Designing Effective Legacy Models for Major Events: A Starter for Policy Makers and Event Delivery Bodies

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This briefing draws on Spirit of 2012's 12-year experiment in developing a new kind of legacy model for major events — one focused on social impact rather than physical infrastructure, delivered independently of event organisers, beyond the host city and built around long-term outcomes and learning. As the UK reconsiders how events can drive social value, Spirit's model offers timely insight into what legacy looks like in practice when it is planned, resourced and governed differently. The following sections set out why legacy models matter now, what Spirit's model involved, and what we learned from operating it at scale.

Why Legacy Models Matter Now

Across the global events ecosystem, expectations of major events are shifting. This shift is prominent in the UK as it is no longer enough for major events to deliver economic uplift alone — the public, policymakers and funders increasingly expect meaningful social value as a core outcome, not a by-product. Effective legacy planning is now essential, yet the systems designed to deliver it have not kept pace. While most now accept that long-term social impact cannot be owned by temporary organising bodies, the planning, governance and funding structures needed to act on that understanding are still underdeveloped.

In practice, despite some early planning, legacy models continue to be assembled hastily, often once an event is already underway, leaving little time for strategic design. Event organisers and policymakers frequently report that they lack a clear blueprint or evidence base for what effective legacy looks like — a gap that becomes more problematic as events increase in scale, complexity and public scrutiny.

At the same time, the event landscape is changing fast. Different event formats — from single-city spectacles to multi-location tournaments, from commemorations to annual festivals — bring very different legacy opportunities and challenges. Emerging trends, including the move from single-city to multi-location hosting (e.g. the Northern Olympic and Paralympic Games potential bid) and the rise of privately funded major events such as Invictus and Glasgow 2026, raise important questions about who should be responsible for legacy, how expectations differ, and what minimum standards should apply.

The context in the UK can be mirrored across a number of other national and regional contexts where there are moments of opportunity. International competition for hosting rights is intensifying, and specifically for the UK's its global reputation for world-class event delivery is one of its greatest strengths. The Spirit of 2012 experiment alongside other innovations are an opportunity to strengthen the position as global leaders in legacy — not just delivery — and solidify the ability of the host nation to have a model that maximises public value and long-term impact.

Taken together, these pressures and possibilities create a pivotal moment: the next few years offer one of the best opportunities in over a decade to rethink how to design, govern and resource legacy, building models that are intentional rather than improvised, evidence-led rather than reactive, and capable of delivering genuinely inclusive social outcomes at scale.

About Spirit of 2012's Model

In 2013, the National Lottery Community Fund invested £47 million in a deliberate experiment: to test whether the social energy generated by the London 2012 Games could be translated into long-term social impact. Spirit of 2012 was established not to focus on physical infrastructure or elite sport, but on the **social legacy** of events — the harder-to-measure ingredients of community connection, inclusion and wellbeing that had defined the success of 2012.

Spirit's model was also shaped by a set of guiding questions about what social legacy from events could and should mean. These questions helped orient its funding towards areas that were often overlooked: whether a funder could 'invest in happiness' by unapologetically supporting joyful, fun participation across the UK; how volunteering could be strengthened across different types of events; how the momentum of "inspiring a generation" — including the unprecedented Paralympic success — could be used to tackle barriers facing young people and disabled people; and how events might act as key moments within wider efforts to build more connected, thriving communities. These questions framed the 'test and learn' approach Spirit took with its grant making and research.

Between 2013 and its planned closure in January 2026, Spirit funded more than 200 programmes across the UK, reaching over 3.6 million people and supporting 104,000+ people into regular cultural or sporting participation, and more than 64,000 into regular volunteering. Its approach was built around **grant-funding multi-year programmes**, developed and delivered by partners in communities, and guided by a small number of core outcomes: increasing wellbeing, strengthening inclusion, and building social connections. All funding decisions were designed with these outcomes at the centre, rather than specific activities or outputs.

Underpinning the model was an explicit commitment to **learning**: Spirit invested heavily in evaluation, theory-of-change development and the identification of evidence gaps, working with over 35 partners and sector experts to build a more robust understanding of how events can contribute to social good. This learning focus enabled adaptation over time — across sectors, geographies and event types — and ultimately shaped a substantial body of insight for future hosts and policymakers.

Having fully disbursed its endowment, Spirit of 2012 closed in January 2026, leaving behind a public **knowledge bank** documenting over a decade of projects, evaluations and policy learning for others to build on.

Spirit of 2012's Lessons for Future Legacy Models

⏳ 1/ Creating the space for long term-thinking

As an independent trust with no responsibility for event delivery, Spirit of 2012 was able to take a multi-year view and allocate resources to social impact before, during and after an event. Where funding was directed to event-organising bodies, this often meant providing early development support to enable meaningful community involvement, and follow-on funding to help programmes transition into business-as-usual. The model also created the flexibility to support charities and public-sector organisations inspired by an event and working toward longer-term ambitions for their place. Taken together, this demonstrated that legacy is far more likely to flourish when those accountable for it are not consumed by the pressures of event-time execution.

🎯 2/ Maintaining Clarity and Momentum Through a Time-Limited, Mission-Led Structure

Spirit of 2012's fixed endowment and defined lifespan had distinctive advantages for achieving legacy. Decisions were anchored in a clear mission, a stable Theory of Change and a long-term view of outcomes, rather than shifting short-term priorities.

This structure reduced the risk of strategic drift or reprioritisation over time — a challenge that can affect organisations with open-ended timelines, including those within local or national government. While vested legacy accountability within government brings advantages, political and financial pressures can make it difficult to protect a decade-long legacy strategy or maintain dedicated resource. By contrast, Spirit's time-limited design enabled consistent focus on the same core outcomes across 12 years, maintaining clarity, coherence and momentum that might otherwise have been eroded.

🌱 3/ Outcomes-Led Funding Unlocks Innovation and Reduces Perverse Incentives

By structuring funding around a small number of long-term outcomes — wellbeing, inclusion and social connection — rather than around specified activities or output targets, Spirit of 2012 created space for partners to design and test diverse approaches to delivering social impact linked to events. This flexibility enabled delivery organisations to develop models rooted in local need and creativity.

The model also highlighted the risks of output-driven approaches, particularly where scale is prioritised above depth or inclusivity. Large engagement numbers can be important – they're an indicator of compelling collective experiences. But within legacy plans, they can also produce unintended incentives for organisations to maximise footfall rather than focus on who is benefiting, who is missing out, and whether participation is translating into longer-term pathways. An outcomes-led approach helped counter these pressures by shifting attention from short-term volume to meaningful, sustained change — especially important when one of the primary motivations for hosting events is to inspire ongoing participation.

🤝 4/ Long-term partnerships and embedded learning strengthen legacy delivery

Spirit of 2012's model combined multi-year, relationship-based funding with a deliberate commitment to learning, creating the continuity needed to understand how social legacy develops. Multi-year grants enabled delivery partners to evolve their approach, respond to local context and build trust with communities, rather than being constrained by short project cycles or the need to continually reapply for support.

Learning was treated as a foundational part of the model rather than a reporting requirement. Joint Theories of Change, investment in evaluation and systematic identification of evidence gaps supported iterative adaptation and generated insights that would not have emerged from isolated pilots or short-term programmes. This experience also demonstrated that the evidence and learning generated around an event should be considered one of its most important legacies — valuable not only for future events but also for the institutions and communities in the host location. At present, this knowledge is rarely captured systematically or preserved over time; evaluation is often short-lived, and learning is routinely lost once delivery teams disband. Spirit's model showed that legacy is strengthened when organisations are supported over time *and* when learning is embedded, shared and protected as a public asset.

😊 5/ The case for investing in happiness

Across Spirit of 2012's funding period, much of the work took place against the backdrop of austerity, COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis — moments when public and voluntary-sector resources for leisure, culture and community activity were under

significant pressure. In this context, activities that were joyful, celebratory or community-building were often viewed as "nice to haves," vulnerable to being deprioritised. A competing narrative positioned them primarily as preventative services whose value depended on the harder outcomes they might unlock. For event organisers, these pressures sometimes encouraged overclaiming about the kinds of social problems an event alone could address.

Spirit's model demonstrated a different position: that happiness, connection and shared cultural energy are not peripheral to social legacy but core drivers of it, and that subjective wellbeing is a legitimate end in itself. By focusing on how events contribute to a small number of strategic outcomes within a wider plan for change, the model also resisted the tendency to overpromise. It highlighted that the emotional and cultural dimensions of participation — joy, belonging, visibility — are fundamental to sustained engagement and should be recognised as central components of legacy rather than optional extras.

🔗 6/ Events as cross-sector convenors

Events themselves often bring sectors together: sports events host powerful cultural programmes, cultural festivals generate volunteering, and the same venues regularly serve sporting, cultural and community purposes. This means people experience events fluidly across sectors, and many of the barriers to inclusion are shared and best addressed collectively. It also means that events encourage cross-sector collaboration like little else – providing the impetus for institutions to work collectively to deliver a spectacular show. Jointly agreeing legacy outcomes helps to amplify that impact.

Spirit of 2012's model intentionally built on this natural convening power. By bringing together organisations of different sizes, sectors and geographies — including partners across the National Lottery family — it created spaces for shared learning and demonstrated how collaboration amplifies impact. This portfolio approach showed that while cross-sector legacy building is more complex, it strengthens outcomes by reflecting how people actually participate and how places really work.

🗺️ 7. Legacy happens nationally and locally — but is sustained in the "middle spaces"

Spirit of 2012 was not a place-based funder – it had a UK-wide remit, and many of the events it funded were of national or international significance. It was also as interested in communities of interest as it was geographic communities. However, the way that events were experienced, interpreted and taken forward within local contexts was integral to its funding approach. Some of the most successful grants where when the magic and spectacle of the big event combined with deep community engagement. Its

model demonstrated legacy is not shaped solely by national strategy or by community-level activity, but in the “middle spaces” where regional bodies, networks and partnerships translate ambition into practice. Debates are often framed as a choice between top-down direction and bottom-up co-production, yet Spirit’s experience showed this to be a false binary. Effective legacy building requires both: strong national ambition *and* meaningful community voice, lived experience and local ownership.

The model demonstrated that these two forces meet — and are reconciled — in the meso-level systems where organisations collaborate, align resources and sustain momentum over time. This highlighted the need for deliberate connective structures that sit between policy and place, ensuring legacy is not left to isolated local delivery nor dispersed across shifting national priorities, but is carried forward through the partnerships and networks that bind the system together.

⭐ 8/ High-quality events are the foundation of legacy

Spirit of 2012’s experience underscored that social legacy depends first on the quality of the event itself. The creativity, excellence and ambition of event organisers, artists, athletes and producers are what generate the energy, pride and collective experience that legacy initiatives build on. Events are powerful cultural moments in their own right, and attempts to position them solely as vehicles for social outcomes risk overlooking the foundational role of high-quality delivery.

This also highlights an important structural consideration: the skills, focus and pressures required to deliver an outstanding event are not always the same as those needed to sustain long-term legacy. Expecting the same organisations — often temporary, operationally focused and time-bound — to be responsible for both can create unrealistic expectations and undermine both functions. Legacy is strongest when event excellence is protected, and when long-term impact is held by organisations with the accountability, capacity and time horizon to steward it beyond the event window.