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Findlay-King, L., Nichols, G.S., Forbes, D. et al. (1 more author) (2018) Watching the pennies and the people – how volunteer-led sport facilities have transformed services for local communities. Managing Sport and Leisure, 23 (4-6). pp. 277-292. ISSN 2375-0472

https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2018.1550369

Watching the pennies and the people – how volunteer led sport facilities have transformed services for local communities

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Managing Leisure on 2019. available online: Forthcoming https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2018.1550369

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Abstract

Rationale/Purpose

This paper shows how the transfer of public sport facilities to management led by volunteers has increased the responsiveness of services to local needs; while at the same time reducing running costs. It provides a contrast to previous research on transfer to large leisure trusts.

Design/Methodology/approach

It draws on interviews with key personnel at 8 sport facilities transferred to small-volunteer led community groups.

Findings

Running costs have been cut because of the greater attention to detail and flexibility of volunteer managed services. The service has become more sensitive and flexible to the needs of the local community because volunteers are their own marketing information system, rooted in that community. The positive outcomes are driven by needs to attain economic sustainability; and to renew volunteer effort by changing the public perception of the facility to an asset created by the community, rather than just as a public service consumed by it.

Practical implications

The paper shows the progressive potential of the small trusts in meeting local leisure needs, making a case to support this type of sport facility delivery.

Research contribution

These small leisure trusts retain advantages of the large leisure trusts, established in the 1990's, but with further advantages derived from local production.

Keywords: volunteer; community; sport facility management; asset transfer

Introduction

In recent years, the UK media have frequently reported on the vulnerability of local government sport centre provision. Sports centre closures, some transfer to delivery by large leisure trusts and some local community take over are apparent (Conn, 2015; Sheffield, 2018). Year on year there has been a decline in sport centre numbers (Mintel, 2018).There is no clear record of how many of the closing sport centres are owned by local authorities, but the CLOA (2015) report on reduction in funding to sport. At the same time the outsourcing of sport facility management by local authorities, has grown (King, 2014) and most recently the proportion of leisure centres and swimming pools managed by local authorities has declined from 25% in 2014 to 18% in 2018, whilst the number of facilities operated by Trusts has increased by 22% in the same period (Mintel, 2018). Thirty five percent of the UK's leisure centres and swimming pools are now managed by Trusts and as a group, they are the largest operator in the sector (Mintel, 2018).

As context, the management of public sports facilities in the U.K. has changed significantly since the 1990s. The process of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) allowed costs to be allocated to public leisure provision (Nichols, 1996). Combined with a more market led ideology and a continued shift away from leisure being regarded as a right of citizenship this led to more market oriented leisure services (Nichols and Taylor, 1995). From the 1990's delivery of leisure services through trusts enabled significant cost savings through their eligibility for rate relief. A small number of private sector providers and trusts emerged from those able to bid for contracts within CCT (Nichols, 1995). These were prepared to take large local authority contracts. As the coalition government from 2010 cut local authority budgets the provision of leisure, as a discretionary service, was vulnerable. This led to closure of some facilities and a consolidation of the oligopoly of trusts, who offered local government a way of maintaining provision through transferring facility management, while reducing public expenditure. Whilst the original leisure trusts had started out as small trusts, these quickly grew as they had taken on multiple leisure facilities and, or provision across multiple local authority areas (Mintel, 2018). Trust delivery of leisure facilities in the UK, is dominated by these large trusts. However, there has always been some involvement of local small volunteer led groups since the first trust takeovers of sport centres from local authority provision. More recently in the current decade, this type of delivery by small, community groups appears to have increased (King, 2014). This was facilitated by the Localism Act (2012) and reflected a policy of reducing the central state and devolving power and responsibility to voluntary groups (King, 2014) through promoting a 'Big Society', which could be regarded as a variety of associative democracy (Nichols, et al. 2015). King (2014) also reported an expectation by local authorities that the role of the voluntary and community sport sector would increase in sport facility and service management. The impact of these small, volunteer led, leisure trusts are therefore the focus of this study. They are different to the large trusts, which emerged from the 1990's in several respects. In the large trusts, the trustees are volunteers; although often seconded from other organisations. The process of transfer from local authority management was led by paid employees of the local authority and the facilities continue to be managed and operated by paid staff. In the small volunteer led trusts volunteers planned and executed the transfers to trust status themselves. This was often done relatively quickly to avert closure of the facility. Volunteers take roles of governance and delivery after transfer (Findlay-King et al, 2018).

Therefore, as the volunteers are embedded in the community, the facility serves; does this enable it to be more sensitive to the leisure needs of local people? Further, does the more 'hands-on' role of local volunteers enable a tighter control of costs through an attention to detail? Thus, the focus of this paper is on the possible advantages of delivery of leisure services by local volunteers, in contrast to large leisure trusts, in the areas of cost reduction, enterprise and innovation. We also consider why these changes have taken place. By doing this we aim to contribute academically to the literature on trust led sport services and public service management. Additionally we offer some practical insight for small volunteer groups and local authorities as to whether small trust management is advantageous.

Drivers to and benefits of Sport facility provision by Voluntary Leisure trusts

Third sector delivery of public services

Research into the role that the third sector can have in the delivery of public services/facilities is limited but there have been studies that have evidenced the positives of social entrepreneurship in delivering public services (Addicott, 2011, Hazenberg & Hall, 2016 for example). This has been of note in the leisure sector (Reid, 2003; Simmons, 2004, 2008) which we will discuss shortly, but also in health and community work (Farmer and Kilpatrick, 2009; Hall et al, 2012). Third way delivery has often been uncritically sold as the saviour of public services, as Dey and Steyaert observe (2010, p.91) referring to the ‘double bottom line’ of ‘doing good’ (the social) and ‘doing well’ (the economic). The literature referred to above in this area commonly refers to more efficient models of delivery, accompanied by better service for users, enabled by greater freedom and innovation.

Large leisure trusts

In leisure, previous research has focused on the transfer of sport facilities from the UK public sector to large leisure trusts. Simmons (2004, 2008) and Reid (2003) focused on the first wave of transfers in the 1990s. Simmons (2004, 2008) examined five leisure trusts through qualitative interviews with key stakeholders in the Trusts and their parent authorities and documentary analysis. Reid (2003) examined a large single trust, with ten leisure facilities, similarly through qualitative interviews with key stakeholders at the Trust, leisure centres and the local authority.

Simmons (2004) identified the advantages of leisure trusts in 5 leisure trusts examined, as increased income, reduced expenditure and greater customer orientation and responsiveness, although service improvements were minor and likely to be focused on extending service hours. Greater financial flexibility, savings and ability to apply for external funding and increased usage led to improved financial performance. In some cases, this enabled facilities to be developed, cross subsidy of sports development work (if this had been transferred to the Trust) and concessionary pricing. He noted that involvement of service users and community representatives on the trust boards encouraged debate over service provision, but closeness to the community was little mentioned apart from this. The local authority had the strongest influence on how business was conducted. As the community were minimally involved in decision-making or shaping services, he argued that the public would not change their view of the facility from being consumers to being partners in provision.

In further work Simmons (2008) considered how the five trusts had contributed to the Department of Trade and Industry's (2002) dimensions of measuring success in: enterprise, competitiveness, innovation and social inclusion. He observed a culture change in which trust management was able to be more flexible in resource allocation and responding to local needs. The approach entailed:

> "clearer goal setting, proactive management to these goals, attempts to remove 'red tape', increased use of performance-related incentives, greater attention to organisational communication strategies, and improvements in the quality and usage of information management systems." (Simmons, 2004, p.167)

However, Simmons (2008) found that financial viability was reliant on business rate relief and VAT savings. Although Trusts were in a position to raise external finance to refurbish facilities this fundraising was not always successful. The trusts all had different levels of engagement with user groups, so one could not generalise about the closeness of the relationship to the community they served. Overall there was a sense that there was 'more to do' to better involve community and users.

Similarly to Simmons, Reid's study of one Trust (2003) noted how the establishment of a large leisure trust was promoted by a budget cuts; leading to an inability to subsidise running costs and capital investment. As the trust studied by Simmons, Reid's facilities were able to benefit from exemption from non-domestic rates (which the local authority had previously been obliged to pay to central government). A further similarity was that facility management had more autonomy, with “centre managers reporting that the board had transferred greater decision-making powers to them which, whilst placing them under additional pressure, also increased their job satisfaction” (p.179). A culture of greater responsibility was evident, with managers “acutely aware of their budget…and income patterns” (p.180). However, autonomy was limited by financial reliance on local authority grants and requirements to use Council services (limiting the ability to achieve greater value). A contrast with Simonds’s findings was that the facility did not have responsibility for sports development and community education; which led to a lack of co-ordination with this work. The Trust representatives claimed a “greater customer focus” (p.180) and more sophisticated marketing, enabled by new IT systems.

Thus, both Simmonds and Reid found a synergy between greater managerial flexibility to become more customer focussed, and improved financial performance; although the major financial advantage of trust status was relief from non-domestic rates. Both found a greater attention to costs, although cost reductions were still constrained in Reid’s example by the link to the local authority. In both examples the trusts’ focus on leisure and a limited number of facilities; in contrast to an authority’s responsibility for multiple facilities; enabled a greater attention to details of costs and marketing. However, in neither case were local people directly involved in management. For example, in Reid’s trust the increased customer focus and service quality improvements resulted from the need to survive independently without the Council as a “safety-net” (Reid, 2003, p.174) rather than resulting from the engagement of local volunteers in management. Thus for Reid the Trust was not able to fully realise its potential as a ‘third way’ of providing services. This is a contrast to the facilities in our study in which volunteers are involved in governance and delivery.

We can turn to public service management literature to explore this further. The drive to reduce costs, increase income, be enterprising and responsive to customers that Simmons (2004, 2008) and Reid (2003) both found, can be viewed as a reflection of what Hodgkinson (2012) in a study of public leisure services conceptualised as a ‘hybrid strategy’ typology (p.106). Hodgkinson presented the hybrid strategy as fit for purpose in the public leisure sector - seeking to add value, whilst keeping the cost base low enough to have low prices relative to competitors. Using a positivist approach to measure relationships between five strategic approaches in public leisure services; and business and social outcomes; Hodgkinson (2012) claims that a strategy characterised as ‘hybrid’ is the most successful in achieving both outcomes. This strategy was defined as one that ‘provide(s) a service that is superior to competitors, whilst simultaneously maintaining a tight control on costs for a lower cost-base relative to competitors’ (p. 101). Leisure centre manages who indicated on a Likert scale that they had this type of strategy, also tended to report strong business performance – measured by perceptions of ‘new customers, profitability, market share and marketing’ (p. 99); and had a centre usage representative in demographic characteristics to a three-mile radius catchment. This leads Hodgkinson to conclude further, that ‘strategy content developed in a private sector context is relevant to the study of generic strategies in the public sector’ (p 105). This study is limited by the necessarily imprecise measurements of the independent measures of ‘strategy’ and dependent measures of ‘performance’ and one might question if the ‘independent’ variable of hybrid strategy’ is actually independent of the outcomes it is claimed to predict. However, this supports the need for public leisure services to try to achieve both economic and social objectives, which Reid (2003) and Simmons (2004, 2008) previously examined in the large trusts; and the need to understand how they can do this. Further, while Hodgkinson's sample included 280 responses, it did not analyse by size of centre or identify those where local volunteers had a role in management so there is a place for research, to examine the small centres.

Small leisure trusts

Finally, there has been limited research specifically into the small trusts, which have emerged largely to save individual facilities from closure in response to budget cuts of local government since 2010 (Findlay-King et al. 2018). This has included: the transfer of a local authority swimming pool in 1990 and it's re-opening under community trust leadership (Fenwick and Gibbon, 2015); two studies of grass-roots based takeover of sport facilities, a multi-sport facility which transferred from a large leisure trust in 2011 (Reid, 2016) and a football focused facility which became a social enterprise in 2014 (Reid, 2017). In all cases, similarly to the large trusts, service improvements were identified and a change in management culture. Fenwick and Gibbon (2015) note an increase in trading income for the pool since transfer and a culture of enterprise developing alternative income streams. Likewise, Reid (2016) comments on entrepreneurial innovation and greater risk taking evident within the multi-sport facility, including provision of alternative non-sport services, attraction of non-sport funding and partnership working used to develop usage in quiet day time periods. The facility developed sustainable niches in under-served segments of the local sporting market and used a key holder system for clubs to independently use the facility and operate without staff, at evenings and weekends. This latter development shows a process that:

> "…would be impossible within risk averse local government, where clubs are mere recipients of a space from those delivering a 'job' there, customers become volunteers and were integrated within the sustainable business model" (Reid, 2016, p.9)

With the football focused facility Reid (2017) notes that the success was down to the main entrepreneur's extensive time spent in the community, understanding local needs and developing ownership.

Thus, limited research into small leisure trusts notes some similar changes to the large trusts; reduced costs, increased income, a change in management culture including greater flexibility and greater responsiveness to customers. However, Reid's work hints at the benefits of close community engagement. The small leisure trusts in our study all manage one, or at the most, two facilities. They have been established at a time when the strain on local government budgets has become even greater to the extent that a transfer to volunteer led groups has been proposed (often by the groups themselves) as the only alternative to closure and the loss of services. In contrast to the early leisure trusts (examined by Simmons (2004, 2008) and Reid (2003), the trusts we focus on are comprised of local volunteers who have been motivated by a desire to contribute to their own community. They represent associative democracy (Nichols, 2015) in the sense that they represent people living in the immediate vicinity who have joined to provide their own facility and who take governance and delivery roles. This is different to the large leisure trusts who did not always draw trustees from the local community, or where they did this was limited. Thus, we expect that while the small volunteer led transfers do not have same level of general management expertise of the earlier trusts, they may have greater sensitivity to the local community. Further, the greater involvement of volunteers in day-to-day decisions, as well as strategic management, means they can pay greater attention to costs and income.

Thus the research questions for this paper are:

1) Have the Trust facilities been able to reduce costs (apart from by no longer having to pay non-domestic rates)?

2) Have the facilities been able to be more enterprising and innovative in response to local community needs?

3) Why have these changes taken place and what has brought them about?

Research approach

To address these questions this paper draws from exploratory, inductive, qualitative research conducted to examine the issues arising with the asset transfer of public sport facilities in the UK from the local public sector. The full study examined a range of sport and library facilities which had asset transferred to voluntary groups from previous local authority management. For these we looked at the background of the organisation, the reason for transfer, the process of transfer, the involvement of stakeholders (e.g. local authority, volunteer groups), the role of volunteers before and after the transfer, the benefits and challenges of volunteer delivery and the long-term prospects and sustainability (Findlay-King et al, 2017). This paper was drawn from the study findings on management change, and its impact within the sport facilities.

After University ethical approval for the project, empirical data was gathered from in-depth semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in 8 small volunteer led leisure trusts. These were defined as small by their inception and continued operation as a community or sport club based asset take over. They all operated one sport facility, except trust D which operated two facilities (one standard size sports centre and a small gym) and had operated an additional two small facilities in the past. The sport trusts were from the north of England due to researcher travel limitations. The trusts were selected to represent those, which operated asset transferred sport facilities, were community led and had varying operational delivery models: by volunteers only, paid staff and volunteers and paid staff only. Both urban and rural based trusts were chosen, but it was not the intention to compare these.

An initial questionnaire to 2000 members of the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity, through their email bulletin, had served as a small scale, scoping exercise to show the extent of asset transfer in leisure services. This had a very limited response, too small to conduct any meaningful analysis, which led us to redesign the research to use qualitative methods, as more suitable for meeting our research objectives. However, from this survey an initial 4 respondents who were willing to talk about their experiences of sport centre asset transfer were identified. This was followed by a UK ESRC sponsored Festival of Social Science event, in 2014 to discuss Asset Transfer, through this a further 4 case studies were identified. Interviews were conducted with volunteers who had led the transfer process, managers of transferred facilities and a manager of a community action organisation (CAO) (Table 1 shows the sample).

Table 1. Facility Overview

Facility	Facility type	Context	Interviewee role
Sport Facility A	Swimming pool	Urban	Trustee (volunteer)
Sport Facility B	Single sport Academy	Rural	Director (volunteer)
Sport Facility C	Swimming pool and gym	Urban	Chief Executive (paid)
Sport Facility D	Swimming pool and gym	Urban	Trustee (volunteer)
Sport Facility E	Swimming pool	Urban	Manager (paid)
Sport Facility F	Swimming pool	Rural	Trustee(volunteer)

Sport Facility G	Swimming pool	Rural	Three interviewees: all trustees (volunteers – including CEO of Community Action Organisation)
Sport Facility H	Swimming pool	Rural	Facility Manager (paid)

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to explore several areas for the full study, including the areas relevant to this paper; the management change, service transformation, critical success factors and challenges. The limited responses from the CIMSPA survey, and more usefully, the ESRC seminar; helped formulate the interview questions used. Open-ended headline questions on these areas and probing questions for examples were used. Interviews were in-depth and lasted on average 2 hours, additionally interviewers spent time touring facilities with the interviewees. Interviews with sport trusts were conducted by three members of the research team, who all had experience of social research interviewing to build rapport. The interviews were transcribed and case study summaries approved by the participants. Transcribed interviews were shared within the team and regular debriefs were held during the data collection process to ensure that interviews were similar in standard open-questions, probing and length.

The full set of transcripts from sport centres and libraries were analysed using open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) by two of the authors. First order themes were manually identified across the transcripts and then grouped into emerging second and higher order themes by the two authors independently. The two authors then met, to discuss and reach consensus on the themes. From this, the key themes emerged, which included within the sport facilities: cost saving, income generation, programme change and culture change.

Results and Discussion

We address research questions 1 and 2 in this section, in order to fully illustrate the changes. We then compare these changes with those achieved by the previous wave of large trusts. We then explore how these changes have come about, to answer research question 3.

The trusts ability to reduce costs?

Across staff in the facilities we looked at there was a strong focus on, and impetus to reduce expenditure to ensure the facility was successful. This occurred in several ways. The facilities now had control over their costs and no longer needed to use local authority service providers. All reported that they closely monitored each cost item to manage or reduce where possible, some reporting that they did this on a weekly basis.

> "…every night I get in I've got to do the accounts because I don't like to get behind but it's good that you can see each day or…week compared to the previous year…if we are down a bit I need to make sure we can get that up or we've got to make savings and things…" (Facility B)

This would not have been possible under a local authority where costs are often recorded above the facility level. All of the organisations had reduced their utility costs by re-negotiation and some spoke of changing providers every couple of years for the best deal, this flexibility would not have been possible under the local authority.

One facility found that the authority had lighting excessively above the legally required level, so they were able to reduce this. This facility and others introduced energy management measures and significantly reduced costs.

> “Basic stuff, turning motors off if we didn’t need them, turning lights off…literally staying on top of every little thing, pennies make pounds” (Facility E)

> “…the building didn’t have any sensors in, so we put sensors in…I mean kids are kids, they put a light on and left it on, so we changed all of that to save us money” (Facility B)

Facility E spoke of needing to change the culture of staff in relation to cost attention, they were used to thinking that whilst the building was open they would have all electrical equipment working, instead of turning items off as described above.

They were also able to get reduced prices on services that the facility was previously required to use from the local authority. Facility maintenance and development costs were reduced by procuring materials and volunteer trades work, locally either free or at low cost. Volunteer groups worked to achieve either a full or a partial refurbishment after taking on the facilities. For example, Facility B used free end of line paint from a DIY chain, furniture from a charity and ceiling tiles from a shop being refurbished. The ability to save on trade services depended on local contacts, at one facility a trustee was a local builder and in another local electricians volunteered

"…three years of free labour" (Facility B). In Facility H, they benefited from financial support in the form of free services and materials from:

> "…a land owner…[who] donated the land and a substantial amount of materials, cash and expertise in terms of architects…joiners." (Facility H)

These benefits were possible because of the charitable status of the Trusts and would not have been available under local authority management.

Facilities spoke about key cost reduction coming from utility, maintenance savings, but the most significant savings from reducing staff costs.

> "…don't worry about a marketing budget of a couple of grand when you are spending £160,000 on staff, you save 2 or 3 percent of that, then that's a lot of money…" (Facility C)

All facilities used volunteers in some operational jobs. In many of the facilities, the staff team working under the local authority had been made redundant which saved the burden of the previous staff salaries, terms and conditions. In most facilities, using volunteers provided a considerable saving on salary costs and the new staff structure was streamlined, with most staff on the minimum wage. Some facilities operated with no paid staff in the initial years and only 1 or 2 after this. For example, Facility B stated "…the first year we ran absolutely 100% with volunteers because we didn't have the money to take staff on…" The volunteers across facilities were used for a wide variety of roles from reception, programme service and duty management roles, to "everything really maintenance wise…" (Facility H) and professional services. There were facilities that had only paid staff in some particular roles e.g. life guarding or duty management, but in some there was a mixture of paid staff and volunteers in the same roles e.g. reception and management. Several facilities noted that replacing paid staff with volunteers represented significant cost savings:

> "I think the sort of jobs that I've got people doing as volunteers tend to be more professional-type jobs which would cost us quite a lot of money to get done by somebody externally" (Facility F)

Different methods of volunteer recruitment and management were evident which worked effectively to ensure tasks were covered. Several facilities also talked about ensuring that members knew about volunteer involvement and that if staff had to be employed to cover volunteer duties, fees would rise, so they are compelled to also help.

In contrast to the local authority, the facilities also reported that they used paid staff in a different way, with an expectation that they are multi-skilled and work inter-changeability between roles, reducing costs required for multiple specialists. For example at Facility H – all staff including the manager, are expected to interchange between lifeguard, gym instructor, reception, swim teacher and pool technician roles. At Facility E "…we didn't have cleaners, we didn't have reception…" More was expected of the staff, than would have been the case under the local authority culture. There were multiple examples of facilities that previously had 'dead time' where the facility was closed with staff in. Programmes were changed to ensure staff were used for all of their working hours:

> "…they would have a school in for half an hour and then close for half an hour after that, they would have to have a cup of tea, it was just ridiculous" (Facility C)

> "Before we took over, the pool was open from 7 am with the staff, but they didn't start until 8.15 or 8.30am…We opened at 7 am and we started at 7.15am letting people through the door, it wasn't an hour and a half of staffing before we had actually started the programme" (Facility E)

Being independent of the local authority, meant that the Trusts had greater capacity to raise grant income and all had benefited from this and noted numerous grant support received. "One benefit of being a community asset is that we can apply for grants that the Council wasn't able to apply for" (Facility G). All facilities also spoke about fundraising organised by volunteers from the community, which became an important source of continued funding to offset costs. However, whilst the facilities had reduced costs and increased grant income, they were not cost neutral and did not envisage becoming so. One trustee spoke about the desire to become sustainable through income and other grants, and less reliant on the local authority, but thought that the demographic catchment market constrained them from achieving this.

> "I know in some areas Trusts are cost neutral and they can even generate income to survive on their own but due to demographics and the nature of [location] I'm not sure we will ever be able to get to that point at the swimming pool and if the local community didn't want to put money into it, it…would have to close." (Facility D)

All the groups relied on local authority support in the form of a peppercorn rent, rate relief and in a few cases grants or donations from the authority. Some were concerned about the continuation of this support:

> "…we've had no rates at all to pay. We've just gone through a review…so we're not sure whether they are going to ask for that 20% as from now" (Facility B)

The facilities are vulnerable, as a major capital bill or loss of key volunteers may threaten their viability.

> "…this year we're forecasting an £8,000 surplus and that's not a big surplus to forecast at all, so if the boiler breaks it can cost £10,000 to fix…if we lose a cylinder…we haven't got that kind of wriggle room in the budget this year, so there's more grey hairs…" (Facility A)

> "You might have £100,000 in the bank but that doesn't go far if you have a failure of something…" (Facility H)

Overall, the cost savings were possible because of the charitable status and small size of these trusts, with the ability to be flexible and pay attention to detail, in contrast to under previous local authority control. As the Chief Executive of Facility C observed the local authority was struggling because of costs management:

> "…some places you go they are fairly busy and I've thought, 'why are you closing that'? They're closing it because the costs are so ridiculous because they are paying staff far more than they should do for what they are doing and they are not open enough, so I've thought you can do that much slicker than that, but bureaucracy stops them…" (Facility C)

Enterprise and innovation in response to local community needs?

All facilities spoke about developing and investing in their facility, as soon they took over the management of it. The facilities had often been left in a poor state of repair by the local authority. Minimally in all facilities there was a thorough clean up and repair completion. This was considered key to relaunching the facility under their management, so that they were not perceived as the 'same old'. Pride was taken in a facility, with some describing how staff and volunteers treated it like their own home, keeping it well maintained, clean and tidy.

> "…everyone has ownership so it's almost their own home type thing, so if there's something spilt on the floor they won't just walk past it, they'll actually pick it up and clean it…I think when you have staff who are employed it just becomes a job and it's almost well it's not mine so I cannot really be bothered about it." (Facility B)

Service provision was under close management, with an immediate re-assessment of space use and programming. All described how they were running existing services better. For example, the CE of Facility C swimming pool said that under the local authority formula, they had only been allowed to take 30 swimmers at one time, but by their own re-assessment, they were able to take 60, so provision expanded immediately. Many of the facility Directors talked about how services were now built around customer needs, not staff constraints. For example, at Facility C again, on taking on the facility, they had been told that there were 42 hours in a week of available swim space, but they managed to increase this to 82 in the first weeks (by opening earlier, having a consistent programme on weekends and bank holidays and operating back to back sessions). They commented on how timings had been driven by a focus on staff in the past, now they wanted to be open every day at the same times to avoid confusing the customer, creating a facility that was fully ‘open’ and customer focused. This was similarly mentioned at Facility E “I just tried to formalise everything so we’ve got set days, set times, so people knew when we were open, what we were doing…”

However, all realised that sport services were difficult to make profitable, particularly standalone swimming pools, so they developed new services, including non-sport ones e.g. Facility D offered cultural and community hub activities, Facility A ran circus skills for children, and a gardening group, Facility B hosted community events such as election counts and blood donation. For example, Facility A used the arts to bring in different community users:

> “…we got a big outdoor cinema screen…in the swimming pool and we showed Finding Nemo and Jaws, so you could swim and watch films…they showed Ghostbusters for Halloween…we’ve got a group of mermaids that come in and do synchronised swimming demonstrations.”

Some of this had to be creative change to fit with UK transfer of undertakings regulations e.g. a gym club that took on one leisure centre could not run the previous programme of ‘kick boxing, tumble tots, dance etc.’ but adapted all to a gym theme with gym fit, baby gym, gym dance. Participants talked about thinking creatively about how their facilities could be used.

> “I think it has changed the community’s perceptions about what a swimming pool could be or what a leisure centre could be or what it could be used for…when X City Council had it, it was just the very minimum…” (Facility A)

Programme management focused on keeping existing customers and in particular ensuring that group ‘sport club’ users, as consistent, frequent customers were satisfied, but also developing new markets.

Overall, the volunteer Directors reported greater customer orientation, with customer needs being understood better and a closer relationship with customers. The volunteers represented the community and there appeared to be great willingness to listen to customers. “I think communication now between the pool and the pool users is streets ahead of where it used to be.” (Facility G). There was a sense that they could change to give the community what they want. Directors are embedded in (reside in the community) or linked to the community (Head Teacher, GP, retired local politicians). Volunteers, in operational roles as well as Directors with an expected strategic role, brought forward ideas from the community. The CEO of Facility C talked about how they further involve the public in annual strategy days:

> “we take all of the Trustees and staff away…we take volunteers along…and we might even invite members of the public who we think might have an opinion and might be useful.”

Staff contrasted this to where these services had previously been constrained. For example at Facility B baby gym was previously a taught session. The centre wanted it to be a structured education-led session but listened to the parents who wanted to come in and explore with their children. This is now facilitated with just with a staff member on hand for safety. Parents use it as a social setting to come and meet other parents. They also adjusted the start time to allow for parents dropping off older children at school.

The responses to customer needs were possible not only because of improved closeness to the local market, but because they now had the benefits of having control and flexibility to make adjustments, free and autonomous from local authority control.

> "…essentially there are good things about running a relatively small organisation because you've got people on the Board that are from the community, the staff all live locally and they've got good links into the community so you can make decisions based on the local offering or what locals want and if you're a larger Local Authority or even a larger Leisure Trust or own operator you get told to roll out the corporate offers and those corporate offers might not necessarily be what the local community wants or needs but they do that everywhere. We have this ethos where if you're a small Trust like ours and you've got the ability to change things you are not under the demand of the Local Authority." (Facility D)

The Directors spoke of an enterprising culture, where the innovation we have discussed above was a result of greater idea creation from staff, volunteers and managers. This entrepreneurialism was driven by the freedom from corporate local authority shackles and political interference, and with a shorter chain of command, but also by the need to compete to survive. They were able to use finance flexibly and respond to trends quickly, as we saw above. This meant they could assess, with more sensitive appraisal of the local market, appropriate programmes and prices, and make changes without bureaucratic delays.

> "We looked at our pricing and we thought we can change things, the next day change the programme…you didn't have to put a report in to account for something, it was a bureaucracy of the local authority then which slowed everything down." (Facility C)

A sense of shared responsibility among the organisations was evident and some talked of feeling that the facility operated as a community or like a 'family'. Volunteers and paid staff, alike, felt responsible for the facility survival and success thereby encouraging change and innovation. Paid staff had an opportunity to be more involved in decision-making, in contrast to during local authority control. Managers talked of a culture change, where staff created programme ideas to fill low use times, contrasting to how in the past they were not concerned about customer levels.

> "From day one the staff were always here and any activity we had done and think it's not been busy enough they would come and tell us that session was quiet. In the past staff would never go to the manager but all these staff have been involved in the development. The staff supply the ideas, they say we should change that, we should change that because they work with the public all the time so have always been dead sensitive to what the public wanted." (Facility C)

There were also many examples of paid staff growing community engagement, using their own time to promote the facility e.g. leafleting door to door. In other examples, the whole organisation impetus to be successful led to enterprising solutions such as a:

> "… facility's purpose-built swimming lessons database, designed by one of the volunteers. With its specificity to the pool's layout, teaching stations and procedures, it is far more fit-for-purpose than anything else on the market" (Facility H)

Whilst the management spoke of working directly with paid staff and volunteers and a sense of ownership from all, some felt that it was the involvement of volunteers, from the community, that led to a more committed organisation:

> "…there is perhaps more of a feeling of connection with the pool with the volunteers (than perhaps with the paid staff who are doing it for a job) who have been there for the long haul as it were and consequentially perhaps a bit more dedicated to the task." (Facility F)

To an extent, the Manager drove this sense of shared ownership and responsibility and the Volunteer Directors stressed the need to get an entrepreneurial person in post, who understood the sport service delivery and had experience of recruiting and managing volunteers. Other aspects needed for the role e.g. technical operations could be learnt.

The innovative culture was coupled with a greater focus on a single or smaller number of facilities, rather than several sport centres or a mix of leisure, arts and tourism services, meaning that they could focus all efforts into making one space well used. However, whilst there was an impetus to increase income and reduce costs, a few facilities noted that they could be become a victim of their own success, as they saw local authority support reduced where it was judged not to be needed. One Director in negotiation with their local authority over purchase of the facility equipment said:

> "[The local authority] came back to us with 'you've got a massive surplus, so you're being greedy now, you can afford that'." (Facility A)

Comparison of small sport trusts, to the previous wave of large trusts

The facilities we have examined show that there are benefits to small-scale community trust management. They have become more competitive by reducing costs, but they are still sustained by local authority financial support and without this, it is unlikely that they would be viable. Innovation and enterprise is evident, with an improved facility, range of programmes and customer orientation.

In comparison to the first wave of leisure trusts (Simmons, 2004, 2008 and Reid 2003) responsibility for, and efforts in, cost cutting are evident in both sets of trusts. However, the small trusts we examined were acutely aware of the responsibility across all staff. As smaller entities, they were able to scrutinise costs in more detail, and change quickly. They could also change suppliers, unlike the previous Trusts constrained to using some services because of the local authority. They used volunteers in operational roles to a greater or lesser degree and therefore made considerable savings on staff salaries. Our Trusts were able to save money more effectively, but were still as reliant on local authority financial support. All trusts were eligible for grant funding, but the smaller trusts appeared to be utilising this more than what Simmons and Reid observed in the larger trusts. However, the smaller trusts were more vulnerable to the impact of capital cost change. Overall the smaller trusts appeared to be more competitive on cost reduction, but as reliant on local authority financial support.

The response to local community needs was enterprising and innovative. Similar to the observations on the larger trusts, the smaller ones had a change to an entrepreneurial culture, with quicker decision making and empowerment of staff, however notably these included active involvement of volunteers at operational levels as well. Programmes and facilities had improved and whilst the investment in equipment or facility development would have been less extensive than in the larger trusts, there was a sense that this was changing to what the community wanted, resulting in improved income. Simmons (2004) noted that service improvements had been relatively minor in the large trusts, with this likely to be focused on extending service hours, likewise our facilities extended service hours, but they changed far more with regard to the facility and programmes. The examples given in the trusts we looked at appeared to suggest a careful consideration of customer feedback and interest – with bespoke programming. Simmons and Reid had spoken about staff feeling responsible for the success of their facility, in our cases whilst staff responsibility improved, with multiple volunteers involved in the facility, the Trustees talked about how volunteers treated the facility as carefully as if it was their own home. As we noted from the small number of previous studies on small leisure trusts, our cases has similarly increased trading income and developed alternative income streams (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2015). However, like Reid (2016) found in small trusts, the changes in some programming was more diverse and involved greater risk taking than previously. The alternative non-sport programmes and partners were outside of the usual area of a sports centre.

Looking at management strategy in public services, the facilities appear to typify the hybrid strategy that Hodgkinson (2012) identified as particularly fit for purpose for public leisure provision. There was a drive to innovate and provide an enhanced programme offer superior to competitors, and, necessarily at a relative lower cost-base. The closeness to the customer is necessary to add customer value and to establish where costs can be saved without affecting valued service (p.107). This is possible as they have the freedom to make these enhancements and savings.

Why have these changes taken place and what has brought them about?

Overall, there are benefits from small community management of facilities, but why have these changes taken place? The smaller size of the new trusts means that greater attention can be placed on management of every cost and offers a greater flexibility for changing services quickly in response to local demand, improving their sustainability. The role of volunteers in all aspects of governance and delivery; as associative democracy; characterise a different enterprise where the community is close thereby offering a greater sensitivity to understanding their needs. Simmons (2004) noted that the public were not partners in the previous wave of large trusts, the models we looked at were closer to this, with the community inside the management model as partners in governance and delivery. This is the closer community engagement that Reid (2016) had also observed in a small leisure trust. Whilst Hodgkinson (2012) did not distinguish size of centres or identify those that had volunteers in management roles, it appears that the smaller, volunteer led facilities we looked at are particularly adept at operating a ‘hybrid strategy’ due to their ability to control costs, and make responsive decisions on costs and community programme needs.

The small enterprises also had a different relationship with the local authority than the previous wave of trusts. Where an authority had leased several facilities to a trust they held an influence and the Trustees talked about challenges of authorities that wanted accountability and had concerns about democratic deficit (Simmons, 2008). With the small single facility trusts, whilst they were financially reliant on the authority there was little mention of constraining authority influence on decision-making, more over in some cases there was criticism of a lack of attention and interest from the authority. There was still a benefit from a positive relationship with the authority for advice, but the main contact was a financial one. This meant that the small trusts had greater freedom. Whilst the small size and far greater role of volunteers' characteristic of these enterprises brings benefits, this in turn means that they are more vulnerable. A major capital bill or loss of key volunteers may threaten their existence. The politics of these enterprises can also reveal problems, similar to those raised by Reid (2017) - long hours and stress for volunteers, vulnerability of previous local authority facility staff who may be made redundant or continue on different or detrimental terms and conditions, for example Facility E casualised all of its staff onto zero hours contracts.

The driver to the initial asset transfer is important to consider. The trusts we examined have come about because of local authority budget cuts. This has led to greater involvement by the community in the delivery of services. This appears to be a reaction to cost cutting, rather than an ideologically led change. Participants did talk about thinking that they could run a facility better than the local authority and meet community needs. However, any vision of a different way of doing things came after the need to act to save a facility, as local authorities announced closure or transfer plans.

Conclusion

We can draw from this research the following. Firstly academically, we can conclude that the small leisure trusts we examined retain the advantages of the first wave of large leisure trusts of the 1990s (Reid, 2003 and Simmons 2004, 2008), but with further advantages because they are produced for the community by the community. The use of volunteers from the community as trustees and in operational roles brings the trust closer to the community to understand and respond to needs. Volunteers in operational roles leads to a significant saving. Meanwhile the trusts are enterprising, think carefully and creatively about space use, to maximise income and minimise costs. They have a different relationship with the local authority to the previous Trusts, where the authority appears to be less of an influencer on business conduct, but still a key source of financial support. However, this in turn is a disadvantage, bringing vulnerability, reliant as they are on local authority peppercorn rent and rate relief. In contrast to the larger leisure trusts, if the local authority financial support changed then facility closure would be likely to be immediate.

Secondly, the main practical conclusion for small leisure trusts is to pay attention to detail in managing costs; and be sensitive, flexible and innovative in meeting local demand. This is facilitated by the small size of the organisation and the overlapping roles of trustees, managers and members of the community the centre’s serve. Thirdly, from a local authority policy perspective, the broader context of asset transfer is the relationship between the public and voluntary sector in leisure provision. A traditional critique of the public sector is that it is impossible for it to anticipate the infinite range of individual choices of leisure, which is an inherently freely chosen activity. Therefore, the public sector will always be ineffective in meeting leisure needs (Gratton and Taylor, 1991) However; a strength of the voluntary sector is that it accurately reflects shared enthusiasms. In effect, the small leisure trusts led by local volunteers are able to combine collective provision with a sensitivity to local leisure needs, as the volunteers managing the facility are local people. As in other voluntary sector provision, the consumers and producers are the same people (Nichols et al, 2013). Local authorities could consider the progressive potential of these small trusts in meeting local needs effectively and efficiently. This adds strength to the case of community groups aiming to take public facilities on.

There are limitations to our research, as it is based on eight North England based trusts only, which limits its generalisability and whilst multiple volunteers were interviewed in some facilities, in others only one viewpoint was provided. Further research is merited on a wider range of facilities, plus small trust transfers that may have failed, to explore fully success and sustainability. The knowledge and skills requirements of paid staff and volunteers and the role of the local authority as support, would be worthy of further exploration. Although political sensitivities would make this difficult, research could explore exactly how much had been saved by replacing paid staff by volunteers, and by how much other costs had been reduced. Simmons (2008) and Reid (2003) both explore the impact of transfer to trust on social inclusion, further research could explore the sensitivity to groups in the community and the balance between commercial and social objectives. Finally, a research question is the extent to which these transfers are a short-term political fix; avoiding facility closures; or are sustainable in the long-term.

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