

Uniting the Movement? A Critical Commentary on Sport England's New Strategy

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### **Abstract**

In January, Sport England, the non-departmental public body responsible for growing and developing grassroots and community sport, published its latest strategy, *Uniting the Movement*. The 10-year strategy intends to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity by investing into sport and physical activity programmes and organisations in order to tackle obesity and social inequality with the goal of creating a happier and healthier nation. This critical commentary provides an analysis of this strategy and its implications for sport and physical activity organisations, arguing that the strategy more accurately represents incremental rather than fundamental change and that its development can be characterised as emergent and opportunistic rather than being radical and planned in response to fundamental environmental change. In particular, the commentary explicates the assumptions underpinning the strategy, discusses the overarching themes and central issues embedded within it, and considers its likely impact over the next decade.

*Keywords:* Sport England, Strategy, Uniting a Movement, Participation, Community Sport

### Uniting the Movement? A Critical Commentary on Sport England's New Strategy

In January 2021, Sport England published its latest strategy, *Uniting the Movement*, a 10-year strategy designed to “transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity” (Sport England, 2021, p. 1). Its mission, “to invest in sport and physical activity to make it a normal part of life for everyone in England, *regardless of who you are*” (p. 8, emphasis added). The later point deliberately (re-)emphasising Sport England's desire not only to tackle the growing obesity crisis, but the continued patterns of social inequality that have been “reinforced or even exacerbated” (p. 4) as result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tim Hollingsworth's (CEO, Sport England) remarks in his forward remind us, if any of us need reminding, of the devastation that the pandemic has caused both at an individual and societal level and how now, more than ever, there is a need to “re-imagine how we keep movement, sport and physical activity central to the lives of everyone” (p. 4).

The central question to be considered with any new strategy is what is new? This may be a strategy published in extraordinary times, but what about it is extraordinary? This is important if we are to “re-imagine” (p. 4) sport and physical in the way that Sport England envisions. If we are to re-imagine, then what is the big idea that has alluded us for all these years? Or is it more about pulling the right combination of political, economic, and social levers to achieve desirable outcomes? At first glance, this does appear to be an unprecedented strategy in unprecedented times. It is important, however, to separate ‘rhetoric’ from ‘reality’ when it comes to interrogating policy change (Green, 2006).

My reading of the *Uniting the Movement*, rather than unprecedented, appears to be characteristic of incremental rather than fundamental change for two reasons. First, the strategy has emerged mid-way through a policy cycle with the Department of Digital Culture, Media, and

Sport (DCMS), still seeking to carry out the objectives articulated within *Sporting Future: An Active Nation* (DCMS, 2015). For this reason, you should expect some sort of continuity between *Uniting the Movement* and its predecessor (*Towards an Active Nation Strategy 2016-2020*). A closer inspection of these two documents reveals several similarities and areas of continuity. These include the continued shift towards non-traditional service provision, the increasing emphasis on the importance of physical activity and health and well-being, the desire to address long-standing societal inequalities, sustained emphasis on children and young people, behaviour change, facility investment, and governance, and a continued focus on funding specific investment programmes within local communities. This interpretation is also consistent with the policy change literature (e.g., Bloyce & Smith, 2007; Green, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Lindsey, 2020) which suggests that Sport England is unlikely to deviate too far from its previous direction of travel, in part, due to path-dependency, but also the resource-dependencies that continue to exist between government and the sports councils (Houlihan & Green, 2009).

Second, the fact that the initial consultation and the strategic planning process began prior to the pandemic suggests that the *Uniting the Movement* strategy probably represents more of an *emergent* strategic plan that has finally been formalised, rather than something new that has been rationalised and *planned* in response to fundamental environmental change (O'Brien et al., 2019). It is clear from how the strategy is presented that the pandemic provided an opportunity to articulate “a new way of doing things” (p. 4), offering an impetus to “upgrade” and “adapt” (*ibid*). Sport policy in England has always fluctuated between ‘sport as a social good’ and ‘sport for sport sake’ (Collins, 2010; Lindsey & Houlihan, 2013) and been subject to tensions between mass participation and elite sport (Green, 2007). Rather than radical change, then, new strategy more accurately reflects the continued post-Olympic era shift away from ‘pure sport’ and ‘sport

for sport sake' towards the instrumental use of sport for social change "to tackle the longstanding inequalities we've long seen in sport and physical activity" (p. 4).

What can also be drawn more broadly from the above discussion is the importance of recognising that no strategy is created in a vacuum. They are products and social artefacts of their time that are subject to and influenced by broader social, political, and economic forces that are often beyond their control (Johnson et al., 2017). Sport England's strategy has been published at during a period of significant economic, social and political uncertainty and at a time when, more than ever, sport needs strong leadership and support in order to survive let alone "recover and reinvent" (p. 18) itself. In this regard, Sport England should be commended for its efforts to consult and formalise a strategy in the lead-up to and during a pandemic. This is by no means an easy feat and in my view an indication of good leadership. In normal times, however, it is important to acknowledge that previous policies to tackle inactivity and solve the obesity crisis have failed. Participation rates have remained stubbornly stagnant over the past 50 or so years (Weed, 2016). We must accept as the starting point for any new sport strategy that getting more people to be more physically active is a notoriously 'wicked problem' (Sam, 2009) that subsequent governmental policies, enacted and implemented by Sport England, has yet to solve.

Another notable feature of the new strategy is its 10-year timeframe. This is unusual for a strategic plan and even more unusual for one that is created by an agency that operates arms-length from government. Usually, strategic plans are 3 to 5 years, in part, due to the inherent complexity, uncertainty, and constant changing of the environment surrounding it (O'Brien et al., 2019), but also because politicians and governments typically operate on 4-to-5-year cycles. If a week is a long-time in politics, then a ten-year strategy must be considered a lifetime. Multiple

lifetimes in the case of the DCMS. The average tenure of a Secretary of State Minister for the DCMS over the past decade is 1.4 years. There is good reason to believe that this trend will continue over the next ten years. The assumption being made here by Sport England officials and those who adopt their latest strategy is that successive ministers and governments will continue to support their endeavour. This is risky since ministers and governmental policy often dictate non-departmental public body strategy and not the other way around. Ultimately, then, Sport England is gambling that subsequent ministers will choose to put aside their own ego's, professional aspirations, and even ideologies to allow the strategy to be realised.

The benefits of adopting a long-term strategy are clear. It provides Sport England, and by extension the sporting sector, with a well-defined agenda or 'road-map' for the future and ultimately a better sense of its own long-term direction. This is something that many sport organisations, particularly ones that have traditionally been reliant upon government funding in order to survive, have notably lacked in recent years (Bostock et al., 2020). By setting out a 10-year strategy, Sport England is able to provide grants to support community-based projects over a longer-term period than it has provided previously. This, in turn, enables sport organisations to invest into programmes and initiatives with a degree confidence that they will continue to be supported into the future. This confidence is especially important in the current environment since many sport organisations have seen a significant decline in participation due to the impact of Covid-19, lockdown measures, and the economic downturn (Grix et al., 2020). So perhaps this new strategy along with its subsequent investment portfolio, can provide some much-needed stability in what are otherwise very turbulent times.

A notable admission from the document is exactly who Sport England intends to work with to realise its goals. This is probably a deliberate choice by senior officials rather than any

sort of omission, which effectively gives the public body an ‘open-door policy’ for it to work with ‘just about anybody’ who can demonstrate they can get people more physically active. This may be convenient for senior officials and politicians, but it makes subsequent planning and implementation more difficult.

Another potential downside of this flexible approach to partnership working is that Sport England may find itself straying into relatively uncharted territory which may or may not be welcomed. The admission here is that the non-departmental public body (rightly) recognises that it cannot “achieve [its] ambitions alone” (p. 48) and that if its objectives are to be realised then it may need to continue to invest in areas that it has not traditionally invested and work with partners which it has not previously partnered. This continued divergence from the ‘core market’ and the safe domains of sport will undoubtedly provide new opportunities for some and be a potential threat for others. Equally, the continued broadening scope of who Sport England is willing to work with will open-up new opportunities for charities, trusts, and other non-sport service providers.

The strategy’s central assertion and its title suggests that it seeks to ‘Unite the Movement’. To achieve this, Sport England claims to be “joining forces” (p. 18) with partners to tackle five “big issues” (covid recovery, connecting communities, children and young people, health and well-being, and active environments). The new strategy can be viewed as an attempt by Sport England to set the agenda for getting the nation more physically active, and in doing so, situate itself as a central body, conduit (or “connector”) for various stakeholders within what it describes as the ‘movement’ sector. This is an ambitious and laudable goal, but in stating the obvious, there is no such thing as the movement sector. More accurately, there are a range of individuals and organisations across multiple industries and sectors, all with varying degrees of

interest and capacity to work within and around sport. In short, precisely what or who constitutes the movement sector or how Sport England intends to bring these various stakeholders together still remains unclear.

What is clear from the strategy is the agency's desire to continue to broaden its own remit to be "much more than a funder" (p. 17) and to act as an 'advocate', 'connector', 'partner', 'empowerer', 'champion', and 'catalyst' for change – a tall order for any organisation. More broadly, this choice of language is indicative of an agency that increasingly views itself as operating across departments and sectors. Rather than a realistic long-term strategic goal, then, perhaps the '*Uniting the Movement*' tagline more accurately represents how Sport England increasingly envisions itself as a meta-governing agency (Dowling & Washington, 2017).

Finally, the new strategy attempts to articulate and promote the ongoing benefits that sport and physical activity can provide to society with a strong focus on not only the relative social return on investment, claiming that for every £1 invested into sport that it produces £4 back to society (SIRC, 2020), but also what sport can do for society including providing economic, social, health and welfare benefits. We now live in a post-Olympic, post-austerity, pre-recession era. Sport can no longer justify its existence on increasing participation numbers and winning more medals alone. It must demonstrate its impact and contribution to society. This is not easy to do, especially when attempting to measure in-tangible benefits which are not so easily quantifiable as either medals or participation rates. Despite this, it appears that Sport England is learning to recognise impact when they see it, regardless of whether it can be quantifiably measured. Sport England have finally accepted that a national target for increased participation is both a blunt and unhelpful measure and have chosen instead to adopt a "hybrid approach" (p. 52) to demonstrate success. There has also been some useful progress within the

literature (e.g., Chen, 2018; Oatley & Harris, 2020) to help evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and programmes beyond traditional logic models or scorecards. I hope that some of these ideas will be meaningfully embraced to evaluate the new strategy in the years to come.

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