

Facilitating organisational effectiveness among volunteers in sport

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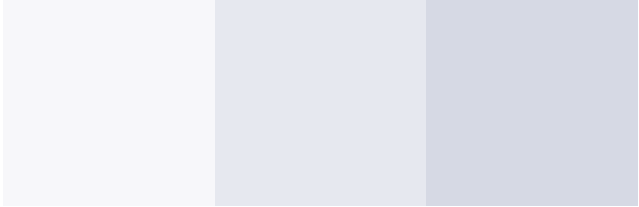
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One of the UK government's policy positions in sport is to facilitate improvement in the voluntary sector's effectiveness and capacity, in order to help achieve governmental objectives for sport. However, attempting to change the voluntary sector in sport so that it serves as a more effective agent for government policy carries certain risks, as this sector is largely independent of government. This article explores the nature of volunteers in sport in order to judge if they are willing to change and willing to act as agents for government policy. It also examines the receptiveness of sports volunteers to an explicit, external initiative designed to facilitate improvement in the sector: Sport England's Volunteer Investment Programme, which operated from 1997 to 2005. The evidence used is from a national study of volunteering in sport, conducted for Sport England in 2002. The findings provide mixed evidence of the extent to which voluntary sport in England is capable of responding to the calls of government, and they suggest that if the voluntary sector is used in this way, a high wastage rate is to be expected. Different methods of stimulating the sector are considered.

Recent governments have made much of the importance of the voluntary sector, as a medium for improved citizenship and as a 'third way' alternative to public service and market provision (Davis Smith, 1998a; Howlett and Locke, 1999). In the UK, government policy for sport has for a long time recognised the importance of the voluntary sector. In 1983 the Sports Council strategy set targets for increasing participation:

the development of mass participation . . . will require local authorities and education authorities, local sports clubs and other local voluntary groups and local commercial interests to work both separately and in partnership (Sports Council, 1983:35)

The sheer scale of voluntary sport in England makes it important for government policy to consider the voluntary contribution in any strategy to develop sport. The most recent



study for Sport England – the national government agency for sport in England – estimates that in 2002 there were more than 5.8 million volunteers in sport in England, contributing over 1.2 billion hours, largely through more than 106,000 voluntary sports clubs (Taylor et al, 2003), most of which are affiliated to national governing bodies (NGBs). Sport is the single largest contributor to the voluntary sector as a whole in the UK, with 26 per cent of all volunteers (Davis Smith, 1998b).

A seminal report for sport in England, *Game plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002), made clear the role of government in sport: to facilitate.

The Government does not run sport, and nor should it . . . DCMS's key role must be to develop, lead and co-ordinate the strategy for sport and physical activity in the UK (page 169).

The department should be seen as a strategic commissioner rather than a funder (page 171).

(DCMS is the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, the central government department with responsibility for sport in the UK.)

In the UK, however, government does have a degree of funding influence over the voluntary sports sector, the principal means being exchequer grants (that is, direct from central government) to NGBs, and Lottery funding to NGBs and voluntary clubs. According to *Game plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002), 22 per cent of exchequer and Lottery grants for sport in 2001–2002 were awarded to NGBs, and a further 12 per cent to voluntary clubs; in other words, a third of the total of £307 million went to the voluntary sector. In addition, local authorities provide a range of financial and in-kind assistance to voluntary sport (Nichols et al, 1998, Taylor et al, 2003). NGBs are a lead ‘agent’ for government in sport, and as Houlihan (1997) observes:

The progress towards a more formal and selective relationship between governing bodies and the Sports Council has been gradual but steady (page 170).

He also accurately predicted that government grants to NGBs will become more selective and more closely tied to the current government’s priorities.

A twin-track approach is evident in the relationship between government and the voluntary sector in sport: first, relying on the voluntary sector as an agent of government policy in service delivery; and second, seeking to improve the efficacy of the sector. Government priorities for sport have been made clear recently in *Game plan* and also in Sport England’s *Framework for sport* (2004a). The primary objective is to increase participation. The government’s target is that 70 per cent of the population should reach the recommended levels of physical activity by 2020 – the current figure is 30 per cent. Sport England consultation suggests that 55 per cent is achievable. Other objectives that are relevant to the voluntary sector are either details concerning increased participation, such as social inclusion and increased participation by young people, or they are secondary to the main objective, such as promoting active citizenship.

Government is clearly intent on improving the voluntary sector's capabilities in UK sport. Key features identified in *Game plan* for improving the organisation and delivery of sport and physical activity in the UK include:

Government investment should be used to drive modernisation and wider working with the voluntary and private sectors (page 162).

NGBs . . . should be encouraged to modernise, with capacity building where necessary; to seek alternative sources of income; and to rationalise their numbers (page 180).

Sport England aims to make clubs better managed, more sustainable and more accessible, for grassroots participation as well as talent development (page 181).

The twin-track development of the relationship between government and the voluntary sector has a relevance to broader policy areas than simply sport (and indeed a wider relevance than just the UK) (Davis Smith, 2003). Harris, Rochester and Halfpenny (2001) suggest:

The Blair government sees the private and voluntary sectors as key instruments for the delivery of its policies. It has also continued in the Thatcherite tradition of expecting the voluntary sector to demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness (page 4).

In 1998 a 'Compact' between government and the voluntary sector was drawn up after consultation with the sector (Home Office, 1998a). This Compact was initially applicable to central government departments and offices, and not to non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) such as Sport England, although there is a stated intent to extend it to NDPBs and local government. In an introduction to this Compact, Prime Minister Blair stated:

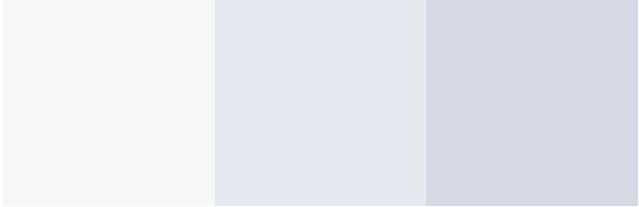
Government and the [voluntary] sector fulfil complementary roles in the development and delivery of public policy and services (page 1).

The Compact provides undertakings by the voluntary and community sector, which include:

*[To] maintain high standards of governance and conduct and meet reporting and accountability obligations to funders and users . . .
To develop quality standards appropriate to the organisation . . . (page 7).*

There are also undertakings of good practice, including:

*to promote effective working relationships with Government . . .
To put in place policies for promoting best practice and equality of opportunity in activities, employment, involvement of volunteers and service provision (page 7).*



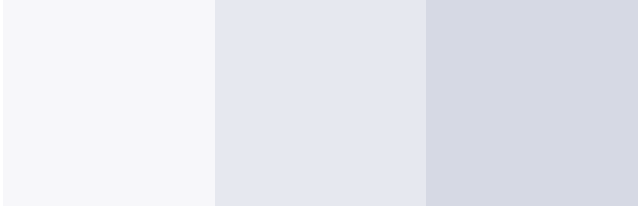
This quest to improve the working of the voluntary sector was reinforced by further guidance on good practice in a supplement to the Compact (Home Office, 1998b), with details on issues such as 'high standards and effective management of volunteers', 'monitoring and reporting' and 'accreditation of skills acquired through volunteering'.

There are concerns, however, about the balance between supporting volunteering and seeking to control it (Davis Smith, 2003). Dingle and Heath (2001) warn of the need to differentiate between support to volunteering because it is an expression of active citizenship and support to achieve government objectives. Blackmore (2004) identifies a danger of 'mission drift', with resources in voluntary organisations diverted to delivering funders' priorities. She also warns against the growing audit and performance measurement culture in government, which may come to affect its expectations of the voluntary sector and undermine the sector's distinctive character. However, she also reminds us that most of the pressure for effectiveness and accountability comes not from government but from the members of voluntary organisations (Gribben, Robb and Wilding, 2002).

Wilding *et al* (2004) suggest that while in the Labour government's first term of office the emphasis was on partnership with the voluntary sector, there is concern that the focus in the second term has been very instrumental, to ensure effective delivery of public services. Another government review (HM Treasury, 2002) reinforces this impression, with its emphasis on building the capacity of the voluntary sector to fulfil public service delivery. Building capacity 'is about ensuring that voluntary and community organisations have the skills, knowledge, structures and resources to realise their full potential' (HM Treasury, 2002:19). Building capacity is a key theme for the voluntary sector in the recent government review of sport (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002).

Implicit support for initiatives to improve the management and efficacy of the voluntary sector in sport is provided by criticisms of the current capacity of the sector to meet broader government objectives. Collins and Kay (2003), for example, express reservations about the capabilities of the sector in delivering the government's social inclusion objective. In the context of Lottery funding, Garrett (2004) demonstrates, through a sample of four voluntary clubs, a very mixed response ranging from compliance with government requirements for a Lottery award to explicit resistance to such requirements. In the most resistant case, a club accepted the Lottery funding with no intention of meeting one of its conditions. Cases of resistance after receipt of government funding have given rise to concerns about accountability (National Audit Office, 1998).

Such criticisms and concerns serve to underline the independence of voluntary sector organisations, particularly the clubs, which typically are not reliant on government subsidy. The Compact and the Treasury review both emphasise that the independence of the voluntary sector is important, but that in principle it also undermines the effectiveness of the sector's contribution to public service delivery. As Gratton and Taylor (1991 and 2000) point out, although some collective benefits may be derived from the voluntary sports sector, in the main voluntary clubs produce private benefits



for their members, and most of their income is from these members. Clubs may unwittingly provide collective benefits consistent with government policy – for example, active citizenship and increased participation by young people – but they have no direct incentive to provide such benefits. The main indirect incentive is the relationship of clubs with NGBs, which are more accountable to government via the Sport England grants that they receive.

Another constraint on the capacity of the voluntary sports sector to act as an agent of government policy is the fact that volunteers are under increasing pressures in their roles, as indicated by Sport England studies (Taylor *et al*, 2003; Nichols *et al*, 2003; Gratton *et al*, 1996; Nichols, Shibli and Taylor, 1998). These include societal pressures – such as the constraints of time imposed by the paid workplace and family commitments – and some which are institutional: for example, heavier obligations as a result of legislation (e.g. health and safety, child protection) and greater demands from NGBs and Sport England (e.g. funding requirements, equal opportunities policies, accreditation schemes).

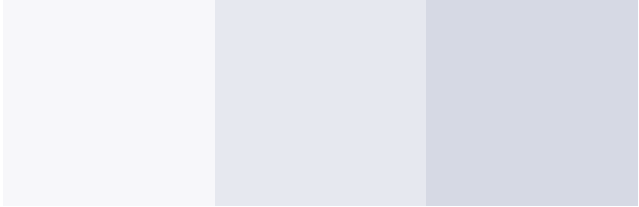
This article provides further evidence with which to analyse the relationship between the voluntary sports sector and government. The analysis is conducted with reference to the government's primary service delivery objective for sport: increasing participation.

The evidence examined is of two types. First, evidence on the attitudes of volunteers in sport towards management and external assistance provides a general analysis of the potential receptiveness of volunteers to fulfilling an 'agency' function for government policy.

Second, evidence on volunteers' attitudes to one of the most explicit attempts to help them improve management practices – Sport England's Volunteer Investment Programme (VIP) – provides a specific example of their willingness to respond to external help and direction. In a qualitative investigation of sports club volunteers who are members of VIP, Coussins (2003) suggests that the programme is welcomed by, and useful to, these members, but highlights problems with awareness, even among members, of the exact objectives and purpose of VIP. This article extends the analysis of VIP beyond its members to the wider sports volunteering community, using the Sport England research.

Methods

The primary evidence for this article comes from extensive qualitative research conducted as part of the 2003 Sport England study (Taylor *et al*, 2003). More than a thousand telephone interviews were conducted, with national and regional representatives from NGBs and club-level volunteers from eighty-eight sports, and with staff/volunteers at fifty local authorities, thirty-one youth organisations, a hundred schools, twelve disability sports organisations, twenty further education colleges and twenty universities.



In addition, fifty-one focus groups were conducted with a total of 308 sports volunteers at clubs in twelve major sports: athletics, badminton, bowls, cricket, football, gymnastics, hockey, netball, rugby union, sailing, swimming and tennis. Prior to each focus group the participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire. The major criterion for the selection of sports for the focus groups was the scale of participation. This also meant that most of the sports selected had well-developed NGB partnerships with the national government via Sport England. However, this bias has an unknown effect on the propensity of volunteers in clubs in these sports to be amenable to serving as agents of government policy. On the one hand, a good NGB-government relationship is a positive influence, but on the other hand it may increase feelings of resentment about any top-level expectations of clubs that result from the relationship.

The interview and focus group schedules typically contained questions on:

- the extent of sports volunteering in the organisation;
- problems encountered by volunteers;
- the existence of formal management tools (volunteer co-ordinator, written volunteer strategy, written guidance for volunteers);
- the availability and use of assistance from outside the organisation/sport; and
- awareness, membership and utilisation of VIP.

The nature of sports volunteers in England

The characteristics of voluntary sports clubs lie at or between two extremes: the one resistant to external influence, the other more amenable. These extremes have some affinity with Pearce's (1993) distinction between management by interpersonal control and management by bureaucratic control. However, just as Pearce recommends a balance between the two styles of management, clubs at the two extremes display some common characteristics as well as differences.

Some volunteers are enthusiastic about their sport or club, but feel antipathy, or even hostility, towards the concept of management. They see voluntary clubs as fundamentally different entities from commercial or public services:

We're all volunteers, so who am I to say that you're not doing it right? You just go along with it. When you are relying on people's good will I don't think they necessarily need to be 'managed'. You don't want to put people off who are giving up their time, however large or small that amount of time is. It's a tightrope you're walking and you've got to keep their good will (swimming club secretary).

This perceived difference manifests itself in a resistance to management:

I don't think they want to be 'managed'. We're all managed at work. If you volunteer for something then you want to feel like a volunteer and do it for the pleasure of it, not because you are being managed and told what to do (athletics club).

If you'd got people queuing up for jobs then I'm sure it would be different. You can't sack the secretary if there is no one wanting to do it (hockey club).

In another club a volunteer suggested that management of volunteers would be like paid work without the pay. One rugby club described itself as a 'loose co-operative'. There is an implicit objective in clubs of this type to minimise bureaucracy, and a preference for informal approaches to organising club activities.

This emphasis on informality is paralleled by perceived strengths in the organisation of volunteers, which are socially orientated rather than orientated to more formal notions of organisational effectiveness. The social strengths of an informal approach include camaraderie, sociability and friendliness.

The informal/traditional extreme of club organisation is summarised in Figure 1. The characteristics of this type of club are seen as strengths by members, yet there are fears over its fragility (Taylor *et al*, 2003), despite evidence from elsewhere in the UK of the durability of clubs (Allison, 2001). This type of club is characterised not only by insularity and independence, but also in many cases by shortages of volunteers, recruitment problems, long-serving key volunteers, increasing workloads and lack of development. Most importantly for the purposes of this article, the combination of characteristics in Figure 1 militates against a favourable view of potential external assistance. Independence is a key feature of this type of club, but a complex array of social and institutional challenges (Nichols *et al*, 2003) raise doubts about the viability of their informal approach to organisation.

Figure 1: The informal/traditional case

This type of club is not managed. They have no job descriptions, and no way of enforcing someone to the job. They don't want to get involved in grievance/disciplinary procedures – 'how can you discipline a volunteer?' There is a culture of self-help and contribution: all volunteers working towards a common goal, committed to the club and their sport.

Some of the main characteristics of this type of club are:

- Motivations compatible with mutual enthusiasm and social benefits.
- A proud culture of informality, which translates into active resistance to the relevance of terms such as 'management' or even 'volunteering'.
- Pragmatic solutions to resulting problems: e.g. multi-tasking; key volunteers staying in post for far longer than they anticipated.
- Reactive rather than proactive; this is not seen as crisis management, but rather as 'mucking in' – often limited to key volunteers.
- Professionalisation, in the sense of more formal management, is seen as a fundamental threat to the culture of the organisation.

Mistrust of assistance on offer from external sources. This is seen as extra work and this club is too constrained in resources to even acknowledge the offers from outside, let alone seek them.

The research produced various indications that independence and informality were not

necessarily sufficient for the sustainability of clubs. Some volunteers recognised there were problems:

In most clubs there's a real problem of succession planning. Most clubs don't even consider it. If two of us left from the club suddenly, I don't know where things would go. We haven't looked at that. The longer you stay in post, the harder it is to say 'I'll go' (secretary of a badminton club).

Several focus groups acknowledged that a lack of formality in volunteer management was a weakness, in various guises including: lack of communication; concerns about the succession in key posts; poor awareness of members' willingness to volunteer; lack of assistance from the national governing body and other external agencies; and lack of a forum for sharing good practice.

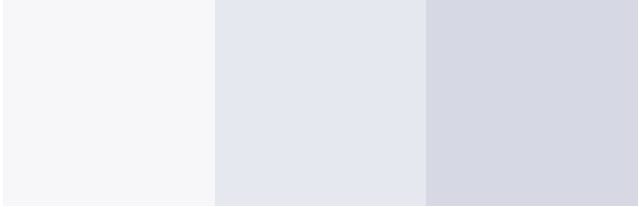
Other focus groups revealed a variety of formal measures used by clubs in order to improve management. These included: audits of members' willingness to volunteer; mentoring of volunteers; job descriptions; delegation and line management; a disciplinary code to remove volunteers from posts if necessary; and training of volunteers. The research identified best-practice examples of clubs that were at the other extreme from the informal/traditional club. Figure 2 represents this more formal organisation.

Figure 2: The formal case

Volunteers at this type of club are managed formally, by the club's committee or a designated co-ordinator. They have less difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers because they deal with these issues strategically. There is also a more developmental view of the club and its volunteers.

The characteristics of this type of club include:

- The same primary social motivations as traditional/informal organisations: friendship, giving something back, the parental motive, but simultaneously volunteers also want the club to do well in sporting terms and to be well organised.
- Professionalisation is seen as a response to pressures. This type of club is more likely to adopt paid work procedures and is more receptive to paying for work, e.g. coaches.
- More formal and managerialist in approach, but often not seeing it as that. They are more likely to use procedures such as audits of volunteering potential, mentoring, job descriptions and training. Some even have volunteer co-ordinators.
- These organisations are more proactive in anticipating development and in planning to resolve problems and taking actions to deliver the plans.
- More systematic and managerialist in promoting an explicit 'contribution culture', not taking it for granted and moaning when it doesn't happen.
- Receptive to external assistance, welcoming it and seeking it for resolving problems and for development.



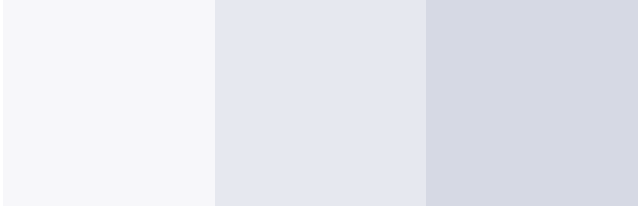
A noticeable feature of the more formal club is that its volunteers share the primary motivation of the informal/traditional clubs – social benefits – although their other motivations are more compatible with ‘bureaucratic’ objectives – that is, organisational effectiveness. A defining difference between the types of club in Figures 1 and 2 is that whilst the former were resistant to external advice and support, the latter were not only receptive to it but actively sought it. This difference is important to the government’s primary objective for sport – increasing participation by building capacity – because the formal clubs are more likely to be effective in achieving this. Other government objectives, such as active citizenship, may be achieved by clubs at both extremes, so the differences matter less here.

The extent to which the voluntary sector is composed of more traditional/informal clubs is an indication of the wastage rate likely to be suffered by any external policy initiatives aimed at voluntary sports clubs, owing to this type of club’s antipathy to such initiatives. The effectiveness of the sector in achieving service delivery objectives, such as increasing participation, will be similarly constrained, unless improvement happens coincidentally in some of these clubs. However, the research, being qualitative, was unable to quantify the percentage of voluntary sports organisations that are more traditional/informal and therefore more resistant to external help, as against the percentage which are more formal and receptive to external help. In any case, many organisations were not at one extreme or the other, but somewhere in between.

Nevertheless, there are indications in the results about the relative scale of formal volunteer management and problems with involving volunteers in sports clubs in the voluntary sector. Arguably the most explicit signs of a more formal approach to volunteer management are the appointment of a volunteer co-ordinator and the existence of a volunteer strategy. Of the 338 clubs interviewed that provided responses to appropriate questions, just fifteen (4.4 per cent) had a volunteer co-ordinator. Only three clubs had volunteer strategies; all three also had volunteer co-ordinators. The fifteen clubs with volunteer co-ordinators were significantly more likely than clubs without co-ordinators to have produced written guidance for their volunteers on such matters as health and safety, insurance, child protection, the recruitment and management of volunteers, sponsorship and fundraising.

However, there is no significant relationship between having a volunteer co-ordinator and experiencing fewer problems with recruiting, managing, retaining or training volunteers, nor with such difficulties as decreasing numbers of volunteer, increasing numbers of volunteer jobs or the growing amount of time given by volunteers. Taking a more formal approach cannot therefore be proven to reduce the problems that affect voluntary sports clubs. It is possible, however, that a more formal approach is more likely to disclose such problems.

The problems facing voluntary sports organisations in England are widespread but not all-pervasive. Whilst 40 per cent of the organisations researched were seeing a fall in the number of volunteers, in another 40 per cent numbers were increasing. Furthermore, the most frequently cited reason for increasing workloads in voluntary



sports organisations we contacted was not greater bureaucracy and persistent volunteer shortages, but rather increased sports activity: for example, the development of junior, female and/or veterans' participation. This suggests that a good proportion of the clubs in English sport are more developmental, with possibly greater receptiveness to external initiatives.

When asked about their awareness of and use of external sources of assistance, 39 per cent of clubs were aware that their NGBs offered support, 16 per cent were aware of local authority assistance and 12 per cent were aware of Sport England assistance. However, the percentages of clubs which had actually received support from these sources were lower: 21 per cent for NGB support, 10 per cent from local authorities and 9 per cent from Sport England. The fifteen interviewed clubs that had volunteer co-ordinators were significantly more likely than clubs without co-ordinators to be aware of, and use, the support available from local authorities and Sport England. However, there was no difference between clubs with and without a volunteer co-ordinator in the awareness of, and use of, support from NGBs.

Therefore, the variety in the types of club and in attitudes to greater formality and professionalism presents a challenge to any attempts to improve the organisational effectiveness of clubs. One implication is that a variety of support initiatives may be required to attract the attention of a larger number of clubs. The research provided a more specific test of the potential receptiveness among clubs to external initiatives designed to facilitate more formal management. This is the extent to which one of the most explicit initiatives for volunteers in sports organisations, VIP, has penetrated its primary market.

Volunteer Investment Programme

Sport England, formerly the Sports Council, launched its Volunteer Investment Programme (VIP) in January 1997, in response to its first national study of volunteers in UK sport (Gratton *et al*, 1996). This research had found that many volunteers in sports clubs were overburdened – through having multiple roles, volunteering for excessive hours and being poorly managed and equipped – and that the clubs were finding the recruitment and retention of volunteers increasingly difficult. VIP was therefore 'created to raise the profile of volunteers in sport by: highlighting the vital role they play; and providing them with much needed practical support' (Burgess, 1996:1). VIP effectively concluded in 2005, as part of a review of Sport England services, with the ending of over two thousand quarterly mailings to members and the devolution of recognition awards to NGBs. The provision of materials and courses to help voluntary clubs continues under the Running Sports brand (www.runningsports.org), and other initiatives have been introduced to bring about improvements in voluntary sports clubs. However, at the time of the research reported on here, VIP was the main improvement programme for sports clubs.

VIP had four key aims: raising the profile of sports volunteers; promoting volunteer management; providing support in the recruitment, retention and recognition of volunteers; and promoting good practice in volunteer management (Hammond, 2001).

Membership of VIP was free to anyone working as a volunteer co-ordinator in a sports club or organisation. It was delivered in a number of ways:

- an initial welcome pack;
- training opportunities;
- free seminars and quarterly mailings;
- opportunities to receive up to £5,000 and public recognition for good practice in volunteer management (VIP Recognition Awards);
- access to special promotional material and discounted publications.

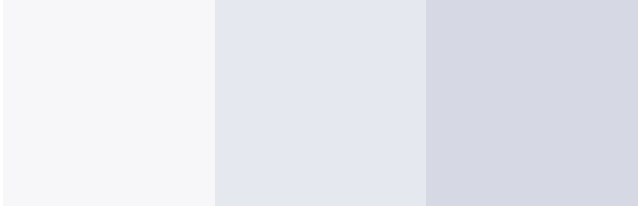
Sport England encouraged NGBs to become members of VIP and to promote membership of VIP to their constituent bodies and affiliated clubs. In addition, Sport England marketed VIP to local authority sports development units and directly to sports club volunteers via its courses (such as Running Sport), publications and website. Awareness, membership and utilisation of VIP will have depended on the extent to which NGBs in particular, and local authorities to a lesser extent, actively promoted it to their member clubs at the grassroots of sport, for whom it was designed.

The recent research provides evidence of the awareness, membership and utilisation of VIP amongst eighty-six sports, and also of the attitudes of respondents towards the programme. Table 1 summarises the extent of awareness, membership and utilisation of VIP in different volunteer organisations. Besides the absolute levels of awareness, membership and use of VIP, two of the noticeable features in Table 1 are the 'conversion' rates: that is, converting national NGB awareness, membership or use of VIP to the local level, and converting awareness at any level into utilisation of the programme.

Table 1: Awareness, membership and use of Sport England's VIP

Sports volunteers for:	Sample sizes	Awareness of VIP (% of volunteers)	Membership of VIP (% of volunteers)	Use of VIP (% of volunteers)	Conversion rate of awareness to use (%)
National governing bodies (NGB)	118	70%	25%	25%	36%
Regional NGB	269	46%	12%	12%	26%
Local sports clubs	343	27%	5%	5.5%	30%
<i>Conversion rate of NGB to local (%)</i>		39%	20%	22%	

Source: Telephone interviews, Taylor *et al.* (2003)



The highest conversion rate from national to local club level (39 per cent) is for awareness of VIP, from 70 per cent of NGBs to 27 per cent of affiliated clubs, which shows how effective NGBs are in passing information to their clubs. Presumably Sport England expected NGBs and other brokers of information, such as local authorities, to make clubs aware of VIP. The significantly lower awareness at club level is possibly the result of problems in the flow of information and/or a lack of time, resources and/or commitment to make club volunteers aware. Part of the explanation for the low level of awareness at the club level could also be methodological, in that the telephone interviews were conducted with just one member of each sports club. There are likely to have been instances where the interviewee wasn't aware of VIP but another member of the organisation may have been.

The conversion rate from awareness to use is highest for national level NGBs, at 36 per cent, and lowest for clubs, at 20 per cent. This implies a degree of 'informed rejection' of VIP which varies from 64 per cent at the national NGB level to 80 per cent at the local club level. Given that the primary market for VIP is clubs and one of the key agencies in promoting it is NGBs, then both conversion rates conspire to diminish the programme's impact. Awareness falls from 70 per cent of national NGBs to 27 per cent of club volunteers; 5.5 per cent of club volunteers actually make use of VIP. Clubs with volunteer co-ordinators were more likely than those without co-ordinators to use VIP, but nevertheless only a small minority of this formal subset did so. Awareness of VIP amongst focus group volunteers from the twelve major sports sampled is only slightly above the average for all sports, at 30 per cent of volunteers. There was, though, a considerable variation in awareness of VIP across the focus group sports, from over 40 per cent of volunteers in cricket, rugby, swimming and athletics to just 5 per cent of bowls volunteers. It must be noted, however, that only four clubs per sport participated in the focus groups, so that although there were 308 respondents in fifty-one focus groups, the variation in awareness of VIP across sports is not statistically reliable.

Local authority involvement with VIP was mostly restricted to promoting it to clubs or nominating a local volunteer for a VIP Recognition Award. Several local authorities confirmed that VIP was being promoted to clubs through their local Active Sports Partnership (another Sport England initiative), and others said that it was something they hoped to look at soon. However, only 28 per cent of the local authority respondents in the research were aware of VIP, about the same proportion as among club volunteers.

Whilst some clubs researched had positively embraced VIP and found it to be very useful, at every level of sport it was not unusual for those who had heard of VIP but had not used it to say that it was good in principle but a step too far for overstretched volunteers. Some of these perceived VIP to be too formal, professional or bureaucratic.

It's seen as an extra task rather than any advancement (petanque, national level).

Great in theory, probably great in practice, but when you are the only person doing it in the club, it's the straw that breaks the camel's back (judo, regional level).

They seem to assume we've got vast numbers of people with time to go to seminars. To be perfectly honest, we are not at that level. It doesn't seem to apply to us (gymnastics, club level).

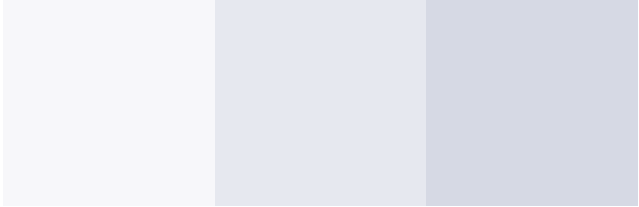
Too much hassle to fill the form in – not worth the bother – too many hoops to jump through (cricket, club level).

VIP was designed to be flexible rather than prescriptive, and remarks such as those quoted above would be viewed by Sport England as misperceptions. Despite this, such comments point to the need for initiatives such as VIP to be even more effective at giving a clear and simple message to prospective users, if the conversion rate from awareness to use is to improve.

Another major constraint to both awareness and use of VIP at the local level is demonstrated by the finding that twenty-two out of the fifty-one focus groups showed clear signs of informality in their organisation of volunteers. These clubs identified with the informal tradition of voluntary sports clubs, which has evolved with few formal procedures. Volunteers in such organisations are likely to fear that management could become too structured, leading to more paperwork and to professionalisation. Whilst VIP is not necessarily a threat to this informal approach, any external assistance on offer is treated with scepticism because key volunteers cannot find the time to accommodate it. Such clubs are trapped in the volunteering equivalent of crisis management, which means concentrating on necessary operational issues at the expense of more strategic matters.

Another factor limiting the awareness and use of VIP was a lack of time and resources in some NGBs to promote the programme and help clubs to start using it. In some NGBs this problem was most noticeable at the regional level. Clubs that do not have proactive volunteers to take the lead on new initiatives such as VIP need support from their NGB, typically via a development officer or a regional/county volunteer. Without this kind of support during the incubation period, it is unlikely that VIP would have become established at a club, and more likely that it would become sidelined in favour of operational issues. Even among members of VIP, Coussins (2003) found that pressures caused by shortage of volunteers combined with an impression that the programme involved a lot of work to result in an under-utilisation of VIP.

It is not necessarily the larger, well-resourced NGBs that are more effective in providing this kind of support than smaller NGBs. However, it is increasingly the case that larger NGBs are under the greatest pressures as a result of the partnerships with, and funding by, government (Nichols, 2003). Out of the ninety-five sports recognised by Sport England, twenty have been targeted for exchequer funding as priority sports, and another ten are funded to a lower level as development sports (Sport England, 2004a). These partnerships are a double-edged sword for NGBs and clubs, as successive governments increasingly appreciate the benefits of using sport as a policy instrument. The conditions of these partnerships inevitably result in these pressures cascading down from NGBs to regional and club-level volunteers.



The VIP analysis serves to confirm the impression given by the analysis of the nature of volunteers in sport. If agencies such as Sport England, NGBs and local authorities are to succeed in improving organisational effectiveness, single initiatives such as VIP are likely to have a limited impact.

Conclusions

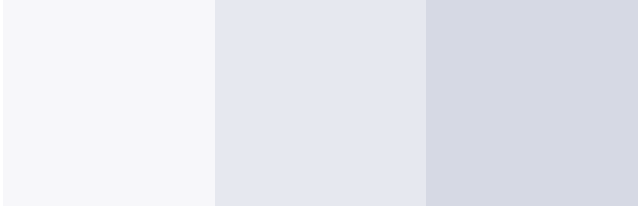
The heterogeneous nature of sports clubs, ranging from the informal/traditional to the formal, suggests that there will be a high wastage rate in delivering government policy through the voluntary sector. The informal traditionalists will resist overtures threatening change or influence – even if they are designed to ‘help’ clubs – as interference. Some of the reactions to VIP demonstrate this.

The research produced evidence of a tension between the desire to foster the informal, social attributes of organisational operations, and a wish to be more formal and professional (in the sense of better organised). In the focus groups the social aspects were emphasised as much as the effectiveness aspects, often by different clubs in the same sports. Furthermore, the research produced examples of successful organisation and management by both informal and formal clubs, in terms of building capacity and avoiding the common problems faced by the sector: volunteer shortages, recruitment problems, long-serving key volunteers and increasing workloads. The mechanisms of the informal approach are ad hoc, spontaneous, possibly even crisis-motivated, but effectiveness, particularly in avoiding the common problems, is achieved by a self-help contribution culture that relies on an absence of formality.

One key issue is whether to leave the traditional/informal organisations to their own fate, or to continue to encourage them to change. The portents for change are not very good, according to the typical characteristics of this end of the spectrum, as portrayed in Figure 1. The increasing pressures on volunteers (Taylor *et al*, 2003; Nichols *et al*, 2003; Gratton *et al*, 1996; Nichols, Shibli and Taylor, 1998) may engender a sense of crisis which demands change. Nevertheless, these pressures have been building for some time and there is no clear evidence of the sector shifting towards the formal extreme.

Perhaps there is a need to acknowledge that clubs can be effective whilst still retaining an informal culture. For such clubs, external assistance is an option that they may or may not choose to take up. The challenge for Sport England, NGBs and local authorities is therefore to help overstretched volunteers see that initiatives such as VIP can offer solutions to some of the difficulties they face. Among the main obstacles to achieving this are the informality and independence of clubs.

Any government initiative to help informal/traditional clubs must appear to be supportive in a way that does not threaten the informality of clubs and is easy to take on board. This is a difficult mission to accomplish. The research evidence suggests that language may be critical in breaking down resistance to modest increases in formalisation: terms such as ‘volunteers’, ‘management’ and ‘strategy’ are not as appropriate to some voluntary clubs as ‘members’, ‘help’ and ‘improvement’. The



mission is to 'help members improve the running of their clubs', not to 'enable club committees to manage their volunteers more effectively'.

The more formal organisations arguably have more potential for development and for the agency function sought by government. As Harris, Rochester and Halfpenny (2001) suggest:

The stress placed by both policy analysts and researchers on partnerships and on input and output measures again gives prominence to those voluntary organisations that are structured, formalised and professionalised and therefore capable of co-operating or competing with public and private sector organisations (page 13).

It is logical to provide explicit forms of assistance to such clubs, because there is a higher potential take-up rate for initiatives designed to improve organisational effectiveness.

In addition to VIP, more recent initiatives to stimulate greater effectiveness in the voluntary sports sector include building assistance to clubs through County Sports Partnerships, and also specific schemes such as Clubmark and the Community Club Development Programme.

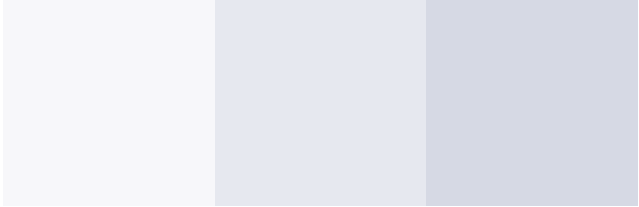
Clubmark is an accreditation scheme for sports clubs with junior sections, organised by Sport England and achieved by over two thousand accredited clubs in over twenty sports (www.clubmark.org.uk). The scheme sets out criteria for sports clubs to meet in child protection, coaching and competition, sports equity and ethics, and club management.

The Community Club Development Programme is a collaboration between the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Sport England and sixteen NGBs. In the three years 2003–2006, £60 million was awarded to a thousand projects, followed by another £40 million for 2007–2008 (Sport England 2006), to stimulate links between clubs and schools, and between 'hub clubs' and NGB development programmes. Sport England's objectives for the Community Club Development Programme were clearly focused on 'improving' the organisation of voluntary clubs:

The aim is a sustainable and financially viable sports club infrastructure. Investment is being made simultaneously in training and developing key people (coaches, officials and administrators) (Sport England, 2004b:15).

It is no coincidence that the sports clubs which have taken a more formal route to meeting challenges such as recruitment shortages are often (but not always) from the major sports, such as football and rugby. NGBs that possess their own sports development officers are better able to repackage products such as VIP, incorporate them into their own development programmes and promote them face-to-face with the end user. This increases considerably the chances of them being used.

However, initiatives such as VIP, Clubmark and the Community Club Development



Programme will inevitably be inefficient because they cannot be targeted solely at 'responsive' organisations, and therefore some of their exhortations will fall on the deaf ears of 'resistant' organisations. According to the recent research, VIP for example achieved a market penetration of just 5 per cent of clubs. This equates to just over 5,300 clubs out of an estimated 106,000 plus voluntary sports clubs in England. The take-up of Clubmark and the Community Club Development Programme is in the order of one to two thousand clubs, again small minorities of the total.

Although initiatives such as VIP are best suited to the more formal type of voluntary sports club, some see this as a limited ambition. Such programmes encourage and reward the clubs that already meet government objectives for development and organisational effectiveness, rather than encouraging the informal/traditional clubs to change.

VIP has been promoted to clubs but it could be promoted more. It's not been used as a tool as such. The people who use it are the clubs that have good volunteer systems, clubs that would be good without VIP. It needs to be promoted to clubs that don't have volunteers, that don't reward and value their volunteers (local authority sports development officer).

However, it might be more realistic and more cost effective to expect better organised clubs to improve than struggling clubs.

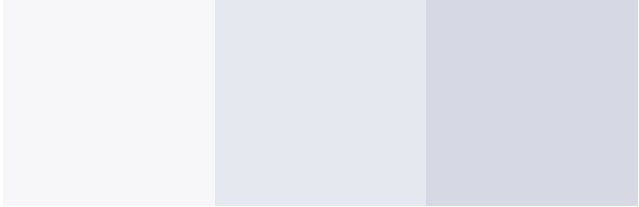
One alternative to the encouragement of either type of existing club, informal or formal, is the creation of new clubs or the development of existing clubs, funded partly by government. This is more targeted and therefore less risky, and the funding provides leverage to encourage such clubs to act as agents for government policies. One recent initiative by Sport England demonstrates this approach: the Active England Innovation Fund, created with finance from the Big Lottery Fund, which made available £108 million for the development of multi-sport clubs or 'sport hubs'. The advantages claimed for these hubs include economies of scale, new opportunities for professional development and wider access to publicly funded equipment and facilities (Sport England, 2004b).

It is too early to judge if initiatives such as those reviewed above will succeed in transforming voluntary sector sport. Nevertheless, they are consistent with a multi-pronged, government-funded approach to improving the effectiveness of the sector in sport. An enduring threat to the efficacy of such initiatives, however, is resistance by more informal organisations to pressures to change.

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