

Progress on London's 2012 Olympics and Paralympics – Update October 2008

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The world is now a very different place from that which set of the context of London's 2012 Olympics and Paralympics when I wrote 12 months ago. On the positive side, Beijing's Olympics and Paralympics were something to celebrate during 2008. In June 2008, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) reported that London's progress towards 2012 was excellent, and about 6-10 weeks ahead of schedule. Even the cost of staging the Olympics – so widely reported in the British media as an issue of concern – did not cause them concern at the time. However, those costs may yet have some bearing on what happens.

The issue of cost

Although the cost – currently estimated at between UK£10-11 billion – is 3-4 times higher than original estimates, the benefits of the facilities after the event have also increased. Land values in east London have – in spite of the 'credit crunch' – already risen sharply as perceptions of the area improve, and investors are keen to purchase land and housing. These will be included in the final account of costs and benefits.

The big unknown, whose costs are notoriously difficult to estimate, is **security**. Even in the current climate, it is easy to estimate for the cost of a stadium but almost impossible to calculate expenditure on security. Physical security features – e.g. the 10-metre fence around the Athletes' Village, for instance – are easy to cost. But how many security staff will be needed? Already, hundreds of security staff patrol the site during the construction phase.

Aldershot Army base has been chosen as the training camp for the British Olympic team ahead of London 2012. It beat competing bids from Bath and Loughborough universities, not just because of its proximity to London, but because of its security as an army base. The British team faced threats in the weeks before Sydney's and Athens' Olympics.

Impact of costs upon the venues

All Olympic and Paralympic venues are now confirmed except for two

- The Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) announced in March 2008 that an alternative site for the canoe slalom is being considered to replace Spitalbrook in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire because of local industrial contamination. An alternative, six miles south, is being investigated.
- Fencing events may be moved from the Olympic Park to the ExCel Centre beside the former Royal Docks.

However, there are bigger question marks as cost management begins to drive decisions about 2012 venues. The following web link – http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/olympics/2008/10/olympic_chiefs_discussed_how_t.html - is worth reading and updating since – at the time of writing this – some changes are likely to the venues. Changes are almost certain as costs bite.

Other venues outside London's Olympic Park are progressing well. Sailing events

are to be held next to Weymouth and Portland National Sailing Academy (WPNSA), in Dorset on the south coast. This has helped to regenerate the old Naval Air Station at Portland, now known as Osprey Quay, where new residential, commercial and marina facilities have been given planning permission and where building started in May 2008. On one of the most exposed locations in the western English Channel, it provides superb natural sailing waters. Facilities include –

- A new slipway, 70 moorings and associated facilities.
- A new 600-berth commercial marina nearby. Part of the sailing venue, 250 of its berths will be used for test events as well as during the Games.

Construction should be completed by late 2008, making Weymouth and Portland one of the first venues completed for 2012.

Olympic Park – work has begun!

In east London, the first big impression for visitors to the new Olympic Park is of environmental impact! On July 2nd 2007, the ODA (responsible for the development of all the facilities) took over ownership of the Olympic Park, and closed it off (see photo below). Now access is closed to all except construction traffic (Figure 1), and guarded heavily by hundreds of security staff. Within its boundaries, work is starting on the different venues and facilities.

Figure 1 Closure of the entrance to Carpenters Road in Stratford – one of several roads now permanently closed into the new Olympic Park.



Photo: Bob Digby

For both safety, and especially security, the entire site of the Park is now surrounded by a large Berlin-like blue wall (Figure 2), which cuts across all roads leading into the site. This has blocked access along Carpenters Road, linking Stratford with the A12 further north. Traffic must now pass through Stratford, and journey times are already longer for local people.

Figure 2 The blue wall that now blocks access throughout the Olympic Park – this photo was taken in Hackney Wick



Photo: Bob Digby

The wall is almost continuous (Figure 3). Now, the Olympic Park resembles a construction city in its own right, with blue site offices for throughout the Park (Figure 4), which are being used by over 1000 employees, from engineers, architects, and foremen to digger drivers.

Figure 3 showing the extent of the boundary 'blue wall' around Olympic Park.

Map from Google Maps



Figure 4 Clearance of the Olympic Park sites, and the blue blocks built for construction staff



Photo: Bob Digby

The site of the main Stadia

The former Marshgate Lane industrial estate – the site of the Stadium and Aquatic Centre) – is now levelled and construction has begun. Over 300 firms were relocated from the estate, mostly to other parts of east London, though there has been some employment loss out of the area. The majority are located within east London however.

Work on the 80 000-seater stadium started in May 2008, three months ahead of schedule, and the stadium is now (November 2008) visibly above ground level and rising fast! Once the Olympic and Paralympics are over, it will become a 25 000-seater athletics venue and could also become home to a lower-league football or rugby club. In some areas, ground levels to form the stadium foundations were lowered by 9 metres. The bowl will site the permanent part of the stadium, and be supplemented by 55 000 removable seats to be dismantled after the Games.

The data for the site are already staggering. 800 000 tonnes of soil have been dug out from the Stadium site to be re-used elsewhere in the Olympic Park. Much of the soil has been transported to sites over the UK – including one in Lincolnshire – where chemical contamination is removed. Both water and soil around the island site (between the courses of the River Lea and its canals) are contaminated from previous users, including low-level radioactive waste from industrial dumping and bomb damage from World War 2. Soil has been stripped away and is being removed, either for cleaning or disposal. Fish and newts, too, have been removed from watercourses and taken elsewhere whilst the site is cleaned, and will be returned later.

To the north of the Olympic Park, the former bus depots and utility sites along Waterden Lane around the old Hackney Stadium – the sites of the Hockey Centre, Velodrome, and multi-sports arena – have also been vacated and then demolished.

Clays Lane – the saga continues

With all developments, there are usually casualties. Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, an American researcher, has shown how, in both Sydney and Beijing, the casualties are usually low income groups and those with few voices politically. Such is the case in Clays Lane.

Clays Lane is a former housing co-operative, and an experiment in social housing that began when it opened in 1981. Identified as the site of the future Olympic Village, it was vacated by July 1st 2007, and has now been demolished. It was unique as a housing project. Its purpose was to provide social housing for single, homeless men – the most difficult of all social groups to re-house. Rather like a block of student flats, it offered communal living and shared facilities for people who were otherwise sometimes isolated. Rents covered costs only and were not for profit, so that in April 2007 the average cost of rent, council tax and heating came to no more than about £65 per person – about half the east London average, and a long way below London's average rents and costs. Now, the site has been cleared, and residents have had to be moved; the community no longer exists and individuals have been dispersed throughout the Borough of Newham.

Figure 5 Clays Lane prior to demolition in 2007.



Photo: Bob Digby

There is a great deal of ill feeling among former residents about the ways in which they were treated. Readers can find out more by visiting the Games Monitor <http://www.gamesmonitor.org.uk/>.

The problem is that they were an impoverished, marginalised group with few political supporters. Many were homeless before living in Clays Lane, and several had physical and mental health problems. One report, carried out in 2005, concluded that

'It was a very sociable community and provided a network of support for a variety of people who were described as 'vulnerable'. Interviewers noted how the courtyard layout had enabled social interaction and included discussion of how this could be adapted elsewhere if the community moved. The estate had been established to provide housing for single, sometimes homeless, people, a valuable resource which has now been lost. It was a very diverse community. We counted over 40 different nationalities present at Clays Lane.'

Julian Cheyne, quoted in

<http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2008-01-31d.181822.h>

Following re-housing across Newham – which, according to most residents, was a remarkably fair local authority and had full sympathy with their case – most former residents are now at least £30 a week worse off, and those on benefits or in low-paid jobs are struggling with increased rents and bills. As compensation, residents were offered about £1500 to allow for increased housing costs, but spread over three years – i.e. about £40 per month. Many have found that their housing costs have increased by far more than this. Total compensation offered was £8500, including £4000 'loss of home' payment, and £2625 for 'disturbance costs'. Most members of the community have, according to one former resident, spent more than this on refurbishing their flats, furniture, carpeting, and electrical items.

Views about Clays Lane differ. Several different interests were involved; the Housing Association which managed Clays Lane, local authorities, the ODA, the Mayor's Office, and other government bodies and MPs – each with different perspectives about Clays Lane and the relocation.

Two other groups who lived at the Clays Lane site have fared much better. Students at the University of East London are now accommodated on the main university site at Docklands (pictures at <http://www.uel.ac.uk/residential/oncampus.htm>). The traveller community at Clays Lane was far more vocal and well organised than the housing co-operative. They have been re-housed on a brand new site just half a mile away.

Progress on the Olympic Park

Meanwhile, the true legacy of the Olympics for east London will be the Olympic Park. Architects and landscaping companies have been nominated to develop proposals for the open spaces in the Olympic Park both during and after the Games. Their brief is to create a new vision of a park that will demonstrate sustainable, active living. Work will begin in 2009 on this, the largest new urban park in London in over 150 years, since the Victorian era. After 2012, the Park will include allotments, meadows, wetlands, wooded valleys, orchards, wildlife habitats, and sports facilities such as canoeing, mountain biking and climbing. For the first time, new cycle- and foot-paths will connect the Lea Valley with the River Thames, creating a green corridor.

The issue of costs and sponsorship

One of the big questions throughout the development of the facilities is – and will remain – cost. Whilst the big sponsors – for TV and media distribution rights – have yet to be arranged, sponsors are being arranged now. British Airways has become

the fourth official sponsor for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympics Games in London, paying £40m for marketing rights and the right to be the UK team's official carrier to the 2008 Games in Beijing and the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver. BA agreed to fund travel bursaries for athletes and take part in volunteer training volunteers for 2012. To date, Lloyds TSB has paid £80m, EDF has pledged £50m and Adidas has agreed on a £100m sponsorship investment. However, larger sponsors will be arranged closer to 2012; in Sydney, for instance, NBC paid US\$800 million for television rights.

Looking ahead

Without doubt, there are challenges ahead.

- Credit crunches, failing banks and investment houses, and collapsing share markets have placed a very different backcloth against which to invest in east London. The regeneration legacy may well be slowed.
- Falling house prices and a stagnant buyers market challenge whether or not housing around the Olympic Park will be built.
- A change of Mayor of London has changed the political context; Boris Johnson has already stated that he wants to see more money invested in a sporting legacy rather than urban regeneration.
- In Sydney, a similar situation – rising costs, an environmental clean-up and significant regeneration plan together with a political change of viewpoint – led to plans for social housing being shelved, and a sell-off of the Olympics Village at market housing rates.

In spite of progress, there are several issues to play for. There is no doubt that, where legacies of 2012 are concerned, several decisions are far from final.

Note about the author

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