

Record numbers of people are playing sport: can local authorities meet demand?

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Chris Hayes LGiU associate

Summary

- This briefing looks at the implications for local authorities of Sport England's latest [Active People Survey 2013/14](#) which shows that more people are playing sport than ever before.
- A record 15.6 million people aged 16 and over are playing sport regularly, 1.7 million more than 2005 when London won the bid to host the Olympic Games.
- The largest growth is in young people, but there remains a significant gap in participation between young men and young women and between people with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.
- Local authorities should develop a coherent strategy for sports provision that is based on local need, informed by new models of service delivery, and fully aligned with the delivery of local public health priorities.
- This briefing is relevant to all tiers of councils and of particular interest to strategic commissioners of sport and leisure and related services.

Briefing in full

Introduction

With a summer of high profile sporting events in full flow, it is timely to reflect on [recent figures](#) published by Sport England, the non-departmental public body under the Department for Culture, which show that more people are playing sport regularly than ever before.

That is good news for the government's [Olympic legacy strategy](#) which came under criticism in 2012 for stimulating only a small increase in the number of people playing sport, and again when the numbers dipped in December 2013.

But the figures provide food for thought for local service commissioners who are faced with opportunities to reap the social and economic benefits of a more active population on the one hand, and the challenge of managing the increase in demand on the other.

This briefing provides an overview of the key findings from Sport England's latest Active People Survey dataset for 2013/14, an analysis of the implications for local authorities, and a look ahead at the future direction of sports policy.

Who plays sport?

Sport England's bi-annual Active People Survey measures the number of people taking part in sport across the nation and in local communities. It is the largest survey of sport and activity carried out in Europe, sampling more than 165,000 people from the age 14 and over.

The headline from the latest data release covering the period April 2013 to April 2014 is that the number of over-16s playing sport once a week every week has risen to a record 15.6 million, an increase of 180,000 in the last six months and 1.7 million more than 2005 when London won the bid to host the Olympic Games. The largest growth is seen in young people, with a record 3.9 million 16-25 year-olds playing sport regularly.

Age and gender continue to be the main determining factors in the take up of sport. 54.5 per cent of 16-to-25-year-olds take part in at least one sport session a week, compared to 32 per cent of older adults (age 26 plus). More men play sport than women. Currently 40.9 per cent of men play sport at least once a week, compared to 30.3 per cent of women. At a younger age, men are more likely than women to play sport, but this difference declines with age. It is therefore noteworthy that within the 16-25 age group the biggest increase over the last six months has come from girls, with an increase of 85,000 (compared to 68,000 for boys), with netball and badminton proving particularly popular.

Sports driving the increase in the 16-25 age group include football, netball and rugby union, with swimming, athletics and cycling joining the group when looking at overall take up across ages.

There has been an increase in the number of disabled people taking part in sport with 17.8 per cent playing sport regularly, up from 15.1 per cent in 2005/6, but there is still a gulf in the gap to their non-disabled peers.

The Active People Survey also provides an insight into how people are involved in sport. Over 9.2 million people (21 per cent of the population) are members of a sports club, while 7.3 million received sports coaching and 5.7 million took part in competitive sport. There are also 2.9 million people who volunteer regularly in sport.

Overall then, this latest data from Sport England shows that significantly more people are playing sport than ever before, but it should not be lost that most adults (52 per cent) still do not play any sport at all, according to the survey.

Local examples of good practice

With participation in sport on the rise, a number of local authorities are finding new ways of delivering sport and leisure. Hartlepool, Newcastle and Sunderland are among local authorities pioneering a new approach to sport, on the back of a [joint project](#) kick started by Sport England in 2013. Their sport and leisure services saw effective commissioning as a key means by which they could better place themselves to raise awareness about their service offer and increase take up and impact. By better understanding the commissioning landscape and local need, the three local authorities were able to develop new models of delivery and partnerships to deliver sport locally and meet strategic objectives.

Newcastle City Council, for example, has pioneered a 'stage and play' model of operation in which the council's sport and leisure service is very much seen as a 'catalyst and connector' of provision at a local level. In this model the council takes ownership of and provides the facilities in which the activities take place, such as a leisure centre or outdoor area. A range of organisations, including the council's own services, are then commissioned to 'stage' the activities. This approach recognises that there are often a diverse number of agencies responsible for delivering leisure opportunities to residents and visitors.

In Hartlepool, the service has strengthened and formalised working relationships with its children's services, resulting in the service working with the looked after children teams on a range of activities including targeted holiday provision and inter-generational sessions. The council has also driven through a new leisure development on the outskirts of the town, one of the first of its kind in the country featuring innovative inflatable sports domes. [The financial model](#) is of particular interest. The complex was funded by the sale of council land to a developer. In releasing the land, the council negotiated a deal where it has become a silent partner in the leisure business, receiving an income through the profit, and a guaranteed minimum income in the event of no profit. Hartlepool has benefitted from new housing and a new leisure development, and the council has a new income stream.

Sunderland meanwhile has developed closer working with its Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The sport and leisure service is now better positioned in the commissioning process for services that improve the physical health of Sunderland's population. The service is also working with the council's youth offending service to provide diversionary sport and leisure activities to those at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

Other examples of good practice locally, highlighted in the government's [second annual report of the Olympic and Paralympic legacy](#), include:

- Bury Council's ['I Will if You Will' project](#) which is getting more women and girls in Bury active through sport, by focussing on creating an environment that encourages women to get together and try sport in new ways.

- Luton Council's 'Together Through Sport' project which brings different communities together, using sport to engage, empower and improve the lives of disadvantaged young men aged 14-19.
- Dorset County Council's [post-2012 legacy programme](#) which is funding projects that develop and encourage participating in sport and physical activity, and promoting health and wellbeing across Dorset.

Comment

Can local authorities meet future demand?

The physical, emotional and social benefits of sport are well documented, most notably in the Department of Health's [Start Active. Stay Active](#) guidance. So too are the financial benefits. [Research](#) into the costs of physical inactivity has showed that NHS providers in England spent more than £900 million in 2009/10 treating people with diseases that could have been prevented if more people were physically active.

There is also a clear economic argument for investing in sport. [Business in Sport and Leisure estimate](#) that the sport and leisure industry as a whole provides over four million jobs and contributes approximately £200 billion, over three per cent of GDP, to the UK economy.

And yet, local government faces something of a tipping point in its capacity to meet demand and contribute to these wider outcomes. Councils have for years squeezed their budgets for sport so they can meet demand elsewhere. [An analysis](#) conducted by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) examining the impact of spending cuts on sport and recreation services found that: "The 'financial health' of Sport and Recreation Services (SRS) was generally weak across two thirds of authorities prior to the current economic downturn and is significantly weaker following the Comprehensive Spending Review of 2010." It also notes that "the downsizing and the fragmentation of leisure departments in recent years has meant that the strategic coherence for sport and recreation services have been undermined."

Councils thus far have valiantly responded to the increase in demand for sport through a range of measures including bringing in more external coaches, increasing the capacity of sessions, investing in new facilities, bidding for funding, and supporting volunteering. Indeed, in partnership with schools, they have been key agents themselves in the increase in take up. But a reactive 'sport for sports sake' approach is unsustainable in the long term. To meet current and future need, local authorities must embrace the wider social and economic benefits of participation in sport and develop a coherent strategy. They must take a long term view, investing in sport and leisure up front to deliver benefits and realise savings later on. And they should look at where sport and leisure can be commissioned to deliver strategic

outcomes in other key service areas, or require the market to come forward with a sport and leisure 'solution' to achieving those outcomes.

With public health functions now under council control, for example, and the strategic challenges of obesity, emotional wellbeing and an ageing population high on the agenda, the opportunities for local authorities to integrate sport back into the mainstream are there for the taking.

Recommendations

This briefing makes the following recommendations:

1. Local authorities should understand how the national trend towards more people playing sport regularly translates locally. They should make use of local information on who plays sport and how to inform the wider commissioning of services in their areas, particularly in the public health arena where there is so much to gain from encouraging people to stay active. Sport England provides a range of [interactive tools and datasets](#) that allows commissioners to do this at local authority and super output level.
2. Local authorities should review their current sport and leisure offer against local demand and develop a coherent long term strategy for sport that is aligned and integrated with other relevant service functions.
3. Where investment is needed councils should turn to more innovative models of service delivery, collaborating with sport and leisure providers and attracting investment around outcomes-based contracts, social impact bonds, or payment by results schemes that lend themselves well to sports provision in the community rather than under council control.
4. Local authorities should look at their governance arrangements to ensure that sport and leisure bodies are adequately represented in strategic decision making. Health and wellbeing boards for example should have strong links in with the local Community Sports Partnership.

The direction of sports policy

Overall, the figures published by Sport England amount to positive news for the government's current policy agenda of investing in high performance sport, delivering an Olympic legacy, and improving schools sports and physical activity.

But as the Minister for Sport and Equalities, Helen Grant MP, herself, was quick to point out:

“...there is still more work to do to get more women participating as well as those with a disability. I know that Sport England and sports governing bodies are working hard on this front as well as looking at innovative ways to appeal to people who may think that sport is not for them.”

Expect equality and access, increasing participation and tackling obesity to feature heavily in both the conservative and labour policy commitments for this portfolio in the run up to the 2015 general election.

The difference between the two parties will be in the means not the goals. The conservatives will continue to promote using outside coaching bodies and organisations to deliver sports provision in schools and the community. Labour on the other hand have signalled a commitment to a more traditional approach of investing in grassroots sport.

It is difficult to see either party reversing the current tightening of the purse strings as far as budgets are concerned. As the Sport and Recreation Alliance has [pointed out](#) in its facts and figures briefing, “By the end of this Parliament, funding for local council services, including sport and leisure services, will have fallen by £20 billion – a cut of 43%.”

Sport is on the rise, and that is a good thing for local communities. The challenge now is meeting demand in the context of austerity.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk