those from under-represented and disadvantaged groups, is likely to be hampered without further government investment. It remains to be seen whether this will be provided via the ‘Levelling up’ agenda or whether additional resources will be made available through the implementation of the promised new national sport policy. In the interim, relationships with organisations such as Active Partnerships, who saw their funding cemented in the ten-year Sport England vision, might become even more critical. The traditional variance in engagement between Active Partnerships and local authorities, in some areas working almost independently of each other (Keech 2013; Grix & Harris 2017), might be smoothed out by this distribution of resources. Arguably, the end of the Coalition government and the return to single-party control, rather than offering clarity and reassurance, signalled the greatest period of uncertainty for local authorities in what might be termed the ‘national sport policy era’. In light of this, the final section of the chapter suggests enduring themes for practitioners and scholars alike to consider when assessing the status of local authorities as implementers of national sport policy.

## **Conclusion: future challenges and opportunities in implementing sport policy**

Despite the reduced capacity and investment faced by many local authorities, there is a strong argument that they remain a crucial delivery agent of sport policy. The Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (2021) report on 'Sport in our Communities' outlined that local authorities were well positioned to provide facilities, support both formal and informal activities and ensure that they are accessible to everyone in the community. At the time of writing, local authorities had responsibility for 31 percent of grass pitches, 13 percent of sports halls and almost a fifth of all gyms. Additionally, when compared to the provision offered by schools and the private sector, public swimming pools owned by local authorities represent the majority of accessible water space. Local authorities are recognised as vital place-shapers, however, as the report acknowledges, demand was increasing for the limited available facilities, a situation which was set to be exacerbated by the expected closure of one in every three public facilities (LGA, 2021). The presumption is therefore that local authorities still have a crucial role to play in implementing national sport policy - the LGA urging the government to utilise future national Spending Reviews to put local government finances on a long-term, sustainable basis so that councils can repair ageing infrastructure and resume providing sport development support to clubs and communities. The implementation of sport policy by local authorities is unlikely to be straightforward at any point within the foreseeable future.

Whenever you are reading this, a number of things are likely to be the case: local authorities will be under-resourced relative to the demands placed upon them; local authorities will be asked to undertake an increasingly diverse and complex number of roles; local authorities will be essential to the wellbeing and sustainability of the communities they serve. As well as addressing inequalities that are likely to continue worsening, local authorities will be tackling the impacts of a population that continues to age, with an accompanying social care crisis to try and manage (Andrews and Dollery 2021). Climate change will increasingly demand local authorities' attention, both in terms of operating more sustainably (upgrading ageing sport facilities is likely to be both challenging and expensive) and contributing to the fight against global warming through local awareness programmes and related interventions. The pull towards these agendas could present yet another threat to non-statutory provision such as sport and physical activity. There is, however, cause for optimism. As this chapter has shown through its history of local government's involvement in implementing national sport policy, local authority-led sport and physical activity can make a significant contribution in challenging domains such as care for older people. The army of council-based sport development professionals may be a thing of the past, but through strategic partnerships that engage diverse organisations and individuals, local authorities will remain favourably positioned to steer locally relevant services that interpret and implement national sport policy with the greatest impact.

## **Leeds City Council case study - Katy Bowden, Development Manager, Active Leeds**

Leeds City Council serves the second largest local authority area in the United Kingdom, with a population in the region of 800,000. The Council has a long history of investing in and supporting sport and physical activity provision across the city via its Active Leeds service. At the time of writing, provision remains 'in-house' after proposals to move into a leisure trust model were abandoned in 2008. The Council is therefore directly responsible for the management of seventeen 'dry' facilities, fourteen swimming pools and thirteen gyms plus an outdoor activity centre. In addition, the development team focuses on "reducing inactivity and increasing the level of physical activity in Leeds" with an overarching focus on reducing health inequalities in the city's most disadvantaged communities. In recent years, the Council has also invested heavily in bringing major sports events to the city. The corporate plan 2020-25 outlines support for residents to develop 'healthy, physically active lifestyles', to 'support growth and investment' and to 'enhance the image of Leeds as a city'. A Council report estimated that physical activity generated an economic impact of £244.1 million to Leeds economy and provided a total of over 7,000 jobs in Leeds, whilst volunteering in physical activity was worth £147.5 million (information taken from Sport England local profile data). The Council takes a strategic approach towards the development of sport and physical activity and works closely with key partners to achieve its ambition for Leeds to be the most active big city in England.

The work undertaken across the city has been strongly influenced by national sport policy. During the 2012-17 period, in which the national policy focus was on 14-25-year-olds, emphasis was placed on the implementation of NGB Whole Sport Plans including increasing levels of competition within schools and improving school-club links. Data and insight was used by NGBs to develop a largely product-based approach such as 'Back to Netball' that local authorities could 'buy into' and offer to local communities. This was a coached activity that provided females who had enjoyed netball at school an informal route back into the sport to build their confidence. Other sports also adopted this approach, with a multitude of branded products emerging as many NGBs targeted local authorities with large populations of 14-25 year olds. Leeds, which has a higher than average proportion of young people, was therefore of interest to NGBs who had been encouraged by Sport England to engage with local authorities to coordinate these new opportunities across local areas.

The challenges associated with contributing to the delivery of national sport policy were amplified by the broader financial challenges facing the city council. In response to austerity measures implemented by the national government, a comprehensive service review was undertaken in 2011, with a subsequent reduction in the net operating budget for the sport and leisure service of £2million between

2010-11 and 2011-12. Centralised teams for facility programme management, aquatics and fitness were created to reduce duplication across leisure centres, whilst posts within the development team were deleted and a new structure implemented to create two clear functions: an Active Sports team who would work with NGBs and local clubs, and an Active Lifestyles team who would focus on physical activity interventions. Further savings were generated through asset transfer of community sports facilities such as Armley Baths and the establishment of a social enterprise to run the City Performance Gymnastics programme. However, the need to balance increasingly challenging financial targets, whilst responding to the demands of key partners such as NGBs and trying to ensure access for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to sport and physical activity, placed the service in a difficult position.

Indeed, the influx of NGBs working across the city caused a number of operational challenges for the council. For example, NGBs representing different indoor sports all seeking to introduce their products in the same leisure centres at the same time stretched the capacity of the facility workforce with some smaller NGBs relying on facilities to adopt their product, train staff and deliver the programmes themselves. In addition, the simultaneous introduction of so many new 'offers' and 'products' caused confusion in local communities. Some NGBs also required support from the development team to access their knowledge of local areas and guidance on where to target their new opportunities, whilst others required help in accessing facilities, contacting schools, and engaging communities. In practice, adequate resources, and capacity to support NGBs to implement their Whole Sport Plans in Leeds were not available, particularly when the target geographical areas that had been identified across the city by NGBs did not correlate with the priority areas for the Council - an example of a disconnect between national and local sport policy.

National participation data generated by the Active People Survey into the impact of Whole Sport Plans identified that although there were examples of good growth amongst some sports, most sports were primarily attracting already active participants, thus demonstrating an increase in the measure of the adults participating in 3 x 30 minutes of exercise per week but not altering those at 1 x 30 minutes per week, which remained relatively static. In addition, pressure on NGBs to demonstrate growth meant many focused their efforts into areas of the city where engagement required less effort, namely the more affluent areas. Attempts to address this with NGBs focused around the idea of a 'tale of two cities', which highlighted the complexities of demographics of the city, namely the stark disparity in life expectancy between the north of the city and the south. The realities of what was needed - time and a substantial input of resources - to achieve systemic change in these areas caused a further conflict between the city council's priorities and the capacity of NGBs to respond to this challenge. This was partly resolved via Sport England funding for a 'Place Pilot', which involved the commitment of additional resources to support NGBs to engage and deliver in areas of high priority as defined

by the council. This funding was used to employ 'activators' to build connections in communities and develop appropriate activities in those areas such as community park tennis, 'Run Leeds' and table tennis.

Subsequently, the five big issues outlined Sport England's (2021) *Uniting the Movement* strategy aligned well with local priorities in Leeds and reflected the challenges of the post-Covid environment. The Council was working towards a co-produced Physical Activity Ambition, a process that started with a city-wide consultation on physical activity which generated responses from over 4,000 residents. This revealed that there was motivation amongst residents to be physically active but that some social and environmental factors made this challenging for many individuals. A key focus moving forwards for Active Leeds was to focus on 'system change' (to look at how factors which enable physical activity can be aligned e.g. transport links, facility access, the physical environment) and to adopt community-led approaches to identify solutions. This represented a shift from the top-down approach utilised by NGBs towards an approach which embraces engaging with communities. For example, Leeds Girls Can (a local take on the successful national campaign) identified and supported volunteer ambassadors to drive opportunities within their local area or community. Elsewhere, the Get Set Leeds Local (a Sport England-funded programme) based in four of the 1% most deprived neighbourhoods in the city, took a community-led approach to identifying, developing, and implementing solutions to make it easier and more appealing to be active in a given place.

In addition to the strategic focus on physical activity, the Council has since 2013-14 invested heavily in hosting major sports events such as the Tour De France Grand Depart in 2014, the 2015 Rugby World Cup, and between 2016 and 2022, the UK stage of the World Triathlon Series. Whilst such events contributed to the government's ambition to create a 'decade of sport' following the hosting of the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games, the primary justification for the Council is economic impact (the World Triathlon Series is estimated to have brought in a cash boost to the local economy of £1.2million). Mega events also offer opportunities for spectator and volunteer engagement and the incorporation of mass participation races within the main programme. For example, development activities (including introductory programmes) that built towards the Triathlon event weekend helped to generate new interest in swimming, cycling, and running in Leeds for a relatively small investment of resources.

Looking to the future, while there may be continued complementarity in national policies focus on embedding long term, systemic change by utilising community-led, asset-based community development approaches, Leeds City Council needs to continue being financially prudent as budgets remain stretched after a decade of austerity measures. The ability to generate income from facilities plus access external funding opportunities is crucial, whilst investment is needed to support

refurbishing and renewing existing facility stock. The challenge will be to fulfil these objectives, whilst ensuring that facilities and activity programmes remain attuned to the needs of inactive and vulnerable groups across the city.

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