

Opinion

ANDY WASLEY

Asks what message the 2012 Olympics send out to gay people?



I'M GOING TO put my neck on the line and say something that will leave me accused of being an Olympic killjoy: gay people have been let down by London 2012.

I think the Games are, overall, a great thing. Not just because of the men's diving, men's swimming and men's gymnastics, delightful as they are. Rather, I know from the work Stonewall does with hundreds of schools around the country how important sport and the Olympics can be to young people. The Games teach that taking part is more important than winning (UK Eurovision fans will probably relate here), and that it is how you perform, not who you are, that really matters. For a young gay person in Britain today what could be more powerful than seeing an openly gay athlete compete and win a medal? To see that their sexual orientation is no barrier to success?

Of course, I'm also very proud that the Olympics will be showing the world just how brilliant and diverse Britain is as a country. Sadly, though, Team GB doesn't represent that country as fully as it could. Because among the 550 indigo-clad hopefuls there's just two openly gay athletes (Paralympians Lee Pearson and Claire Harvey). That's pretty shabby.

It isn't hard to see why there are very few top-flight, out-gay athletes. Research for Stonewall shows that more than half of gay young people don't like taking part in sports, often because they're homophobically bullied while doing so. Young gay people have virtually no openly gay sporting role models, and casual homophobia is commonplace in British sport stadiums. Sport often looks like an unwelcoming pastime or career for gay people.

The Olympics presented an amazing opportunity to change that – indeed, they were actually won on the promise of a 'legacy of greater inclusion' for all communities. But when challenged on what they've actually done to make sport more attractive to Britain's 3.7 million lesbian, gay and bisexual people, London 2012's organisers can't really give a convincing answer. All they can claim by way of being gay-friendly is signing the Government's Sports Charter against homophobia, and producing a pin badge (at £5 a pop) with a rainbow flag. Hardly a legacy to be proud of.

Gay Londoners and visiting spectators also seem to have been forgotten. Most of the people who we look forward to welcoming will have no problem with gay people, but a minority will come to Britain with deeply homophobic attitudes (gay people are still persecuted and even killed by the state in 80 countries). I want to know that London 2012 and the Metropolitan Police have a plan that will ensure that my boyfriend and I, and all other gay people living in or visiting London, are safe during the Games. I'm not convinced they do. It has fallen to Stonewall to do something about it: we'll be producing a simple guide for gay visitors on their rights in Britain, how to stay safe and what to do if things go wrong.

London 2012 is also a rare chance for Britain to show the world why it's great. Gay people have a uniquely wonderful story to tell about who we are as a country, and Britain is rightly a beacon to the world on gay equality. Only a decade ago we couldn't tie the knot with the person we love – but we could legally be sacked or turned away from hotels, just because of our sexual orientation. Less than 10 years ago, Section 28 (remember that?) was still ruining kids' lives.

Thanks largely to hard work by Stonewall, today we enjoy legal equality at work, we can have civil partnerships, adopt children and fight for our country. Schools are taking homophobic bullying seriously and casual homophobia is looking as outdated as racism. What a fantastic story to tell. And what a shame it's been overlooked.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people have contributed more than half a billion pounds to the Olympics' staggering £9.3 billion budget. We all hope it's worth the expense, and that London 2012 will be a brilliant success – but as the opening ceremony approaches, gay people have every right to ask what have we really gained from our support?

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