

Volunteering at the Olympics

Governance International Associate John Tatam reports about his volunteering experience at the Olympics 2012 in London.

I had heard a lot about the impact of volunteers on the Olympics, particularly in Sydney, so when we won the bid I leapt at the chance to be involved at least to some extent, on the inside.

The application process was surprisingly complex and extended. Around a quarter of a million people applied; some hundred thousand plus were interviewed; and seventy thousand finally selected, which despite my feeble responses to questions like 'When have you gone the extra mile?' included me.

There were many roles available from supporting particular sports to back room jobs like media relations and driving the fleet of four hundred BMWs! As a keen cyclist I had opted for the cycling team. It turned out that over fifteen hundred volunteers were needed for the two road races (the biggest events of the games), several hundred for the time trials and the mountain biking, but just a few for the velodrome. I got shifts on the road races and time trial.

Being a volunteer gave just a glimpse of the sheer scale of the Olympic venture: all the volunteers and fifty thousand paid staff were put through an orientation day at Wembley arena. There were thousands there on my day – yet this was just a tenth of the total number; attending uniform measurement and distribution was also an eye opener. The lead up to the Olympics was full of the usual moans and groans about organization from the media and elsewhere. I just thought: 'What do they know?'

The orientation and the 'venue specific' training focused principally on motivation, making us feel vital to the success of the Olympics, and of course being positive with the public. Given that we were volunteers and that some of the tasks we would be given would inevitably be less than exciting I can see that setting the right mood was essential. After all we heard that lots of G4S paid staff failed to show. I would guess that the level of absenteeism among volunteers was minimal.

The men's road race was on the first day – and Team GB was of course fancied. We were driven out in coaches to our sectors of the route and as we passed gathering crowds (some cheering us!) town greens with big screens and picnickers already assembling, flags, bicycles hanging out of windows or on roofs, and a primary

school's witty display of wicker cyclists on bikes (some with dogs on the back) it really felt like something significant was happening. Something very unusual was stirring in Surrey.

I had a very rural sector but large numbers of people slowly gathered and the mood was fun and relaxed with the endless succession of Police and official's motor bikes coming through and high fiving the crowds. My particular job was 'flagging' a bridge where the road narrowed from double to single lane and bales protected the bridge parapet. Some of the crowd were open about having chosen this spot in the hope of seeing a crash. The men's race passed through fine in a lead group of twenty odd and a peloton of about one hundred and thirty – though, of course, passing inches from my nose. The women were less successful.

As the women's peloton of about sixty approached at, I guess, around thirty miles an hour, I suddenly realised they were not all going to make it despite my frantic whistle blowing. I must have closed my eyes and jumped to the side before hearing the sound of cycles hitting the ground and thinking 'Oh no, not on my patch!' I opened my eyes to see four cyclists and bikes on the ground in front of me and a Brazilian ten feet down in the ditch (with one of the bales) but already trying to clamber out. I helped her and her bike at which point the TV picked up the scene– they simply had not seen her disappear down the hole. I was then undecided whether or not I should be helping the other women sort out their bikes or maybe ringing for help. I was conscious that I was probably on TV at this point and ought to be looking decisive! (My family, who had been watching on television inevitably focused on this 'Mr Bean' moment rather than my heroic rescuing of the Brazilian cyclist.) It was all over in no time. What had felt to me like a serious incident was just a blip in their race!

On the Wednesday I was at the Time Trials and really lucky to be based right in Hampton Court. This meant I was able to see the start, the finish, the return of the cyclists, Brad's victory lap and medal ceremony. A fantastic privilege to be there at the point where it all started to go right for Team GB!

I was also able to attend a number of events – free and ticketed – as a spectator. (This included standing three feet from where a Canadian cyclist took a bad cart wheeling fall in the men's triathlon, so I am now being seen as jinxed). Clichéd though it is, the London Olympics was a once in a lifetime experience, and I am grateful that I have had the chance to experience it, and be absorbed in it from the outside and, a little, from the inside. I now have six days of Paralympic cycling down at Brand's Hatch.

So does this mean there will be more volunteering from me and others? That is not so clear. I got the impression that many of my cycle team colleagues were already

involved in local clubs etc and the Olympics was a very high profile one off event. It is too early to tell what the long term impact might be.