

2012 Olympics: a sporting legacy?

John Woodhouse

Will the London Olympics secure its promised mass sports participation legacy?

The London 2012 Games begin in a little over two years' time. The claimed legacy benefits of hosting the Games were at the heart of London's original bid and, following the bid's success, the previous Government published a Legacy Action Plan in June 2008. One of the five legacy promises is **to make the UK a world-leading sporting nation**: this includes a commitment to help at least two million more people in England be more active by 2012.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport leads on getting more people active through sport, while Sport England (the government agency responsible for community sport) is working to get one million more adults regularly taking part in sport. The Department of Health is leading on delivering the second half of the two million target by co-ordinating health-related activities.

For Sport England's purposes of increasing participation in sport by one million people, 'regular participation' is defined as "three sessions of moderate intensity sport each week" where a session lasts for at least 30 minutes. Progress towards this target is measured by Sport England's Active People Survey. The third survey, published in December 2009, found that:

- In 2008/09, 6.9 million adults participated in sport three times a week for 30 minutes at moderate intensity – an increase of 115,000 adult participants from 2007/08.
- Male participation is higher than female: 4.2 to 2.7 million. Male participation increased over the year while female participation fell.

LEGACY PROMISES

Five promises were made regarding the long-term benefits of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games:

1. To make the UK a world-leading sporting nation
2. To transform the heart of East London
3. To inspire a generation of young people
4. To make the Olympic Park a blueprint for sustainable living
5. To demonstrate that the UK is a creative, inclusive and welcoming place to live in, to visit and for business.

- There was a large increase in non-white adult participants. Numbers rose by 16%, almost 100,000, to over 700,000. White adult participation increased slightly over the year.
- Sports participation among adults with a limiting disability or illness fell by 10% over the year.

One of the challenges for the future is therefore not just to raise the general level of participation, but to increase participation amongst those less likely to participate in sport: women and the disabled, for example. The barriers facing people in under-represented groups will also need to be addressed.

FREE SWIMMING

The Government's leading proposal for a community sports legacy has been a new

fund to encourage local authorities to open swimming pools free to the over-60 and under-16 age groups. The free swimming programme began in April 2009, with the latest figures showing that:

- 81% of local authorities have agreed to provide free swimming to the over-60s, with 61% agreeing to make it available to the under-16s
- More than 10 million free swims have taken place so far: 6.9 million by people aged under 16 and 3.5 million by those aged over 60.

However, a number of non-participating local authorities have claimed that the funding on offer does not cover the costs of administering the scheme, thereby having an impact on other services and possibly on council tax. The programme also hopes to encourage all local authorities to offer free swimming to everyone by 2012. Whether this is likely remains to be seen.

A LASTING LEGACY?

There is some debate about when to assess an Olympic legacy: a premature assessment based on incomplete evidence may overlook eventual success. As the Organising Committee of an Olympic Games (OCOG) disbands within two years of the Games ending, a full and balanced evaluation of each Games arguably cannot be carried out.

Despite the large claims that are often made about the social benefits of hosting major sporting events, there is a lack of rigorous post-event evaluation. In particular,

there is limited research on the impact of the Olympics on general levels of sporting participation. Analysis of sports participation in Australia between 1985 and 2002 suggests that in the year following the Sydney Games in 2000, seven Olympic sports experienced a small increase in participation while nine declined. There was a similar pattern for non-Olympic sports, with the largest increase in non-competitive walking. The most substantial sport-related impact of the Sydney Games was in fact an increase in *passive involvement* through live and televised viewing.

Other research has indicated that the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games made no measurable impact on immediate post-Games participation rates and that other major sporting events have had a limited 'trickle-down effect' on sports club membership.

It is also possible to challenge the various models of behaviour change underpinning claims that major sporting events result in increased participation. Some studies have, for example, questioned the 'role model' thesis, according to which people are inspired to take up sport after watching their heroes.

In a 2007 report, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee concluded that "no host country has yet been able to demonstrate a direct benefit from the Olympic Games in the form of a lasting increase in participation". Will the London Games be any different?