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Sport policy formation and enactment in post-devolution Wales: 1999–2020

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ABSTRACT

Sport Wales (previously the Sports Council for Wales) is the lead non-government organisation for the delivery and management of sport policy in Wales and receives an annual grant from the Welsh Government, which is supplemented by additional money from the National Lottery. There are also 22 unitary authorities that are responsible for school and community-level sport and physical activity provision. The purpose of this article is to undertake a policy critique of sport in Wales since devolution. The provided commentary charts the development of Welsh sport policy since 1999 as part of an overall governmental emphasis on physical health and wellbeing. It is divided into the three organising themes that reflect three domains of sport and physical activity participation – school, community and elite. The analysis is predicated on a review of outcomes and impact on different sectors and draws upon (some) comparisons with the English context. The principal conclusion is that even though the Welsh Government has been led by the Labour Party since devolution, the adoption of neo-liberal principles has (at least implicitly) impacted negatively on policy formation and enactment. This article offers new insight into sports policy development and enactment in Wales since 1999 and draws attention, in particular, to the importance of sport and physical activity at a time of global pandemic as well as the neglect of black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in policy discourses.

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Introduction

Wales is one of the home nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) with a population of just over 3,000,000 (Office for National Statistics 2019). It is a small country (there are over 130 countries with a larger population and over 150 with a greater land mass) but it has a rich sporting history (Jarvie 1999, Johnnes 2005). Indeed, Wales has a long history of enculturation through areas such as the arts, and perhaps more notably through sport. Even prior to devolution, organisations such as the Urdd have been providing (sporting) opportunities for young people between the ages of 8–25 since 1922 through the medium of Welsh (Urdd Cymru 2021). This affinity to the Welsh language has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity of late, and one of the ambitious targets of the Welsh Government is for there to be 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government 2017).

In recent times, on the world stage, the principality has enjoyed some notable sporting successes, with national fervour reaching a peak during 2016 when the Wales men's football (soccer) team reached the semi-finals of the UEFA European Championships – the first time that qualification for

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a major tournament had been secured since the World Cup in 1958. Women's football has also flourished in Wales in recent years, with the national team narrowly missing out on qualification for the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France. For small nations especially, sport is often a vehicle for the expression of ethnic identity and national pride (Fleming 2016), and these examples illustrate the enactment of identity that characterises engagement with, and consumption of national sporting contests; they also underscore political questions linked to the economy, health and wellbeing (Holden 2011). Thus, sport is an important policy tool at the disposal of politicians. Historically, sport in Wales has been managed politically by the UK Government at Westminster, but it became one of the areas of devolved responsibility bestowed upon the new constitution as part of the devolution process, which was ratified in the Government of Wales Act 1998 (Holden 2011).

Following devolution, most of the research on UK sport policy has focused primarily on England and has neglected the other home nations. The purpose of this paper is therefore to provide an evaluative commentary on the development of sport policy in Wales. Following a brief background and context covering governance of Welsh sport policy, there are three substantive sections that provide an overview of sport/physical activity domains: school, community and elite (Hylton 2013). These sections review the success of policy interventions. The commentary also considers the extent to which the not-for-profit and commercial sectors have influenced sport policy. A summary section completes the paper.

The governance of Welsh sport policy

The main goal of devolution is legislative decentralisation (Bradbury 2008), which takes the form of either primary or secondary legislative powers and in Wales, the latter has applied. The 1998 Act was based on a series of 'top-down' proposals developed by Welsh Labour between 1992 and 1997 by the then Shadow Secretary of State for Wales, Ron Davies. It was reported that Davies capitalised on momentum associated with the Scottish devolution referendum in 1997, and although viewed as limited because of Wales' perceived political shortcomings, the constitution of the new Welsh Assembly was seen as being *avant-garde* (Bradbury 2008). As Day *et al*. (2000, p. 25) explain:

> The devolution of decision-making powers to the National Assembly of Wales signifies political recognition of the distinctiveness of Wales as a place that merits representation, which has its own voice and its own problems and concerns. In other words, it is accepted as forming a distinct, though not totally separate society.

The symbolic influence of these responsibilities was downplayed, for although the powers were mainly secondary, they still included responsibility for the National Health Service (NHS), education and lifelong learning, economic development, social justice, the arts and culture (Holden 2011). This was important for Wales as although it has a rich cultural heritage, it also has a long history of attempting to overcome the effects of deprivation. Such was the salience of this, the first Welsh government made an ambitious (and unsuccessful) goal to end child poverty by 2020 (Evans 2019). Even though policies that have focussed on reducing unemployment have made great strides in reducing poverty in relation to the rest of the UK, the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (a multiple outcome official measure) still demonstrates that there is roughly a 9-year life expectancy gap between people from the most and least deprived areas (ONS 2020). Nevertheless, in recent times policy makers have taken a more collaborative approach to reducing inequality, with sport and physical activity featuring prominently in a number of different policy domains.

As its own policy domain, public sector sport, leisure and recreation had been governed in Wales for many years before, but these developments intensified Wales' commitment and stewardship. Welsh Ministers have had authority to provide support and guidance to the various agencies responsible for promoting sport and recreation activities, but the Sports Council for Wales (now known by its trade name, Sport Wales) was formed by Royal Charter in 1972, and it is the lead non-government organisation for the delivery and management of sport policy in Wales (Law Wales 2020). It receives an annual grant from the Welsh Government, which in the 2018/19 financial year

was just over £27 million pounds (Sport Wales 2020a).[1] This grant is supplemented by additional money from the National Lottery, which has ostensibly enabled the Welsh Government to resource community-level delivery.

Operating beneath national government are 22 local authorities that have the responsibility to deliver school and community-level sport and physical activity provision. This arrangement emerged from New Labour's 1997 overhaul of existing structures in Westminster following general acceptance that Wales had been politically managed in the same (parochial) way for over a century (Bolton and Fleming 2007). The Local Government Act 2000 changed this by requiring local authorities in both England and Wales to introduce new constitutions and the devolved National Assembly in Wales set its own guidance. A new partnership agreement was established between the Welsh Local Government Association and the National Assembly Government equipping local authorities with a politically balanced board, modernised committee structure and enhanced powers of scrutiny (Bolton and Fleming 2007).

The development of sport policy in Wales has been wide-ranging, with sport featuring as a smaller piece of the public health jigsaw that has largely emphasised physical health and wellbeing. In 2005, the Welsh Assembly Government released the all-encompassing national sport policy, *Climbing Higher*, which included new physical activity guidelines for adults and children. Adults, for example, should aim to participate in at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise five times a week, and for children it was 60 minutes five times a week (Welsh Assembly Government 2005). Consistent with many other national sports councils in Europe, North America and Australasia, Sport Wales has a dual policy agenda which embraces the two broad – sometimes intersecting, sometimes competing – priorities of increasing participation (especially with young people) and achieving (more) elite success on the international stage (Sport Wales 2012a).[2]

School

It was during the period of John Major's Conservative administration (1990–1997) that school sport became a highly visible strategic priority prior to devolution. Receiving personal endorsement from Prime Minister Major, *Raising the Game* identified the need to reverse the decline of school sport (Bolton *et al*. 2007). The Labour-led Welsh Assembly Government mirrored these concerns, claiming that young people's participation in physical activity was worrying, especially for those in secondary schools (Bolton *et al*. 2007). Indeed, when New Labour assumed power in Westminster in 1997, they soon published *A Sporting Future for All* (DCMS 2000) – a policy statement that was lauded for its emphasis on school sport.

Later, under Tony Blair's leadership of the UK Government, an offshoot of *A Sporting Future for All* saw Labour galvanise physical education and school sport (PESS) in England with the publication of their PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy (DfES/DCMS 2003). This strategy signalled the start of substantial funding increases for PESS in England, most of which were channelled into increasing the number of School Sport Partnerships consisting of clusters of primary and secondary schools across the whole of England (Lindsey 2020). Thus, it became widely accepted that PESSCL became the standardised organisational model for the implementation of Labour's PESS policy, and the PESSCL strategy also witnessed the first attempts to measure participation through the School Sport Survey. Given the importance and level of resourcing placed on this new organisational framework, it was strange that only one form of official data capture occurred in the form of this survey in 2009/10.

In parallel with Westminster, the Welsh Assembly Government (2005) released the all-encompassing policy, *Climbing Higher*. As Bolton *et al*. (2007) report, it had three targets with specific objectives for young people to achieve by 2023:

Target 3:

- At least 90% of boys and girls of secondary school age will participate in sport and physical activity for 60 minutes, five times a week.

- All secondary schools will provide a minimum of 2 hours of curricular based and 1 hour of extracurricular sport and physical activity per week. (p. 9)

Target 7

- 80% of children will be junior members of sports clubs or centres. (p. 9)

Target 9

- In the next 20 years, all children in Wales will have experienced an outdoor adventure activity before the age of 12 and a further experience before the age of 16. (p. 11)

Climbing Higher also provided the impetus for the Dragon Sport and 5x60 PE and school sport programmes within primary and secondary schools in Wales. Dragon Sport is a Sport Wales initiative that is funded by the National Lottery. It was originally designed to provide engaging extra-curricular sporting opportunities for 7–11-year-olds. The original objectives of the scheme were to establish clubs in both the school and community environments; recruit and train a volunteer workforce but most importantly to make sport fun for all children (SCW, 2006). Preliminary evidence noted some early successes with the programme, as in 2007, 86% of all schools in Wales were running Dragon Sports clubs and the scheme had recruited and trained over 6400 volunteers (Griffiths and Rainer 2009). However, as the programme has matured it has changed on several fronts. Now known as the Dragon Multi-Skills and Sport programme, its annual budget was reported as just over £1 million pounds in the 2016–17 financial year, when it has previously been as high as nearly £2 million pounds in 2009–10 (Public Accounts Committee 2017). Furthermore, there is little/no available evidence about the current effectiveness of the programme. Moreover, data from Sport Wales' (2018) school sport survey reported that only 64% on 7–11-year-olds have current sports club membership – which is significantly under target 7 of climbing higher (80%).

In the secondary environment, Dragon Sport's counterpart was the 5x60 initiative, and the overall aims of 5x60 were to encourage diverse and engaging participation alongside ensuring young people were empowered to develop and promote opportunities. The 5x60 programme was managed by 5x60 officers employed by local authorities and based within a school – sometimes with responsibility for more than one. Their remit was two-fold. First, to create and develop extra-curricular school sport and physical activity, and to source facilitators (ie sports coaches) to aid the delivery. Second, it was intended that the 5x60 officers became the interface between school and community settings, providing a stepping-stone to build successful partnerships and networks (Bolton *et al*. 2007).

There were many positive features of the programme (Leyshon *et al*. 2012), but these did not align with traditional notions of team sport. Instead, young people relished the opportunity to participate in alternative activities such as fencing, mountain biking and gorge walking. Interestingly, and perhaps more in-keeping with a traditional sporting paradigm, young people valued competition and the opportunity to represent their school. An evaluation of 5x60 by Rainer *et al*. (2015) reported several issues with the programme. As well as the common barriers to participation (ie transport, motivation to participate, lack of resources, and poor school-club links), there was a role conflict between 5x60 officers and existing PE staff that created tensions and an unnecessary barrier to successful delivery. Additionally, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to provision did not work and further exacerbated the disparity between what young people want to do both inside and outside of school.

Sport Wales has tracked PE and extra-curricular sport participation for almost two decades. It has been consistently documented that pupil enjoyment of PE diminishes as they transition from primary to secondary school. Moreover, recent trend data have shown that outside of PE, young people participate more in community rather than school sport. Longitudinally, the percentage of pupils across years 3 to 11 (aged 7 to 16) who participate regularly (ie three times a week or more) in

community sport has risen from 40% in 2013 to 48% in 2018 (Sport Wales 2018). There are two simple but important conclusions to be drawn: first, established community sport clubs are a key driver for participation; second, and worryingly, that young people either participate whole heartedly or not at all.

When a coalition government between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was formed in Westminster in 2010, the sport policy that ensued dismantled the established network of physical education and school sport in England, and encouraged a return to elitism and competition, which in part influenced the Welsh context. As Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove rejected school sport partnerships as neither affordable nor the best way for schools to improve competitive sport potential (Garratt and Kumar 2019). The corollary of this fostered a blurring of policy boundaries that saw Gove axe £162 million of annual school sport partnerships funding, instead using National Lottery funding to establish a competitive school sport programme, which became the *School Games*. Indeed, conflating PE and competitive sport has sparked an ideological return to the vestiges of *Sport: Raising the Game* (Department of National Heritage 1995), which had sought to emphasise the role of individualism, elitism, citizenship and national pride (Garratt and Kumar 2019).

Funded by Sport England, the *School Games* programme commenced in 2010 and consisted of four types of competition ranging from intra-school to national competitions (Your School Games 2020). Whilst not formally adopted as a nationwide initiative in Wales, representation at several national competitions, as well as Cardiff and Swansea hosting the competition is evidence of implicit adoption of the games in Wales. This was solidified at the local level and Sport Cardiff (the city's unitary authority sport development unit) managed the Cardiff Games – which is a pan-city inclusive multi-sport competition introduced in 2013 in which all primary and secondary schools were entered automatically and took part in sporting competitions arranged in line with the academic calendar (Cardiff Games 2020).

The commercial sector has permeated PE and school sport, especially in the primary sector. Private companies have capitalised on a lacuna in this provision and provide PE and extracurricular support, which is paid for through school budgets and the pupils, respectively. For curricular provision, the lack of expertise (and inclination) of primary school teachers delivering PE has been discussed extensively, and this disposition stems to a significant extent from a lack of confidence and knowledge in being able to deliver PE lessons (Blair and Capel 2008). This is further conflated by initial teacher training programmes in primary education, where trainee teachers have a disproportionately low exposure to PE in relation to other subjects (Sloan 2010). In turn, this has meant that primary schools have been willing to outsource PE, normally packaged to cover teachers' planning, preparation and assessment time (Parnell *et al*. 2017).

Extra-curricular sport and physical activity provision has also become part of an offer from the commercial sector. For example, under the auspices of corporate social responsibility and community engagement, the public-facing charitable arms of professional football clubs have provided community football coaching in school settings after school in term time, as well as in the school holidays. With a mandatory requirement to provide coaching under the rubric of education, and overseen by an amalgam of footballing governing bodies, clubs charge pupils a fee for the services provided. So, there is a potential barrier to participation from the outset, and far from being inspired by altruism, there is also a suggestion that whilst these programmes have the veneer of sport-for-development, they are actually used as investment for capital gains through talent identification and recruitment to the clubs' academies (Hylton and Totten 2013). Indeed, Hylton and Totten (2013) go further and note the much wider issue of the commercial sector's involvement in school sport. For example, Sainsbury's sponsorship of the School Games was branded as a leading supermarket chain championing school sport and the associated benefits of sport and physical activity. But Sainsbury's vouchers for kids' scheme – through which schools were able to buy sports equipment by encouraging parents to do weekly shopping in their stores – meant that parents would collectively have to spend £280 for a skipping rope and £2,490 for a bean bag (Hylton and Totten 2013).

The scheme was abolished in 2017 after running for 13 years, with Sainsbury's donating over £186 million to schools across the UK (Active Kids 2020), which further spotlights how much money customers have had to spend in their supermarkets in order to yield such a substantial donation. Their involvement in the sector has continued, with the launch of the Active Kids' sport and physical activity school holiday clubs. These multisport clubs are packaged as 'cheap childcare' in school holiday periods and can only be paid for in full or by converting Nectar points.[3] This arguably creates a further barrier to participation for disadvantaged children whose families simply cannot afford to attend, and this is particularly important given the current climate in light of the global pandemic. Indeed, preliminary evidence in Wales suggests that young people are participating less than pre-COVID-19 times, with the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children's participation glaringly wider (Sport Wales 2020b).

Community

Community sport and physical activity has been at the forefront of sport policy in Wales both directly and in other areas of social policy. The beacon of community sport and physical activity in Wales is the free-swimming initiative. As Europe's longest running health programme, free-swimming began in Wales in 2003 as Welsh Government policymakers moved swiftly to form their own distinctive health priorities. Free-swimming has two target groups, each emerging from different policy areas. The under-16s were targeted to try and raise participation as part of *Climbing Higher* and the over-60s were targeted as part of a *Strategy for Older People*, which was intended to address older people's rights as well as tackling isolation, poverty and social exclusion (Anderson *et al*. 2014).

Implementation of free swimming for young people took less than three months from the ministerial announcement to its formal launch across the 22 unitary local authorities in Wales, with a further 16 months before it was introduced for the 60-plus population in November 2004 (Anderson *et al*. 2014). The delivery of free-swimming in Wales is largely top-down, with Sport Wales being responsible for distributing an annual grant of approximately £3 million as part of their overall budget. The formula for grant allocation was very basic – which has fundamentally been an authority's population (Bolton and Martin 2013). Each authority received its annual grant to mitigate both the cost of free-swimming and lost income. Moreover, it was reported that there was no alignment between the grant allocation and the scheme's aims or any free-swimming performance measures and targets (Anderson *et al*. 2014).

Nevertheless, throughout its duration free swimming has seen notable successes in raising participation for both target groups, especially between 2004 and 2010. There has been a considerable increase in participation since its introduction, with many of those now swimming stating that they would swim less or give up completely if they had to pay (Bolton and Martin 2013). These successes are offset slightly by other factors that impact upon participation such as pool locations, opening times, transport links, existing fitness levels, body image, a dislike of swimming and the need for young children to be accompanied by an adult (Bolton and Martin 2013, p. 459). Still, it represents a substantial return on government investment, which is a totally different outcome to the English context where free swimming lasted for only 1 year (Bullough *et al*. 2015).

Sport Wales' *Community Sport Strategy 2012–2020* has been an integral part of delivery in recent times. Five broad areas were earmarked in the hope of creating thriving sporting communities: (1) thriving clubs, (2) local decisions, (3) quality education, (4) committed workforce and (5) appropriate facilities (Sport Wales 2012b). A cursory evaluation of the strategy portrays a mixed picture of success. Evidence suggests that adults, especially, are moving away from traditional team sports in clubs, taking a more individualistic approach to sport and physical activity participation. For example, amongst the most popular activities in Wales, adult football participation stands at 8% but is behind walking, gym or fitness classes, (indoor) swimming, jogging and cycling (Sport Wales 2019).

Sports club membership levels for adults in Wales are even less – for football and rugby union stand at 4% and 3% respectively, badminton and squash at 3%, tennis, golf, and netball at 2% and cricket at 1% (Statista 2017).

Similar trends are evident in England. A secondary analysis of Active People Survey data between 2005 and 2015 by Harris *et al*. (2017) has shown that there has been a general decline in adult participation since the 1990s, especially set against the backdrop of substantial public funding invested between 2008 and 2016, which showed that 43 out of 45 government funded sports showed either no change or a decrease. Interestingly, the report concludes that forming identity in contemporary society negates one of the traditional benefits that team sports confer on their participants, and therefore young people are seeking to express themselves through individual/lifestyle activities (eg, fitness classes). Ultimately, this has the knock-on effect of decreasing civic activity and diminishing levels of social capital, which has tended to remain in older generations (Harris *et al*. 2017). Perhaps more strikingly, and something that can help explain these trends in the Welsh context, is the supply and demand of sport and physical activity, and the extent to which the commercial sector appears to be leading the charge.

These findings may also go some way to explaining some unintended outcomes of the second priority (above) in the Welsh context. 'Local decisions', within the community strategy, were concerned with prioritising needs and wants of local communities, focussing on the development of sport at local level through the decentralising of established sports structures (Sport Wales 2012b). This was underscored by the aspirational ambition of girls, women, people living in poverty and hard-to-reach groups becoming central to the decision-making process. Sport Wales stated that this would be apparent through strong regional and area sport structures, and there has been some targeted success (see Bolton *et al*.'s (2018) commentary of the Us Girls initiative), but in the main the commercial sector has successfully infiltrated and sustained supplier power in a number of different ways.

The growth of the private sector health and fitness industry in Wales (and across the UK) has provided individuals with diversity and choice. For example, budget gyms offer affordable exercise opportunities 24 hours a day and cater for the changing working patterns that are now the building blocks of several different sectors of the British workforce. This additional competition to the more traditional (and now aged) local authority leisure facility means that people who have less disposable income than others still have access to newer facilities with the latest equipment (Duggan 2014). This is especially important when evidence demonstrates that where cost as a barrier is removed or supplemented, participation at the gym increases for people from deprived areas, and one which has featured successfully in localised public health policy in England (Rabiee *et al*. 2015).

Welsh Labour has led the Welsh Government since devolution, yet there are certain facets of their policy development that are similar to those laid out in Westminster by the Conservative-led administration and the coalition government during the same period. The former UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, swung even further to the right of his already centre-right ideological principles (Mackintosh and Liddle 2015). This has seen a return to the Conservative 'Big Society', whereby financial austerity has reduced the public spend on discretionary areas (such as sport, physical activity and leisure). Some key indicators of the policy shift in England were the cancellation of the £55 million school building programme, the postponement of the plan to build 3500 school playgrounds at a cost of £235 million, alongside the already discussed phasing-out of the £162 million PE and School Sport Strategy (Devine 2013).

Throughout the UK, the Big Society has been most prominently revealed in the third sector as perhaps an unintended consequence of proposed policy goals. The resounding success of Parkrun is a prime example. As a mass-participation community running initiative across the UK, Parkrun allows runners of all abilities to run a timed 5K race in (rural and urban) parkland areas. There are now 29 locations in Wales (out of 727 in total) with social inclusion and social cohesion emphasised in a way that allows elite and recreational runners to participate in the same place at the same time (Stevinson *et al*. 2014). More recent research has also unearthed positive evidence that Parkrun breaks down

other barriers associated with cost and accessibility, as well as boosting local economies with pre- and post-event socialising, and fostering strong club links if participants want to become regular runners (Sharman *et al*. 2018).

Elite

Even before devolution, elite sport has been viewed as a priority in Wales and the steps taken have arguably set the precedent for other home nations. The setting up of a government mega events team that advised on the hosting of several notable events, as well as athlete support, being a mainstay of the policy landscape with The Elite Cymru athlete support programme has been in existence since 1997. Originally incepted to financially support Olympic/Paralympic athletes with podium potential – UK Sport took ownership of this in 2006. Nevertheless, the programme has remained and now covers: individual non-Olympic and non-Paralympic sports, Commonwealth Games' sports, and sports that medal on the world stage (Sport Wales 2021). At a broad level, the programme offers a commensurate level of financial and auxiliary support in line with other home nations.

The latest policy statement related to elite sport in Wales can be located in the *Elite Sport Strategy* (Sport Wales 2015). The overarching mission of the strategy is for Wales to become the number one Commonwealth Games sporting nation, with the supplementary aim of increasing the number and quality of athletes on UK-wide World Class Programmes. There were six broad objectives: (1) Wales to top the per capita medals table at the 2018 Commonwealth Games; (2) Welsh athletes to win 6–10 Olympic and 20–30 Paralympic medals over two cycles of competitions; (3) Welsh athletes to account for 10% of UK World Class programmes; (4) Welsh athletes to make up 7% of TeamGB in 2016, rising to 10% thereafter; (5) the top eight elite sports delivering systematic talent development by 2018; and (6) 120 athletes in the 'medal zone' at the start of the 2022 cycle.

In measuring the outcome of elite sport policy, Wales has experienced some impressive gains. When calculated in relation to medals won per head of the population, Wales finished second (only to New Zealand) in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games medal table (Abbandanato 2016). These successes then continued into the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games where Wales won a record 36 medals (BBC 2018). Remarkably, these successes have occurred despite the strategy point (4) not being realised. There were 366 athletes representing TeamGB at the Rio games (TeamGB 2016), of whom 23 were Welsh – which equates to 6% rather the targeted 7% (BBC 2016). Moreover, specifically, in relation to Aim 17 of *Climbing Higher*, the men's Welsh Football Team has sustained a top-24 world ranking. Currently ranked 31st at the time of writing (FIFA 2020), the team has also recorded the biggest rise in ranking history in 2015, moving from 117th to 8th (BBC 2015).[4] The women's team has also achieved significant success, rising to 34th from 56th since 2003 (FIFA 2020).

A notable omission from Welsh sport policy is the extent that (second order) mega-events (see Gruneau and Horne 2016) have contributed to the country's development, although Welsh Labour did recognise the value that they can bring to the economy. In Cardiff alone, there are three modern stadia with a combined capacity of 119,000 seats – the Principality Stadium, home of the Welsh Rugby Union (WRU), the Cardiff City Stadium, home of Cardiff City FC, and the Swalec Stadium (home of Glamorgan County Cricket Club). Indeed, Wales has hosted a number of elite (second order) sporting events in recent times, notably the men's Rugby World Cup in 1999. The WRU invested £114 million in the Millennium Stadium,[5] which at the time plunged the national governing body into significant debt (Harris 2015). Despite this, as well as early scepticism from the Welsh media and public, a successful tournament was delivered in 1999 the stadium became an icon for Welsh tourism, even gaining a front cover spread on the Welsh Assembly Government's (2008) national events strategy.

To host sporting mega-events, potential host nations must often present legacy benefits, yet there is little or no evidence to show how Wales has benefitted besides economically. The city of Newport hosted the 2010 Ryder Cup, but as Harris (2015) has argued, no benefits accrued because

the venue (the Celtic Manor Resort) sits on the easterly fringe of the city, and the only real regeneration was to the resort itself. It is hard to disagree when in 2014 the venue hosted the NATO summit, even though most formal engagements were hosted in neighbouring Cardiff; and later, in 2018, Sir Terry Matthews opened the Wales International Conference Centre on his Celtic Manor site as a joint venture with the Welsh Government, further cementing the advancement of neo-liberal economic aspirations for Wales. The 2017 UEFA men's Champions League Final provides another example of a boost to the Welsh economy of £45 million, but aside from the development of a single 'legacy' small-sided 3G football pitch in one of the most deprived and culturally diverse areas of the City, there has been little evidential impact since. These outcomes align with what Nichols and Ralston (2015) term as 'regulatory capitalism'. This is where the governance arrangements of hosting mega sporting events display a clear disconnect between economic aspirations and legacy planning. Their research looked at London 2012 Olympic legacy planning and delivery, and they found that several community engagement events were hampered because of the prioritisation of economic gains. They also report that contractors, employees and volunteers were censored through non-disclosure agreements, which meant that 'legacy' in relation to knowledge transfer (ie, sharing best practice) for future second order mega events is somewhat impeded.

The intentions underpinning funding elite sport raise questions around what governments actually want in return for their investment. Grix and Carmichael (2012) have argued convincingly that if it is to embrace the virtuous cycle of sport – which in simple terms is a cyclical model that suggests elite sporting successes lead to increased mass participation, and thus, a healthier and wider pool for talent identification – then this is an impossible panacea. An over-emphasis on the part of the government to effect change through elite sport policy discourse, and evidence from England has confirmed that the relationship between elite sport and mass participation is arbitrary (Carmichael *et al*. 2013). In Wales, one of the key priorities related to the strategy is the focus on raising participation in order to grow the talent pool in Olympic/Paralympic sports. However, trend data on participation patterns coupled with a dwindling sports club membership is stifling these aspirations. The only real increase in participation numbers because of increased elite success has been the growth of women's football – which, interestingly, does not feature in the strategy. There has been a rise of 50% in participation since 2016 with 8,600 women and girls now registered with football clubs in Wales (FAW Trust 2020). It is thought that this is attributable to a high-profile and largely successful World Cup qualifying campaign, which ultimately resulted in missing out narrowly on qualification for the 2019 tournament.

Summary

It is clear from the commentary on the development of sport policy in post-devolution Wales that even though Wales has been led (or majority led) by a Labour government throughout, the enactment of a hybrid ideological approach has seen the influence of neo-liberal principles underscores the policy landscape, with the commercial sector embedded firmly in the provision of sport and physical activity in Wales.

There have, of course, been many successes of sport policy enactment in Wales, but there are also lessons to be learned for policymakers in relation to measuring the success of sport policy and its outcomes. Bolton *et al*. (2018) has warned against the setting of ambiguous sport policy goals. Instead, they argue for a 'theories of change approach' to measure the impact of sport policy. Using the *Us Girls* programme in Wales, they have demonstrated the merit in using logic models to ascertain the impact of sport and physical activity initiatives and their alignment with wider policy goals, rather than just reporting participation trends, or trying to measure whether people are 'hooked on sport' or not as the case may be. Hence, there is real potential for sport and physical activity to impact positively across several policy domains. This is especially important in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic that began early in 2020. There is evidence of increased susceptibility to the virus amongst those with obesity (Public Health England 2020) as well as explicit guidance from the NHS (2020) to

those with underlying health conditions that may be linked to physical inactivity (Hardman and Stensel 2009). So, whilst sport and physical activity are not panaceas, participating in sport and physical activity can certainly help to offset some of these possibilities (Bolton and Martin 2013).

Finally, a serious omission in the development of Welsh sport policy has been the lack of specific focus on increasing participation within black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. This comes at a time when the UK is experiencing acute political division. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign has been visible in high-profile sports – but none-more-so than in professional football with a full endorsement from the Premier League in the UK with its own campaign. When football resumed in the UK after COVID-19 restrictions had been eased, players had BLM logos embroidered on their shirts and were supported to take a knee before (or during) matches (Premier League 2020). Using sport as a mechanism for calming tension/raising awareness about broader societal concerns is certainly not new terrain – see, for example, the Action Sport initiatives of the 1980s (see Houlihan 2003). Yet recent evidence in Wales has revealed that BAME communities consistently feel disenfranchised from participating in sport and physical activity. Dashper *et al*. (2019) report that this is because Welsh sport policy has inadvertently neglected BAME voices in the policy formation process, instead focussing too much on the supply aspect of sport and physical activity, which often overlooks the nuances of what underrepresented groups actually want (Fleming 2016).

Policymakers and policy actors in both national and local government need to understand how the sport and physical activity landscape is slowly starting to be dominated by the commercial sector in the three traditional sport development environments. Therefore, there is potential for stronger inter-sector partnerships to be formed in order to create a shared space where stronger relationships will strengthen provision for participants.

Notes

1. Accurate funding figures for the 2019/20 financial year have been delayed due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.
2. Wales has been in a Labour-led coalition government since 2016, but sport policy developments have remained unchanged and relate to previous 'totally' Labour-led administrations.
3. The Nectar reward scheme is Sainsbury's supermarket customer loyalty scheme.
4. FIFA changed the way that rankings were calculated in 1999 and again in 2018. The algorithm currently in use is explained in a technical note (FIFA 2018).
5. The Millennium Stadium is Wales' national stadium. Built to host the 1999 men's Rugby World Cup, it has been known as the Principality Stadium as part of a sponsorship deal since 2016.

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