

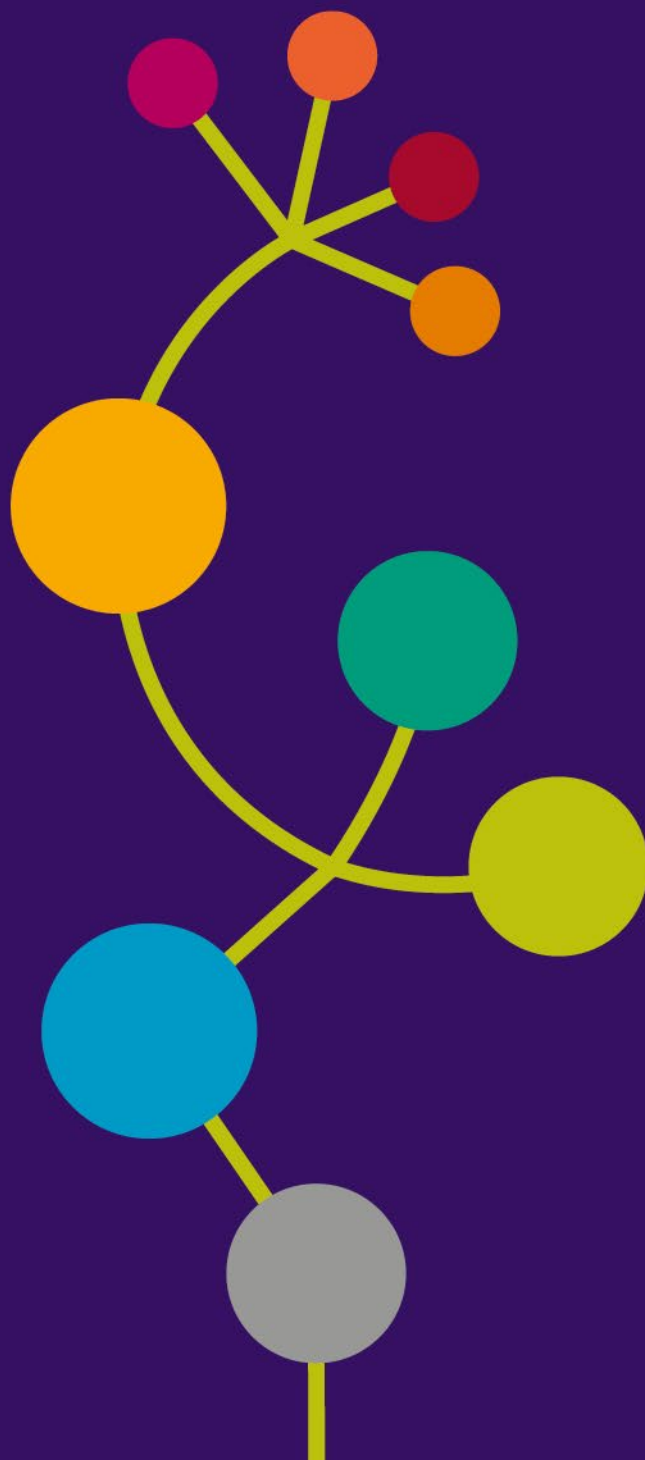
Policy briefing

October 2024



Loughborough
University

UK Capital of Sport: A feasibility study



A policy brief produced in October 2024, authored by colleagues at Loughborough University, Counsel Ltd. and Spirit of 2012.



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Starting point of the study - the importance of events to communities

The event industry in the UK is buoyant and estimated to be worth around £42billion. On top of this, large-scale sporting and cultural events such as the Olympics, Paralympics and Commonwealth Games have significant positive impacts on communities across the country. Similarly, many have witnessed the social legacy City of Culture bids – including losing bids – can have on a town, city or region. In recent years inquiries and studies have gone beyond large-scale and considered the impacts of events at local, community, regional using a more place-based approach.

Against this backdrop, a feasibility study was launched in collaboration with [Spirit of 2012](#) and [Counsel Ltd.](#) to explore the potential for a UK Capital of Sport. This policy briefing will outline its findings, including the key challenges policymakers must consider if the concept is taken forward.

Study approach

The feasibility study project team sought to find out if there was an appetite for a UK Capital of Sport and, if so, what model that would take. To do this, the team:

- Gathered evidence and insight from over 150 different of voices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales through online public polling, interviews, presentations and workshops.
- Explored a range of previously hosted local through to international events and festivals through documentary analysis and event attendance and observations.
- Used a balance of evidence-based and visionary thinking across three stages to develop event models and concepts, using an Ideas Incubation Group and working collaboratively with concurrent Spirit of 2012 strategic projects.



Study findings

The evidence produced from the review of previous events was analysed through adopting and adapting key principles from strategic decision making (such as, PESTLE analysis) to highlight what has worked well in the past and identifying some trends across different event concepts and models. The study captured themes which any future model must consider if the proposal is taken forward:

Political considerations – an event will need ‘buy-in’ from different governmental organisations and agencies. Successful place-based events have a strong political backing, an emerging trend is for regional and city-based political support to drive this beyond a ‘city of’, for example the Liverpool City Region, Borough of Culture.

Economic considerations – an event will need to be affordable across the whole event lifecycle i.e. feasibility, bid, preparation, hosting, legacy stages. Funds are drawn from a range of different sources, with a growing trend to base an event on a mixed investment model, for example the Great Run events have a mixture of commercial and governmental in kind and direct economic support.

Sociological and sporting considerations – an event will need clearly defined and engaged beneficiaries in the host community, moreover for this study an event that can demonstrate a connection to health and wellbeing. The clarity of ‘who’ directly benefits from an event is mixed, with events like the European City of Sport or Britain in Bloom having a clear remit to target community beneficiaries. Moreover, events such as City of Culture reference the presence of health and well-being, but few events embed it as a primary underpinning drive or outcome.

Technological considerations – an event will need a primary event operational model. A range of legal models were used across different events, ranging from franchises to kitemarks. The longevity and legacy of events does not explicitly correlate with one dominant operational model, however a trend with ‘cities of’ or ‘places of’ is to create organizing/delivery committees within existing public infrastructure.

Legal considerations – an event will need an accountability body and clarity on who is responsible for delivering and reporting on different stages of the event. A mixture of centralized and decentralized ways of working in relation to control and accountability, for example the European City of sport model is managed much more as decentralized model, and the pressure is on the host place to comply with regulations and secure long-lasting impacts.

Environmental considerations – an event will need to consider varying aspects of sustainability, notably environmental sustainability. A growing trend in recent events is to promote sustainability initiatives within the event delivery, however, less evidence found on how sustainability principles were present at the feasibility, bid and planning stages.

Study conclusions

From this the project built and tested a series of bidding models and proposed event concepts. The **three models for bidding** that tested the most favourably were:

- **Competitive bid (one winner)**, e.g. every 4 years, replicate the City of Culture infrastructure and examples.
- **Competitive bid (multiple winners from across the Home Nations)**, e.g. every 4 years, transform to include multiple winners based on differentiators such as per Home Nation or per size category (city, town, village).
- **Competitive applications (multiple awardees through a clear criteria)**, e.g. every 4 years, if a place meets a threshold, then they are awarded a status and potential extra recognition / status. This could be capped at an agreed number (e.g. top 5/10) but this may not be necessary.

The **three Capital of Sport event concepts** that tested the most favourably were:

Enhancement of an existing event - partner with the next City of Culture to embed health and wellbeing outcomes and strengthen the contribution of sport within existing event infrastructure.

“I think wrapping activity around an existing City of Culture would be the most impactful. The current event infrastructure investments would allow for greater value for money if they can also be used for increasing sport and physical activity. There is also an increasing focus that sport and culture sit hand in hand.” Feasibility Consultee, 2023

Wrap around a planned event – partner with another major event – e.g. the 2028 Men’s European Football Championships – to better embed health and wellbeing outcomes for the host places.

“Great communications and media opportunity if an existing event’s profile is leveraged to include this type of wrap around event. However, the event will not always appeal to everyone.” Feasibility Consultee, 2023

Standalone event – design and deliver a standalone ‘Capital of Sport’ through a multiple winner model with a clear focus on promoting the use of events to bolster health and wellbeing outcomes in places of all shapes and sizes.

“Place based programmes have a ‘feel’ of being more grassroots which could really help with engagement from individuals in their communities.” Feasibility Consultee, 2023

Policy recommendations

Realising and creating a Capital of Sport would require a bold pursuit for better evidence and thinking around shared cross-sector impacts of events in the UK. In this study, it is clear how a focus on health and wellbeing could coalesce event commissioners, designers, planners and host communities around a shared outcome.

If one of the models suggested was to be taken forward, the study recommends:

- That the prospective event owner to secure early dialogue with key event partners to develop a 'Capital of Sport' to test further.
- Financial and economic sustainability are prioritised.
- Co-produced health and wellbeing approaches should form a key part of the model.
- That the 'Capital of Sport' is used to align partners and agendas.

About the lead academic partner

[Dr Verity Postlethwaite](#), Vice-Chancellor Independent Research Fellow. Her research is broadly focused on how events have been used in local, national, and international contexts as a catalyst for social changes associated with disability, gender, and geographic inequalities. Recently, Verity led Loughborough's team in the [Capital of Sport: Feasibility Study](#).

This is one of a number of policy briefings from Loughborough University's Policy Unit, created in collaboration with researchers at the University. The Policy Unit helps researchers at the University, who can offer high-quality research evidence, connect with policymakers to inform the policymaking process and benefit society as a whole.

Over 90% of research at Loughborough University is 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent'. (REF, 2021).

If you would like more information on this briefing paper please contact Loughborough University's Policy Unit Public Affairs Manager, Paddy Smith, by emailing p.smith2@lboro.ac.uk.

CAPITAL OF SPORT **A Feasibility Study**



Find out more
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