

Dr Lindsay Findlay-King, Dr Geoff Nichols and Dr Fiona Reid – Written evidence (NPS0078)

Evidence from committee members of the UK Sport Volunteering Research Network. The network aims to facilitate the interchange of information, ideas, and practice in the research of sport volunteers; especially between researchers and practitioners.

<https://sports-volunteer-research-network.org.uk/svrn-board/about-the-svrn/>

Committee members include those with the most experience of researching volunteer led community sports clubs in the UK since the 1990's.

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Summary

This evidence first gives an overview of local sports clubs (community sports clubs) including: their contribution to society, organisational structure, the challenges they face, and in particular, the impact of Covid-19 restrictions. It then responds to individual questions in the brief. Community sports clubs make a major contribution to opportunities for sports participation and volunteering. They are small organisations, based in local communities. They exist mainly to allow members to play a sport and are completely reliant on management by volunteers. They are independent of government, but may rely on local authority facilities. They have the potential to make a wider contribution to society, although this depends on the vision of key volunteers. Whether they just provide opportunities for members or meet broader needs of society, the clubs and volunteers who run them must be supported in any new plan to maintain involvement in sport. They are a very valuable economic resource and cost almost nothing from the government to run while often providing an excellent service to their members at a low cost. Thus they are a very cost-effective public health and well-being intervention. Support is especially important now when clubs face challenges of reacting to covid-restrictions, including; financial sustainability, maintaining membership, and keeping the key volunteers motivated.

1. Overview of community sports clubs

1.1 The number and contribution of community sports clubs

There are at least 72,000 community sports clubs in England (1), accounting for 8.6m sport-participating adults; 3m non-sport participating adults – who will include volunteers or social members; 2.6m volunteers and 6.8m juniors. This estimate only includes clubs which are affiliated to a representative national governing body, so will be an under-estimate. The estimate of members is from club surveys, which probably over-represent larger clubs (2).

The estimates of numbers of clubs and members and other research into clubs, has generally been based on one of the four home countries; however, our understanding can be applied across England, Scotland, Wales and N Ireland as the structure and contribution of clubs will be the same in each country.

Clubs make a considerable contribution to opportunities for sports participation, with associated benefits to mental and physical health. They provide opportunities for young people to develop a commitment to sport. In contrast to local authority leisure facilities or private gyms the clubs are run almost entirely by volunteers. This reduces the costs to members. Volunteers gain considerable mental health benefits from volunteering, and the club structure allows for a progression of volunteer involvement.

The contribution of all volunteering to UK society has been estimated at £200 billion in social value each year: around 10% of GDP. Volunteering in sports clubs accounts for 9% of all male volunteering in Wales, the highest percentage for any activity, and 4% of all female volunteering. An estimate of the value of sports volunteers in England is £20bn; which combines the value of volunteering time with subjective well-being for volunteers (3).

The estimate would be much bigger if it also included the benefits of the sports participation in clubs which the volunteers enable to take place. A caveat is that presenting this as a monetary value tends to devalue the altruism and civic responsibility which motivates volunteers.

1.2. Organisation and structure of community sports clubs.

Clubs are mutual aid organisations which exist to express the collective interests of members – primarily to play a specific sport. Many affiliate to a national governing body because this provides a structure for competitions, provides collective services such as insurance, provides guidance, and represents their interests. However, some clubs will not affiliate, and some groups of individual may not have any formal structure.

Apart from the rewards of playing sport a major reward of club membership is the social relationships; conviviality. A recent survey of club members across Europe found this reward was more important than sporting success (4).

Nearly all the work to run the club is done by volunteers. This is concentrated in the most demanding roles of coach, fixture secretary, secretary, chair, and treasurer. Clubs are very reliant on a relatively small number of volunteers who contributed a large proportion of the work and who will have a strong influence of what the club does. A large percentage of these core volunteers have been members of the club for over ten years. New volunteers often join to support their children's participation. Clubs have to rely on new volunteers developing a commitment to the club, such as they gravitate towards more demanding key roles (5, 6).

Clubs are embedded in their local community. About 25% were founded before 1945, and some as far back as the 19th century. They have a long tradition of independence.

1.3 Challenges faced by community sports clubs.

There is a long-term trend away from participation in formal sport, especially team sport; and towards sports people can take part in individually and in small groups; at times that suit them. This reflects a fragmentation of leisure time – as hours of work and other demands change, people are less likely to have time for leisure at the same time or regular times as others. So, as an example, it is much harder to find 11 people to play in a cricket team each Sunday afternoon. Growth sports are running, walking, cycling and gym membership (7).

Volunteer roles have become more demanding as they are affected by more regulations; for example, safeguarding regulations require clubs with juniors to have a welfare officer, and for volunteers to take DBS checks. The reliance on a core of volunteers who do most of the work makes it harder to replace them. However, they are essential to maintain the club structure which allows others to take lesser volunteering roles and to participate (8).

It has become harder for clubs to access public leisure facilities at times and costs they require as these have closed, or are managed on a more commercial basis as subsidy has been reduced (9).

1.4 The response to Covid-19.

Clubs need to be supported to survive the impacts of covid-19 restrictions because of their contributions to health and wellbeing.

Clubs have tried to adapt their sport to maximise opportunities to play within the restrictions. This has given volunteers more work to do. They have had to react quickly to changed government guidance, which has had to be interpreted for their sport and club (10).

Clubs with fixed costs of facility maintenance and reduced incomes may not survive financially. Increased costs include sanitising premises and equipment, and less sharing of transport. Clubs may need to meet facility maintenance costs and pay rent. Income may be reduced from membership fees, reduced number of people in coaching sessions to maintain social distancing, higher instruction costs per person, cancelled competitions, closure of catering facilities and reduced fundraising from club events. A survey of Australian clubs (11) and a survey of UK football clubs (12) both concluded that a significant number would be not be financially viable.

Members may not return after lockdowns and disrupted seasons. Sport England analysis shows a major fall in sport participation. The ability to adapt the sport to achieve social distancing varies between sport, and an adapted form, for example, rugby without tackling, may have less appeal to members. Both sport participants and volunteers are deterred by the risk of catching covid (13). The core volunteers remain committed to trying to return the club to pre-covid activity. However, if any of these drop out it will be hard to replace them when the club is not active.

2. The contribution of community sports clubs in relation to the questions asked by the committee.

2.1. How can local delivery, including funding structures, of sport and recreation be improved to ensure that people of all ages and abilities are able to lead an active lifestyle? For example, how successfully do local authorities and other bodies such as Active Partnerships, Leisure Trusts, local sports clubs and charities work together, and how might coordination be improved?

The main influence on the relationship between local authorities and clubs has been the reduction in budgets for local authorities since 2010. Between 2010 and 2015, the average cut in local authority budget across England was £130.06 per person. From 2015/16, the Institute of Fiscal Studies show further considerable falls in spending power of local authorities. As a consequence, local authorities have sold leisure facilities, reduced subsidy, and transferred management to trusts. Many clubs rely on use of local authority leisure facilities but have found it harder to get access at a time and cost required, and this has been removed entirely if facilities have been closed.

Local government sold over 4000 buildings per year, over a five-year period, from 2012/13 to 2016/17 (14). Over 700 public football pitches have been lost since 2010 (15). Since 2014/15, over 12,000 public spaces have been disposed of (16) which may have been used for informal recreation.

Local authorities have reduced the subsidy of leisure facilities and have passed management of them to trusts. The proportion of leisure centres and swimming pools managed by local authorities has declined from 25% in 2014 to 18% in 2018. Thirty-five per cent of the UK's leisure centres and swimming pools are now managed by trusts, dominated by a few large national operators (17). These will only take on profitable facilities. For example, in 2016 Newcastle City council transferred three facilities to North Country Leisure, which is part of the GLL group. The council wanted to include a fourth pool in the package, which was losing £260,000 a year, but no bidder would submit an offer had this been included.

Some clubs work with local authorities to further policies, such as promoting physical activity and participation by under-represented groups. There are examples in the 12 'Local Delivery Partnership' pilots promoted by Sports England, initiated in 2017. A review of these may lead to lessons on how this approach can be applied generally.

2.2. How can children and young people be encouraged to participate in sport and recreation both at school and outside school, and lead an active lifestyle? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.

Community sports clubs provide major opportunities for young people to participate in sport and develop a sporting commitment. English clubs have approximately 6.8m junior members.

2.3. How can adults of all ages and backgrounds, particularly those from under-represented groups, including women and girls, ethnic minorities, disabled people, older people, and those from less affluent backgrounds, be encouraged

to lead more active lifestyles? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.

Clubs can promote participation by under-represented groups, but this depends on the aims of the club, as represented by the core volunteers. This is often made possible by Sport England grants. Two examples are described in Appendix 1. Both these show the importance of: the vision and skills key committee members bring to the club, willingness to use Sport England support and advice, willingness to work with other organisations – such as schools, a developmental approach towards junior members, and recognizing the value of social aspects of membership.

One can think of clubs as different types. The role of clubs in society will depend on how wide a vision for the club volunteers in it have, ranging from:

- a. Providing for people who want to play a specific sport.
- b. Actively encouraging people to take up the sport. This may include making links to other organisations, such as schools or youth clubs.
- c. Actively encouraging people to take up the sport who would not otherwise do so, as they are disadvantaged in some way.
- d. Trying to meet broader needs in society beyond sports participation. This could include seeing sport as a means to social development, especially of young people; or it could be broader than this, to include meeting new needs arising from the pandemic.

The clubs in the appendix are at levels c and d. But lots of clubs will be perfectly happy at level a, where they make a valuable contribution.

2.4. Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation, the Government's 2015 sports strategy, outlines five outcome priorities: physical health, mental health, individual development, social and community development and economic development. Are these the right priorities and how successful has the government been in measuring and delivering these outcomes to date?

Sport England's priorities in their 2021 strategy are to improve health and wellbeing, to tackle inequalities and to work through collaborating with others. We agree with these.

Sport England's Active Lives survey, repeated annually, gives valuable information on participation trends. Measures of physical and mental health show an increasing divergence between social classes over the last ten years (18).

2.5. Is government capturing an accurate picture of how people participate in sport and recreation activities in its data collection? How could this be improved?

As above, Sport England's Active Lives survey is one of the most comprehensive in Europe. It is refined periodically.

2.6. How can racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and ableism in sport be tackled?

Community sports clubs would be sympathetic to tackling these, but it is not one of their core aims. They are mainly groups of similar people joining together to

express an interest in a particular sport. This could be compared with an organisation such as the Scout Association, which has aims of developing young people, and has active policies and mandatory training for leaders on these issues.

2.7. What can be done to improve and implement effective duty of care and safeguarding standards for sports and recreation activities at all levels?

Sport England's clubmark accreditation requires clubs to have a welfare officer and implement safeguarding policies. Clubs may not aspire to this clubmark status, but they are still legally required to follow safeguarding procedures for working with juniors or vulnerable adults. Again, an organisation such as the Scout Association which works specifically with young people has mandatory training for leaders as well as following legal requirements. One could not oblige volunteers in clubs to take this.

2.8. What are the opportunities and challenges facing elite sports in the UK and what can be done to make national sports governing bodies more accountable? For example, accountability for representing and protecting their membership, promoting their sport and maximising participation.

The contribution of community sports clubs is to provide opportunities to develop an interest in sport and skills at the 'bottom of the pyramid'. Thus community sport is the basis of development of elite sport.

National governing bodies are primarily responsible to the clubs they represent, although they may receive funding from Sport England. Therefore, club members and their club representatives should determine the NGB's policies. At the same time, NGBs are obliged to follow conditions of Sport England funding. NGBs want to maximise participation in their sport. Clubs may try to recruit new members or they may regard themselves as a club which those interested in taking part in the sport can join; a type 'a' club in the typology above.

2.9. What successful policy interventions have other countries used to encourage people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to participate in sport and recreation, and lead more active lifestyles?

Other countries have policies which incentivise clubs to promote participation for young people (19, 20). In Switzerland sports clubs are supported through the national *Youth and Sport* programme to promote youth sports. Clubs receive a fee per young person (aged between five and 20 years) participating in their sports clubs. This programme is mainly implemented through volunteers in sports clubs. In 2010, approximately two-thirds of the Swiss population aged between ten and 20 years took part in this programme. Funding also pays for the development of coaches and for instructors.

In Denmark local authorities are legally obliged to give voluntary sports clubs free access to facilities; or a minor fee, for club members aged 25 or under. Local government also pays a direct fee to clubs for each member aged 25 or under.

2.10. Should there be a national plan for sport and recreation? Why/why not?

Yes – but a plan needs to have broader aims of maximising the health and wellbeing of society, with sport and recreation as a contributor to this. Supporting volunteers and volunteer led community sports clubs would be central to this plan. This would need to build the opportunity for physical activity into people’s lives automatically; which would include policies on travel, transport and work place welfare. It would include policies to improve diets, including incentivising healthy eating and cooking. It would include education to help young people develop a commitment to and skills for a healthy life-style. Increasing health inequalities and obesity have contributed to the country’s high covid-death rate and these need to be reversed. Across Europe, higher levels of inequality are associated with lower levels of sports participation, volunteering, leisure time and health (21, 22).

If a plan is just for sport it would be frustrated by not being able to influence all the factors which determine sports participation.

Appendix 1. Examples of clubs which have reached out to under-represented groups.

(adapted from ref. 19)

Northern Hope Gym Club, Birtly, Co. Durham

Founded	Members #	Sports/related activities
1989	400	Gymnastics

What made this club successful

Both success in promoting volunteering and the willingness to integrate new, and difficult, groups, reflects the vision of the club’s founder, who remains the Head Coach and Director. This vision includes the personal development of young people; including self-discipline, commitment, sportsmanship, respect for others and enjoyment of life; through gymnastics. Thus staff have to be role models as well as instructors. In particular, the Head Coach and Director had a very positive approach to trying to integrate the young people excluded from sport and society. The development of sessions for a group of young people excluded from sport and society was made through a personal contact. The expansion to the new building, which has been developed to encourage social interaction, was supported by a grant from Sport England.

Description of the club

The club has 400 members from pre-school age to 18. There are 15 volunteer coaches and another five volunteers taking administrative roles. These 20 form a management committee. In addition, numerous other roles are taken by volunteers; for example, looking after the tuck shop, fundraising or making costumes. The club has its own premises – a large factory space it took over in 2012 and adapted to its needs by dividing it up. Sessions are run every evening from 4pm to 8pm, for groups of different ages and ability. There are also sessions three times a week during the day for pre-school groups.

The head coach is employed part-time at the club and volunteers for the rest of the time. She founded the club in 1989 and when it moved into the new building

in 2012 she gave up her previous part-time paid work to spend all her time running the club and coaching.

Some coaches are paid and some are voluntary. The volunteer coaches are supported by the club to take coaching classes which cost £400. For example, a young person may take a coaching course and agree to give back a member of hours of coaching. The club pays for volunteers over the age of 18 to take the necessary 'disclosure and barring' check.

The development of the new building in 2012 was supported by a grant of £50,000 from Sport England. Members come from a 20-mile catchment area which is considerable for one hour sessions. Gymnasts from the club win national level competitions.

Good practice in reaching out to new groups

The club ran special sessions for young people aged 11-17 who had been excluded from main-stream schools and were in a 'special school' in Newcastle (10 miles away).

The sessions were arranged by the parent of a gymnast who was a teacher at the school. Initially only four or five children were taken at one time. Their behaviour was extremely unsocial; swearing, fighting and averse to any personal contact. The sessions were extremely successful in changing behaviour. For example, participants learnt to accept physical contact and reciprocated relationships of respect. They were extended to 12 young people at a time – with a waiting list. Sessions were only 15 minutes long, with an extra three minutes 'free time' for good behaviour. This was as long as possible with this group, as they had a very short attention span. Unfortunately, it was not possible to build on this work with further opportunities for these young people to develop, as they lived too far away to attend the gym club independently. There was no parental support, perhaps this was not possible.

Intensive training was done with two young people, who were exceptional gymnasts, to support them taking part in a national competition. But just before the event they dropped out. The reasons are not clear.

Other sessions have been run for adults and for parents. An adults' class was started for anyone in the area to come and train basic skills at any level. Some participants were pure beginners and some were retired gymnasts who wanted to continue but not compete, or adults who did gymnastics in their youth and want to relive it all over again.

A session for parents was linked to a fundraising event. Parents had the opportunity to have their children (club gymnasts) teach them gymnastics and put them through their paces. It was a fab night, both enjoyed by the parents and gymnasts alike. Certificates were presented to the parents at the end of the session.

Sessions for adults and parents show attempts to develop participation from new groups.

Sources for further information about the club

Website: <http://www.northernhope.co.uk/> - homepage for the sports club

Market Harborough Squash Club, Leicestershire

Founded	Members #	Sports/related activities
1970s	290-300	Squash and racketball

What made this club successful in reaching out to other groups

- The vision and skills the secretary and key committee members bring to the club
- Willingness to use Sport England support and advice.
- A general positive attitude to opportunities.
- Willingness to work with other organisations – such as schools.
- A developmental approach towards junior members, to encourage them to remain with the club.
- Recognition of the value of social aspects of membership, and facilitating these.

Description of the club

The club was formed in the 1970s by a cricket club, with which it shares grounds. In recent years the squash club has increased membership and the cricket club has reduced members, so now the squash club is the stronger partner. Only two years ago the relationship between the two clubs was reconstituted such as all adult members of both clubs have voting rights at annual general meetings and extraordinary general meetings. The clubs have independent committees and run separately, although there is some cross over of members. Each can help to raise the profile of the other.

The club owns the facilities and leases the land from a charity. (This means they can set their own membership fees and court fees, which might not be possible if using a local authority facility). The squash club has five courts. These are also used for pilates during the day.

It is a membership club, so only members can play. There are about 240 adult members and 50/60 juniors. The club has recently gained members from other local clubs which have closed. Members can pay annually or monthly, and there are full, off peak, family and junior categories with no additional court fees. This may make the club's membership more expensive than some, but with no court fees actually encourages people to play more, and then the club gets the benefits of people using the bar etc. afterwards in the week. From a club management point of view, it means the club knows its income and does not have to rely on additional income from court fees which can be unknown amounts.

The club employs a part-time cleaner and four part-time bar staff. All other roles are taken by volunteers. This includes roles on a management committee and a range of other roles – such as bar work and maintaining the building. Each of the 7 teams has a volunteer captain and there are two female volunteer coaches, and five male volunteer coaches.

The club secretary and her husband joined the club seven years ago, from another club, and saw ways it could be developed. They volunteered for the committee and gradually gained members' confidence and trust as they became more involved and developed a vision for the club. The club secretary had trained as a physiotherapist and had previously worked as a manager in the National Health Service. This experience has helped her in her volunteer role in the club, which she combines with paid work as a pilates instructor, also at the club. So she is at the club most of the day, and she put it, 'almost lives there'.

The club caters for all levels of ability, from elite players, to grass roots, and the youngest member is aged four. This balance of abilities is good for the club as there are role models for a progression of ability, but also a thriving social environment.

Good practice elements - Promoting adult members

The club is seen as a community – some members will just want to play, but the social aspect of membership is important for others and the committee arranges activities to allow for this. For example, a new members evening is run to help new people get to know each other and feel part of the club. Spaces in the club have been created to enable social mixing, such as comfy chairs in the bar and viewing area. A space has been made for parents to meet informally during Saturday morning junior sessions.

The secretary's vision of the club is as a community, in which volunteering is a key contribution.

Good practice elements – Promoting participation by young people

All junior members are allowed to use the court at no cost during the day. Juniors who come to the club coaching sessions get free off-peak membership. Parents of younger junior members then often join to bring them along to practice. As with adult membership, there are no junior court fees. Juniors only start paying membership when they start playing in the club leagues or want to play in peak time. This membership is only £8 per month. This means the courts are very popular with juniors in the school holidays. While a high proportion of young people in the area attend university, this is always in another town, as there is not a university locally. Young people who attend university are also allowed to use the courts with no charge in the university holidays. This is to keep them connected to the club and the sport, and as role models for the junior members (in contrast, they would normally have to pay court fees while playing at university). Similarly, if young people return to Market Harborough to live after attending university they are allowed to join for a year at the junior rate. The youngest junior is aged four. The game can be adapted for young people using different balls.

The secretary's vision is for club membership to develop young people to be 'nice people' as well as squash players – the two go together, and she is proud of compliments that have been paid to junior members by other clubs. Being brought up in a family which volunteered, she believes that if this can be instilled into young people it will develop the future club volunteers. Thus there is an ethos of volunteering built into the junior section, and the club as a whole.

Unlike in some other sports there is not a junior volunteering award, however 7 or 8 young people have used volunteering at the club as part of their Duke of Edinburgh award. This has involved young people coaching others. However, young people do not seem to be primarily motivated by external rewards from volunteering, such as adding to their CV. Occasionally a course has been run for junior assistant coaches. One junior was supported to take a level 1 coaching award, which is the one adults would take. This cost £230 and takes a weekend. To encourage junior players the club took part in Sport England's Sportivate scheme, in which clubs are linked to schools. This normally involves the club setting up a junior section in a school, but for squash it has to involve young people coming to the club to play. Within this a local school has brought older

children to use the club for one term a year, free of charge. This has led to some joining as juniors. Sport England provided some funding for extra kit and coaching sessions for the first few months but the club now provides this as part of normal practice.

At one school the club runs an after school club. One school has come at lunchtimes for one term to enable sports course children try squash. Links with senior schools will change as at present the link is with the one school which has children over 14. Two other schools run from 11-14 years old. Next year all three schools will cover all age groups, so this will give the potential of arranging inter-school competitions. In a separate scheme the club has made links with eight primary schools. Community Postcode Lottery funding and funding from the local authority, together with some sponsorship from local firms, has allowed mini-squash walls to be installed in the schools. These enable children of their age to practice hitting a modified ball against the wall and hitting it back. Teachers were trained how to use it. These 'rebound walls' have been in place since November 2015. The club has not seen the rewards yet but now the walls are in the schools the next phase is to go out again to them, running weekly sessions for a month, and then getting the schools to bring the children to the club for an inter schools' festival. To encourage juniors the club has encouraged a senior junior member to join the club committee.

Good practice elements - Promoting sport to women

Influenced by Sport England's 'This Girl Can' campaign (www.sportengland.org/our-work/women/this-girl-can/) the local authority contacted the club to set up a scheme to promote squash to women. The club's female coach provided a good role model, as she is a mother with three young children. She helped recruit women from school playgrounds. Some had played squash before but others were new to it. One free session was offered, and 7 at the rate of £3 each. If a woman attended all eight she was given a free racquet and ball; 14 participated regularly. A social event was also provided. Participants were given a free t-shirt. Eight joined the club and have competed in the club closed competition and joined special ladies' leagues, which the club developed to promote them playing.

This initiative will be repeated, and this is made easier by the recent expansion of the number of courts to five. At the same time, a careful balance has to be kept between the needs of all members, for example, in deciding the best night for a 'club night'. A club night is open to all members and is a way for people to get to play short friendly games with people they may not normally play, helping them find new partners to play against. Parents, male and female, have also joined as a result of their children joining the coaching.

Sources for further information about the club

Website: <http://www.harboroughcsc.co.uk/> - homepage for the sports club

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