

London's 2012 Olympics and Paralympics

Bob Digby explores the geography of the London Olympics and Paralympics and presents ideas for teaching about big sporting events, about regeneration and urban change, and about sustainability. It is the third of three *Teaching Geography* articles focused on the Olympics; the other two were focused on Sydney (Digby, 2007) and on Beijing (Digby, 2008).

By the time readers are browsing this copy of *Teaching Geography*, they will – if they teach in any of the UK's secondary schools or in Departments of Education in its universities – have received a free DVD from the Geographical Association about London's Olympics and Paralympics in 2012. They can also browse a new website established by the Geographical Association – Planet Sport (www.geography.org.uk/projects/planetsport) – which is designed to become a one-stop shop for all teaching and research materials for geographers interested in the Olympics/Paralympics and sports geography. Teaching materials to accompany this article, together with other Olympic and Paralympic themes, can be found on the Planet Sport website.

The Geographical Association, together with its Australian counterpart, AGTA, has for some time now supported teachers who wish to use examples of large sporting events in their teaching through the provision of teaching materials. These include:

- Statistical analysis around themes of development – e.g. how far do the Olympics and Paralympics medal tables reflect levels of economic and human development?

- Environmental issues – how sustainable are the Olympics and Paralympics?
- Social issues – how far do human rights issues impinge upon Olympics and Paralympics values (for further discussion on this, see Digby, 2008).

How can London's Olympics and Paralympics further such opportunities for teaching and learning? Andrew Church (2006) refers to one perception of the Olympics and Paralympics as 'the view from the royal box' – that is, the Olympics and Paralympics form a spectacular event or a great party that enthuses and provides enjoyment. He postulates, however, that geographers bring more than this: that, thinking geographically, the Olympics and Paralympics can be seen in terms of:

- their potential for bringing about change at different scales – local, regional, national and international
- their economic, social and environmental impacts
- the processes by which these impacts are realised.

Background to London's Olympics and Paralympics

London's bid to host the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics was based upon two fundamental geographical concepts – those of location and urban change.

Location

In selecting Stratford, in the east London Borough of Newham, as the location of the Olympic Park, the bid committee selected the city's most accessible location outside central London. As well as its most densely-trafficked surface rail commuter route (Liverpool Street into Essex), four underground tube lines, the Overground, and the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), from 2009, the new

Stratford International station on the CTRL, will give Stratford international links. The network has to be able to handle the 250,000 people who will converge upon Stratford for afternoon events, a further 250,000 for evening events – and of course double that number as one cohort leaves and the other arrives.

Urban change

In selecting east London, the bid committee chose the borough of Newham, amongst the UK's most deprived boroughs, as their location. The five host boroughs – Newham, Tower Hamlets, Greenwich, Hackney and Waltham Forest (Figure 1) – would attract new investment for regeneration. Already altered since the Docklands economic, market-led regeneration that began in the 1980s, regeneration now is also about environmental and social change. The new Olympic Park will mark the first major addition to London's public open space since the late nineteenth century. Whereas the free market – of property developers and finance companies – was at liberty to develop Docklands, the vision for east London now is to provide affordable housing and quality of living space that meets the needs of Newham's population.

East London remains sharply divided in terms of socio-economic well being. The emergence and growth of the 'new economy' in Docklands (particularly banking, insurance and financial services) has yet to trickle down into some parts of east London. Although there has been a huge shift of the middle classes into east London, there remain stubborn pockets of high levels of deprivation in Newham and Tower Hamlets, in spite of their location adjacent to the City and Canary Wharf. If the Olympics and Paralympics are to bring benefits, then their success will depend on whether they impact upon areas such as Canning Town, where Canary Wharf and similar regeneration projects have yet to have any real effect.

The projected impacts of the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics

As with all recent Olympics and Paralympics, there are significant economic, social and environmental impacts.

Economic impacts

It is hard to estimate the range of economic impacts; a full evaluation is unlikely to be carried out much before 2013–14. However, there are winners, losers and questions.

Students are likely to raise questions about cost. As with every Olympic Games in recent years, projected costs



Newham	The London Borough in which most Olympic facilities are located, e.g. the Olympic Stadium
Olympic Park	A new park created for the 2012 Olympics and the location of most Olympics venues. The first major park to be established in London for over a century, it extends along the valley of the River Lea towards the Thames
Lea Valley	The area alongside the River Lea, a tributary of the Thames, it extends from north-east London through most of the Olympic sites, and forms the focus for the new Olympic Park
Stratford	The largest community within Newham and the main commercial heart of the borough. London's biggest transport hub outside centre of the city, it is the main reason for the selection of this location as the site for the 2012 Olympics.

Figure 1: The Olympics in east London. Photo: © London Development Agency.

at the time of the bid have proved to be gross underestimates. Equally, the most ambitious projects – an honour which, until London 2012, probably went to Sydney – also made money. The one unknown factor is security, whose true cost could be up to £2 billion. Of course, projected costs are conjecture at this stage, but some points are worth making:

- Plans for the new Olympic Park (Figure 2) have altered considerably in terms of their scope since the original feasibility study. As the plans for regeneration have increased, so too have the projected benefits (e.g. housing)
- New estimates contain significant contingency funds
- Original estimates were that additional tourist spending alone would be in the region of £400–£700 million as a result of the Olympics. This is likely to be much

- greater in view of data from Sydney, whose benefits from tourism ran at over three times the original estimates in the Olympic year, and continued into 2002
- With the exception of Wembley Stadium (whose delay was down to problems with the Australian company which built it) every recent sports construction project in the UK (e.g. Emirates Stadium, Manchester Commonwealth Games) has been completed on time and to budget
- Some unknown factors are worth research. What happened to the 380 companies which were relocated from the Olympic Park? Among the key drivers of the economy, several have stayed locally, but research is needed to assess what has happened to these.

It is fair to ask whether London's costs can balance. The UK Government estimated in mid-2008 that costs would reach £10–£11 billion – over four times the original estimate – but that these would be exceeded by the scale of benefits. These costs will have to be balanced by ticket sales and sponsors – but the payback will occur largely through indirect impacts. Tourist spending and the increase in construction employment each generate ripple effects in east London, but the big payback will come in terms of land values. Accounting procedures post-2012 will have to factor in increased land values as the 'desirability' of the area increases. Even if a prolonged credit crunch ensues, land values around the Olympic Park will have more than doubled since 2005.

In terms of deadlines, London was estimated in May 2008 to be 6-10 weeks ahead of Sydney at a comparable stage of development. Its project management was given '9.75 out of 10' by the IOC in their progress assessment in mid-2008.



Figure 2: The site of the Olympic stadium in June 2008. Images of the stadium design can be downloaded for educational use from the London development Agency (LDA) website at <http://www.london2012.com/news/image-library/venue-images/index.php>. Photo © London 2012.



Figure 3: Clays Lane housing estate, demolished in 2007 to make way for the Olympic Village. Photo: Bob Digby.

Social impacts

Since the change of mayor in May 2008, several questions have arisen about some of the social issues such as housing. Newham's population is younger, and has larger families than anywhere else in the UK. London house prices are well beyond their reach and there is great need for social housing. One community based at Clays Lane near Stratford has already been broken up (Figure 3), a casualty of the Olympic Village for the 17,500 athletes.

Until recently, plans for housing

have been substantial, with estimates of up to 9000 new homes around the Olympic Park after 2012. In Sydney after 2000, cost pressures and a change of political will forced a change of policy from social housing to free market private housing, which promised far higher rewards.

Environmental impacts

The plans for London 2012 have extended Sydney's concept of the 'Green Olympics'. Using some of the same design personnel responsible for

Sydney, London's central hub is Olympic Park, the first major park to be created in London for over a century. As well as providing a traffic-free concourse during the Olympics and Paralympics, the Olympic Park will promote the regeneration of the Lea Valley and create a new Lea Valley Regional Park.

Currently there is considerable contamination within the valley, dating from its industrial past, from wartime munitions dumps, or from bombsite clearance after World War 2. Environmental quality is low. East London is the only area of London where surface pylons transmitted electricity overhead; in all other areas of London, cables took it underground. In 2007 their removal began as a part of the new infrastructure for an energy grid in east London. Industrial decline has led to a proliferation of derelict sites.

Teaching about London's Olympics and Paralympics

The Planet Sport website outlines a teaching unit of 6-7 lessons teaching about London's Olympics and Paralympics, each lesson taking up to one hour. It focuses on how secondary geography teachers might exploit this opportunity to teach about regeneration in east London. The detailed plans, suggested activities and resources for each lesson, which can be downloaded from the Planet Sport website, are designed to help students:

- understand the scope, scale and impact of hosting London's Olympics and Paralympics
- increase their knowledge and understanding of the regeneration process, of how east London is changing, and of the role of the Olympics and Paralympics in bringing this about
- understand different viewpoints about London's Olympics and Paralympics
- realise the opportunities for study both within and outside the classroom.

The lessons, which are listed below, are targeted at the 13-17 age range, but once downloaded can be edited and tailored to suit any secondary age.

Lesson 1: Introducing London's Olympics

Resources needed from Planet Sport website:

- Copies of Enquiry Page 1
- PowerPoint on London's Olympics and Paralympics (slides 1-11).

Lesson 2: Assessing the need for socio-economic regeneration in east London

Resources needed:

- Access to computers (at least one per two students)

Resources needed from Planet Sport website:

- Enquiry page 2: census data from 2001 for Canning Town South, one of the most deprived areas of Newham (Excel)

Lesson 3: Assessing the need for environmental regeneration in east London

Resources needed from Planet Sport website:

- Enquiry Page 3 – up to 6 per student
- PowerPoint on London's Olympics and Paralympics (slides 12-28).

Lesson 4: Assessing the socio-economic impacts of regeneration in east London

Resources needed:

- Access to computers (at least one between two)
- Rough paper

Resources needed from Planet Sport website:

- Enquiry page 2: census data for Millwall, the council ward in Tower Hamlets Borough that contains Canary Wharf; it shows data for a regenerated ward (Excel)
- Enquiry page 4 – one per student
- PowerPoint on London's Olympics and Paralympics (slides 29-36).

Lesson 5: Assessing the potential impacts of environmental regeneration in Newham

Resources needed:

- Access to computers (at least one between two)

Resources needed from Planet Sport website:

- Up to five copies per student of Enquiry Page 5: Assessing environmental impact
- PowerPoint on London's Olympics and Paralympics (slides 37-43).

Lessons 6 and 7: Assessing the sustainability of the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics

Resources needed:

- Access to computers (at least one between 2-3 students)

Resources needed from Planet Sport website:

- Enquiry page 6: Assessing the sustainability of London's Olympics

Summary

The concept of sustainability is potentially difficult for some students. If you show your free DVD programme on London's Olympics and Paralympics, together with some of the resource sheets here, your students should be able to make more concrete sense of what sustainability can mean. Use the Planet Sport website for ideas for resources for other teaching about the Olympics and Paralympics, and keep revisiting this site, as it will be updated to 2012 and beyond! ■

Note

Bob Digby will be giving a lecture about the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics at the Geographical Annual Conference to be held in Manchester, 16-18 April 2009.

References

- Church, A. (2006) 'Introduction to London's 2012 Olympics and Paralympics', PowerPoint presentation, presented at Philip Allan Updates conference.
- Digby, B. (2007) 'Teaching about the Olympics', *Teaching Geography*, 32, 2, pp. 73-9.
- Digby, B. (2008) 'Teaching about the Beijing Olympics', *Teaching Geography*, 33, 2, pp. 64-8.

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