



Organizing the 'greatest show on earth'

Case Study
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Liz Underhill, Head of 2012 Integration and Assurance, Janette Lissaman, 2012 Programme Office Manager, and Heather Sinclair, 2012 Programme Assurance Manager, at the Government Olympic Executive, a directorate of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, talk about the biggest job of their lives.

Introduction

Hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games is, quite simply, a mammoth task. By the time of the Opening Ceremony at least 100,000 people will be working on the Games, including 3,000 staff, 70,000 volunteers and large numbers of contractors. With a public sector funding package worth £9.298 billion, it is imperative for Britain's reputation nationally and internationally that the Games are delivered successfully. But it's the legacy of the Games that will inform opinion on success or otherwise in the longer term.

Although the methodology Managing Successful Programmes (MSP®) is used throughout the organization, this is a programme on a scale far bigger than any MSP training can prepare you for. How do the programme managers working on the Olympics manage something this big?

It's complicated ...

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games have a lot to deliver and standards have been set high. The organizers must put on world-class sporting events: during the Olympics and Paralympics this means the equivalent of holding 26 world championships at the same time. But they are also aiming to leave a lasting legacy for the UK by boosting sports participation and ensuring the world-class facilities are used after the Games. London 2012 is also working overseas to spread the message of international participation, organizing the Cultural Olympiad to unite culture and sport, and working with the local community to involve people in the international events happening on their doorsteps. That's a lot of projects to organize and coordinate.

In addition, London 2012 has to ensure venues are built, tested and ready to put on great sporting shows, including those taking place at the Olympic Park in East London, a project often quoted as twice the size of Heathrow's Terminal 5 but being built in half the time. Organizers also have to make sure that London and the UK can carry on working while the Games are on, ensuring local residents and businesses continue to receive the goods and services they need, and making sure that the transport system can accommodate the huge number of visitors and participants who will be in London.

There are a number of different organizations involved with delivering the London 2012 Games. The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) is a private company responsible for staging the Games. The Olympic Delivery Authority is a public sector organization that is responsible for designing and building the new venues. Many central government departments and agencies are involved in providing services, coordination and oversight for the programme, such as the Home Office, Metropolitan Police, Department for Transport and Transport for London, and local government has a huge role to play in the delivery of local services and ensuring that the Games come to life in London and around the UK. Finally, there is the Olympic Park Legacy Company, a joint venture of central and local government, which has the responsibility for ensuring the Olympic Park thrives after the Games have finished.

Added to the complexity of organizing such a vast number of individual projects and coordinating the involvement of so many delivery organizations is the fact that the Games have a rather fixed deadline. The Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games will start at 20:12 on 27 July 2012 regardless of which stage preparations are at, so it's vital there's a clear, shared understanding of what must be delivered, by whom and how everyone's going to get to that end point. There's also a real need to make sure there is visibility about how things are going and an understanding of what the risks are, and how problems will be resolved.

If that isn't enough, there's the added dimension of public interest in the Games. Stories feature in the press every day – unsurprising given the potential impacts on national pride and the UK's international reputation. And, with so much riding on a successful Games in 2012 and a sustainable legacy in the years after, scrutiny is high – everyone wants to know how things are going. How do you keep everyone happy and deliver a great Games?

Where to start?

Anyone who has been on MSP training would think that the first place to start would be to make sure you've got a mandate, senior level buy-in, and a blueprint setting out what the aims of the programme are. With the Olympic and Paralympic Games, many of those essentials are taken care of during the bid process, which ended in 2005 for London. The scope of what the International Olympic Committee requires from a host city is clearly laid out and London described in its candidature file how it would meet these challenges and what it would do to make its Games special. Senior level support from all parties across government was secured during the bid process.

But winning the bid was just the start – how do you make those ideas and concepts a reality? This is where the process gets complicated and where structured methodology can only help to a certain extent. At a project level, PProjects IN Controlled Environments (PRINCE2®) techniques are invaluable in organizing work and ensuring clear boundaries of responsibility. But as the projects are collected into programmes and the programmes are collected into 'super programmes', life becomes more complicated. Those with a high-level view of the programme apply the principles of MSP to bring structure to the programme – pulling together high-level plans and ensuring risks are managed effectively. Cross-programme or integration risks, issues and progress are managed and a programme brief is kept updated to clarify the aims, organizations and governance arrangements across the programme.

The London 2012 approach

'With a programme this big the art of programme management becomes almost more important than the processes,' Sinclair says. 'It's important to establish good working relationships to ensure challenges and problems can be resolved quickly.' She also says it's vital to take a pragmatic approach – dealing with so many different organizations, both public and private sector and both large and small, means that a 'one size fits all' approach isn't always going to work.

'In fact with the best will in the world it's never going to work. So it's important to have a thorough understanding of everyone's roles and who is responsible for what – and not be afraid to let people get on with their jobs. A flexible approach and being able to communicate your aims effectively is crucial to get people on side, build cooperation and get things done,' she says.

One way London 2012 has approached this is to form networks across organizations to bring together people with similar remits to enable communication and sharing of best practice. These networks range from informal knowledge sharing forums, to more structured and focused decision-making groups. Lissaman says, 'A paper report does not mean you know what is really happening. What you need is for people to be open and honest with you and good communication is key. We have to deal face to face with stakeholders too.'

Underhill agrees: 'Winning over the hearts and minds of your colleagues is just as important as the process. The ability to manage successfully relies on collaboration and creating a programme management family. Constituent parts of the programme are massive programmes in their own right.'

Another approach the programme has tried to adopt is to learn from previous Games and spot where things may be falling through the gaps. For example, by breaking down organizational silos and bringing together different people by theme rather than by employer, the team have identified scope gaps and overlaps in good time and have been able to resolve issues that would have been far more expensive and difficult to manage if they'd been identified closer to Games-time. This sort of cross-cutting approach to issues also helps to build relationships across organizations and prepare people for working during the Games, when issues will need to be identified and resolved quickly by those with the expertise, authority and experience that matters. They'll need to deal with situations appropriately and efficiently using the senior levels of governance to focus on preparations and set strategic direction.

But perhaps most of all, London 2012 has learnt that flexibility and being aware of changing environments are key to keeping on track. This was perhaps inevitable in light of the radically different economic climate in which London 2012 finds itself operating now, compared to the situation when the bid was won. Changes to the economic climate have had an impact on many areas of the programme, with changes of approach being needed to ensure the original aims of legacy and sustainability are delivered. Since then, there have also been political changes at all levels – local, London Mayoral and central government – and minimizing the impact of these changes on the programme has been achieved by securing cross-party support to the bid from the outset. Organizers also regularly review the effectiveness of governance structures and adjust them to meet changing circumstances and to evolve with the lifecycle of the programme.

Looking ahead

The preparation for the Games has now moved into a new stage – with the build phase nearing completion. As the Games get closer and deadlines get tighter, everyone will have to pull together even more. There is a huge amount of commitment, energy and enthusiasm for making sure that a good job is done.

There are, naturally, huge challenges in getting such enormous projects and programmes to coordinate their activities and their knowledge, as Lissaman says, 'Everyone involved in 2012 passionately wants it to be successful and they know that they can't do this on their own.'

Top tips for getting engagement on a large scale

- Be pragmatic – in a complex programme it is not possible for a 'one size fits all' approach to programme management
- Work in an engaging way that invites participation
- PRINCE2/MSP can be seen as bureaucratic so find ways to sell them – use language that people can understand

- Relationships matter so talk to each other – don't rely on emails and processes
- It is vital that you have the right stakeholders involved in planning for understanding interdependencies
- Build integration activity into plans at the outset
- Create something that is seen as adding value and not a burden.

The strategic objectives of the Olympics and Paralympics are to:

- Stage an inspirational Games for the athletes, the Olympic family and the viewing public
- Deliver the Olympic Park and all venues on time, within agreed budget and to specification, minimizing the call on public funds and providing for a sustainable legacy
- Maximize the economic, social, health and environmental benefits of the Games for the UK, particularly through regeneration and sustainable development in East London
- Achieve a sustained improvement in UK sport before, during and after the Games, in both elite performance and grassroots participation.

About MSP

The Olympic Programme, Programme Office uses the MSP guidance to underpin its way of working. MSP is a best-practice framework for delivering complex programmes in accordance with long-term strategies. MSP was developed for the Office of Government Commerce, and is now owned by the Cabinet Office, part of HM Government.

MSP defines programme management as 'the action of carrying out the coordinated organization, direction and implementation of a dossier and transformation activities to achieve outcomes and realize benefits of strategic importance to the business'.

The MSP framework ensures stakeholders are identified and engaged in an appropriate manner enabling those who have an interest in the outcomes to participate and be involved. MSP recognizes that communication with the stakeholders is vital to the success of the programme. MSP incorporates a number of tools and techniques to enable the stakeholders to be engaged, including stakeholder mapping and analysis, and a stakeholder engagement process.

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