THE ENGLISH PUBLIC SECTOR FOR SPORT: THE SYSTEMIC CASE FOR COMPLEX-PLURALISM

Gary Evans, University of Southampton, UK, gea@soton.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

Since 1997, the English public sector for sport has gone through constant restructuring and reorganising in an endeavour to create a new sporting system. The catalyst for this was Game Plan (DCMS, 2003) followed by policy documents such as The National Framework for Sport (Sport England, 2004), and The County Sport Partnerships (Sport England, 2005). A key policy objective of these documents is that sporting opportunities should be in partnership with a range of private and voluntary organisations. In addition, contribute to policy areas such as health, lifelong learning, and safer communities, all crucial government's cross-cutting agenda. Lord Carter's (2005) review re-emphasized this offering several recommendations to enhance the system performance such as a single system for community sport, and better performance management. However, with such multiple partnership working, greater external focus for service provision and the cross-cutting agenda, how will the new planning and performance management frameworks cope with the systemic challenges? This research set out to discover the actual systemic issues and how organisations in the public sector are attempting to deal with them.

METHODS

Data for this paper was collected from ten semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule. The participants were purposively selected from the public sport and recreation sector of the Southwest region. All were senior sport and recreation professionals with significant responsibility for sport and recreation in their organisation. The Southwest was selected to align with the nearest Regional Development Agency (RDA), given the regionalization of sport in England. The public sector was selected in recognition that the public sector is currently the main deliverer of sporting opportunities at the foundation, re/introduction and participation levels of the Sport Development Continuum (Hylton et al, 2001).

The design of the interview schedule was crucial to ensure participants were not restricted and felt they had opportunity to clarify any question before responding to it. The aim was to promote open free discussion to allow systemic issues to emerge naturally out of the conversation on each question (Patton, 2002). The interview schedule was based on the fundamental systemic concepts of recursion, variety, control and communication (Beer, 1979), and Checkland's (1981) emergence, hierarchy, control and boundary. Beer and Checkland considered these vital to the performance and purposefulness of a system. Interview transcripts were analyzed using an inductive content analysis procedure, which was initiated using Microsoft EXCEL before loading into the qualitative software programme MAXqda. MAXqda collated themes with similar verbs to reveal sub-codes, sub-codes eventually revealed the overarching codes. Finally, to order the overarching codes systemically, Castle's (1999) circumstantial forces, values and viewpoints, activities and means (CVAM) processes were used. Castle believes these are essential for correlating systemic factors to elicit the performance and purposefulness of a system.

RESULTS

Table 1 positions each overarching code uncovered with this research into a CVAM process. Correlation reveals twenty five (25) sub-codes as circumstantial forces, sixty one (61) as values and viewpoints, fifty six (56) as activities, and nineteen (19) as means, majority of which were negative correlations.

Table 1. The overarching codes and the CVAM processes

Circumstantial forces	Values & viewpoints	Activities	Means
Organizational interpretation of the UK policy frameworks	Influence of political leadership	Dynamics of sport networks and partnerships	Constraints of organizational capacity and capability
Local tensions when advocating planning for sport	Organizational reasons for service dedifferentiation	Effectiveness of performance measurement and review	
Challenges to the traditional system boundary	Rise of an interpretive approach to planning		

Correlation does indicate a value and viewpoint domination, which is a revelation because either a circumstantial force or means domination was anticipated. However, value and viewpoint domination is indicative of systemic problems and potentially of conflict (Castle, 1999). Again, it represents mainly negative correlations which participant organizations are trying to correct in order to achieve a positive correlation and a more purposeful system. Crucially, the data reveals a switch in emphasis. For participant organizations with a focused department for sport, values and viewpoints dominated so as to accommodate external systemic pressures. For participant organizations without a focused department for sport, activities dominated so as to accommodate internal systemic pressures. However, each underlines the same problem which is a process of connectivity needed to achieve a positive correlation and a more purposeful system. This really sets the challenge for new performance frameworks. Not only must they measure performance, they must also promote continuous improvement, change and connectivity in contexts where potential conflict may exist.

DISCUSSION

The English policy frameworks for sport are formal circumstantial forces impacting on participant organisations. Organisations are interpreting these in a great variety of ways, although delivering on them is fraught with complexity. The demand to work in partnership with many organisations is challenging the traditional sport system's boundary and its planning and performance management processes. The new boundary demands connecting many systems and sub-systems organisations are struggling with. This is compounded by uncertainty over the political system's view of sport. The reasons for service differentiation seems influenced more by secondary stakeholders than by those delivering the service. This suggests pluralism and unresolved issues of power with planning characterised by a thematic approach. It is no longer planning for sport's sake, more for what sport can contribute to other extrinsic objectives. The whole partnership process appears driven by need rather than desire.

An interpretive approach to strategy creation, synthesis and deployment was detected in the data. It has evolved because organisations wish to challenge convention, or they are simply unhappy with the appropriateness of a model's guidance to direct their planning processes. At the local level tensions were evident as many viewpoints must be reconciled when advocating and planning for sport. This makes complexity and how organisations reconcile it. A concern is the processes used by organisations to validate their strategy choices. It is either missing, or too simplistic to be of any real value. The effectiveness of performance measurement and review is also questioned. It is not developed, and no participant claimed to be measuring outcomes of service provision. A further concern is that organisations are operating at 'full' capacity. It appears there is little resource left to

deal with other demands. It is clear that unless additional resources can be found through efficiency savings, some organisations will struggle to continue to offer the same level of service delivery. The major implication of these systemic issues and those contained in the data is that the context for sport in the English public sector is complex-pluralist (Flood & Jackson, 1991). It is complex because large numbers of elements interact. It is pluralist because even though there is a basic compatibility of interests, values and beliefs diverge to some extent. This makes the context systemically challenging for the introduction of any new planning and performance management frameworks. The impacts of these challenges are to be explored in the next phase of this research. In addition, impacts of CPA - The Harder Test (Audit Commission, 2006) which indicates how whole service provision will be measured from 2006 onwards, and The Delivery System for Sport England (Sport England, 2007) which indicates how the community sport networks are to be connected.

REFERENCES

Audit Commission (2006) CPA – The Harder Test: Scores and analysis of performance in single tier and county councils 2006. London: Audit Commission.

Beer, S. (1979) The Heart of Enterprise. Chichester: Wiley.

Castle, J. A. (1999) The Development of a New Methodology and Virtual Paradigm for Operations Strategy, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Canterbury.

Checkland, P. B. (1981) Systems thinking systems practice. Chichester: Wiley. Department of Culture, Media and Sport (2003), Game Plan: Government's Objectives for Sport and Physical Activity. London: DCMS.

Flood, R. L. and Jackson, M. C. (1991) Creative Problem Solving: Total Systems Intervention. Chichester: Wiley

Hylton, K. Bramham, P. Jackson, D. and Nesti, M. (2001) Sports Development: Policy, Process and Practice. London: Routledge.

Lord P. Carter (2005) Review of national sport effort and resources. London: DCMS.

Patton, M. Q. (2002) Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods. 3rd edn. London: Sage Publications.

Sport England (2007) Sport England Policy Statement: The Delivery System for Sport in England. London: Sport England.

Sport England (2005) County Sport Partnerships. London: Sport England.

Sport England (2004) The Framework for Sport in England, Making England an Active and Successful Sporting Nation: A Vision for 2020. London: Sport England.