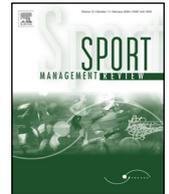




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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr

Youth sport volunteers in England: A paradox between reducing the state and promoting a Big Society



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 March 2013

Received in revised form 30 August 2013

Accepted 7 September 2013

Available online 8 October 2013

Keywords:

Sport

Volunteer

Big Society

Youth

ABSTRACT

This paper uses the example of volunteers in clubs promoting youth sport to consider the role of the UK Government in promoting a general civic activism as part of a 'Big Society'. The UK government advocates the replacement of public sector provision by a greater role for volunteers. Exemplary of the 'grassroots' organisations which epitomise 'Big Society' ideals are the 64,000 volunteer-run sports clubs in which almost 1.5 million volunteers support over 5.3 million junior participants in England. These clubs face problems which state intervention could alleviate; and this state support may in fact be critical to maintain the structures which provide the opportunity for so much volunteering to take place. The government's desire to increase volunteer activity can be seen to be at odds with other policy intentions such as cost-cutting, and with wider trends affecting volunteerism such as professionalisation. Thus the paper illustrates the complex, even paradoxical relationship between promoting civic activism and the role of the state. The example of youth sport volunteers also suggests that policies to promote a Big Society will need to deal with more fundamental questions about the role of volunteering.

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1. Introduction

This paper estimates the numbers of Voluntary Sports Organisations (VSOs) and volunteers in England that support junior sport participation. The central role of VSOs and volunteers as a medium for government policy ([Sport England, 2012](#)) is juxtaposed with the additional burdens placed on volunteers; some of which have been exacerbated by reduced public expenditure and other government policies. The major contribution of volunteers and the tension between promoting volunteering, while at the same time reducing public expenditure, is understood within the broader context of the UK government's general promotion of volunteering within a 'Big Society' ([Alcock, 2010](#)) and used to explore limitations of this policy.

The paper first introduces the Big Society policy. It then describes the structure of VSOs in England as a legacy from conditions in the 19th Century. The role of VSOs as a medium for government policy to promote participation by young people is reviewed and the implications of additional burdens placed on volunteers by accreditation schemes. Using a survey of clubs conducted in 2009 a revised estimate is made of the number of clubs and their size. A sub-sample of clubs involved in the provision of opportunities for young people is used to examine the characteristics of these clubs and the particular challenges

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these volunteers face. These survey results are complemented by a further survey of regulatory burdens faced by clubs. This leads to a discussion of the balance between a reduced role for the state to facilitate civic activism, and where the state still must intervene to reduce the burdens faced by volunteers and promote the conditions favourable for volunteering.

The main questions this paper addresses are (1) how many VSOs and volunteers support junior sports participation – thus reflecting the type of civic activism the Big Society policy aims to promote? and (2) what challenges do these volunteers face and how are these related to government policies? To address these questions the paper uses research to show: the number of non-profit sports clubs in England; the members and volunteers these clubs represent; the number of clubs with a junior section and their characteristics; the volunteers involved in supporting junior participation; and the challenges and opportunities faced by these clubs. A broader purpose of the paper is to use this example to raise questions about the viability of the Big Society policy.

2. Promoting the Big Society – UK Government Policy

In the current UK coalition government the idea of the 'Big Society' draws from both Conservative and Liberal Democrat traditions. For the Conservative party, prior to the 2010 election, it was seen as a contrast to the 'big state' of New Labour. According to Conservative party literature, the Big Society ideal is that of a "society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control. The Big Society is our positive alternative to Labour's failed big government approach" (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 1). It is an "endorsement of the positive and proactive role that voluntary action could take" (Alcock, 2010, p. 380) after independence and initiative had been allegedly stultified by the expansion of the state under New Labour. For the Liberal Democrats, Big Society policy is consistent with their commitment to devolving political decisions to local levels as far as possible and promoting local community activism. It also resonates with the Liberal tradition of fostering local activism as an expression of civic responsibility in a liberal pluralist society. Thus the development of the concept after the 2010 UK election built on common ground for the Coalition Government partners, although its ambiguity could also serve the function of maintaining political unity, in the same way as the ambiguity of a policy to increase 'social inclusion' maintained the commitment of diverse political factions in New Labour (Levitas, 2005).

The "Big Society is not just a question of the state stepping back and hoping for the best; it will require an active role for the state" (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 1). One policy aim related to promoting the voluntary sector is to reduce regulation in public life. A Cabinet Office Paper (2010, p. 1) states that "government will make it easier to set up and run charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations..." and "unnecessary red tape surrounding government support will be removed...". This is relevant to sports clubs where previous research has indicated that coping with regulations creates constraints on volunteers in the UK (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Nichols et al., 2005) and across Europe (GHK, 2010). The new government responded by commissioning a review of regulatory burdens of sport volunteers, led by the Sport and Recreation Alliance (2011). This review is used to complement the findings from the research in this paper.

The Big Society policy aims of engendering a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation (Blond, 2010) have been described as trying to create a society in which individuals spontaneously act together, directed by a common sense of civic virtue. Such aims have been criticised with the assertion that the social conditions for this to happen no longer exist (Raban, 2010). Neither political party has attempted to articulate the Big Society ideal with reference to academic analysis of the relationship between the state and civic activism. However, it has been shown that societies can be placed on a continuum of 'statism': the extent to which the state or civil society is the principal locus of public life. Anglo-Saxon countries are at the low end of the 'statism' scale. This scale has been used to explain the 'mosaic of local civic institutions that developed in nineteenth-century Britain' (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001, p. 812), and that "voluntary action in Anglo-Saxon countries is still cast in a powerful *liberal* ideology that continues to celebrate voluntarism as autonomous and jealously defends its arm's length relationship from government".

The structure of sports clubs in England is discussed in the next section but at this point it is worth noting that the multitude of small single sport clubs, represented by National Governing Bodies (NGBs) independent of government, was established in the late 1800s. These NGBs enabled the first codification of modern sport, thus permitting national, and later, international, competition (McIntosh, 1987). A strong ethos of amateurism was reflected explicitly in the names of NGBs founded in this period: for example, the *Amateur* Boxing Association, *Amateur* Rowing Association and *Amateur* Athletics Association. It is also speculated that such clubs enabled the new urban working class to express a sense of identity around place, which had been lost in the rapid move from rural communities to industrialised cities (Holt, 1990); representing a 'bottom-up' form of civic activism.

This use of statism as an explanatory variable at a structural level offers greater depth to Raban's (2010) criticism of Blond (2010) that the conditions of 19th Century Britain are idealised: they no longer exist and thus a Big Society is not viable. However, Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001) have shown that between 1981 and 1991 globalization of a model of strong markets and civil societies coincided with an increase in membership of associations across nations. They hypothesise this is because it induced "more liberal models of political organisation, typified by high levels of association and the growth of new social movements" (p. 815). Thus one would have expected membership of associations to have increased in this period, and there is some evidence of this. However, as Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas point out, care has to be taken to

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