

Major Sporting Events for the Community: Engaged by, Participated in, and Benefiting the Community

Policy briefing

Executive Summary

Major sporting events possess the potential to generate substantial social, economic, and cultural benefits for host communities. However, in regions where host communities reflect diverse socio-economic conditions and entrenched inequalities, it is overly simplistic to assume that such benefits will naturally permeate all segments of society. Evidence consistently demonstrates that without deliberate and targeted strategies, the advantages of major sporting events can bypass marginalised groups, further reinforcing existing disparities. This underscores the critical need for well-designed frameworks to actively broaden community involvement, ensuring equitable access to opportunities and fostering inclusive legacies. Evidence from Birmingham highlights that adopting strengths-based co-creation approaches can potentially maximise community engagement and unlock a range of opportunities associated with major sporting events. These approaches focus on leveraging the existing skills, knowledge, and capacities of local residents and organisations to foster meaningful involvement. Recommendations include implementing targeted promotion strategies to raise awareness, efficiently utilising resources to align events with regional priorities, and embracing strategic frameworks such as the "sense-seize-transform" model. This framework has been instrumental in developing a publicly accessible toolkit designed to empower community-based organisations, providing them with practical guidance to enhance their engagement with major sporting events and realise long-term benefits.

Background/Context

Major sporting events hold substantial potential to generate positive social, economic, and cultural impacts for host communities [1]. Recent promising evidence from overseas indicates that Shanghai successfully hosted 178 major events in 2024 (across 55 sports), generating direct economic impacts of over £11 billion and indirect economic impacts of £30 billion [2]. These outcomes did not happen overnight; they resulted from over 20 years of strategic planning, involving the exacting development of an event portfolio designed to boost destination branding and align with broader social and economic development objectives [3].

Turning the focus inward, Birmingham and the West Midlands have embarked on their own "golden decade" strategy of hosting major sporting events [4]. A total of £70 million in underspend has been secured by the West Midlands Combined Authority to ensure the legacy of hosting the 2022 Commonwealth Games [5]. However, existing literature consistently highlights that the benefits of major sporting events do not arise automatically and require strategic leverage to ensure equitable distribution [6]. Particularly, in host communities where socio-economic conditions are diverse and inequalities are pronounced, it is unrealistic to anticipate that these benefits will naturally extend to all sections of society [7].

Simultaneously, local residents are increasingly advocating for active involvement and meaningful representation in high-profile sporting events, underscoring their desire to be acknowledged as key stakeholders [8]. However, in the absence of deliberate and targeted measures, such events risk marginalising local communities, effectively sidelining those who stand to benefit the most. To overcome this challenge, it is essential to adopt thoughtfully designed strategies that emphasise inclusive engagement, ensure equitable access to opportunities, and foster lasting legacies that empower all segments of the community. These approaches are vital for transforming major sporting events into catalysts for long-term, community-wide benefits.

Research Method

The University of Birmingham worked in partnerships with Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Race Impact Group, and Sport Birmingham to identify ways communities can connect to major sporting events. Co-creation approaches—bringing together event stakeholders, practitioners, and individuals with lived experiences—proved particularly effective in shaping strategies tailored to local needs.

Specifically, guided by strengths-based principles [9], where individuals' pre-existing skills and knowledge are recognised and utilised, a cross-disciplinary research project was conducted. Using mixed methods, the study included over 700 surveys from 17 wards in Birmingham—representing one-third of the city's most deprived areas—and face-to-face interviews with a representative sample.

Research Findings

Challenges in community engagement with major sporting events include:

- **Barriers to attendance:** Cost, time, and lack of interest.
- **Barriers to volunteering:** Limited time, awareness, and information.
- **Barriers to employment/contracts:** Lack of information, interest, and time constraints.

A general lack of awareness and understanding of opportunities stemming from events further restricts participation. Evidence supports the use of structured engagement strategies, such as volunteer networks and marketing efforts tailored to community-preferred platforms such as social media.

Additionally, leveraging co-creation principles allows communities to maximise event benefits by applying their skills and interests. As part of the project, a toolkit was developed to support community-based organisations in capitalising on future major sporting event opportunities [10]. This resource provides actionable guidance for designing strategies to improve engagement, access, and long-term impacts.

To ensure that major sporting events are truly "for the community"—engaged by, participated in, and benefiting the community—efforts must be undertaken by both policymakers and community-based organisations. Each party must leverage its unique strengths and resources to create a cohesive approach that delivers sustained legacy impacts. As outlined in Recommendations 2 and 3 (see below), policymakers play a critical role in aligning events with regional priorities and fostering inclusive practices, while community-based organisations are essential for driving grassroots engagement and capitalising on opportunities that support local development.

Recommendations

1. **Enhanced Communication Strategies:** Increase awareness of events and associated opportunities via targeted, accessible marketing on preferred platforms such as social media.
2. **Efforts from Policymakers:** Policymakers have a critical role in establishing a lasting legacy by continuing to host major sporting events that align closely with the region’s features (economic, social, and cultural). Hosting strategically aligned events allows resources to flow into communities, ensuring they are relevant to and welcomed by the communities. Importantly, the expertise and knowledge gained by local talent in organising such events must be leveraged to enrich legacy outcomes. Policymakers should focus on embedding engagement-oriented practices into event planning while ensuring alignment with ongoing regional development initiatives.
3. **Efforts from Community-Based Organisations:** Community-based organisations, particularly local businesses, can actively capitalise on the opportunities created by major sporting events by adopting the "sense-seize-transform" strategy [11]. This involves:

- **Sense:** Proactively identifying upcoming event opportunities that align with their expertise or goals.
- **Seize:** Taking strategic action to leverage the identified opportunities, whether through partnerships, service offerings, or employment initiatives.
- **Transform:** Adapting business practices or community engagement frameworks to continuously enhance their ability to benefit from event hosting legacies.

To further support organisations in the "sense" and "seize" stages, the abovementioned toolkit offers detailed, step-by-step guidance tailored to community needs. Using this evidence-based resource, organisations can design strategies that maximise their engagement and benefit from hosting major sporting events.

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Contact

Dr Shushu Chen
University of Birmingham
s.chen.5@bham.ac.uk; www.majoreventlegacy.com