

EVALUATING THE CONTRIBUTION OF AREA YOUTH GAMES TO ENGLISH SPORTS POLICY

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Context

Considerable concern has been expressed at the declining participation rates in sport and physical activity. To partially address this there has been significant investment in, and the firm establishment of structures, for Physical Education and school sport (DfES, 2003, 2004). In community sport, however, structures remain complex and embryonic (Carter, 2005). One element of recent continuity in community-based sporting opportunities for young people has been the annual Area Youth Games (AYGs). The rationale for AYGs was developed and refined during the late 1990s in order to provide young people with new and appropriate competitive sporting opportunities locally. Sport England views AYGs as having rich currency and focus within local sports development programmes, whilst raising the overall profile of sports development. A total of almost 10,000 young people participated in AYGs in the South East in 2004 (PMP, 2004). This paper evaluates the evolution and contribution of AYGs to English Sports Policy, based on longitudinal research in one area of South East England. It analyses the impact of the event in terms of sports development and how far the AYGs contribute to sports development outcomes and processes. The research measures attainment against the stated aims of the specific AYG and examines the contention that “the Youth Games are not intended to be an isolated event, but rather the focal point for local sports development programmes and form part of a coherent sports development process which creates quality opportunities for participation and competition for young people” (Keech, 2002).

Methods

To assess how far the aims were met, a set of related questionnaires were constructed in 2000. These were tailored to each of the stakeholders, piloted, and reproduced the following year. Questionnaires to sport-specific Development Officers/competition organisers, local authority Chief Leisure Officers and local authority Sports Development Officers were sent by email. Response rates were over 80%. In 2003 a review of the purpose of the Games took place and was based on detailed discussion groups with stakeholders. Proposals were made in 2003 to realign the AYG on which the research was based with its intended sports development outcomes, through the principles of Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD). Whilst dialogue on the proposal continues, further research was required on aligning the sports development outcomes with the corporate requirements of partner agencies. This research is taking place in 2005 through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, and some findings are incorporated into this paper.

Results

So far, the project indicates that there is a remarkable amount of evidence from participants, coaches, officials and spectators (usually parents) who support the value of AYGs. In contrast, there is a lack of understanding about the true direction and purpose of the AYGs from practitioners who strongly claim the need to re-evaluate their purpose and determine whether it is a tool for foundation sports development programmes. AYGs simultaneously offer both participation and competition in sport, but there appears to be a lack of understanding regarding these terms. The governance of AYGs is complicated by the apparently irreconcilable demands placed on two sets of stakeholders. NGBs are primarily concerned with developing regular participation through competition as set out in Whole Sport Plans. Local Authorities are charged with developing participation in order to address the social exclusion agenda. A clear tension exists amongst stakeholders and there is a contradiction between the intentions of NGBs and local authorities.

Discussion/Implications

Not until these tensions are addressed and resolved will there be a coherent approach to AYGs. Given the lack of clarity in purpose and the differences in the understanding of practitioners, it is of little surprise that opinions amongst competitors, coaches and spectators are almost equally divided as to whether the event is intended to be competitive or participatory. To rectify this, the purpose of AYGs

must be precisely defined and a clear and effective approach established. It is, therefore, suggested that local authority representation is not the most appropriate method of team selection. The adoption of District teams, possibly mirroring the areas of School Sport Partnerships, would provide opportunities for greater participation, increased partnership working, and would permit a more equitable approach to the event, ensuring that 'weaker' authorities would be supported. It may also address the resource implications of the event and would ensure that local authority boundaries are not constraints on young peoples' participation. There is little doubt that as 'events,' AYGs are a major success. The sports development outcomes, however, are less clear. The dilemma, therefore, is to find a mechanism to retain the elements of AYGs related to promoting youth sport in the county, while at the same time ensuring the right young people are getting access to appropriate competitive opportunities. Criteria for the impact of the specific AYG on which the research is based on young people's participation are being developed locally in the hope that data can be shared amongst all local authorities. The importance of developing connections and performance measures are key to a sustainable environment for many young people in emergent community sport structures.

References

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