Sport for the learning disabled has a long if patchy history in the UK, but the Special Olympics movement was founded in the USA in the 1960s. In sporting terms, SO is highly distinctive in that it is based on the duel principles of participation as well as competition. While all learning disabled athletes can take part in competitions at national and international sporting events, their level is based on their ability as much as their disability.

SOGB is only one of several organisations providing sport for the learning disabled in the UK but it is the largest. It was set up in 1978 and currently has approximately 8,500 members. Its growth is not planned on the basis of need but is rather dependent on the work of local volunteers. The first SOGB National Summer Games took place in 1982 in Knowsley on Merseyside with 800 athletes. Leicester first hosted the Games in 1989.

The Games have become a national mega-event with Leicester 2009 hosting around 2,400 SO athletes, 1,200 coaches plus 6,000 family members and carers.

The 2009 SO National Summer Games were organised in a very short space of time for an event of this scale, with little commercial sponsorship and little knowledge transfer from planning past Games. There was also relatively little local experience available of running events on this scale involving people with learning disabilities. Sports facilities in Leicester made it impossible to run more than one event at any venue, thus adding to the complexities of the event and raising questions about linking venue sites. However, the Games benefited from having a highly committed, if small, full-time staff, enthusiastic volunteers and creative logistical expertise, which together effectively ensured that the 2009 Games were successfully delivered.
Editor's comments - [ This report examines the holding of the Special Olympics Great Britain (SOGB) National Summer Games – for people with learning disabilities – in Leicester in July 2009. For the first time, the views of the organisers, the athletes, their families and carers and the volunteer ‘army’ who assisted in staging the Games have been systematically collected and analysed.

In addition, three on-street surveys covering 919 members of the Leicester public were carried out at broadly six-monthly intervals before, during and after the 2009 Games. Each sample was balanced for age, gender and ethnicity in line with the city’s demographics. The aim here was to assess possible changes in public awareness of learning disability and the local impact of the Games.]

References:
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