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Roles and responsibilities: what direction for county sports partnerships?

The launch of an independent appraisal of county sports partnerships prompted many to reassess the structures that make up the UK's sporting landscape. Wayne Allsopp explains why CSPs should remain central to the future for sport.

The purpose, role and responsibilities of county sports partnerships (CSP) within the current sporting landscape is not particularly clear. Over time many have been forced to steer themselves in a different direction to the one they were originally established to achieve. What is very clear now is that many different versions of CSPs have evolved, all with different management models and all carrying out different roles and responsibilities according to where their sources of income. The time is right to review the role of CSPs and consider their purpose alongside restoring some accountability. While creating some consistency with CSPs is important, we need to allow the flexibility that they need to be successful.

If the government's new strategy is to be delivered the core purpose of CSPs needs to remain. In name alone you would expect CSPs to be about creating fit-for-purpose partnerships, partnerships where organisations have the appetite to pool resources to develop grassroots sport in what is fast becoming a very difficult financial environment for a non-statutory public service.

It is important that CSPs continue to engage the right partners at the right level if they are to be successful. Again, in name you would expect the jurisdiction of a CSP to continue and embrace the district and borough councils within the county, supporting the delivery of sport and physical activity within these geographical boundaries. The fly in the ointment for most CSPs has always been large unitary authorities, with which, from my experience, they have always struggled to engage.

The real change required is to recognise that unitary authorities need supporting to create their own local partnership that can work in parallel with county sports partnerships. City sports partnerships (for want of a better phrase) would go a long way to addressing the demographic imbalance between counties and cities when it comes to promoting participation in sport and physical activity. The concept of a local sports network embedded within the wider community plans for local authorities seems to fit with the government's Sporting Future strategy and the outcomes that it aspires to deliver. Previously known as community sport networks (CSN), these partnerships made enormous sense within a city looking to develop sport and deliver a number of social outcomes.

The fact that we are discussing the future of CSPs outside the timescales of the Sport England strategy review indicates that CSPs are here to stay and it is a matter of what role they are going to play. The key word is 'delivery' and it is probably a reflection of what the first-generation of CSPs back in 2000 were tasked with doing through the Active Sports Programme. We do not need another bureaucratic strategic body that only top-slices government sports funding for its own survival. Given the current financial climate and difficulties faced by local authorities, we need strong local partnerships that will take

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ownership of sport and physical activity for their respective areas.

CSPs need to own the government's new framework for sport and the outcomes, outputs and actions within it. My suggestion would be that CSPs should be very action-driven and focus their efforts on delivering the below two key outputs locally: first, more people from every background regularly and meaningfully taking part in sport and physical activity, volunteering and experiencing live sport; second, a more productive, sustainable and responsible sport sector.

Two actions in particular are very relevant to the role of a CSP: actions that meet the needs of the customer and enable them to engage in sport and physical activity; and actions that strengthen the sport sector and make it more effective and resilient

Encouraging stakeholders to come together to pool resources to focus on the above and then considering the below aims and key performance indicators should be the role of all CSPs in delivering the governments new sports strategy.

Increasing participation in sport and physical activity should be the main vision for all CSPs. They should be held accountable for this as a result of the funding they receive from government and Sport England. [KPI 1 Increase in percentage of the population taking part in sport and physical activity at least twice in the last month - Sporting Future: A Strategy for an Active Nation]

We cannot lose sight of the fact that many CSPs are not totally reliant on government sport funding. Many have established relationships with their respective public health partners, which places them in a much stronger position when it comes to the delivery of physical activity. This is an area where I believe CSPs can make a difference when it comes to targeting people that are less active. The Workplace Challenge initiative is just one example of a programme that some CSPs have delivered well. If the Department of Health would work with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) through Sport England and made the relevant resource available I believe all CSPs are well placed to deliver a number of health/physical activity-related programmes. This would create a more level playing field and would, in the long term, have a positive impact on public health across the country. [KPI 2 Decrease in percentage of people physically inactive - Sporting Future: A Strategy for an Active Nation]

Given their previous focus on people aged 16 and over, the new directive to target people from the age of five is unknown territory for Sport England and some CSPs. With the education system creating autonomy within schools, including directing the primary PE and sports premium funding directly to primary schools, the role of CSPs with regards to children and young people could be limited to just the School Games. While directly influencing and supporting PE and school sport will not be easy for most CSPs, they should be a vehicle to deliver programmes to improve school swimming and cycling as demonstrated within the Sporting Future strategy. [KPI 5 Increase in the percentage of children achieving swimming proficiency and bikeability Levels 1 – 3. Sporting Future: A Strategy for and Active Nation]

Since the disbanding of school sports partnerships (SSP), we need a local body to work with primary schools to improve PE and school sport and to hold schools accountable for doing that. I appreciate that some school games organiser roles have been expanded in an effort to sustain similar structures to the previous SSP networks but they have no jurisdiction over the PE and school sport funding. Ofsted pay very little attention to PE and school sport and some surveys would have you believe that we are seeing a decline in the amount of PE and school sport on offer in schools. The Department for Education needs to work with DCMS and Sport England to make the PE and school sports

funding available, along with any additional money promised through the sugar tax. Sport England should then engage the Youth Sports Trust to work with CSPs to improve physical literacy targets. This model of delivery seems to work with the School Games. [KPI 4 Increase in the percentage of children achieving physical literacy standards. Sporting Future: A Strategy for an Active Nation]

Improving workforce development, whether that be in a paid or voluntary capacity, is something that CSPs should have a role in. The delivery of sport and physical activity is very diverse and for the vast majority of people it is very reliant on the voluntary sector. Local coaching and volunteering plans should be created by CSPs to demonstrate how they are going to improve the sporting landscape. Alongside the strengthening of the voluntary sector we need regional CIMSPA boards to work with their respective CSPs to create a regional workforce development plan. A new generation of leaders within the sector is required to move away from the army of grey-suited public sector leisure officers who have driven public sector sport to the verge of extinction. The Leicestershire and Rutland Sport Leadership Programme is an excellent demonstration of their commitment to creating the leaders of tomorrow. A core team of vibrant and enthusiastic young leaders places the Leicestershire CSP in a strong position. [KPI 7 Increase in the number of people volunteering in sport at least twice in the last year. Sporting Future: A Strategy for and Active Nation]

CSPs are organisations that have stood the test of time and despite the political changes they have always been a fundamental part of the sports system. It is now time to consider getting the balance right between being commissioned to deliver and being a commissioning body. Cash-strapped local authorities will see a slow death of sports development which will leave grassroots sport fighting for survival. Schools are being given the license to improve their own education, including the delivery of PE and school sport, without any criteria or guidance. At the heart of the sporting landscape will always be the workforce and in particular the army of volunteers. This lifeline for grassroots sport must always remain a priority for our sports system. CSPs need to bridge the gaps in all of these areas where necessary. Some are already on the road to achieving this with service level agreements in place that have helped create strong partnerships. However, more than ever, now is the time for some CSPs to get out of their ivory towers pledging strategic lead for sport and physical activity and get down to a local level and make a real difference.

It is time to strengthen the purpose and the role of CSPs within the delivery system for sport. CSPs are here to stay and most have a proven track record of delivering successfully at a local level. However, Sport England slipped to a position of paying lip service to the role of CSPs, a situation that over time raised questions regarding their purpose. Now is the time to assess each individual CSPs on the merits of their plan and how they are going to deliver the aims and objectives of national policy. If sport funding levels are retained then the previous half a billion ring-fenced for national governing bodies of sport (NGB) should now be made available to CSPs. CSPs should be Sport England's main delivery arm for growing participation in sport and physical activity; NGBs should be the arm for sustaining participation in sport. Other ministerial departments such as the Department for Education and Department of Health should seriously consider CSPs as a vehicle to improving physical activity, PE and school sport.

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