

From Covid to the Olympics – the things that can inspire us

John Oxley: July 2021

Facilities, Clubs and a Systems Approach for an Active Oxfordshire

It seems hard to believe that we've been living with the notion of the coronavirus pandemic for eighteen months now. Of course, whilst that is a statement of fact, what affects behaviour and attitudes is HOW we think about Covid-19; how it affects our daily lives in the moment, and how we might think it will affect us in the future. And there is no doubt, our thoughts, beliefs and attitudes have ebbed and flowed over those eighteen months, and I'm pretty sure that most of us remain uncertain as to how the continued presence of the virus will affect us over the next few weeks, months and the next year.

I recall saying at the beginning of the pandemic, that the toughest things to deal with was the uncertainty that prevailed, and that affected our ability to plan. Someone then reminded me that irrespective of the uncertainty, what was incumbent upon leaders was to provide new vision and a compelling direction of travel. Of course, they were right!

I'm reminded that there is no point in becoming older unless you use it to become wiser! The enormous benefit of being eighteen months older is that it has allowed us ample time for reflection. The hiatus of that period where many parts of the sport and physical activity sector have been suspended motionless, has afforded us an opportunity to carry out a forensic examination upon where we've got to and how we got here!

The smart ones have observed the frailties of our sector; the virus didn't cause the challenges that we now face, they merely exposed the 'fault lines' that already existed.

So, what has become clearer and what has hindered us in the past? Understand that and we stand a decent chance of setting a better course for the future.

We've worked in silos

On the face of it, we look very well administered at a national level; Sport England, ukactive, the Sport and Recreation Alliance, CIMSPA, the Activity Alliance, Active Partnerships, UK Sport and a National Governing Body for pretty much every sport and activity you can think of. All bases covered then, but what do they all do? And how do each of their national agendas manifest themselves at a local level? I guess many of us may struggle to answer those questions effectively.

We understand why people exercise but not why they don't

The pandemic has disrupted our lives and consequently our exercise habits have been disrupted too. What is clear is that for many, those commitments to regular exercise are fragile and we have to confront the fact that the proportion of the population for whom exercise is habitual is very small. We must also acknowledge and confront our own attitudes; inevitably and for the large part, the leaders in sport and physical activity exercise themselves and this perspective is taken in to their leadership. Consequently, we're perfectly formed to be attractive to those that have an affinity to exercise, and I see little evidence of programming, marketing, pricing and communication strategies that demonstrate empathy towards those for whom exercise is unfamiliar, uncomfortable or unattractive.

We've referred to ourselves as a sector or an industry

We may want to dismiss language as just semantics, but the fact remains that the pandemic shone a focus on things and perceptions and perspectives then stick. We're influenced by what we see, what we read, what we hear and what we experience. The government chose to apply the term 'the hospitality and leisure industry' to the plethora of things that exist in the sport and physical activity environments. We must accept that we've done little over the years to fashion a different status to our work. My question would be a simple one; do we exist to promote the value of sport and physical activity as a significant contributor to the physical, mental and social well-being of society or are we a market amenity simply trying to appeal to those who may choose to use some of their disposable income on being active?

Our narrative has been inconsistent...and our action even more so

If we follow on this theme, cast first as 'hospitality and leisure', suggested that our proposition was of no more worth than a couple of pints on a Friday night. Our leaders then fought gamely to suggest that our gyms should remain open, firstly because they were 'safe' and then because if they didn't, businesses would 'go bust' or fail to re-open. Finally, our narrative shifted to physical activity being a good thing for population health and that physical activity could be useful in building a society more resistant to ill-health.

Very little was spoken about swimming pools, or parks and open spaces or safe places to walk, run or ride a bike, or the thousands of voluntary sports clubs who provide opportunity in local communities.

Aside of one or two notable exceptions, the 'bounce-back' action from the 'bricks and mortar' part of our sport and physical activity 'sector' has been to sell gym memberships at discounted prices using the traditional tactics, media and imagery. If we're not careful, we'll just get back fewer than we had before!

We know the cost of sport and physical activity but not the value

So many of our sport and physical activity 'assets' are owned by local authorities. Now is not the time to fully re-trace our steps, but since the mid 1980's compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and subsequently 'best value', local government has commissioned and awarded contracts for the management of those assets largely based upon price. There is no doubt that over that time out-sourcing addressed inefficiency, it drove innovation, it brought new investment, it improved service quality – but the fiscal pressure placed upon local government meant that the 'system' continually wanted all of those things ever cheaper so that ultimately, and arguably, that system broke. Operators were evaluated on efficiency and to meet that evaluation they were largely forced to 'sell' to those who could afford to pay.

So, if we've identified just a few of those things that may be hindering our progress, then what can we do about them?

Coalesce around core principles and invest in each other

To avoid falling in to old habits and working in silos, all those working across the sport and physical activity eco-system (yes, it is this and neither a sector nor an industry!) should coalesce around the same beliefs and principles – a common purpose for sport and physical activity. Sport England's strategy 'Uniting the Movement' is an attempt to do just that. It recognises that progress is made collectively and collaboratively, it's a long-term (10 years) commitment, and it appreciates that physical activity is about movement; anyhow, anywhere and indiscriminatory. It is a terrific starting point and one deserving of our commitment.

However, alone it will not be enough. To collaborate effectively, those 'leaders' within our 'system' must invest time and effort in having an appreciation of each other. Understanding much more deeply what different parts of our system do, how they do it and why. The test of true collaboration and system leadership relies upon having a preparedness to broaden our perspective by valuing the perspective of others. If we can do that then opportunity will be discovered that we never previously thought existed. If we can understand the roles of each other and our respected drivers, we stand a greater chance of identifying common purpose, of refining objectives, of removing duplicated effort and of ridding ourselves of unhelpful confrontation.

Show humility – explore the potential of the wider system

Humility is a terrific attribute. Acknowledging that we don't have all the answers, appreciating that others can provide us with different perspectives and new insights, having an inquisitiveness and a hunger to learn and be better informed so that we can make far better decisions and better use of our own time and effort, will be essential to encouraging more people to be more physically active.

At a local level we must be prepared to piece together the whole of our eco-system. Facility operators should work to understand the role of Active Partnerships, to connect with the voluntary club network so that we can find better ways to collaborate and exploit the strengths and talents of each other.

And with humility goes this need to look beyond our traditional sport and physical activity environment. This is about population health and so we must understand how we may be able to collaborate with others who interact with our communities, in health, social care and education for example.

This is not about us presenting ourselves as a wellness expert – remember we've only been useful to about 20% of the population – it's about being respectful and enquiring appreciatively and exploring whether there is mutual interest in collaborating and cooperating so that society benefits.

Let's be clear – it's about being healthy

Our narrative must change. It's a shift from 'fitness' to 'health', from 'markets' to 'communities' and for sport to be just seen as one of those fabulous and fun things that enables us to just move about a little more. Yes, allow the Olympians to inspire us.....but inspire us to just take part – lovely if one or two are captivated so much that they cherish a medal too, but mainly its about seeing sport as something that just ignites our enthusiasm – frisbee in the park is as valuable as triple somersaulting off a 10 metre board!

And so, we must question the language we've used in the past and change it according to the audiences we're trying to reach, and we must challenge the images we've used in the past and change those according to those to whom we're trying to appeal.

And we must challenge pricing strategies that may deter participation and we must challenge concessionary schemes that don't properly reach the targets to whom they are aimed – and are more likely to isolate and stigmatise than encourage.

We must value movement because it's healthy, and it doesn't matter whether that movement is a walk in the park or an hour on the allotment, it's exercising our heart and lungs and stimulating our muscles. A work out in the gym can be great and so can a class but does everything have to be done in hour blocks? Absolutely not! Time is a limiter to exercise so we must be prepared to accommodate the time of others, not impose our views on our customers. We know that self-esteem limits activity so we must work to create an environment where participants feel safe and assured and their

confidence built. And we know that starting exercise is tough on your own, so we must develop approaches where participation takes on a group and community dynamic, because that delivers a mental and social health benefit too and not just a physical one.

Bottom line is the narrative is about developing a healthier population.

Appreciate and celebrate the value of sport and physical activity

Here we mean 'value' not 'cost'. If we truly desire for our population to become healthier by encouraging them to be more physically active, then what resource are we prepared to apply to it. Where does 'moving about more' come on our policy-makers list of priorities. Or is it about a list? Should we not attempt to build health and well-being into our health, social care, education, travel etc etc budgets in a more cross-cutting way? So that 'moving about' is a valued part of those policy-makers decision-making process. It becomes a cultural thing – its just the way we do things around here.

If we continue to commission facility management contracts, for example, in the traditional way. If we want 'cheapest price' to operate a building, then we'll get what we've always got – a market amenity that is attractive (largely) to those who can afford to pay for it. And those local community facilities will be forced into a 'market-share' battle with the commercial fitness providers. They'll lose.

If we want those facilities and services to truly contribute to population health then we need to describe the services differently, commission them differently, measure them differently, and yes, probably fund them differently too.

I believe a revolution and transformation is within our grasp. It requires us to be courageous but it only requires us to ask consider the same challenges that have prevailed for some time but ask ourselves some different questions along the way.

I leave you with one simple example. For a long time, it has been a Key Stage 2 objective to get every child to swim 25 metres. Our success rate has largely been one child in every two! The objective has determined how we approach the task.

So, what if our objective was to encourage every child to love the water such that they could be confident in and around water into adulthood?

Would we approach teaching in a different way? Would we introduce a range of aquatic activity for children to experience? Would we focus on 'play' to learn?

I don't have the answers but if we are to grasp the initiative then we must be prepared to challenge convention, to share ideas and to ask ourselves some questions like we've never asked them before.

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I've enjoyed 35 years' experience in the leisure management sector having served my 'apprenticeship' as a Lifeguard, Instructor and Duty Manager. After that I enjoyed some pretty senior leadership roles as Commercial Director and Group Operations Director for SLM (Everyone Active), Managing Director for mission-led charity Active Nation and Chief Operating Officer for Places Leisure.

I believe stuff's achieved by people through people.

I've been a Director and Board member at ukactive, a Bodylife Award winner and speaker at industry events. I'm a Fellow of CIMSPA and a Quest Board member.

I'm passionate about sport and physical activity and I've a thirst for igniting that passion in others. If I can share a little of my enthusiasm and it makes a difference, then that would be grand.