

# Data-based evidence – without proper interrogation or context – does us all a disservice



Jude Reid  
Development  
Manager  
(Sport)

One of the key indicators of how active Scotland is as a nation, comes from a question in the Scottish Household Survey which asks if respondents have been active at least once, for 30 minutes in succession, over the last month (this can include recreational walking). If the answer is yes, they are considered active.

The 2019 Scottish Household Survey concluded that 80% of the population are active and that 20% are inactive. On paper this seems like overall we could pat ourselves on the back and be considered a pretty active nation.

However, to propose that 80% of the nation is active because they participated in physical activity for 30 minutes at least once in a month seems a bit over-inflated. Exercising once a month for 30 minutes doesn't scream out 'active nation' to me.

There are a couple of things in particular which I find troubling from this research - however what I'd like to highlight here is the use of figures like this to present a positive picture, when in actual fact the reality is often less than rosy.

---

Unfortunately, the use of figures or information to portray the picture you want to present is all too common at every level, in every sector. There are a multitude of reasons for this.

When public monies are being invested into agencies and programmes to deliver positive outcomes, of course there is a desire to demonstrate a positive change. And there will be progress, and good news should be shared and made available for others to learn from and replicate if/where appropriate.

However, where this is not the case, and there is a fundamental problem which is not being addressed, is it prudent to overlook or gloss over what the information/stats/data is actually telling us?

Many societal problems cannot be solved using short term fixes and when systemic change is required, this takes time. Long term and consistent investments and partnerships are required to provide adequate time to implement a solution, witness a response and evaluate whether there has been a positive effect which could be sustained.

---

Many societal problems cannot be solved using short term fixes and when systemic change is required, this takes time. Long term and consistent investments and partnerships are required to provide adequate time to implement a solution, witness a response and evaluate whether there has been a positive effect which could be sustained.

Not every approach will achieve the desired response and often projects simply won't work. If people are genuinely 'innovating' (some might consider this a somewhat overused buzzword) and trying new things, then surely failure is unavoidable? This should be accepted by agencies and investors as inevitable and the benefits of learning which come from 'failing' should be embraced, not covered up and hidden so that others waste resources trying to implement the same solutions which don't work. Isn't it more important to try something new then learn lessons from what doesn't work, rather than fear trying anything at all, or just keep using the same methods which aren't really creating any tangible change?

Those who fund and support organisations on the ground to deliver invaluable work within communities need to offer an environment which encourages real innovation, freedom to try new things and the confidence to report back when something hasn't worked.

In the sport sector, there is a genuine fear that funding will be cut if certain performance indicators aren't reached. It's fair to expect to see results for investment - however, it's important to consider whether the performance indicators are measuring the right outcomes, and whether trying to reach unachievable targets is also actually leading to false representation of how the sector is truly performing.

Presenting a positive picture when the reality is quite different seems counterintuitive to me. If a sector isn't performing well, and that message isn't clear, how will people who make decisions and investments know? Hiding the real extent of a problem, only exacerbates it. We need to be open and honest that the problems exist – and, then, the focus should be on channelling resources into discovering and tackling their root cause.

Using data as evidence has become increasingly important as funding resources become more limited and access to funds more competitive. In addition, in today's climate, the requirement to be able to demonstrate the social impact the sector or an organisation is making has never been greater. However, to blindly trust or selectively interpret data – without proper interrogation or context – does everybody, particularly the intended beneficiaries, a disservice and, ultimately, will not properly address the deep-rooted issues within our communities.