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## **Shifting policy: School Sport Coaching – An evaluation and implications for schools and coaches**

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### **Introduction**

The UK sporting context over the last 15 years has been characterised by evolving and shifting sporting policy. With each change in sport policy the various stakeholders involved have necessarily adapted to the new challenges and different funding sources with the aim of encouraging more involvement in sport and physical activity in an attempt to tackle the damaging effects of sedentary lifestyles (Biddle, Gorely and Stensel, 2004, Hamilton et al, 2008). This shifting policy has had significant implications for PE and school sport. This paper outlines some of the changes that schools have had imposed on them by both the labour government who came to power in 1997 and then by the coalition government elected in 2010. It focuses on the findings from an evaluation of the School Coaching Programme conducted by the Institute of Youth Sport, for the Youth Sport Trust, over the three years of its duration (2008 -2011) with a particular focus on the effect of shifting policy on the programme itself and on the sporting opportunities for all young people in schools.

### **School sport and government policy**

The history of state intervention in Physical Education (PE) within schools has ranged from periods of neglect to times of intense involvement associated with the development of numerous external interventions (Hoye, Nicholson and Houlihan, 2010). The last fifteen years have been characterised by a number of government initiated interventions intended to redress weaknesses in PE and school sport at a time when concerns over young people's activity levels have been expressed publicly (Department of Health, 2004). Hardman's survey of PE in European schools (2002) indicated that the UK has much in common with its European neighbours as PE/sport is an 'obligatory school curriculum subject in all member states' and that for most countries PE is delivered according to statutory guidelines. There are, however, many incidences where 'actual implementation frequently does not meet with statutory ...obligations or expectations'. Areas that indicated neglect were the erosion of time allocated to PE/sport, lack of official assessment, diversion of resources away from PE/sport to other subjects and shortage of qualified staff. In terms of its status in comparison with other subjects, Hardman concluded that PE/sport was accorded a lower status than other academic subjects.

Hardman's concerns about the state of PE and school sport in the UK were echoed by Ofsted in 2002 who commented that in primary schools:

'Accommodation is inadequate in about one in seven schools; this is having a damaging effect on pupils' progress in PE.' (Ofsted (2002)<sup>1</sup>, p3)

In the same report the following comments were made:

'In many schools there are weaknesses in the quality of accommodation and specialist resources which make it difficult to deliver the National Curriculum in PE and to offer a broad range of extra-curricular opportunities. The lack of a school hall, deteriorating hard areas, sloping fields or poor drainage restrict the proper development of PE in these schools.' (Ofsted (2002)<sup>1</sup>, p6)

A similar report (DFES, 2005) on physical education in secondary schools included the following comments:

‘A quarter of schools continue to have inadequate accommodation that inhibits pupils’ access to a range of curricular and extra-curricular opportunities.’  
(Ofsted (2002)<sup>2</sup>, p3)

At the same time that it was identified that PE had become a poor relative in schools there was increasing recognition about the possible negative implications of this unsatisfactory situation. Growing concern amongst researchers, medical practitioners and policy makers about the health and fitness of young people highlighted the need to improve the state of PE and school sport within schools. Investment in the sporting infrastructure available to schools included the Big Lottery Fund’s £751 million investment in mainly sporting facilities. Other responses from the government included the introduction of a target of providing two hours of physical activity a week in school for all children aged five to sixteen. Between 2008 and 2011 the government indicated that all children should have the opportunity for a further three hours of sporting activities a week, although not necessarily delivered through schools. This was known as the 5 hour offer (Improvement and Development Agency for local government, April 2008).

Another key development during this period was the introduction of the School Sports Partnership programme. School Sport Partnerships were groups of schools working together to develop PE and sport opportunities for all young people. A typical partnership consisted of a partnership development manager, eight school sport coordinators and forty-five primary link teachers. The partnership staff aimed to enhance opportunities for young people to experience different sports, access high quality coaching and engage in competitions.

### **The School Sport Coaching Programme**

The School Sport Coaching Programme was a key strand within the PE and Sport Strategy for Young People introduced in January 2008. The PE and Sport Strategy for Young People, and thus the School Sport Coaching Programme, was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, now the Department for Education.

The School Sport Coaching programme aimed to:

- create a step change in the quantity and quality of coaching offered to young people;
- contribute to the progressive development performance for young people;
- support engagement in competition;
- support the development of school to club links and to;
- support volunteer coaches and support teachers in delivering school PE and sport.

Coaching grants of £21,500 per year were paid directly to each School Sport Partnership to ‘top-up’ their existing funding. The programme was jointly developed by the Youth Sport Trust and sports coach UK and aimed to support ~1500 additional coaching hours per School Sport Partnership per year to meet the Department for Children, Schools and Families target of an additional 675,000 hours per year. It was hoped that over a sustained period the coaching would contribute to the progressive development of performance for young people and would support engagement in competition and contribute to meeting the 5 hour offer. The Partnership Development Manager in a ‘Coach Management’ role was accountable for the funding, but the Partnership Development Manager was able to contract out parts of the delivery of the programme to other relevant bodies. Overall, the ambition was to create a step change in the quantity and quality of coaching offered to young people.

The funding for the School Sport Coaching programme was limited to three years from the outset and therefore sustainability was an issue that was apparent to Partnership Development Managers from the beginning. Consequently, most of the School Sport Partnerships managing the School Sport Coaching programme had been attempting to make the programme sustainable by linking with schools, coaches, local community clubs, local councils and NGBs to access funding and development support for the coaches. The management of the School Sport Coaching programme was heavily dependent on the School Sport Partnership infrastructure.

## **Research Overview**

The research methods for the evaluation of the School Sport Coaching programme included three on-line surveys, one telephone survey and case study visits. Respondents to the surveys and interviewees in case study areas, were asked to report on, and reflect upon, the delivery and impact of the School Sport Coaching programme.

At the end of the third year of the programme (June/July 2011), on-line surveys were sent to 3,000 secondary schools and 4,000 primary schools in England, via email, for the attention of the Head of PE and Primary Link Teachers respectively. Two follow-up reminder emails were sent in an effort to enhance the response rate. In total 282 surveys were returned achieving a 9% response rate for the Head of PE survey and 427 surveys were completed by the Primary Link Teachers achieving an 11% response rate. On-line surveys were sent to 667 coaches and 61 surveys were completed achieving a 10% response rate.

At the end of the third year (June/July 2011) of the programme telephone calls were attempted with each of the 450 Partnership Development Managers at their hub-site school. Approximately one-third of PDMs (159) were no longer in post at this point (due to the cessation of programme funding). A total of 151 telephone surveys were completed achieving a 52% response rate from those Partnership Development Managers still in post.

In addition to the surveys, four case study visits to School Sport Partnerships were carried out each year of the evaluation. In each of the case study areas in year three, interviews were undertaken with key staff appropriate to each case study. These interviews included Partnership Development Managers, coaches, school sport coordinators, competition managers, NGB representatives and teachers including Heads of PE, Directors of Specialism, Primary Link Teachers and teaching assistants. In addition, focus groups were undertaken with primary pupils in one case study and an interview was conducted with a year 10 sports apprentice.

Survey data were analysed using a commercially available computer package (PASW). All the interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

## **Research Findings<sup>1</sup>**

This section presents some of the findings from the evaluation and examines the extent to which the programme was successful in achieving its aims.

### **Creating a step change in the quantity and quality of coaching offered to young people**

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Heads of PE reported that there had been an increase from 4.8 to 8.0 coaches working in each secondary school and Primary Link Teachers reported an increase from 3.0 to 5.7 coaches working in each primary school from before the programme started to the end of the third year of the School Sport Coaching programme. Furthermore, Heads of PE reported 10.8 hours of extra-curricular coaching in secondary schools and Primary Link Teachers reported 4.4 hours per week of extra-curricular coaching in primary schools per week in the third year of the programme resulting in an estimated 2,527 hours of coaching in each partnership per year. This represents an increase of 1,857 hours on the pre-programme number of hours of coaching per partnership of 670 hours (as reported by Partnership Development Managers in the 2008-9 survey). Over 95% of Partnership Development Managers reported that the School Sport Coaching programme had increased or greatly increased the quality of coaching across the partnership and the numbers of schools accessing high quality sports coaching. Coaches and teachers working alongside each other was considered valuable in terms of skill development and because this impacted immediately on staff/pupil ratios.

Extra-curricular coaching activities that took place during the 2010-2011 academic year by a paid qualified or volunteer qualified coach were most prevalent in traditional sports such as cricket (79%), athletics (77%), badminton (76%), basketball (75%), rugby union (72%) and football (72%) and in activities such as multi-skill clubs (83%) and dance (74%).

### **The progressive development of performance for pupils**

Nine in ten teachers (86% of Heads of PE and 91% of Primary Link Teachers) reported an increased number and range of opportunities for pupils as a result of the School Sport Coaching programme. Over 80% of Heads of PE and over 90% of Primary Link Teachers reported that pupils' enthusiasm for sport, skills and ability, and confidence in a sport setting had increased or greatly increased in the third year of the programme in comparison with before the programme started. Over 70% of Heads of PE and over 80% of Primary Link Teachers reported that pupils' motivation for and participation in sport/physical activity had increased or greatly increased in the third year of the programme in comparison with before the programme started. The case study findings showed that as a result of the School Sport Coaching programme more young people were taking part at a higher level of competence in a wider range of sports with better specialist coaches for young people with a disability. The case study findings also showed that the high quality of coaches and the coaching had raised the expectations of young people and school access to quality coaches was easier and they were seen as an integral part of the workforce.

### **Supporting engagement in competition**

Three-quarters (75%) of Heads of PE and 65% of Primary Link Teachers reported that coaches had organised or helped to organise inter-school competitions. Similarly 83% of Heads of PE and 76% of Primary Link Teachers reported that coaches had helped to prepare pupils for inter-school competitions. Over half of Heads of PE (54%) and over half (55%) of Primary Link Teachers reported that coaches had organised or helped to organise intra-school competitions and to prepare pupils for these competitions (71% secondary pupils and 61% primary pupils). The case study findings showed that coaching was most often organised to conclude with a competition or festival event and that young people enjoyed the opportunity to progress on from a coaching to a competition opportunity; overall this led to an increased quality of competition and to more young people and teams taking part.

### **Supporting the development of school-club links**

Almost all Partnership Development Managers (97%) reported that the School Sport Coaching programme had contributed to the development of links with local community clubs. The case study findings showed that recruiting coaches from community clubs and the development of relationships between pupils and those coaches aided the transition from school to club and promoted progression along the participation pathway.

### **Supporting volunteer coaches and supporting teachers in delivering school PE and sport**

Three-quarters (75%) of coaches reported that they had worked with young leaders and 48% of coaches had worked with adult volunteers in a team-coaching role. Nine in ten coaches (86%) reported that teachers had observed or worked with them at most sessions or occasionally during coaching sessions. Nearly all Heads of PE (95%) and nearly all Primary Link Teachers (96%) reported that the School Sport Coaching programme had provided additional CPD opportunities for teachers. Nearly all Heads of PE (94%) and nearly all Primary Link Teachers (96%) reported that the School Sport Coaching programme had increased the ability of school staff to deliver PE and sport. The case study findings showed that the School Sport Coaching programme had invested in developing young leaders who were accredited and supported the delivery of the programme, leading to an increased number of volunteers helping at festival and events.

### **Factors key to the success of the School Sport Coaching programme**

The findings presented above indicate that the programme was successful in achieving its aims. The impact of the School Sport Coaching programme was greatest when it was aligned with, and tailored to, existing sports provision within schools. The case study findings indicated that there were a number of contributory factors leading to this success. These factors included:

- Effective partnership working with stakeholders including NGBs, the local authority, the County Sports Partnership and Further and Higher Education Institutions.
- Securing additional resources by using the School Sport Coaching programme as leverage.
- Building good relationships with staff and with pupils which was reciprocated by greater involvement in the programme.
- Club coaches being given access to schools in order to work with young people that they would not have been able to access otherwise.
- Coaches providing young people with novel experiences because they were delivered by external people and by people who were perceived to be experts and enthusiasts.
- Retention of coaches through increased opportunities to generate an income and through investment in their coaching skills.

Challenges identified in meeting the aims of the programme included: the need to develop the trust of school staff and to prove the worth of the programme; lack of involvement of some local NGBs and lack of opportunities for young people to be able to become involved in local clubs; variation between schools in their willingness to become involved in the programme. These challenges seem likely to remain relevant to future developments in school sport.

## **Discussion**

In the Autumn of 2010, the arrival of a new coalition government was accompanied by a major shift in policy with an increased emphasis on competition. The new government stated that they would encourage more competitive sport in schools and give schools the freedom to organise themselves, 'rather than imposing a centralised government blueprint.' (Letter from Rt Hon Michael Gove MP to Baroness Sue Campbell of the Youth Sport Trust, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 2010<sup>2</sup>).

As part of this change the government concluded that the existing network of School Sport Partnerships would not be the best way to help schools achieve their potential in improving competitive sport and the Department for Education would no longer therefore provide ring-fenced funding for School Sport Partnerships. Without the support of the School Sport Partnerships the infrastructure for coaches going into schools would be limited. Schools that wished to continue with coaching would need to recruit coaches without the previous level of support from the partnerships.

The Department for Education also removed the need for schools to: plan and implement their part of the 'five hour offer'; collect information about physical activity involvement of pupils; monitor and evaluate the range of activities being provided in schools. These changes had the potential to reduce the allocation of resources for PE/sport in schools and are similar to the areas that Hardman (2002) reported indicated neglect in PE/sport: the erosion of time allocated to PE/sport; lack of official assessment; diversion of resources away from PE/sport to other subjects; and shortage of qualified staff.

After an outcry from pupils, teachers, sporting governing bodies and former Olympians about the disbanding of the School Sport Partnerships, the Government decided to part-fund the partnerships for a further two years. In addition to this the Government renewed the emphasis on school competition and provided funding for a 3 day a week post for a School Games Organiser for each partnership area. The role of the new School Games Organisers would be to establish the School Games in their areas, supporting as many schools as possible to set up intra- and inter-school competitions (levels 1 and 2) and to work with Local Organising Committees to provide level 3 competitions (regional). Despite this concession many partnership staff were made redundant, whilst others had to reduce hours and become part-time.

However, despite reduction in partnership staffing the legacy of the excellent work of the School Sport Coaching programme may facilitate the continued work of coaching in schools. For example, interviewees in case study areas reported that various strategies had been adopted to enhance the worth of coaches in schools including observation and monitoring of coaches and enhanced professional development programmes. In addition the programme had been successful in building the faith of school staff in the quality of available coaching and thus school staff were more likely to seek out coaches for further contributions in school. Partnership Development Managers also reported that they had considered other ways of funding coaches such as being directly funded by schools, being funded by pupil/parent contributions or by NGBs. Thus despite the reduction in partnership staffing most coaches (87%) planned to continue coaching in schools after the conclusion of the School Sport Coaching programme.

However, there would seem to be some risks with this change in the support structure and funding basis for coaching in schools. Partnership development managers feared that without the support structure and mentoring opportunities offered by the partnership that new coaches commencing coaching in schools may lack the necessary skills to transfer their knowledge to larger groups of school children compared to coaching smaller groups in clubs. In addition with schools, pupils and parents paying for the coaching there was thought to be

a risk that those most in need of coaching and least likely to seek out club opportunities of their own accord (including primary age children) may miss out, due to financial, transport, skill level, social and cultural constraints. The Partnership Development Manager from one of the case studies summarised the situation by stating:

It will be the kids who would benefit who will probably miss out in a lot of cases and governing bodies will probably move all of their focus into secondary or ninety per cent of the focus into secondary. So the primary sector potentially will miss out I think on the back of that.

## Conclusion

The School Sport Coaching programme was an extremely successful strand within the PE and Sport Strategy for Young People. One Partnership Development Manager said of the programme, "It's probably the single most important strand I think to benefit all the children across the partnership".

As previously stated the School Sport Coaching programme had always been a three year funded programme and strategic Partnership Development Managers had planned for sustainability. However, that sustainability was expected to be supported by the infrastructure of the School Sport Partnerships. The shift in policy from central support and funding to local funding has disrupted this.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The findings from this research will be available on the Youth Sport Trust School Sport Xchange website, as they are the organisation who has funded this research. The website can be accessed at the following link: <http://ssx.youthsporttrust.org>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0065473/refocusing-sport-in-schools-to-build-a-lasting-legacy-of-the-2012-games>

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