

# BEYOND PARTICIPATION TO SPORT FOR CHANGE

Sport can be a transformative tool to bring about positive benefits – but what are the challenges facing delivery organisations and how can funders best support work in this area? **Linda Macdonald** of The Robertson Trust looks at the issues.

The Robertson Trust began funding sporting projects over a decade ago. At the time, research we had commissioned had, perhaps unsurprisingly, identified the potential benefits of using sport and arts as diversionary tools to support and engage young people. The result was a sporting strand within our open grants programme that has since provided over £5 million to organisations delivering sport in Scotland.

While the initial rationale for this reflected the still broadly-accepted narrative that participation in sport is intrinsically good and automatically produces positive outcomes, we began to question this assumption as our work developed and the number of organisations we funded increased. In reality, we found that applicants often struggled to express what it was they wanted to achieve beyond increasing participation and supporting participants to improve performance.

Organisations typically had a sense that sport would bring about positive benefits, but struggled to articulate what these would be or how they would know if these changes occurred as a result of participation. Increasing top-level participation figures, meanwhile, was often the primary focus, with little or no consideration being given to who was participating, how long they were staying engaged for, and what, if any, positive benefits they were experiencing as a result of involvement.

## WIDER SOCIAL BENEFITS

Naturally, we were aware that the traditional sports development model was adept at engaging those who were already inclined to participate. Our

experience, however, also told us that the sport-focused model was not so well equipped to support those people who were less likely to get involved.

With our focus on wider social benefits rather than participation, we began to think more about why we were funding sport, and what more we might be able to do to support organisations using sport to bring about positive change in their communities.

In response, we developed two main programmes of work aimed at building our understanding of the sporting landscape and how sport can be more effectively harnessed to deliver wider benefits beyond participation and enhanced performance.

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## OUR PROGRAMMES

Our Working with Young People programmes aimed to develop the evidence base around the approaches that are most likely to be effective in engaging young people who would not normally participate in sport.

Many organisations expressed the difficulties they had in engaging and retaining harder-to-reach groups – and young people in particular – in existing sporting activities and, through our funded work, we tested how developing youth work skills, and enabling sporting organisations to adapt their core offer, could help them to better involve these target groups.

These programmes highlighted the importance of a person-centred approach and building relationships with services users and community partners, reflecting the fact that barriers to engagement can be complex and difficult to overcome without support.

Too often, the conversation around why people – and young people in particular – are excluded from sport focuses exclusively on cost and access to facilities. While these are crucial factors in making participation easier, our experience has shown that they ignore other areas such as peer pressure, past negative experiences around sport, and fear and embarrassment, all of which can be powerful blockers to participation.

Our other main programmes focused on supporting the development of capacity and impact for clubs and organisations. We funded 33 organisations through a Legacy 2014 programme, match-funded by the Scottish Government, which looked at how sports organisations could be supported to be more sustainable and impactful.



We also commissioned some independent research to look at how sports in Scotland could be supported to be more impactful and produce outcomes across a range of policy areas. This research concentrated on sport for change approaches (defined as where sport is intentionally used as a tool to bring about positive outcomes) rather than sports development approaches.

## **SPORT FOR CHANGE – WHAT'S NEXT?**

Our Sport for Change work has produced a number of recommendations and we are now working closely with the Scottish Government and sportscotland to identify actions to take forward.

At a strategic level, there is a need to produce clearer messaging that the purpose of investing in sport is to deliver positive outcomes, both in the form of enhancing sporting performance and supporting wider social benefits for individuals and communities. Within this framework, participation is a necessary component, but it is not the end goal.

At a delivery level, the research identified the need to provide additional support to sporting organisations around sustainability and the ways in which they

deliver and evidence the impact of their work. There is an extensive network of organisations delivering sports-based activities in Scotland (around 13,000 sports clubs alone), and a significant number of these operate on a voluntary basis, with resources focused on delivery of the sporting element. For smaller clubs and organisations to move to a 'beyond sport' model of operation, additional capacity skills and resources are needed.

Delivered in the right way, with the right people, sport and physical activity can make a contribution to a wide range of policy areas and outcomes including health, wellbeing, skills and communities. However, for this to happen, the focus needs to be on the individuals and communities that we want to support, rather than the sport itself.

## **WHAT CAN FUNDERS DO?**

From a funder's perspective, one of the most interesting findings from the commissioned research is that many sporting organisations feel there are few funding opportunities available to them. It is our belief that, while this may be true if the sole interest is delivering medals or increasing participation, money is available to those able to talk purposefully about

their intentions and evidence clearly how the use of sport is leading to improved outcomes for those they are working with.

As we have learned from our various programmes and our own experience of over a decade of funding sporting projects, many sports organisations *do* contribute to improved outcomes, but struggle to articulate this. Our advice to other funders working in this area would be to understand this and look at opportunities for supporting such organisations to think about what changes they are trying to bring about and how they will evidence their impact more effectively.

The Robertson Trust is committed to working in this space in the coming years and supporting the ongoing development of the sporting sector as a powerful agent in reducing inequalities and supporting improved outcomes for individuals and communities. If you are interested in finding out more about our work in this area, please do get in touch. ●

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The reports mentioned can be accessed at [www.theRobertsonTrust.org.uk/innovation-and-learning/our-il-themes](http://www.theRobertsonTrust.org.uk/innovation-and-learning/our-il-themes)

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