



SUSTAINABLE YOUTH

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Can sport and cultural activity play an important role in addressing the challenges of social exclusion and deprivation, whilst leading to a better quality of life in urban neighbourhoods? Speaking from personal experience, **Geoff Thompson, Executive Chairman of the Youth Charter for Sport, Culture and the Arts**, explains how sport and recreation can 're-engage', 're-motivate' and 're-inspire'

Just over a year ago, Manchester played host to the 2002 Commonwealth Games, the biggest sporting festival to be held in the UK since the 1948 Olympic Games. This was also a major milestone in Manchester's regeneration strategy that has now seen sport act as a catalyst in attracting millions of pounds of inward investment. East Manchester is now a hive of activity with the legacy of the Games realising social and economic sustainability, as well as opportunity in the lives of the future citizens who will hopefully benefit from this incredible civic effort.

However, what role can the legacy play in the continued social inclusion and cultural cohesion of a city and region that faces the ongoing challenges and effects, both socially and economically, within the negative costs and impact of youth disaffection, exclusion, anti-social behaviour and crime. All of these issues cannot only impact on the confidence of a community, but also the ongoing investment and sustainable growth of Manchester and the North West.

THE YOUTH CHARTER FOR SPORT

There is much being done to look at social inclusion, regeneration and what role sport and cultural activity can play in addressing the ongoing challenges of social exclusion, deprivation and its impact on the quality of life. But what do we do? How can we do it? And, more importantly, how can we join it all up?

The Youth Charter for Sport was born out of such an approach – a joined-up and truly collaborative effort during Manchester's 2000 Olympic Bid. The shooting of a 14-year-old schoolboy, Benji Stanley, brought to national and international consciousness the tragic impact that social exclusion can have on the lives of young people and disadvantaged communities.

Compelled to act out of my own feelings of disadvantage, disaffection and frustration at an early age, sport and recreation gave

me an outlet for my aggression as well as allowing me to develop in an informal setting the character, discipline, self-esteem and respect that would translate into life-skill attainment and sporting excellence.

Joined by over 350 agencies and individuals, sportsmen and women (who without sport could have been at Her Majesty's Pleasure rather than at Her Majesty's Leisure), The Youth Charter was launched at Wembley in 1993 with a simple mission "to provide young people with the opportunity to develop in life through sport". Education, health, social order and the environment would be the benchmarks of how successful or indeed unsuccessful we would be.

The area of Hulme & Moss Side in Manchester, historically deprived with a riot-torn past, had now given rise to a new culture of youth and violence, territory and turf wars which saw the Sunday Times liken the area to Los Angeles and Beirut. It was in this community that I decided to translate the Youth Charter's philosophy, objective, mission and aims from words to action.

RESPECT, RECOGNITION AND REWARD

Since then, the Youth Charter for Sport has developed a unique approach of prevention, intervention and rehabilitation inclusion programmes and projects that engage, motivate and inspire a healthy attitude of attainment, achievement and aspiration. As a model of best practice, the Youth Charter has acted as a reference point with its approach replicated in other disadvantaged communities, both nationally and internationally. The Charter has also acted as a catalyst in highlighting and campaigning, as well as influencing, Government policy in the role that sport can play as a social vehicle of change.

This method requires not only a joined-up approach, but also all the qualities that are required to achieve sporting excellence.

Working within the formal and informal gaps that appear in addressing the needs of youth culture and the wider community is not an exact science. But once trust has been achieved, opportunities and choices are made and a clear path identified. The next step is to socially broker a network of multi-agency support that will continue to provide what we phrase as the three Rs of the streets: respect, recognition and reward.

This joined-up approach has what we call the 'vaccine effect' of reducing the virus of hate and violence. With the unifying power of sport and cultural activity, social and cultural cohesion, along with a much-improved quality of life has seen the educational, health and recreational lifestyle choices of our young translated into a positive and progressive approach. But sport and cultural activity alone is not the answer.

We learned very quickly that once you 'respect', you can 're-engage', 're-motivate' and 're-inspire' those young people we are trying to help. You can then 'recognise' the need to provide the ongoing support and network. The respect now established can then provide pathways to re-education, further education, employment and even social enterprise.

YOUNG CITIZENS AND THE FUTURE OF REGENERATION

The Government is currently looking at ways in which sport can help deliver its wider social agenda and this is to be welcomed. However, initiative overload, analysis, paralysis, targets and percentages, outputs and

outcomes could be better co-ordinated and delivered.

We have to keep pace with our youth culture if we are to truly cancel out the negative effect with a positive effect. We need to look at the potential of youth, provide them with the capacity, skills, tools and leadership. They can provide both the best research and the most effective measurement of our cultural trends, both present and future. Our young citizens must be first, foremost and uttermost in future regeneration strategies, plans and delivery. Then, and only then, can we build on the considerable potential that exists, improve the social framework that still remains all too fragile, whilst contributing to a more successful diverse and multi-cultural economic landscape □

BIOG DETAILS

Geoff Thompson MBE is founder and Executive Chairman of the Youth Charter for Sport, Culture and the Arts, a UK-based charity and United Nations Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), which he established to address youth disaffection in 1993. Geoff is a former five-times World Karate champion and is a community youth activist who advises young people, communities and youth-related organisations and governments on the educational, health and social benefits of sport as a social vehicle of change. Geoff is currently a board member of the New Opportunities Fund and an independent assessor for the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA).