

Social licence for sport and recreation

“Social licence” to operate is often short hand for broad acceptability. However, it is difficult to determine what constitutes approval. And, during rapid change existing acceptability can change quickly. Sport and recreation can't rely, as they have previously, on broad acceptability of past activities and practices.

What we're seeing

A fuzzy concept

Social licence is an increasingly used term. It is used to reflect ongoing acceptance by the general public of standard practices and operating procedures. This can apply to an activity (such as mining, or collection and use of personal data), and a company, other organisation, industry or sector. Growing use of the concept reflects a shift away from centralised control – be that in the public or private sector. However, what level of agreement gives a “social licence”, and what factors take that licence away, are vague. It can also be used as an excuse not to engage with the public if their support is assumed.¹

Equestrian sports

Social licence has been explicitly used in relation to animal welfare for equestrian sports, greyhound racing, and rodeos. Equestrian organisations, after recent cases of animal injuries & perceived abuses, are currently thinking how they can address animal welfare concerns.²

Participant safety & wellbeing are also growing issues

While the term isn't explicitly used, social licence is a factor in recent controversies and concerns about the treatment of athletes, and their mental health, in high performance sports and other organisations.^{3, 4, 5, 6} Injuries, such as concussions, and the steps taken to reduce the risks also affect trust and confidence in particular sports or activities.⁷ As do rules and enforcement restricting the use of banned performance enhancing drugs. The treatment and support of different genders, identities and disabilities in sport and recreation is also influencing attitudes.⁸

Value of spaces and costs of infrastructure

Growing concern about inequalities and rising costs of living is leading to debates about using large areas of public urban land for exclusive recreational sports such as golf courses. Opponents suggest that such spaces would be better used for affordable housing.⁹

The costs of new stadia, and large sporting events are also being challenged. Especially when promised wider community benefits do not come to pass, or public money is thought to be better spent elsewhere.^{10, 11, 12}

Environmental impacts

The environmental impacts of sport and recreational activities, events, and infrastructure are also becoming significant factors that influence perceptions of acceptability.¹³ While the current focus is on sustainability, construction projects, and societal expectations are already moving to regenerative construction.¹⁴

Consider cultural not just social licences

The Māori Data Sovereignty Network, *Te Mana Raraunga*, have challenged the implied individual focus of social licence. They emphasise the importance of a “cultural licence” perspective under Treaty of Waitangi partnerships.¹⁵ A “licence”, social or cultural, isn't a permanent or even long-term approval. It requires constant testing and nurturing.

Potential implications

Create

- Strong community and funding support requires good and active community connections

Relate

- Support requires sharing of similar values

Consume

- Support for particular sporting and recreational activities or organisations can change quickly based on practices & behaviours

Degrade

- Trust and acceptance rapidly decline if organisations don't keep up with societal attitudes

Connect

- Social and cultural acceptability can't be taken for granted, or assumed

Define

- Identify the predominant values that motivate communities

More information(links)

¹ ['Can I see your social licence please?'](#)

² [Maintaining a social licence “crucial to the future of horse sport”](#)

³ [Cycling review calls for reevaluation of core foundations](#)

⁴ [Gymnastics review calls for massive shake-up](#)

⁵ [Findings from Black Ferns 'culture and environmental' review](#)

⁶ [Elite sport and mental health: The disturbing issue we can no longer ignore](#)

⁷ [Rugby's problems run much deeper than concussion from the odd 'big hit'](#)

⁸ [Player facilities at Eden Park being made gender-neutral](#)

⁹ [Golf clubs fear losing public-owned land](#)

¹⁰ [The Economics of Hosting the Olympic Games](#)

¹¹ [Major sports events: are they worth it?](#)

¹² [Christchurch residents split over stadium budget blowout](#)

¹³ [Sport and the environment](#)

¹⁴ [The shift from sustainable to regenerative design](#)

¹⁵ [Te Mana Raraunga Statement on Social Licence](#)