The transfer of public leisure facilities towards volunteer delivery.
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| 150 word abstract for inclusion in the conference programme | The UK Government deficit reduction plan in May 2010 had an ambitious target ie the “structural” deficit eliminated by 2015, with a reliance on spending cuts to achieve this. To achieve this Local Government is attempting to transfer delivery of leisure services; such as sports facilities and libraries; to volunteers. This paper reports findings from the initial scoping study interviews with volunteer groups; local authority representatives and stakeholders. The cases represent a range of leisure facilities all of which have experienced a transfer of delivery to volunteers. Initial findings indicate that this is a sensitive area; several issues are not discussed openly or ignored in official advice. We found the transfer to volunteer delivery is not a one size fits all. Issues raised include the role of volunteers; social capital and sustainability. We propose one way of categorising the transfer towards volunteers is to distinguish between governance and delivery. This research has indicated the need for a larger study. |
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The transfer of public leisure facilities towards volunteer delivery

The paper reports findings from the initial scoping study, these included interviews with volunteer groups; council/authority representatives and support stakeholders. The interviews and cases were selected to include a range of types of leisure facility but all of which have already experienced a transfer of delivery to volunteers. The scoping study starts to answer the questions below but indicates the need for a more extensive study.

Introduction

The formation of the coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in May 2010 produced a deficit reduction plan with an ambitious target (the “structural” deficit eliminated by 2015) and a reliance on spending cuts to achieve this. As a response to these cuts in budgets local government is attempting to transfer delivery of leisure services; such as sports facilities, museums, art galleries and libraries; to volunteers. In most cases this is being done quickly, possibly as a response to local pressure groups, and without guidance on best practice. These services are vulnerable as there is not a statutory duty to provide them. However, they have a high public profile. As Sir Merrick Cockell (2014), leader of Councils in England and Wales recently stated “we need to be asking whether people are prepared to take a direct role in providing other services like running local museums, sports classes, the upkeep of parks and spaces”

The aim of this research is to identify good practice in making this transfer. The broad theoretical framework is the relationship between the state and civic society and the role of local government in leisure provision; this has to take account of the uneven distribution of social capital.

Questions addressed by the research include:

• What are the benefits of transfer beyond cost savings to the authority?
• To what extent can local government ensure the services continue to benefit all the local community and meet broad social objectives, rather than meeting the needs of a particular group of volunteers?
• What factors need to be in place to enable a transfer to take place and how viable is this in the long term?

The paper details the literature surrounding the topic; identifies the methodology adopted and discusses key findings from the scoping exercise

Literature

Civil Society – Big Society -Third Sector? - The term civil society has been contested (Greenhaugh & Harradine, 2014) and is the topic of extensive debate (Wagner, 2012 in Evers, 2013) Civil society has been defined as the ‘part of society which has a life of its own, which is distinctly different from the state, and which is largely in autonomy from it’ (Shils, 2003: 29). It includes charities, social enterprises and voluntary and community groups (Cabinet Office, 2010)
Civil society is synonymous with the Third Sector as illustrated by the rebranding of The Office of the Third Sector to Office for Civil Society in 2010. Boundaries around the sector are notoriously blurred, ‘baggy’ and contested (Alcock and Kendall, 2011) definitions still vary and this can lead to discrepancies and confusion (Chapman et al., 2010; Alcock, 2010).

The idea of the ‘Big Society’ was first noted in the 2010 document Building the Big Society and draws from both Conservative and Liberal Democrat traditions. Using volunteers to deliver leisure services links in with giving communities the right to bid to take over local facilities. The Big Society is not a new idea, charities and voluntary groups “have a long history of helping change the communities around them for the better” (Morris, 2012) and has received sustained and continuing support across the political spectrum (Paxton et al., 2005). Initiatives prior to the Big Society had encouraged the development of marketization and a mixed economy. Current welfare reforms and reduced resources have seen the changes accelerate. The current UK government is therefore looking for members of the public to compensate for the cuts in public spending by running services themselves (Kisby, 2010). Relationships between Third Sector Organisations and state agencies are not neat, boundaried or homogenous; they are multi-layered and dynamic (Alcock and Kendall, 2011) and this has resulted in challenges to inter-organisational relationships (Nichols, G, et al., 2014).

The resulting ‘unsettlement’ of these relationships has led to a ‘partial de-coupling’ between the sector and the state (Macmillan, 2013). Third sector organisations are encouraged to become more enterprising, business-like and competitive, yet also to consider collaboration and merger, and further exhorted to demonstrate their impact.

Should leisure activities be publicly provided? Both national and local government have a long history of using leisure, sport and the arts as a means of achieving policy objectives. Between the 1970s and 1990s two models of leisure provision emerged. The welfare model was at its strongest nationally in the 1970s, it recognised that councils had to provide the basic leisure needs of the community. The local authority as the “accountable body” had a duty and to be direct providers of services owning and managing facilities. It has had a very strong impact on policy, especially at the local level. Problems with this include defining the level of sport or recreation policy that all are entitled to; implementing effective policies to achieve this level of equity of opportunity; and avoiding directing subsidy towards the predominantly higher social classes, who make most use of public leisure facilities. The business model emerged in the 1980s and 1990s with the marketization of leisure services and the emergence of CCT. The policy of competition was promoted emphasising cost savings through competitive tendering and outsourcing to private sector companies. As a result of this commodification and privatisation of public space and goods the citizen became a consumer. While there is not a statutory duty to provide these facilities there is a strong public expectation and their removal is very politically sensitive.

The development of social capital to improve wellbeing and opportunities has been an argument for financially supporting leisure activities including sports venues; museums and libraries. The central premise of social capital is that social networks have value. Putnam describes social capital as the ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam, 2000: 19). Developing and harnessing social capital has been a pre requisite of government initiatives and is “required reading in Downing Street (Hall, 2003) It is considered key to the Government’s localism agenda of locating communities centre stage (Cabinet Office, 2010). The voluntary sector working through local communities is promoted as the agency of social recovery, “from state power to people power” (Cameron, 2010). Volunteer groups need social capital to exist but this is not evenly distributed. As the New Economics Foundations argued the energy, time, resources, and political knowhow to take up new community rights and opportunities are not equally distributed in society, “economically deprived areas have fewer resources to draw upon whether financial or skill related” Schmuecker, 2011:16. Opportunities are concentrated in the areas where more socially advantaged volunteers retain the capacity to deliver them (Macmillan, 2011).
Methodology
To gather information about the impact of funding changes on leisure policy a qualitative approach was chosen as an inductive approach. A scoping exercise was undertaken to identify and gain insight into the key issues that had developed as a result of the changes in government funding. Semi structured interviews were carried out with representatives from Local Authorities; Volunteer Organisations Support Groups and Volunteer leisure organisations representatives. An interview schedule based on concepts identified in previous research and the literature research was devised. This schedule was amended taking into account the initial interviews and the role of interviewee. Questions were asked on the background to the organisation; the process of change – involvement of various stakeholders e.g. Local Authority; Volunteer groups; the role of volunteers before and after the transfer; the benefits and challenges of volunteer delivery and the long term prospects and sustainability. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and/or summary notes developed. Common themes were identified. The chronology of the interviews allowed for inductive insights to be developed as the research developed

Results
We have found this research to be very sensitive. Several issues are not discussed openly, or ignored in official advice, such as Sport England’s advice on asset transfer. We have termed these large elephants in the room. We structure our results to illustrate these as they raise the most interesting questions for further research.

The role of volunteers had changed with the transfer of public leisure services; volunteer delivery is not a one size fits all. Several models were found. In some examples authorities had completely transferred all aspects of the facility to volunteers. In one respondents opinion “Asset transfer to the voluntary sector potentially delivers all the benefits above and can grow the capacity of the sector”. For several examples volunteers were partly involved; the capital assets remained with the council who retained the maintenance of the fabric of the building or the human resource was managed through a mix of paid staff and volunteers, One respondent stated “ Our model involves utilising paid staff and volunteers at the same site” The term partnerships was often quoted, in Newcastle the buildings were leased to the club or managed by a third party.

One way of categorising the transfer towards volunteers is to distinguish between governance and delivery (Brooks, 2002; Inglis, Alexander & Weaver, 1999) and if the roles are taken by volunteers, paid staff or both. Governance involves strategic planning and policy development, while delivery involves directly delivering the service. These distinctions help us place our case studies in the following framework.

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<th>Governance</th>
<th>Paid staff</th>
<th>Paid staff and volunteers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Delivery – paid staff</td>
<td>O. Hall</td>
<td>W. Library</td>
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<td>Delivery – paid staff and volunteers</td>
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This refines a conceptual scale between delivery by the public sector or by civil society. In effect this scale could be applied to either of the dimensions of governance or delivery in the model above. Thus if one considers the delivery of public leisure services as having been transferred towards volunteers one can distinguish if this applies to governance, delivery or both.
As discussed earlier all Political Parties in the UK have manifestos that include some form of encouraging enterprise and community engagement. At a local level politics is a critical factor in deciding which facilities to close or which volunteer groups to support. Transfer of the delivery in the face of cuts to budgets is a bullet the authorities have to bite. The transfer towards volunteers is a forced move although some local authorities also want to encourage volunteering.

The uneven distribution of social capital volunteers across the cases indicated services will be more likely to be taken over in advantaged areas. Marginal voices may not be heard. Organisations that are in less economically prosperous areas may not have access to a skills or financial resources or philanthropic audiences. “It may be the case that the people building the Big Society are those who have the capacity to participate. This is likely to present challenges for sport services operating in less-affluent areas”. (King, 2013: 223) Again – the local authority may not have the extra time required to develop voluntary capacity in disadvantaged areas.

Reduction in funding has impacted on the ability of local government to pursue and deliver social objectives. Hard choices have had to be made. The provision of certain leisure services is not required by statute, thus although community and individual development may be perceived as important other services take priority.

If several leisure service facilities are taken out of the control of the Local authority then the ability of local government to plan strategically is reduced. The remaining local authority facilities will sometimes be competing with the ones now run by volunteers. Thus decisions on pricing, programming and staff will be made partly with a view to competing for the same market. Thus two pools in close proximity may be targeting the same schools for swimming lessons. With the possibility of both operating inefficiently and possible closure.

The support of volunteers was not a new phenomenon, prior to transfers volunteers had participated for example, members of existing friends groups and were seen as adding value and an enhancement not replacement to the service offered. Roles were typically as front of house / ambassadors/ meeters and greeters. After transfer a concern was volunteers may be doing the work employees previously. An additional concern was the skills set required to maintain the service delivered e.g. trained life guards or librarians – Respondent “Volunteers do not always understand the boundaries on responsibilities or respect library service philosophies”. Clearly in some situations the use of volunteers would raise serious health and safety concerns.

The speed at which these changes are happening and the impact on leisure provision is also noteworthy. “It takes time and should never be rushed”. With the transfer to volunteers it is sometimes hard to develop a core of dedicated and skilled committed volunteers to be trustees”. Volunteer support agencies or local authorities themselves may be committed to developing volunteers and community engagement, but this takes time, which may not be available as cuts have to be made quickly.

Implicit in this transfer are the risks involved to the Local Authority. The issue of TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)) is something local authorities have to consider as they transfer assets. One can take a risk with the interpretation of the regulations. It is not practical for a facility managed by a trust led by volunteers to take over responsibility for former local authority employees under the same terms and conditions as the wage costs would normally be too high, but also the considerable pension obligations. Thus employees may be transferred to other facilities still managed directly by the local authority, although they may claim this is not to identical work. The risk of a successful claim against this has to be weighed against the cost of a continuing subsidy to the facility. It is also very difficult for volunteers to take on an open ended responsibility for capital costs of buildings which may have considerable unforeseen repair costs. To allow this to happen the local authority may also offer to take the risk of meeting these costs for a short period of time. The LA has to weigh these risks against the cost of continuing to support Leisure services directly. Arrangements must be in place to safeguard both the local authority and group...
If the local authority is forced to withdraw - services will remain for the well-off only – so no justification of subsidy. Only a move back to 19th c philanthropy will provide for the poor. It seems unlikely that volunteers who have worked hard to establish a viable business plan for their local library in an affluent area will have the additional capacity to support a group in a disadvantaged side of town.

A key issue was found to be sustainability, can a management structure led by volunteers be sustainable as it depends on the continuing enthusiasm to volunteer and the willingness of key volunteers to remain contributing. Often groups crystallised around the threat to a well established facility – but could this momentum be sustained? Examples have already surfaced of organisations being faced by “burn out” of key volunteers or skill gaps as volunteers scale back or leave the area/organisation. Organisations are faced by the dilemma of being true to their missions and values but at the same time requiring an attitudinal shift of those involved to move enthusiasm to a business model.

If councils are to be involved in the delivery of the services then a win win situation needs to be developed as one respondent stated “can you continue to work with them, does this make it more sustainable and if not, how can you offer some on going support anyway. Respect and good will go a long way.”

Although one impetus to developing volunteer managed services has been responding to cuts in budgets, there is also a desire to promote community activism / involvement. This has led to certain benefits – volunteer enthusiasm, innovation, more community involvement etc. However as one respondent stated “There is a discrepancy between where volunteers consider / perceive themselves to be in terms of a priority for national governing bodies of sport, their strategic significance, their ability to deliver and the reality of the situation”

Conclusions:
The change does offer opportunities. A move away from public provision towards volunteer led provision can provide a platform for enterprising activity for all organisations involved. It assists in making local authorities think outside the box and incorporate elements of entrepreneurship into its approach.

Volunteer organisations need to develop enterprising activity to ensure sustainability but to do this they need the support for this enterprise leap to take place (Cox and Vitanen, 2010)

The changing balance between public sector provision and provision by volunteers (Tschirhart, 2005) could lead to improvements and cost savings within remaining authority controlled resources. A criticism of the public sector is that it is bureaucratic and is inefficient at allocating resources, but for one council “It has prompted a review of building costs and the findings have had cross authority benefits.”

The provision by volunteers may be concentrated in those areas of high social capital and some areas may see public series and assets disappearing as they may not have the resources for co production. One opportunity could be for successful volunteer organisations to support or expand into other less advantageous areas but this may be unlikely. Clifford (2011) comments there may be widening gaps between better resourced and other areas.

A criticism of transfer is that it will move services from meeting the need of all the public and as a vehicle for social objectives, towards one led by the objectives of the particular volunteers. The volunteer organisations are close to the community and therefore have a unique perspective, they can identify local needs and develop new services for example - asset transfers can be an opportunity for renting out room space.

Community involvements that are in the main dependant on a group of trustees or committee ensure that power can be shared this can reduce the influence of individual politicians or parties. However other stakeholders should be considered to bring their advice and expertise to the process. Begin the process as early as possible and involve the local voluntary services council.
This scoping exercise indicated that further research was required to answer such questions as:

Can government objectives – such as equity of access, education, conservation – be protected?

What local government support is required?

Can volunteer enthusiasm be maintained?

Is volunteer management and enthusiasm reliant on a few key individuals?

What is the best management system for the new organization, to channel the energy and enthusiasm of the volunteers; but ensure effective delivery and public accountability?

Can further volunteering be promoted / stimulated by this opportunity?

Is this an opportunity to build social capital in less advantaged areas, thus developing community resourcefulness?

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