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The tape that binds: sport's regulatory burden

Renamed and revitalised, the Sport and Recreation Alliance has gone into battle over the burdens and barriers being foisted on sports clubs. Mick Owen reviews their hard-hitting report, Red Card to Red Tape.

There has been a growing acknowledgement among even the more cynical commentators on the sports system that the organisation formerly known as the CCPR has been quietly getting its act together of late. Now called the Sport and Recreation Alliance, the body, once famous only for accommodating organisations representing everything from caravanning to caving, has, under chief executive Tim Lamb and chair Brigid Simmons, become more relevant, more visible and far less fusty. The launch pictures for their recent report on the regulatory burden being placed on sports clubs may make the event resemble a 1950s sherry party at a golf club somewhere deep in the shires but the content of the report and its genesis speak of a 21st-century organisation choosing the right battles and fighting them in the right way.

In this case the battle was picked by sports minister Hugh Robertson and the chosen way to fight it is with quiet, professional efficiency. Although not delivered in welter of high-profile publicity, there is little doubt that the 208-page Red Card to Red Tape report could have a significant effect on the vitality of the nation's "voluntary sports clubs", a label which, by the report's definition, covers any "formally organised group that provides sport or recreation to the community and relies on the involvement of volunteers to exist".

National media headline writers seemed to have passed up the chance to feast on the carcass of the report but for people immersed in the sector some lurid options spring to mind. "Clubmark failing clubs" could be one; "coaching is club's biggest burden" another; and, for the Jeremiahs who eternally knock every effort to create a safeguarding net to protect the nation's children at play, how about "CRBs too costly says sport"? In truth, the report does say something like all of these and the writer, a policy officer at the Alliance called Syann Cox, unashamedly leads with them in her executive summary. This despite the fact that the bulk of the report deals with the bureaucratic barriers which clubs find in the arenas of funding, taxation, facilities and access, health and safety, data protection and the Community Amateur Sports Club scheme (CASC).

Cox is clearly an enthusiast. She believes "the report to be relevant and comprehensive, with recommendations that can bring about progress for sport and recreation". She also sees the report "as a fantastic reference tool for our policy work" and only half jokingly suggests that her work colleagues should all learn to recite it, perhaps while doing group callisthenics on the Burwood House lawn of a morning. She is also a fan of statistics and claims that the "deployment of both quantitative and qualitative research measures has produced robust data". With an online questionnaire followed by "expert workshops" and a period of consultation with Alliance members, Cox, as a statistician, will know best whether responses from 1,401 clubs out of the estimated "151,000 or so" clubs that are believed to exist in the UK is a statistically significant sample, although the fact that only 45 different sports responded from the 320 "governing and representative bodies" that the Alliance has as members would be a concern.

However, what is of most concern to the disinterested observer is the genesis of the report. Hugh Robertson, the sports and Olympics minister, is a Conservative. His party's aversion to bureaucracy and their big society agenda are, some might say, little more than a thinly veiled attack on public service. The 'big society' agenda, while ostensibly aimed at allowing the voluntary sector to take more responsibility locally, fails to explain who will build the capacity of local groups to make this possible. With no third sector capability,



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the devolved services will have to be delivered by the commercial sector, a sector which is notoriously disinclined to tolerate the interference of bureaucrats like the local planning officer and the Health and Safety Executive. More local services being delivered by more private companies with less regulation; hardly a picture one would expect a body which represents grassroots sport organisations to be espousing. Perhaps that is why their revamped website refers to the Alliance as a "trade association".

Whatever the origin of the concept and the validity of the method by which it was brought to life, there can be no cavilling with the overall message: it is increasingly difficult to manage a modern sports club and some of the barriers and burdens could be diminished. For the record, the report's recommendation on Clubmark is that: "It should be strictly focused on clubs rather than NGB measurables, with clear and tangible benefits relating directly to club development." On coaching it says that governing bodies should share good practice, that Sportscoach UK should clarify the role of the UKCC Level 1 award and that both of them should make routes into coaching easier for the volunteer. On the last of the three tabloid subjects the report actually makes very positive noises about CRB checks, saying they "are welcomed by sport and recognised as essential tools for safe recruitment practices", although it does call for some streamlining of the actual system and implies that cost is always an issue.

Whether the man on the Javelin train to the Olympics should be thinking of reading Red Card to Red Tape is doubtful as, apart from anything else, there are parts of it which deal with quite dull subjects but the design is accessible, the images diverting and the odd quote a joy. Did you know for example that "4% of English inland waterways are accessible compared to 100% of Swedish rivers yet in England over 90% of the population live within 2 miles of a waterway"? You can bet your bottom dollar that the people at Canoe Wales and Canoe England do and that it was them who told the Sport and Recreation Alliance but shooting the messenger because you do not like the message is a bad strategy. Anybody who works for a governing body or a government agency would be advised to spend a train journey with this report and decide for themselves whether to give it credence. If nothing else it will give them an insight into the mindset of the golf playing fraternity in the home counties.

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