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## **Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference 2016**

**Sports policy implementation and its impact on community sports and physical activity funded programme delivery**

Anees Ikramullah (University of Kent), Niki Koutrou (University of Kent)

**Sports policy implementation and its  
impact on community sports and  
physical activity funded programme  
delivery**

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**AUTHOR:**

**ANEE IKRAMULLAH**

**CO-AUTHOR:**

**NIKI KOUTROU**

# Abstract

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With alarming trends pointing towards shortcomings in delivering upon London 2012 legacy promises, a systematic review was administered on research and policy from 2005 onwards to ascertain how sports policy can impact the delivery of funded community sports and physical activity programmes. Secondary data from Sport England for Year 4 (2014-15) of their Sportivate programme displays a boom in participation leading up to the Olympic Games but plateaus following London 2012. Completed participants primarily consist of younger children, which resonates with requirements issued by government policy. Whilst findings display a closing gender gap in participation, sports policy cannot be seen as the sole reason for this with particular reference to media campaigns and training workshop utilisation. With measures of participation retention decreasing in Year 4 of the programme, greater emphasis on the professionalisation of voluntary sports organisations is required to ensure sports policy changes cultures in the long-term and not just aiming to meet quantifiable targets.

# Introduction

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In recent years the number of 16-25 year olds taking part in sport has plateaued and in some areas decreased (Sport England, 2014). The decrease identified is not a particularly new trend as Sport England (2003) recognised a 3% decrease in the amount of young people taking part in extra-curricular sport from 1999 to 2002. Even more concerning was the identification of a 3% increase in young people who took part in no extra-curricular sporting activity whatsoever. Additionally, there was another 3% decrease in the membership of sports clubs in this same period of time.

As well as the former Coalition government's BIG Society scheme, many sports policies can be considered a primary factor in the context of how community sports and physical activity programme, like Sportivate, are affectively delivered. Over the last 20 years there has been a greater political promotion of structured and legitimised sporting systems to oust the splintered and unplanned approach that previous Labour and Conservative governments had adopted in the United Kingdom (Green, 2006). This is clearly evident in *Sporting Future* (Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), 2015), the latest sport policy produced by the UK Government.

This research intends to review government sports policy and how changes in political discourse have altered the development of community sport and physical activity. Additionally, this government action will be comparatively reviewed with an assessment of Sport England's Sportivate project in order to understand how participation figures for sport and physical activity are influenced by the guiding actions of sports policy makers, and whether the London 2012 rhetoric '*inspiring a generation*' has truly been fulfilled.

# Review

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## 1 Sportivate

Sportivate was launched in April 2011 with national funding of £56 million over 6 years until March 2017. The investment comes from National Lottery funding through Sport England and is delivered via 45 county sport partnerships across the country. Sportivate is one of Sport England's flagship funding programmes which is aimed at reducing inactivity in young people. Initially, the programme was established to target inactive 14-25 year olds however, this has since expanded to 11-25 year olds from 2013 (Sport England, n.d). Sport England have identified 4 key target groups within this age bracket for County Sport Partnerships to focus on within their Sportivate projects:

- Inactive young people
- Women and girls
- Young people aged 19-25
- Disabled young people

Sportivate is delivered to reflect a national framework from the former Coalition government's BIG Society scheme (Cabinet Office, 2010). From this, there is a localised focus through the filtering down of responsibility to county sport partnerships who channel funding, oversee project applications, monitor and evaluate progress and ensure the impact of sustainable programmes. It is through these methods that they endeavour to meet the following outcomes:

- Match and generate new demand for sport and physical activity
- Working closely with local providers
- Increase in the usage of leisure centres and other local facilities
- Establish close relationships with clubs to encourage participants to take part and volunteer at National Governing Body (NGB) community sports clubs.

(London Sport, 2015)

The final outcome is of particular importance within Sportivate as NGBs are capable of delivering a wide number of projects for a range of 11-25 year olds. Furthermore, they provide a clearly signposted exit routes for sustained sporting activity beyond weekly programmes for individuals participating in a Sportivate project.

## 2 Community sport and physical activity participation

The decreasing trends in community sports and physical activity were particularly prevalent amongst those aged between the years of 16 and 25 suggesting a post-school dropout of participation. Talema et al. (2006) noted that this is due to a lack of participation at an earlier age which is prerequisite for the amount of sporting activity individuals take part in at a later age. These sentiments

were resonated by Tammelin et al. (2003), however they denoted that variety of sport was the main denominator in determining physical inactivity in later life. This had support from Bocarro et al. (2008) who also emphasised the importance of sporting variety as a participation determinant. Much of this research has been acknowledged through the UK government's 2015 sports policy strategy, *Sporting Future* (DCMS, 2015), which highlights the need to focus on younger age groups in order to increase participation at a later age.

Within the issue of age groups, Rowe (2012) identified that the inactivity of individuals is greater amongst females than males with only one-third of females participating in sport at the age of 18 compared to two-thirds of males. Woods (2016) amplified these findings by highlighting that girls often starting participating in sport at a later age and also dropped out sooner extending upon the sentiments of Talema et al. (2006). However, Woods also found that females were more likely to participate in a wider range of sporting activities, whilst males tended to stick to more traditional sports. This negates the points raised by Tammelin et al. (2003) and Bocarro et al. (2008) suggesting greater measures need to be considered in order to increase female participation in sport.

### **3 A review of UK Government sporting policy**

In July 2005 London was successful in their bid to host the Olympic Games based on the legacy of inspiring a new generation to become physically active. Despite advances in schemes like '*Sport Action Zones*', data showed that by 2009 the increase in sporting participation had stalled (Jefferys, 2012). This is quite an understandable difficulty as political changes meant Gordon Brown continued Tony Blair's sporting legacy promise and then the coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat government had to eventually deliver the Games. Fortunately, Bloyce and Smith (2015) reviewed that the legacy movement received cross-party support which allowed for policy potential on successful administering this promise. ISR (2005) also recognised the adoption of a '*Team Westminster*' approach to the challenge at hand, highlighting that in the field of sports policy, productive debate outweighs political point scoring.

Plans for the legacy relied on the unification of organisations as proposed by DCMS (2010) and appeared evident through the '*Places People Play*' initiative. However, Bloyce and Smith (2015) highlight how this supposedly new initiative merely continued upon existing programmes. Despite this audacious repackaging of existing strategies, there is also recognition for the level of continuity a move like this offered. The policy of using this partnership approach for work through centralised policy was not a new concept from the Coalition government, but was actually a central mechanism of social policy delivery (McDonald, 2005)., Nichols et al. (2005) highlighted its importance in transcending a nationalised model down to a local level through governments and onto local sports clubs. Nevertheless, Houlihan (1997) issued early warnings of such a process as the malleability of sport as a policy instrument induces the erosion of autonomous action from other bodies acting according to sport policy.

The Coalition government, through the emergence of the '*Big Society*' agenda (Cabinet Office, 2010), continued the ideology of working in a unified manner towards meeting the legacy promise of London 2012. But, Efford (2015) highlighted how the impact was virtually non-existent as fewer people were physically active than they were in 2012. The connotation of a Labour MP stating this appears somewhat hypocritical as DCMS (2008) issued the '*Playing to Win*' strategy, steering sport

policy towards elite performance goals leading up to London 2012. Subsequently, the youth sport strategy issued by DCMS (2012) under the Coalition government seemed necessary as it redirected sport policy away elitist ideology. Despite this, a tougher regime of payment-by-results increased the pressure on community groups to move to a more centralised and professional model of sports development. Not only would this impact on measures of monitoring but also had the potential to affect the sustainability context of Games (CSL 2012, 2011).

This system highlighted the austerity measures that swept the nation under the Coalition government. School Sport Partnerships also fell victim to this as Labour's £162 million strategy was brushed aside in favour of self-funded school sport partnerships (Jefferys, 2012). Austerity clearly overshadowed the ambitious Olympic legacy targets and DCMS (2015) recognised this with a typically masking political policy used to eclipse failed targets. The emphasis placed upon school sport at youth participation in this policy review of 2010-2015 clearly contradicts the actions taken to cut funding at a community level. Disturbingly for community sport, with constraints on funding, a 29% increase in funding for UK Sport was announced in 2015, highlighting policy's elitist sentiment towards performance and medals rather than health and participation (Cutmore and Ziegler, 2015). Where clearer focus has been offered in policy towards either elite or community sport by various party-led governments, the dichotomy of elite sport and grassroots participation is once again absolved as a singular policy attempts to tackle both issues within '*Sporting Future*' (DCMS, 2015).



# Research Design

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Each Sportivate programmes consists of 6-8 sessions for 1 hour per week with individuals meeting participation completion criteria if they attended all but one of the sessions within the programme. The total number of completed participants over the 4 years is 491,793 and the sustainability evaluations are taken from a sample of each year's completed participants as follows:

- 1,739 respondents in Year 1
- 2,439 respondents in Year 2
- 1,898 respondents in Year 3
- and 1,823 respondents in Year 4

The following analysis draws from secondary data gathered through figures in national Sportivate data (Sport Structures Ltd, 2015). The data represents the findings from Year 4 of the programme which offers a collation of all 45 county sport partnership programmes. From the review, the number of completed participants is compared across age groups starting with the 11-13 years old age groups (introduced in 2013-14) and ending with the upper age group of 22-25 years old. 4 years worth of national data is covered from Year 1 (2011-12) until Year 4 (2014-15) with further comparisons drawn on the yearly gender gap in completed participants and sustainability evaluations of each year.

The discursive analysis offers explanations for these results through the critique of government sports policy to be systemically reviewed from 2005 onwards. Public policy and research presents insight into the rhetoric issued from a centralised system that filters national funding through more localised stakeholder groups including county sport partnerships and voluntary sports organisations.

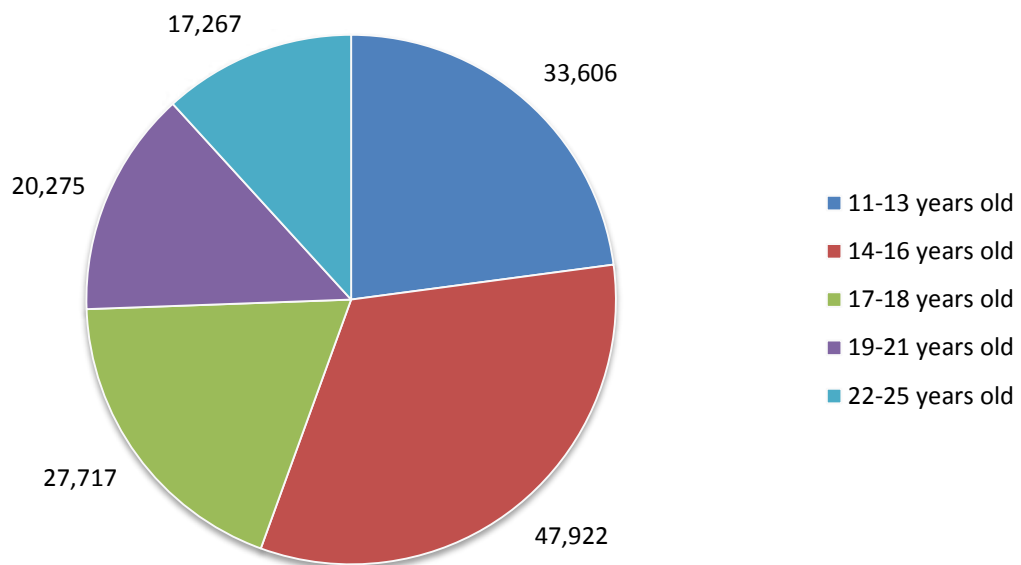
Interpretations of policy are predominately drawn from 2005 onwards to coincide with the inception of the Coalition government initiative, *Big Society*. This offers a unique insight into the changing perceptions of sports policy since the announcement of London as 2012 Olympic Games' hosts.

# Results

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In Year 4 (2014-15) a total of 176,200 young people (aged 11-25) were reached, taking part in 11,596 projects. 146,787 (83.3%) of the total reached completed the projects they attending, meaning they attended all but one of the sessions in their registered programme.

**Figure 1: Age distribution in completed participants from Year 4 of Sportivate programme**



Adapted from Sportivate Programme Evaluation (Sporting Structures, 2015, pg20)

In Year 4 the largest age range for completed participants was the 14-16 year old age bracket with 47,922. The second largest was the 11-13 year old age group which is somewhat surprising given that Sportivate only extended the age categories to include earlier ages just one year previously. 22-25 year old represented the least amount of completed participants with 17,267 and over half of the participants came from between 11-16 year olds.

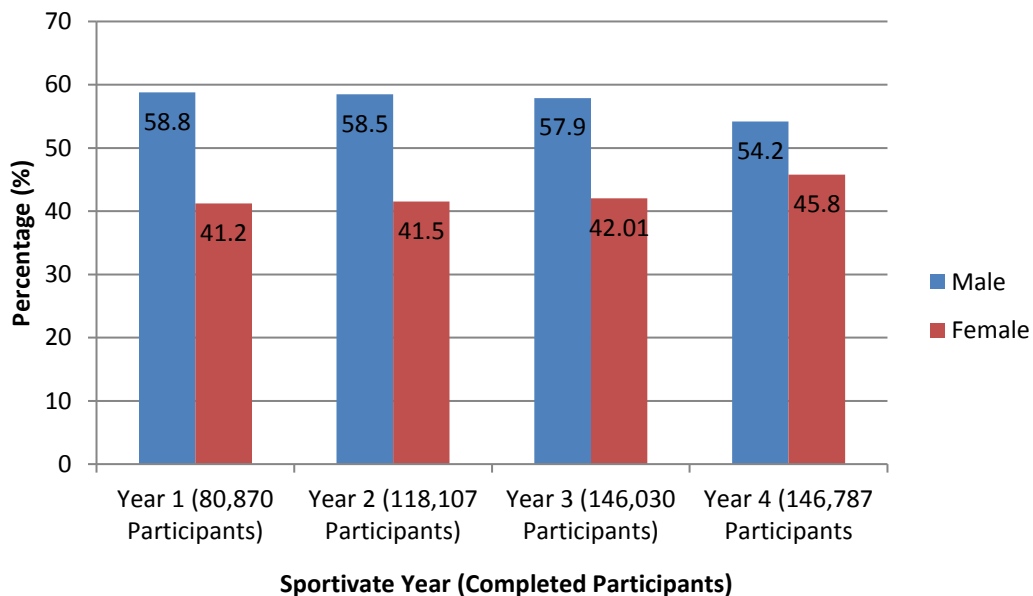
**Figure 2 – Yearly age comparison in completed participants from Year 4**

Age	% Completed Year 1 2011-2012	% Completed Year 2 2012-2013	% Completed Year 3 2013-2014	% Completed Year 4 2014-2015	% Completed Year 1-4 2011-2015
11-13	N/A	N/A	15.2	22.9	11.3
14-16	58.5	56.9	42.7	32.6	45.7
17-18	19.3	19.9	20.3	18.9	19.6
19-21	11.9	12.9	12.0	13.8	12.7
22-25	10.3	10.3	9.8	11.8	10.6

Adapted from Sportivate Programme Evaluation (Sporting Structures, 2015, pg20)

In Year 4 the highest percentage of the 19-21 and 22-25 age demographics were met. An increase of 1.9% and 1.5% can be seen respectively from Year 1 to Year 4. This displays a move towards targeting older age groups which is more aligned to the Sportivate key outcome of getting more people into sport following state-funded school sports participation. Further evidence for this can be seen in the decrease in the percentage of 14-16 year old participants that are reached. It is difficult to draw comparisons with the 11-13 age bracket as the expansion to include these ages only occurred in 2013.

**Figure 3 – Yearly gender gap comparison in completed participants**

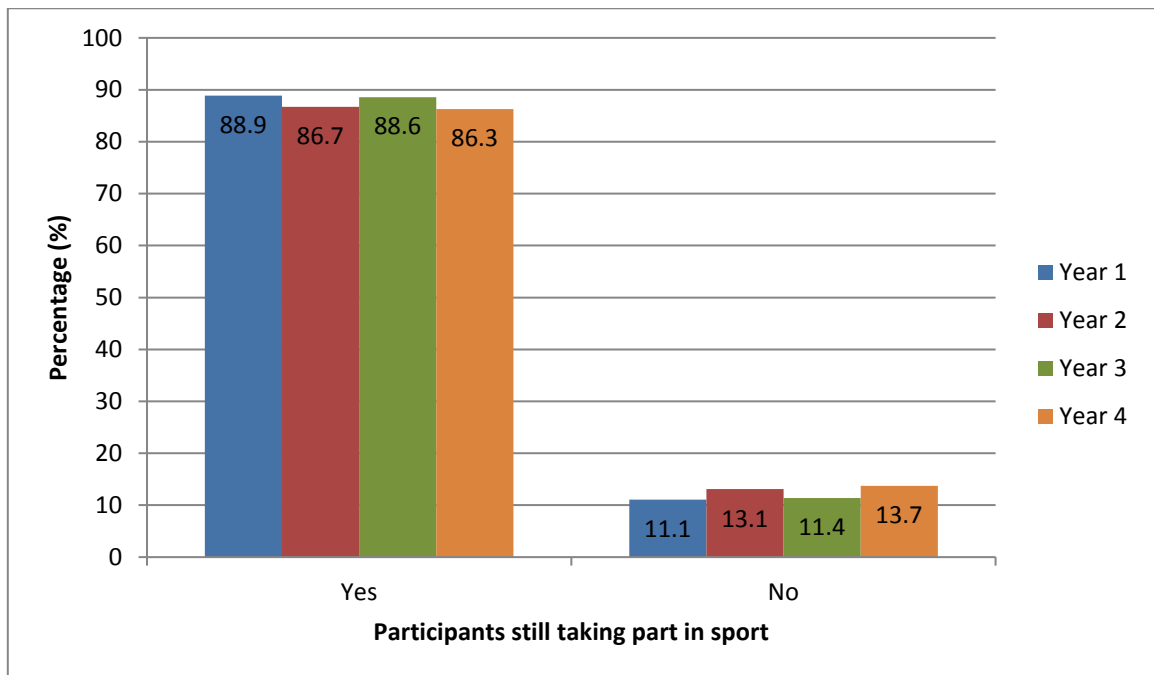


Adapted from Sportivate Programme Evaluation (Sporting Structures, 2015, pg16)

From the figure above it can clearly be seen that the gender gap between male and female participants has decreased over four years. This is despite a relevant stagnation from the beginning of the programme with only a 0.9% difference in the gender gap from Year 1 to Year 3. In Year 1 there were 17.6% more male participants than female. It has been clear that with the increase in

focus towards women and girls sport has helped minimise this difference to 8.4% in Year 4. It is clearly evident however, that the majority of this gender gap has closed post-Olympics as there is a 3.79% decrease in the gender gap from Year 3 to Year 4 compared to just 0.9% from Year 1 to Year 3.

**Figure 4 – Sustainability measure of participants still taking part in sport 3 months after Sportivate programme completion**



Adapted from Sportivate Programme Evaluation (Sporting Structures, 2015, pg39)

This information is based on a sample of 1,823 participants who participated in Year 4 Sportivate projects. As the figure displays the number of participants retained in sport has decreased in Year 4 by 2.6%, however this change in number is relatively minimal over the four years. Data suggests that a further breakdown sees a struggle in the retention of female participants as male respondents (87.8%) are more likely to still be participating in sport 3 months after the end of the Sportivate project when compared to female participants (84.9%). Sport England also identified similar issues with the retention of disabled participants as only 77.4% remained playing sport 3 months after the Sportivate project ended. Qualitative feedback from participants when giving their reason for no longer taking part in sport suggested that the Sportivate project ending was a key factor.

# Discussion

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A substantial increase in the number of completed participants within the Sportivate programme from Year 1 to Year 4 contrasts with the general findings from DCMS (2012) that there has been a decrease in the number of people participating in extra-curricular activity. It could be argued that these figures were taken prior to the Olympic Games but Sportivate data still contradicts this as a large rise in completed participants is apparent from Year 1 into Year 2. Sport England (2014) however, also recognises that there was a post-Olympic plateau in sporting participation which is identifiable from the results as total completed participants rose by only 757. This supports the connotation that the government has wasted an opportunity to increase participation (Efford, 2015). However, it was in fact Labour policy issued through *'Playing to Win'* (DCMS, 2008) that steered policy towards performance-orientated goals and away from the legacy promise set by the London 2012 Olympic Games bid.

Amongst 16-25 year olds this participation stagnation is increasingly evident as only small fluctuations in the percentage of completed participants appear over the 4 years. This offers support for the key target group that focuses on projects for those aged 19-25 years old, but perhaps does not meet the key outcome of generating a new demand for the supply of sporting activities (London Sport, 2015). With the failure to meet key outcomes by focusing on essential target groups, government policy is perhaps justified in its approach to move towards a performance-related funding system (DCMS, 2015).

*'Sporting Future'* (DCMS, 2015) offers support for research regarding the age focus of sporting participation. The justification for expanding the Sportivate programme to include 11-13 year olds is noted from Talema et al. (2006) who found that a lack of participation at an early age could be used as a predictor for how much activity is taken at a later age. Despite *Sporting Future* (DCMS, 2015) highlighting the need to focus on younger age groups, a near 10% drop in completed participants from Year 3 to Year 4 amongst 14-16 year olds offers cause for concern. The suggestion for the future of Sportivate strategy needs to be reviewed in order to ensure frequency (Talama et al., 2006) and variety (Tammelin et al., 2003; Bocarro et al. 2008) are considered when organisations apply to deliver sport and physical activity through national funding.

The plateau effect is also relevant when discussing the gender gap comparison from Year 1 to Year 3. With very little variation between gender differences for the first 3 years, the biggest gap closure comes after the Olympic Games from Year 3 and moving into Year 4. Whilst female-only programmes support the reason for this, closer attention should be paid to the key outcome of working in partnerships and collaboration with local facilities, leisure centres, and voluntary sport organisations affiliated to NGBs. Sport England (2014) identified that there are several county sports partnerships who successfully reached female targets through carefully thought-out strategic measures. Active Cheshire made females aged over 19 a priority due their use of connections with providers able to cater for this demographic, which also coincides with addressing 2 key target groups. Furthermore, Energize Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin hosted a launch night to specific particular training and information delivery to benefit projects targeting female participation. With the addition of the Sport England's *'This Girl Can'* organisations are approaching delivery female

programmes with greater confidence and success. These findings contrast with the progress of other key outcome groups but cannot be completely down to the governance of sporting policy. Marketing campaigns and specific training have largely given the tools to access the female target groups with a '*Sport for All*' attitude not too dissimilar to one that ironically emanated from sports policy the GB Sports Council issued in 1972 (McIntosh and Charlton, 1985).

Nevertheless, the positives that have recently come from the closing gender gap in sports participation are not conclusive. Women in Sport (2015), highlight that regardless of participation completion success, there is a greater need for well planned exit routes from funded programmes in order to reduce the lapse female participation. From Year 1 to Year 4 of the Sportivate programme less people are continuing to participate beyond the duration of the funded programme delivery. Woods (2016) extended upon Talema et al. (2006), by stating that girls starting sport at a later age would often drop out at an earlier age, further highlighting the sustainability issue that surrounds participation in sport and physical activity. This could be cause for concern for Sport England due to their priority in Sportivate projects being able to signpost exit routes for continued provisions of sport for participants following the project completion.

# Conclusion

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The work of governments in sport policy will always be regarded with certain scepticism. Aspects of policy display benefits for delivering objectives through a centralised system for immediate results; however a lack of long-term planning in sports policy appears to hinder the impact of sustainability through funded sports programme. Whilst great importance is placed on how funding should be distributed according to meeting criteria's governed by sporting policy, further emphasis should be placed on post-programme participation to ensure the term sustainability is not just folly for politically masking failures in meeting ambitious targets.

Professionalising local level delivers through a national framework is a long term vision that is becoming more prevalent but as political climates change, so does policy. And with this, the suggestion comes to give greater autonomous control to county sport partnerships to deliver funded programmes like Sportivate in order to close the gender gap in participation, which would require further research to monitor other factors that affect this. Additionally, greater research is required in order to understand how the dichotomy of elite sport success and grassroots participation has become one entity through sports policy leading up to the London 2012 Olympic Games. Perhaps the shortcomings in sustainability can be due to an ambitious legacy programme that was often confused by sports policy unsure on whether its priorities lay with elite success or developing community sports and physical activity. However, the increased emphasis on partnership delivery through professional networks appears to be a positive step if a unification of the two objectives is the political pathway for sports policy, despite issues that have surrounded such an approach from the 1970's up until present day.

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