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**“The legacy element...it just felt more woolly’: Exploring the reasons for the decline in people with disabilities’ sport participation in England five years after the London 2012 Paralympic Games.**

**Abstract**

This article explores why sports participation of people with disabilities in England has declined since the London 2012 Paralympic Games (LPG). Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff employed in a variety of sports and disability-specific organisations. Our preliminary findings suggest that the decline is a result of a complex interplay between multiple factors. A competency gap and a lack of relevance between Paralympians and the rest of the community of people with disabilities might have limited the impact of the legacy. In addition, an absence of coordinated leveraging of the LPG, and a decline in the media coverage of disability sport in the aftermath of the LPG, might also have dulled the legacy. Finally, our data shows that austerity and negative media coverage of people with disabilities deterred some people from participating in sport.

**Introduction**

Providing sport participation opportunities for people with disabilities, of all ages, was a specific legacy ambition of the Coalition government from hosting the London 2012 Paralympic Games (LPG) (Office for Disability Issues, 2011). It wasn't until March 2010, however, that specific legacy plans for the LPG were first articulated by the former Labour government, squandering opportunities for advanced legacy planning (Weed, 2013). Thus, five years on from the hosting of the most successful Paralympic Games in history (Degun, 2012), did the LPG deliver on its promise to increase the sports participation of people with disabilities? Evidence from the Active People Survey (APS) suggests there has been a small

increase in once a week sports participation of people with disabilities since 2005 (+1.5%) (Active People Interactive, 2017). A peak of 19.1% of people with disabilities were participating in sport at least once a week in 2013, but this has fallen to 16.8% in 2016 (Active People Interactive, 2017). These figures are unlikely to be what Lord Sebastian Coe had in mind when promises of how the 2012 Games would inspire a nation were made. This article is the first to obtain some preliminary empirical evidence about the reasons for the LPG not sustainably increasing the sports participation of people with disabilities in England. By providing possible explanations as to why sustainable increases in sports participation have not occurred, we add to an underdeveloped academic field of inquiry (Brown & Pappous, 2018). Understanding of the legacy process is often missing from the mega sports event literature (Girginov & Hills, 2008), therefore this research will look to plug this gap in the Paralympic legacies field by focusing specifically on the LPG. The findings from our research will help inform future hosts as to the limitations of using a sports mega event, such as the Paralympic Games, to increase sports participation of people with disabilities.

### **Mega sport events and grassroots sport participation**

Paralympic Games legacy research remains an underexplored field of academic inquiry (Misener, Darcy, Legg, & Gilbert, 2013; Pappous & Brown, 2018). Misener et al. (2013), in their thematic analysis, identified thirteen empirical studies about Paralympic legacy, but the majority focused on the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games and were conducted post-hoc (Misener et al., 2013). Pappous and Brown (2018) identified empirically weak examples of increased sport participation following the Paralympic Games, but the authors were unable to support, based on the available empirical evidence, claims that the Paralympic Games can increase the grassroots sport participation of people with disabilities. Brittain and Beacom (2016) argue that the potential for transformative social change for people with disabilities as a result of the LPG has not occurred because of various contextual factors, such as negative

media coverage of people with disabilities and reduced disposable income as a result of austerity measures. However, Coates and Vickerman (2016) suggested that the self-efficacy of young people with disabilities may have been positively influenced by the Paralympic Games.

Overall, there is a lack of research on the sport participation legacies of the Paralympic Games, but research on sport participation following the hosting of the Olympic Games is a field that has started to receive scholarly attention in the beginning of this decade. Veal, Toohey and Frawley (2012) found tentative evidence suggesting that the number of children participating in sports featured at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games increased more than in sports not featured at these events. Adults, on the other hand, did not demonstrate an increase in sport participation in sports featured at both events (Veal et al., 2012). Veal et al. (2012) stress, however, that the potential participation increases could be linked to factors other than the event itself. In addition, Pappous and Hayday (2016) contended that grassroots participation programmes were more effective than the 2012 Games in increasing participation in fencing and judo. The majority of evidence would suggest that the Olympic Games, on its own, is unable to increase grassroots sport participation (Weed et al., 2015). Indeed, the 2000, 2012, and 2016 Olympic Games, on their own, do not appear to have been able to increase sport participation of their respective nations (Reis, Frawley, Hodgetts, Thomson, & Hughes, 2017). Long-term strategies and significant engagement with the local communities are required for increased sport participation to occur (Reis et al., 2017). Furthermore, access to suitable sporting facilities is required to help leverage inspiration from a sports mega event (Brown, Essex, Assaker, & Smith, 2017). Thus, the hosting of the Olympic Games may be able to provide a short-term stimulus for sport participation, but it is unlikely it can be sustained. Indeed, Pappous (2011) found a small increase in sport participation in the year of the Athens 2004

Olympic Games but, in 2009, participation levels were lower than they had been in 2003. In terms of physical activity from sporting mega-events, Bauman, Bellew and Craig (2015) found no statistically significant difference in physical activity following the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Similarly, the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games did not increase the physical activity of Canadian children, despite efforts to leverage the 2010 Olympic Games (Craig & Bauman 2014). Bauman, Bellew and Craig (2015) suggest that the Olympic Games, on their own, are unlikely to increase physical activity, but they may increase intention to be active. Potwarka and Leatherdale (2016), however, argue that a more localised reading of participation data is needed to understand the trickle-down effect, as it is likely to be localised rather than national. In a systematic review of the health and socioeconomic impacts of major multi-sport events from 1978 to 2008, McCartney et al. (2010, p.1) found the evidence to be ‘...not sufficient to confirm or refute expectations about the health or socioeconomic benefits for the host population of previous major multi-sport events’. Mega sport events would appear to not be able to inherently provide increases in the physical activity of the host nation.

Despite the absence of a link between sporting mega-events and increased grassroots sport participation, a belief in the power of a mega-event to increase sport participation is emphatically present in the political discourse of governments (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). This belief in the power of mega-events to inspire people to participate in sport is known as the ‘demonstration effect’, which has been defined as ‘...a process by which people are inspired by elite sport, sports people or sports events to participate themselves’ (Weed, 2009, p. 4). In order for the demonstration effect to work successfully, it needs to be leveraged, and is more productive amongst current or recently lapsed sport participants, rather than inactive or least active individuals (Weed et al., 2015). The Olympic Games therefore needs to be one component of a wider strategy aimed at increasing grassroots sport participation. Thus,

leveraging – ‘...a forward thinking, strategic approach where both the impacts and the ways to achieve them are planned in advance of an event’ (Smith, 2014, p. 18) – implies an understanding about how a mega-event may be used to improve and enhance what can be gained from hosting the event (Chalip, 2006). Leveraging is separate from event impacts because impacts from events are supposed to have an automatic character, whereas leveraged outcomes are a product of a planned set of initiatives which have been linked to the event to provide enhanced benefits (Chalip, 2006; Smith, 2014). Chalip, Green, Taks and Misener (2016) argue that three types of organisations – sport organisations, event organisers, non-sport organisations – are central to the leveraging of a mega sports event. Furthermore, leveraging is dependent on the three organisation types working towards a common sport participation goal (Chalip et al., 2016). All three organisation types must attend to the influence that context can have on mega sport event leverage, as well as the resources available to facilitate leveraging. Failure to adequately address both contextual and resource considerations, coupled with an absence of an agreed sport participation objective for the leveraging activities, will likely result in unsuccessful leveraging of a mega sports event (Chalip et al., 2016).

However, leveraging is not without difficulties. Bell and Gallimore (2015) argued that the external environment, the economy, and changes to the public sector all had a role in inhibiting the effectiveness of leveraging the London 2012 legacy in the north west of England. Lovett and Bloyce (2017) found that organisations relied too much on the demonstration effect in increasing sport participation from the 2012 Games, with the cuts to local government hampering the delivery of sport in Birmingham. Brittain (2016) postulated that cuts to benefits and negative media coverage of people with disabilities, as well as the wider budget cuts to local government, inhibited the social potential of the LPG. Hayday and Pappous (2017) contended that a number of factors limited the leveraging potential of the

2012 Olympic Games. This included poor communication between the national governing bodies of sport (NGB) and voluntary sports clubs (VSC), lack of NGB resources to support VSCs' leveraging, and a mistrust between NGBs in knowledge sharing due to funding implications associated with APS targets (Hayday & Pappous, 2017). The budget made available for leveraging by organisers of mega-events is often much smaller, comparatively, to the budget allocated for the event, which may suggest some organisers do not prioritise the potential benefits from the event as strategically as possible (Smith, 2014).

It is clear from the literature that increased sport participation following a sports mega event is unlikely to occur on its own; rather, it needs to be leveraged. The findings presented in this article will explore the main reasons for the decline in people with disabilities' sports participation since the LPG, as suggested by the APS10 (Active People Interactive 2017).

## **Method**

This article is borne out of a wider research project evaluating the grassroots sport participation legacy of the LPG for people with disabilities in England. The research reported herein is focused only on one aspect of the wider research, namely potential reasons for the decline in sports participation since the LPG, based on the national once a week sport participation APS10 data (Active People Interactive, 2017). Therefore, it is important to make it clear that some individual sports may have had positive impacts from the LPG in contrast to the national picture. Thus, the explanations presented here are necessarily broad and national in scope. The authors acknowledge the findings will not apply to every sport, however this study has offered insights, based on empirical data, for the declining sport participation that has been experienced nationally, as suggested by APS10.

## ***Data collection***

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect the data, as in-depth interviews are well suited to exploring an underdeveloped phenomenon such as the sport participation legacy of the LPG (Kvale, 2007). Data collection commenced in July 2015 and concluded in March 2017. An interview guide (Figure 1) provided a generic framework for discussion about the impact and management of the sport participation legacy from the LPG. The average duration of the interviews was one hour. Seventeen of the interviews were conducted face to face, fourteen interviews were conducted either using Skype or by telephone due to geographic and financial limitations<sup>1</sup>. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants included in the study.

**FIGURE 1 INSERTED HERE**

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### *Sample*

The sample consisted of twenty-seven senior managers from a variety of sports organisations, and three individuals from non-sport organisations. Sports organisations were chosen because of their fundamental role in increasing participation from the LPG (Collins, 2010). The organisation type and the majority of the participants were purposively chosen, while some sport respondents, such as those from NGBs and county sport partnerships (CSPs), were identified following a snowball approach. The organisations included in this research comprised seven national disability sport organisations (NDSOs), nine NGBs, five national sport organisations (NSOs), three non-sporting organisations (Non-SOs), five CSPs, and one disability sport organisation (DSO). The selected organisations enabled a wide range of stakeholder experiences of the Paralympic legacy to emerge. NDSOs were chosen in order to understand impairment specific issues, NGBs were the main organisation responsible for increasing sport participation, CSPs and the DSO supported and helped deliver the NGBs'

strategy at a local level, NSOs provided a range of national perspectives about sport for people with disabilities, and Non-SOs provided expert views regarding people with disabilities and associated issues.

### ***Data analysis***

The credibility and the trustworthiness of the interpretations of the interviewer were enriched by following the tactic suggested by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015); Kvale (2007), who suggested soliciting the verification of the respondent at the end of the interviews. Therefore, the interviewer summarised the main findings from the discussion and asked for the participant to provide their interpretation of the summary. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then coded using first-cycle processes advocated by Saldaña (2016). In vivo coding was used on all interview transcripts. This included highlighting the participant's quotes that were relevant to the broad themes of impact and management of the LPG sport participation legacy. Initial coding was used on the first nine transcripts to aid with key themes. This coding technique uses elements of in vivo coding and process coding, with the aim to reveal insights into the causes and consequences of the actions of the interviewees (Saldaña, 2016). In addition, some transcripts were holistically and descriptively coded for generation of broad themes. This included reviewing 'clumps' of the transcript for themes in the case of holistic coding, and providing descriptive labels for the topics discussed during the interview in the case of descriptive coding. Codes were then categorised into key topic areas and further analysed. The broad categories that emerged from the data analysis were:

- Impact of the LPG on sport participation;
- Management of the sport participation legacy;
- Inspiration and Paralympians;

- Disability sport and stakeholder relations;
- Organisational development and challenges;
- Media coverage of the LPG;
- The influence of the external environment on the sport participation legacy.

Summaries of the participant data was then mapped onto a master table that contained all of the interview data under each of the broad categories. This enabled contrasts and comparisons to be made across the different stakeholders. To compliment the coding and categorising of the data, analytic memoing was used to record emergent thoughts and themes about the data during and after analysis (Saldaña, 2016). The analytic memos were then reviewed in conjunction with the generated themes to further analyse the data. The lead author verified and discussed the initial findings with the co-author and this facilitated further development of the data analysis.

## **Results**

A number of possible reasons for the decline in sport participation were offered by the interviewees, suggesting the role of the LPG is a multi-dimensional one. The findings presented in this article reflect the complexity of attempting to use a mega sport event such as the Paralympic Games to increase sports participation of people with disabilities.

### ***Limitations of Paralympians as role models for the rest of the disability community***

An impediment to the effectiveness of the demonstration effect was a perceived competency gap between the individual and the Paralympian. Although not exclusively, this was thought to be more prevalent amongst disabled adults compared to young people. The disparity between an individual's sporting ability and that of the Paralympian may have added to regular participation not being sustained, exacerbated by unrealistic expectations of novice's abilities by mainstream clubs:

“There was just this expectation that they’d just be able to do it straight away... And suddenly they were being told, ‘you can become an elite athlete’. And I think that had a bit of a knock-on”. (DSO One).

For some people with disabilities, particularly those with high support needs or complex impairments, there can be an incongruous relationship between themselves and a Paralympian, stemming from the disparity in daily life experiences. Relying only on inspiration to increase sport participation failed to acknowledge the structural barriers that prevent some people with disabilities from being active in society:

“Not only is some of it off-putting to some people because they think, ‘well, if that’s what sport and physical activity means, then I’m not gonna even bother [emphasis] thinking about it because it’s so far from what I’m ever going to achieve’. But then it’s also this thing about, well, ‘also I don’t feel I have the personal resource to do it and you’re telling [emphasis] me that I can, but I can’t’”. (Non-SO Three).

Inspiration on its own is unlikely to be sufficient because ‘if it’s just abstract; it’s nonsense’ (Non-SO One). Service quality was thought to be of more fundamental significance to maintaining regular participation than deriving inspiration from Paralympians:

“...Whether they sustain and build an interest depends on the offer and the reception they get...Those things are much more important, fundamentally, to sustaining interest than, you know, multiple Paralympic Games.” (NGB Seven).

Peer role-models were thought to be more resonant to an inactive person’s sense of self, and would help encourage inactive people with disabilities to be physically active:

” ...The person that’s inactive can look at that and go, ‘I could do that’...And I think if role-models can be seen as ‘everyday people’, for want of a better word, then that can be really inspirational”. (DSO One).

Peer role models were thought to be most effective at engaging inactive disabled adults, but there was a feeling that Paralympians were most relevant to children and young people, due to Paralympians potentially being closer to an individual's sense of self. Children with a younger learning age were more likely to be inspired by seeing Paralympians and their medals, but beyond a young learning age group, simply showcasing Paralympians and their medals is of little utility in being able to inspire participation. For children and young people with an older learning age, it is the background story of the Paralympian that is likely to be more inspirational, rather than just the colour of their medal. Building a personal connection with the Paralympian will thus provide a better chance of effectively using athletes to increase participation:

“The younger the learning age of the child...just their presence and the fact that they are someone like me, you know, an Ellie Simmonds to a child who's got dwarfism is like, 'wow! [emphasis] I could do that!'...What we tend to see for older children is it's the story, the athlete's story and the journey they've been on, which can have an aspirational effect on young people... if you send out Paralympians just to hang medals round people's necks or hand out certificates in assemblies, it has very different [emphasis] level of impact on older children than it does younger children (Respondent anonymised to maintain confidentiality).

Paralympians, in the main, will be more appropriate sources of leveraging for young people with disabilities, and people with disabilities already participating in sport or who hold an interest in sport. Disabled adults without that investment in sport are unlikely to be sufficiently inspired to sustain their participation beyond the initial 'buzz' generated by the event.

***Lack of leveraging and an overreliance on the demonstration effect***

There was a lack of leveraging from the organisations included in this research. Participants believed legacy outcomes were poorly defined and lacked clarity, leading to an absence of a coherent strategy:

“The legacy element...just felt more woolly, if you like, in terms of what we were trying to achieve. A big lesson for me would be to say, ‘ok. What do we want to do with that?’ And then properly plan accordingly to do it.” (NGB Two).

Underpinning this lack of focus was the perception that event delivery was of more importance to event organisers than the fostering of a legacy from the LPG. As the time for hosting the LPG got nearer there was a feeling that delivering a world-class event was prioritised at the expense of the sport participation legacy:

“I think we paid a little bit of lip service to legacy until it became important to measure. I think in the build-up... it was more about the Games than the legacy of the Games, and kind of then had the Games and a little bit of the planning really kicked in about legacy”. (NDSO Seven).

It was thought sports organisations such as NGBs and CSPs were not prepared, despite the seven-year gap between confirmation of host status and the staging of the LPG, to be able to sustainably increase the participation of people with disabilities in sport. The success of the LPG, therefore, appeared to take sport organisations by surprise, with NGBs, NDSOs, and mainstream VSCs not in a position to respond accordingly to increased demand after the LPG:

“It had a huge impact and I just don’t really think we believed how successful it was going to be, and we could have done a lot more off the back of it that we just weren’t prepared for; because we weren’t asking the right questions”. (NSO Two).

“I suspected all along that the infrastructure was not strong enough to support the interest that would be generated. And because the foundation wasn’t in place, we probably weren’t prepared to try and keep that sustained level country-wide, not just for us, country-wide, to be able to sustain it. (NDSO Two).

An overreliance on the demonstration effect resulted in insufficient demand for sport participation being created amongst people with disabilities before the LPG:

“I think there was an assumption that if you have a very successful Paralympic Games, then suddenly lots of people with disabilities will want to do sport and physical activity... The hardest thing is getting people with disabilities to want to do sport and physical activity in the first place. And that’s [emphasis] what the legacy should have been, it should have been the engagement of people with disabilities themselves. And there wasn’t really anything, or not much, concrete, around that... They [voluntary sport clubs] probably didn’t get any people with disabilities knocking at their door because we hadn’t done that demand focused stuff” (CSP One).

Due to the lack of leveraging and disjointed planning that occurred for the sport participation legacy, enthusiasm to participate in sport had not been established sufficiently for people with disabilities not already predisposed to sport. Consequently, the impact of the LPG on these people was not strong enough to override existing barriers to participation. In addition, poor participation experiences for people with disabilities may have limited the potential of the demonstration effect. Inadequately trained staff and an understaffed workforce were likely to have led to some people experiencing poor service quality:

“...People were inspired to go, ‘I want to do that’, but then there’s no point if you have a six-month waiting list to join a club. And that, I think, has happened quite a lot with certain sports”. (NDSO Three).

It is important to point out that two of the interviewed NGBs experienced internal restructuring issues within their organisation, and this might have influenced their capacity to leverage the LPG. This internal upheaval meant that these NGBs were unable to provide adequate attention and resources to the provision of sport for people with disabilities after the LPG:

“After London we lost UK Sport funding so there was a period of, probably a year or so, possibly even slightly longer, of real instability, in terms of not knowing what that then meant for the sport at the highest level, and then, almost by nature, because of the way we’d been structured previously in terms of the top-down approach, if then the top wasn’t gonna be there, how did that then make a difference?” (Respondent anonymised to maintain confidentiality).

“We went through loads of changes 2 years ago... As we went through our restructure, EFDS were told to leave us alone, basically, until we were sorted... We’ve only just got a membership database up and running, so we’ve only just got figures and things... we haven’t been in the position previously to track insight and things, which is difficult to then know what’s working and what’s not working, if that makes sense?” (Respondent anonymised to maintain confidentiality).

Notwithstanding the importance of contextual circumstances of some of the NGBs, generally, the NGBs and other sports providers did not effectively channel the post-LPG ‘buzz’ and momentum. Instead, the main sports organisations struggled to react to the immediate demand in a manner conducive to achieving sustainable grassroots sport participation for people with disabilities in England.

*Need for greater inclusive culture*

Prior to the LPG, there was a general lack of inclusive culture within most NGBs and CSPs, with most NGBs lacking a history of mainstreaming their sport for people with disabilities (Thomas and Smith, 2009). Most mainstream NGBs did not fully embrace the principle of inclusion in how they governed their sport (Brown & Pappous, 2018). This is highlighted by the experiences of one of the senior managers at a mainstream NGB:

“...It’s on the back of people’s lists, really. So it’s a lot of nagging from me... if it wasn’t a directed target from Sport England I think it might be a bit of a harder sell, in that respect.” (NGB Nine).

Due to most NGBs not having experience in providing sporting opportunities for people with disabilities, knowledge and understanding of disability was often weak. Awareness of how to provide accessible sport participation opportunities for people with disabilities was often absent:

“It’s a big culture change for NGBs and everyone that’s now supposed to be on this journey... [NGBs were] Not interested in anything else, absolutely not interested, with one or two notable exceptions, in doing anything around disability [before the LPG] ...it’s quite a culture shock to suddenly go into this completely different relationship with a different view of what you would do.” (NDSO Four).

The lack of inclusive culture meant that some NGBs did not understand how to offer compelling participation experiences to people with disabilities and how best to promote sport participation opportunities. Most NGBs and CSPs were not aware of how to access and engage with hard-to-reach people with disabilities, consumers who did not fit their typical target market, as ‘it’s not like a natural fit’ (Non-SO Three). Making people with disabilities aware of available sport participation opportunities was a challenge for some providers:

“...Still people don’t understand that there are so many sport opportunities out there, and that they can actually attend them and it is for them, rather than thinking it is for someone else....we’re still at the point where people are still saying, ‘but we didn’t know that was there’”. (CSP Three).

Some NGBs lacked specific disability officers, which meant that the time available to disability sport participation was often in competition with other NGB priority areas:

“Some of the NGBs, they have a member of staff who’s charged with disability, but it’ll be part of another role, so their main role will still be non-disabled sport and then they’ll have disability sport as a bolt-on. So it’s very hard to dedicate too much of your work time to one area when you’ve got other targets as well.” (NDSO Six).

Some NGBs have the capacity to have specific disability teams, with a dedicated disability officer driving the disability work for that sport, but the majority of NGBs do not have the resources to do this. Not having a specific disability officer meant that some NGBs devolved responsibility for providing for people with disabilities, stating each of their employees have a responsibility for disability when, in reality, it is low on the list of their priorities.

NGBs are often looking for the next Paralympians of their sport and this search for talent can be detrimental to sport participation at the grassroots level, with some NGBs using their talent needs as a way of boosting the number of athletes available to them:

“So what governing bodies are doing is they’re using talent to drive participation... So by targeting the very few, small groups, they’re hoping to get more people, and that doesn’t work.” (NDSO Five).

There is a danger that NGBs’ focus on talent neglects people with disabilities who do not fit their requirements, which often means adults with disabilities are not catered for as much as children and young adults are, as older adults are less likely to be future Paralympians.

### ***Focusing on numbers not sustainability***

Some respondents believed the focus on APS targets produced a myopic approach to sport participation. Participation programmes may have been successful in achieving participant numbers, but this did little to encourage sustainable participation:

“The next four years we delivered on our participation targets, job done. If I’m honest, do I think, you know, we’ve done a particularly good job, in terms of creating a lasting legacy specifically around the Games? Not especially”. (NGB Two).

Indeed, the focus on targets has been labelled by some respondents as evidence of a ‘tick-box’ culture in Sport England, and Sport England being focused on ‘quick wins’. This was detrimental to sustainable participation because it didn’t address barriers and long-term behaviour change, but was likely to be a result of the need for Sport England to justify the public funds spent on sport, especially during a time of public spending cuts:

“I look at how they [Sport England] are and I just realise that they have a tick box culture, and that’s basically what they did”. (Non-SO One).

“I think that’s to do with people at Sport England not having a vision, and the fact that they’re a publically funded body who, at the end of the day, are accountable to politicians.” (NDSO Four).

Sport England’s recent change in strategic focus from sport for sport’s sake to being more concerned about the wider benefits sport can provide, is an admission that using NGBs as the main organisations to increase sport participation has been unsuccessful (Harris, Nichols, & Taylor, 2017; Weed, 2016).

### ***Gap in the media coverage of disability sport between the different Paralympic Games***

Whilst there was extensive coverage of Paralympic sport during the LPG, respondents felt there could have been more media coverage between the 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Games. The media were thought to be ‘major events junkies’ (NGB One) in focusing on disability sport only when a major event was being staged:

“...we need to try and make the media coverage that surrounded it more general. More in everyday life, rather than every 4 years we have a big shout about what people with a disability can do, and then we don’t mention it again for another three and half years.” (Non-SO Two).

“Other than the Commonwealth Games, which came up in Glasgow, really [emphasis], how much more disability sport have we seen since 2012 in the media? Not a lot.” (NDSO One).

There is a paradoxical situation in that demand is unlikely to be generated unless there is more media coverage, but that the media are unlikely to have more coverage of disability sport because existing consumer demand is deemed to be insufficient:

“There’s a bit of a chicken and an egg thing, I guess, in terms of not putting on events because people won’t support them and sponsor them and they won’t sponsor them because you don’t get the publicity and the footfall that a sponsor requires but, until you do that, then they can’t put their money into it... I don’t know how you solve that. It seems like a vicious circle, in a way.” (NGB Four).

The power of the media to increase awareness and perceptions of disability should not be underestimated, as ‘we’ve learnt the power of the media, without a shadow of a doubt...In terms of the social change’ (NSO Four). The media coverage of disability sport, as well as disability in general, has improved and progressed since the LPG, largely driven by Channel

4's support. Despite the positive progress some participants felt more media coverage could be afforded to disability sport in between the Paralympic Games:

“So throughout the Paralympic Games it was on Sky Sports News, it was on things like that. It was in the general media. We saw a big pick-up in terms of numbers wanting to get involved straight after, and I think that's largely down to the fact it was advertised; people saw things that they don't normally see. But then, six months later, it's not on any of those national media outlets anymore, it's not in the news. And we see a decline again.” (Non-SO Two).

The media coverage of the LPG was so extensive and wide-ranging that no other disability sports event has been able to generate media coverage on a comparable level. However, the drop in in-depth media coverage for disability sport other than the Paralympic Games has made it difficult to sustain the positive momentum created by the LPG. The reduced amount of media coverage for disability sport after the LPG therefore did not help efforts to increase the sports participation of people with disabilities.

### ***The role of austerity***

The introduction of austerity measures following the formation of the Coalition government in 2010 undoubtedly impacted on leveraging the LPG (Brittain & Beacom, 2016). For some people with disabilities, austerity measures have made sports participation unaffordable:

“We've had a few centres that have shut.... So we've seen a slight dropping in capacity, and we've definitely seen people unable to afford to do it, for whatever reason.” (Respondent anonymised to maintain confidentiality).

Local authorities experienced some of the deepest budget cuts implemented by the Coalition government (Lowndes and Gardner 2016), which has reduced the number of sport services

councils can provide. There was concern from one participant regarding the effect of budget cuts on the commitment of local authorities to being inclusive:

“The amount of disability officers at a local level is reducing massively.... And what they’ve seemed to have done to counter that is turn round and go, ‘oh no, we’re inclusive. All our Officers have a responsibility for disability’. Crap. What it is, is you’ve lost your money for your Disability Officer. You couldn’t turn round and say ‘we don’t do it’, so you now say it’s endemic in everybody’s job. They’re simply not doing it because the expertise isn’t there and it’s the last thing on the list.” (NDSO Seven).

Reductions in the number of dedicated disability officers is likely to have had a negative impact on the number and quality of sport participation opportunities that can be offered at a local level to people with disabilities.

The introduction of austerity and the attempted ‘reform’ of the welfare system led to negative media coverage of people with disabilities (Briant, Watson, & Philo, 2013). Indeed, the negative media coverage is thought to have deterred some people with disabilities from participating in sport due to a fear of losing welfare benefits if deemed to be ‘too active’ (Brown & Pappous, 2018). As one participant noted, ‘we’re up against a lot of messages in the media, which are saying, you know, you’re a benefit scrounger or you’re a superhero; there’s no in-between’ (Non-SO Three). The attempt to capitalise on the LPG for increased participation was partly stymied by the media stoking a culture of fear amongst some people with disabilities, and a culture of mistrust amongst some non-people with disabilities:

“I think some of the media outlets were talking about people making up an impairment to get all of these benefits, so then the scroungers attitude; people with disabilities are scroungers. When it’s something like 0.3% of benefit claims are

fraudulent, or something like that... It has some very, very negative detrimental effects on their lives, to the point where being active really isn't a priority anymore... it's also the fact that a lot of people with disabilities don't want to be seen to be active because they're then scared they might lose their benefits". (CSP One).

Austerity measures and the characterisation of people with disabilities as 'benefit scroungers' by some sections of the media, may be an important reason for the decline in sport participation following the post-LPG high in October 2013. For people with disabilities without the 'sport participation habit', fear of losing benefits and being labelled as a 'benefit cheat' may have been more powerful than any inspiration that might have been gained from watching and/or experiencing the LPG (Brown & Pappous, 2018).

## **Discussion**

The LPG was intended to increase the sport participation of people with disabilities, but the national picture would suggest this ambition has not been fully realised (Active People Interactive, 2017). What lessons can future hosts learn from the attempt to use the LPG as a social marketing campaign to increase sports participation? This section attempts to answer this question by critically reviewing the evidence presented in this article.

### ***The demonstration effect has limited utility***

The demonstration effect was the main theory behind using the 2012 Games to increase sport participation (Hughes, 2013), but our data suggests that, for inactive people with disabilities, a perceived competency gap between the individual and the Paralympian can prevent some people from increasing their sport participation. This echoes the concerns raised by Boardley (2013) about using the 2012 Games to increase sport participation. Naturally, there were some people inspired to participate in sport as a result of the LPG, but the utility of using inspiration to increase participation is limited for individuals not predisposed to being sporty

(Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Lyle, 2009), precisely the audience that is likely to be inactive and in need of increasing their sport participation. Furthermore, relying on inspiration alone fails to acknowledge systemic and societal barriers, as well as challenges related to an individual's impairment, that can constrain the participation of people with disabilities in sport (Darcy, Lock, & Taylor, 2017). According to our interview data, the LPG appears to have been more effective at inspiring younger people with disabilities, as there is likely to be a more congruent relationship between children and young people and Paralympians than is the case with adults. It is important to point out, however, that the Paralympic Games only includes a limited range of impairments (Howe & Silva, 2018), thus the opportunity to make a tangible impact on the behaviour of all young people with disabilities is constrained by this limitation. This is problematic because the importance of building a synergistic relationship between an individual and the sporting role model has been emphasised previously (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002). The Paralympic Games may therefore be able to influence the behaviour of only a limited number of young people with disabilities. MacCallum and Beltman (2002) claim that long-term engagement and interaction between Paralympians and the individual is likely to be the optimal way of influencing the behaviour, rather than through the use of mega sport events (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002). Using peer role models, therefore, might be more effective for inactive people, particularly adults, as the individual's life circumstances may be more closely aligned (Lyle, 2009).

### ***The LPG was not leveraged by most sports organisations***

A failure to appreciate the potential of the Paralympic Games' impact led to a reactive, rather than proactive, response from sport organisations (Weed & Dowse, 2009). The ability of the NGBs to successfully increase sport participation was questioned by various commentators prior to the 2012 Games (e.g. Charlton, 2010; Collins, 2010). Our research found the NGBs to be ill-equipped in resources, structure, and knowledge of how to successfully leverage the

LPG. It is a consistent comment from leverage academics, but one that should be repeated here: leveraging needs to be strategically planned, coordinated, and managed in advance of the event (Misener, Taks, Chalip, & Green, 2015). This should occur at the earliest possible opportunity to enable behaviour change and for the structures and systems to be developed. Increasing demand amongst people with disabilities to want to participate in sport was not understood by the majority of sports organisations as a shared goal. A plausible solution therefore would be to include people with disabilities within the structure and creation of participation programmes at an early stage. This did not occur for the vast majority of sports organisations. Chalip et al. (2017) have highlighted the need to ensure that marketing communications are relevant to the intended audience, but this was not possible for most NGBs and CSPs because of the lack of knowledge they possessed about disability. Thus, specific marketing and participation programmes for non-active, moderately active, and active people with disabilities would be strongly suggested. For example, peer role models may be more effective for people with disabilities that have not been active for a length of time, whereas young people with disabilities may be more receptive to messages featuring Paralympians with similar impairments to themselves. According to our data, most mainstream sports organisations viewed people with disabilities as belonging to one homogenous group. This ignored the lack of common disability identity shared by most people with disabilities (Watson, 2002), as well as the differentiated responses to marketing stimuli from people with various activity levels. It is important for sports organisations to prioritise the involvement of people with disabilities in the design and delivery of sport participation programmes, in order to ensure the participation opportunities are commensurate with the motivations and needs of people with disabilities.

***Traces of institutional ableism existed within sports organisations***

Our data suggest that the failure to leverage the LPG was not only because sports organisations consistently neglect the importance of leveraging (Misener, Taks, Chalip, & Green, 2015), but was also a result of the ableist structures and culture prevalent within the sports sector. Campbell (2009) argues that ableism positions people with disabilities as diminished humans, stemming from the privileging of non-disabled people's experiences to the detriment of people who do not conform to the non-disabled perspective. Whilst sports organisations may not have intentionally set out to devalue people with disabilities, the failure to consider the needs and motivations of people with disabilities is indicative of the lack of importance associated with providing sport participation opportunities for people with disabilities. Most NGBs had been paying lip service to grassroots disability participation before the LPG (Thomas & Smith, 2009), lacking a culture of inclusion and understanding of disability. By failing to consider the needs of people with disabilities, indeed to recognise people with disabilities as legitimate and valued consumers, sports organisations exhibited traces of ableism. Indeed, Brown and Pappous (2018) argued that ableist cultures existed within NGBs before the LPG, resulting in the marginalisation of people with disabilities' voice in the provision of sport for people with disabilities. Our data echoed the findings of Brown and Pappous (2018), namely that people with disabilities were an afterthought for some NGBs and CSPs. We believe the development work that has occurred after the LPG was instigated as a result of funding obligations from Sport England, rather than a culture of inclusion. The ableist practices of some NGBs may have also been a result of the historic focus of NGBs before the LPG. Before Sport England decided, in 2008, to place their faith in NGBs to increase grassroots participation, NGBs had predominately been concerned with the management of national squads, governance of their sport, and serving their members (Charlton, 2010). Thus, some sports organisations were focused on athletic and ability-laden ideals to the extent that individuals who did not match these values were not acknowledged

by NGBs and CSPs. We believe ableism within sports organisations may not have been intentional, but a result of the insular and narrow focus of sports organisations and how they viewed their ‘ideal’ consumer. This narrow-minded focus ensured there was a lack of awareness and understanding of people with different circumstances and ability levels to the perceived norm. Many NGBs and CSPs, therefore, did not appreciate the potential of the LPG (Weed & Dowse, 2009) because the majority of sports organisations were ruled and governed from a non-disabled perspective. Disability scholars have been for many years supporting the idea of “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998), arguing that any policy related to the disability community should not be decided without the direct participation of people with disabilities (Lurie, 2017).

***Grassroots sports participation work should not be driven by funding alone***

We recommend that future hosts do not just match funding to short-term goals at the expense of focusing on the wider benefits of sport. Funding should be linked to sport participation, but there needs to be a recognition that being too pre-occupied with short-term targets is unlikely to yield sustainable participation in the long-term. This was recognised by Nichols, Grix, Ferguson and Griffiths (2016), in their analysis of CSPs’ implementation of the Sport Makers programme, whereby the top-down approach from Sport England limited the effectiveness of the volunteering policy change for the end user. Therefore, there is a danger that financial incentives dominate the thinking of sports organisations to the detriment of long-term behaviour change. This was the case with some of the NGBs, who met their disability participation targets but might not have addressed systemic barriers and challenges to sport participation.

***The environmental context needs to be conducive for leveraging the Paralympic Games***

The introduction of austerity measures following the formation of the Coalition government in 2010 undoubtedly impacted on leveraging (Brittain & Beacom, 2016), as well as people with disabilities' sport participation. Cuts to local authorities' budgets, where sport is a discretionary service, led to the closure or reduction in sport services accessible for people (King, 2013). People with disabilities are likely to have particularly been affected by this as their use of public leisure facilities in England is high when compared to people without disabilities (Kung & Taylor, 2014). Furthermore, austerity measures have had significant negative impacts on the lives of some people with disabilities (Cross, 2013), with disposable income to spend on leisure significantly reduced for some people (McKnight, 2014). The lack of balance in the media coverage of people with disabilities as being either 'superhumans' or 'benefit scroungers' (Crow, 2014), likely had an impact too. The prominent role of austerity and negative media coverage emphasises the importance of the external environment being conducive for mega sport events to be leveraged. This is not to suggest sports organisations were unable to leverage just because of the external environment, as that is evidently not true, but that there are factors beyond the control of leveraging organisations. In addition, the context needed for participation to be increased as a result of the LPG was lacking within some of the sports organisations that were interviewed. For example, two of the NGBs experienced internal restructuring that limited their capacity to deliver compelling participation experiences for people with disabilities. Furthermore, Brown and Pappous (2018) discovered that a number of NDSOs lacked competent governance and financial management, limiting their ability to leverage the LPG. Thus, is it possible that the demonstration effect may not have worked effectively for some of the sports organisations because their contextual conditions were not applicable for the mechanisms associated with the LPG to operate effectively (Pawson, 2013; Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

***Sports organisations are part of the solution; not the solution***

Sports organisations are vital to the leveraging chances of a sports event, but there needs to be a realisation of their limitations and strengths at an early stage, and to put measures in place to improve on their weaknesses. Utilising the resources and ability of people with disabilities' organisations may have helped in engaging people with disabilities not ordinarily enthused by sport mega-events. As suggested by Chalip et al. (2016), one type of organisation, in this case sport organisations, were unable to achieve successful leverage on their own. Future hosts would do well to heed this lesson and Chalip et al.'s (2016) advice: successful leveraging requires all organisations – event organisations, non-sport organisations, sport organisations – to be actively involved in the leveraging process. The NGBs should have been part of the solution; not *the* solution. We concur with Chalip et al.'s (2016) recommendation for a separate structure through which the legacy can be leveraged. A dedicated committee made up of various stakeholders from the three types of organisations would be of great relevance. Logistically, sports organisations would need to take a prominent role in a steering group. Sports organisations are the experts at delivering sport participation opportunities, therefore they should be the stakeholder with the most leveraging responsibility. Non-sport organisations, particularly organisations focused on people with disabilities, will be required to lend their expertise on disability issues and inform the content of the leveraging output. Sports organisations are often lacking in understanding the wants and needs of people with disabilities, but this is a task that organisations focused on people with disabilities should excel at, therefore they would need to be involved at all stages of the leveraging process. It is likely event organisations will be preoccupied by the demands of staging the Paralympic Games (Chalip et al. 2016), thus their involvement is likely to be the lowest of the three organisation types. Nevertheless, event organisations would still need to be involved at various points to ensure a fully connected and harmonious leveraging of the Paralympic Games. Without a leveraging structure, it is likely the responsibility for

leveraging will be subsumed by the needs to deliver a successful event by event organisers, deemed as being of less importance than meeting the needs of existing members and management of national squads for sport organisations, and lacking strategic importance for non-sport organisations compared to their own specific organisational interests (Chalip et al., 2016). The weakness of sport organisations in understanding disability could be offset by active involvement of relevant non-sport organisations.

***Increased representation of people with disabilities within sports organisations is needed***

Increased representation of people with disabilities has been called for in other leisure industries, such as gaming and fashion (Asthana, 2017), and it is called here for the sports industry. It is people with disabilities who are best placed to understand the key motivations and barriers that exist to increasing sport participation. Our research found that participation programmes before the LPG, and still today, have mainly been designed and organised without the input of people with disabilities. The importance of including people with disabilities in the design of participation programmes is a message that has been made before (Horne & Spring, 2014). Sport England has recently launched its 'Code for Sports Governance', in which Sport England called for greater participation of minority groups on the Boards of NGBs (Sport England, 2016). But we are calling for increased representation not to be just limited to the Board, but to occur across the different levels of the workforces of sports organisations. For example, only two of the participants from the sports organisations included in our sample consider themselves to have an impairment. We recommend the voice of people with disabilities be represented by people with disabilities themselves and this to hold greater priority and power within sports organisations. Recruitment and retention of people with disabilities will only occur if sports organisations demonstrate a commitment to be inclusive. Working with local organisations focused on people with disabilities to promote and communicate sport management recruitment

opportunities, may help to increase the representation of people with disabilities.

Furthermore, a peer role-model scheme profiling people with disabilities who are already working within sports organisations, might be one way of increasing the visibility of people with disabilities within sports organisations. In sum, people with disabilities must be an integral component of designing sport participation experiences, if leveraging of the Paralympic Games for increased sport participation is to occur.

## **Conclusion**

There has been a complex interplay of multiple factors that have been responsible for the decline in people with disabilities' sport participation following the post-LPG high in October 2013. It was found that the demonstration effect – the main theory behind using the LPG to increase sport participation – should have been but one strategy, rather than *the* strategy to increase participation. Furthermore, a strategy reliant on the demonstration effect did not acknowledge the societal, structural, and impairment constraints that can limit people with disabilities' sport participation. A lack of coordinated leveraging of the LPG compounded the lack of relevance between Paralympians and some people with disabilities, and the issue of structural barriers to participation. Moreover, the limited experience and knowledge of providing sport participation opportunities for people with disabilities by sports providers resulted in the momentum generated by the LPG not being channelled as effectively as it could have been. Whilst the media coverage of disability sport has improved, the inevitable drop in in-depth media coverage for disability sport other than the Paralympic Games has made it difficult to sustain the positive momentum created by the LPG. Finally, and of particular importance, austerity measures and the characterisation of people with disabilities as benefit scroungers has acted as a significant deterrent to some people continuing or taking up sport participation (Brown & Pappous, 2018).

All research has limitations and this study is no exception. The scope of this article is such that only reasons for a decline in sport participation have been reviewed. However, it is to be acknowledged that there has been important progress made in grassroots disability sport since the LPG. Further studies should attempt to shed more light on the reasons for the participation of some people with disabilities in sport. For example, understanding of disability and how it manifests itself has improved within the sports sector, albeit there is still much more work to be done. Despite many positive steps that have been taken, national sport participation in sport has still declined since the LPG (Active People Interactive, 2017). This highlights the temporary influence the Paralympic Games has on sport participation. Positively influencing behaviour change of inactive people with disabilities is a difficult and long-term process, and an expectation that the Paralympic Games is going to solve on its own is unrealistic. A second limitation is that the findings presented here are only from a top-down perspective and do not include bottom-up perspectives of people with disabilities at the grassroots level. Our understanding of the strengths and limitations of using the LPG to increase grassroots sport participation would be enhanced by incorporating the views of people with disabilities at the grassroots level, and comparing and contrasting the views from the top-down and bottom-up perspectives. This was beyond the scope of this article to achieve this. Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings presented in this article represents the first step in building an understanding of the limitations involved in using sporting mega events, such as the Paralympic Games, to increase people with disabilities' sport participation.

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1 One participant was interviewed twice, due to time restrictions in the first interview. The first interview was conducted face to face, whilst the follow-up interview was a telephone interview.