

Great Expectations: Voluntary Sports Clubs and Their Role in Delivering National Policy for English Sport

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Abstract Voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) account for about a quarter of all volunteering in England. The volunteers work in a mutual aid, self-production, self-consumption system whose main purpose is identifying and nurturing high-level performers. But the new HMG/Sport England strategies leading to London 2012 expects volunteers to make a major contribution to sustaining and extending participation. The study utilized six focus group sessions with a total of 36 officials and members of 36 clubs across the six counties of Eastern England to assess whether and to what extent government policy objectives can be delivered through the voluntary sector. The study focused on the perceptions and attitudes of club members about being expected to serve public policy and the current pressures they and their clubs face. The results lead the authors to question the appropriateness, sensitivity, and feasibility of current sport policy, particularly the emphasis on VSCs as policy implementers.

Résumé Les clubs de sport bénévoles constituent près d'un quart du volontariat considéré dans son ensemble en Angleterre. Les bénévoles travaillent dans le cadre d'une entraide mutuelle, une indépendance et un système de consommation personnelle dont le principal objectif est d'identifier et de veiller au développement de sportifs de haut niveau. Cependant la nouvelle stratégie de HMG/Sport England menant à Londres 2012 s'attend à ce que les bénévoles apportent une contribution

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majeure pour soutenir et étendre la participation. L'étude a eu recours à six sessions de groupes comptant 36 officiels et membres de 36 clubs parmi les six comtés de l'est de l'Angleterre en vue d'évaluer comment et dans quelle mesure les objectifs de politique gouvernementale peuvent être atteints par le biais du secteur bénévole. L'étude s'est concentrée sur les perceptions et les attitudes des membres de club en vue de répondre à la politique publique et les pressions actuelles auxquels ils font face ainsi que leurs clubs. Les résultats amènent les auteurs à se questionner sur l'aspect approprié, sensible et faisable de la politique de sport actuelle, tout particulièrement sur l'accent mis par les concepteurs de politique des clubs de sport bénévoles.

Zusammenfassung Ein Viertel aller Freiwilligenarbeit in England wird in Sportvereinen ausgeübt. Die Freiwilligen arbeiten in einem System von gegenseitiger Hilfe, Eigenproduktion, Eigenverbrauch, dessen Hauptzweck die Identifizierung und Förderung von Spitzenperformern ist. Aber die neuen HMG/Sport England Strategien in Vorbereitung für London 2012 erwarten von Freiwilligen einen großen Beitrag zur Stärkung und Erweiterung der Mitgliedschaft. Die Studie verwendete sechs Veranstaltungen von Fokusgruppen mit insgesamt 36 Funktionären und Mitgliedern von 36 Klubs aus sechs Grafschaften aus dem Osten Englands, um zu untersuchen, ob und inwieweit staatspolitische Ziele über den freiwilligen Sektor geliefert werden können. Die Studie konzentriert sich darauf, was Klubmitglieder sich vorstellen und davon halten, im Dienste der Staatspolitik zu agieren, und unter welchem Druck sie und ihre Klubs gegenwärtig stehen. Die Resultate lassen die Autoren an Angebrachtheit, Sensibilität und Machbarkeit der gegenwärtigen Sportpolitik, insbesondere die Betonung auf Sportvereine als diejenigen, die Politik umsetzen, zweifeln.

Resumen Los clubes deportivos de voluntarios (CDV) representan aproximadamente una cuarta parte de todo el voluntariado en Inglaterra. Los voluntarios trabajan dentro de un sistema de ayuda mutua, auto-producción y autoconsumo cuyo propósito principal es identificar y fomentar deportistas de alto nivel. Sin embargo, la estrategia del nuevo HMG/Sport England con vistas a Londres 2012 es confiar en que los voluntarios hagan una aportación importante fomentando y ampliando la participación. El estudio se basó en seis sesiones de grupos focales con un total de 36 oficiales y miembros de 36 clubes de seis condados del este de Inglaterra para evaluar si pueden lograrse los objetivos de la política del gobierno a través el sector de voluntariado y, en caso positivo, hasta qué punto. El estudio se centró en las percepciones y actitudes de los miembros del club, en concreto: si esperan contribuir a la política pública y cuáles son las presiones que afrontan actualmente, tanto ellos como sus clubes. Los resultados llevaron a los autores a cuestionar la idoneidad, la sensibilidad y la viabilidad de la actual política deportiva, sobre todo el hincapié que se hace en los CDV como ejecutores de la política.

Keywords Sports clubs · Volunteers · Pressures · Public policy · England

Introduction

A collection of recent strategies, including the government's (Her Majesty's Government, HMG) Olympic Legacy Plan, referred to the promise or vision of England as a world-leading sporting nation (DCMS 2008; Sport England 2008). In working towards this vision Sport England (SE) asserted that "a modern network of sports clubs will be the centrepiece of people's sporting experience" (2008, p. 3), thereby highlighting a commitment to supporting sports participation in such environments. The *Strategy* focused policy on raising participation by one million more participants by 2012–13 after the London Olympics—an inheritance from the previous policy phase, but to be delivered mainly through National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and their affiliated voluntary sports clubs (VSCs), a reversion to sport for its own sake, rather than sport for shared social good (Collins 2008a). This "world-leading" sports development system was intended to reduce the drop-off in participation between the ages of 16 and 18, speed the transition from school to club sport, and to increase adult participation, as well as playing a key role in developing talented athletes. These ambitious aims will place increased emphasis on the role of VSCs in delivering HMG's policy for sport (Collins 2008b).

In light of such political developments, this paper is timely as it examines the views of a sample of VSC volunteers regarding the alignment of VSC objectives and sport policy objectives, and their views on VSCs as delivery agents of government sport policy.

Context: A New Era for Sport?

There is an extensive and growing literature on the voluntary sector, which is seen mainly as a series of altruistic efforts to help disadvantaged people, the environment, and a host of other causes. The sports, arts, and hobbies sectors are different in that the bulk of their products are consumed mainly by the members who produced them. The literature virtually ignores this in theory and practice, but this slant isolates the two sectors from the 15 other areas of voluntary activity identified in the national survey of volunteering and charitable giving (Cabinet Office 2007).¹ It also affects how the sectors are seen by the state.

The NGBs are not primarily companies driven by economic criteria; SE has, however sought a programme of "modernization" which involves clarifying objectives and relating structures and roles more closely to them (usually involving specialization, bureaucratization, and the introduction of more paid professionals). In turn, NGBs have started to pass down some of the same processes to VSCs, notably the Amateur Swimming Association, the English and Welsh Cricket Board, and the Rugby Football Union. But these processes should not rely blindly on economic measures of efficiency which are inappropriate to mutual benefit organizations (Thiel and Mayer 2009). Harris and Rochester (2001) argue that this approach further

¹ Education, religion, health, children, local community, hobbies, overseas aid, animal welfare, elderly people, conservation, social welfare, politics, safety, justice, and trade unions.

intensifies the tension between the state's respect of the autonomy of the voluntary sector and the need to attach conditions on support (financial or otherwise) as a consequence of public accountability.

For a long time the role of club sport and its NGBs was seen as identifying talent, supporting performance development, and delivering competitive success—and this became the foremost aim of policy in England, Australia, and Canada (Bergsgaard et al. 2007; Stewart et al. 2004). From 1997 onwards—when sport was called upon to help deliver the cross-cutting issues of regeneration, better health, safer and more cohesive and inclusive communities, and lifelong learning—encouraging volunteers, both youth and adult, became an end to help sport and also to increase social capital and active citizenship (Coalter 2007).

In recent years, VSCs have been allocated a leading role in delivering government sports policy, reinforcing the notion of a new purposive stance towards the third sector (Kendall 2000, p. 2). Previous reports include references to voluntary organizations as key drivers of participation in sport (Sport England 2004) and the positioning of VSCs as a core component of the “Single Delivery System” of English sport (Sport England 2005).

HMG's Olympic Legacy Plan, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) latest vision for sport, *Playing to Win: A New Era for Sport* (DCMS 2008), Sport England's *Strategy 2008–11* (Sport England 2008), and the new PE (Physical Education) and School Sport strategy have solidified a three-part policy platform for sport involving: (i) 90–100% of 5–16 year olds in 5 h of PE and school sport per week (3 h for 17–19 year olds); (ii) an increase of one million new adult participants in sport, contributing to getting two million more adults active by 2012; and (iii) the aim for fourth place in the Olympic medal table and at least second place in the Paralympics medal table in 2012. These plans have reinforced the view of VSCs as policy implementers, setting out expectations for VSCs to help sustain and grow participation in sport.

The UK sports system has more small, single-sport clubs than any other country in Europe except France. This gives close social cohesion, even cliquishness, but engenders organizational weakness because the loss of a key officer or playing members can leave difficult-to-fill gaps. This is in strong contrast to the larger multi-sport clubs found such as those found in Germany, in particular (see Table 1), that are able to take on innovations and public policy programmes with greater security for both the club and the state.

In 2008, sport strategies were realigned from sport for good (Coalter 2007) towards “pure sport,” highlighting a commitment from central government to invest in sport for its own sake. The SE Strategy included sector-specific targets, stating that “clubs and coaching should have a positive impact on participation rates. We hope that this will attract an extra 200,000 sporting participants per year” (p. 19)—participants are defined as people undertaking 30 min of moderate sport at least three times a week. It also set a target for the third sector, a category that, whilst not defined in the strategy, would usually include VSCs, of 100,000 new participants by 2012–13.

As the new “heart of delivery,” NGBs will be assigned a target of 500,000 new participants by 2012–13. The role of VSCs as delivery agent is clearly

Table 1 A profile of sports clubs in England and Germany

Topic	Germany pop 80 million	England pop 55 million
No. of clubs (000)	90+, after taking in 10+ from East Germany	106 in 87 sports—no data on 15 sports
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21.5 m; 27% of population • 49% have junior sections (73% in largest clubs) • Contribution to GNP €8.5bn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8.2 m in 78 sports; no data on 14 sports; 14% of population • 55% have junior sections (Scotland) • Value-added €3.7bn
Size distribution (playing members)	Av 306, with 6% (4,000) multi-sport clubs with over 1,000 members (30% of total)	Av 43 ranging from 5 in table tennis to 500 or more in angling, or golf
Longevity	No data	46% over 30 years (Scotland)
Availability of numbers relating to staff, coaches, volunteers, etc.	Yes	Some data from sportscoach UK survey
Structure of income/distribution of expenditure	Yes	No
New sports/services offered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsorship modest but growing, especially for larger clubs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsorship very modest • 39% achieve a surplus, only 8% strong
Problems	Yes	No
Help needed by clubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging volunteers, recruitment, and retention • Tensions between volunteers and professional staff • Burden of legislation (child protection, health & safety) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support for coaching courses • Only 22% have written plan (Scotland), but growing with NGB club development plans, e.g., Rugby/Football Union, Amateur Swimming Association
Planning	No data	
	No data	
Wider benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health-related sports • Teach fair play, tolerance • Offer reasonable priced access • Commit to youth work • Rank community, sociability high 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basis for active citizens • Provide ethics/rules framework • Offer reasonable priced access • Relieve public purse • Help deliver on cross-cutting issues

Source: Allison (2001); Anders (1991); Breuer and Wicker (2008); Central Council for Physical Recreation (2002); Collins and Nichols (2005); Heinemann and Schubert (1994); Nichols et al. (2005); Sports Council (1996); Sport England (2004); Taylor et al. (2003)

acknowledged: “National Governing Bodies are placed at the heart of the strategy as it is their networks of community clubs and other assets that will drive delivery” (Sport England 2008, p. 10). The net result is an expectation that voluntary sport organizations will play a leading role in recruiting the 1 million new sports participants by 2012–13.

In considering the role of VSCs in delivering sport policy objectives, it is important to respect their diversity and autonomy, areas that are well documented (see, e.g., Allison 2001; Harris and Rochester 2001; Nichols et al. 1998; Taylor 2004; Taylor et al. 2007). We build on research into the varying management styles of volunteers in small voluntary organizations (Billis 1993; Rochester 1999; Stebbins 1996). Through their research of VSCs, Taylor et al. (2003) observed two broad categories—informal/traditional and more formal/contemporary club types. Building on this, Cuskelly et al. (2006) provided a spectrum of club types (based on Australian Rugby Clubs), including traditional, operational, and contemporary clubs.

To date, most research has focused on the number of clubs and members or on the nature of volunteering, to provide better support. In a representative survey of sports clubs in Scotland, Allison (2001) reminded readers that volunteers are mostly amateurs primarily motivated by a love of their sport and a desire to “give back,” rather than an ambition to increase club membership or drive participation rates. What has not been done, unlike in Germany in particular, is a survey of the infrastructure, finances, and human resources of clubs, so that government knows what sort of private structures they are expecting to deliver public policy objectives (Collins 2008a). Much more is known about the welfare sector for housing, child/elderly care, and other social policies that work in policy communities with other social policy departments like the Home Office. We return to this below.

In today’s society, competition for people’s time, money, and enthusiasm is intense, and clubs need to make sports volunteering attractive if they are to compete (Taylor et al. 2003). Demands for time and enhanced skills that require formal training (as in coaching, officiating, working with children) can seem prohibitive. Taylor et al. (2003) observed further that some new club members are likely to be consumption-oriented and less likely to volunteer, viewing the club as provider of a service rather than an organization supported by mutual enthusiasm and effort (Nichols et al. 2005).

Meanwhile, HMG, Sport England, and NGBs have encouraged professionalization and development of a “service delivery” philosophy, partly to reassure parents and citizens. Evidence of this includes Clubmark and other accreditation standards, development plans, coach contracts, particular requirements of funding programmes and non-negotiable conditions of awards, and NGB development programmes that are “offered” to local sports clubs in return for funding or other inducements (Cuskelly et al. 2006; Jackson and Bramham 2008; Nichols et al 1998; Taylor et al. 2003).

Nichols et al. (1998) saw a move among sports clubs from mutual aid organizations (Bishop and Hoggett 1986) towards service delivery organizations (Handy 1988), suggesting that contemporary society expects VSCs to deliver a service of comparable professional quality to private/public alternatives, reinforcing a “service delivery” culture as opposed to a loose and informal organization run by the shared

enthusiasm for the common enjoyment of its membership. Building on this, Enjolras (2002) pointed to a shift in the participant's perception of his/her relationship with the provider. If participation in sport is seen as an exchange between participant and (service) provider, then the relationship between VSCs and their members is transformed from one of participation to consumption, a danger recognized by Horch (1994). The pressures of professionalization can make both administration and coaching seem burdensome and too much like the daily grind of paid work—not what members joined for.

The combination of these pressures and other findings from his national survey led Taylor (see Sport England 2005, p. 107) to report that the implications for driving participation through voluntary sports organizations were “rather bleak”:

Faced with a conspiracy of problems caused by societal changes and national institutions requirements, voluntary sport organisations are hard pressed to deliver their core activities, and many are doing so with diminishing and increasingly hard-pressed volunteer resources. The scope for such organisations taking a lead role in developing participation in sport seems as remote as hoping for significant extra funds for local authority sports development from the exchequer.

However, Taylor (2004) also stated that it would be premature to give up on voluntary sport organizations, describing the sector, which has 5.8 million volunteers as “too big to ignore” (p. 103). Taylor (2004) believed that any attempt to grow participation in sport through the voluntary sector would result in great inefficiency, chiefly due to the independent and diverse nature of (small) VSCs who do not have to accept being coerced into supporting public policy, and may not have the capacity to respond to demands of public policy, but also because the few non-traditional clubs are more likely to respond to external initiatives and incentives.

The launch of the latest DCMS and SE strategies marks another shift in government sports policy. Thus, our research focused on three areas: (1) awareness of and attitudes toward sports policy: How aware are VSCs of HMG sport policy, specifically the targets set for them, and what are the attitudes of their members towards sport policy? (2) VSC objectives and the view of VSCs as policy implementers: What are the objectives of VSCs as seen by members and how willing are VSCs to deliver policy objectives? (3) Pressures confronting VSCs and volunteers: What issues are currently challenging VSCs and volunteers and adding pressure to the task of managing them?

Research Method

Epistemologically, this research follows an interpretive social constructionist approach (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Burr 2003; Gergen 1999; Gubrium and Holstein 2002). Importantly, this approach emphasizes the idea that human knowledge is a human construct, and therefore research should examine the world of lived experience from the points of view of those who live it. In this respect total objectivity of both the questions and findings is difficult to achieve. This is not to say that findings are not valid; they completely represent the thoughts and opinions

of those interviewed. However, care must be taken in any attempt to generalize the findings to a broader population as this research was undertaken amongst a very specific population in a particular location. The strength of this approach is that it allows in-depth investigation of the experiences of a population purposively selected for their knowledge and experience of the system under investigation.

To address the three above-mentioned issues, this qualitative research was conducted in the East of England with the help of the six County Sports Partnerships (CSPs). SE and CSP Board members helped test the list of issues, and CSP Club Development officers distributed the invitations. Six focus group sessions were held between March and April 2008, with samples of club members selected by the CSPs, ensuring representation across the six counties in the region. Purposive sampling was chosen as the most appropriate technique to ensure a balance of location, sports played, the playing and total membership of each VSC, facility ownership, and whether the VSC was previously known by the CSP. Given the scope of this research, it was not considered necessary to carry out sports-specific focus groups, as in previous focus group research on volunteering by Taylor et al. (2003). The groups included 25 men and 11 women and drew on 25 sports.

The focus groups followed a standard approach, with an introduction that included assurances about confidentiality and disclosure, followed by an introductory activity. Each two-hour evening session focused on the three areas detailed above and involved prompted and unprompted discussion. Full transcripts were produced for all six focus group sessions.

The analysis of the six focus group discussions started with a data reduction process, using coding of raw data into conceptual categories, and writing summaries until all relevant data was assigned a code. Data were initially sorted by issue/geographical location, followed by issue/sport. The second phase involved open coding, with the identification of thematic groups emerging from the data. Only then were patterns in the data investigated. Further data reduction took place at this stage using axial coding to identify the causal relationships between conceptual categories, including awareness of policy objectives and attitudes to policy, and consideration of club objectives and attitudes to policy (Denscombe 2007; Silverman 2007). This open and axial coding of data enabled identification of specific issues, themes, and patterns to be identified, which were considered against findings in the literature—including objectives, targets, and assertions detailed in the new national sports strategies.

By its very nature, this kind of research is more likely to attract pro-active clubs. It is possible that some VSC representatives were reluctant to work with external organizations like CSPs, and did not pass on the invitation to other club representatives, or had no desire themselves to engage in such research. On the other hand, it could be argued that the research provided resistant or apathetic clubs/representatives with an opportunity to voice their frustration and apathy, and so were more likely to attend. The approach to sample selection resulted in a range of clubs attending, some of which had well-developed partnerships with NGBs, CSPs, and/or local authorities. To what extent this may have skewed the response is not known. It could be argued that positive relations form a positive influence, but equally that positive relations within the sport (between SE and the NGB) engender feelings of resentment about expectations imposed from above on VSCs (Taylor et al. 2007).

Research Findings

Awareness of and Attitudes Towards Sports Policy

Whilst one or two volunteers had an up-to-date understanding of sport policy objectives, the overwhelming message was that most VSCs did not understand central government sport policy or had an understanding that was largely outdated. Table 2 presents a summary of members' comments that relate to policy confusion, chiefly stemming from what is seen as tension in different policy positions, criticism of the frequent changes in policy, and an overall apathy towards the government and, in particular, the perceived difference between messages sent via various media, and the reality of volunteers' experiences. Whilst on the one hand the comments in Table 2 may not be surprising, it is important to reiterate that current policy holds an explicit role for VSCs with a specific target of 800,000 new participants in sport being placed on NGBs and their VSC networks. The lack of understanding or awareness, albeit with a limited sample, suggests that this is an area for national sport organizations and NGBs to consider further, with a view to improving the communication to local level organizations such as VSCs.

The processes used to develop policy were a recurring theme in the discussions about policy objectives. A number of volunteers felt strongly felt there was a hierarchical, top-down approach, with the government and national sport organizations like SE developing policy with an expectation that the voluntary sector would deliver unquestioningly without being involved in developing these policies. Whilst two volunteers were particularly aware of current sports policy objectives, neither had been consulted nor involved.

Table 3 summarizes responses to this perceived top-down approach to policy development. Although there were strong opinions on the issue of a top-down

Table 2 Policy confusion

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- The current government has moved the goalposts; now the focus is on winning medals
 - I don't know what policy is now—it's changing every year
 - There is a heck of a lot of turmoil
 - Sport this, Sport UK that, it's confusing, there's so much duplication
 - From top to bottom it is confusing. I am not sure how much they spend at the top; the money does not always come down to the bottom level
 - It just looks a mess to me
 - Not sure, mixed messages—win medals, but then sell off playing fields?
 - It is all just confusing to me
 - Government like putting activity on, but are not prepared to pay for it
 - It's a joke really
 - Providing sport for all, you know disability, ethnic minorities—that's where all the grants are anyway
 - Mixed messages, promoting sport, then selling playing fields, it sends the wrong message
 - I think it's more about the National Health Service (NHS) nowadays and getting people active
 - I do not have a clear picture of what government policy is about
 - It's all mixed messages
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Table 3 Top-down approaches to policy

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- I think you need to listen to clubs, rather than just telling them
 - Requirements come down from high... [the government, NGBs, and Sport England] and we are just expected to get on with it
 - It is just as bad for the governing bodies, they are being dictated to by government
 - It seems that NGBs are being dictated to
 - As far as I am concerned, clubs have not been asked to follow government policy
 - They expect [what they say] to happen tomorrow
 - Government's policy is whatever the latest minister thinks, which is part of the problem
 - What's government understanding of what sports clubs do... the issue is do the government understand how clubs work?
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Table 4 Uncertainty about “deliverability”

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- Sometimes you are just not sure how long policy is going to be policy, there seems to be one big push after another on a range of different issues
 - Lots of words but not a lot of action
 - From what I understand it's all being cut at the lower end, paying for the higher end to make sure that we have the best in London in 2012
 - It is not clear and whatever it is meant to be delivering, it doesn't appear to be being delivered
 - They talk a lot at the top [ministerial level] but actually do very little
 - Policy is just so wishy-washy
-

approach and general resentment towards the policy making process, these were understandably limited to volunteers who had some knowledge of sport policy objectives. The majority of volunteers were confused about policy and lacked awareness that there were any expectations on VSCs at all: “I cannot see that what we do within our club as something that the government would have an interest in.” Other respondents suggested that policy was too focused on the needs of the government: “Government policy is whatever the latest minister says it is, which is part of the issue” and “Government policy should be less about delivering for the government and more about delivering for the voluntary sector.” These responses revealed an interesting theme relating to the general top-down approach and resentment towards the explicit role set out for VSCs in HMG and SE strategies.

In five of the six focus groups, volunteers expressed uncertainty about the “deliverability” of central government sport policy. Volunteers appeared either distrustful of government policy or lacked confidence that it could be delivered, as shown in the responses highlighted in Table 4.

VSC Objectives and Views of VSCs as Policy Implementers

In considering VSC member's views about their club's aims and objectives, we looked at how far there was alignment with national sport policy. As might be expected in a loose-linked voluntary system, clubs reported a broad range of objectives, ranging from inward-looking goals, focused on day-to-day survival, to developmental, outward-looking ones. Table 5 shows this range, categorizing them

Table 5 Survival and developmental objectives for VSCs

Examples of survival-orientated objectives	Examples of development-orientated objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first thing for us is to stay in business • To make sure we have enough income to make ends meet • Our objective is to keep our members pleased • Need to ensure that ends meet, with rising costs it is difficult to run the club • We do not want growth as we are creaking at the edges • We cannot afford to be there as much as we would like to be, we are more focused on day-to-day survival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We want to provide a broad cricket offering to the whole community including high quality coaching and competitive opportunities • To achieve high standards of performance in our sport • We are interested in supporting the talented end of the game • We want to work with local schools, recruit children, and get as many players as possible • We want to develop a broad base and develop talent • To attract as many youngsters as possible • To grow our club and gain new members

as either “survival orientated” or “developmental” objectives. Clearly participation, social inclusion, and performance development aims were mixed, even in such a modest sample. This highlights the nature of the challenge to policy, although the extent to which this is understood by Ministers, SE, or NGBs is unclear. Did the NGBs involved in the consultation for SE’s 2008–11 strategy promise to deliver a commitment to participation through their clubs on a scale never before essayed?

The focus group discussions revealed a common challenge across VSCs in reaching agreement on objectives. In reporting this challenge, which was acknowledged by his peers, one club volunteer explained: “We have different factions within the club: the coach wants to develop talent, two or three people want to get more members in, whilst the majority of committee members want to get on and play their matches.” Such diversity of opinion and ambiguity will obviously create some tensions and may impact on whether or how clubs deliver sport policy.

To develop a clear understanding of the views of volunteers on VSCs as policy implementers, it was necessary to provide all volunteers with a brief overview of the key current policy objectives for sport. Analysis of the responses of volunteers revealed four broad categories: resistant, indifferent, reactive, and supportive; further details are set out in Table 6.

Most volunteers felt that government policy was not and should not be a direct concern of volunteers or VSCs. Many stated that their motives were fuelled by a love of their sport and their club, and that they were neither interested nor motivated by the idea of being part of a structure that is responsible for hitting participation targets. A small number of clubs across all six focus groups suggested that their clubs are already delivering, or would be interested in delivering, government policy objectives for sport: “We have no problem delivering policy as it is the same as our own objective, to get more people participating in sport.”

This range, with its degree of resistance and indifference, also needs to be taken into account by policy-makers, as do the resources needed to encourage the

Table 6 Volunteers' views about VSCs delivering policy objectives for sport

Resistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clubs can't be told to do what someone else wants them to [do] • My immediate reaction is hands-off. The government should not be requiring the voluntary sector to deliver their policy • Leave the voluntary sector to the voluntary sector. We try to develop for the sake of the club, not to achieve government policy
Indifferent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If people want to play sports they will come and knock on the door, you cannot take to the streets • I have no problem with government sport policy, but I do not really see our club as deliverers of that policy. We are all volunteers who do it because we are passionate about our sport • We are far more concerned with running our club
Reactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have a development plan, but had we not been forced down that route I am not sure we would have one. We did it because we needed some funding • We have become a charity, we get money from the NGB to deliver things, but it is not that straightforward • Our club does not necessarily see itself as a deliverer of government policy, but it could be, if the resources were available • We jump more to our NGB than we do government, it lays down what it expects of us in order for us to get funding or grants
Supportive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We welcome it, but we are lucky, we have funding from the NGB and can be proactive with all sorts of stuff • We would welcome a role in delivering government policy, so long as we were clear about resource and structure • I feel that we have a role to deliver policy • We have no problem doing it, delivering what the policy is as it is the same as our own objective, to get more people participating

supportive and engage the reactive. In the end, VSCs have the right to refuse partnerships with anyone, including HMG (Nichols and James 2008), and should not be penalized for their choice, even if not rewarded.

Pressures Confronting VSCs and Volunteers

An added dimension to the investigation and debate about VSCs as policy implementers is the need to consider the range and type of pressures confronting the sector. The discussion with the six focus groups built on the findings of previous studies (Allison 2001; Reid Howie Associates 2006; Taylor et al. 2003) revealed five strong themes: volunteer recruitment, bureaucracy, member attitudes, resource constraints, and the effects of the rapidly evolving sports development profession. There are considered in turn.

Volunteer Recruitment

Most volunteers voiced concerns about a lack of new volunteers, stating that it was “just too difficult to recruit new volunteers” and that they did not know where to start. Others reported they had tried to recruit from within the club, but people were

Table 7 Lack of volunteers

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- I just do not have the time to put it in and make it work and there are very few others to help out
 - It is just too difficult to recruit new volunteers
 - With regards to the actual committee it's usually the same people
 - It usually comes down to one or two people
 - One thing I am afraid of is burnout
 - I just get the impression that it's the same people every year who are doing the sort of key jobs
 - If you took 1 or 2 people out of the club, it would pretty much collapse
 - Our biggest pressures are volunteers prepared to do it and then those that can actually give time to do it. Only a few people actually end up helping
 - It's very hard to get volunteers. It's an age that if you excuse me I think there is a group, what I call the Thatcher's children that are so self-centred that they don't want to volunteer at all
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not willing and usually claimed they have too little time to help. Many opined that these difficulties meant their clubs struggled to get by with a few committed volunteers: “with regards to the committee, it's usually the same people.” Table 7 shows a summary of these comments, with only two representatives saying that they had enough volunteers to manage the tasks associated with the club.

In two sessions, volunteers suggested that the pressures felt by clubs were not as much about numbers of volunteers as the type of volunteers that they were able to recruit. One respondent suggested his club had enough volunteers, but they lacked the experience or ability to lead and coordinate activities: “I think within the club there are a good number of volunteers and in fact I think there are an increasing number who are prepared to help. The real challenge is finding volunteers who are able to take responsibility and able to lead.”

Several volunteers also felt that the issue of payment was a challenge in that many people, particularly youths, were unable or unprepared to give their time unless paid to do so. The majority of club representatives said they would not entertain the idea of paying and that this would be the beginning of the end of volunteer-run clubs. One or two, however, admitted to paying new recruits, albeit only assistant coaches and coach helpers. Table 8 sets out a brief summary of the comments relating to pay. Tensions on this issue were particularly conspicuous in cricket, tennis, rugby, and athletics clubs.

Table 8 The issue of paying volunteers

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- Our young people help and it's brilliant that they do, they help the coaches. But they're paid and I'm now listening to people saying that we have to pay them more to compete with the fact that they could go to Tesco's and earn that sort of money, therefore you've got to pay, so it's becoming more of a money issue
 - I think money and payment are coming into it, more paid people and fewer volunteers
 - I think paying coaches causes a problem; we could end up losing an awful lot of our volunteers
 - I now feel that I am acting as a part-time business development manager for zero money
 - Getting youngsters can work, but it is difficult, many expect to be paid to coach or help out
 - You've got the younger people who I think in this day and age have to go to work to earn a living who would like to give a lot more and they can't
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Bureaucracy

With professionalization in voluntary sports organizations comes bureaucratization (Kikulis et al. 1989), for NGB purposes or for accountability to sponsors or public grant-aiding agencies. Our results suggested that bureaucracy affected all VSCs, albeit to differing degrees. Many clubs mentioned that the volume of paperwork they handled had increased. Child protection legislation and Clubmark were commonly cited as examples of this. Clubs understood the need for both, and were positive about the schemes' intentions, but the certification process, particularly the paperwork, was deemed overwhelming by many. One club member who had recently worked through the Clubmark process commented: "Our club development plan has really helped to clarify the future direction of the club. Most of us are now really clear where we are heading, so from that perspective it is great, but whether it really needed to be 80-odd pages long is another issue altogether."

Other examples of what was seen as bureaucracy included coach and volunteer contracts (introduced by some NGBs), new data reporting systems, and the processes of securing external funding. It was clear from the discussion that this is not a direct reprisal against professionalization. The comments were aimed at helping to ensure that future schemes are streamlined, minimizing the amount of form-filling associated with accreditation standards, development plans, and child protection procedures.

There were also clear concerns about the longer-term impact of increased bureaucracy, which implied requiring more volunteer time, and for those clubs with a few, this meant more work (and seemingly more pressure). This raises questions about the longer-term willingness of the stalwarts to continue multi-tasking and keep their club going. It also is a concern for clubs trying to recruit new volunteers, as one person stated: "I can just see myself signing up fifteen potential volunteer coaches and imagine my colleague next to me says, 'Oh by the way here are the coach contracts and here are the volunteering contracts and all the other bits and pieces that have to be completed.' We would be killed in a stampede as they turn around and run out the door."

Member Attitudes

Interestingly, the issue of lack of appreciation and high expectations from members was a common, unprompted discussion topic. Responses from volunteers varied between those who thought these attitudes were deliberate—that is, that club members expected high quality services in return for membership fees—to other volunteers who saw this as nothing more than an unintentional consequence of people leading busy lives, having different priorities, and not thinking about or understanding the practical implications of running a club.

One or two clubs in each of the six focus groups noted a lack of appreciation and a feeling of being taken-for-granted: "There are a very irritating minority who demand things of you... it's really annoying," and "I think it's also just that aspect, sorry... I've paid my membership therefore I've done my bit, I have a right to come here because I've paid to be here." The most criticism or annoyance was levied

Table 9 Member attitudes

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- We've been billed as the cheapest babysitting service in the area
 - Basically we are being used as a cheap baby-sitting service
 - You've got to be very careful because some of the people who are most active use the term babysitting for want of a better phrase. Two years down the line they're doing the same thing
 - Parents were dropping their kids off and running off, leaving them with us and then picking them up an hour later than they should have done. It took us years to change that so I do think it can happen, it's how you manage it... there's also a lack of appreciation that behind the scenes a lot of volunteering is going on, people just don't realise
 - There are a very irritating minority who demand things of you as if you were a paid servant and it's really annoying
 - I think maybe it's also just [an attitude of] "I've paid my membership therefore I've done my bit, I have a right to come here because I've paid to be here"
-

toward parents; many volunteers felt they were being used as a cheap baby-sitting service, with some admitting to doing this themselves in the past. Table 9 highlights summary comments relating to the attitudes of other club members.

Resource Constraints

Unsurprisingly, resources were repeatedly cited as a key pressure. Some opinions were particularly strong, with volunteers voicing frustration and anger over the impossibility of their situation, particularly regarding meeting NGB or government expectations when neither was seen as supportive. Discussions on this topic underlined the great tension between the professionalization of sport and the historic largely amateur nature of sport clubs in England. Many volunteers said their club simply did not have the resources or capacity to deliver policy goals; with specific reference to the facilities needed to accommodate a growing membership, people needed to respond to coaching and administrative requirements (like Clubmark) and funding to address especially coach development. The cost of coaching awards for various sports has risen significantly, for example: "In netball, a level 3 course now costs over £1,000, yet the NGB want us to have more level 3 coaches, that is just crazy"; "making sensible charges for coaching courses, some of them are now in the realms of Harry Potter, pure fantasy, do they realize that these costs are paid for by voluntary clubs?" and "We need more support and help with attending courses, particularly the cost, these are so expensive now that many of our coaches do not bother." Even the powerful and relatively well-resourced German club system ranks as its most serious problems retaining volunteers and attracting new members (Breuer and Wicker 2008; De Knop et al. 1999).

The Evolving Sports Development Profession

The research revealed a more surprising source of pressure: investment in "professional" sports administration and the subsequent growth of professional sports development. Volunteers specifically referred to professional Sports Development Officers (SDOs) working in NGBs, CSPs, or Local Authorities (or their local

Community Sport Network) as an additional pressure. They reported two major issues: the expectations and pressures exerted by the government, SE, and NGBs; and the size, complexity, and nature of the system, which has a growing number of specialist organizations, partnerships, and networks involved in the delivery of sport.

Discussion and Conclusions

For VSC members, regular changes in policy have created a muddled and confused picture. Sports club volunteers are unclear about policy objectives, many hold an out-of-date view, and many have limited confidence and willingness to become delivery agents, reinforcing the complex and, at times, challenging nature of the relationship between state and the voluntary sector. Part of this may be due to distance: in large NGBs there may be district, county, and regional levels between them and their policy organs; something that is even truer in federal systems (Cuskelly et al. 2006). This is a matter of concern, not least because after long periods when performance and development of the athlete was the priority, the new SE strategy allocates VSCs a crucial role in recruiting up to one million new sports participants. This presents a significant challenge to SE and to NGBs.

First, if VSCs are critical to policy delivery, national sport organizations, and NGBs must at the very least ensure that there is clear communication with VSCs, clarifying the new policy objectives and targets. Second, they need to encourage VSCs to commit to the new policy objectives and deliver activities that will contribute to the new growth targets, despite little or no involvement in developing the new policies.

As an alternative, SE, NGBs, and other organizations may choose to focus attention on those clubs that apply for grants, either from the Lottery Sports Fund or their NGB. Explicit grant criteria and/or award conditions could be applied to fund only those VSCs able to demonstrate (on paper, at least) their intention to meet policy objectives. Whether such overt pressure—creating funded sheep and unfunded goats—is something that anyone wishes to see in the sports movement is another, ethical matter. In addition, in his detailed case studies of four clubs in receipt of lottery funding, Garrett (2003) found that conditions of funding do not guarantee that a club will conform. Despite the funding and the attached conditions, clubs reported that they were either unable and/or unwilling to conform to the conditions of lottery funding and pursue the policy objectives of Sport England (Garrett 2003, p. 22). While good relations with regional and National NGBs were the most significant components of institutional factors for Seippel's (2004) Norwegian sports clubs, they faded into insignificance in the clubs when viewed against problems of recruiting and retaining members, coaches, and volunteers. Breuer and Wicker's (2008) large German sample also reflected this.

The small average size of over 90% of English VSCs presents substantial challenges to the capacity of these clubs. Most of the 90,400 clubs in Germany are small and single-sport also, but the minority (6%) of large multi-sport clubs (with over 1,000 members providing a quarter of all club members) are the ones that provide the bulk of new and competitive sports, and take on the tasks of meeting the

needs of hard-to-reach groups or helping disaffected youth (see Table 1 and Anders 1991). England has no cadre of such multi-sport clubs. The limited capacity and varying motives of VSCs, and the limited power of SE and NGBs to enforce them in a voluntary, opt-in system makes the efficacy of this approach highly questionable.

The key feature of the VSC sector, as for other voluntary agencies, is its diversity and independence, enabling approaches ranging from an informal collective of volunteers involved because of their mutual enthusiasm for their sport to a more formalized, professional service delivery agent. The problem of accepting policy tasks and associated grant aid or contract monies is that it incorporates VSCs in the state's business, and this has been a major concern in health, education, and welfare services. In this respect, VSCs must be free, without penalty, to refuse to help with the state's priorities or to adopt different methods of delivery. SE's 2007–8 consultation with NGBs was principally with NGBs that wholeheartedly supported the new SE strategic direction, seeing more priority given to pure sport and more autonomy in drawing up their Whole Sport Plans. However, it takes time for sport's grassroots to receive, consider, and embody or reject such messages. Only time will tell to what extent they do this.

The research method employed in this study unearthed a richness of comment, clearly expressing attitudes formed by experience—but it should be recognized that this sample was limited by the lead author's resources. Ideally this study requires replication with a wider range of clubs and in other, especially urban regions. In two or so years' time it would also be worthwhile to return to this sample to see how clubs have adopted and delivered the new policy, or rejected it. Further, this research highlights the need for policy makers to acquire a more sophisticated understanding of club types, particularly with regard to their objectives and attitude towards playing an active role in policy implementation.

This study found VSCs variously oriented toward goals of survival or development of participation or performance, and many members indifferent or hostile to being agents responsible for government objectives for sport, perceiving this as an objective for which they held no direct responsibility. Some NGBs have undertaken countrywide operations to get each affiliated club to clarify its role, whether for basic teaching and participation or talent identification and performance development of nurturing elite players; examples include the Amateur Swimming Association with Swim 21 and Rugby Union, and the focus club community clusters developed by the England and Wales Cricket Board. Our sample repeated earlier findings (see Taylor et al. 2003) about serious resource constraints of facilities, finance, and human resources. If this small sample is even somewhat representative, SE and NGBs need to think hard about their publicity, promotion, and incentive policies. It seems to us that top-down policy makers have once again taken too much for granted. If too much pressure is put on the willing minority we may see the unintended consequence of creating what Pearce (1993) referred to as “martyred leaders.”

Policy makers, then, have three options in their approach to this sector: (1) continue with the current “blanket approach,” and accept inefficiencies, wastage, and a degree of frustration and resistance (Taylor 2004); (2) go beyond hub clubs and the clubs built around soccer (2008-11 Strategy, p. 22) to try to create a bigger cadre of large multi-sport clubs, while realizing that these are not part of the

mainstream tradition in the UK and for some time will remain a smaller part of the system than in Germany; or (3) develop a targeted approach, requiring research and a deeper understanding and respect for the diversity of VSC types.

Our research suggests that VSCs are not clear about policy objectives for sport, despite being central to the delivery of this policy. It also suggests a range of attitudes towards VSCs as policy implementers. Given these issues, the autonomy of sector, and the range of pressures facing VSCs, we recommend that policy makers commit to the third option. This will bring a richer understanding of the voluntary sports sector, a critical ingredient to the successful implementation of sports policy objectives and something which HMG, SE, and NGBs cannot afford to ignore.

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