

From SSP to CSE: a case for change

Despite David Cameron's World Cup bid-related suggestion of a rethink, the future of the Youth Sport Trust's school sports partnership (SSP) programme looks parlous and change is certain. Svend Elkjaer proposes a way forward for beleaguered partnership development managers.

The announcement that funding for school sports partnerships (SSP) would be withdrawn with effect from 31st March 2011 has been met with universal and strong criticism across sport. As with so many areas within sport in Britain there has never been a proper assessment and review as to whether they delivered value for money, whether they had outlived their usefulness and whether all 450 of them were well-functioning enterprises. Of course people have got the right to sign petitions and write letters of protest to their MPs but, in my humble opinion, it will not make any difference to the government's decision to withdraw the direct funding of the SSPs.

Let me now offer you another school of thought. For four years SSPs have had pump prime funding and now they have to learn how to become self-reliant, sustainable enterprises. SSPs should regard this situation not as their death warrant but as a huge opportunity to learn from the social enterprise sector and use their relationships, skills and assets to transform themselves and become community sports enterprises serving not just schools but their whole community. But how?

According to the Social Enterprise Coalition, "Social enterprises are business organisations that trade in the market with a social purpose." They are enterprises which are developed and constituted to fulfil a particular social or community purpose. Their profits are reinvested towards those social or community purposes and they are normally owned and managed by the members of the community in question.

Setting up the legal framework to function as a social enterprise through becoming a company limited by guarantee or a community interest company (CIC) is the easy bit. The main challenge is to develop the enterprise culture and skills required. I do appreciate that this is a big leap for many people working in sports development but one that has to be taken.

Matt Hilton, director of specialism at Fleetwood Sports College and partnership development manager at Wyre and Fylde SSP, is one of the many people working within the SSP programme who feels that now is the time to seize the day. "Following the devastating news from the comprehensive spending review, it is true to say that SSPs are going through the seven stages of grieving, shock, denial, anger, guilt, sorrow, acceptance and engagement," he said. "The biggest challenge for SSPs is to accept, engage, adapt and realign their services to meet the needs of existing and potential clients. There is scope for new ways of working in the form of a social enterprise with SSPs becoming a 'buy in service' that offers bespoke services and products that are value for money. Indeed, it could be said that SSPs have operated under the auspices of a social enterprise with their aims and objectives and surplus monies being reinvested for the benefit of children and young people.

"One thing is for sure, SSP staff will have to think creatively and be entrepreneurial in developing new ways of working in order to generate new income streams. This will be underpinned through maintaining and building positive relationships with new and existing partners. If SSPs can make the transition in doing things differently – doing different things – then a highly skilled leadership and management network will continue to transform the lives of young people and the wider community."

So how could this work? Well-functioning SSPs will have developed a number of initiatives which will have a value for schools, children, parents and the community as a whole. In some cases you would now have to negotiate payment directly with each school and other partners; in other cases you could charge participants and their parents (people are quite happy to pay for good sporting and customer experiences; just ask the 400,000 people who play 5- and 6-a-side football every week). Yes, this means that they are now becoming customers and will have to be treated as such but you are becoming an enterprise and will have to act accordingly.

Then consider the many changes we are seeing in delivery of community services with asset transfer and commissioning of services: the scope for an enterprising SSP becomes even greater. With the Big Society on the doorstep the opportunities are going to be plentiful and there are many other potential community partners than schools. One example? There are 1,900 housing associations in Britain with around

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five million tenants. Most of these partner with local community groups, partly because they are keen to encourage their tenants to engage with their community and partly because it is in their interests to keep their tenants active. So sport and physical activity is an obvious partner. Indeed, there are at least four housing associations that employ their own sports development officers.

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INCommunities is the former housing department of Bradford Council. When Bradford Dragons basketball club converted became a social enterprise INCommunities attended the launch and, as a result, a partnership between the two was forged that sees the Dragons running basketball coaching sessions for the tenants in the wards, tenants getting subsidised tickets to the Dragons summer camp and qualifying for discounted tickets to the Dragons' first team home games. The total value of this package to the Dragons is £26,000, which is a lot of money for a small club like them. An enterprising SSP could deliver a similar programme.

Community sports enterprises should be delivering community activity and leisure in the communities, not just schools; things like Pushy Mums programmes where mums pay £3 to run with their baby buggies in organised groups or Doggy Walks (the one in South Shields attracts 18,000 people once a year who walk 3.5 miles with their pooches and it has raised £3.2m for charity over 15 years).

The practical issues of setting up and developing a vibrant, visible and viable community sports enterprise based on the foundations of the SSP is certainly a challenge but the rewards are great, both for the people who work in the partnerships and for those who benefit from their work.

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