



Spirit of 2012: Areas of Research Interest on the social impact and legacy of events

Published: January 2026 **Authors:** Ingrid Abreu Scherer and Amy Heaton-Finch

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Introduction

Spirit of 2012 was established in 2013 with a £47 million endowment from The National Lottery Community Fund to support projects across the UK that bring people together and to grow the social legacy of events. For more than a decade we worked closely with event organisers, academics and policy makers to understand what makes events that matter - that support people's wellbeing, improve perceptions of disability, and help people feel included and connected to each other.

Our evaluations and collaborations have highlighted the social value of events but also revealed evidence gaps and unresolved questions. While many research avenues exist, these five Areas of Research Interest prioritise the issues most relevant to policymakers and practitioners seeking to design and deliver more impactful events.

We have one focus area specifically on developing methods and measures. The lack of consistent and tested measures is holding back many crucial areas of research, so developing this aspect underpins many of the other ARIs.

About our Areas of Research Interest

Our Areas of Research Interest are grouped into five overarching themes, with specific of research questions and gaps in each theme.

The five areas of research interest:

1. [Events as Policy Interventions: Models for Lasting Social Impact](#)
2. [The impacts of events and how they are experienced by different groups.](#)
3. [The mechanisms which enable events to achieve lasting impact.](#)
4. [The effectiveness of different event types.](#)
5. [Methods and measures for understanding the impact of events.](#)

These ARIs build on twelve years of learning from and supporting communities across the UK designing and delivering events, as well as partnerships with universities and research organisations. Our [Knowledge Bank](#) brings together our learning from project and programme evaluations and research and is starting point for people interested in building on our research.

1. Events as policy interventions: Models for lasting social impact

Spirit of 2012 has been the UK's dedicated funder of events for more than a decade, and has convened policy makers, practitioners and researchers to understand 'what works'. How different partners need to work together to build the social legacy of events is a priority for future research. This research area focuses on policymaking, commissioning and partnerships for maximising impact and legacy.

Our Work: Spirit of 2012 itself, established as an independent trust to carry on the inspiration of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, is one example of a legacy model. Our work has focused on how commissioners support events that are designed with social legacy and long-term impact in mind (including in bidding, programming, evaluation and post-event support). Future research should build on the findings and recommendations of our [Inquiry into the Power of Events](#) and [Creating the Golden Thread](#) reports.

Questions

1.1 How do different event legacy models compare in their effectiveness at securing sustained social impact?
1.2 (a) How do events contribute to the evolution of policy priorities such as wellbeing, cohesion, and creative industries? (b) What approaches enable events to be practically integrated into existing strategies, both locally and nationally?
1.3 What are the advantages and disadvantages of different bidding and selection processes for hosting events? What factors increase the likelihood that unsuccessful bidders still gain value from the bidding process?
1.4 How do applicants and places leverage event bidding to develop local infrastructure and skills?
1.5 What are the impacts of events on areas with less developed infrastructure, and how can these impacts be maximised even where they cannot host?
1.6 How does perception and trust in government (local or national) and delivery institutions affect the impact and legacy of events?
1.7 How should the benefits of events be weighted or prioritised? (a) In relation to the links and trade-offs between social benefits and other impacts of events (such as environmental or economic)? (b) In relation to benefits that accrue to the sector (e.g. art, sport) and/or to residents /the public (c) In relation to the geographic distribution of benefits across the country

2. The impacts of events and how they are experienced by different groups

This section looks at what we know about the social impact of events, and their distributional impact. The aim is to understand not only the benefits events can generate but also who experiences them, and in what ways.

Our work: Spirit of 2012 set out to make a positive change in three outcome areas: personal and community wellbeing, perceptions and attitudes towards disability, and social cohesion and understanding. By having common outcome measures across all grants and commissioning research we have added significantly to the evidence base on the social

value of events. But many questions remain. Spirit of 2012 used the ONS4 subjective wellbeing questions across our grant portfolio. You can read more about this work in our [Wellbeing Starter Pack](#).¹

2.1 How can the value of 'in the moment' or short-term positive wellbeing of events be calculated?
2.2 Do different forms of engagement in events (e.g., volunteering, participating, performing) influence distinct dimensions of wellbeing (such as hedonic or eudaimonic)?
2.3 What is the impact of events on 'in the moment' wellbeing of different event experiences, including stimulating positive affect and emotions (happiness, enjoyment) and reducing negative affect and emotions (stress, sadness)?
2.4 How can the value of 'in the moment' or short-term positive wellbeing of events be calculated?
2.5 How do events affect feelings of pride (in local, regional or national places, or identities), and how does this link to social cohesion?
2.6 What is the Theory of Change behind events and broad social cohesion outcomes?
2.7 What is the impact of events which bring different people together (bridging) compared with those that bring similar people together (bonding)?
2.8 What impact do different conceptual models of disability (e.g. medical model, social model, radical model) have on the lived experiences of disabled people attending or participating in major cultural and sporting events?
2.9 What are the long-term impacts of major events on educational and career choices of the children and young people who take part?
2.10 What is the impact of events on rural populations and areas with historically low investment?

3. The mechanisms which enable events to achieve lasting impact

Events need to be designed to meet the needs and aspirations of the places and people who will benefit from them. What works in one context does not automatically work in another. Future research can help to understand the ingredients and mechanisms that lead to social change in different places through different events.

Our work: Through our grant funding, we have built up a bank of good practice examples in which event organisers and third-sector organisations share their process learning about why their projects were successful, and what they would do differently. We've summarised lessons from these in a series of thematic reports you can access on our [knowledge bank](#), alongside individual project evaluations.

Research priorities

3.1 How do media messages and communications affect the social impact of events on different groups (participants, volunteers, local artists and residents), particularly with regards to ongoing participation?
3.2 How do media messages and communications around events impact perceptions of disability?

¹ Cognitive wellbeing measures such as life satisfaction and feeling that life is worthwhile (to capture both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions) are now being used across many events. Our view is that whilst this should continue to be a focus of evaluation and research, we know much less about events and *affective* wellbeing.

3.3	What is the role of co-production and community buy-in on the impact of events?
3.4	How are cross-sector collaborations mobilised and structured as pathways to delivering long-term social impact?
3.5	How can competing benefits be understood and balanced in event design (for example increased visitor numbers which bring income into an area but may cause disruption and exclude local people)?
3.6	How do civic realm and infrastructure investments function as mechanisms for generating sustained social impact from major events?"

4. The effectiveness of different event types

Different types and scales of events will have different impact on people and places. Although there is a lot of research on major events, the impact of smaller community events and private events is not as well studied. There is also a need to look beyond the impact of individual events to the way people experience a mix of events in their lives: attending a mix of event types, of different scales, across any given year. Increasingly places are taking a portfolio approach to commissioning and hosting events and this needs to be factored into research. This includes understanding cumulative impacts on people and places.

Our work: We have been deliberately cross-sector in our approach, sharing learning and identifying commonalities as well as differences between sports, arts, commemorative and community events. We have sought to draw out good practice that can be shared between sectors – but also to highlight where specific event types, or ways of participating, might lend themselves to specific outcomes. You can read more about the practical work of taking a portfolio approach to events in our [Developing Event Strategies](#) Starter Pack.

Research priorities:

4.1	Which types of events are held in different places across the UK, and how does this reflect funding and policy priorities?
4.2	What is the cumulative effect of a mixed annual calendar of events (including religious events and local commemorations) on different people in a place?
4.3	What is the effectiveness of festivals that mix sport and arts/culture compared to those which just focus on one of these?
4.4	What are the risks and benefits of commemorative events in creating positive social change?
4.5	What is the effect and value of private or privately funded events in a place compared to publicly funded events? How do private events affect participant experience, expectations and outcomes? What is the longer-term impact of private versus public events on infrastructure and social outcomes?

5. Methods and measures for understanding the impact of events

Researchers and evaluators should continue to use qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the impact of events. Events at all scales – from community to major – should be evaluated in consistent ways to enable comparison across activities and places. The distributional impact of events is a priority for future research, so inclusive and meaningful measures are vital. Some essential knowledge is needed to build future events evidence, so we recommend a conceptual and measures review of the evidence to understand how events are currently understood and evaluated.

Our work: Spirit of 2012 based its funding on a [Theory of Change](#), created with cross-sector partners in 2013. There is a need to strengthen the theoretical models that inform event design and evaluation. Evidence-informed theories of change can help practitioners understand how and why an event may have positive social impacts. We also want to ensure any measurement is feasible within the fast-paced, short-term nature of events – and that the responsibility for evaluation sits with those who are accountable for long term impact. We have focused on developing a range of practical tools for low-capacity organisations to improve their evaluation practice. You can find these in our [Event Evaluation Starter Pack](#).

Research priorities:

5.1	How are events conceptualised and understood across different cultures, communities and geographies in the UK?
5.2	How is the social impact of events measured across the UK and internationally, and how does this map onto strategic impact areas?
5.3	How can wellbeing and other subjective measures be improved to confidently capture the impact of events for people with learning disabilities? ²
5.4	(a) How can the full social cost-benefit analysis of events be assessed for local, regional, and national budgets? (b) How can the non-use value of events be measured in ways that are meaningful and proportional for a range of event types?
5.5	How can the disbenefits or negative outcomes of events, especially on the wider community, be measured and understood?
5.6	How can the anticipatory effects of events be measured and understood? How can the effects of the memory of an event be meaningfully measured?
5.7	How can we measure the cumulative impact of events, or an event calendar, on individuals and communities?

The Events Evidence Ecosystem

Our ARI will help fill knowledge gaps, but research alone is not enough. Evidence must be collected, translated, and shared with those commissioning and delivering events. Policymakers, funders, researchers, and organisers need to collaborate, learn from each other, and apply findings. Training and peer networks should ensure evidence is tested in practice and good approaches spread quickly.

Events span arts and sport, community and business, local and national. Convening across these fields is vital to build shared learning. A [central data observatory](#) should be established to aggregate UK event data, track who benefits or is excluded, and support common, accessible outcome measures.

Practice in Need of Evidence: Pine

Practice in Need of Evidence (PINE) refers to approaches or interventions being used in real-world settings which don't yet have a solid evidence base to support their effectiveness.

² This question emerges from our own experiences, along with our grantees, at attempting to use standardised methods with this group. We know that there is interest also in understanding the appropriateness of measures with other marginalised groups.

Events - due to their responsive, innovative and cross-sectoral nature - have many examples of practice in need of evidence.

Our test-and-learn approach was focused on supporting projects to reflect on their approach in stages and adapt their work accordingly. We've worked with many organisations over the years to help build up their knowledge and evidence for existing or emerging practice.

Funders should continue to support event organisers to test and evaluate their existing practice and share their findings with their peers. Researchers should seek out this practitioner evidence and build on it so that practitioners can act with confidence.

Our [Creative Pathways to Wellbeing](#) research project used case study synthesis methodology to draw out the contexts and mechanisms that led to positive outcomes in creative projects. This approach values and tests event practices and can help design more comprehensive research projects.

Call to Action

These Areas of Research Interest are intended to guide new research into events by academics, evaluators, and researchers in the UK and internationally. To maximise their impact, we encourage you to share these ARIs widely across your networks — with colleagues, institutions, funders, and partners — so they can inform and inspire collective action.

These ARIs can:

- **Guide research funding programmes** that address knowledge gaps in policy and practice,
- **Help develop academic research projects** and prioritise research questions,
- **Stimulate dialogue and collaboration** between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners,
- **Shape teaching and training agendas** by embedding emerging priorities into curricula,
- **Inform evidence-based policymaking** by highlighting where research can directly support national and local event strategies,
- **Strengthen accountability and evaluation frameworks** of upcoming major events by aligning research priorities with policy objectives and social impact goals.

By sharing and applying these ARIs, you can help build momentum for a stronger, more connected research community that delivers meaningful impact through events