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**Youth sport volunteers in England: a paradox between reducing the state and promoting a Big Society.**

**Abstract**

This paper uses the example of volunteers in clubs promoting youth sport to consider the role of the UK Government in promoting a general civic activism as part of a 'Big Society'. The UK government advocates the replacement of public sector provision by a greater role for volunteers. Exemplary of the 'grassroots' organisations which epitomise 'Big Society' ideals are the 64,000 volunteer-run sports clubs in which almost 1.5 million volunteers support over 5.3 million junior participants in England. These clubs face problems which state intervention could alleviate; and this state support may in fact be critical to maintain the structures which provide the opportunity for so much volunteering to take place. The government's desire to increase volunteer activity can be seen to be at odds with other policy intentions such as cost-cutting, and with wider trends affecting volunteerism such as professionalisation. Thus the paper illustrates the complex, even paradoxical relationship between promoting civic activism and the role of the state. The example of youth sport volunteers also suggests that policies to promote a Big Society will need to deal with more fundamental questions about the role of volunteering.

Key words: sport, volunteer, Big Society, youth.

## Introduction

This paper estimates the numbers of VSOs and volunteers in England that support junior sport participation. The central role of VSOs and volunteers as a medium for government policy (Sport England, 2012) is juxtaposed with the additional burdens placed on volunteers; some of which have been exacerbated by reduced public expenditure and other government policies. The major contribution of volunteers and the tension between promoting volunteering, while at the same time reducing public expenditure, is understood within the broader context of the UK government's general promotion of volunteering within a 'Big Society' (Alcock, 2010) and used to explore limitations of this policy.

The paper first introduces the Big Society policy. It then describes the structure of voluntary sports organizations (VSOs) in England as a legacy from conditions in the 19th Century. The role of VSOs as a medium for government policy to promote participation by young people is reviewed and the implications of additional burdens placed on volunteers by accreditation schemes. Using a survey of clubs conducted in 2009 a revised estimate is made of the number of clubs and their size. A sub-sample of clubs involved in the provision of opportunities for young people is used to examine the characteristics of these clubs and the particular challenges these volunteers face. These survey results are complemented by a further survey of regulatory burdens faced by clubs. This leads to a discussion of the balance between a reduced role for the state to facilitate civic activism, and where the state still must intervene to reduce the burdens faced by volunteers and promote the conditions favourable for volunteering.

The main questions this paper addresses are (1) how many VSOs and volunteers support junior sports participation – thus reflecting the type of civic activism the Big Society policy aims to promote? and (2) what challenges do these volunteers face and how are these related to government policies? To address these questions the paper uses research to show: the number of non-profit sports clubs in England; the members and volunteers these clubs represent; the number of clubs with a junior section and their characteristics; the volunteers involved in supporting junior participation; and the challenges and opportunities faced by these clubs. A broader purpose of the paper is to use this example to raise questions about the viability of the Big Society policy.

### **Promoting the Big Society – UK Government Policy**

In the current UK coalition government the idea of the ‘Big Society’ draws from both Conservative and Liberal Democrat traditions. For the Conservative party, prior to the 2010 election, it was seen as a contrast to the ‘big state’ of New Labour. According to Conservative party literature, the Big Society ideal is that of a “society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control. The Big Society is our positive alternative to Labour’s failed big government approach” (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 1). It is an “endorsement of the positive and proactive role that voluntary action could take” (Alcock, 2010, p. 380) after independence and initiative had been allegedly stultified by the expansion of the state under New Labour. For the Liberal Democrats, Big Society policy is consistent with their commitment to devolving political decisions to local levels as far as possible and promoting local community activism. It also resonates with the

Liberal tradition of fostering local activism as an expression of civic responsibility in a liberal pluralist society. Thus the development of the concept after the 2010 UK election built on common ground for the Coalition Government partners, although its ambiguity could also serve the function of maintaining political unity, in the same way as the ambiguity of a policy to increase 'social inclusion' maintained the commitment of diverse political factions in New Labour (Levitas, 2005).

The "Big Society is not just a question of the state stepping back and hoping for the best; it will require an active role for the state" (Conservative Party, 2010, p.1). One policy aim related to promoting the voluntary sector is to reduce regulation in public life. A Cabinet Office Paper (2010, p.1) states that "government will make it easier to set up and run charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations..." and "unnecessary red tape surrounding government support will be removed...". This is relevant to sports clubs where previous research has indicated that coping with regulations creates constraints on volunteers in the UK (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nichols et al., 2005) and across Europe (GHK, 2010). The new government responded by commissioning a review of regulatory burdens of sport volunteers, led by the Sport and Recreation Alliance (2011). This review is used to complement the findings from the research in this paper.

The Big Society policy aims of engendering a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation (Blond, 2010) have been described as trying to create a society in which individuals spontaneously act together, directed by a common sense of civic virtue. Such aims have been criticised with the assertion that the social conditions for this to happen no longer exist (Raban, 2010). Neither political party has attempted to articulate the Big Society ideal with reference to academic analysis of the relationship between the state and civic activism. However, it has been shown that societies can be placed on a continuum of

‘statism’: the extent to which the state or civil society is the principal locus of public life.

Anglo-Saxon countries are at the low end of the ‘statism’ scale. This scale has been used to explain the ‘mosaic of local civic institutions that developed in nineteenth-century Britain’ (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001, p. 812), and that “voluntary action in Anglo-Saxon countries is still cast in a powerful liberal ideology that continues to celebrate voluntarism as autonomous and jealously defends its arm’s length relationship from government”.

The structure of sports clubs in England is discussed in the next section but at this point it is worth noting that the multitude of small single sport clubs, represented by National Governing Bodies (NGBs) independent of government, was established in the late 1800s. These NGBs enabled the first codification of modern sport, thus permitting national, and later, international, competition (McIntosh, 1987). A strong ethos of amateurism was reflected explicitly in the names of NGBs founded in this period: for example, the Amateur Boxing Association, Amateur Rowing Association and Amateur Athletics Association. It is also speculated that such clubs enabled the new urban working class to express a sense of identity around place, which had been lost in the rapid move from rural communities to industrialized cities (Holt, 1990); representing a ‘bottom-up’ form of civic activism.

This use of statism as an explanatory variable at a structural level offers greater depth to Raban’s (2010) criticism of Blond (2010) that the conditions of 19th Century Britain are idealised: they no longer exist and thus a Big Society is not viable. However, Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001) have shown that between 1981 and 1991 globalization of a model of strong markets and civil societies coincided with an increase in membership of associations across nations. They hypothesise this is because it induced “more liberal models of political organization, typified by high levels of association and the growth of new social movements” (p. 815). Thus one would have expected membership of associations to have

increased in this period, and there is some evidence of this. However, as Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas point out, care has to be taken to distinguish between (mere) association membership and active participation, and this observation requires more systematic study.

A further criticism of the Big Society concept (not addressed in this paper) is that the civic activism it engenders is always within parameters that preclude challenging the state itself (Newman and Clarke, 2009) and that partnerships between the voluntary sector and state “have become increasingly compulsory...” (p. 60) as a means to accessing state resources. This is relevant to sports clubs and NGBs because of the tension between their acceptance of support from local and national government, and retaining their independence (Grix & Phillpots, 2011; Houlihan & White, 2002).

Formal volunteering in sport is an important area of overall volunteering in England: a survey of the population in 2002 found that 13.4% of those aged 16+ had engaged in formal sports volunteering in a 12 months period (Taylor, et al. 2003). The methodological difficulties of measuring sport volunteering serve to qualify this figure, but comparable surveys have all concluded that sports volunteering in formal organizations is very important in England (Nichols, et al., 2004). A limitation of using volunteering in sport to illustrate the ideals of a Big Society is that sport’s volunteers’ motivations are a balance of “altruistic active citizenship around enthusiasms and the benefits they derive themselves from maintaining the structure in which they can participate and reap the social rewards” (Taylor, et al, 2003, p. 71). Volunteers in sports clubs may be motivated more by providing the opportunity for their children or themselves to take part in sport than by a general desire to express a general civic responsibility and may even regard potential volunteers who do not share their enthusiasm for a specific sport as ‘outsiders’ - beyond the remit of the club (Nichols, et al. 2013a). On the other hand, volunteering in general is understood as a balance between altruism and self-

interest (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011) which may change as “civic action is out-competed by the myriad of choices, constraints and priorities evident in people’s leisure lives” (Such, 2013, p. 103).

### **Voluntary Sports Clubs in England**

Sports clubs in England typify small ‘grass-roots’ associations, in which members collectively provide a mutual benefit. Such organizations exist to satisfy the interests of members; have no social change agenda; operate within legal guidelines; and membership is voluntary (Tschirhart, 2006). They remain in a structure reflecting their 19th Century origins: typically catering for a single sport and with a local membership. Very few of these clubs are specifically for junior participants; junior sections having typically been developed as a branch of the main club, which is focused on adult participation.

The most recent survey of volunteering in England and Wales (National Statistics, 2011, p. 95) shows the most important type of organization helped through regular formal volunteering is ‘sport / exercise’ (54% of volunteers), followed by ‘hobbies / recreation / social clubs’ (42%). So while this survey did not ask specifically about sports clubs run by volunteers, it does confirm the importance to these organizations of volunteering.

An estimate made in 2002, based on responses from NGBs, was that in England there were over 100,000 affiliated sports clubs run by volunteers, involving over 8 million volunteers (Nichols et al., 2004). The present research updates this. No estimate is available of the number of unaffiliated clubs. Indeed, the nature of sports clubs run by volunteers makes definition and collection of data difficult: at what point does a small group of individuals playing regularly together constitute a formal club, are junior sections of adult clubs counted as separate clubs and is a multi-sport club counted as several clubs or one (Allison, 2001)?



Further, if information on clubs is collected through NGBs of sport — the representative organizations in England — it will exclude clubs not registered with appropriate NGBs, whether for reasons of expense or because registration is not required to compete in a league structure.

While initially sports clubs and NGBs were entirely independent of the state recently they have been used by government as a medium for policies such as bridging between diverse groups (Harris and Young, 2009), social inclusion and health (Long and Bramham, 2006), promoting social capital (Nicholson and Hoyer, eds. 2008) and promoting the social integration of young people (Coalter, 2007a). Currently sports clubs run by volunteers are central to Sport England's (2008) strategy to promote participation (Sport England is the non-departmental public body responsible for implementing government sport policy) although the efficacy of using sports clubs run by volunteers as vehicles of sport policy has been fiercely debated (Coalter, 2007b; Blackshaw and Long, 2005).

### **Youth Sport Policy and Voluntary Sports Clubs**

The government's use of junior sports clubs as a vehicle for delivery of its youth sport strategies has presented challenges and opportunities to volunteers. Policies within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's 'Playing to Win', and Sport England's 2008-2011 strategies place an emphasis on raising participation levels amongst both adults and young people and increasing competitive structures within formal, organised sport. Sports clubs are considered to be a critical aspect of this framework, responsible for the sustained engagement of young people in sport. The Physical Education and Sport for Young People strategy (Department for Education, 2008) made a commitment to ensuring all young people participated in 5 hours of sport a week. Junior sections of sports clubs were key agents in the

delivery of this target, providing activities to contribute to provision outside of the school day. As indicated in the introduction Sport England's most recent strategy 'Creating a Sporting Habit', continues to focus on transitioning young people from school provision into local clubs and also emphasises the importance of establishing new community clubs for young people particularly in disadvantaged areas. It seems likely therefore that further pressure will be placed on existing volunteers but also that the recruitment of new volunteers will be necessary to support the establishment of new community clubs. Government policies for the promotion of youth sport have impacted significantly on regulating junior clubs and the volunteers who run them. These regulations include club accreditation, the requirement for coaching qualifications, child protection and other procedures. Junior club accreditation is one example of how regulation has had a major impact on volunteers – as described in the next section.

#### The *Impact of 'Clubmark' Accreditation on Sports Club Volunteers*

Clubmark, introduced by Sport England in 2002, is a 'licensing' system setting out broad criteria that junior clubs are expected to meet. It is the mechanism through which Sport England and NGBs have tried to enforce best-practice requirements on junior sections of sports clubs. Attaining Clubmark status, although optional for clubs, is a condition for funding support from local and national government. It can lead to support from NGBs, greater publicity and promotion and, within some local authorities, preferential access to facilities (Clubmark website, 2011). For volunteers and parents it can be regarded as a badge of a club's quality to promote recruitment of juniors: a club lacking accreditation may cause parents to consider it unsafe or unsuitable for young people. Thus, while attaining Clubmark status is voluntary for the club, there are considerable pressures to do so.

Clubmark requires junior clubs and their volunteers to comply with Sport England's defined standards across four areas: the playing programme; duty of care and safeguarding and protecting children and young people; knowing the club and its community; and club management. Attaining and maintaining Clubmark status involves reassessment every two years. Policy documents need to be developed and workplace-style procedures such as risk assessments are undertaken. Additional volunteer roles within clubs, such as child protection officer, are created. Volunteer coaches are required to continue their professional development by regularly attending training. In 2009, 4,867 sports clubs had received Clubmark accreditation and a further 4,400 were working towards it (KKP, 2009).

Thus while Clubmark accreditation was introduced by Sport England as a direct consequence of its policy of raising junior sports participation through sports clubs, it has had an impact of presenting several inter-related challenges to sports clubs' volunteers.

### **Methods**

The survey of sports clubs on which the results are based was conducted for the Sport and Recreation Alliance (formerly the Central Council of Physical Recreation) in 2009 to provide an overview of the state of sports clubs in the UK (Taylor et al., 2009). Data from a sample of UK sports clubs was collected in the form of responses to an online questionnaire. Governing bodies of sport facilitated this collection either by directly alerting club secretaries to the questionnaire, or by a general promotion of it on the governing body web site. In addition, some County Sport Partnerships (a regional level of sport administration in England) were contacted directly to promote the survey to their members.

Responses on basic club characteristics were provided by 2,991 clubs. Of these, 1,975 clubs provided a complete set of responses, including questions on membership, volunteers,

income and expenditure. The sample over-represented Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs: 17% of the sample [CASC status confers certain tax benefits]) and clubs that had achieved Clubmark status (40% of the sample, although only approximately 5.7% of clubs in England had attained Clubmark in 2009). Therefore, the sample probably over-represents the more formally organised clubs, which tend to be larger, and those with junior sections. One reason for this is that the requirements of accreditation mean these clubs have easier access to financial and other records, making it easier for them to complete the survey questions.

For the analysis of clubs with junior sections, motor sport and university clubs were excluded from the data set because both were outliers in terms of average size, and neither was likely to be important for junior participation. The survey categorised clubs as ‘non-profit’, ‘profit-making’, ‘informal’ and ‘other’. Only non-profit clubs were retained within the analysis reported here because these clubs are the most likely to be run by volunteers (as opposed to private and public sector clubs). Non-profit clubs, the most common type of club, represented 93% of those in the complete sample of 2991 clubs. From the full data set (minus motor sport and university clubs, and including only non-profit clubs) clubs were identified as having a junior section of 5 or more members (1714 clubs), having a junior section of 4 or fewer members (209 clubs), and having no junior section (325 clubs). This permitted a comparison between clubs with 5 juniors or more and clubs with no juniors to identify distinctive characteristics of the clubs which promote junior participation. In reporting ‘junior’ members, clubs used their own definition of ‘junior’ as it would have been very difficult to ask for membership details by age. In the large majority of cases, however, ‘junior’ means ‘under 18 years old’.

An open question asked clubs to identify ‘any challenges and/or opportunities for your club, either now or likely in the next two years’. These responses were coded to identify

those related to volunteers in general, relationships with national government, relationships with local government, and relationships with national governing bodies of sport. The neutral wording of the question – encompassing both challenges and opportunities - meant that responses had to be coded by the researcher as a ‘challenge’, an ‘opportunity’, or ‘unclear’ because respondents might not make it clear how they viewed a particular issue. They give an impression of the important issues to junior club volunteers.

The interpretation of challenges and opportunities from the 2009 sports clubs survey is complemented by an independent survey of regulatory burdens faced by all clubs — ‘Red Card to Red Tape’ — conducted by the Sport and Recreation Alliance (2011) in 2010/11. This obtained survey results from 1401 clubs, prompted for their perspectives on six major areas of concern. So although the unprompted questions in the 2009 sports club survey used in this paper were specific to clubs with junior sections, the prompted responses in the Red Card to Red Tape survey, which were from all clubs, are a useful complement.

### **Results: The Contribution of Volunteers to Youth Sport**

#### The Number and Size of Clubs

The survey (Taylor et al., 2009) estimated that there were a minimum of 85,000 affiliated clubs in England. This estimate was based on telephone contact with the major NGBs or information on their web sites. That result suggests a 15% reduction from the level reported in 2002 (Taylor et al., 2003). This difference can be attributed partly to methodological differences: an inclusion of a more complete sample of NGBs in 2002, and a change in NGBs’ record keeping. A detailed comparison of the records provided by NGBs in 2002 and 2009 revealed several discrepancies which make identifying trends by sport difficult. In general there are ‘substantial methodological difficulties’ in measuring trends in

this type of organization (Tschirhart, 2006: p. 535). The surveys in 2009 and 2002 suggest a reduction in the number of clubs – although the overall number of clubs is still very significant. Thus the figure of 85,000 is a minimum estimate, but it will include the large majority of clubs with junior sections, as these are likely to be affiliated to NGBs. It is impossible to gain an estimate of the numbers of clubs that are not affiliated; possibly because they do not compete in a league structure or are completely informal. These considerations illustrate the difficulties in researching this type of grass-roots organization.

Within the sub-sample constructed to eliminate outliers and include only not for profit clubs, the average club had 112 adult and 82 junior members. On average clubs had 21 volunteers, giving a volunteer/adult member ratio of just over 1/5.5. The average club had only 1.3 full-time paid staff and 0.4 part-time paid staff – mainly taking roles of coaching, grounds maintenance and bar work. This confirms the picture of a mosaic of a large number of small clubs led by the members themselves.

Only 49% of clubs made a surplus in the year of the survey, 25% broke even and 26% made a loss – although the small sums involved means profits and losses are small and can normally be easily balanced between years. This confirms that profitability is not a club objective – rather an aim is merely to generate enough income to meet costs. These features — small size, volunteer dominance and low-level financial status — reveal these clubs as characteristic of ‘a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities’ (Conservative Party, 2010). That is – the type of organization the Big Society seeks to promote.

The Importance of Volunteers in Supporting Junior Sport

Seventy six percent of clubs had a junior section of 5 or more members. If this is aggregated by the estimated number of clubs in England (85,000), over 64,600 clubs in England have 5 or more juniors. Aggregating that with the average number of juniors per club gives a total of just under 5.3 million junior members participating in sport in clubs in England.

This may be a conservative estimate because, as noted above, the estimate of the number of clubs in England is a minimum and this calculation excludes clubs with fewer than 5 junior members. On the other hand, this may be an over-estimate of the total number of juniors because a junior may be a member of more than one club. Further, the 2009 survey over-represents clubs with Clubmark: that is, the clubs most likely to have a junior section.

Table 1 compares clubs with 5 or more juniors with clubs that have only adult members. T-tests were used to indicate significant differences at a 95% level.

Insert table 1 here

Clubs with junior sections are bigger (average adult membership 126) although these are still small organisations. Clubs with junior sections have an average of 23.93 volunteers per club. Although the number of volunteers per club is higher for clubs with juniors it is not possible to identify volunteers who are specifically helping with junior sections. Nevertheless, the member/volunteer ratio is 50% higher in clubs with juniors than in adult clubs. Based on an estimate of 64,600 clubs in England with junior members, over 1.5m volunteers are helping with these clubs. Interestingly, clubs with junior sections have an especially high number of non-playing members per club: i.e. 46.5. The questionnaire did not distinguish between volunteer non-playing members and 'social members', but the association with junior clubs suggests that a large proportion of these non-playing members are supporting junior participation, e.g. through ad hoc, occasional volunteering. Many of these 'social volunteers' may therefore represent the Big Society ideal of 'mass engagement'. Clearly, junior clubs are

still small organisations and are even more reliant on volunteers than are adult clubs. This is because clubs with junior members are more likely to have volunteer coaches and are much more likely to have paid coaches, part-time or full-time, than are adult clubs. This is reflected in coaching fees, which are higher for clubs with juniors. These clubs also have higher costs associated with volunteers and staff.

As expected, clubs with junior sections are far more likely to have Clubmark accreditation — 52.6%. The 8% of adult clubs who have this accreditation probably once had junior members and still have a junior section, or have gained the accreditation in anticipation of starting a junior section. Clubmark is associated with the larger number of volunteer coaches and greater use of professional coaches in these clubs. Clubs with junior sections are also more likely to have CASC registration, which allows them to benefit from a range of tax reliefs.

Clubs with junior sections are more likely to use local government and school playing facilities — thus making them more reliant on a relationship with the public sector, although this difference is not statistically significant.

Thus, even more than adult clubs, junior clubs are small organizations, almost completely reliant on volunteers, but with greater burdens on volunteers arising from their role in promoting national policy objectives of increasing junior participation, and reliant on local government for access to playing facilities.

## Challenges and Opportunities Faced by the Clubs



An analysis of clubs with junior sections shows the opportunities arising from a relationship with local or national government, as well as challenges which the promotion of the Big Society will need to overcome. They are summarised in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

The most common challenges were associated with facilities owned by local government or by schools. Access at the time required, cost and quality of facilities were all often-cited issues. For example, clubs reported that:

‘There are limited local facilities with space we can use during the evenings which means we are forced to use places which are available rather than the cheapest.’

‘There is currently a 5-year waiting list to have a local pitch that is owned by the local authority.’

‘It is a constant problem to find venues that allow block bookings (essential when playing league matches). Local Authorities/ Schools and Colleges who are the main suppliers of the facilities spend very little on the maintenance of their facilities ...’

‘The ground is looked after by local authority who keep reducing the hours the groundsman has available.’

Thus the availability of facilities at a time and cost required is being reduced and is likely to have been constrained further since the time of the survey (2009) as local government has responded to cuts in income from national government for 2011-12. All of these concerns are about facilities hired from local government or schools. Forty per cent of junior sports clubs used local authority facilities for playing, and 30% used school facilities: both figures approximately 10% above those for adult clubs. This highlights an important relationship between the voluntary and public sector, but one which is very likely to be affected negatively

by local government's responses to funding cuts as hire charges are raised, local government looks for more profitable use of facilities, and maintenance is reduced.

However some clubs saw new opportunities arising from changes in access to facilities — for example:

‘We have recently been informed that the school premises in which we have hired the gym hall through the leisure services for the last 4 years is to be pulled down... The club has taken the decision to move into (another) building which will give us 24/7 sole access for less money than the charges made by the leisure services for 11 hours per week!’

In this instance removal of a facility has stimulated the club to find a better alternative however the overall picture suggests this club has been fortunate. The Red Card to Red Tape research report only asked clubs directly about playing field facilities. Twenty nine percent of clubs cited a negative impact associated with playing fields — which may have been a combination of reduced access and quality, and increased cost. This response must have represented an issue strong enough to be reported without having been prompted in this survey. The second most reported challenge for junior clubs was in obtaining or training coaches. This reflects the much higher costs associated with coaching in junior clubs, the higher proportion of clubs (11.5%) that use paid coaches, and the Clubmark accreditation requirement for coaches trained to a particular level. Example responses from the 2009 survey included:

‘The main difficulty facing clubs now is the cost of coaching courses ... it is our retiring competitive gymnasts that we are hoping will cross over to coaching, keeping all their

knowledge and experience in the clubs. The fees are far too high as most of them will be students with little or no income.’

‘Our biggest challenge will be funding coaching courses which have trebled in price in the last year. A lot for a 16 year old to find.’

‘Coaching/Teaching qualifications are expensive and the club isn’t in a financial position to pay for its volunteers or Head Coach to attend the relevant training courses for them.’

The increased demand for coaching qualifications from those participating in the sport, especially parents of juniors, combined with Clubmark accreditation, can be understood as part of a professionalization of the voluntary sector in sport (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nichols et al., 2005), encouraged by Sport England. The Red Card to Red Tape report found that ‘coaching qualification requirements’ were the most common bureaucratic burden reported by clubs (64%) although 22% felt they had a positive impact on their club. This was the issue which had the most polarised views in this report.

Recruiting and retaining volunteers were together the third most common challenge to clubs. This was attributed to the requirement for specific skills — ‘it is becoming increasingly difficult to find volunteers with the relevant skills and availability’; and to time pressures — ‘It’s difficult to engage with parents of new juniors, so that they become volunteers for the club. They seem to want to ‘drop and run’. Adult club members are busy, time-poor and not willing to help the club organisation.

Recruiting volunteers has consistently been reported as a major challenge for sports clubs (Gratton, et al. 1997; Taylor et al. 2003). It is possible that the nature of sports clubs as coalitions of people around shared enthusiasms (Hoggett and Bishop, 1985) makes them less willing to apply a rational systems-approach to volunteer role identification and

recruitment (Schulz et al., 2011). Nevertheless, this represents a general challenge to the Big Society agenda: how to encourage volunteering when the level of volunteering has remained static for over 20 years (NCVO, 2011).

The fourth most frequently mentioned challenge, for 56 clubs, was obtaining funding, and a further 34 specifically mentioned obtaining sponsorship. Included in this category of challenges was the limited supply of grants, conditions for grants and the complexity and amount of work required by volunteers in making applications. Conditions for funding may become more selective as funders have fewer resources to allocate. This is related to the difficulties of finding facilities at the time and cost required, as again it reflects cuts in public expenditure. Example responses included:

‘It appears to us that while there are grants available for capital items ... there is no ... source of grants to purchase essential maintenance machinery, without which the club would not be able to function.’

‘Funding opportunities [are] reducing due to lack of funds for anything but Olympic sports ... .’

‘New sources of funding require commitments that are outside our ability to supply, i.e. disabled cycling (required expensive equipment).’

‘We are applying for an ‘Awards for All’ grant but the submission has repeatedly (3 times so far) been returned for seemingly irrelevant administrative details.’

‘... there seems to be funds for courses; however, it has doubled my administration trying to apply for funds for these courses.’

Thus applying for funding in a more competitive environment is a significant administrative burden for volunteers. Applying for funding was the second most cited

challenge facing clubs reported in the Red Card to Red Tape survey, mentioned by 57%.

Comments on sponsorship specifically mentioned the economic climate and the 2012 Olympics:

‘Challenges are the effects of the current economic climate limiting available sources of sponsorship.’ ‘... as the 2012 Games seems to have high-jacked all the money ... ’

‘Sponsorship negatively affected by economic situation, as is money raised from advertising and events, ... .’

The Olympics have gone, but the economic situation has not improved. Although one might have expected attaining or maintaining Clubmark status to be a particular consideration for junior clubs this was recorded specifically as a challenge by only five clubs, whilst 11 clubs saw it as an opportunity. For example:

‘Our governing body is not very helpful and keeps coming up with ways in which our work load increases. Their new initiative, Clubmark, is something a club like ours will never be able to complete as it is just too time-consuming.’

‘The challenge is to complete the Clubmark accreditation and this will bring opportunities of more grants and players to the club as well as better facilities.’

‘Getting funding for smaller clubs is difficult unless you have Clubmark or equivalent, but the amount of work involved in this just adds to the overall administration time required ...’

The Red Card to Red Tape survey (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2011) recommended that Clubmark requirements be simplified. The ambiguous attitude of volunteers towards this

increased formality suggests it can be regarded as both improving the club's effectiveness and as a burden; as in voluntary organisations in general (Adler and Borys, 1996).

**Conclusions — the role of volunteers in promoting youth sport and the paradoxes in the state's role in promoting civic activism within a Big Society.**

Sports clubs with junior sections appear to epitomise the ideal of civic activism in a Big Society, but the challenges and opportunities they face illustrate the complex relationship between volunteering and government. The provision of sports opportunities to young people by over 1.5 million volunteers in over 64,000 clubs in England could be used to illustrate the type of involvement the Big Society policy seeks to develop. However, the network of clubs and NGBs of sport within which volunteering can take place far pre-dates a Big Society policy, as it was created — along with a mosaic of similar institutions — in the conditions of the 19th century. In this sense the policy can be said to be based on an ideal which existed in the past, but in 21st Century Britain conditions are very different. It is questionable that a similar structure of organisations, reliant to this extent on volunteers, could emerge now because the voluntary sector occupies a far smaller area of activity between the commercial and public sectors in leisure. These sectors have expanded dramatically, thus contributing to 'the myriad of choices, constraints and priorities' (Such, 2013, p. 103) competing for leisure time. This will make it harder to recruit or retain the 20% of volunteers in key roles who contribute 80% of volunteer time (Nichols, 2005) and maintain the structure in which others can make more limited contributions. Further, it would be impossible for sports clubs with an average surplus (excluding golf clubs) of £1,316 p.a. (Taylor, et al. 2009, p. 41) to establish or replace the infrastructure of facilities.

Thus the network of clubs and NGBs of sport is a very valuable resource. It can be regarded as a cultural heritage which needs to be maintained because it provides the opportunity for individuals to express civic activism and because it would be extremely difficult to recreate. More generally, while a low level of statism in the 19th Century may have been a condition encouraging the development of civic activism, it is not so clear how government can shift the locus of public life to civil society now, given the increasing pressures on volunteers' time (Nichols, 2009).

The survey confirms that the number of junior clubs is large; but that individually the clubs are small, and very reliant on volunteers – more so than clubs with no junior sections. It also confirms that the main challenges faced by clubs all reflect the relationship with government. For example, the increasing cost of facility hire from local government reflects cuts in local government expenditure imposed by national government. If the clubs are to continue to operate at the same level they will need to pass on increased costs to their members. The increased costs and time required for coach training partly reflect the accreditation requirements of Clubmark, promoted by national government, and partly a professionalization of voluntary sector sport as it has to attract members in a more competitive leisure market. The costs of coach training can again be passed on to participants, but the time required will be a burden on individual volunteers. Both these factors will lead towards a professionalization of coaching. The recruitment and retention of volunteers may have become more difficult as the general rate of volunteering has decreased since 2001 (National Statistics, 2011). The underlying causes of this need to be understood if they are to be addressed. Government funding for clubs through specific grants has become more competitive and time consuming to gain as national resources have been directed towards the 2012 Olympic Games and as local government funding has been reduced.

Thus the voluntary sector and public sector are closely intertwined. Government will need to act with care and sensitivity if it is to promote volunteering in sport. The coalition government's commissioning of the 'Red Card to Red Tape' report shows a concern for reducing bureaucratic burdens on volunteers, and will do so if the report's recommendations are implemented. Reduced government funding will force NGBs to become more independent, moving back to the position before 1994 when their funding from Sport England was significantly increased as a result of access to National Lottery revenue (Green, 2008). For clubs, increasing costs of facility hire can be passed on to members and participants; likewise so will increased costs of coaching, unless Clubmark accreditation requirements for coaching standards are reduced. If there are fewer government grants for NGBs and clubs these organizations will be less obliged to meet the conditions attached. So it is possible that weaning voluntary-led sports organizations off state support will help them reassert their independence and autonomy. But it may also make many of them so unviable that they will be lost, thus removing the structures in which a large amount of formal volunteering takes place. While the estimated 15% decline in the number of sports clubs between 2002 and 2009 has to be qualified by the methodological problems in making this estimate, it may also reflect a trend towards participation in sports such as keep-fit and jogging, in which individuals take part outside the club environment. This trend was identified between 1987 and 1996 (Coalter, 1999) and has continued between 2005 and 2010 (Gratton, et al. 2011), and it may in turn reflect a general move towards a more individualised society.

The situation is complicated by the government's appropriation of NGBs and sports clubs as a medium through which to promote policy goals such as participation by young people. It is paradoxical that government expects clubs to continue to be the means of



promoting policies such as increasing youth participation, while at the same time cutting these organizations free of state support.

A second (related) complication is the coincidence of the Big Society policy with significant cuts in public expenditure. Local government faces a 27% cut in grants from national government in the period between 2010-11 and 2014-15. Even if a local income tax is implemented as a Liberal Democrat promoted alternative to the council tax there will still be a 14 % drop in local government spending over this period (The New Economics Foundation, 2010). This will compound the difficulties of clubs gaining access to playing facilities at the time, cost and standard they require; and will curtail other funding opportunities.

This may provide a jolt towards independence, but it may also mean that the opportunities offered as a direct result of civic activism, such as junior sports participation, are concentrated in the areas where more socially advantaged volunteers retain the capacity to deliver them (Macmillan, 2011). Thus the role of the state in supporting civic activism needs to strike a very careful balance between reducing involvement in some areas and increasing it in others. It must be borne in mind that civic activism is facilitated by a structure of voluntary sector organisations which must be nurtured and maintained in order to provide the opportunities for activism: it is much easier for the individual to volunteer to provide opportunities for youth sport if there is a local club to volunteer in. As the UK Conservative party has recognised, promoting the “Big Society is not just a question of the state stepping back and hoping for the best; it will require an active role for the state” (Conservative Party, 2010, p.1). We have shown there is a paradox between on the one hand trying to increase volunteering and on the other, increasing pressures on volunteers through cuts in public expenditure and increasing regulatory burdens. Policies to reduce regulatory burdens on

volunteers can help but a significant change in attitudes towards volunteering as leisure, such as people are willing to give a lot more time; directed by a general sense of civic responsibility; would require a radical change in the relationships between work, leisure and volunteering (Nichols, et al, 2013b). Without this a Big Society is built on dubious foundations.

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**Table 1.** Comparative Results — Clubs with 5 or more Juniors / Adults-only Clubs

Category	5 or More	Adults only	SD at a 95%
	Juniors		level
Number of clubs in sample	1714	325	*
Adult members per club	126	83	*
Junior members average	108	0	
Volunteers per club	23.93	12.57	*
Members per Volunteer	9.8	6.6	*
Non-playing social members per club	46.50	19.65	*
Clubmark attained	52.6%	8%	*
CASC registered	22.1%	8.3%	*
Has volunteer coaches	85.3%	70.0%	*
Has P-T paid coaches	19.1%	6.8%	*
Has F-T paid coaches	5.0%	0.5%	*
Coaching and tuition fees, average p/a, per club	£3,686	£191	*
Spend on staff and volunteers expenses, p/a, per club	£10,115	£1,409	*
Use local government facility for playing	40.8%	32.8%	
Use school facility for playing	30.6%	20.6%	

**Table 2.** Challenges and opportunities reported by junior clubs

Factor	Number of Clubs Mentioning Challenge / Opportunity	
	Challenge	Opportunity
1. Access to facilities		
1a Access to facilities at <u>time</u> wanted, from local authority or school	139	31
1b <u>Cost</u> of Local authority or school facilities	104	2
1c <u>Quality</u> of local authority or school facilities	85	13
2. Coaches — cost of, training of, obtaining	113	21



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3.	Volunteers		
3a	Recruiting volunteers	63	3
3b	Retaining volunteers	44	2
4.	Applying for funding — including lottery and grants	56	41
5.	Sponsors	34	3

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