An analysis of County Sports Partnerships in England: The fragility, challenges and complexity of partnership working in sports development

Abstract

The management, use and reliance upon multi-agency partnerships in the field of public sector sports development became increasingly important following the election of the 'New' Labour government in 1997. In this study one example of a multi-agency partnership - County Sports Partnership (CSP) – will be examined through a case study analysis of four CSPs in the East Midlands region of England. A review of the theoretical and conceptual literature around partnership working will inform an appraisal of the impact of CSP arrangements in this region. The theoretical framework of partnership dynamics by Shaw and Allen (2006) is utilised to explore the reality of partnership working in sports development in conjunction with the findings of four in-depth interviews that were conducted with Chief Executive Officers and senior managers in each of the CSP regions. In particular, consideration will be given to the potential implications and issues of 'working in partnership' for public sector sports development officers and managers who negotiate the complex and challenging policy environment surrounding multi-agency working in sport. The key findings of the research include the extent to which there appears to be a misunderstanding of the CSP role amongst some CSP partner agencies, the fragility of partnership working; the importance of relationship management; and the complex shifting politics of sports development policy.

Introduction

The notion of partnership working within sports and leisure management is not a new one. Indeed, the need to work through and develop partnership arrangements in the narrower professional field of sports development is one that can be traced back to the early Action Sport programmes of the 1980s (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008). However, in more recent times, the shift towards the imperative of partnership working has been linked to the ideological movement of the 'Third Way' (Dowling et al 2004, Giddens 1997, Mackintosh 2007, Rummery and Coleman 2004) and the political project of the former 'New' Labour government (Balloch and Taylor 2001). It seems in some policy literature that partnerships were a panacea for delivering the 'modernisation' agenda of the former 'New' Labour government (DCMS 2002, DCMS 2008a, DCMS 2008b, NAO 1998, Sport England 2005c) whilst for others partnerships were rhetoric that offered little more than 'shop front partnerships' of little genuine multi-agency working (Rowe 2006).

The need to work in partnership now saturates the discourse of policy and practice in sports development in England (Bloyce et al. 2008, Mackintosh 2008). This appears to be the case to such a point whereby they are less of a policy 'option' and more of a 'necessity' for those working in this field. As Bolton et al. (2008, p. 101) state 'the partnership imperative, has, therefore, moved from being a desirable tactic for the advancement of sport and recreation development to its current status of necessity for prosperity and survival'. This shift in perspective is explained by other academics (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008, Robson 2008) and, crucially, by practitioners in this study. However, what is also noticeable is the minimal academic attention

that this area of sports development practice has received. This seems incongruent with its priority for government and for those who have been encouraged to embrace its implications in sports development practice (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008, MacDonald 2005, Robson 2008).

The CSP is one of the partners charged with addressing the inherent challenges around the promotion of sports participation. Other potential partners include school sport organisations, voluntary sector clubs, local authorities and national governing bodies (NGBs). It is briefly worth clarifying what is meant by sports development. For the purposes of this study sports development is taken to encompass the processes, practices and policies that centre upon increasing levels of sports participation and promoting the wider benefits of sport (Bolton et al. 2008). Sports development embraces the dual goals of increasing community sports participation linked to the aspiration to improve standards of elite sports performance. Furthermore, the work of the sports development officer (SDO) could embrace varied aspects of community sport including voluntary sports club development, community event planning, volunteer recruitment and retention and coach education and development activities. Similarly, Green (2005) has argued that, in defining this field of sports development, policy should address at least three key specific matters namely: athlete entrance, retention and advancement. Indeed the boundaries of sports development are constantly shifting and increasingly hard to delineate as these three distinct features highlighted by Green (2005) do not necessarily reflect the diverse range of activities which now incorporate sports development practice. Equally, as has been identified elsewhere, there is no unified, agreed definition of sports development (Houlihan and White

2002, Hylton 2008). A detailed discussion around the conceptual and theoretical definition of sports development is beyond the scope of this paper, but, as Girginov (2008, p.14) states, 'what emerges from various interpretations is a chequered picture which defines sports development as a process, policy domain, activity/practice and discourse'.

As MacDonald (2005, p. 595) has argued, 'a more detailed empirical examination is necessary to tease out the nuances, complexities and contradictions of CSPs'. This view, which is shared by Houlihan and Lindsey (2008), is in part a key reason for the research direction undertaken in this study, to help inform understanding of not only sports development partnership working, but also help fill the current gap in knowledge of the role, scope and challenges facing CSPs in England. This justification for the research is reinforced by the call for increased evidence-based practice and policy (Davies et al. 2000, Nutley et al. 2007, Rowe 2009) which is heard with increasing urgency in the field of sports development. Indeed, Sport England only published their own national research strategy in 2005 encouraging evidence-based policy for sports development (Sport England 2005a). As Mackintosh (2007) has noted, engagement with evidence-based practice and policy is embryonic in the field of sports development as local authorities, and other agencies such as CSPs begin to use research to evaluate and inform policy and practice. This said, national level developments to measure performance through local area agreement (LAA) strategic frameworks through national performance indicators are an indication of progress. For example, CSPs and local authorities are using Sport England's national Active People Survey data to benchmark against participation outcomes of policy

(Rowe 2009). Hence, this paper will also attempt to inform and facilitate debate concerning the most effective sports development practice of partnership working, inter-agency collaboration and wider working of CSPs.

In view of points mentioned above this article will also explore the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that have been utilised to help examine the reality of partnership working in sports development by exploring the experiences and practices of those who work in CSPs in England. In particular, the theoretical framework proposed by Shaw and Allen (2006) will be drawn upon to help underpin the analysis of the processes of partnership working in CSPs. The aims of this research project are firstly to examine the role, characteristics and structures of CSPs in the East Midlands. Secondly, to explore, in relation to CSPs, the challenges, benefits and features of partnership working processes in sports development. Also, to improve understanding of the experience of partnership working in sports development for those staff located within CSPs and finally, to inform current policy and practice in the sports development context of CSPs. These aims will be achieved through a case study analysis (Gomm et al. 2000) of four CSPs in the East Midlands region. The experiences of those working directly in such a partnership focused environment will be examined in order to inform current practice in sports development.

If we are to embrace the recent call for 'evidence-based policy' and research–informed practice in public service provision (Davies et al 2000, Nutley et al 2007, Sport England 2005a,) then further empirical evidence is needed to help stimulate debate not only about 'what works?', but also to

establish a clear understanding of the operation of CSPs and the nature of their organisational environment.

County Sports Partnerships: policy background

Whilst partnership working in sports development is not a recent phenomenon (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008, Robson 2008), it was only in 2003 that CSPs were introduced into the sport policy landscape in England. There are 49 CSPs across England and these often vary considerably in terms of their specified role, their strategic scope of activity, and their organisational and management structures within local and regional sports systems. For the period 2009-2012 all 49 CSPs will receive core funding from Sport England to deliver services that link and underpin national governing body Whole Sport Plans (WSPs) and wider Sport England performance targets related to sports participation (Sport England 2009). CSPs' core services encompass the six broad fields of strategic planning, leadership, advocacy, partnership building, capacity building, safeguarding and equity (County Sports Partnership Network, 2009). In addition to these 'core services' further 'enhanced services' can be made available to NGBs, Sport England and other partners in local areas dependent upon individual negotiation and funding arrangements. The classification into 'core' and 'enhanced' services relates to the period 2009-2012 and was introduced just after the fieldwork phase of the study reported here was conducted. Hence, the evaluation of role, remit and characteristics of the CSPs in the context of this study relates to those established in the earlier governance and funding guidance document (Sport England, 2005b).

In the DCMS *Game Plan* strategy (DCMS, 2002) it was suggested that, given the existing range of agencies involved in sports development at the time, sub-regional strategic agencies were needed. The Carter Review (2005) provided further support for the expansion of the CSP structures in England 'as a key building block and channel for investment – alongside LAs [local authorities] and NGBs in club development, coaches and volunteers' (Carter, 2005 p. 28). Crucially, from the outset CSPs were not set up as providers of activities but as sub-regional strategic bodies for channelling investment (Robson, 2008) alongside the, now disbanded, Regional Sports Boards (RSBs). For many CSPs their original structure emerged through a transformation of the 45 Active Sport delivery partnerships that were in place in England. Indeed, many CSPs as they currently exist have been born directly out of a gradual transition from the 45 county-based Active Sports Partnerships established by Sport England in 1999 (DCMS, 2002). These partnerships were set up to improve the pathway thought to exist between participation and excellence and to re-establish robust performance pathways for young people to progress in sport.

According to Sport England (2008) there were three core functions that each CSP should fulfil. These were: strategic co-ordination and planning; performance management; and marketing and communications. It was also recognised that there would be three key 'work areas' on which CSPs should focus, developing pathways for young people, including contributing towards the Physical Education School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) agenda; workforce development; and club development. The PESSCL strategy, published in 2003, included in its remit the development of an infrastructure of

400 Specialist Sports Colleges and the establishment of a network of School Sport Coordinators to improve the proportion of children progressing into sports clubs (DfES/DCMS, 2003). In the Sport England strategy for the period 2008-2011 CSPs were recognised as a key delivery partner alongside NGBs, local authorities and School Sports Partnerships (SSPs), with NGBs being positioned as the key operational structures at the heart of the strategy (Sport England 2008).

What is apparent from a review of more recent policy documents (CSPN 2009, DCMS 2008a, DCMS 2008b) is that we are moving into a new period of change for CSPs where the evolving Sport England priorities, biased towards a central and pivotal role for NGBs, have been the catalyst for the direction that CSPs are likely to take in the future.

Conceptualising partnerships

Whilst partnerships in sports development have been the focus of some empirically grounded research (Bolton et al. 2008, KKP 2005, Lindsey 2006) other fields of public policy such as health and social care (Dowling et al 2004, Lymbery 2006, Rummery and Coleman 2003) and regeneration (Laffin and Liddle 2006, Rowe 2003), have received far greater attention. Within these wider fields far more rigorous attention has been paid to the potential theoretical frameworks that can help explain the nature and reality of partnership working. That partnership working has influenced such a wide sphere of public policy perhaps indicates just how much of a central feature of the former 'New' Labour approach it had become (Powell and Glendinning 2002). Or, as Houlihan and Lindsey (2008) refer to in their analysis of

partnership working in sports development, it is, at an ideological level, part of the wider 'parent concept' of modernisation. It is to some of these wider spheres of theoretical influence that attention will now be turned.

It has been suggested that 'to some extent we can argue that the term "partnership" is such an illusive label that it now lacks any real meaning. At best we can suggest that it captures a way of working rather than conveying a particular organisational model' (Diamond 2006, p. 278). If this perspective on partnership working in the public sector is to be sufficient then the very process of conceptually defining what a partnership may constitute is itself problematic. However, it is perhaps more useful to attempt to at least map out some of the complexities of defining such a well-used term that has embedded itself within the discourse of such a diverse and wide range of public policy sectors. Lymbery (2006) draws the distinction between 'partnership' and 'collaboration' in relation to delivery and multi-agency working in social work and provides a useful starting point for definition and parallels the work of Robson (2008) in relation to sports development. Here, the difference is made explicit by Lymbery (2006, p. 1121) who claims that 'the term partnership is deployed when two or more agencies have established arrangements that enable them to work together. By contrast, 'collaboration' can refer to two activities: the process of working together to establish the partnership and the process of working together to achieve the outcomes of the partnership'. This is useful for considering the CSP specifically, as there is a perhaps a necessary and important clarification needed between the partnership organisation that is the CSP and the varied collaborative work that they engage in. CSPs are not merely the

administrative and operational agencies, but also fulfil a representative function in relation to the wider sub-regional network of agencies in each geographical area.

Uhlik and Parr (2005) utilise a distinction in relation to park and recreation services in the United States to suggest that a genuine partnership has an inclination to engage with longer term relationships. They also recognise that partnerships are uniformly labelled as such without the necessary regard for the more subtle strengths, patterns or resources present within such varied types of organisational linkages. Similarly, Powell et al. (2002) have identified the difficulty of selecting the 'unit of analysis' for data collection and evaluation when referring to a partnership. They highlight how this can equally be an individual, a team of professionals or a locality or area. This is particularly pertinent to the CSP, which in many ways represents the range of organisations and individuals that buy-in to the partnership that each represents, rather than being the core staff that reside in a CSP regional office. This has clear implications for the challenge of evaluating the potential impact of CSPs.

It is thus clear that there is a well rehearsed debate that explores the vagaries, contradictions and difficulties inherent in defining the concept of a partnership. However, the intention of this paper is to move beyond this debate to explore the specific nature and experiences of partnership working in the varied contexts within which CSPs operate. A further area of conceptual uncertainty that has to be recognised in relation to the aim of this paper is the various approaches taken to evaluating partnerships. Indeed, Powell and Glendinning (2002) and Dowling et al (2004) have expressed the central

distinction in approaches to the evaluation of partnerships in terms of the emphasis given to 'process issues' or 'outcome issues'. In undertaking their own systematic literature review of partnership evaluations in health and social care, Dowling et al (2004) identify the clear bias towards focusing on partnership processes rather than outcomes. Whilst not as well developed as in other policy areas there is a growing body of literature which suggests how an effective partnership in the field of sport and recreation may be constituted (Frisby et al 2004, Houlihan and Lindsey 2008, Robson 2008, Sport England 2005c Uhlik and Parr 2005).

Furthermore, other theoretical frameworks have been employed to help specifically analyse, interpret and understand partnership processes; these are of particular relevance to this study. The work of Frisby et al. (2004) evaluated local government partnerships in Canada developing an inductive theoretical framework to examine the organisational dynamics of partnership working. In particular they identified managerial structures and managerial processes as central features of this model highlighting a further tier of factors within these two categories that shaped potential negative consequences. Their framework, whilst very specific to the context of local government, does highlight issues that are potentially pertinent to CSPs in England such as tensions between partners and the importance of managerial structures and processes in shaping potential outcomes.

Building upon elements of the initial framework provided by Frisby et al. (2004), Shaw and Allen (2006) developed and extended their conceptual model in the setting of voluntary sector inter-organisational partnerships in New Zealand. This extended framework will be utilised in this study of CSPs

in England to examine the dynamics of these partnerships. The reasons for drawing upon this framework are threefold. Firstly, Shaw and Allen (2006) develop their conceptual frame in the specific context of a sports development partnership rather than local government. Secondly, it is driven by the imperative of collaborating with practitioners rather than imposing a framework upon a partnership setting. Thirdly, it has a particular applicability to the research aims of this study due to the focus on theoretical aspects of partnership processes and dynamics over outcomes. In particular, this theoretical framework incorporates Frisby et al's. (2004) examination of managerial structures which, they argue, could include analysis of partnership management, power relations within the partnership and formal communication processes. Likewise, they define managerial processes as aspects encompassing 'competing values, coordination and informal communication' (Shaw and Allen 2006, p. 207). These features of their theoretical framework allowed them to explore and examine the central dynamics and features of the voluntary sector sports development partnership they were researching. For these reasons, Shaw and Allen's framework will be used to analyse the findings of this study and to help gain better insights into the data presented from the interviews conducted.

Research into partnership working in sports development

In terms of CSP partnership working the call for further evidence and empirical research (MacDonald 2005, Houlihan and Lindsey 2008) is only beginning to be acted upon (Mackintosh 2008). In relation to sports development partnership working in England, there are some recent attempts

to utilise theoretical frameworks for helping to understand and examine their working practices and processes. MacDonald (2005) is the one researcher to specifically attempt to apply, utilise and explore a theoretical framework in the context of CSPs. In his largely theoretical and conceptual analysis of partnership working in sport policy, MacDonald focused upon the potential contradictions and power relations present in CSPs by constructing a theoretical framework for understanding partnerships with a distinction being made between 'strategic' and 'communicative' partnerships. Specifically, Habermas' theory of communicative action is utilised to examine partnership working through MacDonald's development of a typology of four forms of partnership working. This typology is then applied to the case of CSPs where it is suggested they fit with the rational goal model of governance. In the analysis and justification for this categorisation it is proposed that 'the management of CSPs themselves operate within a prescribed framework with clear objectives set by the dominant powers, but are granted managerial authority over other actors in the partnership, so as to better adapt national policy to fit local conditions' (MacDonald, 2005, p. 594-5). Thus it is proposed in his 'preliminary analysis' of CSPs that they are a 'strategic partnership'. Here, he concludes that the self-governance model of communicative partnership may be more appropriate to achieve increased levels of physical activity.

This study is in part a response to this and similar calls for the need for more detailed empirical evidence and research findings into CSPs. However, the initial observations of MacDonald (2005), whilst not empirically grounded are a useful starting point for identifying the benefit of utilising and developing

theoretical frameworks to help understand partnerships in sports development. In his view the role of theory in partnership research is two-fold. Firstly, 'interpretative' allowing academics and practitioners to access a clearer understanding of partnership working. Secondly, he suggests there is a 'transformative' aspect, where professionals in the field can perhaps improve and adapt approaches to their own partnership working through the use of theory.

In a study of partnership working in sport Lindsey (2006) utilises the policy network framework to examine regional partnerships in the New Opportunities for PE and Sport (NOPES) structures. Whilst not an examination of CSPs it is a further rare example of detailed, empirically grounded research into the form and effect of partnerships on sport. Lindsey (2006) focused on how the nature of a partnership may influence the processes that occurred within 10 NOPES partnerships in local authority areas across the UK. The findings of the study drew upon Marsh and Rhodes' (1992) framework for categorising policy networks to identify three types of partnership utilising four conceptual features namely: membership; integration; resources; and power. Even within this framework it was recognised that within the 'groupings' of the 10 partnerships there was not homogeneity within the three 'forms' he identified.

This said, there are some further studies that have directly researched the CSP. Perhaps the largest of these studies was commissioned by Sport England and was undertaken by the sports development consultancy Knight, Kavanagh and Page in 2005. This study was based around eight CSPs as part of a wider analysis of the then Active Sports partnerships and programme

that in part evolved into the the current CSP network. The primary aims of the study were to consider the impact of CSPs work on clubs, the credibility of CSPs, their relationships with partners, potential political and economic impact of CSPs and training needs.

The proposed methodology was equally wide-ranging encompassing a survey with 500 sports clubs, a partner survey and qualitative research comprising ten face-to-face CSP interviews supplemented with two focus groups. Here, it was recognised that the impact of CSPs on clubs had seen average club membership increase by 47.9% over the previous four years. However, it was recognised within this study that with no control group there is no way to determine the causality of impact. In terms of the CSP role within the wider sports community networks 44% of clubs were very aware of their CSP, but 17% of clubs rated the impact of their CSP as 'poor' or 'very poor'. A weakness in these results was that there was only a 31% response rate (167 surveys).

Furthermore, through qualitative research that was undertaken it was recognised that there was an arguable, variable impact dependent upon the 'stage of development' of each CSP and its historic relationship or background in terms of the Active Sport platform. Where CSPs had developed directly from Active Sports they had greater success in engaging other partners such as NGBs and local authorities. It was suggested that the main impact of CSPs in 2005 was in increased information sharing and maximisation of resources although there is little evidence to support this observation. The final key observations from this study centre upon the role and function of CSPs, here it was suggested that 'in a significant number of

cases, the 'core team' is seen by partners as 'the partnership' rather than as equal partner in a partnership of which they are a partner' (KKP 2005, p. 23). Here, it was also suggested that the evidence from the study illustrated that engagement with partners to share CSP aims and objectives had in some cases been limited. Specifically this had been the case where the CSP included a unitary authority. These aspects of the qualitative findings need to be considered from the perspective that at the time of the study CSPs were in their infancy.

Research Methods

Shaw and Allen (2006) argue one of the central features of their framework for understanding partnership dynamics in sports development are managerial structures. Indeed in this study the organisational status/type of the CSP encompassed a not-for-profit limited company, two university campus located CSPs, and a County Council office-based team. Location and host setting were therefore very varied. This to most managers was not seen as a key issue. It is clear from the fieldwork undertaken in this study that CSPs are one of the central emergent features of the sports development networks in the East Midlands.

The empirical data in this project were collected by in-depth qualitative interviews with four CEOs and Directors of CSPs in the East Midlands region of England between July and August 2008. Of the five CSPs in the East Midlands region, four agreed to be part of the study. Alongside the face-to-face interviews, secondary documentation and organisational information was also collated to inform the case study approach (Gomm et al 2000, Amis

2005). All interviews were an hour in length, tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim to provide detailed text for analysis. Examples of secondary documents included annual reports and strategic plans. Research interview consent was obtained prior to conducting the face-to-face interviews and agreement obtained from each individual participant to take part in the study. Each interview was conducted at the offices of the individual CSP. Interviews explored the emergence and development of the CSP, current staffing and governance structures, challenges of partnership working, differences in approaches to partnership development, role and remit of the CSP in sports development and future role and challenges for the CSPs.

The interview transcript documents were then analysed using coding techniques (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The process of coding the data was an on-going process throughout the primary data collection phase which aimed to develop 'analysable units' and create labels and tags to attach to the raw data. As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) have noted, this fragmented the raw data transcripts and allowed them to be organised and managed around key emergent themes. Coding techniques incorporated attempts to move beyond describing the themes that emerged from the data towards highlighting relationships, patterns and linkages between interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Indeed, a key aspiration of the research was to give a voice to those practitioners and managers that inhabit the daily sphere of partnership working. Qualitative research methods were identified as the most appropriate to explore attitudes, opinions and values associated with partnership working due to their research strength in this area (Amis, 2005). The methods chosen

were identified so as to provide the most useful and informative insights into the practice of partnership working in the CSP context. The focus here was upon identifying the specific challenges and nuances of working and managing in a multi-agency partnership in the sports development sector (Shaw and Allen 2006). Similarly, due to the minimal level of current knowledge in this field the choice of semi-structured interviews allowed the flexibility to probe unexpected issues that emerged during fieldwork interviews. Follow-up 15 minute telephone interviews with a manager and a CEO were also conducted to build upon and clarify matters arising from the initial data analysis that included further additional questions around current operational working and their future CSP role.

Results from this study are anonymous, by county area and individual. Certain specific details have been omitted from the findings to prevent individual CSPs from being easily identified. Direct quotes from CSP staff are hence anonymous and thus individuals are not named, but each of the four host CSPs are linked to quotes by the labels of 'CSP A' to 'CSP D'.

Findings and Discussion

What seems clear is that there are very different perspectives between the four sub-regions as to what the role, function and scope of the CSPs should and can be. This has to be located within the most recent changes to the policy context during the period of this research project (DCMS 2008, DCMS 2008a, Sport England 2009). This more recent policy documentation has provided arguably greater clarity and made the distinction between 'core' and 'enhanced' services.

A misunderstood partnership structure

Interviews with CSP staff across the four counties indicated that one of the greatest challenges facing CSP partnership working was communicating the role, purpose and organisation of a CSP. Each of the four CSPs expressed, to varying degrees, how local authorities, national governing bodies, the voluntary sector and other public bodies had found understanding who the CSP represents, and what they are set up to achieve, as one of their clearest challenges. This can be seen in the comments of one CSP Director:

I think there are some governing bodies that understand what we can do and what value we can add and there are others where we've not had the capacity to work with them and they've not had the capacity to work with us where we're not clear about what it is we can do to help them. (Director, CSP D)

Another CSP Director also stated that:

With the CSPs there's still a level of getting people to understand how the CSP works and what the CSP is there to do, there's an issue around 'Who died and made the CSP God?' (Director, CSP B)

Indeed, this view linked to discussions around the political and power relations present within local sports development systems. In CSP B there were evident power struggles between the CSP and County Council Sports Development Unit (SDU) over who was to wrestle 'control' over the strategic

direction of the County. The intensity of partnership management or power of the partnership leadership was a fundamental driver of partnership dynamics (Shaw and Allen, 2006). In other regions such a political battleground was less evident with the County Council working directly with the CSP to such an extent that they no longer had a SDU and had handed over such a role to the CSP. This was clearly outlined by one CEO:

> The partnership is now seen as the guardian of the strategy for sport in the County, we are the only co-coordinating body that exists and we're not in a position where we are threatened or competing with anybody else. The County Council give us a contract, they don't have their own sports development service, we are it. They contract with us to do that. (Chief Executive Officer, CSP C)

There appears to be a direct relationship between the power relations, local history and even individual personalities leading CSPs with the role they play out in local sports development systems. It is this localised context that is crucial to understanding partnership working or, as Rowe (2003, p. 378) suggests, 'divorcing partnerships, and members of them, from the contexts within which they work is to fail to grasp some key influences and challenges to new ways of problem solving and working'. For some officers this local divergence in structure, form and role allowed the CSP to be tailored to the local and regional context and needs. Individual CSPs play differing roles as delivery agent, strategic advocate and political lobbyist across the four case studies and this perhaps explains why other partners have become confused

as to the exact role of the CSP. As Byrne argues (2001) if there are a range of organisations, communities, agencies and individuals working together as a partnership then issues of power must be addressed. The potential links between power and communication mentioned separately in the Shaw and Allen (2006) framework need to be more closely examined in future research. As supported by Shaw and Allen (2006) and indicated by this research partnership communication clearly influences power relations. In particular, it appears that the CSPs need to hold power or at least perceived power to exert regional influence and encourage strategic developments.

A complex and fragile partnership environment

As has already been suggested the 'New' Labour government had, in 1997, ushered in a period of supposed modernisation. This grand Third Way 'modernisation' project for some has seen partnerships position themselves at the very heart of this process (Lindsey and Houlihan 2008, Mackintosh 2009). However, as some authors have suggested not all aspects of working in a collaborative partnership are necessarily positive (Diamond 2006, Rowe 2006). The framework drawn upon in this study identifies trust, patterns of informal communication and competing agendas as central processes in partnership working (Shaw and Allen 2006). Whilst partnerships may be seen as a key policy feature in sports development the actual challenge of multi-agency working can be far less positive. For example, one senior officer stated that:

There is that constant change of people and dynamics and relationships, and where we are as a partnership it doesn't take much for many years of hard work to be damaged by minute things, an inappropriate comment here or by something happening over there and then you are back to rebuilding those relationships. (Senior Sports Development Manager, CSP A)

What was conveyed by some of the CSP staff interviewed in this study is the fragility of partnership relationships and structures. A phrase often used by interviewees was the need for partner 'buy-in' to sharing a vision, organisational aims and strategic direction that was perceived as a central factor in the potential success of the CSPs. This is a point mirrored by existing literature as a central aspect and characteristic feature of successful partnership working (Ashana et al 2002, Dowling et al 2004). However, amongst the sample of participants in this study there was a sense of how change and turnover in staffing in partner organisations and the need for sensitivity in managing personalities are essential to the day to day working of a CSP.

In addition to the importance of individual personalities and relationships in partnership working is the centrality of associated power relations around CSPs. One Director said:

In the context of (the) chairman that came along with some of the other people we had a powerbase, that sounds egotistical but it was important we had the right people at the right level to attract other people at the

right level. Power attracts power and perhaps it is more about influence than power ... It doesn't set us apart, but we have got a high level board with the local MP that chairs it, key people so it's about influence, it's about taking the short cuts, improving the synergies and improving the system. (Director, CSP D)

Acknowledging the importance of power relations Rowe identifies 'shop front partnerships' which are defined as those 'dominated by one of the main public agencies, often but not always the local authority, (that) present all the trappings of engaging excluded voices whilst relinquishing little power' (Rowe 2006, p. 210). Rowe suggests that such partnerships are less about sharing power and more about presenting an impression of change. Partnership working in the policy environment of sports development is, however, more demanding for CSPs due to the constant change that is present in this field of public policy. This was recognised by one Director who stated that:

Since Oct 2007 we have been in a state of flux, (the) Secretary of State has changed twice, and we are now trying to redefine the relationship with Sport England, as they try to redefine their relationship with National Governing Bodies. At the same time we are doing what we think needs to be done. (Director, CSP D)

The instability of the national policy environment and the fragility of the network of local relationships within which each CSP operates poses significant challenges for effective fulfilment of objectives.

Relationship management and evolving roles with key partners

Relationship management in and around the CSP structure is a central concern if CSPs are to fulfil the high expectations held of them at national level. The development of management processes that incorporate wider partners is a crucial component of partnership dynamics (Shaw and Allen 2006). All staff interviewed in this study highlighted this as a crucial aspect of their work and that of their staff. Reflecting the dual challenge of building relationships around sometimes competing agendas, one senior manager stated:

> There are some real challenges in terms of relationships … relationships are good with most partners most of the time. It's made hard by the number of partners that we work with made hard by the different agendas that those partners have. (Senior Sports Development Manager, CSP A)

Competing agendas within partnership structures has been identified elsewhere as a fundamental issues and one that can threaten to undermine how the partnership operates and how resources are to be allocated (Shaw and Allen 2006). In particular, it was suggested in the case of sports delivery partnership tensions emerged between elite talent and 'sports for sports sake' agendas. The manager of CSP A identified cross-over and possible conflict between sport, physical activity, health and social inclusion agendas in his area:

Generally here the partnership works well, relationships are good with

most partners most of the time ... I wouldn't pretend that we are masters

of our own destiny. We are in many cases answering to the tune of

others. There are challenges with how to marry national initiatives and

challenges with how they fit locally. (Senior Sports Development

Manager, CSP A)

As a way of building relationships several of the CSPs had developed

thematic organisational teams that worked across fields such as communities,

clubs, NGBs, health and physical activity. This also illustrates the point that

although the Shaw and Allen (2006) framework conceptualise managerial

structures and processes as separate components in their theoretical model

they are closely interlinked. Directors of CSPs which identified strong cross-

sector representation on internal forums and committees acknowledged that

this would have clear implications for communication, trust and addressing

competing agendas and particularly what would constitute success in meeting

partnership objectives.

In relation to the conceptualisation of success interviewees were aware

of the problems of identifying an appropriate range of measures. For example,

it was suggested:

We have an annual delivery plan so we are measured on that, we have

tried, not very successfully to evolve that annual delivery plan into also

identifying the work that the broader partnership does but haven't really

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found a way to necessarily measure that. We've got quarterly reporting

mechanisms to Sport England. (Director CSP B)

In contrast, when asked to consider what made a successful partnership it

was argued:

For me a successful CSP is one that continues to show that we add

value to the work of partners that we are bringing in resources from

different places there is still greater work to be done. We are still very

reliant upon Sport England funding we need to find other bits of money

from other places. We don't want to cut the apron strings from Sport

England but we do want to loosen them. We need to be in a position

where we can operate and we can function and offer services without

relying on Sport England. (Senior Sports Development Manager CSP A)

It should also be recognised that at the time of conducting this

fieldwork future research was being planned by three CSPs to undertake

'partner surveys' to explore strengths and weaknesses in external

relationships. This indicates a positive move to recognise the importance of

such relationships and also a research-informed approach to improving CSP

practice. For some CSP staff the seniority of partners linked into their work

was a factor influencing relationships success:

We need to be playing more of role in terms of advocacy, influencing

positioning and we are looking now and I do get into the board rooms of

chief execs and leaders of councils and so forth at certain levels in

business and so forth but, we need to do it even more effectively and we

need to use even bigger hitters than me and I've got them on the board,

so I need to use them. (Director CSP B)

For others the regular change in government and Sport England policy

direction meant that they needed to be able to shift and adapt structures to

cope with the on-going flux in policy. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Uhlik and

Parr (2005) argue that a defining feature of any partnership has to be the

development of long term relationships. A difficulty is that the shifting agendas

which provide the context for CSPs' work creates uncertainty regarding which

relationships need to be formed, their relative importance and how they are

expected to work.

A good example of the shifting agendas is in relation to the recent

changes in emphasis between health, physical activity and 'sport for sports

sake' in national sports development rhetoric. During the course of the

research itself, national policy shifted towards stronger links with national

governing bodies which presented each CSP with new challenges (DCMS

2008a, Sport England 2008). This relationship between the 46 NGBs

recognised by Sport England and the 49 CSPs is perhaps one of the most

potentially complex yet to emerge. At the time of the research in July and

August 2008 CSPs were not in a position to comment as they were awaiting

national guidance and policy to be published. Most of the four CSPs in this

study did recognise that the potential issues in delivering additional services

for different NGBs were considerable. One officer commented:

At the same time I think there will be pressure from other partners, certainly existing partners, to clearly understand what it is they, and other people might want from a central body. I think we may get to the point whereby there are separate divisions in terms of what we do in which it may be that there is a clearer cut core team servicing maybe an NGB team which is delivering on principally the sporting and governing body agenda. (Chief Executive Officer, CSP C)

How the relationships between NGBs and CSPs will develop in the near future was a key point of contention for some staff:

It'll be interesting to see what happens in the next five years. If there is a cynic in me then you might see that if NGBs can really get their acts together over the next four years then more sport may go through those guys ... I think there are some governing bodies that understand what we can do and what value we can add and there are others where we've not had the capacity to work with them and they've not had the capacity to work with us. Where we're not clear about what it is we can do to help them. That's a challenge how we demonstrate to those partners clear value. (Director CSP D)

However, addressing the challenges around partnership working with NGBs and facing the new demands of this policy environment was understood by CSPs as being central to ensuring CSP survival.

Tensions and challenges of partnership working

Rowe (2006) has proposed that there is a 'darker side' to partnership working involving exclusion, opacity and, in the extreme, collusion and corruption. Whilst this study did not identify these more abusive aspects of partnership working tensions were present within the process of working in this sphere of sports development. For some staff the main challenge they faced was clear:

> The biggest problem we've faced is 'them' and 'us' …that the CSP is another tier of something that's been created. We were fine before the CSP came along so why do we need it? (Senior Sports Development Manager, CSP A)

This concern with being perceived as yet another level of bureaucracy linked to discussions that emerged around performance management of the CSP and evidencing impact. All CSPs are challenged to evidence their impact, yet, it is difficult to link the benchmarks of success, such as increased regional sports participation levels, directly to the work of a CSP. Indeed some openly suggested that this was not possible at all. They argued that as each CSP is made up of wider partners such as NGBs, local authorities and School Sports Partnerships (SSPs) then their strategic steering, positioning and advocacy is extremely hard to link these processes to outcomes. For example, how can county-wide sports participation increases be attributed towards the work solely of a CSP when so many partners input to that process? As has been suggested elsewhere attributing outcomes to partnerships directly is complex

with methodological issues around causality (Dowling et al 2004, KKP 2005, Freeman 2006).

In terms of specific issues that were of importance to the CSPs to be able to deliver their operational goals, aims and objectives one CSP Director suggested:

> The key processes are really about communication and understanding the structures that exists out there, understanding what the aims and objectives of partners are and then working out with them how best to achieve their objectives, your objectives and go forward in the same direction. At the same time to make something happen rather than just end up being a talking shop which is what a lot of partnerships can end up doing (Director, CSP B)

This quote identifies both the importance of communication across varied operational and political agendas, but also the fear that some CSPs have of being perceived as no more than a 'talking shop'. Thus, the CSP inhabits a complex reality where they both rely on communication systems and at the same time have concern that they become little more than vehicles for communicating. This observation adds further weight to the sense of just how brittle networks that go to make up a CSP can be in reality and parallels other partnership process research that has highlighted the significance of communication (Mohr and Speckman 1994, Hutt et al 2000, Shaw and Allen (2006)).

Exploring the issue of partnerships' ability to work across multiple agendas (Shaw and Allen 2006) is also something that is further complicated by the varied ways organisations and individuals have of working in a multi-agency CSP setting. Partnering and the day-to-day balance between such styles which was summed up by one CEO who reflected on issues they had faced:

> We've all sat in a meeting where there are different people all trying to supposedly work together and you can see the one person getting extremely frustrated because they've already thought it through and they don't want to discuss ideas first and they want to get to action and there's another person who wants to throw around the ideas a bit more. That's one of the examples of a way in which you can be held back in terms of partnership working. (Chief Executive Officer, CSP C)

Some of the less frequently cited negative aspects of partnership working have been highlighted in relation to the specific situation of the CSP and sports development policy environment. As partnership working has become such a significant element of government policy rhetoric it is perhaps unsurprising that these more negative features have received little attention. Likewise, the lack of empirical research into multi-agency partnership working in sports development has also perhaps limited the scale of insights into the more challenging face of working in partnership.

Individual CSP structure, role and context

In light of the importance of management structures for partnership working (Shaw and Allen 2006) this study set out to explore patterns in and across the CSPs in the East Midlands in relation to their structure, form, size and scope. As one CSP member of staff suggested:

> If I look at CSP X who are technically hosted by the County Council, they don't have the problems we had. Different perceptions, different backgrounds, different histories I think that's one of those things that needs to be taken into account in making it work. One size very definitely doesn't fit all. (Chief Executive Officer, CSP C)

For them, such variations across CSPs were seen as a positive asset to the national CSP network as they were able to shape themselves to local conditions and regional priorities as opposed to fit a national model. It was also considered that the geographical size, regional characteristics and local political contexts are potential factors in influencing the different forms of CSPs. Another Director argued:

> There has been a lot of criticism that all CSPs that we are not all the same. Well we're not all funded the same and we have very different environments and nine different regional approaches and 49 different CSPs, absolutely. The core is the same, but the core elements are about brokering added value and synergy, it's just that their environments

whether that is geography or funding regimes or landscape of

organisations are very, very different. (Director CSP C)

Table 1 illustrates some of the variations across the four case studies

considered as they existed at the time the fieldwork was being undertaken in

August 2008. The study has illustrated a range in the activities of CSPs, how

they are hosted and the staffing patterns. More specifically, Table 1 indicates

the variation in legal status, hosting arrangements, size and consequent

scope of the different CSPs and the mix between delivery and strategic

partnership roles that exists in the four areas. In the four East Midlands CSPs

covered by this study staff numbers ranged from five to 26 resourced from a

myriad of funding sources. A further feature was the hosting arrangements for

the CSPs. For some CSPs their current location was an evolution from their

historical origins in the Active Sports programme which clearly influenced the

degree of interdependence with County Council SDUs. For some CSPs the

host organisation, for example on a university campus, was important as it

gave them an element of perceived independence, equally it also gave

opportunities to access operational support services. This pooling of

resources is seen as one of the core benefits of operating as a partnership

(Robson 2008).

Funding of staffing levels was not as straightforward as perhaps first

appeared, as one officer explained:

Of those 23 people a number are core County Council funded - so five in total. The rest are project funded or through Sport England monies, Community Sports Coaches, Active Sports legacy, through Community Investment Fund (CIF) applications, and core funding of CSPs (Senior Sports Development Manager, CSP A).

Table 1 about here

This complex mix of funding to support CSP staffing indicates a further fragility of some CSPs. As was highlighted by various officers funding regimes in some cases were coming to an end which posed very real challenges for them and would affect their capacity to deliver. Core funding of CSPs was considered sufficient to support the delivery of the more strategic elements of their core services.

Conclusions

Partnership structures have infiltrated many levels of the sports development public sector policy sphere. The central focus of this study was to examine the potential implications of 'working in partnership' for public sector sports development officers and managers who negotiate the complex and challenging policy environment surrounding CSP multi-agency working. As a central feature of the new architecture of sports development they have received very little direct empirical investigation (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008, Mackintosh 2009). In this study four CSP case studies in the East Midlands region of England were examined in terms of their scope, role and the issues

they face in partnership working using the theoretical framework proposed by Shaw and Allen (2006). It was apparent from the findings that there was significant variation in the experiences reported by those working in the CSPs which is perhaps not surprising given the context of the flurry of national policy initiatives and changing policy landscape (Bolton et al. 2008). This perhaps moves away from previous work that suggested the original phase of CSP structures may 'fit' a certain type of partnership model or structure (MacDonald 2005). In the case of the evidence presented here such a conclusion would be very difficult to support in this region of England. What did seem to be emerging at the time of this fieldwork was a new CSP system, that differed from the original conceptualisation of a sub-regional structure and had NGBs more centrally positioned influencing more clearly the character of the enhanced services offered by CSPs. Current knowledge on the form of these emerging relationships is limited but this paper has begun to highlight the possible direction of CSP working in what is currently a very fluid policy context.

Senior managers emphasised the fragility of partnerships at a time of great change in sports development policy. They identified how success in implementing national and regional policy was reliant upon developing effective communication, sustainable relationships, obtaining the support of power holders and policy stability. A potential limitation of the theoretical framework employed is that insufficient weight is given to the role of power within the partnership dynamics, structures and process. It may be that future analyses of CSPs can address this issue in more detail.

While some of the more recently established CSPs were only beginning to make progress towards their goals others seemed to have achieved a significant degree of maturity with widening number of sport-specific development officers, continued presence in areas of delivery that County Council sports development units had worked in and further strategic reach into areas of health policy associated with the physical activity agenda. The challenge here is that the theoretical framework of Shaw and Allen (2006) could also incorporate maturity of a partnership as a further aspect of managerial structures that may influence dynamics. Calls for the utilisation of evidence to inform practice in public services (Davies et al 2000, Nutley et al 2007, Rowe 2009) has yet to be fully embraced by sport development organisations including CSPs.. For all four CSPs and the evolution of their role in their respective sports development regional systems was more influenced by the whims of national policy makers than by evidence of demand and need. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the core funding cycles of CSPs are closely aligned to those of Sport England and that their governance arrangements are also heavily influenced by the same agency.

Given the dynamic and contested nature of the environment within which some CSPs currently operate it is important to recognise the importance of brokering skills and the scale of the relationship management challenges facing those working in CSPs. At the time of this research some of the CSPs were beginning to undertake 'partner surveys' to evaluate more closely partner perceptions and ways to improve partnership working. This development is to be encouraged as a move in the direction of evidence-based policy and practice. Furthermore, research in other fields has

demonstrated the need to get those working in partnerships to step beyond their formal roles to reflect individually and together to identify ways of developing the competencies needed in their specific situations (Armistead and Pettigrew 2004).

With NGBs positioned as central drivers of Sport England's vision for sports development in England the freedom given to individual CSPs to negotiate and develop 'enhanced service' relationships with bodies such as NGBs could be an area that sees the variation in the scope and role of CSPs broaden further. In addition, the relationships between CSPs and their partners could also evolve to incorporate contracting of key local authority services, specialist advice/consultancy and commissioning of partners to deliver designated activities. Future research should consider multi-agency partnership working in other sports development settings such as those of SSPs, local community sports network settings and emerging sport and physical activity delivery partnership arrangements between Primary Care Trusts and local authority sports development units. Furthermore, more longitudinal data are needed in the CSP setting and in the context of partnership working to take into account the medium to long-term highly dynamic nature of partnerships as a most modern vehicle of the former 'New' Labour sports development policy. Similarly, given the range of experiences in this regional set of case studies a broader assessment of CSPs on a national scale would provide further insights into not only where they may differ, but also to identify good practice in partnership development and innovations in how they are meeting the complex challenges facing them in a most dynamic of policy settings.

Recommendations from this project include the need to share experiences across CSPs in different sub-regions to inform policy and practice. Also, CSP senior managers need to embrace the necessity for research to inform their practices. This research should consider specific issues around informal and formal communication between partners, the development of trust and how best to work across competing agendas. CSPs could also benefit from theory-driven research in improving the specific nuances of their partnership arrangements evidence of which at present was very minimal. How the role and positioning of CSP evolves under the newly elected Coalition government still remains to be seen.

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Table 1: Selected characteristics of the four CSPs

	Host organisation	Number of staff full time (FT) part time (PT)	Legal status	Direct delivery role*
CSP A	County Council	23 (FT) 3 (PT)	Part of County council	Yes
CSP B	University	5 (FT)	Part of University	No
CSP C	Private Offices	14 (FT) 8 (PT)	Not-for profit limited company	Yes
CSP D	University	19 (FT) 7 (PT)	Part of County Council	Yes

*Direct delivery = community based coaching sessions, practical event organisation and training delivery.