

The London 2012 Mass Participation Legacy Plan

Now we know WHAT and WHY, but no one is telling us HOW!

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On Monday 15th November, the Coalition's Sports Minister, Hugh Robertson, told us **WHAT** Sport England will do to try to capitalise on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Against growing criticism of spending cuts to sport, there was even a reasonable explanation for **WHY** it is being done. But there was little about **HOW** it will work, and insights provided by research from the Centre for Sport, Physical Education & Activity Research (SPEAR) suggest that the plan will leave a lasting legacy, but that it will not result in a new wave of mass participation in sport.

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The **WHAT** is a catchy three P's, both three programme strands and an engaging three-word mantra: ***“Places People Play”***. The *Places* will be a £90million Lottery funded programme of investment in upgrading local facilities, maintaining and recovering playing fields, and constructing new “iconic” facilities. To provide *People*, a £2million Lottery investment will seek to recruit, train and deploy 40,000 sports leaders. And for those who want to *Play*, £32million from the Lottery will be used to develop “Sportivate”, a programme of opportunities for teenagers and young adults who no longer play to try a new sport. Also for those who wish to *Play*, the Lottery will provide a further £4million to ensure that provision capacity exists for the independent ***“Gold Challenge”*** initiative, which encourages adults to raise money for charity by taking up an Olympic or Paralympic sport.

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The **WHY**, of course, is linked to the national deficit. In austere times, when ***[Sport England's core funding has been cut by over 30%](#)***, and the Department of Education has ***[withdrawn the Youth Sport Trust's £162million annual funding for School Sport Partnerships](#)*** (although this is currently ***[under review](#)***), the government is providing £135 million from the National Lottery to try to exploit the sport participation potential of London 2012. Of course, it would be preferable if the Lottery wasn't being used to plug the cuts in sport funding, and it would be great if the funding pledges made in more prosperous times could be maintained, but it is worth taking time to reflect on how dire the funding situation for sport might have been without the pressure to lever a legacy from the £9.3billion investment in London 2012.

The **HOW**, though, is a different story. Like Kevin Costner's plans in the 1989 film, *Field of Dreams*, the Mass Participation Legacy Plan seems to be based on the whisper in the wind: "If you build it, they will come!" This, presumably, is why the overwhelming majority of the *Places People Play* investment is in supply: £90million for facilities, £2million for leaders and £4million for provision capacity. Even the £32million to be invested in the "Sportivate" programme for teenagers and young adults is for the supply of opportunities. *Places People Play* is all but silent on **HOW** the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games will stimulate demand.

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But what is known about **HOW** to lever a sport legacy from an Olympic and Paralympic Games? According to Lord Coe, we can "use the power of the Games to inspire young people to take up sport". Yes, but **HOW**? [The worldwide evidence, collected, collated and analysed by SPEAR for the Department of Health](#), is that there is a phenomenon called a **demonstration effect**, in which people are inspired by elite sport, sports people and sports events to participate themselves. But this inspiration is not universal. A demonstration effect can inspire those who have participated before to participate again, inspire those who are participating a little to participate a little more, and cause those who are already participating to give up one sport to try another. What it categorically does not do, is have any effect whatsoever on those who have never participated in sport.

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So there is some evidence on **HOW** to lever a legacy. In fact, there is even an [easy to read evidence-based guide, designed by SPEAR for the Department of Health](#), which in addition to explaining **HOW** the evidence suggests a sport participation legacy can be developed, also provides some practical examples of **HOW** it can be done. Helpfully, it even identifies which of Sport England's market segments are most responsive to a demonstration effect, and the types of messages and themes that are likely to nudge them to participate. These insights are derived from [SPEAR's detailed analysis of the demonstration effect for Sport England](#), utilising data from the Satisfaction with the Quality of the Sport Experience and the Active People surveys.

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So in the absence of a strategy on **HOW** demand will be stimulated, what does the evidence suggest are the likely outcomes of the London 2012 Mass Participation Legacy Plan? Firstly, undoubtedly the new facilities and fields will be well used, but they are most likely to be used by people who are already participating in sport to play a little more often in a better environment. Providing facilities for people to play a little more in better surroundings may be a legitimate policy goal, but we should be clear that people playing more often is not the same as more people playing.

Secondly, the evidence shows that the Olympic and Paralympic Games does tend to create an appetite for trying new sports, so the “Sportivate” programme might seem like a good idea. Unfortunately, though, the evidence is that those trying new sports have often given up another

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sport to do so, and so the overall impact on participation is neutral. SPEAR’s work does suggest that this activity switching phenomenon might be used to prevent drop out, but there is no evidence that it can be a successful strategy to re-engage those who have played in the past. In fact, the evidence suggests that successfully nudging those who have played before to play again is most likely to be achieved by using the Games to create nostalgia for sports they used to play rather than suggesting new sports. So, although activity switching might create the illusion of more people playing in some sports, people playing different sports is not the same as more people playing sport.

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Thirdly, in addition to a demonstration effect, SPEAR’s work also provides evidence for a ***festival effect***. A festival effect can create in people a desire, if not an urge, to [actively celebrate the Olympic and Paralympic festival](#) in their own communities. This suggests that the “Gold Challenge” initiative, which explicitly offers adults the opportunity to be part of the legacy by taking up an Olympic or Paralympic sport to raise money for local good causes, may have the potential to stimulate

demand. But, because the festival effect targets those with little previous interest in sport, it cannot be effective where there is a competitive sport emphasis. So, unless “Gold Challenge” considers ***HOW*** to use Olympic and Paralympic themes that de-emphasise competitive sport, those taking part are likely to become one-timers that “tried it once, but didn’t like it”. A competitive charity challenge may well contribute to the Big Society, but unless it understands that the non-sporty are not motivated by competition, it will not get more people playing sport.

These three outcomes (people playing more often, people playing different sports, and people trying sports only once) are the likely result of the Mass Participation Legacy Plan because it addresses supply but not demand. However, other areas of public provision have recently developed more comprehensive approaches. On Tuesday 30th November, the Department of Health published its Public Health White Paper, [Healthy Lives, Healthy People](#).

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This White Paper is widely acknowledged to be influenced by [Richard Thaler’s Nudge](#) ideas, which are derived from behavioural economics in which the provision of supply is integrated with strategies to influence demand. As such, the White Paper’s approach to Public Health is based on three core actions, the first of which is the “strengthening of self-esteem, confidence and

personal responsibility”. However, the other two actions acknowledge that, whilst there is a need to address supply by “adapting the environment to make healthier choices easier”, this needs to be integrated with “positively promoting healthier behaviours and lifestyles” to ensure that there is demand for healthier options. Although the Public Health White Paper refers to the Mass Participation Legacy Plan, unlike the White Paper the Legacy Plan has not sought to “harness the latest evidence from behavioural science” to ensure that there is demand for the supply of sports provision it will create.

So the London 2012 Mass Participation Legacy Plan is likely to provide a lasting legacy for sport, but unless the Plan adopts measures to nudge demand, it will be a legacy of supply that provides better surroundings in which those already playing sport can play a little more, or in which they can switch to a new sport. While “Gold Challenge” has some potential if it seeks to understand **HOW** the non-sporty can be engaged, it is highly unlikely that the Legacy Plan will create a new wave of mass participation. Most likely, the *Places People Play* will be populated by the already sporty making hay while the Olympic and Paralympic sun shines.

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- [A Systematic Review of the Evidence Base for Developing a Physical Activity, Sport and Health Legacy from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games](#) (Weed, M., et al, 2009. Dept of Health)
- [Active Celebration: Using the London 2012 Games to Get the Nation Moving](#) (Weed, M, Mansfield,L. & Dowse, S., 2010. Dept of Health)
- [The Potential of the Demonstration Effect to Grow and Sustain Participation in Sport](#) (Weed, M., 2009. Sport England)