

BEIJING OLYMPICS AND PROSPECTS FOR 2012

So the Olympic Flag has been handed over to the UK and we reflect on the amazing experiences of the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Games and the lessons we can take forward to 2012; not just for London but also for the Olympic sailing events in Weymouth and Portland. Looking back on Beijing, the scale, colour and vibrancy immediately come to mind, categorised in particular by the incredible opening and closing ceremony. If you have not visited an Olympic Games before, it is difficult to comprehend the scale and complexity of delivering the largest peace-time event in the world and the Chinese built a superb 'theatre' to allow the real stars; the athletes, to perform to their very best. The iconic stadiums, like the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube were even more stunning close up and the financial investment made into the Games was staggering.

The sailing venue at Qingdao was arguably the best prepared venue ever and focused on meeting the needs of the Olympic sailors and the worldwide media that accompany the Games in staggering numbers. The performance of Team GB was superb, finishing 4th in the medal table in the Olympic Games, already exceeding expectations for 2012, and 2nd in the medal table for the Paralympic Games, with only China winning more medals. It is difficult to single out a particular British competitor for special praise; there were so many outstanding performances, but for me Ben Ainslie's performance in the difficult sailing conditions of Qingdao, to win his 3rd successive gold medal would be very difficult to beat. Of course, the defining images of the Games will focus on Michael Phelps in the pool and Usain Bolt on the track and watching them in action was truly awe inspiring. If the Olympic Games was the world's sporting event, the Paralympic Games was the Chinese people's event with crowds of 50-60,000 local spectators cheering on the incredible exploits of these remarkable competitors. I think the Paralympic Games has truly come of age; the BBC coverage and viewing figures were very high and I hope that we can take forward the success of our Paralympians into changing attitudes and opportunities for our disabled young people across the South West.

So reflecting on the Games there are some very clear lessons for the future. We have placed legacy at the very heart of our objectives for London 2012. The Games are not just a 16 day sporting event, they have the potential to generate significant opportunities for business, sports participation, education and volunteering and of course the worldwide image of the UK. Over the next 4 years there will be some really exciting ways to become involved in projects inspired by 2012 within our local area. The Games in the UK will be different from those in China and I do believe there is a need to bring the Games back to basics and ensure that a wider range of countries are capable of hosting the event in the future. The visitor experience is not just defined by witnessing some incredible sporting performances or incredible stadia, it is influenced by all of the elements that surround this; the transport infrastructure, security arrangements, retail and merchandising, food and drink, cultural events and meeting spectators from around the world. But perhaps most importantly, it is influenced by the people from the host country that you meet; a friendly smile and a warm welcome arguably do more than any other factor to ensure visitors leave the UK with a positive experience of the Games.

I think we are blessed with a marvellous opportunity in hosting the sailing events. The waters off Weymouth and Portland Bay provide some of the best small boat sailing waters in Europe; the venue build and development are on track, and the regeneration of the surrounding area clearly shows the impact of the Olympics, four years before the Games. There are a wide range of partners who are committed to making sure we collectively deliver the best visitor experience for all spectators to the sailing in 2012 and of course to maximise the legacy impact across the region. The 2012 Games will be here before we know it and it is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I would encourage everyone to be a part of it in some way.

Guy Lavender
Director of Olympics, South West