

# On a mission to motivate

As our sporting community gears up for the Olympics, Kate Hoey talks to Sport England's **Jennie Price** about her drive to inspire – and sustain – a new generation of British athletes



*Kate Hoey is Labour MP for Vauxhall and the mayor's commissioner for sport*

Reading the formal detail in the official Jennie Price 'background', it is not clear why on earth she should have been chosen to apply for the job of chief executive of Sport England. However, when you meet her and ask the question she is quite clear: "I saw it advertised and I thought 'what a fantastic job'. I then wondered if there was any chance they'd be interested in someone like me."

They were, and she was appointed in March 2007. "It was a huge shift to come into sport as far as the subject matter was concerned," she told me. "I had spent seven years in the environmental field, in charge of the Waste and Resources Action Programme established to improve the UK's recycling performance and reduce waste. But when you look at the components of the job there were lots of similarities: numerous stakeholders, a real need for behavioural changes, a similar-sized organisation and one that is largely reliant on government money."

But did she know anything about sport, I ask diffidently. At this Jennie becomes animated and explains that as an only child, her father treated her like a son – so she accompanied him to rugby, football, cricket and athletics events. "I grew up with sport being absolutely part of my daily life, so just the thought of being so engaged was incredibly exciting. In that sense, it was my dream job!"

It is hard to imagine that just a few years ago, Sport England was a bloated, top-heavy, bureaucratic organisation that was viewed by many in sport as the enemy. Jennie's predecessor Roger Draper, now running the Lawn Tennis Association, reduced the numbers employed from 600 to around 300, and now it is around 220 – a size she feels is just about right. That reduction has brought about a shift in focus and working.

Sport England recently made clear that the bulk of funding will now be channelled directly to the national governing bodies of sport, rather than being distributed by Sport England. This was a move that I had called for a number of years ago when I co-chaired an independent review of British sport with Colin Moynihan, now with the British Olympic Association, and I was pleased to see it being taken up by Jennie and driven through.

"When James Purnell became secretary of state, he gave a strong steer that he saw governing bodies as central to delivery, and Andy Burnham continued that," she says. "Amongst the stakeholders there were some concerns that not all the govern-

ing bodies would be quite ready to accept the challenge, but they were asking for us to trust them – to let them step up to the plate."

This shift seems to have led to a sharpening of Sport England's priorities. "We are now really clear why we are here. We are not trying to run everything any more. We are about offering support for grass-roots, community sport. We have a target of one million people doing more sport by 2012."

But, I note, a million people doing more sport is not quite the same as a million more people doing sport. She agrees, but adds: "It will be a change for the good. If you are doing one session a week of sport and we can get you up to three sessions a week, then this is a big step." She does, however, concede that ideally she would like to be aiming for those who currently do no sport at all – the dreaded 'inactives'.

With regard to disability sport she insists that, for the first time, Sport England is now funding every paralympic sport – or its grass-roots community programmes. "We are talking to the English Federation of Disability Sports about how to get money down to the grass-roots as effectively as possible. We

want to see money getting to those actually doing the sport, not on administration."

With the increase in money to governing bodies, and £50m allocated to fund Olympic park facilities, there is not a lot left for Sport England to distribute. They have a £10m pot for a facilities fund and around £25m for what will be themed rounds of funding, and then a small amount for really small grass-roots projects. "Match funding will help of course, although we're going to have to work harder – there will be far less private sector money around.

"But I think that the grass-roots are one of the most attractive bits of sport to sponsor right now. The corporates want to show that they are part of the community. They really like building a relationship with a particular sport – what it does for their employees, the image it helps to create, the sense of identity."

Having covered funding, we move on to discuss the Olympic legacy. Securing a sporting legacy at grass-roots is particularly important to me in my role as London's commissioner for sport – and very challenging. But Jennie is reassuringly upbeat: "I think we have two contributions to make. First, we have to get the increase in participation. Without the Games, I think that the million would be really tough to achieve, but with the profile

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of sport so high we must keep saying to people 'don't just watch, get up and do it!'

The second key area for Jennie is trying to hold onto the newcomers once the Games are over. "If we get the structures in place; if we strengthen the clubs; and if people are really enjoying what they are doing, then I think we will be able to hang onto them. No other Olympic city has done that."

As with much of what she has to say, there is a sense of positivity and purpose about this assessment. But how positive is she about the Olympic Games themselves? What will define them as successful in her eyes?

"You can't ignore the medals. They give a sense of pride and achievement to the whole nation. But if you are watching an event and you think 'I want to do that sport', then it must be as easy as possible to do so. The ticketing will always be an issue – though not my responsibility – but I think that just having the Games here will bring a renewed sense of pride to the UK. And of course there will be events like the marathon where anyone can just turn up and watch."

Before we finish I turn to a slightly controversial subject. Sport England was set up, in theory, to act as the voice of sport to

government, whereas many now feel it represents the voice of government to sport. I ask her if it has become a political organisation: "Not at all. It is very important that Sport England is never seen as being party political. I have a really good relationship with [shadow minister for sport] Hugh Robertson and it is important that we continue to work with all politicians."

So what are Jennie's thoughts on the next few years? "After almost two years of complete upheaval and uncertainty I am now in the 'head down' delivery stage. We are in the really important part of the process. We have never been as small and lean. We have had great support from politicians and stakeholders and I want to ensure that the faith they have put in us was right. I am looking forward to having a new chairman appointed soon too – but the future looks really positive." ■



Use them or lose them: Jennie Price sees "strengthening the clubs" as key to preserving Olympic structures after the Games

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