

The Coaching Plan for England: Better coaches, better experiences, better activity

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Coaching Plan

Who believes coaching should improve the health and well-being of every section of society?

ConnectedCoaches members had a hand in Sport England's new Coaching Plan for England, which was unveiled yesterday. Head of Coaching [Stuart Armstrong](#) reveals the guiding principles set out in the plan and explains how it was shaped by listening to the opinions of the coaches themselves.

- **The framework of the Coaching Plan for England is constructed around coaches' and coach development professionals' opinions on the future direction of the industry.**
- **The plan's four main objectives are to increase the diversity of the coaching community, change the perception and culture of coaching, and to better understand the impact of coaching.**
- **The plan also aspires to improve the accessibility of coaching to participants and for aspiring coaches to take coaching positions.**
- **The focus should be on the experience of the participant, and coaches are 'experience enhancers'.**

Sport England's highly anticipated [Coaching Plan for England](#) was officially launched before the start of yesterday's UK Coaching Awards.

The timing, of course, was deliberate. Where better to deliver a galvanising call to action for the industry and the coaching community than at one of the largest gatherings on the coaching calendar?

The guest list comprised an eclectic mix, embracing the full spectrum of sporting disciplines and roles – from VIPs to volunteers, community coaches to Olympic coaches, and everything in between.

Many had also attended the two-day UK Sport World Class Performance Conference at the same venue, which had finished just a few hours earlier.

Maximum impact was assured as minds were focused and ears pricked, primed for a glittering night of talking shop and celebration, as the industry recognised and rewarded the sterling work of its dedicated coaches, and the incredible impact their endeavours continue to have on the physical and mental well-being of our nation.

And the plan was launched by a coach; Kizzie Payne, a physical activity coach from the highly successful Our Parks movement in London, explained what becoming a coach meant to her and what the Coaching Plan means for others like her.

The coaches talked, we listened

I spoke to Stuart about the Coaching Plan a few weeks before yesterday's launch, and he told me that it was imperative coaches were given a voice to express their opinions on the future direction of their profession.

The plan has been two and a half years in the making, during a lengthy consultation process.

'All the key things we have included in the Coaching Plan came out in this extensive consultation with coaches,' says Stuart.

'It is essentially a response to the industry, carrying the coaches' message: "This is where we want to go next."'

The aim of Sport England's fully transparent project is to achieve a social return on investment.

There is no catch. The Coaching Plan has been born out of a genuine desire to identify and prioritise areas for coach development, driven by a mutual ambition to improve the health and well-being of every section of society.

So, when Stuart talks passionately about giving coaches a voice and actively listening to their opinions and involving them in decision-making, his words are delivered sincerely.

Sir Alex Ferguson is another staunch advocate of the power of listening. As he writes in his latest book *Leading*: 'Listening is one of the most valuable things you can do.'

Informed opinion

ConnectedCoaches members will be delighted to hear that their own suggestions helped to influence the

direction of the Coaching Plan.

Earlier this year, Stuart asked our online audience [what key things they would like to see implemented that would change the coach development landscape for the better](#). He praised the insightful responses and says the wide mix of ideas helped inform Sport England's thinking.

He remembers most of the points raised, and on the morning we meet, at a Sports Coach UK training day in the centre of Leeds, had only minutes earlier delivered a presentation to staff where he quoted members directly.

'Funnily enough, I actually went through the responses from ConnectedCoaches members and lifted a couple of the quotes,' he says.

'One that really sticks in my mind is, why do coach educators have to work in a single sport?

'Because essentially, if we are talking about coaching being based around communication, around understanding your participants, around motivation, all these are common things. Any coach educator could teach anybody those sorts of things without necessarily having the technical knowledge.

'What they were suggesting, and which I think is worthy of exploration, is that initial coach education should be based around those core coaching competencies, and then the technical elements are bolt-ons that you get from the individual sport you are involved in.

'So you become a Level 1 coach, not a Level 1 rugby coach or cricket coach, and then you obtain the technical competencies in those sports to become a specialist.'

There was also a desire among members to see a greater emphasis given in the future to the psychological side of coaching.

Again, point noted and action taken.

'Exactly,' agrees Stuart. 'Understanding how people learn and their mindsets is so important. For example, understanding that with adolescents, there are significant emotional shifts. It is vital if we want to retain people through those difficult ages at 14, 15 – where we see most dropouts – that we understand the brain works differently and that people are motivated in different ways.'

Coaching Plan 2

Going four it!

Stuart explains that the Coaching Plan has four broad objectives.

First and foremost is the desire to increase the diversity of the coaching community.

‘We know that people who are representative of particular target audiences – particularly under-represented groups – can have a bigger impact with participants because they can relate to them, and they have a natural [empathy](#) with those particular groups.

‘This is important because not only will diversity help bring diversity, it will also help us with our participation agenda.’

This dual benefit is a recurring theme of the plan – more on this later.

The second aspiration of Sport England is to change the perception of coaching.

‘A lot of people don’t associate with coaching,’ says Stuart. ‘They think it is just technical people doing things like skills acquisition. But actually coaching is about providing experiences for people.’

This ties in with the third objective, which is to change the culture of coaching.

‘We need to get to the root of how we coach, who are we doing it for and why are we doing it? Again, it is about changing this assumption that it is all about improvement of performance.’

Sport England’s other broad objective is to better understand coaching.

‘We know that negative coaching has a big impact on participation so we want to stop that from happening, or at least reduce the amount of poor coaching that is out there.’

The question on most coaches’ lips will be, ‘What are the potential ramifications for me?’

Stuart believes coaches on the ground should see increased accessibility and more opportunities to learn than currently exist.

The metaphorical vision is to yank the entrance door, which is currently ajar, wide open, and put a doorstep underneath for good measure!

‘This is one of the big missions of the Coaching Plan,’ he says, ‘to enable people to become coaches much more easily than they currently can.

‘At the moment, it is quite costly, and often, there is a big time commitment and requirement to travel distance to attend various courses. But we have got increasingly busy lives, and people are accessing learning on demand in lots of different ways so therefore we are going to use technology as an enabler to help us make coaching or learning much more accessible.

‘We are also going to try and break down some of the barriers that are in place through qualifications so that we can make them much more open to all.

‘Remember that you are a coach if you have started working and have engaged in some sort of learning to

help you with your role. A qualification is a recognition of your expertise somewhere along that learning journey, not at the starting point. So that too should be a big shift.’

Guiding principles

The bold design plan may be clear in its intentions and the result of exhaustive preparation, but not every course of action is set in stone.

Changing culture and behaviours takes time, and the transitional period will allow for regular reflection to see how the vision is progressing – with Stuart at the wheel ready to steer a different course if a subtle change of tack is deemed necessary.

Which direction to take on volunteering, for example, may only become obvious as the journey unfolds.

Sport England is keen to create a new strategy for volunteering and encourage new thinking around this sector. But it is more complex than simply increasing the number of people who offer their services for free.

There are some interesting trends associated with the volunteering sector that bear further scrutiny, says Stuart.

He explains: ‘We know 74% of coaches are voluntary, 14% are part-time and 12% are full-time.

‘But we also know that full-timers do 45% of the coaching hours so it might be that we need more full-time coaches to commit to all those extra hours as well as enhancing the experience for the volunteer coach.’

Coaching Plan 3

A double whammy

Stuart is seeing double. But it has nothing to do with the number of hours spent poring over the Coaching Plan since he took over the reins from Justyn Price in May – ‘Justyn was the architect who drew up the blueprint, I am the builder,’ is the analogy he uses.

By double vision, I mean from the perspective that good coaching has a dual benefit and dual impact.

Expanding on this two-for-one principle, Stuart says: ‘So what I mean by a dual impact is, as I mentioned earlier, coaches help us to reduce barriers to engagement, but at the same time, they are increasing opportunities to engage.

‘The dual benefit, meanwhile, is two things really. From the government’s aspirations for sport, they are talking about developing people and society’s health and physical well-being – as well as the economic and social development of the nation.

‘Coaches provide that dual benefit. They enable experiences that allow people to develop physical and mental well-being, but at the same time, being a coach is also really good for you too, because it gives you all those feelings of personal well-being, self-efficacy, and there are economic benefits – particularly with the increasing number of coaches going into part-time and full-time roles.

‘And there’s the social value of coaching too, whether you work as a volunteer or in any other capacity.’

New thinking for a new age

Stuart appreciates the plan may not meet with universal approval and is braced for a few dissenting voices, but he maintains that the changing sporting landscape necessitates an overhaul of coaching industry roles and goals.

The path to change will always be paved with sceptics. Some resistance is inevitable. ’Twas ever thus. The important thing is that the doubters are outnumbered by those willing to embrace change – with many of the former likely to revise their opinion with the passage of time.

‘Change is inevitable, progress is optional’, says Stuart, quoting American self-help guru and philanthropist Tony Robbins to emphasise the point – before adding that the only thing that is not acceptable is staying where we are.

There is another famous quote from George Bernard Shaw: ‘Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds, cannot change anything.’

‘I’m almost certain that the plan is going to get some pushback, but I would be disappointed if it didn’t,’ adds Stuart. ‘But I think it is incumbent upon us to be responsive to the community we serve.

‘I’m not trying to say that change has to be radical. If you were to take it all on board, you’d be making a significant change. People can move with this at the pace that they want to move at.

‘So the one thing I want to convey is that this isn’t really a Coaching Plan for England, it’s a Coaching Plan for the Coaches in England.’

Please tell us your thoughts on the future of coaching by leaving a comment below.

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