

It's important for those at the coal face of the active leisure sector to understand the direction of the improvement agenda in the public sector. Leisure-net director David Albutt talks to Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association's (CLOA) honorary secretary John Bell about "impact".

IMPACT, OUTCOMES, EVIDENCE: IT'S ALL ABOUT RESULTS

David Albutt: Why all the fuss about "impact" John?

John Bell: For some time there's been a move towards local strategic partnerships where councils, health, police and education, come together to establish a local agreement that typically has a set of priorities for their area; each of these has a further set of indicators to measure outcomes – or the "impact" of investing in particular services.

Those of us working in culture and sport have come to this concept late but we're catching up fast. We have the "bible", *Passion for Excellence*, and the national improvement partners (Department for Culture Media and Sport, Improvement and Development Agency for local government, non-departmental public bodies) are taking

forward a set of initiatives within the *Passion for Excellence* project. There is also a project team looking at measuring impacts and outcomes and seeking a standard approach that will benefit the sector.

DA: Benefit how?

JB: Well, we know that we can contribute powerfully across most, if not all, of the priority issues that local partnerships typically identify: health, for example, by increasing physical activity, but also the crime agenda, where sport and arts can intervene in the lives of young people who would otherwise go off the rails. We can inspire a sense of place (what does that better than a successful local football club?) and we also help people to become more employable. There are all sorts of

positive outcomes. What we've not been good at is proving our worth. We take it as self-evident but, in the fight – and it is a fight – for scarce resources (especially in a recession), we can lose out to people in, say, education, social services, etc. who might not have as good a case as we do but they do have the evidence.

DA: But we have lots of data and Sport England has spent millions on measuring participation through Active People.

JB: Yes, but this data is almost always about inputs. Colleagues in other sectors have for years been talking about both outcomes and outputs. For example: not "we've educated so many people," but "exam results have improved". This means they can demonstrate what impact an investment may have and so have

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been better at getting that investment. We say so many thousands of people used our centre last year but the partners are likely to reply "so what?"

The project team is basing its work on outcomes-based accountability, which is an approach to planning services and assessing performance that focuses attention on the results – or outcomes – that the services are intended to achieve. It's much more than a tool for planning effective services; it can become a way of securing strategic and cultural change by moving organisations away from a focus on efficiency and process as the arbiters of value in their services, and towards making better outcomes the primary purpose of the organisation and its employees.

The other process that is central to this approach is the use of performance management categories; the aim being to distinguish between quantity and quality, and between inputs, outputs and outcomes or results. The most important measure of quality is the proportion of users who are better off because of a particular service, but it is often the one that is neglected.

DA: Sounds very complicated for the over-worked army of people who have relatively little knowledge of, or enthusiasm for, policy.

JB: This is probably unavoidable when "management-speak" meets bureaucracy. It's basically about proving the investment case with hard facts that are in tune with what an area really needs. Let's say that crime in a particular area is high and so the partners have this as a top priority and they are prepared to make resources available to services that can make a difference. Can culture and sport make a difference? Clearly we can. Can we prove it? Probably not.

The real question is: What do we need to measure in order to prove that we can make a difference? Well, there are examples where a leisure service has put on a programme aimed at young people at risk. They've worked with the police and found that reported crime in the area has reduced while the programme ran and that there has been a

saving to the public purse of £100,000. If the leisure service in question goes back to the funding partners with this evidence and suggests that there should be more programmes of the same type, is the answer more likely to be "yes" because the impact of the first programme had been demonstrated? Of course it is; the same can be done around health, social cohesion, etc.

DA: Good theory but does it work in practice?

JB: Of course. CLOA has been looking at how millions of pounds of investment have been made through leisure services in Wigan and Rochdale, for example, on exactly this basis. This is not an investment by the local council but by health, crime prevention and other partners.

DA: Is this just an issue for in-house local government operators?

JB: Not at all. Wigan and Rochdale are both trusts. There are also good examples of such programmes operated by contract management companies. These are, of course, all "agents of local government" in the sense that they mainly operate facilities owned by councils, but this doesn't have to be the case. Local strategic partnerships almost always include representatives from the private sector and there's no reason why a commercial health club operator that is prepared and able to respond to the local priorities shouldn't play a full part.

DA: But it doesn't seem to be happening?

JB: Perhaps we need to work even harder in the sector on communications. We know that the FIA has run a series of programmes that should work in this context. It's a question of understanding the overall structure and then getting them to the table.

We're lucky to have the 2012 Olympic effect, which is focusing political minds currently, but CLOA is very worried about the post-2012 reaction. So, we hope that all of us in the sector – and we include commercial operators and suppliers in that – can work together to make outcomes a priority and maximise the funding opportunities that are available. ¹⁷⁶



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