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research article

The role of mutual aid in meeting society's needs: the example of community sports clubs' responses to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

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This paper considers the role and limitations of mutual aid associations in meeting society's needs. It does this by examining responses of community sports clubs (CSCs) in the UK to COVID-19 restrictions. We firstly make the case that CSCs typify mutual aid associations. Using two qualitative research studies we show how the clubs' responses focused on meeting the needs of their own members, expressing bonding rather than bridging social capital. Clubs' resilience was facilitated by the commitment of key volunteers, understood as serious leisure, and the complete overlap of governance and delivery in club management. These insights allow us to discuss the potential and limitations of this particular type of mutual aid association in meeting society's needs, and qualify general assertions that the voluntary sector would respond to the COVID-19 crisis by developing social capital. It reinforces the need for a typology of the voluntary sector to inform understanding and research.

Keywords mutual aid • social capital • serious leisure • community sports clubs • pandemic response

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Introduction

This paper shows how small mutual aid associations can meet society's needs through meeting the needs of their members. As the COVID-19 pandemic affected the UK in 2020, Haldane (2020: 1) suggested that 'The Covid crisis is the latest in a long historical line, with social capital gluing together communities otherwise at risk of

coming unstuck; the… policies put in place globally to contain the spread of the disease… reinforced the sense of community purpose and social solidarity… causing social capital to flourish'. At the same time Macmillan (2020: 134) proposed that the voluntary sector could: 'offer… new ideas, approaches and visions' to meeting society's changed needs, although research was needed on the extent to which it did this. A review by the British Academy of the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 concluded that 'local volunteer, community and mutual aid groups have been critical to the response to COVID-19, revealing the potential advantages of building and sustaining this type of capacity across the country' (British Academy, 2021: 65). However, assertions of the potential of the voluntary sector to meet society's needs must be qualified by an understanding of the different types of organisations involved (Rochester, 2013), of which CSCs offer a particular example.

This paper first makes the case that community sports clubs (CSCs) are examples of mutual aid associations corresponding to the ideal type described by Rochester (2013). Using two research projects it shows how the responses of CSCs reflect their strengths as mutual aid organisations, but also their limitations in meeting society's needs.

Community sports clubs

CSCs are managed almost entirely by volunteers from the club membership. The best recent estimates show approximately 72,117 CSCs in England; with an average of 100 adult and 77 junior participants, 44 non-playing members and 24 volunteers in each (Barrett et al, 2018; Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2018). The structure and scale of volunteer-led sports clubs is similar across most European countries (Nagel, et al, 2020), Australia and New Zealand (Cuskelly, et al, 2006). The only national survey of sports volunteering to estimate volunteer time, conducted 20 years ago, found that volunteers in sports clubs account for most of the sport-related volunteering (Taylor et al, 2003), which was itself a large proportion of volunteer activity overall. More recently, a national survey for Sport England found that 4.9% of the population over 16 volunteered weekly in sport in 2019–20, with the majority volunteering between one and two hours per session (Sport England, 2021). Thus, CSCs are a major element of volunteering.

Defining a mutual aid association

To make the case that CSCs typify mutual aid associations we first need to define mutual aid. In a wide review of typologies of the voluntary sector, Rochester (2013: 187) drew on Grotz's observation that 'the need to devise different typologies has allowed researchers to shape their work and conclusions… each researcher crafts a typology that fits his or her needs'. This reflected a lack of consensus on defining types of organisation within the voluntary sector. Rochester's general point was that a dominant North American paradigm clumped all the voluntary sector within a broad definition of 'non-profit' and failed to distinguish between different types, including mutual aid associations. Outside the American paradigm others have tried to define mutual aid. For Lyons et al (1998: 52), mutual aid organisations were 'the product of people's ability to work together to meet shared needs and address common problems'. For Smith et al (2015: 1400), who championed the recognition

of 'grass roots associations' in the US, mutual aid was 'People in a locality helping each other from time to time in a neighbourly way', and 'the practice of people helping each other deal with common problems'. As an illustration of the variety of definitions, Power and Benton (2021) recently claimed there are 4,300 mutual aid groups in the UK and 'thousands have sprung up after the pandemic', although they do not explain how they made this estimate, and it will not include the many CSCs. They defined mutual aid as 'a volunteer led initiative where groups of people in a particular area join together to support one another, meeting vital community needs without relying on official bodies. They do so in a way that prioritises those who are most vulnerable or otherwise unable to access help through regular channels'. So this definition includes philanthropic action to support those in most need, as well as supporting members of the association.

In response to the inadequate North American paradigm, and the need to base a research agenda on a more realistic understanding of the voluntary sector, Rochester (2013) proposed eight 'ideal types' of voluntary sector organisations. Within these, an 'association' was characterised by 'clear boundaries between members and non-members, arrangements for electing leaders and officers, rules governing how the organisations go about their activities, and depend[ing] entirely on the efforts of their members to get their work done' (Rochester, 2013: 236). Moreover Ellis-Paine et al (2010: 106) set out the nature and meaning of the volunteering activity in these associations as where 'volunteers identify closely with the organisation and are strongly committed to its aims and values. For leaders, volunteering is likely to go beyond being a spare time activity, to the extent that it is better considered a vocation or occupation; for them it is part of… the "serious leisure" paradigm'. Some of these characteristics are common to the understandings of 'mutual aid', used by Beveridge (1948) in his report, *Voluntary Action: A Report on Methods of Social Advance*. For Beveridge, mutual aid, in contrast to philanthropy, arose from individuals' sense of their own needs: its instigation was from the individuals who would benefit, rather than from philanthropists who judged what was good for them. 'Voluntary Action is defined not by the use of voluntary workers, who are unpaid; but by the organisation being governed by its own members, without external control' (Beveridge, 1948: 8). For Beveridge, these organisations complemented the state in meeting society's needs. Within Beveridge's report mutual aid organisations included trade unions, building societies, housing societies, social clubs, and working men's clubs. The report did not deal with CSCs, perhaps as they were not seen as a priority in tackling the major problems society faced in 1948 as it emerged from the war. However, CSCs were a common feature of UK society at the time, having developed from the last third of the 19th century (Holt, 1990; Nichols and Taylor, 2015).

Community sports clubs as mutual aid organisations

CSCs match the characteristics of mutual aid associations. Their purpose is to serve the needs of their members, which are to play one or more sports and provide conviviality. The latter was confirmed by a survey of CSC members in England which found that for 62% 'the club was one of the most important social groups I belong to' (Nichols and James, 2020). They are independent of the state, although they may choose to take grants from public bodies with conditions attached.

Clubs are governed by their own members who are elected from the membership to take management roles. With the exception of a few national clubs, they serve the needs of people in a particular area, but unlike Power and Benton's (2021) definition they do not prioritise 'those who are most vulnerable or otherwise unable to access help through regular channels'. While CSCs exist to meet the needs of their members, they do make a general contribution to society through the benefits of sports participation (Nichols and James, 2020). Social benefits include improved health, reduced crime, improved education and enhanced subjective well-being. It has recently been estimated that for every £1 invested in sport, which includes the time of volunteers, £1.91 worth of social benefit is generated (Davies et al, 2019).

Social capital and serious leisure

To understand why clubs focused on meeting the needs of their own members during the pandemic, rather than those of wider society, we used the concept of social capital. Although this is a contested concept, Ostrom (2009: 22) defined it as:

> … a set of relationships and shared values created and used by multiple individuals to solve collective problems in the present and future. It reflects how small to large groups interact culturally, normatively, structurally and institutionally. It also describes the effects these interactions have on individual incentives and behaviour and the resulting economic, political and other changes.

Within this, 'bonding' social capital is the expression of homophilic ties between individuals who are similar, whereas 'bridging' social capital shows heterophilic ties between people who are different. Putnam (2000) described bonding social capital as 'sociological superglue', reinforcing exclusive identities within homogeneous groups, and bridging social capital as 'sociological WD-40', enabling social contact between people across diverse social cleavages. This distinction has been applied to understanding why CSCs only tend to recruit new volunteers from within their members or people already committed to their sport, and not from outside the club (Nichols et al, 2013). Shared values and norms of commitment to the sport or the club were an important dimension of homophilic ties. Thus, these subjective dimensions defined 'sameness' and 'difference' just as much as other demographic characteristics. This analysis suggested that this dimension of homophilic ties would be more important in voluntary associations which are expressions of shared values.

Social capital is context specific. Foley and Edwards (1999: 151) assert, 'context counts… and counts crucially'. Coleman similarly points out that 'a given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others' (Coleman, 1990: 302). In applying this to a sports club run by volunteers, social capital may be embedded in the formal structures of the club, such as defined committee roles. However, the informality characterising many CSCs means it will also be embedded in relationships and values which bind the members to the voluntary association, and will determine how the club operates. This is illustrated in club recruitment policy (Nichols et al, 2013) and would be expected to influence who the club prioritised supporting in the pandemic.

In understanding the commitment of key volunteers to sustain activity during the pandemic, we used the concept of serious leisure. The concept of serious leisure as defined by Stebbins (1996: 117) is 'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience'. Stebbins distinguished volunteer activity from other types of serious leisure by 'its altruism, which invariably propels it… the unselfish regard for another or a set of others' (Stebbins, 1996: 219). Serious leisure has six defining qualities (Stebbins, 1996):

- The occasional need to persevere to overcome difficulties.
- The provision of a career involving stages of achievement and involvement.
- The requirement of significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training or skill.
- Durable benefits or rewards.
- Participants' strong identification with their chosen pursuit.
- A unique ethos that develops in connection with the activity.

Stebbins' typologies of serious leisure, casual leisure, and project-based leisure (Stebbins, 2007) have been used in many studies of volunteers. Examples of serious leisure volunteers have included community sport volunteers (Cuskelly et al, 2003), steam engine museum enthusiasts (Hagan, 2008), and leaders in the UK Guide Association (Nichols and King, 1999), among others. Rochester (2013) specifically mentions sports clubs as a context for serious leisure in which volunteers are motivated intrinsically by their enthusiasm for the organisation, in which they play a wide variety of roles.

However, while studies have explored the development of social capital in sports clubs (Cuskelly 2008; Darcey et al, 2014) little is known about the relationship between serious leisure and social capital in this context. More recently a study by Hallmann et al (2023), of event volunteering at a World Masters Games, identified a significant direct effect of serious leisure on social capital, and the influence of volunteer background and role. Local volunteers exhibited significantly more characteristics of serious leisure than the non-local volunteers. These serious leisure volunteers generated and acquired social capital, more so than casual volunteers. Hallmann et al's (2023) study hypothesised a direction of causality with serious leisure causing social capital, although it also acknowledged that social capital networks had to exist beforehand. So, while the Hallmann study was of a one-off event rather than regular CSC volunteering, the experience of serious leisure in volunteering facilitated the development of social capital, which was exhibited by the volunteers maintaining bonds and building bridges across their social network in the course of repeated volunteering. In this paper, in contrast to Hallmann et al's (2023) argument that serious leisure develops social capital, we propose that there is a synergy between the two concepts in the CSC volunteering context, and that this helps to explain the CSCs' resilience and response to the pandemic.

Methods

Two research projects were conducted to explore how CSCs have adapted to the pandemic. The studies aimed to understand how the CSCs had responded to

pandemic-related restrictions and how the nature of their organisation had enabled or constrained them in doing so.

Study 1

Studies 1a and 1b were formed of a longitudinal qualitative exploration of CSCs' response to the pandemic, with the same group of CSCs and key volunteers. They took place in July 2020 (Findlay-King et al, 2020) and were then repeated in January/ February 2021 (Nichols et al, 2021). Thirteen clubs were included in the first stage, then a follow-up study with 12 of the earlier sample (one club had no time available to repeat participate), in January/ February 2021.

Study 1 was constituted to explore the experience of CSCs and volunteers, mindful of effects of the pandemic, that we observed in our own CSC volunteering and communications with practitioner members of the UK Sports Volunteering Research Network (SVRN). We followed this up with a second round of interviews to cover further changes since July 2020. By this time CSCs had experienced a range of restrictions, including complete closure of facilities, the need to conduct COVID-19 risk assessments, and limiting the number of sports volunteers and participants who could meet.

Our previous research has often included CSC volunteers. However, during the time of the pandemic, the volunteers became a harder-to-reach group due to the impact of COVID-19 on daily life, and the stress of managing the pandemic impact on their CSC. Access to participants for study 1 was initially through the research teams' network of contacts from previous studies and social media promotion of the study via the SVRN (of which all the research team are or have been leaders). We then used snowball sampling to expand our contacts. We worked to develop trust with participants, providing not only email contact inviting to interview and key study details, but also the opportunity to speak by phone before interview.

Study 2

During study 1 we became aware of changes that CSC volunteers were making in response to the pandemic to survive and, in some cases, develop their club. To further explore this, our second study (Reid et al, 2022) was funded by and completed for Sport England. This had the aim of finding out how innovations made by CSCs, in response to the pandemic, might be continued as good practice. We looked at the response of CSCs to the pandemic during March to August 2021, and this study provided insight into a third period in the pandemic duration. From that research, in-depth interviews with a sample of eight CSCs and key volunteers have been included. The interviews were with a new set of CSCs and volunteers, so this was different to study 1.

Study 2 included the approaches to sample recruitment that we had taken with study 1, but was also promoted through a Sport England-run, Microsoft Teams group of Directors of Volunteering in sport National Governing Bodies.

Sampling across the studies

Purposeful criterion sampling (Patton, 2015), a technique used to select groups or individuals who are particularly knowledgeable or experienced in the phenomenon

Table 1: Study details

	Number of clubs	Criteria represented by the CSC groups	Interviews/ sampling across studies	Size of club membership. Greater or less than mean club membership size in the UK*
Study 1a July 2020	13 CSCs	Sport Indoor (5)/ Outdoor (8) Facility Owned (8)/ Rented (5) Sport Close contact (8)/ Distance possible (5)	13 key volunteers	< (8) >(5)
Study 1b January–February 2021	12 of the same CSCs	Sport Indoor (5)/ Outdoor (7) Facility Owned (7)/ Rented (5) Sport Close contact (7)/ Distance possible (5)	12 of the same key volunteers	< (7) >(5)
Study 2 March–August 2021	10 National Governing Body Directors of Volunteering			
	8 new CSCs	Sport Indoor (2)/ Outdoor (6) Facility Owned (5)/ Rented (3) Sport Close contact (4)/ Distance possible (4)	8 new key volunteers	< (4) >(4)

Note: *Mean club membership size of 120 participating adult, 42 non-participating adult and 95 junior members (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2018).

under study, by setting predetermined criteria (Palinkas et al, 2015), was used to gain a rich insight into the experiences of key volunteers in CSCs across the two studies. These volunteers were usually the club chair or president, from a sample of clubs which were criterion sampled to constitute a range of CSC types:

- owned versus leased or rented facilities;
- close contact sports versus where participation can be distanced;
- indoor versus outdoor sports.

It was anticipated that these factors would influence the CSCs' responses during the pandemic, and so this matched the intention of looking across a range of CSCs. In the case of all the studies, once we had snowballed a list of possible CSCs, we then invited CSCs to participate that met a range of the criteria. Where any declined we extended interview requests to similar types of CSCs in terms of the criteria that were being met.

Ethical considerations

Due to the stress caused by COVID-19 for CSC volunteers, this research could touch on matters that might be considered sensitive by participants. However, the research was conducted in compliance with Northumbria University (study 1) and Sport England and Bayfirth Research (study 2) ethical guidelines. Participants were briefed, gave their informed consent to participate in the study, and then debriefed. All participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the study should they wish to, at any time.

Research design

The qualitative semi-structured interviews used allowed for volunteers to explain the response of the CSC. These were conducted via virtual communication platforms due to pandemic restrictions. The interview schedule was designed to cover domains that would aid the interviewee in reflecting on the CSC and volunteers, before, during and after the pandemic. Themes explored included: changes, challenges and opportunities in the CSC and volunteering, and the volunteer and member responses. Open questions allowed participants to freely express their views, with the guide adding as an aide-memoire on the topics for the interviewers. In all cases the interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed, which allowed details to be checked with the interviewees.

Interviews were approximately 1.5 hours long. The transcription of interviews allowed for theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), where evidence of serious leisure and social capital, both bonding and bridging, was explored. For this paper, two of the research team coded the transcripts using a theory-derived sensitising coding scheme (Merriam, 2009) from existing research using serious leisure and/or social capital. The researchers worked together to check their consistency. Transcripts from the three studies were analysed together.

While the qualitative approach taken has provided a first insight into the response of CSCs to the novel period of the pandemic, there are of course methodological and sample limitations. CSCs and volunteers were recruited through our networks which, while wide-ranging, represent CSCs who we have had contact with before, meaning that they have either expressed an interest in SVRN insight or been involved in previous studies. To remedy this, we used social media and asked others to pass on information about other CSCs, so to reduce the possible impact of knowing of us as researchers.

Findings

How CSCs responded to the pandemic

As the pandemic initially developed a major challenge for CSCs was reacting quickly to changes in government guidance on how sports could be played, such as the distances between players, the number of players who could participate together, and if contact between players was allowed at all. Sport England and the national governing bodies of the sports to which CSCs are affiliated had no advance notice of these changes, so had to provide guidance to CSCs after central government had announced them. Only then could CSCs make the required changes. The implications of regulations were difficult to interpret for different sports. One sailing club illustrated this:

> '… we could start doing organised dinghy sailing from July 13th as long as on any one boat, it was either one person, so a single hander, or it was people from the same household. This allowed members to compete, if they met these conditions. It's not clear how the club could ensure that any two people in a boat were from the same household. A difficulty was that clubs were restricted to five households per session, but for any formal activity there would be people on the shore, launching, and retrieving the boats.'

CSCs had to adapt quickly to changes. For example, a tennis club had four days to react to the announcement they could open the courts: 'This presented volunteers with a lot of work in a short period of time; we had to un-padlock the gates; a few of us had to make notices; we had to set up a booking system because we had to follow LTA guidelines …'

CSCs adapted the way the sports were played to achieve 'social distancing' (for example by restricting the numbers of bowls rinks used to allow a gap between them); limiting the size of groups (for example for mountaineering, gymnastics); or reducing physical contact (for example no scrums in rugby). Adapting the sport could meet the general need for physical exercise, and this might be achieved by online sessions, such as gymnastics for juniors or general fitness sessions to help members keep fit.

CSCs also had to react to losses in income from membership fees, if these were not renewed or were paused; reduced numbers in coaching sessions; cancelled competitions; closure of facility hire and catering; and lost sponsorship. At the same time adaptations to the way sport was played involved increased costs. To mitigate this clubs applied for grants and rent relief, used a job retention scheme, and carefully managed their costs. Most CSCs had not suffered a significant fall in members. The national decline in sports participation during the pandemic (Sport England, 2020) was not reflected in a fall in club membership in the cases within this study.

While clubs adapted the opportunity to play sport, as best they could, they also adapted to meet the social needs of members; recognising their importance. As far as was practical, virtual substitutes replicated pre-pandemic activities. This included talks, competitions, quizzes, virtual Christmas parties and general social exchanges, using WhatsApp groups and Zoom events. Sometimes these activities actually increased social interaction, for example a golf club volunteer reported the amount of "stuff that was going around you know, just supporting each other… throughout the time we were locked down". In some clubs this extended to doing shopping for older members and delivering newsletters by hand when they did not have internet access, and for others, checking on members' mental health. This illustrates a positive outcome of the club's social networks being used to provide other support to members and social solidarity being enhanced.

Understanding the response of CSCs as bonding social capital

We have already shown that the main focus of the CSCs was in trying to meet the needs of existing members, through adapting the sport where possible and continuing to meet the needs of members for conviviality, often through new methods of interaction. As an archery club put it: "because of the culture we had, which was very supportive, one of the challenges we saw was keeping… that club identity and camaraderie together…". A golf club set up:

> 'WhatsApp groups for players that played on a Tuesday and a separate one for the Saturday players… checking on the older ones and making sure that they were alright… doing shopping for some of the older people and that kind of thing. So that was really nice and I think it's brought out a little bit more community spirit in this… section.'

Responding to the pandemic could lead to a strengthening of bonds between members. A football club showed this deepening of social relationships: "It wasn't something we were expecting to have to deal with. But actually, I think it's helped us to come together more as a group of trustees because we've had to get on together and get this done. So yes, I think it's had its benefits definitely". These responses reflected strong bonding social capital. However, it was not possible to completely substitute for face-to-face activity. A riding for the disabled group found that "it's impacting on volunteers who are missing the social interaction, they're missing the connectivity of people and to a degree you need your 'horse fix', you do get very fond of equines".

Some clubs broadened the sport they offered to attract new and different members, and this was consistent with their collective aims of providing opportunities to play their sport. For example, an archery club used older members to create a new 'field archery course' which simulated shooting animals in a wild environment. This appealed to a new group of members. The same club found that "as a result of people working from home, we've got a lot more people coming along now on a Monday morning, on a Wednesday morning [sessions which were previously poorly attended] because they've got a degree of flexibility from working from home". A yachting club described how they wanted to "get more women into our sport" through developing links with a university club, a rowing club and a dragon boat club, who could all share the club facilities. This would also generate more revenue for the club. Another yachting club changed its emphasis from competitive sailing to offer more recreational sailing, to appeal to a wider range of participants, while a boxing club found that by developing new training exercises they had attracted more women and adults.

A golf club offered a shorter version of the game on a nine-hole course, again to attract more members. A rugby club was considering developing "different forms of rugby… walking rugby is one that we think might work for people, trying to get the older element out… and we're also looking to get more into women's rugby". These examples all developed new participants through the bonding commitment to a particular sport. The rugby club did let a women's fitness group and a dog training group use its facilities for no charge, but this was the only example of developing bridging capital. Participants reflected on how the desire to expand their membership may have been there pre-pandemic, but it was the pandemic that provided thinking space and time to instigate this.

While CSCs showed a heightened concern to meet the needs of their existing members, there was little evidence of them changing what they did to meet society's broader needs. This was not because they were oblivious to them but because this was beyond their purpose, as defined by the collective interests of members within a mutual aid organisation. Typically, the sailing club didn't see itself "becoming [anything] other than a sailing club". A hockey club elaborated on this:

> 'While we want to be like that, I think first and foremost, we are just going to remain a sports club, of course, we want to offer support [to members], but we don't want to do that in… a formalised manner. Because we're not counsellors at the end of the day… obviously, it's really great to see clubs engaging like that… delivering meals and that, but it's not something that we really thought about or approached. I think, you know, our main focus is delivering sport as best we can.'

One exception in our sample, in respect of bridging outside the sport, was a wrestling club which put together a volunteer-led delivery service of food to people who were "self-isolating, especially the elderly". The wrestling club was based in a Sikh community centre, and although the club welcomed people who were not Sikhs, the delivery service was an extension of provision of free food to the local community, which was "what we used to do anyway, but became more specific". So, the club volunteers were acting as members of the centre, propelled by the Sikh faith to extend altruism to others, "so it wasn't just a wrestling club and it became a sort of a much bigger community club, I would say". Nevertheless, after the pandemic, "a lot of that attention is back onto the mat again".

So the CSCs' role did not extend to general philanthropy, which is consistent with Rochester's (2013) typical mutual aid association, and with Beveridge's (1948) understanding. Reaching out to new groups of participants was with the long-term health of the club in mind by developing new members, and was an expression of bonding social capital. The homophilic ties were the commitment to the particular sport. Clubs did not go as far as tightening bonds between members at the expense of loosening bonds with other groups; what Putnam (2007) called 'hunkering down'; but there was a deepening of bonds between existing members.

How the commitment of key volunteers as serious leisure facilitated resilience and adaptation

Key volunteers in the CSCs exhibited the characteristics of serious leisure. They had to persevere to overcome difficulties and make the adaptations illustrated above. Commitment was key: a sailing volunteer described:

> 'It's just been really difficult. But that's just the way it is… almost a volunteering deal, which is you volunteer to do something, and you get your reward in terms of seeing people are benefiting from what you're doing. It's been a bit difficult…. I didn't sign up to be Commodore of a non-sailing club. I knew it was going to be hard this year.'

Keeping the club running was a considerable personal effort:

> 'I think it does feel a bit more of a burden because you've got just so many things to think about extra….There are just so many questions, you know, there's nowhere to get the answers… you've got to work it out for yourselves to quite an extent.' (Golf)

> 'It has been massive, it became a full time job for me during that lockdown… at the end that was huge, huge, huge… but you know you want the club to succeed.' (Indoor bowls)

Volunteers had to learn many new skills. The main innovation was in the use of digital technology, such as zoom meetings and booking systems. This proved too challenging for some older volunteers, for example, a set of bowling green stewards resigned because they could not manage the new technology for processing green fees.

However, the rewards were considerable. A volunteer from a group that facilitates riding for disabled people explained how they cherished the experience: "I have to be honest and say [our group] is a lifesaver, the rewards experienced from volunteering mean I love it. I've done 28 years with them now and it's my passion". Other volunteers spoke of the social rewards of helping others:

> 'The reward is not financial, the reward is helping somebody, putting a smile on a kid's face… apart from that it's just a lot of hard work. But it never feels that way to us because… we want to do the right things, we want to help people and we find that rewarding.' (Wrestling)

The key volunteers tended to be drawn from long-standing club members, and for some the club had become a very important social institution which they identified with. A wrestling club volunteer expressed this:

> 'And we've been there for nearly 30 years and we were self-sustained for that long… the dedication and the knowledge that's been passed down from a father and uncles etc, who were wrestlers. And it's kind of like a way of life… and it's like one big happy family.'

A unique ethos, drawn from loyalty to the club and members, meant volunteers shared the same desire to do whatever it took to keep the club going and spoke proudly of this: "you know, you're the temporary custodians of an institution and that's it and you have to accept that. We're still all feeling that we want to keep everything going within the club" (Golf).

They strongly valued the rewards of club membership to the members, which drove their desire to keep offering activity, both by adapting playing, and alternative activities, even when this was difficult to achieve: "… squash is not just physical. Tactical, it's technical. And it means a lot to a lot of people. And so that's why we're desperate to try and keep our members interactive somehow. But we've got so little to offer them. It's really quite difficult". Thus, considering the work of key volunteers as serious leisure helped understand their strong commitment to keeping the CSCs running.

Discussion

Our findings show that CSCs are mutual aid associations in the sense described by Rochester (2013) and Beveridge (1948). As the CSCs existed before the pandemic, they adapted to meet the needs of members in changed circumstances. This was enabled by the commitment of key volunteers, interpreted as serious leisure and an expression of bonding social capital. This suggests that serious leisure and social capital both grow with continued involvement. We argue that it is the interaction of these that enables the continuation of CSCs, based on the foundation of existing social capital and serious leisure. This contrasts with Hallmann et al (2023) who argued that serious leisure determined social capital. This is probably because Hallmann's research was of volunteers in a sports event where they were unlikely to have known each other before volunteering, and so would not have had a base of social capital to build on.

In CSCs as small mutual aid associations, three characteristics facilitated the response to the pandemic. Firstly, the same volunteers take on roles of governance and delivery

and are recruited directly from the membership. This overlap of governance and delivery enabled CSCs to be very sensitive to the needs of members. Secondly, the members were very loyal to these mutual aid organisations: the bonds of social capital and serious leisure were very strong. Few CSCs in our sample had experienced a significant drop in membership, despite the overall fall in sports participation shown by Sport England (2020) surveys. In fact, as some of our results showed, the social rewards of membership may have become even more important during the restrictions associated with the pandemic. Thirdly, the management of CSCs is relatively informal. In this type of small group there is not usually a rational systems approach to management, in which the resources available (including volunteers) can be deployed most effectively through defined roles, to meet the organisation's aims. While this has often been advocated (see McCurley and Lynch, 2006) CSCs are not managed like this; personal relationships are more important. The informality of CSCs allowed for maximum flexibility: a small number of volunteers could very quickly agree adaptations to the running of the club. This corresponds to the informal organisation within grassroots associations which Rochester characterised as 'unmanaged' (Rochester, 2013: 229).

However, while CSCs illustrate the strengths of this type of mutual aid association in responding to the pandemic, by maintaining or even growing activities and members, they also illustrate some general weaknesses which may reduce their capacity to meet society's needs in the future. Sports participation has shown a trend away from participation in traditional team sports and towards participation as an individual or in small informal groups, which is consistent with Putnam's (2000) thesis of a move from collective to individual activity, 'bowling alone'. So, there is likely to be a decline in the number of clubs. Surveys of CSCs have consistently shown the difficulties of recruiting volunteers to the key roles, the ones most demanding of time (Nichols et al, 2005; Barrett et al, 2018), so if these cannot be replaced, clubs will not be able to continue. Analysis of the motivations of sports volunteers has shown a balance between altruism and self-interest, which will apply to all volunteering, but there is a concern that the dominant view of citizens as self-interested consumers may crowd out altruism in the long term (Nichols et al, 2019).

Nevertheless, the resilience of CSCs appears to support the British Academy (2021) conclusion that mutual aid organisations had been critical in the response to the pandemic, but there are caveats to this. Firstly, the commitment of volunteers and loyalty of members in CSCs had been built up over many years before the pandemic. New mutual aid organisations springing up in response to the pandemic would not have this resource and would have needed to recruit new volunteers. The Community Life Survey covering April 2020 to March 2021 found a very small increase in the number of people volunteering formally, and a more significant increase in the proportion of people volunteering informally, which was the highest level since the inception of the survey in 2013–14 (DCMS, 2023). Conversely, both formal and informal volunteering fell to the lowest recorded levels in the following year. This suggests it would be hard to establish new mutuals, like CSCs, during the pandemic because they would require a significant increase in the number of formal volunteers. The many neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, set up to enable people to share support locally (Marsh, 2021), will have contributed to bonding social capital and could be thought of as mutual aid associations. However, these would have required little volunteer work to set up and maintain. This may account for a large proportion of the increase in informal volunteering. However, beyond this, new mutual aid associations would need to buck the trends to recruit volunteers and members.

Conclusion

The studies in this paper show the resilience of CSCs, as small mutual aid associations, in meeting the needs of their members during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they question the motivation and ability of CSCs to meet the needs of wider society when members are their primary collective concern. In conclusion, our paper firstly supports Rochester's (2013) advocacy for a typology of organisations within the voluntary sector to help to understand their different contributions to society. Within this there needs to be a refinement in the categorisation of mutual aid which acknowledges that there is difference between organisations in their purpose of serving members and/or wider society's needs. This challenges the British Academy's (2021) conclusion that local volunteer, community and mutual aid groups had been critical to the response to COVID-19, and Haldane (2020) and Macmillans' (2020) claims that the voluntary sector would be inspired by the challenges of the pandemic to meet the changed needs of society. Our analysis shows we cannot generalise across the voluntary sector and need to understand the responses of different types of organisations within it. CSCs epitomise mutual aid associations, but other organisations will respond in different ways.

Secondly, we use theoretical understanding of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) and continued development of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996) to explain the CSC response. Our understanding of the development of social capital and serious leisure, in synergy within CSCs, adds to understanding of the relationship between serious leisure and social capital in volunteering (Hallmann et al, 2023).

Limitations and further research

Finally, this was an exploratory study. We have not represented all types of sports, locations and organisation sizes. We do not claim that our findings can be generalised to all CSCs or sport volunteers during the pandemic, but by including multiple studies we were able to see similar findings emerging repeatedly across time. However, our sample design meant that only key volunteers' voices were represented. Further research could refine the category of mutual aid associations within a typology of voluntary sector organisations. In the context of CSCs we have presented a synergy between social capital and serious leisure. However, as Rochester advocated, we need to '… take research [further] forward by qualitative studies…' (Rochester, 2013: 240), and so in-depth research of the social capital and serious leisure interaction process in this situation is required.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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