

Volunteering: *The Leisure Review* round table

In the weeks before the comprehensive spending review was unveiled *The Leisure Review* invited a mix of people with a vested interest in volunteering to discuss one of the key components of any future sports system. This is what they said.

Round the table

Steve Boocock

Chief executive of Wiltshire and Swindon Sports Partnership (WASP), a county sports partnership. Previously with a national young people's organisation supporting voluntary youth clubs, he was the first head of the Child Protection in Sport Unit where he supported sports governing bodies, clubs and volunteers to implement safeguarding practices, policies and procedures. He finds he struggles with managing the interface between organisations and volunteers.

Alice Meason

Grants director at Quartet Community Foundation. Community foundations were set up in the USA in 1914 to encourage people with money to give back to their community. Community foundations around the UK distribute mainly small grants on behalf of a variety of funding bodies, including some government grants and a fund called Grassroots Grants. Quartet is not a single-issue funder; instead it funds everything you can imagine and more.

Richard Ward

Practice manager of a GP surgery and the managerial lead for Mid-Devon GP consortium. His non-work roles include vice-chair of Exeter Canoe Club (where he also coaches), netball coach and committee member at his daughter's club, and MC of a peripatetic village hall comedy club. His background is in coaching, including a six-year spell as English coaching development manager for the British Canoe Union where he was responsible for 10,000 coaches. He was the national coach for marathon and sprint racing and has worked in a canoe factory.

Mick Owen

Managing editor of *The Leisure Review* but significantly a coach and coach educator occupying the space between the volunteer and the professional. Formerly a sports development manager and leisure centre manager.

The debate

TLR: Before we debate the issue of volunteerism – a word I may have just invented – and sport can I ask Alice what the third sector, the mainline volunteering world, think of sport?

AM: The third sector doesn't think about sport any more than it thinks about the arts or community activity or anything else that it funds. Sport is a means to an end. We don't fund sport per se but we fund the parent organisation that is doing different things. We've funded a list of sports including golf and fishing but why did we fund golf? There's an estate in north Bristol which is not particularly nice but it's near Clifton Golf Club, which is very nice. The lads from Southmeads were being a bit of a pain in the neck so somebody in Southmeads got in touch with the golf club and they devised a scheme to take the lads to the club and teach them to play golf. So it's not just about sport. It's about 'the big society' except that it's real life; it's what people actually do.

How would sport react to hearing that?

SB: I don't think it would be surprised. I sit on the Wiltshire assembly which is a relatively new animal, and sit on two parts of that, one being the voluntary sector assembly and I was the only person there representing sport. There must have been 100 or so other organisations. Nobody knew that sport had anything to do with volunteers.

AM: And yet it's very much volunteer led.

SB: At every level, whether the board of the national governing body or the club; they will all be volunteers. I think there is an independence in sport that has led it to

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Round the table: (L to R) Steve Boocock, Alice Meason and Richard Ward

“There are seven canoe clubs on a 500m stretch of the River Ex in Exeter not because that's the best way to organise canoeing but at some stage that's how many people wanted to be the captain.”

missing out on some of the opportunities that there are for the voluntary sector. Sport is pretty self-sufficient. The parallel I was drawing out during the assembly discussion was faith-based organisations which would not see themselves as voluntary bodies because they too are self-sustaining and haven't had to rely on some of the infrastructure organisations in order to grow and develop. To some extent this means that sport misses out on what is out there. I also think – and this what you were touching on – that those other voluntary organisations can miss out on what sport can offer because they don't see it as being a way of delivering a whole range of opportunities and resources.

AM: I suppose the organisations that we deal with possibly do but the other thing we say in our guidelines is that we don't support pure sports-based organisations nor do we fund pure arts-based organisations. It's where sport or art is used as some form of community development tool at whatever level that may be. We do find quite a bit of that.

RW: The thing that cracks me up when I sit on a committee is when someone says, 'We've got to raise a bit of money.' My netball club is a classic example. I suggested that we put in a grant application and that what we'd have to do is make what we want sound like what they want. From a philosophical point of view, I think sport does deliver a social policy but in terms of the clubs that run it I can't believe how naïve they are thinking that the world owes them a living. They probably haven't made the connection with the voluntary sector. The club has about 50 members and has been nominated as a south west champion because they are well organised, but they are completely unaware of what is happening in the rest of the world. They've got one thing on their mind. What they do is deliver Friday afternoon sport to girls – about 40 or so rock up most nights – and who do we have trouble with getting to stay in sport? Kids between 15 and 17 just leaving school and girls in particular. So they do all that but they haven't thought beyond trying to do a bit better in netball. I would say that sports clubs I have been involved with have been pretty naïve about what their contribution is.

MO: They are there to provide sport. All the clubs I've been involved in were all about the sport.

RW: But then the governing body comes along and says, 'You really ought to have Clubmark.' The club then says that they have operated in the community for a long time, they've offended no one and achieved a little; but now it's not good enough.

AM: We found that a lot of sports clubs had missed that regulatory thing, whereas the voluntary sector has had to step up to the mark, with safeguarding and that sort of thing. Somehow for a lot of the smaller sports clubs it has just passed them by. Often they are not part of the voluntary sector networks; they don't go to the Council for Voluntary Service to find out what a management committee does, for example.

SB: On the flip side though, and obviously I declare an interest in safeguarding in light of my previous role, the sport sector was actually way ahead of anywhere else in the voluntary sector and the model for the [Child Protection in Sport] Unit was beginning to be replicated within the arts and within the faiths. The model developed for the Catholic church was based on the model for the unit. So there are some areas where sport has moved on. Club accreditation is another one. Alright Clubmark is not the world's best but how many other voluntary organisations have got something that is actually a national accreditation programme that is open to anyone who wants to take part? I've been talking to our local safeguarding board and they were amazed when I was able to say that there is this national standards framework and a national framework of education. How many other organisations have got access to something like that? Their response was, 'Well, we probably don't need to do a lot with sport.' This means there is then a greater focus on, say, a little arts group who have got absolutely nothing and have no national point of reference. Sport is then left to get on and do its own thing and probably not share as much as it could do. One of the new challenges that will be around will be the trusts that have been set up to manage local facilities. We are seeing this in Wiltshire and how clubs respond to that challenge will be very different because they are going to have to respond to a broader audience within their community.

That's a trust that has been constructed from clubs within the voluntary sector, as opposed to the leisure trusts that we currently have, which are simply arms-length versions of previous management structures? This is something completely different?

SB: Yes, this is the community ownership of the facility and community management. There are some tensions on the horizon with some of the larger, multi-sport clubs where you have one club that almost defines that this is its turf and that committee will run the bar and so on, while other people come cap in hand to try to get a bit of playing time. When you get facilities with pools obviously the swimming clubs are going to want to get involved in the running of those but whether they will have the capacity to manage them is another matter. Where's that skill set going to come from?

TLR interviewed a coach in Rochdale a few editions ago who worked for a swimming club who were virtually the only users of a pool that the council had mothballed. It was open one hour a week for the public and anything else was used by the club. They wanted to have the management of that pool

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themselves. There was a tension between the club and the trust to see whether that could happen. Interestingly, there was another tension between the club and governing body over the club's constitution. So here's one of the key parts of the system, the governing body concerned, making it harder rather than easier.

RW: That doesn't surprise me at all. I can cite numerous examples from canoeing where that was felt to be the case from the volunteers' perspective. It's a very strange relationship between clubs and the governing body and it probably queers the pitch for a lot of activity that clubs could do.

Part of that tension is where the volunteer butts up against the professional. Part of the problem is that there are volunteers involved in volunteer management.

AM: There is also the issue of who governs the governing bodies because they are all single sport and all have their own way of doing it. We have had quite a bit of local difficulty around karate clubs. There is more than one governing body.

SB: There's four figures of governing bodies in martial arts.

RW: That's all down to how many people want to be the captain. There are seven canoe clubs on a 500m stretch of the River Ex in Exeter not because that's the best way to organise canoeing but at some stage that's how many people wanted to be the captain. It's bonkers.

But we got to our position of sporting eminence displaying that sort of behaviour. That's how people like to behave. I think that's part of why people get involved in sport. But what about the people who are paid to do it for 37 hours a week, who have decided that there is a sports system into which we should all fit? Are they causing more trouble than they are worth?

RW: If you use the Australians as an example, when they set up their institute of sport in the first year of a team of eight swimmers that went to the whatever games it was seven were from the institute and one from the clubs. Three or four years later seven were from the clubs and one from the institute because the clubs responded to the challenge and were able to work out what was required. There's enough knowledge in the system for clubs to be able to do a good job but in canoeing the volunteering system went from one in which volunteers had no resource from central funds to one where a youth programme was set up and employed paddle development officers with a budget and travel expenses who were told to go off and do some development. We didn't really have much idea what that meant but we learned as we went along and at the end of the year they said, 'Haven't these development officers done a great job.' Of course they had because they had the time to think, the budget to get on with what they were doing and they hadn't had to fight for resources. At the clubs they're up against someone who has a box to tick and wants you to tick it for them but as a club you don't really have the time or resources to do anything other than comply with what the governing body says. Other systems, Hungary for example, do employ coaches within their clubs but they actually remunerate the clubs through a points system.

A professional coach will deliver better paddlers, while a professional development officer will deliver a plan with some boxes filled in. Discuss. Alice, you're a professional in the system.

AM: One step removed, perhaps. We're dealing with much smaller groups and you do think, 'I need a bit of advice so I'll approach the sports development unit at the council'. I think there are still some. But their brief is quite different so they are not in contact with these little clubs.

RW: You have to ask yourself what you actually need to take part in sport. What do you need to get started? I wanted to start a netball club because my daughter was keen and I thought that there was not much sport for girls in the village and nowhere really to play, apart from the school which had built a classroom on the court. So I went to see the netball development officer. I was told it was a great idea but I'd need some posts and some bibs, and there's a couple of different grants I could apply for. I just want to play netball but I left the meeting feeling as though I now needed to raise some money. The netball set-up required names of those playing to be affiliated but I didn't know who was going to turn up. And the school said I had to be affiliated to be covered by insurance so I was in a Catch 22. And I was going to need to open a bank account. At that stage I gave up. I'm a fairly motivated individual but it was just too much.

If you talk to John Dwan (see TLR April 2010) who runs an organisation that delivers 'doorstep sport' he says that the biggest challenge he faced when he wanted to set up an angling club in East Manchester was finding an adult with a bank account. Steve, you're on the spot because you're part of the 'sports system'. How do you plead?

SB: What you are beginning to see develop is a system, and netball have been quite successful with it, in which you say, 'Come and play netball. We're not about growing clubs, we just want to give you the opportunity to play our sport. You might then want to go on to a club but that's not what we're about here.' For sports

development that has been the challenge: do you want people to do sport or do you want people to affiliate to your governing body? What I've seen is a growth in the concept of 'just come and play'. Leisure centres have been doing it for years. Try to get a five-a-side football pitch. Those players don't want to sign up to a league. I think some of the smarter governing bodies are beginning to recognise that if they are going to grow as a sport, and there are lots of vested interests in making sure that they do, governing body survival not being the least of them. They are realising that you've got to deliver your sport where people want to play it. I was talking today about, if you're on a low income, how difficult it is to get your kids to play football. You can be looking at anything up to £150 up-front at the start of the season for your player registration. If you want to play golf, how do you find the money to do that? People are now realising that there are some structural barriers. How can we do what we do, which is getting people to play sport, as opposed to creating a system?

And football just requires a ball, some jumpers and a reasonably flat surface...

SB: Football has just started a 'Get into Football' initiative where football development officers are going to turn up in parks with jumpers to get the kids to play football.

AM: There's a play rangers scheme as well. There's no reason why they shouldn't play football.

RW: I've just walked down a street here and there's some kids playing footy. Great. I hope they're not allowed.

SB: Running is another really good example where the emerging running clubs have happened despite the governing body rather than because. You need someone who can be the catalyst. Whether that's someone in your village, as Richard was describing, who wants to play netball or perhaps someone who just wants someone to run with.

RW: Any sports development programme requires the three Fs: first find fanatic. You've got to find the nutter who is going to take it on. And I mean that in the nicest way. What do volunteers bring? The main thing, I think, is sustainability. Exeter Canoe Club has been there since 1952. I know Kevin [Ack CHECK NAME] has been in their in a sports development role for a long time but he's not been there since 1952. How many governments and different policies have we seen wax and wane yet the canoe club is still there and bigger than it's ever been.

On the other end of the scale you have volleyball, a very small sport in this country, where a fanatic will come along and start a club which will grow and last five or six years and it will fade away. Is there anything wrong with that?

RW: Absolutely not. That's what you find in business. Businesses that have been around for 25 years are fairly rare these days. A lot of businesses fail in the first year and a lot of clubs do the same. I did with this netball venture. I went down an easy route. All these big clubs started as little clubs. Tesco didn't have a chain of hundreds of stores all over the place when it started. You've got to start small and the more difficult you make it for people the smaller the pool you have to draw on.

Looking at Manchester United, the hypermarket of dreams, and all the bad things it now stands for, it was started by a church as a club to stop men drinking. Now it is what it is.

AM: And all the Boys' Clubs were based around sports activities.

SB: There's a fantastic boxing club in Bristol which was a Boys' Club set up by a philanthropist. Boys were getting into bother and what could be done about it? Something healthy. They emerged at the same time as the Salvation Army and other religious organisations, such as the Boys' Brigade and the Scouts, thinking, 'something must be done'.

AM: And you've got to make it easy. I used to play badminton and I thought I might like to do it again but could I find a badminton club?

The question would be, could you find one that would let you in and let you play? Is it any wonder that cycling has become so popular, given that all you need is a bike to do it?

SB: If you look at the most recent Active People survey, cycling is up, athletics is up – which is probably running rather than track and field – netball's up. The sports that have gone down are the ones that are expensive.

RW: Canoeing is similar. I'm a parent and I would fail in my duty, somewhere in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if I didn't buy them a functioning bicycle. Actually they weren't used a lot because it's pretty hilly round our way so it's hard work. But it's cultural. If you go to Canada every garden has an open canoe.

SB: The Active People survey measures people who take part in activity so if I go for a run or a bike ride I am counted as a runner or a cyclist but they wouldn't ask me if I were a member of a club. Round me there are a few people who meet to go out on a bike occasionally and to all intents and purposes that's a club.

RW: I run with a mate of mine and ours is called Sandford Healthy Activity Group. We have a laugh, it's a standing joke in the village and we're in the 'activities' section of the tourism brochure in the post office.

That doesn't need a young person with a track suit and a laptop. We've yet to hear in this conversation a justification for the sports development profession. All we've heard is instances when it hasn't worked or it has stopped things happening.

RW: Don't get me wrong. I've met numerous good sports development professionals – they encourage people and clubs think highly of them – but actually being a sports development professional isn't enough. 'Sport' is a verb; it's a 'doing' word. People are more interested in what you do than what you say you are going to do so if you are going to be a good sports development officer you have to deliver something tangible to the clubs, opening a few doors, cutting through a few barriers. Those are ways in which governing body sports development officers have been fantastic. In netball someone said they could get me some bibs, which is great, but it then goes into accreditation and policies which are often a bit tricky, things that have been created as part of an industry which up to that point hadn't really affected us.

There must be far more active recreation occurring untouched by sports development than the other way round.

AM: In defence, not that sport is my area, but we manage Sport Relief money and when we started doing that we recruited someone from Wesport [the local county sports partnership] and he's very good. He knows his stuff and there's a very practical approach to it. He's also been involved in a thing called breakthrough mentoring, which is about mentoring young people through sport. So our experience of the sports development profession is quite mixed: it can be very good or it can be very distant. We're in contact with a lot of those smaller organisations that are just getting on with it. One of the Sports Relief cash grants we made was for an older people's walking group. The average age was in their eighties and they wanted outdoor kit. Great.

RW: Quite often it doesn't take much to solve your problem. It might be a couple of hundred quid but the problems get bigger the more established you become.

Before we go we really have to address the 'big society'...

RW: Have you read 1984? If you're going to be miserable for the next few years you need a diversionary activity and if you have been involved in sport you have probably been involved in the big society for a long while. John Prescott had his active communities initiative and it's got to go up a level if you're going to have something to look forward to. Everything has been so money-oriented you begin to think 'if I'm earning less money I must be less happy' but that is not what the surveys seem to show.

So is Mr Cameron only offering a smokescreen?

RW: He's flying a kite and for me it's a good kite to fly. People have laughed at the concept and my response has been, "Well, what do you want to do? Do you want to sit at home and be miserable? Let's get on with it."

But we don't need David Cameron to give us permission, do we?

RW: No but there's a difference between what people want to do and what they are enabled to do. The litigious society suggested that you help no one because they might sue you. That's the message that comes across. But [the big society] needs to be more than just an aspiration. It needs policy and practice to be lined up to allow the vision to match the reality. If things are in discord it's impossible.

So you think we do need David Cameron's permission?

RW: I don't know that I want his permission, I just want him to do something to make his words line up with reality.

Alice doesn't believe he will...

AM: It's the methodology and the 1984 reference. I was listening to someone last week who had had a conversation with [Nat Wei CHECK] the guy who came up with the [big society] idea about how they see this thing going forward. I started hearing about the big society and thought, hang on, people are doing this; they are volunteering right across the board. It's actually happening. I hope somebody in government is listening when someone tells them that people are doing all these things. This happens and has been happening for decades, centuries in fact. There's that aspect of it but then they've come up with this [big society]. The latest I've heard is that there's a desire to make things more straight forward so people don't get tied up with all these knots and you can just get on with your event. What you do is log onto the one big database which tells you to tick this box for your insurance and it's all mapped. So everyone knows what everyone else is doing and they're all doing it in the same way. Somebody somewhere will know what everyone is doing every minute of the day, which really is Big Brother.

Steve, the big society?

SB: Going back to the community trust; I think it is an unrealistic concept to think that a group of volunteers want to take on some of these roles and functions. One of the things we haven't touched on is why people volunteer. I volunteer and I work and I do both of those things for very different reasons and I get very different rewards from those two functions. Actually I would actively resist having to take on some of the professional functions in my volunteering capacity and I don't know how you would overcome that hurdle. I don't know how you would suddenly say to a [volunteer] group, 'Right, now you are running this library. If you want your library open you've got to take on board all of the expectations that the community has about how it should be run plus the liability if the thing collapses in 18 months' time. Or next week actually, because your volunteers don't turn up because they don't want to work that way.

In real volunteering, as opposed to sports volunteering, there's a large part that is about upskilling volunteers.

AM: There's a big thing about if you want to get into a particular profession or if you want to find out about something then the way to do it is through volunteering. But a lot of the organisations we see are those with volunteers who are clawing their way back, having been through some fairly hideous experience. There's quite a lot of that going on, people gaining confidence and experience, and being able to present a potential employer with what they can do.

But if someone like that wanted to volunteer many organisations wouldn't know what to do with them.

RW: What we've done at our club over the years – and we haven't made a conscious effort – is develop the leanest system of volunteers possible. We don't meet unless we have to meet and we have only as many people on the riverbank as is absolutely necessary. Partly because the culture is that it should be pretty basic and the coach should do everything before we have a drink but we're pretty lean. We've got chairs and vice-chairs and people like that because we have to have them but they're not the key people in the organisation. The key people who are those who are delivering the sport on a day-to-day basis. If you looked at the club from a business perspective I think you'd see that if you cut any of the people you would cut some aspect of the activity. If I use that analogy because in the NHS they always cut frontline staff. The bean counters are kept on just in case they need more frontline staff. It's just incredible. In many ways these sports clubs are pretty lean and it's only when they feel they need some more meat on the bone that they'll come to an organisation like Alice's or to a sports development professional.

SB: The other side of that though is you've got bods who have been there for years and the fact that they've been there for years is inhibiting any growth or development. I was talking to someone recently who has introduced a new policy where you take on a voluntary role and you can't stay for more than two years in that role. This is a way of encouraging people to volunteer – quite a few people don't want to be saddled with something forever – but it also brings quite a lot of vibrancy in the organisation because they always have new people coming in. When you have a volunteer, how can you sack them?

MO: I wish we'd grasped that nettle. There are so many bad volunteers. A volunteer is worth ten men they say but...

RW: But it depends which volunteer you're picking.

AM: That's when you get back to your tensions and your arguments, and your discussions and your politics with a small 'P' in all these groups. Some people always want to run the club.

RW: But isn't that true the world over even in business organisations? Isn't that natural? When I worked in sport the most vitriolic arguments were volunteer to volunteer. They were never professional to volunteer, never professional to professional. If there was going to be a fight it was going to be between volunteers and they were bloody ruthless. It was always the Friday afternoon phone call about a "child protection issue" and it was never about child protection. It was always about someone shouting at someone else.

SB: One of the things I struggle with, and there may be good examples in the voluntary sector, is how the volunteer and the professional have morphed. One of my criticisms is that we've tried to professionalise volunteering by taking the systems and the structures of how the professional works. For me it doesn't work. Volunteering needs to be something different and we need to find a different way of managing the volunteer that doesn't turn the volunteer into a professional and doesn't take away the strengths and the benefits that volunteers bring. Ironically it is me saying that having policies, procedures and job descriptions is not the way to do it. I think there genuinely has to be a third way of creating a structure and a system that enables volunteers to do what they want to do, which is, in sports terms, wanting that cricket or football team to turn out on Saturday. How do you create something that allows that to happen but my worry is that the big society will just take what happens in a local authority and try to superimpose that onto the voluntary

world, saying 'That's the way you need to do it because that's how it is done.'

We've got a facility that the local authority can't afford to run. Who's going to run it? It's a choice between the voluntary sector and the private sector. Is the "Big Society" shtick not just another way of getting the private sector into local authority buildings because the voluntary sector won't be able to do it.

AM: Some will but you'll get bigger and bigger organisations mopping up contracts.

SB: And it will be the big voluntary sector organisation that has a bid-writing team, that has their own equivalent of a sports development officer that can parachute in, win the bid but then spend the next six months scratching around trying to find voluntary organisations on the ground that can actually deliver.

As we round up is there any other messages people would like to get out there?

RW: Today's the start of the rest of my life. Tomorrow is another day and I haven't got too many days left in the general scheme of things. I would like the big society to work, I really would. I want to make something of my life, of my kids' lives, of the community that I live in so that we can actually do something other than go shopping at weekends, get drunk in the pub – although I do quite like that occasionally – to get on and do this. What I don't want to do is spend the next two years arguing about whether it could or it couldn't work. I voted in May and for the first time I voted for the person that won the election so my guy is in power or influencing power; it's a first for me. I engaged in the democratic system. They have made a decision, which I delegated to them, on my behalf. They've come up with a plan so let's get on with it. If we don't get started we'll never do anything. My plea would be, why don't we just start? Let's just get on with it. I'm anti the Big Brother stuff but I don't want to be here in five years time to hear someone say, 'I've had this great idea called community engagement.'

AM: There will just be a shift of who is doing what at which point in time. Certainly our perspective is 'this is what's happening, what can we do positively to engage and contribute'.

At TLR we think the same but we work in the private sector, which is 'me first'. You're talking about 'us first'.

RW: I'm talking about improving the general karma around me, the general aura. I don't want to be surrounded by miserable people saying, 'That won't work.' One of the lads at Crediton rugby club told me that he wouldn't have 'sappers' in his team, by which he meant someone who is negative, sapping the enthusiasm out of the team. 'If you're not positive, you're not in the team.' I like to be positive so if I'm wrong in two years time I'd like to be hung for trying, rather than having sat there thinking, I could have done that.

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