# "It's like a marriage… some of it's alright… some of it's really good… some of it's a nightmare": An analysis of sports clubs, sport policy and partnerships.

Stephen Robson & Janine Partington

Carnegie Faculty

Leeds Beckett University

LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

# Introduction

- Substantial research undertaken on structure, governance of clubs (for example, Taylor, Barrett & Nichols 2009; May, Harris & Collins 2013) and aspects of their role as policy implementers (for example Harris, Mori & Collins 2009; Nichols 2013)

- Period of social, political and economic change in macro environment coupled with changes within sport development (SD) policy arena
  - But focus still exists on partnership working as a tool for delivering policy (Lindsey 2006; Houlihan & Lindsey 2008; Robson & Partington 2013; Simpson and Partington 2013)

- Very little research specifically focusing on sports clubs and partnerships

- Our research interests / focus
  - Previous research on sports clubs and their relationship with the external environment (Partington & Robson, forthcoming)
  - Partnerships as a way of managing interactions with the external environment (Thibault, Frisby & Kikulis 1999; Slack & Parent 2006)
  - Resource dependence and boundary spanning

LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

# Methodological approach

- Clubs were chosen on the basis of their 'fit' within sampling criteria / framework using Nichols's (2013) criteria for voluntary sports clubs (VSCs):

| | 'New' club (established within the last five years) | 'Established' club (in existence for over five years) |
|---|---|---|
| **Mainstream / traditional sport** | Girls' football club<br>Rugby league club<br>Athletics club<br>Netball club | Tennis club<br>Junior football club<br>Swimming club<br>Cricket club |
| **Minority sport** | Handball club<br>Badminton club<br>Table tennis club<br>BMX club<br>Triathlon club | Archery club<br>Judo club<br>Gymnastics club<br>Hockey club |

- Previous studies in related areas (eg Shilbury and Ferkins 2011) extol virtues of qualitative depth in understanding sport administrators' experiences and opinions

- Semi-structured interviews undertaken with senior club officials

- A variant used of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Sparkes and Smith 2014)

LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

# Findings

- Policy
  - Understanding & perceptions of policy
  - Policy implementation: From paper to practice
  - Partnerships as a key mechanism for delivering policy

- Partnerships
  - Types of partnership
  - Benefits and challenges of partnership work
  - Managing partnerships
  - Boundary spanning
  - Resource dependence

- Key contributions from respondents

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

# Policy

- Green (2008:23) – policy as "a statement of intent regarding achieving, maintaining, modifying or changing something" e.g. 'Creating a Sporting Habit for Life' (DCMS 2012)

- Sports clubs as key drivers of participation and at the "forefront of local sport policy implementation" (Adams 2011:25)

- Emergence of a performance management culture in sport development e.g. no-compromise agreements and Whole Sport Plans (Collins 2010; Harris 2013)

- Collaboration even more important (Adams 2012; Robson & Partington 2013; Simpson & Partington 2013) eg Whole Sport Plans (WSPs)

# Understanding and perceptions

- Various theories of policy formulation e.g. policy communities, multi-level governance, punctuated equilibrium (see Cairney 2012 & Hill 2013)
  - Formulation of sport policy often seen as top-down and not necessarily needs-driven
- Awareness of current national policy was low; most clubs were aware of WSPs but perceived them as belonging to the NGB, not the sport or club
- Harris, Mori & Collins (2009) & Nichols (2013) discuss the role of sports clubs as 'policy implementers', yet few participating clubs perceived themselves as playing this role…

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

- Some evidence of clubs who engaged with their NGB taking part in national programmes e.g. the FA's 'Ability Counts' scheme and establishing new teams, but not always recognised or connected to NGBs' work around their WSP
  - Many clubs feel national policy is external to them i.e. - <span style="color:red">"We are our own club at the end of the day."</span> (archery club)
- Lots of frustrations with NGBs in particular and a perceived lack of appropriate support for clubs
  - e.g. judo club described being bombarded with communications from the Regional Development Officer but not provided with any financial support and made to pay to access training courses

- Unclear objectives and policy aims (Cairney 2012) and shifting goalposts (Green 2006)
    - [Are you aware of national policy and does it have an impact on the ground?] "No, not really, I mean I think the worst thing that happened was they got rid of the School Sports Partnerships; that was crackers. We really had a good working relationship with all the schools through the SSPs and when they went…it's now very hard." (tennis club)
    - Sport policy often undermined by broader political issues e.g. public sector cuts. Many clubs identified reduced support from local government e.g. one badminton club stated that "We don't really work with them as much now…there's no way they will help you like they used to because you are not paid into this programme of theirs [local authority club support programme which had a fee attached]."

- Partnerships as a mechanism for achieving / implementing policy by NGBs
    - Pressure on clubs to maintain link with NGB via RDOs etc
    - Partnerships as an often untapped opportunity for clubs?

# Partnerships

- Clubs subscribe to prevailing conceptualisation of partnerships as incorporating "interagency, inter-professional, collaborative or joined-up working, joined-up thinking or a whole systems or holistic approach" (Ballach and Taylor 2001:6)

- Membership versus partnership? Difference between 'regulatory / legal' relationships and 'developmental' relationships e.g. archery club - "they are just a <u>governing</u> body at the end of the day."

# Partnerships (cont)

- Surprisingly many clubs described their relationships with their NGB as limited - "I don't really get involved with them a lot" (swimming club) and "I mean, yes, we do try and work with them but sometimes you feel you're head-butting a wall" (football club)

- Benefits of working in partnership included – access to small grants (or support with completing funding applications), reduced price coaching courses or access to workshops, communication re: other opportunities and programmes, access to facilities.

- Majority of clubs recognised these as being helpful, but there were negative implications in terms of the cost of accessing training, coaching awards and conferences etc.

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

- **Motivations for partnership?**
- For example Johnson, Whittington & Scholes (2011)
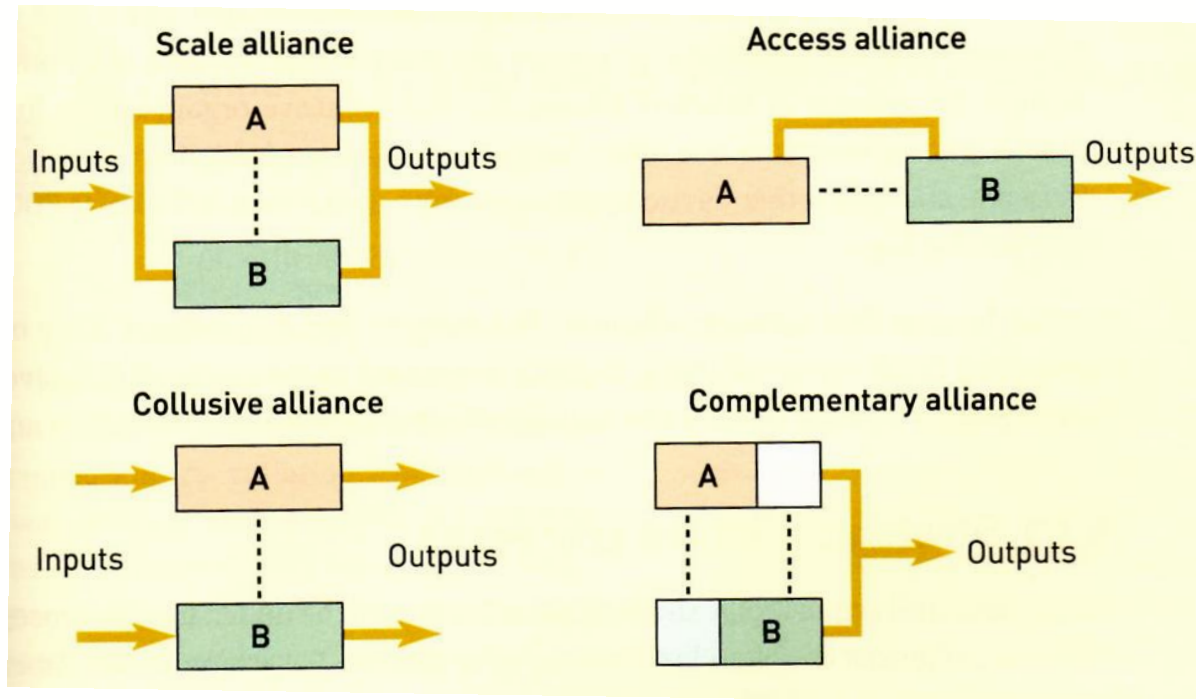


- For example, a football club hosted the annual schools' football festival in order to develop links to primary schools including a SEN school to target new members (access alliance)
- A table tennis club accused another club and the local authority of entering into a collusive alliance, leading to other clubs being excluded from key development opportunities

- **Partnership challenges?**
- Partnerships often predicated upon personal relationships (Robson & Partington 2013).
  - For example, the swimming club discussed the appointment of a new Regional Development Officer: "It's [name of officer]; I didn't rate [the previous officer] at all, [new officer] is much better, [is] more communicative, [has] been around a bit more I think… [is] better, [is] calm."
- Intermittent partnerships (e.g. see partnership lifecycle – Johnson, Whittington & Scholes 2011)
  - Gymnastics club: peaks in interest / partnership activity around London 2012, Glasgow 2014 etc
- Communication overload – all talk, no action?
  - Clubs felt that they often had to initiate a partnership – despite regular communication from NGBs it was clubs who often led the partnership
- Enforced partnerships (Simpson & Partington 2013)?
  - "Sometimes you are sort of caught between the devil and the deep blue sea because some of the things that the County FA will insist has to happen"

LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

- Competition or collaboration?
  - Netball club 'bounced' from facility by NGB despite pre-agreed Back to Netball time allocation
- Partnerships and policy?
  - Clubs as *de-facto* policy deliverers by definition, but not necessarily consciously
  - Used and abused by NGBs **or** entrepreneurs?
    - "Well, I get on with people, I do a lot of networking, I get in with the council, I meet all councillors, I talk to them all.  I don't fall out with anybody…I do network, I believe in networking" (swimming club)
  - Conversion of social capital (Adams 2011)
    - "I do think the role I do outside of running the football club massively helps, develops links, I think people probably won't admit it but the fact that they are liaising with someone who's a PE teacher, who's obviously gone to university… I do think that you maybe go into a room and demand a little bit more respect…certainly when you are talking to people who are trying to get things off the ground in terms of the new initiatives the FA are throwing out there."

# Boundary spanners

- Boundary spanners manage the interface between the organisation and its environment and actively collaborate with other agencies (Williams 2013)

- Lots of theory on boundary spanning within public sector management (e.g. Williams 2005; 2013), but only limited application in sport development (e.g. Simpson & Partington 2013)

- Boundary spanners in clubs: charismatic leaders converting social capital?
  - Williams (2013): key attributes of a boundary spanner
  - "So, yes, everything comes to me and if I can't help, I'll know where to get the information – I'm like a nice sponge!... I go to every meeting we're invited to, every conference, training courses.  As I say, I just feed all the information I get back from British Cycling right down, so when we do a first aid course, rather than just a few key volunteers going, I got the first aid company to come to us" (BMX club)

- Ultimately can impact on the ability of clubs to attract resources into clubs…

LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

# Resource dependence

- An organisation experiences external control when it depends to a large extent on its external environment for a critical resource, e.g. funding (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003)
  - Skille (2011); Wicker et al (2013) – European perspectives on resource dependence and sport clubs
- Ability of clubs with boundary spanning strengths to access resources
  - Partnerships as *counter-dependencies* (Hatch and Cunliffe 2006) driven by smart clubs' boundary spanners eg gymnastics club's influence upon local authority and NGB
  - Opportunities for clubs to exploit this phenomenon, but they need to better understand what NGBs require from them
  - 'Selective' partnering by clubs? "The Respect campaign: we massively support that. In turn your reward is hopefully you are going to be first in line to get the base [access to a new facility]." (girls' football club)

# Concluding thoughts

- Current study suggests a disconnect between policy and its implementation by NGBs and grass roots sports clubs
  - Clubs indicate that they are happy to buy in to relevant policy
- A smarter approach to partnership might hold the key
- Perception of clubs' reliance on NGBs is an over-simplification – NGBs are often more reliant on clubs
- Relevance to stakeholders:
  - Are NGBs engaging meaningfully in partnership with sports clubs?
  - How can NGBs (and possibly local authorities) recognise and support <u>smaller clubs</u> (must avoid encouraging 'favourite clubs' (Adams 2011))?
  - How can NGBs encourage purposeful boundary spanning behaviours by sports club officials?
  - How can NGBs foster appropriate resource dependencies?
  - Partnership arrangements need to be consensual, not enforced

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

# Reference list

- Adams, J.S. (1976) The structure and dynamics of behaviour in organizational boundary roles.  In: Dunnette, M.D. (ed) Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Chicago, Rand and McNally.

- Adams, A. (2011) Between modernization and mutual aid: the changing perceptions of voluntary sports clubs in England. International Journal of Sport Policy. 3 (1) March, pp.23-43.

- Adams, A. (2012) Social capital, network governance and the strategic delivery of grassroots sport in England. International Review for the Sociology of Sport. 49 (5), pp.550-574.

- Ballach, S. and Taylor, M. (2001) Partnership Working: Policy and Practice. Bristol, The Policy Press.

- Beyerlein, M.M., Beyerlein, S. & Kennedy, F. eds (2005) Collaborative Capital: Creating intangible values. Bingley, Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

- Cairney, P. (2012) Understanding Public Policy: Theories & issues. Basingstoke, Palgrave Mamillan.

- Collins, M. (2010) From 'Sport for good' to 'Sport for sport's sake' – not a good move for sports development in England? International Journal of Sport Policy. 2 (3), November, pp.367-379

- Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2012) Creating a Sporting Habit for Life. London, DCMS.

- Green, M. (2006) From 'Sport For All' to Not About 'Sport At All'?: Interrogating Sport Policy Interventions in the United Kingdom. European Sport Management Quarterly. 6 (3) September, pp.217-238.

- Green, K. (2008) Understanding Physical Education. London, Sage.

LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

- Harris, S., Mori, K. & Collins, M. (2009) 'Great expectations: the role of voluntary sports clubs as policy implementers'. Voluntas International Journal. 20 (4), pp.405-423.
- Harris, S. (2013) UK Central Government and Sports Development. in: Hassan, D. & Lusted, J. (eds) Managing Sport: Social and Cultural Perspectives. Abingdon, Routledge. pp.65-89.
- Hatch, M. and Cunliffe, A. (2006) Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives. 2nd ed. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Hill, M. (2013) The Public Policy Process. 6th ed. Harlow, Pearson Education Limited.
- Houlihan, B. & Lindsey, I. (2008) Networks & Partnerships in Sports Development. In: Girgonov, V. ed. Management of Sports Development. Oxford, Butterworth Heinemann.
- Johnson, G., Whittingham, R. & Scholes, K. (2011) Exploring Strategy: Texts and cases. 9th ed. Harlow, Prentice-Hall Europe.
- Lindsey, I. (2006) Local Partnerships in the United Kingdom for the New Opportunities for PE and Sport Programme: A policy network analysis. European Sport Management Quarterly. 6 (2) June, pp.167-184.
- Nichols, G. (2013) 'Voluntary sports clubs and sport development'. In: Hylton, K. (ed) Sports Development: Policy, process and practice. 3rd ed. Abingdon, Routledge. pp213-230.
- Partington, J. & Robson, S. (forthcoming) "I'm sure that it does filter through to some degree but I wouldn't say that I've ever noticed it": Voluntary sports clubs and the external environment: European Sport Development Network Conference, September 9, 2014, Walsall.
- Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R. (2003). The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press.

LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

- Robson, S. & Partington. J. (2013) Partnerships in sport. In: Hyltpon, K, (ed) <u>Sports Development: Policy, process and practice</u>. 3rd ed. Abingdon, Routledge. pp.127-148.

- Shilbury, D. and Ferkins, L. (2011) Professionalisation, Sport Governance and Strategic Capability. <u>Managing Leisure.</u> 16. pp.108–127.

- Simpson, K. & Partington, J. (2013) Strategic Partnerships. In: Robson, S., Simpson, K. & Tucker, L. eds. <u>Strategic Sport Development</u>. Abingdon, Routledge. pp.156-176.

- Skille, E. (2011) Change and Isomorphism - a case study of translation processes in a Norwegian sport club. <u>Sport Management Review</u>. 14. pp79–88.

- Slack, T. & Parent, M. (2006) <u>Understanding Sport Organizations.</u> 2nd ed. Champaign, Human Kinetics.

- Sparkes, A. and Smith, B. (2014) <u>Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and Health: from process to product.</u> Abingdon, Routledge.

- Thibault, L., Frisby, W. & Kikulis, L. (1999) Interorganizational Linkages in the Delivery of Local Leisure Services in Canada: Responding to Economic, Political and Social Pressures. <u>Managing Leisure.</u> 4. pp.124-141.

- Wicker, P., Vos, S., Scheerder, J. and Breuer, C. (2013) The Link Between Resource Problems and Interorganisational Relationships: a quantitative study of Western European sport clubs. <u>Managing Leisure.</u> 18. pp31–45.

- Williams, P. (2013) We are all boundary spanners now? <u>International Journal of Public Sector Management.</u> 26 (1), pp17-32.