



26 November 2010

Comment on Government Policy re School Sports Partnerships (SSPs)

I should clarify that my comments are not about the Welwyn Hatfield SSP in particular but are generic as we work with a number of the Hertfordshire SSPs.

In my view, the two main consequences of the demolition of SSPs will be:-

Firstly, the loss of a co-ordinating and organising structure that initiates a range of sporting activities and sport related opportunities for primary and secondary school pupils. While the delivery of those activities may be actually carried out by or in partnership with a range of other agencies, these agencies will spend more time and thus be less efficient in delivery, if they have to pick up the task of dealing with every individual school. Inevitably, certain schools, and so an increasing number of children are less likely to receive such opportunities unless the school itself is proactive.

Given the lack of expertise and resource within the primary sector (and some of the secondary sector) to include sporting activity, the foundations for sporting participation at any level will be seriously eroded. Inevitably then fewer children going into secondary schools will have levels of competency that enable them to enjoy and improve in any sport – hence longer term participation and performance levels in the major games as well as minority sports will decline.

Related to this one can see a decline in quality of activity as well as quantity. While SSPs may not directly manage quality, one can see in the various SSP activities that some SSPs have been active in sharing information and making judgements in their own programme commissioning on what constitutes good value and what is appropriate in activities such as coaching delivered by third party agencies. Most primary schools have no capacity, experience or capability to do this so they may end up with “activity” but I would suspect its quality and effectiveness will diminish.

Secondly while the expressed intention of the “new programmes” is to introduce more intra and inter school competitive activity, this would be more effectively done by retention of **some** of the existing structures.

Given the steps envisaged and taking account of the points above it is clear that there is a contradiction in policy aspiration/resource allocation. The aim of having a hugely increased minimum number of volunteers with less training and guidance being delivered is one obvious example relating to required workforce. The likely decline in athlete capability – and so performance level of competition for the majority - is highlighted above. Even for the very capable minority, the big problem with lack of skills compared to many of our European counterparts is illustrated in a major game such as football where the “culture” of too much competition at junior levels has destroyed skill acquisition and had a detrimental effect that impacts right up to elite level.

As a sports professional working in the Higher Education sector, I am sure we will see a detrimental effect in future as initiatives delivered under SSPs such as young leaders,

HERTFORDSHIRE SPORTSVILLAGE

ambassadors, officials and volunteers will at best be sporadic and worst disappear.

In this comment I have no agenda in economic terms (as a venue we earn a tiny percentage of our income from SSP activity) but, speaking as someone who has worked in sport (in commercial, public and higher education sectors) for a long time, as a parent and as a critic of many government and related agency “initiatives”, I would suggest that while the SSP model is far from perfect, I think it has overall had a very positive effect in arresting the decline evident in amount and quality of school sport delivery seen in the 1990’s.

The question of cost and value of this SSP structure to arrest and reverse decline in school sport activity is of course open to challenge but I am reminded of the warning “if you think safety is expensive - wait til you have an accident...”

In years ahead we will reap what we sow in terms of the quality and quantity of young people’s participation and performance in sport (let alone the whole question of health issues) just as the consequences of the conflicts in school sport policy in the late seventies early eighties resulted in the need to introduce SSPs in the first place.

Nick Brooking
Director of Sport,
University of Hertfordshire,
de Havilland Campus,
Hatfield,
AL10 9EU