

DELIVERING SPORTS POLICY THROUGH NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS: EVALUATION OF THREE RELATED INTERVENTIONS IN THE LOCAL SPORTS DELIVERY SYSTEM IN ENGLAND

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INTRODUCTION

In the past three decades in the UK there has been a shifting set of priorities in terms of delivery and governance of the local sports policy system which might crudely be expressed by reference to three stages. In terms of delivery, a traditional welfare state paradigm based on **bureaucratic, hierarchical principles** of organisation, gave way in the 1980s to a commercial / entrepreneurial approach to policy delivery, with an emphasis on **markets** which was perhaps most clearly evidenced in the introduction of Commercial Competitive Tendering (CCT). This was to be overtaken by an emphasis on **partnerships and networks** in service delivery in the 1990s perhaps most strongly reflected in the introduction of County Sports Partnerships and School Sports Partnerships at local level. This shift in delivery emphasis was accompanied by a parallel shift in emphasis in terms of governance priorities, from a welfare state focus on **accountability**, to a commercial concern for **efficiency**, and subsequently with maximising effectiveness by **system integration**, developing 'joined up policy' across a range of policy constituencies.

Within the contemporary context of partnership development, this paper relates the interim findings of an evaluation of the use of social network analysis as one of three initiatives introduced to enhance system integration in the operation of two County Sports Partnerships in England. (The other two initiatives are the introduction of a performance management software tool and the use of management development tool, Effective Intelligence.) The study reported here is part of a UK Treasury / Sport England funded project to evaluate the impact of the three initiatives indicated above, over an eighteen month period from September 2006 until March 2008 (Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy, 2005).

County Sports Partnerships (CSPs) were established throughout England from 2005 (Sport England, 2005) with the principal aim of providing a mechanism for coordinating the delivery of sports policy in a variety of sectors (local government, education, national governing bodies, sports clubs etc.) to ensure that resources for delivery of opportunities for sport and exercise were optimised.

METHODS

A social network mapping exercise was conducted for both the Lincolnshire, and the Leicester-Shire and Rutland CSPs and the various constituencies with which they interacted. The population to be surveyed was first established by developing a list of the key contacts for the two CSPs in September 2005. These contacts represented individuals from a range of constituencies including the following: School Sports Partnerships, local authority sports development officers, the health sector (Primary Care Trusts), national governing bodies (local / regional representatives), Sport England (East Midlands Region), sports clubs, sports venues, local authority (non-sport) representatives, Board Members of the CSPs, and commercial operators; with the target population in each case being >120.

Each of the individuals contacted, were asked to complete a web based survey designed by Netform. Respondents

were asked to respond to five questions (intended to reflect five dimensions of partnership interaction):

Who do you go to or talk to, to help you get day to day work done around sport and physical activity? (Work Links);

Who do you go to or talk to when you need a decision relating to work around sport and physical activity?(Decision-making Links);

Who do you go to or who do you talk to when you need expert advice relating to work around sport and physical activity? (Expert Advice);

Who do you go to or who do you talk to when exploring new ideas or new ways of working around sport and physical activity? (Innovation Links);

Who do you make contact with to keep up to date with what's going on in the world of sport and physical activity? (Social Links).

In each case respondents were asked to indicate the individuals they had contacted in respect of the above and the regularity of contact (daily, weekly, monthly, annually). The results were published on an intranet site to allow all stakeholders access to the findings (the set of maps of interaction for each of the five dimensions), and meetings were held for each of the main constituencies to communicate the main findings and their significance.

In order to evaluate how the findings from the SNA might inform management practice, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 interviewees (9 from each CSP survey) with 4 interviewees from each of the CSPs, local authorities, Partnership Development Managers in education, and National Governing Bodies, and two from the health sector. The aims of the interviews were to evaluate the appropriateness; scope; accuracy; and quality of analysis provided in the application of the SNA tool, and to identify ways in which the approach informed management improvement plans.

In addition to the SNA diagrammes provided, individuals who were characterised as information 'hubs', 'gatekeepers' or 'pulsetakers' were identified. Illustrative examples of the SNA maps and the associated commentary will be provided in the presentation.

RESULTS

Interviews highlighted a range of implications for the use of this tool to inform management. These can be characterised briefly as:

The benefits of the process:

Simply undertaking and designing the SNA list of respondents brought home certain messages about which groups were known to the staff of the CSPs and which were not.

The findings provided some clear evidence of the networking which was going on in the system (though not necessarily providing information on the partnership activities undertaken).

The identification of hubs and gatekeepers in particular was useful in highlighting individuals in one's own or other organisations who were critical to networking (with for example consequences for aspects of succession planning).

The highlighting of strong channels of intercommunication and weak or non-existent channels confirmed where priorities might be adopted to enhance interaction in the future.

Identification of poor channels of communication allowed investigation of the reasons for such an outcome. Interaction between the sports sector in general and the health sector was for example weak and was seen by participants as being the product of the two sectors having different measures of success / targets; and of the differing.

Limitations included:

Criticisms of the ambiguity of some of the questions adopted, and the terms adopted for their explanation;

Lack of flexibility in the visual display of the results. Lack of clarity in the written explanation of the findings generated by the computer software.

The danger of developing a 'blaming culture' where individuals felt implicitly or explicitly to be subject to criticism because they were less well connected than the norm. There are no benchmarks for the level of interaction between constituencies and some constituencies are more difficult to interact with than some others.

The feedback to the various constituencies was insufficiently detailed, and the effort to provide such feedback had been underestimated. This limited the motivation of some parties who had not gained to participate in a follow up survey.

Regularity of contact was identified by the survey rather than quality of interaction.

Value for money in terms of the cost of securing this information was also an issue for the two CSPs.

DISCUSSION

While the results of the survey indicated difficulties which occurred at the **operational level** in terms of employing this type of analytic tool to inform management, there were in addition issues of a more strategic kind in terms of the **organisational** and **political** theoretical assumptions underpinning the use of the SNA tool. In terms of organisational theory-related assumptions, it is clear from the feedback provided to the two CSPs that 'flat' organisational networks and non-hierarchical organisational structures are implicitly regarded as inevitably superior to more traditional organisational structures. Such conclusions run counter to traditional contingency theory and the more developed configurational approaches based on Mintzberg's work. In the political context also the partnership approach which emphasises policy experimentation, localism / decentralisation and differentiation as policy traits, also seems to run counter to the tendencies towards centrally derived goals and the managerialisation of policy processes (Newman, 2001), as evidenced in the approach outlined in Game Plan (Department of Culture Media and Sport, 2002)

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