

Bonding issues



Chris Mackintosh reports on the challenges of partnership working in sports development, following on from a research project looking at County Sports Partnerships (CSPs).

PARTNERSHIP WORKING is not a new theme for those working in the field of sports development. In fact, it is probably one of the most commonly-heard and frequently-used management mantras for those who work in this area. Some might argue it has been used to such an extent by the Government, Sport England and national governing bodies of sport that it has now been left a rather misunderstood concept.

The number of agencies and organisations in sports development that are encouraged to initiate, develop, maintain and 'work through partnership' is immensely varied. It encompasses a diverse and complex spectrum of professionals, from School Sports Partnerships and County Sports Partnerships to sports facility managers, governing body coaching development groups and those working in the voluntary sector.

While other areas of public service provision in regeneration, health and social care have seen numerous applied and theoretical studies into the practice of partnership, collaboration and multi-agency working, this scale of interest has not been mirrored in the sports development field. Everyone seems to work in partnership, agencies are always working in a multi-agency collaboration, but how effective are we as professionals at working in this highly sensitive and complex environment?

We must illustrate the need for further research into what works in terms of partnership working, what makes an effective partnership and how we can transform partnership arrangements and relationships to make them more sustainable, efficient and co-operative. Similarly, we need to encourage individuals and organisations that find themselves at the heart of a partnership to be reflective about how they work. They should also recognise the need to evaluate the process of partnership working that is so central to delivering the

shared aims and objectives that supposedly unite them and their partners.

However, if evaluating the processes of partnership working is to be seen as not just necessary, but essential, then more needs to be done in terms of sharing practice as to how organisations should go about doing this.

Good practice in partnerships

Research interviews with sports development professionals and case study analyses were undertaken to critically evaluate the assumptions and perceptions that underpin the actual practice of partnership working in CSPs in the East Midlands. In this research project, much good practice has already been identified. Good practice could be seen as partner surveys to evaluate perceptions of how effective CSPs have been at developing genuine collaboration.

Similarly, some CSPs have also begun to seek out their own research partners to analyse their current ways of working and explore the inherent complexity of professional skills necessary to work across organisational boundaries. It is apparent that the policy context for this work is perhaps one of the greatest challenges. Changing parameters, alternating priorities and shifting funding are all significant features of the policy environment that CSPs operate within. Factor in the complexity of genuine partnership working with the shifting sands of what the Government, Sport England, and, increasingly, governing bodies are demanding, and you begin to see the practical and very real difficulties that a CSP may face.

Initial issues that came out of the study have shown that the local context of a partnership is perhaps one of the key drivers of how a partnership develops and exists. Managers reported varied experiences, localised historical contexts



and regional politics as crucial to the success of a partnership-based organisation.

Further findings from the research also pinpointed what could be termed emergent drivers for an effective partnership working process. Firstly, gaining partner 'buy-in' to the shared vision, aims and objectives of a partnership was, unsurprisingly, seen as a core component of delivering the joint goals. Building trust among partners here seemed to be essential to gain such 'buy-in'.

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However, what also emerged was the sensitivity and brokering skills needed to build such trust and how it needs to be viewed in a longer term perspective. Managers highlighted the potential difficulties facing those sports development professionals working in this field, including individual personality dynamics, the often short-term nature of funding regimes, competing political priorities and a tendency for partnership overload. Further research is needed to explore not just the detail in the complexity of such issues, but also to explore potential solutions for those on the ground.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for those working in partnership is how to evidence their successes and illustrate how they have contributed towards wider shared goals such as increased sports participation, reduced drop out from sport and the wider health, crime and inclusion targets and performance indicators. There are no easy answers to such challenges. However, it is perhaps time to look across the sports development sector boundaries to share good practice and inform current evaluation techniques to improve the ways in which evidence can be collated and disseminated to underpin the assumptions that are held about the varied partnerships that exist in sports development.

Rapid evolution

Since New Labour's focus on partnership working as a key driver in their modernisation project, sports development has experienced a rapid evolution of a wide range of varied partnership arrangements. Findings from this research study on CSPs have illustrated how the networks of organisations and individuals in sports development cut across hugely diverse organisational cultures.

The challenge for professionals operating day-to-day in such settings is twofold: firstly, to develop the complex skills set needed to work in partnership, and secondly, to recognise that the reality of partnership working in sports development seems to be one that is very specific to the organisation you are based in, and the nature of those that you are trying to encourage to embrace your own partnership vision.

Indeed, CSPs encompass a significant range of different practices, work areas and attitudes to partnership working. However, those working in CSPs are keen to identify how these differences are not the issue, but that they simply reflect local and regional variations that are based upon identified sports development needs. Perhaps more research informed practice in this area of sports development, supported by the sharing of good practice in how to measure the effectiveness of a partnership, would give a renewed enthusiasm and direction to what has arguably become a tired term.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Chris Mackintosh is a lecturer and researcher in sports development based at Nottingham Trent University. If you are interested in finding out more about the research into partnership working in sports development, contact him at christopher.mackintosh@ntu.ac.uk