

Blowing The Cobwebs Off Sport England's National Governing Body for Yoga

It's hard to believe it's nearly twenty five years since the British Wheel of Yoga successfully applied to Sport England to be their National Governing Body for yoga. The BWY is just one of about 90% of NGBs that have never been assessed against the recognition criteria which have been in place since 2010¹, so the trophy cabinet is long overdue for a dusting down.

Mat K. Witts

Prior to 2010, Sport England can't say how it's NGBs were assessed, because it didn't keep records. It is also unable to say much about the recognition of most current NGBs because it is unwilling to make assessments when applications have already been approved, which in some cases was many years ago.

The 'National Governing Body' title is widely seen as a measure of preeminence. Sport England's recognition policy and processes are it admits, overly complex, but the unwillingness or indifference to implementing it may come back to haunt it if NGBs are going to continue to be a part of the sports governance framework in Britain. Sport England needs to find a way of convincing NGBs they have a right to enforce the new UK Sports Governance code over them in what has been an expensive initiative for British tax payers in recent years.

But, according to recognition policies in force since 2010, the right to impose new rules on NGBs are broadly contingent on defining the activity they wish to govern, to enable them to show evidence of sufficient control and influence over the activity.

The problem is some NGBs will have trouble differentiating between the activities in the community they claim to govern and activities mostly involving straightforward bodily movements of people in everyday settings that are outside the narrow remit of sports governance. Some NGBs may end up footing the bill for implementing the new governance code, even though they have not been given an opportunity to demonstrate they are meeting the published criteria for being recognized as NGBs.

The roll out of the new code could turn out to be the worst of all worlds for some NGBs. Activities like exercise, movement, dance, rambling, long distance walking and yoga may struggle to meet the core recognition criteria that requires satisfactory evidence that they can be governed through broad consent. Official rules, coaches, competitions or referees are mostly not relevant to (more or less) universal human ways of living, such as standing at a Bus stop, or flexing our muscles when waking up in the morning (acrobatic and competitive artistry aside).

Stretching, concentrating, contemplating, moving and dancing are often done with no official rules or competitions to go by, and we do of course, all breathe too. An NGB for yoga therefore would either have to invent a definition for yoga that includes a particular kind of stretching, moving and breathing that they can claim to govern, or be faced with defining an activity that is so universal among the species, no organization could claim they have sufficient control and influence over the activity, leading to a ridiculously broad definition for yoga that catches 'all human beings that move, think or breathe'.

Activities like exercise, movement, dance, rambling, long distance walking and yoga do not seem to be capable of being adequately defined in order for an NGB to be able to demonstrate it has sufficient control and influence over the activity. These sorts of activities are unable to exclude many kinds of natural human function (i.e. movement, walking, stretching and so forth).

¹ A full list of National Governing Bodies is listed on the Sport England website at the following URL:
<https://www.sportengland.org/our-work/national-governing-bodies/sports-that-we-recognise/>

The general intransigence about making timely assessments and appropriate record keeping not only fails to ensure NGBs are continuing to meet the overarching/core/minimum criteria, but Sport England's assessment of it's own practices, overall preparedness and view on specific risks according to it's own 'business priorities' leaves ample room for legal challenges, disputes and confusion.

This once prestigious sounding title is in jeopardy, simply because it may be misleading the public, participants, stakeholders and causing bad feeling among other membership organizations that may rival NGB's in wanting to raise revenue from membership subscriptions, donations or from organizing programmes in direct competition with NGB's.

Sport England intended to review the policy again in 2018, but whatever Sport England or the BWY may eventually plump for as a definition, yoga in the hands of these two organizations is already shaping up to be a fantastic way to slack off from what might be much more meaningful work for them both, if they were to finally admit defeat and each go their separate ways instead.



1. Illustration: Movie poster from Ferris Bueller's Day Off - a 1986 American coming-of-age comedy film

Notes for editors

NGB's who have been assessed under the recognition policy introduced in 2010 are:

1. UK Ultimate (2015)
2. GB Boccia (2015)
3. GB Wheelchair Rugby (2015)
4. Goalball UK (2015)
5. Parkour UK (2016)
6. English Association of Snooker and Billiards (2011)
7. Boccia England (2013)
8. Surfing England (2017)
9. Scottish Surfing Federation (2014)
10. Caledonian Snooker (2015)
11. Pentathlon Scotland (2015)

- The NGB role is not an 'award'. NGBs are self-appointed, and subject to application.
- The NGB designation does not mean its courses have been quality approved or accredited.
- Being a Sport England NGB does not bestow any legal powers to govern an activity.