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Delivering sports policy through local governance and partnership: New labour and the English county sports partnerships

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Background

This paper addresses the attempt by New Labour to develop new forms of governance in local sports policy in England. Specifically the paper focuses on the impact of the introduction of County Sports Partnerships (CSPs) in 2002 as a vehicle for delivering a partnership and governance based approach. The introduction of governance approaches to policy delivery with partnerships which seek to go beyond organisational boundaries to network-based decision-making and resourcing systems is more than simply an English or sport related phenomenon but represents a transnational phenomenon (Moore and Hartley, 2008).

There are three related literatures which are highlighted as directly informing New Labour's broad policy goals in relation to local governance in the context of its attempts to define a new policy path or Third Way. These are the literature on governance itself; on networks generally, and policy networks in particular; and on social capital.

Methods

The empirical focus on the paper is analysis of two case study CSPs and is conducted in two stages. The first stage involves analysis of the results of a social network analysis undertaken by a commercial service provider in Leicester-Shire & Rutland (LSR), and in Lincolnshire (Lincs) CSPs. This stage involves calculation and analysis of the density of interaction between members of stakeholder organisations (n=227 (LSR), 225 (Lincs); response rates of 72.9% and 74% respectively). The SNA considers five dimensions or types of interaction (information about work, decision-making, expert advice, innovation, and social discussion). The stakeholders are drawn from four related / overlapping policy constituencies (sport, education, local government, health), and from the the public, private and third sectors.

The second stage involves analysis of interview data from 98 interviews with members of all four constituencies reflecting on the reasons for the pattern of interactions which emerge from the social network analysis.

Results

The pattern between stakeholder organisations and policy constituencies which emerges in the social network analysis is one which is broadly similar in both CSPs. Density is greater in the case of LRS, though this may be explained to some degree by the wider geographical spread of Lincs with a concomitant lesser opportunity for face-to-face interaction.

Given its role, the CSP organisation itself is unsurprisingly the most strongly engaged stakeholder in interaction around sport and physical activity issues, followed by national and regional government bodies of sport, local government, educational bodies and partnerships, voluntary sector sports organisations and the health sector. The one stakeholder which represented a major difference between the two counties was that of Partnership Development Managers employed at School Sports Colleges where the density of social network links was much higher in the case of LSR CSP.

The second stage interviews provided respondents' insights into why the relative pattern of densities had developed and how they might change with the maturing of the CSP system. Headline findings include the following:

(a) Health Sector. Although the value of physical activity in contributing to physical and mental health is widely recognised, the medical profession is dominated by a clinical culture, but greater emphasis seems to be evident when staff operating in this area comes from a public health rather than a classical medical background.

(b) Local Government. There was evidence of a developing shift from sports development to community development as the primary concern of LGs, and of staffing growth in some LGs. This growth was based on a non-sport agenda (e.g. exercise and even non physical activity health related programmes such as posts promoting healthy eating). There was also evidence of sport being 'sold' to partners / politicians to achieve non-sporting policy goals (joined up policy).

(c) Education / Partnership Development Managers. In Lincs 'insularity' was reported as high among PDMs and this was evident in a lack of engagement with other sectors. This manifested itself in a lack of trust for some respondents, which was described by some as the result of an over-emphasis on physical education targets / KPIs (even though the limitations of these targets as tools were acknowledged). By contrast in the other CSP there was what was described as a long-standing culture of cooperation which preceded the introduction of CSPs.

(d) National / Regional Governing Bodies Size matters and explains much of the variance within this group. Larger NGBs can resource a local presence and therefore greater interaction with other stakeholders, smaller NGBs struggle to meet local demands. There is a lack of inter-NGB interaction – and thus cross sector lessons may not be being learned and disseminated. NGBs tend to work within their own strategic plans. Smaller NGBs in particular could gain from

cooperative working in programmes such as coach training in the development of generic coaching skills.

Conclusion/Application to practice

Conclusions explore the implications for theory in terms of governance, policy networks and social / professional capital, and for the delivery of this form of local governance.