
Sport Clubs in England, research questions across Europe

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Abstract

Using a review of recent sports clubs surveys (SARA, 2013; 2011) in England and secondary analysis of the last four waves of the Active People survey (Nichols and Taylor, forthcoming) this paper raises questions of how clubs will respond to the following changes:

- a trend towards informal sports participation
- a trend towards episodic volunteering, which is time limited
- the promotion and adoption of more 'professional' management practices
- reduced support from local and national government, which may represent an opportunity to reassert clubs' independence
- a changing relationship between clubs and their representative governing bodies, who are obliged to promote government policies as a consequence of dependence on central government funding.

The purpose of the paper is to generate discussion over the extent to which these changes are common across Europe (GHK, 2010). A theoretical context is the changing relationship between the voluntary, public and private sectors of provision (Rochester, 2013). Civil society has been defined as distinctly different from the state and autonomous from it (Shils, 2003). When they were formed English sports clubs were in a tradition of the type of voluntary action advocated by Beveridge as initiated by citizens for the public purpose of helping fellow citizens (Beveridge, 1948: 8). The state is reducing its direct provision as public spending is being cut so one might expect the voluntary sector to become more important. At the same time, the remaining public funding of national governing bodies of sport and of sport clubs is conditional on a contribution to government policies. These include policies to grow sports participation but also to promote the adoption of 'professional' management practices common to the private sector. A move to a more individual rather than collective society (Putnam, 2002) is reflected in a growth in episodic volunteering (Macduff, 2005) and in informal sports participation out of the traditional club structure, rather than traditional team sport (Sport England, 2014). Thus both volunteering and leisure are changing to reflect a more individualistic society (Nichols, et al 2013).

Will these changes mean that the voluntary sector in sports provision declines in importance as it becomes less relevant to increasingly fragmented and individualistic lifestyles or will it become more important as a provider of affordable opportunities? Will reduced state support allow the voluntary sector to reassert its independence or will increasing competition for fewer state resources oblige the voluntary sector to increasingly adopt the policies associated with state funding?

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