

# Current Issues in Contemporary Sport Development



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Edited by

Kay Biscomb, Richard Medcalf  
and Gerald Griggs

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8544-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8544-7

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## FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this publication, which represents the culmination of a great deal of hard work by colleagues at the University of Wolverhampton in hosting the 2014 European Sports Development Network (ESDN) conference.

The ESDN's vision is to help to create an environment where sports policies, programs and practices are positively influenced by innovative, research-informed insight and collaborations between academics and practitioners. Inspired by this vision, our goal is to grow our reputation and profile as a credible academic and professional network. This involves working collaboratively with UK and European partners in the following areas:

- Knowledge exchange and critical debate
- Constructive challenge of traditional thinking, boundaries, and practice
- Offering innovative ideas and solutions
- Collaborative research projects and funding bids
- Providing a regular program of conferences, seminars and events
- Facilitating learning from best practice
- Developing new learning and teaching resources, programs and initiatives
- Acting as a consultative and advisory body as and when required
- Networking, advocacy and influencing

The papers contained herein closely reflect the remit and purpose of the ESDN in that they come from a variety of academics and sport practitioners. We place equal value on both constituencies - our primary concern is that these relationships are genuinely collaborative, mutually beneficial, and that, over time, they provide a catalyst for positive change by influencing both policy and practice.



There are many interesting insights contained within this publication - I invite you to consider them carefully and reflect upon the possible implications for your own professional practice.

Chris Cutforth  
Chair, European Sports Development Network

## PREFACE

The European Sport Development Network has held annual conferences since 2009. In 2014, the University of Wolverhampton hosted “ESDN2014 – Opportunity through Sport”. This book reflects a small selection of the contents of that conference.

Hosted by the University’s Institute of Sport, ESDN2014 reflected the work of all stakeholders working in the field of sports development, and thus importantly was delivered in partnership with the Sport and Recreation Alliance, the Black Country BeActive Partnership, and Sport4Life UK. The conference adopted the theme of ‘*opportunity through sport*’, to reflect the nature and breadth of outcomes which are possible through active participation in sport and in recognition of the University of Wolverhampton being considered as the ‘*University of Opportunity*’.

Twenty-four papers were presented in themed sessions, ranging from policy and practice, community, health, and legacy. Contributions were made from academics, practitioners, policy makers, and senior managers from the third sector. The keynote address was given by Ruth Holdaway, CEO of Women in Sport, who presented data demonstrating the complexity of the factors that influence women’s and girls’ participation in sport. The conference was concluded by a Sport and Recreation Alliance panel discussion entitled ‘*A sporting manifesto for 2015*’, which considered the political landscape of sport, in mind of the upcoming General Election in the United Kingdom.

You can find more information about the conference at its website, [www.wlv.ac.uk/esdn2014](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/esdn2014), or by searching on Twitter for #ESDN2014.

Dr Richard Medcalf  
ESDN2014 Conference Chair

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- APSE – Association of Public Service Excellence  
AUP – Active Universities Partnership  
BCC – Black Country Consortium  
BCiM – The Black County in Motion  
BICCS – Birmingham Inner City Coaching Scheme  
CASE – Culture and Sport Evidence Program  
CCPR – Central Council for Physical Recreation  
CE – Cheshire East  
CIC – Community Interest Company  
CMO – From Pawson & Tilley's (1997) theory of 'Realistic Evaluation'  
where: C (context) + M (mechanism) = O (outcome) and which  
suggests that causal outcomes follow from mechanisms acting in  
context.  
CONCACAF – Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean  
Association Football  
CRB – Criminal Records Bureau  
CSNs – Community Sports Networks  
CSD – Community Sport Development  
CWG – Commonwealth Games  
DCMS – Department for Culture, Media and Sport  
DfE – Department for Education  
DfES – Department for Education and Science  
ESDN – European Sport Development Network  
E-V-R – environment – values - resources  
FC – Football Club  
FE – Further Education  
FIFA - Fédération Internationale de Football Association  
FRSA – Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturers and  
Commerce  
GB – Great Britain  
HE – Higher Education  
HEAT – Health Economics Assessment Tool  
HESPSS - Higher Education Sport Participation and Satisfaction Survey  
HQ – Head quarters  
HU – Hungary

ICT – Information communications technology  
ID – Identification  
IOC – International Olympic Committee  
IT – Information technology  
KPI – Key performance indicator  
LA – Los Angeles  
LEAP – Legacy Evaluation Action Plan  
LOCOG – London Olympic Organising Committee  
LSC – Learning and Skills Council  
MBA – Master Business Administration  
MBC – Metropolitan Borough Council  
MBE – Member of the British Empire  
MMU – Manchester Metropolitan University  
MMUC/CE – Manchester Metropolitan University Consortium/Cheshire  
East  
MMUCE – Manchester Metropolitan University Cheshire East  
MP – Member of Parliament  
MSAR – Moss Side Amateur Reserves  
NGB – National Governing Body  
NW – North West  
NWDA – North West Development Agency  
OBE – Order of the British Empire  
PA – Physical activity  
PAT 10 – Policy in Action Team 10  
PDM – Partnership Development Manager  
PE – Physical education  
PESS – Physical Education and School Sport  
PESSCL – Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links strategy  
PESSYP – PE and Sport Strategy for Young People  
PESTLE – Political, economic, social, technological, legal, economic  
PFA – Professional Footballers Association  
PGTC – Pre Games Training Camps  
PhD – Doctor of Philosophy  
PLT – Primary Link Teacher  
RFU – Rugby Football Union  
Rt. Hon. – Right Honourable  
SDO – Sport Development Officer  
SE – Sport England  
SSCo – School Sport Co-ordinator  
SSPs – School Sport Partnerships  
SSS – Sport Science Support

STEEPLE – Social, technological, economic, environmental, political,  
legal, ethical

SZIE - Szent István Egyetem

UCLAN – University of Central Lancashire

UEFA – Union of European Football Associations

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

UN NGO – United Nations Non-Governmental Organisation

UoW – University of Wolverhampton

VSO – Voluntary Service Overseas

WHO – World Health Organisation

YST – Youth Sport Trust



# CHAPTER ONE

## OPPORTUNITY THROUGH SPORT

RICHARD MEDCALF AND KAY BISCOMB

### **What is Sport Development?**

#### **Sport can create opportunities**

It is not uncommon to hear evangelical accounts of the perceived positive outcomes of participation in sport. Sport is often deemed to provide the opportunity for friendship, challenge, and betterment. In addition to the many therapeutic individual outcomes of participation in sport (in any number of domains (physical, social, affective, cognitive)), it has long been apparent that sport can stimulate outcomes beyond the individual. Sport *can* be a vehicle to achieve social good (see Collins 2010). Engagement in sport is often seen as a catalyst for opportunities for communities to interact and for nations to meet.

Sport is now commonly considered to have the potential to make a contribution to a range of wider social objectives. However, participation in sport does not happen in a social vacuum. In the same way that we can cite many positive outcomes that are possible through engagement with sport, we must also acknowledge the potential for negative experiences in and through sport. Sport's social and commercial power makes it a potentially potent force, both for good and for bad (Jarvie and Thornton 2012, 4).

#### **Sport can divide us**

Sport celebrates the mastery of an opponent, and the exertion of effort. Consequently, it can provoke conflict amongst both individuals and communities. There are innumerable occasions that evidence how sport can construct barriers between individuals and communities, and thus can

often cause a challenge to our relationships. Engagement in sport can exacerbate social tensions and divide communities (see, for example, Sugden and Bairner 2007). Sport often offers a reward for assertion and aggression in a way that many would find uncomfortable. It is frequently the very nature of sport that stops some people from participating.

There is often a polemic response to sport that is indicative of the way in which engagement in sporting activities ranges from those who are impassioned activists for sport, to those who choose not to engage on any level. ‘Sport’ is a contested term which can mean different things to different people. The nature of sport, and the values which are inherent within participation, are reflective of the rich and varied experiences which participation can bring. In either respect, sport transcends our lives; participation in sport is most commonly a bi-product of very many relationships.

‘Sport development’ is a contested term, with little consensus about its precise nature and purpose (Bramham and Hylton 2008). The conceptualisation of the term has changed over time, and the way in which this descriptor is used continues to evolve. Since the birth of sport development in the 1970s/80s, a variety of models and/or conceptual frameworks have been used by different organisations in different contexts. The European Sport Development Network has adopted a broad and inclusive conceptualisation that recognises the contributions of physical activity and health professionals, as well as the disciplines of policy and management. There is broad agreement that sport development is an umbrella term, which captures many different forms of sport promotion; ranging from opportunities that are as varied as developing fundamental movement skills in young people, to the way in which sport is used to bridge divides created by gang cultures in inner city environments. Ultimately, sport development is concerned with getting more people to play sport, for various reasons and in various ways.

*“Those engaging in sports development must be in the business of devising better and more effective ways of promoting interest, participation or performance in sport”*

(Bramham and Hylton 2008, 4)

The term sport development is a very difficult one to define, as it may apply to the breadth of conceptual theory through policy to actual work being undertaken (Houlihan and White 2002). It should be noted that the authors within this book use the term sport development in a number of



possible ways, but in the majority of cases it refers to the work that is being undertaken in our communities. The authors within this book can be categorised as falling into two camps: those whose focus centres on the development of sport (such as Bell, Keech, Brunton, Galloway, Booth and Partington), in contrast to those whose work is more aligned to development through sport (Kirkland, Jackson and Thompson) (Houlihan and White 2002). In some cases, the concept of sport development is applied to existing structures, such as universities, school sport partnerships and pre-games training camps, and as such, adopts the models of sport development which are promoted by organisations like Sport England and the International Olympic Committee (see Brunton, Keech and Bell). In other cases, sport development is considered in terms of the outreach work undertaken by practitioners (see Kirkland *et al.*), and even in some cases reflects the relationship between sport development and the lived experience (see Booth and Thompson). The range of this application of sport development to the examples within the book illustrates the breadth of the term and the lack of consensus in our collective use.

## Landmarks in Sport Development

Sport policy is now a “*politically salient, cross departmental policy area*” (Philpotts *et al.* 2008, 269) which governments are now commonly using as an “*extremely malleable resource to achieve a wide variety of domestic and international goals*” (Houlihan and Green 2009, 3). The way in which sport policy has an influence upon many parts of Government is testament to the fact that sport is pervasive in our lives. It features in our upbringing, our education, our families, and our friendships. For many people, participation in sport is a central tenant to their identity. For some it is not – hence the perceived need for sport development.

Political involvement from the central government in sport policy and legislation was traditionally characterised by a laissez-faire approach, with early involvement extending only to permissive legislation. Changes in this approach can be seen from the late 1950s, with the appointment of the Wolfenden Committee (1957) and its subsequent report (CCPR 1960), consideration of a Minister for Sport, and finally a separation from the Central Council of Physical Recreation (CCPR) into the Sports Council by 1972. This was the first meaningful recognition of sport development at a governmental level, and marked the onset of a model of sport development that was aimed primarily on “sport for all”, and then on facility provision. It is noted that the first official use of the term emerged in 1965 with the

early discourse about the establishment of the Sports Council (Houlihan and White 2002). Once these had been developed and built, notions of sport development expanded beyond the physical environment into the challenge of existing power relations, and principles of addressing the needs of target groups emerged in the early 1980s. The initial target groups identified by the Sports Council were women, young people and the older community (50+) during a time when the shift was moving towards viewing sport as a tool in addressing power imbalances. Moves within the 1990s demonstrated that sport could be viewed as a mechanism for greater social good, with the promotion of sport in neighbourhood renewal (PAT 10 1999) and the prevention of criminal behaviour, such as the Positive Futures program, funded by the Home Office. The most recent shift, occurring in the light of contemporary local government cuts, has seen sport development become more likely to be delivered in partnership through a variety of agencies working collaboratively.

Traditionally, sport development schemes were built with the intention of ensuring a greater provision for sport and increasing participation and engagement for all parts of society. The development of coaching and ancillary processes were vital to this. Coalter (2007) describes such an approach as *'sport plus'* – with an emphasis on traditional sport development objectives of long-term participation in sport. More commonly seen in contemporary sport development is the focus upon outcomes that are separate to pure sporting benefits. Coalter (2007) gives this the label of *'plus sport'* where sport is seen as a diversionary tool – sport acts as the hook to support the delivery of desired personal and political outcomes. Participation in sport through sport development activities is commonly now often built around (and justified by) a form of community or social benefit.

*“It is clear that while ‘sport’ may be particularly helpful in attracting young people considered vulnerable or ‘at risk’ of committing crime and using illegal drugs, the provision of sport on its own is not sufficient to achieve the desired outcomes of the program”*

(Bloyce and Smith 2010, 94)

Social, educational or health goals are frequently the focus of sport development schemes - the processes associated with sport are a useful mechanism (i.e. team building) and immediate outcomes (for example increased self-esteem or short-term behaviour change) are key. It is these supposed outcomes that warrant the necessary funding, often from the public sector purse.

This creates a challenge. Western austerity measures that are the result of the most recent global financial crises have commonly resulted in a reduction in disposable income. A dilution of public sector provision of leisure services (and thus sports development) further exacerbates this reduction in opportunity, and is driving people towards spending more of their leisure time in the home environment. In terms of sport development provision, the state is doing less than ever to provide opportunities for all of society. The investment of public funds requires a research informed acknowledgement of effectiveness that is sometimes lacking from the complex social process of participation in sport. In spite of this challenge, *“there remains an increased emphasis on outcomes and effectiveness, and an aspiration to base policy and practice on robust evidence”* (Coalter 2007, 1). To maintain the political and social will for sport requires a persuasive justification of its merits and outcomes. Measuring outcomes and impact in sport is inherently fraught with challenge. The drive towards *insight* in sport development (the way in which actions are informed by knowledge of outcomes) is attempting to redress this issue.

## **Current Issues in Sport Development**

The external constraints placed upon the sports industry (and the world of sport development) create challenge and restrict opportunity. The landscape of sport, and the position of sport development within this, is changing. The rise of consumerism and a market-led economy are driving patterns of participation more than ever before. The experience economy drives our participation (or lack thereof) in sport, and, as such, our consumption of sport is changing with structural, political, financial, and operational implications.

The drivers of change in the sports industry are many and varied, ranging from our increasingly hypokinetic lifestyles and the technology contained within them, to shifts in population demographics and the changing intergenerational participatory processes which result. Our changing leisure habits are reflective of changes to wider society – young people are now socialised into sporting experiences that are a world away from those of twenty years ago. On-going social change and changing social interactions are causing a shift in our engagement with sport.

The chapters that follow in this book touch upon many of these issues. They are all written from the perspective of either academic researchers or applied practitioners working in sport development in line with the aims of

ESDN of providing a common forum to bring together research and practice. Four chapters are written from the applied practitioner perspective, five chapters emerge from academic research and one chapter is a hybrid of PhD research located within a county sports partnership.

The importance of the sports club in development issues is examined in chapter two, by Janine Partington and Stephen Robson. This academic piece of research provides an update on the current situation of sports clubs, especially in terms of their partnerships with external organisations and influences with external factors. It illustrates, not surprisingly, that larger clubs are in a better position to be able to respond to their environment, whilst smaller clubs may have more critical issues, such as membership, to deal with. In chapter three, Simon Kirkland and his colleagues from Sport Structures examine three different sports programs aimed at hard to reach communities. These programs, delivered over a ten-year period within the West Midlands region, were designed to address employment issues, and their results demonstrate that between 27% and 55.7% of the participants went on into employment post-engagement with the programs.

In chapter four, Jane Booth explores the difficult concept of sustainability in sports development from a practitioner perspective. In this chapter, she combines the theoretical perspective from Kurt Lewin (1940s) with her own experiences of being a coaching manager within a governing body to question the paradox of truly sustainable sports development and its impact on the role of the SDO. We see a different style of writing in this chapter, as Jane adopts a combination of the traditional academic voice alongside a more personal narrative interweaving an auto-ethnographic stance with her analysis.

Involving and attracting university students into sport programs is different to the wider traditional community for sports development interventions. In chapter five, Julie Brunton and Jim McKenna undertake empirical research with those in an SDO role within a university setting. They identify the enablers and inhibitors of university sport, specifically in the Active Universities Project within one region of the North of England. Following on the university theme, chapter six investigates the ways in which sports and non-sports students gather digital information. Through an analysis of the ways in which university homepages direct students to physical activity Zsuzsa Galloway and her international colleagues from Hungary suggest that the information located on university homepages is a

key source of information for students who use it to inform their choices of physical activity.

In chapter seven, Jade Jackson discusses the impact of the volunteer on the delivery of sport and physical activity interventions. Undertaking research within a County Sports Partnership, she explores the concept of hard to reach communities, their significant role in developing sport for a health agenda in some of the deprived areas in the West Midlands, and the challenges faced by volunteers in that project. In chapter eight, Marc Keech and Jo Buckley present another empirical study based on their research, covering the impact of the dissolution of the School Sport Partnerships (SSPs). Using a case study from one medium-sized town which had overlapping SSPs borders, this chapter examines the experience of loss from the changes and comments on the distrust, uncertainty, loss of communication between school levels and the coalition disregard for the PE and sport partnership working established by the previous government.

Barbara Bell's evaluation of the legacy of a pre-games training camp for visiting Oceania teams for London 2012 appears in chapter nine. Using data collected via interviews with a range of participants involved in the training camp, the results indicate that relationships between the visitors and local clubs and communities were positive during the visit, and helped to enhance perceptions of Olympic links. Beyond the visit, however, it has been difficult to sustain these relationships in any meaningful way. Following on the Olympic theme, in the final chapter, chapter ten, Geoff Thompson presents his overview of the three case studies from his experiences: Manchester 2002, London 2012, and Soccerwise, also based in Manchester. His report provides a historical overview of his work in sport development through the establishment of the Youth Charter.

The world of sport development is continually faced with changing political landscapes that over time result in a cyclical approach to sports policy and resourcing. Such change is a challenge for a sport development industry which is constantly in a state of flux. There is a constant need to devise better and more effective ways of promoting interest, participation, or performance in sport. We hope that the contents of this book provide the framework for critical thought regarding sport development in its current guise, and its future direction of travel.

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## CHAPTER TWO

“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

JANINE PARTINGTON AND STEPHEN ROBSON

#### **Introduction**

Substantial research has been undertaken in recent years on voluntary sports clubs in terms of their structure, scope, and governance arrangements (for example, Nichols *et al.* 2005; Taylor, Barrett and Nichols 2009; May, Harris and Collins 2013), the main challenges they face in terms of maintaining the day-to-day functions of the organisation and their role as policy implementers (for example Harris, Mori and Collins 2009; Nichols 2013). There has also been a growing focus on how sports organisations analyse and manage their external environments (Slack and Parent 2006; King 2013). This is increasingly important to voluntary sports clubs in light of shifting policy objectives and the accompanying focus on legacy, as well as the impact of broader public sector cuts and the economic downturn on themselves and their key partners. Houlihan (2013) contends that the setting of strategic goals and coordination of resources, along with managing the organisation’s relationship with its environment, are the two key elements of successful management. As such, for voluntary sports clubs to function effectively, they need to have an awareness of factors outside the boundaries of the club that could impact on the achievement of their objectives. As Houlihan (2013, 17) argues, factors in the external environment will affect “all organisations, whether they are in the public, not for profit or commercial sectors”, and irrespective of their size.

It is also an apt time to consider the impact of broader social and cultural factors on the work of voluntary sports clubs. For those clubs that have been established for a number of years, the social environment in which they operate will have changed significantly, both in terms of demographics (for example increasing ethnic diversity), rising levels of inequality and changing cultural trends (for example the shift in popularity from 11-a-side football to smaller-sized versions of the game). This piece of research sought to provide insight into how voluntary sports clubs respond to changes in their external environments, with a specific focus on the impact of political, economic, and social factors, and the impact on the way that clubs operate. Research undertaken by Thibault, Frisby and Kikulis (1999) found that a common response to political, economic and social pressures amongst sports organisations was to form partnerships and create resource dependencies, something that is very much evident in the sport development arena. In addition, Slack and Parent (2006) highlight alternative responses, including changing the internal structures of organisations and creating a niche for the organisation to operate in, in order to differentiate it from competitors. Drawing upon semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of voluntary sports clubs in the North of England, and utilising strategic management theories of organisation-environment relations, this research examines the current management issues facing clubs, specifically focusing on how they identify and respond to opportunities and threats from the external environment.

## **The external environment for sports organisations**

Everything that surrounds a system (such as a sports organisation) can be considered part of its external environment (Palmer and Hartley 2012). This system can be influenced by a range of phenomena or elements in its environment, and whilst some of these elements may seem inconsequential today, they could be significant in future years. Henry (2011) discusses the concept of discontinuities, fractures and tipping points; crises that can have a fundamental effect on the organisation's prosperity and even survival. These are often foreshadowed by weak signals – early and often vague indications of changes to come (Holopainen and Toivonen 2012). The test of a good manager is to be able to read the environment and to understand how the elements may impact upon the organisation, tuning into weak signals as early as possible in order not to get caught out. As Tucker and Sullivan (2013) and many others remind us, organisations in



the broader sport development domain have not always kept abreast of the changes occurring around them.

Voluntary sector sports clubs are no less susceptible to the caprices of the external environment than the sportswear manufacturers, international federations, and others we are perhaps more accustomed to reading about in sport management literature. Slack and Parent (2006, 5) define a sport organisation as:

*... a social entity involved in the sport industry; it is goal-directed, with a consciously structured activity system and relatively identifiable boundaries*

This is all encompassing and highlights the inextricable link between the internal and external organisational environments. Thus it is necessary to consider the nature of the external forces that those leading sports clubs cannot directly control, but cannot afford to ignore.

Amongst many others, Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) offer a model of the wider forces that impact upon the organisation, stressing their interrelatedness. There are numerous competing versions of this model, but they overlap appreciably. PESTLE (see, for instance, Johnson, Whittington and Scholes 2011) is possibly the most popular characterisation of the external environment, focusing on the political, economic, social, technological, legal/legislative, and environmental/physical forces acting upon the organisation. Political changes, for instance, at local and national level, can have a significant bearing on the future of the voluntary sports club. The reader will be familiar with the political decision to remove funding for School Sport Partnerships (Conn 2013), and the resulting impact upon school-club links. To use Henry's nomenclature, this was a discontinuity that very few had foreseen, but it provided a clue as to the future direction of the 2010-2015 Con-Lib coalition government. Factors in the PESTLE model are not mutually exclusive; for example, a number of voluntary sports clubs face the threat of losing discretionary rate relief (GOV.UK 2014) as local authorities ponder swinging budget reductions.

Taken together, therefore, changes in the external environment lead to *opportunities* and *threats*, making it essential that managers, or, in the case of this research, those with management responsibilities within voluntary sports clubs, analyse their environments carefully in order to anticipate and, where possible, influence environmental change (Johnson, Whittington and Scholes 2011). The next section examines best practice in

scanning the external environment and managing relations with this complex and challenging realm.

### **Managing interactions with the external environment**

For Pitt and Koufopoulos (2012), the ability to imagine or predict possible futures, and subsequently reduce uncertainty, is a pivotal aspect of the strategic manager's toolkit. *Environmental scanning* can help to identify and predict changes in the environment, such as Henry's (2011) discontinuities or tipping points. If performed effectively, such analysis can provide an organisation with a competitive advantage (seizing upon opportunities), or avert possible disaster (staving off threats). Sports organisations' strategic thinking and planning can be refined to maximise opportunities and minimise threats. The aforementioned PESTLE model or one of its variants such as STEEPLE (social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal and ethical) (see Tucker and Sullivan 2013) provides a framework for a comprehensive assessment of the current and future state of what is "out there". A common misconception amongst public and voluntary sector sport organisations is that such an analysis should only be conducted at the finding out phase of a strategy cycle. Such a PESTLE exercise, perhaps undertaken on a three-or five-yearly basis, is extremely time-and resource-intensive. It also provides a snapshot in time of something that, as has been discussed, is ever-changing. If the PESTLE analysis is not regularly updated, it quickly loses its currency. The current study sought to appreciate sports clubs' use of environmental analysis, however informal, and regardless of whether it was understood as an activity captured in academic literature.

Just as important as monitoring the external environment is the voluntary sector sports club's ability to make use of the information. Literature emphasises the inseparability of the link between internal (e.g. culture, structure, resources), and external environments (see, for instance Thompson and Martin's (2010) E-V-R congruence model). Discoveries of weak signals might precipitate internal changes as a means of gearing up for external fluctuations. Reeves and Deimler (2011, 137-8) remind us of the importance of adaptation, with regard to the notion of competitive advantage:

*In order to adapt, a company must have its antennae tuned to signals of change from the external environment, decode them, and quickly act to refine or reinvent its business model and even reshape the information landscape of its industry.*

Officials of many voluntary sports clubs might struggle to identify with terms such as *company*, *business model* and *industry* (although we argue that these terms have corollaries in the voluntary sport sector) but they will certainly be familiar with the notion of *adapt and survive*. Literature offers us numerous theoretical models relating to organisation-environment relations. *Contingency theory* (that managers should organise as a response to the demands of the environment) is one of the principal disciplines, and includes institutional theory, population ecology and resource dependence (see, for instance, Hatch and Cunliffe 2006). In *institutional theory*, organisations shape their outward appearances to suit external demands. The institutional environment represents the shared values of society, to which organisations must conform in order to legitimise the organisation. The current study strove to establish whether sports clubs were engaged in this kind of behaviour, and if so, at what cost to their traditions and identities. The *population ecology* perspective characterises organisations as competing in a limited resource pool, and will be instinctively familiar to those managing sports clubs. A Darwinian survival of the fittest state is proposed, and ecological niches are examined. We were interested to learn how acutely aware sports clubs were of the resource pools available to them, and to what extent were they in any condition to compete? Finally, *resource dependence* extends this analogy and assumes that organisations are controlled by their environments. The level of dependency can be assessed and smart managers in resource-hungry organisations can seek to develop counter-dependencies. For example, were sports clubs exploiting their unique ability to deliver funding bodies' mass participation and talent development objectives?

Of course, detecting the aforementioned weak signals that signpost changes in the environment might be an unattainable luxury for the majority of the volunteer workforce engaged in delivering the bulk of grassroots sport in England (Sport England 2014b). This is an iterative activity requiring constant attention. It was therefore of interest to explore the realities of looking outward at all when one's time is already subject to multiple demands, let alone being able to meaningfully reconfigure the sports club to address opportunities and threats. The next section outlines the methodological approach taken to addressing these questions.

## Methodological approach

The research was undertaken by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior representatives of voluntary sports clubs from the North of England. The geographical boundaries of the study were chosen due to the researchers' past and present professional links across this area. This provided benefits in terms of access to the research setting, but more importantly for this study, a good understanding of the external environment in which clubs were operating (for example local politics and demographics). Clubs were chosen based on their fit within a sampling framework created for the study that aimed to reflect the diversity of voluntary sports clubs that exist across England. For the purposes of this study, a definition of a voluntary sports club was identified, using a combination of Slack and Parent's (2006, 5) characterisation of a sports organisation, and the work of Nichols (2013), who identifies sports clubs as membership associations run by volunteers, ranging from single competitive teams to those clubs with multiple teams. He also highlights differences between formal, semi-formal and informal clubs. As such, the sampling frame used for this study attempted to secure involvement from clubs representing this range of typologies, as shown in figure one below. In addition to those criteria represented on the frame, efforts were made to ensure that the clubs represented different sports and were drawn from different areas across the North of England (in total, the study utilised clubs from eight different local authority areas).

**Table 1 - sampling frame**

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

A semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes was conducted and recorded with a senior representative from each club (for example the chair or the secretary). Semi-structured interviews were used in order to allow the collection of rich data on each club's interactions with the external environment, and to provide the flexibility to investigate emerging themes and topics of interest. As Long (2013) argues, despite offering the potential to involve more subjects, questionnaires are often too rigid to provide this flexibility, and would not have enabled the level of detail needed to assess each club's awareness of political, economic and social influences, or how they dealt with them. Once conducted, each interview was transcribed, and then analysed in a two-stage process. The first stage involved identifying examples of opportunities and threats accommodated within the PESTLE framework introduced earlier in this paper. The second stage involved looking at how clubs managed these opportunities and threats (for example looking for examples of resource dependencies).

## **Findings**

### **Clubs and their external environments: overview**

Subsequent sections of the paper give a more detailed insight into the political, economic and social facets of PESTLE. Here, we briefly examine voluntary sports clubs' overall approach to interactions with the external environment. As alluded to earlier, the study generated the unsurprising finding that most officials do not scan the external environment, but some had an awareness of how factors within it could impact on their clubs. Perhaps self-evidently, clubs were at an advantage that had officials with professional roles that brought them into contact with PESTLE factors, especially the political arena. A large, junior football club led by a physical education teacher was able to keep one step ahead of the competition in terms of aligning club activities, with governing body policy and strategy. Likewise, a council officer involved in housing policy and strategy in a neighbouring district was in a position of influence in a sizeable cricket club, and therefore able to anticipate developments and circumvent what was seen as minimal local authority support.

In crude terms, larger clubs (in terms of volunteer and committee infrastructure) do take action to maximise opportunities in the micro-environment, the immediate sector within which they operate (see Hatch

and Cunliffe 2006). Internal reconfiguration is likewise driven by more local circumstances. For example the chair of the large girls' football club stated:

*As it stands, I couldn't be more happy with the structure that we've finally got in place, people overseeing certain sections and me only dealing with four or five people, rather than a hundred and five people on a daily or a weekly basis...*

This was precipitated by the club growing (in terms of number of teams) at a faster rate than it was able to keep pace with. The internal reorganisation was predominantly designed to maintain core business, with limited attention to enhancing the club's strategic fit with its wider environment.

Other clubs are often oblivious to the potential impact of changes in the macro (external) environment (and very slow to react to them). In many cases, key contemporary policy developments such as the London 2012 legacy aspiration and the government's Creating a Sporting Habit for Life (DCMS 2012) campaign are not seen as important or relevant on the ground. The feeling of being left to one's own devices was prevalent, especially amongst smaller clubs with less structured relationships with national governing bodies. Additionally there is little evidence of clubs taking specific action to minimise threats in either the micro or macro environment, for instance, identifying discontinuities and weak signals (Henry 2011). Again the smaller clubs are particularly exposed to change and uncertainty. Ultimately, clubs that stumbled upon opportunities made some of the greatest gains encountered in the research. Sull (2005 124) suggests that this readiness to seize upon opportunities can be thought of as "active waiting".

### **Political factors**

Generic PESTLE analysis examines macro-political issues, as well as local concerns. UK central government is now run according to fixed-term parliaments of five years' duration (Parliament UK 2014) whilst the local government political cycle is one of four years. In larger local authorities, elections are held every two years, with half of the seats contested per election. Consequently, the political landscape is ever shifting, and tensions are evident between national policy determined by one political group, and local priorities established by another. Thus sports clubs reported that public sector cuts and the accompanying changes to sport