Written evidence submitted by Dr Matthew McDowell, Dr Jung Woo Lee and Dr Gavin Reid

Re: Major cultural and sporting events – Evidence for the Commons Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport

14 May 2021

Dear Members:

The authors are submitting evidence from the perspective of being experts in the history and politics of sport, events, and tourism, and thus here we are focusing on sporting events, rather than cultural.

Our research, in concert with the majority of academic opinion, reflects the belief that the positive “legacies” of sporting events, used alone as catalysts for sport/tourism development and facility management, are contentious and often overrated, and (in their current form) represent a risky endeavour on the part of the UK Government, the UK’s devolved administrations, and local governments. They are ultimately no replacement for full-scale public-sector investment in these sectors.

Please find attached (from the next page onwards) our responses to the main points being investigated by the committee. Feel free to contact us if you wish to discuss this further, and thank you for considering our evidence.

Sincerely,

Dr Matthew McDowell (primary author)
Lecturer in Sport Policy, Management, and International Development

Dr Jung Woo Lee
Programme Director/Lecturer in Sport Policy, Management, and International Development

Dr Gavin Reid
Lecturer in Sport Policy, Management, and International Development

University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education and Sport
Institute for Sport, Physical Education, and Health Sciences
Edinburgh Critical Studies in Sport (ECSS) Research Group
What does the UK public want from major cultural and sporting events, and how effectively is this being reflected in the planning and programming for events in 2022?

Sport development

Given the absence of a mass sporting legacy on the back of the London 2012 Olympics, it could be argued that the UK public – if we can speak of such a thing - do not want a mere celebration of elite athlete success. We believe that the public want to see the various assets associated with the event, whether it be the Queen’s Baton relay, event tickets, television portrayals and the athletes themselves, used to leverage interest and participation amongst those currently not engaging in sport or physical activity. The public wants national and local government to recognise that elite athlete success at the event will not automatically encourage a mass sporting legacy, with local government provision needing supported so any ‘buzz’ from the event does not merely benefit those who can afford the often high entry price to public sports facilities. We believe that the public want to see the current emphasis on proportionate universalism and inclusion in prominent sport policy documents actually put into practice. The Birmingham Commonwealth Games is, therefore, a real opportunity to implement the UK Government’s ‘levelling-up agenda’ through visualising sport, not just in terms of competition, winning and medals, but also how it can be intentionally used to address deep-rooted inequalities in communities that have been accentuated by Covid-19.

Like many events, the planning and programming surrounding Birmingham 2022 uses very inclusive language of being the ‘Games for Everyone’, with an Active Communities Fund designed to use ‘the power of the Games’ to support inactive people to become more active. However, without detailed theoretically-informed research on what has been done before, during and after the event, it is too early to say whether the public’s wishes for the event have been put into practice.

Tourism

From the standpoint of tourism associated with sporting events, it is perhaps “destination branding” that is most attractive (particularly for local governments): the idea that events help to associate investors and potential visitors with the services that a place can offer, and in turn this helps to reinforce positive associations with a place outwith the sporting arena (Chalip and Costa, 2005). The ultimate positives and negatives of this, however, are tough to quantify on such a large scale: this is a dream of government, and perhaps of business, rather than the public at large, whose calculations on whether an event is worth the financial cost are likely to be dictated by the practical effects that such events will have on their day-to-day lives.

In terms of this, there are two separate questions: 1) do sporting events help to develop a tourist economy? and 2) is a local economy based overwhelmingly on tourism a good thing? The 2012 Olympics in London. Question 1 will be answered later; but in terms of Question 2, the answer would be a resounding “no”. Overreliance on tourism creates a low-wage, low-job security economy, and has led to the industry being labelled unsustainable as a whole (Robinson, 2019). Tourism and hospitality jobs associated with sporting events big and small
are usually temporary, and any more permanent ones will not be the kind to produce large amounts of disposable income.

**Facility management**

There is also the question of facility management. The East End of Glasgow, typically an area of high deprivation, now has a velodrome thanks to the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Cycling has historically had little import with Scottish working-class people, in large part because they are priced out of the kit. And, as Glasgow is not Copenhagen or Antwerp (or other cities with significant purpose-built infrastructure for cycling), it has done little to increase grassroots participation in sport. This is a case of sporting authorities demanding a venue which suits the needs of elite sport, whilst completely ignoring the needs of residents. Performance track cycling has a long history of this, and velodromes and other specialist sporting venues are difficult to repurpose, and due to rapid changes in sporting technology are often rendered obsolete quicker than all-purpose facilities, including leisure centres (McDowell and Skillen, 2014).

Taxpayers, by and large, are wary of “white elephant” structures, as well as a loss of democracy and sovereignty that accompany the Summer Olympics and the men’s football World Cup. In Boston, in the United States, this drove the successful grassroots campaign to withdraw the city’s 2024 Olympics bid. By and large, the IOC (or FIFA) does not respond well to host requests for changes to what they view as their events (Kassens-Noor, 2019). The continuing controversy over Tokyo 2020 is a worst-case scenario for hosts picking up the tab for unexpected global crises; there is no slack in their system.

**What needs to happen for major events to successfully bring people from all four nations of the UK together?**

Given the strength of feeling against the UK witnessed in recent elections, it is unlikely that a two week sporting event will bring people together in any significant numbers or, crucially, for any significant length of time. Any patriotic ‘feel good’ emotions emanating from the event are likely to be short-lived as the stresses and strains of living in increasingly unequal societies do not disappear, even if they are often ignored in event narratives. The BBC could be allowed to continue its relatively uncritical coverage of events as their portrayal, along with that of other broadcasters, has been described as like an opiate for the middle classes. A possible way to bring people from all four nations together on the back of Birmingham 2022 might be to tell the human interest stories behind particular athletes from all four nations – in the language of event leveraging – to reach beyond the limited number of people interested in sport. If this was effectively narrated in the discourse of ‘we’re all in this together’ then this may appeal to some people’s sense of British national identity. Alternatively, it could be decided that the UK will not invest in major sports events and, instead, will use monies that would have been spent on them to ‘level-up’ participation by investing in local sport and physical activity provision based on community development principles.
How should the success of major cultural and sporting events be measured and what should their legacies be?

**Birmingham 2022**

From the viewpoint of sport and public diplomacy, three distinctive legacies associated with a major sporting event in 2022, notably the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham can be identified. These include: 1) cultural relations and exchange, 2) Anti COVID-19 measures, and 3) international medical aid programme.

First, major cultural and sporting events often involve international participants, and the nature of transnational and multicultural exchange during the event can be one way to measure the success of these international occasions. For instance, the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham is essentially an international sporting competition. However, such a large-scale contest often includes cultural and educational programmes as part of the event. These non-sporting aspects of the Games often function as a platform on which cross-cultural communication between different nations can occur, and these inter-cultural encounters subsequently help facilitate mutual understanding and international friendship amongst the participants from various countries and territories.

Second, the 2022 Commonwealth Games will be one of the early major sporting events held in the post-COVID-19 world. This occasion is likely to reveal a new structure of and an operational manual for a global sporting event in new normality, and its anti-coronavirus measures, whether it will turn out to be effective or not, will be an important point of reference for other major international sporting competitions to be staged in the future. While Britain seriously suffered from the viral disease until early 2021, there is evidence that the country is gradually recovering from the pandemic largely due to its relatively prompt vaccination programme. This probably means that the UK would become one of the few places where a major international sporting competition can be hosted comparatively safely. Hence, the effective implementation of the anti-COVID-19 policy should be one of the key areas where the success of the event is measured.

Third, many member states in the Commonwealth are located in the global south, and these nations tend to be suffering from the pandemic. Birmingham 2022 presents a useful humanitarian cause of supporting low-income Commonwealth states. One of the most distinctive legacies of the 2012 Olympic Games in London was its “International Inspiration” programme whose aim was to help the development of youth sport in developing countries in the global south. Similar to this, the Birmingham 2022 Organising Committee should introduce the COVID-19 aid campaign to support the Commonwealth nations whose medical system is unable to cope with the pandemic. This eventually helps them to send their delegations to the competition. Given that Birmingham and the West Midland region is one of the most multicultural and cosmopolitan areas in the UK where many South Asian and African immigrant communities settle, this international medical help associated with the sport mega-event can obtain public support in the host city and beyond. Additionally, this would strengthen the tie between the UK and the Commonwealth nations.
Conceptualising “legacy” and tourism legacies

From an academic standpoint, “legacy” is hotly debated term. Holger Preuss’s (2007) definition is that legacy is “all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by a sport event that remain longer than the event itself.”

In terms of large-scale quantitative studies re the long-term effects of mega-sporting events on tourism, there are many different formulae. One model examines the relationship between host countries and arrivals’ countries, and takes into account common language, currency, and colonial ties, along with bilateral trade – a model perhaps relevant to the Commonwealth Games and major cricket and rugby tournaments. Here, there is a definite pre-event bounce in tourist arrivals, but not such much after the event itself (with even that bounce largely dependent on the event being held, and when the event is held during the usual tourist calendar) (Fourie and Santana-Gallego, 2011). Another more recent model, which examines total non-host tourist arrivals to a host nation during Summer and Winter Olympics over thirty years (and taking into account normal tourist traffic in these places), sees no sign of a long-term increase in tourist traffic for hosts. (Moss, Gruben, and Moss, 2019). Casual tourists do not tend to come to Olympics, and are often driven away due to the negative news cycles often associated with them: research from London 2012 shows that sporting events serve a distinct market within the tourist economy, rather than a general one (Brown, Smith, and Assaker, 2016).

It in increasingly believed by historians that mega-sporting events can have unanticipated long-term legacies, both positive and negative. For instance, the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles are believed to have been a watershed in terms of sport management and private/public funding models for sport (Dyreson and Llewellyn, 2008). The 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, meanwhile, is typically held up as an example of how an Olympics can kick-start tourism in a city; this is however, something of a myth: the city’s regeneration as a post-industrial tourist location was well under way in the 1980s (Smith, 2005). This also the case for smaller nations and polities. For instance, the Isle of Man Year’s Year of Sport in 1985 was explicitly designed as a tourist event, to lengthen the tourist season beyond just the summertime. McDowell has interviewed policymakers who believe that the Year of Sport – when the first Island Games took place – was ultimately responsible for the development of a cycling programme which has produced world-class athletes like Mark Cavendish. The Year of Sport, however, was not successful in changing long-term patterns of tourism’s decline in the Isle of Man, only in managing them, and locally there has been frustration at the lack of twenty-first century tourism infrastructure vis-à-vis a booming finance industry (Canavan, 2013). Ultimately, to build a sport tourism destination, the other infrastructure must be good in the first place, especially in small-island economies and other places which are increasingly being marginalised in the post-1970s global economy (Weed and Bull, 2011).

Tourism “legacies” of smaller sporting events are far more difficult to quantify. McDowell, who is currently authoring a book on the recent history of surfing in the north of Scotland, has interviewed major figures within VisitScotland, as well as local government and quango officials in the region, along with gathering data on grant monies and expenditure from...
EventScotland. His research here shows that it difficult for officials (whatever they might claim publicly) to gather accurate tourist data for local events, as statistics tend to be analysed at a national level. (One official’s means of finding out whether professional surfing events in the north of Scotland were good value for money involved informally asking Thurso shopkeepers whether or not they sensed traffic/footfall had increased.)

**What are the challenges facing the delivery of major cultural and sporting events in 2022, and the bid to host the World Cup 2030?**

The most immediate challenge would be health and safety measures against the COVID-19 pandemic as international travel is one of the main causes of spreading the virus, especially new strains. However, as being mentioned in the previous section, the implementation of the anti-COVID-19 policy and international medical aid programme can mitigate this situation somewhat.

Regarding the Commonwealth Games, another challenge would be the name value of this international sporting occasion in decline. We do not doubt that the Commonwealth Games is a large-scale multi-sport contest which involves athletes from 54 countries across the continents. Nevertheless, this event is perceived as a second-tier international competition in comparison with the Olympic Games and the men’s FIFA World Cup Finals. As a result, the Commonwealth Games tends to receive less media and public attention internationally. This could mean that, apart from the local residents, most people in the UK may feel lukewarm about Birmingham 2022. Hence, the effective promotion of this event. Effective promotion of this competition both nationally and internationally is the key challenges that the event organisers are facing now.

In terms of the 2030 FIFA World Cup, the UK and the Republic of Ireland show their intention to host the premier football championship together. Generally, the FIFA is willing to support a joint bid. Japan and South Korea, despite their historical rivalry, co-hosted the football championship in 2002, and the 2026 World Cup will be held in Canada, Mexico and the US. However, it appears that the British and Irish union is not FIFA’s favourite. Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay confirmed that they would jointly bid for the 2030 World Cup, and the FIFA seems to be more supportive of this South American campaign. China can also join the race to host the FIFA World Cup, and this communist giant has made a great effort to develop football. This implies that the contest to win the right to stage the global football event will be extremely competitive.

That said, the close collaboration between the UK and the Republic of Ireland is the key in order to persuade the FIFA and the international football community effectively. Yet, the Brexit has complicated economic ties between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and the issues around the Irish Sea border have been escalating tensions in Northern Ireland. This post-Brexit political unrest in the UK needs to be resolved before the two sides enter the bid to host the World Cup 2030 next year.
Bibliography


