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Implementing community sport policy: understanding the variety of voluntary club types and their attitudes to policy

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The Olympic Legacy Plan has been a governmental concern prior to the London 2012 Games, particularly, the aspiration to use the event to inspire participation in sport. However, scant attention has been directed towards the voluntary sector and its role as a delivery agent of the legacy aspirations. New policies for community sport set out a clear focus on using national governing bodies and voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) to deliver growth in adult sports participation and to reduce the proportion of participants dropping out of sport by the age of 25.

How far voluntary organizations are aware of and comply with top-down approaches to policy implementation is debatable, particularly when considering the origins and motives of voluntary clubs, their heterogeneous characteristics and their general indifference towards national sport-related policy. This relationship forms the basis of this enquiry. It draws from implementation theory and seeks to explore how far VSCs are aware of policy goals and to understand club management practices and their likely impact on the role of the VSC in delivering community sport policy goals. The findings identify a variety of management practices that can be broadly categorized into three 'cluster types'. Each VSC cluster has a distinct set of aims, support needs and policy outputs. This article concludes by suggesting that more work is required in segmenting club types to identify their diverse support needs and the roles that they may be able to play in increasing participation and reducing the proportion of young people dropping out of sport.

Keywords: sport policy; voluntary sports clubs; implementation; Olympic legacy

Introduction

At its core, this article is concerned with the relationship between national, highly professionalized organizations who make policy (Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Sport England and national governing bodies (NGBs)) and the local, relatively informal sport-related organizations run by volunteers who, at some distance, are expected to implement it (see Figure 1). Specifically, it will evaluate the role of sports clubs in delivering national community sport policy, particularly in relation to increasing participation in sport and reducing the proportion of young people dropping out of sport. We seek to research this vexed issue by (i) categorizing voluntary sports club (VSC) types based on their typical management practices and (ii) revealing the perceptions of VSC volunteers towards national sport policy and the expectation of VSCs as policy implementers.

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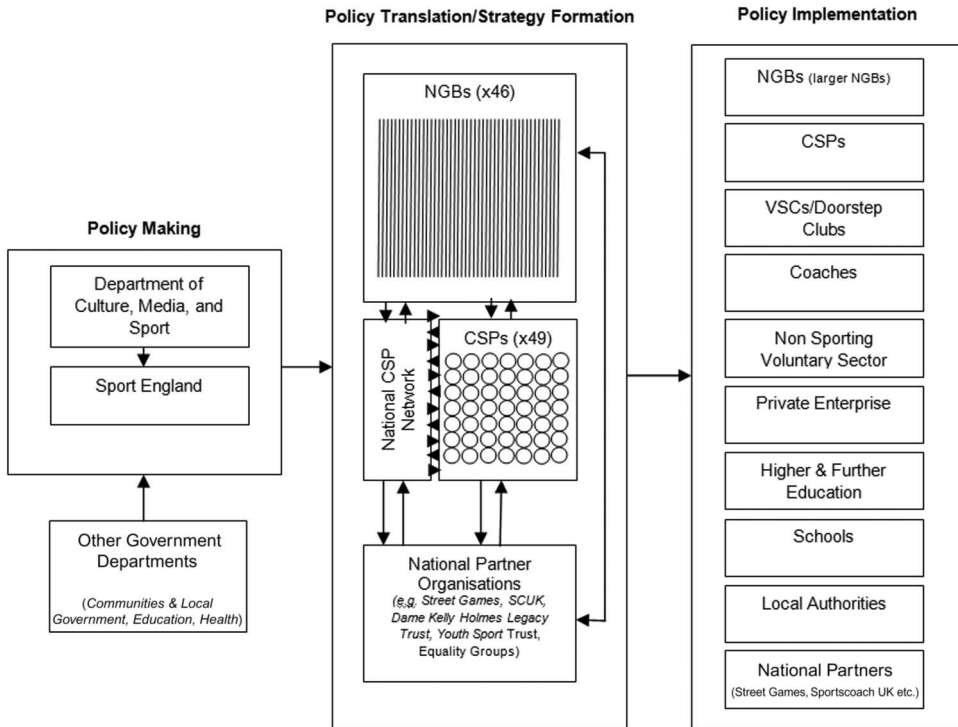


Figure 1. Community Sport in England: the key stakeholders in policy making, translation and implementation.

Source: Harris (forthcoming).

By analysing the changing relationship between governments (central and local) and the voluntary sector, Kendall (2000, 2003) argued that a more purposive stance from government towards the voluntary sector was observable, something he referred to as the ‘mainstreaming’ of the voluntary sector. Clear evidence of this view of volunteers as significant contributors to the services of the state can be seen in the ideological pillars of the Big Society, as detailed below. Similar ideals are presented in a range of sport-related strategies and plans, including the 2012 Legacy Plan (DCMS 2008), *Creating a Sporting Habit for Life* (DCMS 2012) and the national strategy for community sport 2012–2017 (Sport England 2012).

The overarching vision for sport is that ‘sport becomes a habit for life for more people’ (DCMS 2012, p. 3, Sport England 2012, p. 1). NGBs remain the driving force of the strategy, which increases pressure on VSCs given that few NGBs are capable of extending their reach to the local level (Harris *et al.* 2009). In addition, the DCMS strategy explicitly mentioned the role of sports clubs in ‘developing the broadest possible offer to young people’ and ‘improving links between schools and clubs ... making it easier for young people to continue playing sport once they leave education’ (DCMS 2012, p. 4).

Amid attempts to modernize the sector, how far VSCs will comply with the policy aspirations of the state remains a point of debate (Lewis 2005). Given the well-documented heterogeneity of VSCs, the diversity of VSCs’ aims, management practices and support needs, many clubs are ill-equipped to respond to the demands of policy delivery (Taylor *et al.* 2003, Taylor *et al.* 2007, Nichols and James 2008, Adams and Deane 2009, Harris *et al.*

2009). Moreover, a drive to promote greater formality of VSCs to achieve policy goals is unlikely to align with the deep-seated beliefs, values or motives of many club volunteers (Nichols and James 2008). British volunteers primarily engage with their clubs for love of their sport and to ‘give something back’ (Allison 2001b), rather than any sense of duty or obligation to deliver policies on behalf of the state. This has even been found to be true in situations where VSCs receive lottery sport fund grants (Garrett 2004).

VSCs and policy implementation

The state-led notion of VSCs as policy implementers is not entirely new. Evidence of the importance of voluntary organizations, and specifically VSCs, in delivering national policy can be traced back to *A Sporting Future for All* (DCMS 2000) and *Game Plan* (DCMS 2002). These strategies confirmed the salience of sport policy in New Labour’s previous social investment strategies of equality (Lister 1998), inclusion, community cohesion (Freeden 1999, Collins and Kay 2003) and education (Green 2007). These policy commitments were embodied in the idea of active citizenship, where government seeks to ‘enhance the capacities of individuals and communities to enable them to take greater responsibility for their own actions and future welfare’ (Green 2006, p. 225). Underpinning these social investment strategies was the view that the voluntary sector, and specifically VSCs and volunteers, could act as a suitable vehicle to promote responsible, active citizenship (Green 2006). Despite not being an explicit feature of the current strategy for community sport, there is a clear continuation of the principle, and an assumption that they will naturally want to contribute to more people playing sport.

The Conservative Party has been quick to champion ‘Big Society’ ideals in an attempt to replace the public sector. It was originally envisioned to tap into the potential of the voluntary sector to promote social benefits (Conservative Party 2010). Decentralization would empower communities to achieve internal social change. Importantly, the concept embodied the Liberal Democrats’ long-standing values of community action and shifting political power from central government to local communities (Alcock 2010) as well as the Conservatives’ manifesto commitment to collective community action through ‘redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local’ (Conservative Party 2010). The Big Society concept was unveiled in July 2010, with the Prime Minister clearly stating his desire to empower communities in the ‘biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street’ (Cameron 2010). Ostensibly, the Big Society is about empowering communities by passing decision-making powers to local groups; opening up public services to give charities, social enterprises and private companies the opportunity to offer high-quality services; and promoting social action by encouraging individuals to be proactive in local communities (Cabinet Office 2011). Alongside local communities and individuals, government sees the voluntary sector as essential to producing the Big Society, recognizing the potential of voluntary organizations to ‘mobilize and support people’ and ‘play an even more influential role in shaping a stronger sense of society and improving peoples’ lives’ (Cabinet Office 2011, p. 3). In a sporting context, it is reasonable to assume that VSCs are typical ‘community groups’ expected to play their part in mobilizing, supporting, and delivering sport-related public services.

Whilst for some people involved in sport, elements of this Big Society rhetoric may sound appealing, the reality appears problematic. First, there is the dichotomy already discussed, that is the expectation of professional service delivery by volunteers who are primarily motivated by love of their sport. Second, the sheer range and diversity of VSCs requires further, detailed analysis to understand which may be prepared to do what and

which require what support. Third, alongside Big Society idealism is the reality of continual austerity measures. It is possible that local sports development, which in many areas has provided support for VSCs (Harris forthcoming, King forthcoming), will be reduced in budget, staff or abolished, and that local grant opportunities available to voluntary sector organizations such as sports clubs will be reduced (Harris forthcoming).

Against this backdrop, a key question is how far VSCs are able to respond to such expectations. A look at the midterm *Active People 5* results (Sport England 2011a) suggested that the system is struggling with the ambitious target of 1 million more participants (see Table 1). Despite significant funding, some sports appeared to have fewer participants in 2010 than they did in the baseline year of 2008. The overall change in participation at the end of October 2010 was more than 73,300, leaving a shortfall of 926,700 participants and 2 years in which to offset this. Indeed, the Secretary of State has suggested that the 1 million target will be revised (Gibson 2011). The DCMS and Sport England have warned NGBs with substantial shortfalls to exert themselves (Helm 2010)

Table 1. Actual versus target participation rates by sport (2008–2012).

(000 people)	Baseline 2008	Target 2012	Difference base-target	Oct 2011 Actual	Difference baseline base-actual
Athletics	1612	1750	-138	1899	+287
Table Tennis	76	92	+17	135	+59
Boxing	107	132	+25	150	+43
Mountaineering	86	104	+18	110	+24
Netball	119	139	+20	132	+13
Cricket	205	277	+72	216	+11
Taekwondo	24	Unknown		27	+3
Canoeing	44	Unknown		47	+3
Baseball and Softball	7	11	+4	7	-
Fencing	15	Unknown		14	-1
Cycling	1767	1892	+125	1761	-6
Judo	19	Unknown		12	-7
Rounders	26	40	-13	18	-8
Squash and racketball	294	349	-55	285	-9
Gymnastics	61	94	-33	48	-13
Snowsport	121	128	-7	107	-14
Rowing	55	65	-10	40	-15
Volleyball	48	58	-10	32	-17
Hockey	100	Unknown		79	-21
Badminton	536	606	-70	510	-25
Football	2145	2295	-150	2117	-28
Equestrian	342	Unknown		313	-29
Rugby League	82	140	-58	51	-31
Basketball	186	224	38	152	-35
Sailing	90	111	-21	52	-38
Weightlifting	118	Unknown		73	-45
Rugby Union	230	372	141	179	-51
Bowls	278	Unknown		220	-58
Tennis	488	637	-150	376	-112
Golf	948	1023	75	833	-115
Swimming	3244	3514	-270	2809	-435

Source: Sport England *Active People 5* Dec 2011.

and have cut the grants awarded to basketball, rugby union, rugby league and golf for poor performance against the original agreed participation targets (Sport England 2011b).

Implementation theory

The application of implementation theory to the sport policy process has been notable by its absence (O’Gorman 2011). This is problematic, as the various theoretical propositions relating to implementation provide clearer insight and understanding of its dynamics and processes, the impact on outcomes and, thus, an assessment of the relative successes or failures of implementation (Hill and Hupe 2009). Whilst much research aims to review and evaluate programmes and policies and report ‘what happened’, implementation theory is more concerned with exploring causality and ‘the reasons why it happened’ (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973).

In the past, political scientists tended to view policy implementation as a relatively straightforward process whereby government decisions were implemented by service providers (Birkland 2005). This view evolved in the 1970s, mainly as a result of empirical work by the ‘founding fathers’ of Implementation Theory, Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky. Their critical research recognized the complexity of implementation, specifically the direct influence and more subtle shaping by numerous variables, and how far there is clear communication and cooperation between different parts of the delivery chain (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). They pointed to policy goals as often being modified, elaborated or even negated, particularly in long or complex chains of command.

It is clear that there are differing perspectives on how implementation occurs in practice, between those who view policy implementation as a top-down process and those who view it primarily as the result of bottom-up relations. Pressman and Wildavsky defined it as the ‘ability to forge subsequent links in the causal chain so as to obtain the desired results’ (1973, p. xv). This presupposes a rational top-down chain of command, whereby governments and others issue policy, and street-level workers (e.g. clubs, schools, coaches and private enterprises) implement. In more recent top-down approaches, implementation was seen as ‘the carrying out of a policy decision’, where this ‘identifies the problem(s) to be addressed, stipulates the objective(s) to be pursued, and in a variety of ways, structures the implementation process’ (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983, pp. 20–21). Bottom-up theorists presented different perspectives. For example, Lipsky argued that ‘the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out’ (1980, p. xii). It is also important to look to Hjern (1982), who demonstrated that effective policy implementation depends on the interactions of several organizations, particularly those at the front-line primarily ‘formed through processes of consensual self-selection’ (Hjern and Porter 1981, p. 220). Hjern argued that effective policy implementation is trapped by a tradition of seeing it as a stable and sequential relationship between politics and administration (Hjern 1982). He fundamentally challenged the notion of a single-authority, top-down approach to political organization (Hill and Hupe 2009), pointing to the need for greater clarity about the relationship between politics and administration.

Whilst detailed analysis of the implementation literature is beyond the scope of this article, it demands some considerations of the key tenets and limitations of the two perspectives. From the view of the top-down theorist, effective implementation is concerned with how far the actions of implementing officials and target groups coincide with the goals in the initial policy decision. It is believed that grass-roots agents will cooperate with these decisions (Hill and Hupe 2009) based on the idea that top-down political and legal mechanisms will ensure greater effectiveness by affecting the preferences and

constraining the behaviour of implementers (Sabatier 1986). As Kay (1996) previously argued, sport policy is a good example of top-down policy. The authors contend this remains the case with the current (2012–2017) community sport policy, where the main phases are as given below:

- (1) National agencies (i.e. DCMS and Sport England) debate and agree the policy objective;
- (2) National sport-specific associations (i.e. NGBs) each sets out plans stating how they will deliver these objectives and the resources required to do so;
- (3) Sport England reviews the NGBs' plan and makes grant award, primarily sourced from the Lottery Sports Fund;
- (4) NGBs work with other partners (County Sports Partnerships (CSPs), clubs and others) to deliver aspects of the plan; and
- (5) Sport England evaluates progress against agreed targets and takes remedial action as necessary.

Advocates of the top-down perspective point to factors they argue result in successful implementation, including constructing policies with clearly defined goals (van Meter and van Horn 1975), having a single authority responsible for the policy (Birkland 2005), placing responsibility for implementation on agencies sympathetic to the policy's objectives (van Meter and van Horn 1975, Sabatier 1986), and the presence of an 'implementation chain' which operates linearly (Birkland 2005). However, this approach presupposes an authoritative, hierarchical relationship to achieve success, but fails to take adequate account of the norms, behaviour, values and attitudes of implementing agents (Lipsky 1980, Barrett and Fudge 1981, Hjern and Hull 1982).

Local, grass-roots organizations argue they have greater expertise and practical knowledge of policy problems and as such are better placed to design policy (Lipsky 1980). Further, top-down approaches are heavily criticized for ignoring the potential for service deliverers to subvert or modify the original policy decision. For example, Garrett's (2004) study of VSCs receiving sports Lottery funding found them to resist the demands of sport policies as a result of their independent nature and the increased expectation and interferences current policy objectives place on them. For Skille (2008), VSCs' willingness and ultimate decision regarding policy implementation are influenced by local contexts. The imposed policy goals of others may therefore be rejected if agents' interpretation of them does not correspond to their aims (van Meter and van Horn 1975, Skille 2008).

These criticisms of the traditional top-down approaches led to the creation of 'bottom-up' models where policy formulation is undertaken in consultation with service deliverers (Lipsky 1980, Hjern and Porter 1981, Hjern and Hull 1982). Proponents of this approach argue this produces a more realistic mode of operation for implementing agents, since their decisions and routines established to cope with the increased burden of policy delivery essentially become the policies delivered (Lipsky 1980). In addition, deLeon and deLeon (2002) argued that service deliverers may be more compliant implementers if they are involved in the initial policy decision. Bottom-up scholars adopted their own mode of implementation based on these critiques of top-down approaches and ideas of participatory democracy (see also Matland 1995). However, the bottom-up approach assumes the success or failure of policy depends on the commitment, willingness, and ability of grass roots organizations involved in implementation (Berman 1978). Lipsky (1980, p xiii) believed that to manage the various pressures and obligations placed on them, these 'street-level

bureaucrats' adjust their working arrangements to 'salvage service and decision-making values within the limits imposed upon them by the structure of work'.

Because the state can only indirectly monitor implementation at the micro-level, 'there is a wide variation in how the same national policy is implemented' (Matland 1995, p. 148). This is pertinent to VSCs in England, where wide variations exist in organizational structures and cultures (Taylor 2004, Taylor *et al.* 2007, Nichols and James 2008), influencing how VSCs understand, perceive and implement policy objectives (Lipsky 1980). Disregarding such fundamentally important local contexts is likely to result in policy failure (Lipsky 1980, Palumbo *et al.* 1984).

More recently, political scientists have tended to rely on a more holistic model of policy analysis which seeks to analyse numerous variables in the entire policy process, not just the implementation phase (Hill and Hupe 2009). This approach pulls from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives (see Hill and Hupe 2009 or Matland 1995 for a detailed review). Matland (1995), however, argued that this offered little in the way of new or additional insight.

For this study, we selected an earlier approach to implementation presented by van Meter and van Horn (1975). Whilst we do not align ourselves with the top-down approach to policy implementation, we believe it is vital to select a model that analyses highly relevant variables and their interrelationships. More importantly, we argue for selecting a model which reflects the reality of the top-down community sport policy process, whilst also considering the attitudes and perspectives of grass-roots implementers, issues which are crucial to this research.

van Meter and van Horn's model of implementation

van Meter and van Horn (1975) build on Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) pioneering insights into implementation to provide a systematic model of the implementation process (see Figure 2). Directed by three strands of literature (on organizational theory, public policy impact and intergovernmental relations), they suggested that the degree of participatory consensus and the extent of change initiated by the policy must be taken into account if successful implementation is to be achieved. They argued that successful implementation is likely only when marginal policy change is required, and when consensus amongst policy implementers is high.

Six variables are seen as key to the policy outcome, beginning with the *initial policy objectives and allocation of resources*, then filtering hierarchically through *inter-organizational communications, characteristics of implementing agencies and current economic and political conditions* and concluding with the *disposition of implementing agents* (van Meter and van Horn 1975, p 482).

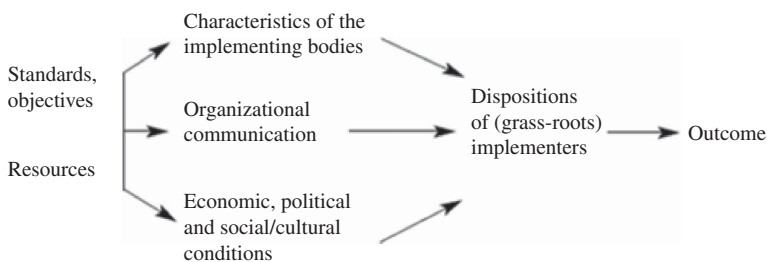


Figure 2. The policy implementation process.

Source: van Meter and van Horn (1975).

The authors also argue that implementation is more likely to be undermined if policy objectives do not accord with the implementers' personal values, sense of self-interest and/or extra-organizational loyalties, or if implementation is likely to alter features of the organization or procedures that implementers like. Thus, we contend that the model has analytic value in the community sport policy process insofar as it provides an analysis of both top-down mechanisms and the dispositions of grass-roots implementers in the English sport policy system, thereby providing a richer understanding of the opportunities and challenges in policy implementation.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-method approach guided by a critical realist paradigm in which a multi-layered view of social reality was structured into three domains: the empirical, the actual and the real (Bhaskar 1989, 1998). Realists maintain that events and discourses occurring in the social world can be understood only by testing theories against the reality of the natural order. However, structures that influence events can only be understood through combining empirical investigation and theory construction, aiding a deeper understanding of the causal mechanisms that structure social action (McEvoy and Richards 2006).

The fieldwork was conducted in a second-tier suburban local authority. A mixed-method design was developed, using quantitative methods to identify statistical associations in the management practices of VSCs, followed by qualitative enquiries to illuminate volunteers' perceptions of and behaviours towards sport policy. The quantitative phase of the research measured the formality of clubs based on organizational structure, management practices and club size. This required developing a quantitative measure of club formality, consisting of 31 questions split between six domains (see Appendix 1). The themes selected for the measure were informed by previous research, which highlighted the key determinants of formal VSC structures, including Clubmark accreditation, improved school-club links, club size, development plans and improved coaching structures (see Nichols and James 2008, Harris *et al.* 2009). Only closed questions with a yes/no response were used. This enabled a simple coding of responses – one point was awarded for yes responses (indicating greater formality) and zero points for a no response. Results were summed on a scale of 1–31 to calculate a formality score of VSC management; the higher the score, the greater the level of formality.

The questionnaire was scrutinized by a panel of eight academics who had published in the area of voluntary sport and industry representatives working in a voluntary sports environment. Their feedback was used to clarify and improve the questions. In addition, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with eight clubs, and the results were discussed to identify invalid questions or potential ambiguities. The questionnaire was distributed by post and email to all VSCs identified via the Borough Council's Directory of Sports Clubs ($n = 99$), a directory that took a number of years to develop and includes most, if not all, clubs in the Borough. VSCs that did not respond to the questionnaire within 2 weeks were contacted by telephone to raise the response rate and reduce the potential for response bias. This resulted in a 49% response rate (45 completed questionnaires), which is considered respectable for postal questionnaire studies (Denscombe 2007).

After responses were summed, data were interrogated via a cluster analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to identify different groupings of club types. This is an exploratory tool used to organize data into homogenous groups based on responses or scores across a number of variables (Ball and Best 2007). It creates clusters presented in the form of a dendrogram by maximizing the similarity of cases inside each

cluster whilst maximizing the differences between cases from dissimilar clusters (Everitt *et al.* 2001). To confirm the number of clusters, a Kruskal–Wallis non-parametric test was subsequently used to determine whether differences between mean formality scores were statistically significant. Clusters were then compared using a series of Mann–Whitney tests to determine where the differences across variables lay between cluster groups.

The qualitative phase of the research involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Participants from the initial questionnaire phase of the study were selected on the basis of sport played, club formality and representation in local area. Of the 45 available contacts who completed the questionnaire, 25 agreed to take part in an interview (a response rate of 55%), 9 declined and 11 were unreachable.

Interviews were conducted with either a club chairperson or head coach, positions that exist in most sports clubs. Interviews comprised a thematic outline that encouraged an expression of ideas and experiences on VSCs' roles in implementing sports policy, including an identification of club aims and objectives, recent club development work, awareness and perceptions of current sport policy and current pressures or challenges facing VSCs (topics previously identified as influential by Harris 2008).

All research materials, including interview transcripts and reflective notes, were collated and analysed using open and axial coding techniques. Initially, the researcher used an open-coded protocol and categorized the transcripts manually into components that were noteworthy or had potential significance to the research objective. Following this, transcripts were interpreted a second time through an axial coding technique that rearranged data into further categories and established relationships between them (Bryman 2008). Finally, a detailed selective coding framework was used to establish the causes and main concepts within each core category.

Findings

Quantitative findings: identifying types of VSCs

The purpose of the quantitative phase of the research was to (i) assess the different management practices of VSCs and (ii) statistically test the appropriateness of informal and formal categories of club management. In addition to collecting data relating to management practices, year of establishment, club membership and number of volunteers were also collected.

Forty-five clubs responded, representing 17 sports, with football clubs accounting for the highest proportion of club respondents (18%), followed by badminton (16%), cricket, golf and swimming (all 8%) and bowls and tennis (both 6%). Lower percentages of rugby, martial arts, table tennis, athletics and hockey clubs responded. Clubs were drawn from both rural and urban parts of the District.

The data were tested using a hierarchical cluster analysis technique. The analysis provided a three-cluster solution based on management practices reflecting what Taylor *et al.* (2003) referred to as formal and informal club types, together with a middle cluster referred to here as semi-formal. The validity of the three-cluster solution was strongly supported by a non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test that found a significant difference between each of the three clusters ($p = 0.01$). Informal clubs were characterized as having few or no formal management practices, whilst semi-formal clubs reported some formalized management practices, most commonly development plans and Clubmark accreditation. Formal clubs reported a higher number of formalized management practices, including development plans, written club policies, job descriptions for volunteer positions, Clubmark accreditation, external partnerships and an active engagement and

Table 2. Size and formalization scores of VSCs by sports.

	Informal (<i>n</i> = 17)	Semi-formal (<i>n</i> = 15)	Formal (<i>n</i> = 13)
Sport	Angling (<i>n</i> = 1)	Badminton (<i>n</i> = 1)	Cricket (<i>n</i> = 3)
	Athletics (<i>n</i> = 1)	Bowls (<i>n</i> = 3)	Football (<i>n</i> = 4)
	Badminton (<i>n</i> = 7)	Cricket (<i>n</i> = 1)	Golf (<i>n</i> = 1)
	Football (<i>n</i> = 1)	Football (<i>n</i> = 4)	Hockey (<i>n</i> = 1)
	Gymnastics (<i>n</i> = 1)	Golf (<i>n</i> = 3)	Rugby (<i>n</i> = 1)
	Hockey (<i>n</i> = 1)	Sub Aqua (<i>n</i> = 1)	Swimming (<i>n</i> = 2)
	Swimming (<i>n</i> = 2)	Rugby (<i>n</i> = 1)	Tennis (<i>n</i> = 1)
	Tennis (<i>n</i> = 1)	Tennis (<i>n</i> = 1)	
	Table tennis (<i>n</i> = 1)		
	Canoeing (<i>n</i> = 1)		
Average membership	28	103	268
Average formalization score	6.4	16.1	22.7

willingness to assist with government targets. Table 2 provides a breakdown of clubs and sports in the three clusters, as well as average membership size and average formality score. Whilst there was no discernable pattern of formality by sport, there was a strong relationship with club size, an issue previously examined by Nichols and James (2008) and discussed further below.

As briefly mentioned above, the three-cluster solution presented in this study supports other observations relating to a formal/informal delineation of club types in England (Taylor *et al.* 2003) and research into Australian rugby clubs, which identified three similar categories referred to as traditional, operational and contemporary (Cuskelly *et al.* 2006). Further information regarding the mean scores for each of the six domains for the three clusters is provided in Table 3.

The final element of the quantitative analysis involved a closer examination of the association between club size and formality. Club size is thought to be significant to sport policy implementation as it is likely to influence the degree of formality or how far professional management practices are employed, because larger clubs will be 'more complex to manage with a greater division of labour' (Nichols and James 2008, p. 106). The correlation coefficient between club size and the formalization score for this study was strong at 0.47 (see Figure 3), but not as convincing as the coefficient of 0.80 found by Nichols and James (2008), although their study covered a smaller sample of clubs from a single sport (netball).

Table 3. Average formalization scores of VSCs.

Domains	Mean scores		
	Informal	Semi-formal	Formal
Administration (6)	2.7	4.8	5.4
Club policies (8)	0.7	3.9	6.3
Workforce (6)	0.5	1.9	3.4
Partnerships (3)	0.3	0.9	1.7
Club finances (4)	1.0	2.4	3.4
Marketing (3)	1.2	2.2	2.5

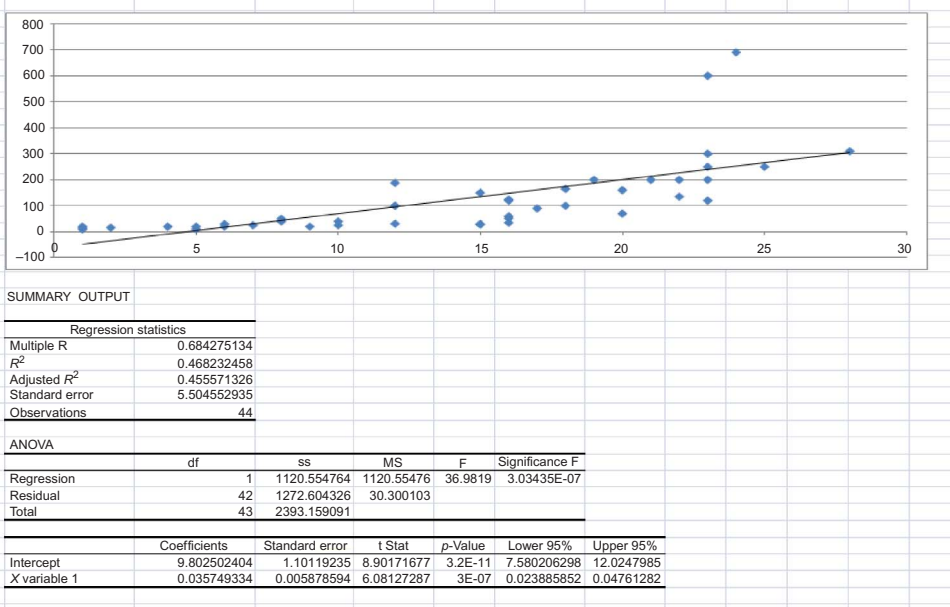


Figure 3. Correlation between club size and formalization score.

Qualitative findings

Phase two of the research involved a series of semi-structured interviews with a selection of clubs from all three clusters. The qualitative data revealed a range of perspectives relating to two key themes: volunteers’ awareness of policy and their attitudes towards their expected role in policy implementation.

Awareness of policy

Volunteers were found to be unaware of current sport policy objectives, although to differing extents across VSC types. Statements from volunteers from informal clubs suggested that they were unfamiliar with current sport policy objectives. Such was the uncertainty surrounding these objectives that the interviewer frequently had to provide an account of recent policies relating to school and community sport. Upon learning of these policies, volunteers commonly responded that they had no previous knowledge of the policy. As one volunteer stated:

To be honest with you, no, I have no idea. (Chairperson, Informal Gymnastics Club)

Similarly, numerous semi-formal clubs and, to a lesser extent, formal clubs, had a muddled understanding of policy objectives. A number of VSCs commented that they were not familiar with or aware of the objectives associated with government sport policy, often stating that although they had been in contact with NGBs and Local Authorities, they only had a vague understanding of what was expected of their club:

I would say that I am not really familiar. We probably haven't kept up with what's been going on ... I think I've got a vague recollection of reading something but I don't know the details, I couldn't quote any details. (Head Coach, Semi-Formal Football Club 1)

A number of statements from semi-formal and formal volunteers also suggested, in some cases, that they had some awareness of policy goals or were familiar with some of the statements about the Olympic Legacy and the goal of increasing participation in sport. However, statements from volunteers also reflected a somewhat outdated view of government sport policy. An example was the common misconception amongst volunteers that clubs were still contributing to government policy via broader social outcomes:

The policies are about getting people involved ... whether it's cricket, athletics or swimming, it's just healthy bodies, to saving the NHS money, healthier citizens. (Head Coach, Formal Cricket Club 1)

Table 4 summarizes responses relating to VSCs' awareness of current sport policy. In general, it was found that those VSCs not engaged with policy, that is informal and some semi-formal clubs, had either no awareness or a confused perspective of government policy objectives. Furthermore, formal VSCs were generally more aware of policy goals, but in many cases unaware of the specific details of policy – a point which may be unsurprising but relatively important given the expected role of VSCs, particularly larger, accredited VSCs, in government policy.

Table 4. VSCs' degree of awareness of sports policy.

Informal	Semi-Formal	Formal
To be honest with you I haven't [heard of recent sport policy objectives]	No I'm not aware of that ... [policy] No, no don't know that ...	I don't think that seems to have filtered through like it should have done.
I have no idea ... haven't a clue!	I would say probably not familiar really. We probably haven't kept up with what's been going on.	I'm not aware of the specifics no.
We're not really involved in things like that	I am not even familiar with it, it doesn't mean anything to me so that is why I was saying no ... It is something that I have never heard of	The policies are about getting people involved in the same thing, and then the legacy afterwards, it doesn't just stop there, we raise the awareness, and then it carries on from there. Whether its cricket, athletics or swimming, it's just healthy bodies, its saving the NHS money, healthier citizens.
We've ignored it, you know, we've cut ourselves off from it ...	I think I've got a vague recollection of reading something but I don't know the details, I couldn't quote any details.	
I can't pretend I know it in detail	Well basically to sort of promote sport ...	Yes the objective is more participation, health conscious and all of these quite sensible objectives

VSCs' role in delivery

The second area of enquiry related to the attitudes of VSCs towards their expected role in policy implementation. As previously highlighted, informal VSCs had a limited understanding of policy initiatives, and on learning of the current community sport policy objectives, their volunteers espoused a clear reluctance to engage in delivery. The following statement from a club volunteer suggested that his VSC was not in a position to comply with policy objectives due to the informal nature and structure of his club:

It's really, really quite basic, our club, there's nothing too structured or sort of organised about our club . . . I've not gone for that [Clubmark accreditation] because we are such a small club, and a lot of things that are in it, I wouldn't do anyway. (Volunteer, Informal Badminton Club 1)

The reluctance of informal VSCs to engage in policy implementation could be attributed to the lack of alignment between the ethos of informal VSCs and policy objectives. The general consensus amongst volunteers was that policy initiatives failed to correlate with the aims of the VSC, as one volunteer who had previously received information regarding community sport policy objectives stated:

. . . we've cut ourselves off from it . . . We didn't feel we needed it. We weren't here to bring in juniors, we weren't looking for extra funding, we weren't looking for improved facilities and we weren't looking for really any support. (Volunteer, Informal Badminton Club 2)

Moreover, common pressures faced by many sports clubs, such as dwindling numbers of coaches and volunteers and the lack of suitable facilities, appeared to be a further underlying factor contributing to their resistance to policy. Indeed, because informal VSCs lacked basic resources to pursue policy objectives, volunteers appeared resigned to the fact that they will not be able to assist in future policy objectives:

I've got some difficulty here with the overall aims of policy . . . we just haven't got the facilities to get involved in this kind of work . . . (Volunteer, Informal Athletics Club)

In contrast to informal VSCs, semi-formal VSCs did not exhibit a strong resistance to policy. Rather, they showed signs of developmental practices more akin to formal VSCs. Statements from semi-formal volunteers provided evidence of a drive to professionalize club structures in line with recent policy, including Clubmark accreditation, increasing participation and introducing more formalized managerial processes:

Yes, I find the policies are good because at least they give us some, if you like, a benchmark to aim for and – so rather than airy fairy – oh let's get everybody in sport, let's get everybody to enjoy, there are some specific numbers in here which they've got and I think that's good. . . . (Chairperson, Semi-Formal Bowls Club)

Despite the willingness of many semi-formal VSCs to deliver policy objectives, a number of statements from club volunteers suggested that full engagement with policy objectives was restricted by similar factors to those faced by volunteers within informal sports clubs. Data from the quantitative phase of the research also suggest that semi-formal clubs were partially, rather than fully, engaged with aspects of sport policy delivery. For example, a common pressure facing semi-formal VSCs was that of bureaucracy and the increased paperwork associated with more formalized management procedures, such as Clubmark, funding applications and Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. For one volunteer whose club

was seeking Clubmark accreditation, the paperwork involved in the process of applying was viewed as a huge strain on his club:

It is a massive hurdle [Clubmark accreditation] because it is more red tape and more paperwork and more bureaucracy to go through and more people are going to go—Oh I can't be bothered with this. (Head coach, Semi-Formal Cricket Club)

Added bureaucracy associated with policy delivery was found to be more of an issue if VSCs lacked the manpower to accommodate any increased demand placed on them. The fact that a number of semi-formal VSCs were dealing with falling membership and volunteer numbers meant that the issue of bureaucracy was only exacerbated:

The problems that we're finding at the moment are definitely dwindling memberships, dwindling volunteers looking after the place, and the money . . . You ask people to volunteer these days and they want paying for it. (Head coach, Semi-Formal Football Club 1)

However, by far the biggest factor contributing to the lack of engagement was the lack of a suitable facility. Findings demonstrated that the quality of club facilities largely determined how far semi-formal VSCs could engage with policy. For example, volunteers stated that the lack of a suitable facility significantly constrained their ability to implement policy goals:

We do feel we are a little bit nomadic and without a base. As such, I do think we are a little bit restricted on following these policies . . . we simply have not got the facilities. (Chairperson, Semi-Formal Football Club 2)

Volunteers from more formal VSCs suggested that they were engaged with a number of initiatives related to policy implementation, particularly in developing school-club link programmes and organizing community-focussed activities with the aim of growing their own membership:

We have Club Mark, we are a focus club, and we are very involved with the county scene . . . I've bought business practices into it because they were all volunteers and none of them were business people in the strictest sense of the word. (Chairperson, Formal Cricket Club 2)

However, although this engagement and drive towards formalization, consistent with government policy objectives, suggests that formal VSCs were willing to assist in policy, this engagement was again found to aggravate the pressures of increased bureaucracy:

[We are] happy to follow them in the sense that we understand why, but over the last ten years the amount of administration has increased tremendously so I would like [NGBs] to come up with a way of reducing it. (Chairperson, Formal Hockey Club)

The fact that formal VSCs had similar objectives to semi-formal VSCs but were more fully able to engage with policy objectives (as evidenced from both the quantitative and qualitative data) suggests the internal structure of formal VSCs is better equipped to deal with policy objectives. Still, formal VSCs did point to the pressures related to dwindling membership and volunteer bases. As one volunteer stated:

It is very difficult for clubs like us that have got a lot going on anyway to try and get it with the right number of staff . . . unpaid staff, may I hasten to add. That, I think, is the most under-rated issue that faces local sport these days or recreational sport. I don't think there is a lot of talk about

the volunteers, how easy it is or how you can be going around getting them . . . believe me it is easy to say that but extremely difficult to get them. (Head coach, Formal Cricket Club 1)

However, whereas this factor appeared to be a hindrance to the majority of semi-formal clubs in delivering policy, formal VSCs were still found to be able to respond to and engage with policy, as well as demonstrate a willingness to deliver policy, even though they faced similar pressures to semi-formal VSCs. Indeed, formal clubs were found to be more likely to use specific procedures to deal with these problems.

In summary, the findings demonstrate how formal VSCs seek opportunities to develop despite the many pressures that they face. In general, informal VSCs were clearly more resistant to government policy. The apathetic or indifferent attitude of informal VSCs towards policy goals was found to be primarily related to their lack of awareness and, more importantly, the disconnect between policy objectives and their casual nature. Semi-formal VSCs stated objectives related to developmental practices, suggesting a willingness to follow objectives, although many volunteers had reservations about their ability to fully engage in delivery. Statements suggested that semi-formal clubs lacked the infrastructure to fully engage with policy objectives due to a lack of volunteers, members and suitable facilities to accommodate the increased bureaucracy and work associated with delivery. Formal VSCs were more likely to utilize specific formalized management procedures to overcome problems in policy delivery owing to their larger size and formalized structure. The professional structure of formal sports clubs thus reflected their ability to assist in delivery.

Discussion

According to van Meter and van Horn, the perceptions of implementers are influenced by three 'elements', namely 'their cognition of policy, the direction (acceptance, neutrality, rejection), and the intensity of the response to it' (1975, p. 472). This study sought to provide an understanding of these elements, whilst also considering the relationship between components and how this may indirectly influence implementers' dispositions. This requires a brief assessment of the six variables which are noted as conducive towards the policy outcome, specifically the *initial policy objectives and allocation of resources, inter-organizational communications, the characteristics of implementing agencies, current economic and political conditions and disposition of implementing agents* (van Meter and van Horn 1975, p. 482).

Initial policy objectives and allocation of resources

van Meter and van Horn (1975) advised that effective policy implementation is far more likely when marginal change has occurred and goal consensus between policy makers and policy implementers is high. With regard to change, it would be difficult to argue that increasing participation in sport represents a dramatic change in policy. The goal of increased participation has been a regular feature of sports development since the 1960s and, particularly, since the Sporting Nation strategy of the 1990s. However, when we analyse sport policy in more detail, we can observe notable shifts, particularly with regards to the focus on adults (aged 16 and over), the precise definition of regular moderate intensity participation in sport (Sport England's method of measuring participation) and, most significantly, choosing NGBs and VSCs to drive the strategy of increasing participation. These issues represent a relatively major shift in policy environment, and it is argued that

expecting effective large-scale policy implementation using a predominantly voluntary workforce is unrealistic amid such change.

Looking at the allocation of resources, investment in community sport exceeds £450 million, and whilst it might be naïve to argue against the need for even more funding, in recent years significantly more central funding has been invested into community sport (Sport England 2012). That said, there is still a debate as to whether this amount is reasonable in the context of changing adult behaviour and achieving significant growth in regular sports participation amongst adults from an obese population. Of greater concern is how the funding is allocated from the centre to NGBs, rarely making its way to VSCs.

Inter-organizational communication

Inter-organizational communication is a critical area that sits at the core of this study. In findings similar to those of Harris *et al.* (2009), many VSC representatives are simply unaware of the specifics of sport policy. This study's findings suggest that most volunteers were unclear about current sport policy objectives in informal and semi-formal clubs, whereas the majority of representatives from formal VSCs were conscious of the broad policy thrust, if not its details (i.e. a focus on adults 16+, as was the case at the time the research was conducted¹). It appears that some clubs, whilst being described by some NGBs as an extension of their network, are quite isolated and have very limited contact, communication or support from their NGB. For example, one informal VSC stated that their involvement in the study was the first ever contact they had with an external sports development agency:

... to be honest, I think your contact and the survey was the first I ever really thought that anyone had acknowledged us as a club. (Volunteer, Informal Badminton Club 1)

These findings suggest that the primary reason why so many clubs are unaware of policy objectives is either (i) a lack of engagement or poor inter-organization communication between agencies and associations such as Sport England and NGBs at the national and regional levels and local sports clubs or (ii) an assumption that clubs are made aware of policy goals via sub-regional NGB or county association personnel, or perhaps via sub-regional networks such as County Sport Partnerships. Harris found similar results: a number of VSCs were unaware of sport policy because communication had not reached that far; 'no one had informed them' (2008, p 38). Other VSCs involved in the interviews reinforced this view, stating that their relationship with the NGB was 'quite distant'. Another possible explanation is presented by Taylor *et al.* (2003), who observed that traditional/informal VSCs were less likely to seek out external assistance and preferred to distance themselves from external sporting organizations. So the issue of inter-organizational communication between key stakeholders in community sport could be:

- (1) where the NGB fails to communicate with VSCs;
- (2) a collective ignorance amongst key stakeholders, all assuming that VSCs are aware of policy goals but very rarely discussing and debating; or
- (3) a situation where the VSC prefers an informal approach and as a result distances itself from the NGB.

Alternatively, perhaps club representatives are ill-informed or indifferent to national policy goals (Harris *et al.* 2009) as they are not viewed as being of high importance to the club, easily forgotten or only recalled at times where the club is likely to benefit (i.e. Clubmark accreditation, lottery funding bids, facility development proposals, etc.).

The characteristics of implementing agencies

The unique culture of VSCs is directly shaped by the deep-seated values and motives of their volunteers. These volunteers primarily offer their time freely to give something back to a club that has supported them, to muck in with their peers, to help the club survive for another year, or perhaps because they want to give their children the opportunity to enjoy sport (see Allison 2001b). These values and motives comprise some of the innate challenges associated with a culture stemming from the amateur ideal (Allison 2001a) and being not overly concerned with external matters such as the government's latest sport strategy or the NGB's new whole sport plan. This reinforces the view that implementers are likely to subvert or manipulate the delivery of policy where it does not fully reflect aims of the implementing agent (Lipsky 1980). Informal VSCs had a strong tendency to be social organizations in which members simply wanted to play their sport. Whilst the lack of awareness amongst semi-formal VSCs and the ambiguity amongst formal VSCs is more difficult to explain, a possible reason is the nature of the relationship between NGBs and VSCs, particularly where the VSC sees the relationship as unhelpful, one-sided (i.e. the VSC pays the NGB affiliation fees and receives very little in return) or perhaps top-down (i.e. policies and strategies are created by the NGB with little, if any, involvement of its VSCs).

The explanations above are supported by the CCPR's 2009 club survey ($N = 2900$ VSCs from 72 sports), where the two most common complaints were that the NGBs (i) showed little or no interest in them and (ii) were primarily concerned with national policy, not club matters or local issues (Taylor *et al.* 2010).

Current economic and political conditions

Political and economic conditions were particularly significant at the time of writing. The recent change in political leadership nationally brought with it changes in sport policy – a more centralized sporting landscape where decisions are primarily made nationally and filtered downwards, and at the same time, a range of (non-sport) policies which, at their core, are intended to redistribute power to the local level, for example the localism bill, local ownership of facilities and the Big Society. The economy remains in a state of flux and austerity measures continue unabated. Deficit reduction policies of central and local government are reshaping the local sports development landscape – some take a broader strategic focus on physical activity, and/or have faced significant staff and budget cuts, or are awaiting their fate via the latest round of restructuring or service reviews. For most, it has resulted in reductions in staff, budgets and small grants that were once distributed by local authorities (Harris forthcoming, King forthcoming). Indeed, a recent Local Government Association (LGA) report suggested that most sport and cultural services will no longer be directly provided by local government by the year 2020 (LGA 2012). Whilst many of these issues are part of the broader context in which VSCs operate, they have an indirect and, at times, profound effect on the ability of the VSC to engage and work with the community for the community.

The disposition of implementing agents

Ultimately, effective implementation, it is argued, depends upon the level of consensus amongst implementing agents on the goals of the policy and the degree of organizational change required to implement it (van Meter and van Horn 1975).

Turning to the level of agreement amongst VSCs with the goals of policy, our findings that there are distinct VSC types with differing objectives, perceptions of and responses to policy support those of Taylor *et al.* (2003), Cuskelly *et al.* (2006) and Harris *et al.* (2009). Although most clubs across the three clusters were unaware of the specifics of recent government sport policy, when they learned of them, informal VSCs demonstrated a strong resistance. This was in contrast to semi-formal VSCs, which generally suggested some willingness to engage, particularly through school-club links and some formalized management procedures (i.e. Clubmark). The formal VSC cluster demonstrated that their aims and aspirations often aligned with community sport policy goals. However, it is important to note that in most cases the import given to this area of work was underlined by the VSC's desire and need to achieve the aim for the benefit of the club, rather than any innate desire to act as a policy deliverer.

With regards to the degree of organizational change required, informal VSCs, with aims related to enjoyment, socializing and mutual enthusiasm faced the biggest change in terms of their structure, systems and processes and aims. As Lipsky (1980) explained, policies seeking large or continued incremental changes are more likely to be resisted or adapted, especially if they are not aligned to the host's priorities. Consequently, when policy goals were found to be inconsistent with the mutual enthusiastic, socially arranged structure of informal VSCs, they were more likely to be ignored or subverted, as implied by Taylor *et al.* (2003, p. 105), who suggested that the informal culture of this category 'translates to active resistance to the relevance of terms such as management or even volunteering', emphasizing a concern that policy implementation through this group of clubs would be difficult and largely inefficient.

Semi-formal VSCs were potentially responsive to policy, although a lack of resources severely inhibited their ability to deliver increased participation. Indeed, this is consistent with literature suggesting that agents often lack capacity in terms of resources, personnel and skills to assist in implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, Lipsky 1980, Harris *et al.* 2009). Implementing agents therefore operate within 'the limits imposed upon them' (Lipsky 1980, p xiii). For example, bureaucracy related to Clubmark accreditation and funding bids were found to be overwhelming or 'even out of reach' for those VSCs that lacked the human resources to accommodate the increased administrative demand this entailed. For Lipsky (1980), implementing agents commonly face concerns regarding a lack of staff required to assist in policy delivery. Indeed, for semi-formal VSCs, dwindling volunteer numbers meant that their ability to keep abreast of paperwork and procedures relating to formalized management practices was now becoming too great a burden:

One of the problems that we're fighting is that we've got less and less people on the committee – we've only got a very small committee now of people that are trying to run things down there. Which in itself, again is not good. But it's true; we just find it very difficult to get people involved and people interested. (Chairperson, Semi Formal Bowls Club)

Such pressures kept semi-formal VSCs from engaging further in policy, supporting Taylor *et al.* (2003) and Cuskelly *et al.* (2006), who identified club capacity as a fundamental issue constraining club development. Hence, many semi-formal VSCs will likely continue to do 'the best they can under adverse circumstances' (Lipsky 1980, p. xiii), but require more

significant organizational change – specifically resources – if they are to play an effective role in growing participation.

With formal clubs, the findings presented an interesting scenario in that although most were unclear about specific policy targets, most held aims and objectives closely aligned to sport policy. As previously discussed, the ability and willingness of clubs to commit to a plan and system of working is more common amongst larger clubs, which have the critical mass and the skills to adopt the professional practices to secure club accreditation, funding overall growth. This does not necessarily lead to a perfect relationship whereby the club views itself as an active policy agent, but if managed appropriately, it is more likely to lead to the club being an effective agent (van Meter and van Horn 1975).

Implications and conclusions

This work is based on a small sample, but we feel the strength of our findings justifies a larger study with a bigger sample of clubs in a larger number of sports and locations to verify or vary the cluster structure and to see if the same lack of awareness and same degree of disengagement and disinterest occurs more widely; if so, there would be serious national policy implications.

Sport England has, in the past, committed to serious research on volunteering (e.g. Taylor *et al.* 2003), but little or nothing on VSCs' structure, resources, challenges and concerns. The Sport and Recreation Alliance's surveys of clubs (previously CCPR) are still relatively small ($N = 2900$ in 2009, with bias to larger clubs, averaging over 200 members and £42,000 annual income) and self-completion 'snowball' email samples which, even with weighting, raise concerns about accurate measures of incidence (Taylor *et al.* 2010). There is nothing, for example, like the German quadrennial surveys of 4000 clubs (e.g. Heinemann and Schubert 1994) which have given the German Sport Ministry substantial detail of finances, human resources, activities, innovations, priorities and attitudes to policies.

With NGBs continuing to be expected to drive the implementation of community sport policy, another implication of this research is greater clarity regarding delivery systems used by NGBs. Indeed, as they are funded substantially by public monies, this calls for greater transparency regarding NGB whole sport plans, the process used to develop them, and more details relating to their contents and targets which mostly remain outside the public domain. More important is the need for greater clarification and transparency regarding the proposed delivery system for each sport. For most NGBs, this is likely to involve VSCs; therefore, it behoves the DCMS, Sport England and the NGBs of sport to ring-fence a relatively small amount of £450+ million² allocated to NGBs for community sport to develop a firm evidence base that involves a clearer understanding of the variety of characteristics, financial predicaments, human resource issues, aspirations, priorities and support needs of VSCs and provides an insight into improvements needed to help them play a more active role in policy delivery.

In terms of the implications for policy implementation, one quick-fix solution bruited about in the late 1990s was, following continental practice, to encourage the formation of multi-sport 'hub clubs'. A small number were granted-aided by Sport England, but no more has been heard of them after a few were established in each region (Collins forthcoming). Quite simply, these are alien to the British tradition of relatively (in European terms) small, single-sport clubs. We believe a more effective alternative for policy implementation would be an exercise based on clusters, whereby VSCs are segmented by management practice, vision, objectives and attitudes to policy, and where appropriate resources and support are developed.

The focus for informal clubs would likely be about retaining the present culture of the club, one, that is managed by mutual enthusiasts (Hoggett and Bishop 1986), unlikely to play a role in policy delivery, but still very important in their own right. Support would likely be relatively low-key, focussing on legal and health and safety issues. The priority for semi-formal clubs could be awareness and action planning. This could involve raising awareness of policy priorities, their alignment with club aspirations, as well as preparing sensible, locally-developed plans to address capacity and resource needs so that the clubs are better equipped to meet their aspirations. This is not solely about funding, but about NGBs supporting these clubs to identify the difficulties and appropriate solutions. These clubs require more support from NGBs – not necessarily in terms of large grants for brand new facilities, but more professional expertise in helping them through club accreditation processes, grant applications, development plan preparation and junior club development, not to mention strategies for volunteer recruitment and retention.

For formal clubs with aligned aims and objectives, attention should be placed on developing a bottom-up approach whereby the club is fully aware and makes an explicit commitment to play its part in policy implementation. This could be similar to the ParticipAction programme developed in Canada, whereby stakeholders signed a charter stating their commitment and intention to play an active part in increasing participation (ParticipAction 2011). This addressed the issue of awareness and could also foster a more explicit, collective, bottom-up approach. It would require developing a realistic action plan which would ideally articulate the club's vision and aspirations, and clearly communicate its intended contribution to the policy targets of each NGB. It is also important for the NGB to clearly demonstrate its role and to articulate clearly how it will support and work alongside this network of formal clubs to support them in delivering their 'growth' action plans. As van Meter and van Horn (1975) suggested, this type of relationship requires sensitive management. Very often, the real strength and value of the relationship will depend upon the softer skills of the NGB representatives in being able to provide appropriate support which minimizes the time committed to processes which may be viewed as bureaucratic. At the same time, the NGB representatives would ideally empower club representatives to spend more time on areas that will enable the club to achieve its aspirations.

In overview, this article argues that the majority of VSCs have poor awareness of community sport policy. Many remain unaware of policy objectives or hold an outdated view of them. When VSCs learn of the exact nature of community sport policy, their response tends to relate to the type of club. For all informal clubs, the natural reaction is to reject any explicit role in policy delivery. The results for semi-formal and formal clubs are mixed, although more formal VSCs demonstrate a willingness to engage with policy and have the ability to respond. Taylor *et al.* (2003) believed that it is how VSC types react and use specific managerial procedures to respond to these pressures that either allow them to overcome or succumb to them, a view supported by Lipsky (1980) in his study of 'street level bureaucrats'. With regards to the intensity of the response, the most notable reaction was from informal VSCs, where there is a clear desire for volunteers to remain part of a mutual aid, self-production and self-consumption system.

Whilst this article argues the need for greater attention, transparency and sensitivity in developing relations with VSCs as policy implementers, it does suggest that there is the potential, capacity and desire for more clubs to fulfil this role. However, it is necessary for the leaders of the community sport system to develop their intelligence of the VSC sector, including a more comprehensive survey of VSCs which could enable a more robust clustering of club types. Economies of scale suggest it would be sensible to do this across

all whole sport plan sports, although the sports-specific findings would be interesting, particularly with regards to sports that typically have teams and clubs with smaller numbers of active members (e.g. netball, volleyball and badminton). Indeed, for these sports (and others), the data may support the need to search for more innovative, non-traditional means of delivery.

Notes

1. Whilst the fieldwork was being completed, the national policy for community sport was to increase participation in sport and active recreation by 1 million adults (aged over 16 years) over a 3-year period between 2008 and 2011. As a result of a change in political leadership, the community sport policy changed in 2011–2012 to increase participation year on year (with no specific target figure) amongst people aged 14 and over.
2. This is the amount invested in 2009–2013 whole sport plan process, for 46 sports. Further details can be found at: <http://www.sportengland.org/funding>

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Measure of club formality.

Domain	Questions
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● NGB Affiliation ● Production of governing documentation including written club constitution, annual report and club development plans ● Regular Annual General Meetings (AGMs) and publication of minutes
Club policies and standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Club accreditation ● Production of club handbook, welcome and information pack, code of conduct for club members, child protection policy, health and safety policy and disciplinary procedures
Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Paid members of staff ● Internal/external training of volunteers ● Dedicated posts to address specific areas of club management and selection criteria for posts ● Volunteer recruitment strategy
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Part of local authority sport development network ● School/club link ● Commercial partnership/sponsorship.
Club finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Aware of the relevant financial support ● Secured grants ● Annual financial accounts and budget
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Website ● Electronic database of club members ● Club marketing activities