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## **Introduction**

Partnership approaches to the provision of public services at local, regional and national levels gained significant traction under the New Labour modernisation agenda which sought greater efficiency and effectiveness. Touted as a useful response to the limited flexibility of outdated and inflexible government departments that adopted 'silo' mentalities (Newman, 2001: p.106), partnership approaches have been widely adopted to establish a means of addressing complex and multi-faceted issues such as crime, poverty, and social exclusion via the collective engagement of government, communities and citizens (Miller and Ahmad, 2000; Newman, 2001; Stoker, 2004). Underpinned by a broader emerging neo-liberal model of governance, greater partnership was also championed as a means of improving transparency in decision making and local autonomy over services via the involvement of communities and third sector organisations in decision making processes (Chapman et al. 2010; Daly and Davis, 2002; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002).

Such is the pragmatic appeal of partnership there is a danger that they are becoming the default approach within many public programmes (Turrini et al. 2010). While it is difficult to argue against the 'what works' approach offered by multi-agency partnerships (Fenwick et al. 2012), partnership represents a complex and confusing interplay between processes, activities and outcomes (Hunter and Perkins, 2012). This can create significant challenges for those working in partnerships who are often lacking in the skills to collaborate effectively (Halliday et al. 2004; Misener and Doherty, 2009), the results of which can lead to wasted resources and partnership destruction (Babiak and Thibault, 2009). Hence, research has been critical both of

the likelihood that partnerships can simultaneously achieve efficiency, effectiveness, and community empowerment, and the lack of attention being paid to the potential drawbacks (Fenwick et al. 2012; Glasby et al. 2006; McLaughlin, 2004). However, given the inherently complex and dynamic process associated with partnership present researchers and practitioners (Zakocs and Edwards, 2006), it is difficult to design methodologies that are capable of developing understanding the relationship between internal processes and outcomes. Based on the rationale that more empirical research is needed in order to develop the evidence base concerning the interrelatedness of multiple partnership factors the aim of the present study was to assess associations between intermediary partnership outcomes and the structural and process aspects of partnership working. This approach might usefully establish evidence which enhances current debates on what is important in partnership working and how this might inform practice. In order to orientate the reader, attention is now given to defining partnership before contextualising partnership working for sport and physical activity promotion, with which this study is concerned.

### **Defining partnership**

Armistead et al. (2007: 212) suggest that partnership represents ‘a cross-sector, interorganisational group, working together under some form of recognized governance, towards common goals which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to achieve if tackled by any single organisation.’ As such, partnership involves the formal mobilisation of interests drawn from a number of partners with which to devise shared strategies for specific concerns (Butterfoss, 2007; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). This emphasises the basic collaborative tenet of partnership working which ultimately concerns developing the social relationships needed to achieve desired goals (Foster-Fishman et al. 2001). Following Lymbery

(2006), Mackintosh (2011) usefully highlights that collaboration can refer to both the process of working together to establish a partnership and the process of achieving partnership outcomes. In this sense it can be useful to understand collaboration as a process ‘through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible’ (Gray, 1989: 5), the need for which is based on ‘intentionality and openness to envision accomplishments that are beyond the expectations of any single organisation...’ (Butterfoss 2007: 26).

In order to establish ‘what works’ in partnership, it is important to understand how collaborative processes and outcomes vary across different forms of collaboration (Granner and Sharpe, 2004). However, the diversity of partnership processes and outcomes present researchers and practitioners with the challenge of identifying methodologies that adequately account for this complexity. While examples of attempts to assess partnership effectiveness in terms of direct impacts do exist (Andrews and Entwistle, 2010), there has tended to be a bias on assessing partnership processes rather than outcomes (Dowling et al. 2004). This is not surprising given the deficiency in research methodologies that are able to explain satisfactorily the link between partnership activity and longer term community level changes (Granner and Sharpe, 2004; Lachance et al. 2006), whereby identifying appropriate, relevant and feasible measures of success is challenging (Hausman et al. 2005). Consequently, while partnership approaches have been justified on their purported ability to engage a broad variety of community actors to address complex issues such as health and social care (Roussos and Fawcett, 2000; Rummery, 2003), there is the paradoxical situation whereby a detailed understanding of the products or impacts of partnership working remain relatively underdeveloped. Similarly, with respect to the sport and physical activity partnership context, a greater understanding of partnership processes has been also called for on the basis that a this might reasonably lead to evidence that both facilitates and informs collaborative efforts

addressing sport and physical activity promotion (Carter, 2005). Recognising that limited research has empirically investigated associations between multiple partnership processes and outcomes within the content of sport and physical activity, this study seeks to enhance the evidence base and inform current research and practice.

### **Community sports networks: partnership approaches for sport and physical activity promotion**

Community participation in sport and physical activity is a long-standing governmental concern which gave rise under the Labour government to the establishment a single delivery system for sport (Figure 1). The single delivery system was a comprehensive framework linking national sport strategy to local delivery based on the principles of integrated management and planning around sporting and physical activity participation objectives (Sport England, 2004). To support this system, Community Sports Networks (CSNs) were created in 2007 as a means of improving collaboration between local partners overseeing and managing local sport and physical activity projects in support of national targets for sport participation and health (Carter, 2005; Houlihan and Green, 2009). Community Sports Networks and local derivatives thereof, including Sport and Physical Activity Alliances (SPAAs), are non-constituted groups of local representatives from a range of organisations including local authority departments, third sector organisations, sports clubs, health and wellbeing specialists, and education institutions with an interest in promoting and delivering community sport and physical activity programmes. Members of CSNs convene to devise and agree action plans, and deliver programmes to support increased local level participation in sport and physical activity. CSNs provide a vehicle for collaboration between local partners with shared interests in sport development, physical activity and health promotion to share resources, expertise,

information, and identify combined responses to local problems. Initially operating in each of the 49 County Sport Partnership (CSP) areas, and supported with direct Sport England guidance (Sport England, 2007), CSNs tend to form within small geographic areas for example, local districts. Consequently, larger counties in England could host five or more CSNs resulting in a potentially significant, although as yet uncharted number across England.

**[Figure 1 about here].**

The development of CSNs was overseen by local officers from County Sport Partnerships (CSPs) who provided guidance regarding the funding available from Sport England in 2007 to initiate the CSN programme. County Sport Partnerships were established in 2004 to bolster the effectiveness of the single delivery system, each of the forty-nine Sport England-funded CSPs acting as quasi-governmental strategic bodies to provide greater coordination and oversight for partnerships with a range of local public and private sector partners including National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and local authorities (Bloyce and Smith, 2010; Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS] / Strategy Unit, 2002). The demise of the single delivery system was brought about by the succession of the Coalition government in 2010 which brought with it a change in focus to market-based rather than network approaches to service delivery and a stronger focus on performance management. Reflective of the constantly shifting nature of national sport objectives (Bloyce and Smith, 2010; Green, 2006), CSPs have since been subjected to tighter controls to ensure accountability to strict performance outcomes (Phillpots et al. 2011, Grix 2010) as is evident in the recent *Creating a Sporting Habit for Life* strategy (DCMS, 2012) in which a mandated partnership approach between Sport England, CSPs, schools and community sports clubs lies at the heart of a determination to increase the

proportion of young people regularly playing sport. These changes have ultimately seen a weakening of CSP support for CSNs (Lindsey, 2014).

While it is not presently known how many CSNs still operate, or what implications the recent accession of the Conservative government will have in the short and longer term, it is unlikely that the change in government will herald any major shift in the broader partnership discourse. This is because partnership approaches have become so ingrained in governance and the process of governing (Hunter and Perkins, 2012). Hence, the salience of local partnership working for devising and implementing local initiative might in some respects increase. Indeed, O'Reilly and Brunette (2014) highlight that partnership approaches are widely endorsed as purposeful responses to a continuing global crisis of physical inactivity amidst a scarcity of resources. In this respect, as vehicles for collaboration between local actors, CSNs are likely to remain key local mechanisms for sharing information, co-ordinating activities and planning for local sport and physical activity programmes. Lindsey (2014) suggests that the potential role of communities in decision making processes has actually been elevated given a renewed focus on localism and the role of local actors in policy implementation. In this respect, those working within CSNs might actually be afforded increased flexibility to pursue local objectives in an evolving context where power is increasingly fragmented (Bolton et al. 2008; Harris and Houlihan, 2014; Mackintosh, 2013). While it is possible that increasing pressure on resources will place greater emphasis on the community and citizens in the prioritising and planning of local services (Perkins et al. 2010; Willis and Jeffares, 2012), the extent to which any genuine shifts to greater localism occur should be considered in light of evidence which suggests that the partnership agenda has actually extended and deepened governments' roles in public policy and service delivery (Grix and Phillpots, 2011; Phillpots and Grix, 2014). While CSNs are not necessarily afforded the attention or significant they once were, as local forms of partnership working between diverse organisations and individuals, it can be argued developing a more



empirical understanding of CSNs will establish evidence that helps advance research concerning partnership processes and impacts.

### **Research into partnerships for sport and physical activity**

It is surprising that research within the field of sport and physical activity partnerships has not received the same attention as in other policy areas for example, health promotion, where partnership working has been consistently endorsed and scrutinised (Butterfoss et al. 1996; El Ansari et al. 2009; Kegler et al. 1998). County Sport Partnerships have provided the main focus of research in the present context given their relevance to the wider narrative on partnership approaches within policy making. While CSPs are qualitatively different from CSNs, given their funding from and accountabilities to Sport England, existing research identifies a number of issues which might have a broader relevance to CSNs. For example, relationships between CSPs and their partners are characterised by symmetrical power relations and patterns of resource dependency across the spectrum of elite and mass participation sport (Grix and Phillpots, 2011; Mackintosh, 2011). The necessity for organisational survival in the sporting context is well documented (Babiak and Thibault, 2008; 2009), and it is likely that partners are compelled to cooperate mainly in return for funding and resources (Bolton et al. 2008; Grix and Phillpots, 2011). This is likely to take place in a context that features a complex interplay of trust, resources and incentives (Harris and Houlihan, 2014). One exception to the focus on CSPs is Lindsey (2014), who adopts a decentred approach to understanding meanings that guides collaborative behaviour within a Sport and Physical Activity Alliance (SPAA, local derivatives of CSNs). Lindsey (2014) identifies that the perceptions of members, and their outcome-focussed actions, were inherently linked and characterised by self-preserving traits (Lindsey, 2014). Thus, it is evident that a range of internal factors are at play for example,

power relations, and external factors for example, institutional values and practices, that are likely to impact the form and function of local-level partnerships within the sport and physical activity context.

However, there is a lack of methodologies within the current sport and physical activity partnership literature that facilitate assessments of associations between the multiple dimensions of partnership. For example, although Babiak and Thibault (2009) highlight key challenges to partnership working including environmental constraints, communication and managing perceived power imbalances between non-profit, public and private organisations delivering sport services in Canada, the authors do not extend their research to investigate the theoretical interrelatedness of these aspects with any identifiable outcomes. Furthermore, while the theoretical framework devised by Frisby et al. (2004) is useful for investigating management issues in sport-focused partnerships, the qualitative approach limits the potential to assess associations between partnership dimensions, thus leaving questions concerning the interrelatedness of partnership processes and outcomes. This evidence gap establishes the rationale for this study which presents the findings of a cross sectional investigation of CSNs focusing on internal partnership dimensions and intermediary outcomes.

### **Conceptualising intermediary outcomes of partnership working**

The inability to establish criteria to assess community level outcomes is a longstanding concern within the wider partnership literature (Clarke and Glendinning, 2002; Roussos and Fawcett, 2000; Weiss et al. 2002). This has given rise to a focus on intermediary partnership outcomes that seek to conceptualise the product, or impact, of partnership structure and processes. Intermediary partnership outcomes bring into focus a range of internal dimensions of partnership which may, theoretically, indicate a degree of partnership viability (Zakocs and

Edwards, 2006; Weech-Moldonado et al. 2003). Partnership effectiveness provides one such example. For example, Babiak (2009) highlights measures of partnership effectiveness at three levels including contributions to the community, serving the target clientele, and ensuring that member relations are productive in securing goals. The complexity of this multi-level approach is recognised by the author who acknowledges the practical difficulty in assessing these measures due to the inherent diversity of members and interests. Further intermediary outputs have been conceptualised in terms of member satisfaction and commitment, the significance of which have been related to partnership management, leadership, communication, and influence in decision making (Butterfoss et al. 1996; El Ansari et al. 2008; Kegler et al. 1998; Rogers et al. 1993). Satisfaction and commitment influence the quality of participation whereby members who rate these aspects highly invest greater resources in support of the partnership activities (El Ansari et al. 2008). Partnership synergy provides a further intermediary outcome which has been conceptualised as a means of determining the degree to which collaborative processes are effective in advance of any tangible partnership outcomes (Weiss et al. 2002). Representing the added value of partnership working, synergy potentially provides a useful proxy measure of partnership effectiveness by signifying the degree to which individuals and organisations are able to accomplish more than could be achieved independently (Lasker et al. 2001).

The assessment of intermediary outcomes necessarily draws attention to the structural, or member and organisational dimensions, and process factors that form the bedrock of partnership activities. From a structural standpoint, perceived empowerment and sense of ownership are important to participation (Butterfoss, 2006; Kumpfer et al. 1993), as are the perceived social, personal and material benefits and concomitant costs of participation (Butterfoss et al. 1993; Chinman et al. 1996; El Ansari et al. 2004). Equating these concepts with capacity building at the individual and organisational levels in which communities are

able to develop ‘culturally sensitive’ initiatives (Butterfoss and Kegler, 2002: p.162) helps to demonstrate their potential significance to CSNs. This is because CSNs are specifically concerned with identifying local needs, priorities, potential interventions, and a locally shared vision (Sport England, 2007). From a process standpoint, partnership management, which concerns the coordination of members, strategy, planning and evaluation (Mitchell and Shortell, 2000), has been described as the ‘glue’ that enables partnerships to stay together (Lasker and Weiss, 2003: p.131). Its relevance within the present context is recognised in research by Frisby et al. (2004), and O’Reilly and Brunette (2014), with respect to the importance of partnership planning and coordination, policies, evaluation, and establishing expectations. Management is important for accountability arrangements, ensuring the efficient use of resources, and conflict management (Brinkerhoff, 2004; Kihl et al. 2014; South et al. 2005).

Leadership helps to elaborate the processes of partnership working due to its potential role in inspiring members to adopt partnership values and vision, and developing trust between members (El Ansari et al. 2008; Goodman et al. 1996). From a transformational perspective, which emphasises action within the spirit of shared interests (Gill, 2006), leadership acts as a potential catalyst for partnership activity that translates the vision and goals of partnership into reality (El Ansari et al. 2008; Huxham, 2003). This stimulates member participation, involvement and shared action (Gill, 2006; Hays et al. 2000), and is a critical process given that member participation contributes to collaborative capacity, or the skills, knowledge, attitudes, relationships and procedures that develop a durable basis for effective action (El Ansari and Phillips, 2004; Metzger et al. 2005; Ratna and Rifkin, 2007). Communication is also a core process and is recognised as an essential component of a positive collaborative environment (Kumpfer et al, 1993), although it may increase the potential for conflict if conducted poorly (Shaw and Allen, 2006). Given concerns that there has tended to be a general

lack of explication of the pathways through which partnership functions and structure influence effectiveness (Lasker et al. 2001), the structural and process dimensions, and intermediary outcome measures highlighted here provide a potential means of investigating intermediary CSN outcomes which might be taken as indicators of viability. Based on this rationale, this paper presents the results of an exploratory study investigating multiple dimensions of CSNs in England.

## **Research methods**

To facilitate the exploration of associations between multiple partnership variables, quantitative data were collected via an online questionnaire administered between September 2008 and March 2009 from 171 CSN members in England (representing a response rate of 48.9% from the 350 surveys emailed directly to CSN members) (males = 51.5%, females = 48.5%), including CSN chairs, core staff and general members. Research participants were included based on the criterion that they were a member of a CSN and had attended at least one partnership meeting in the twelve months prior to the study taking place. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire as fully as possible based on their perceptions concerning the various aspects of the CSN of which they were a member. In addition to demographic and membership variables the questionnaire included Likert scale-type and categorical questions which sought to elicit data concerning a number of operations and processes, involvement, performance, and intermediary outcomes variables (Table 1). Issues of internet coverage bias and issues of accessibility (Salomon, 2001; Sarantakos, 2005) were addressed via the use of snowball and convenience sampling strategies to identify CSN members via participant connections and networks to maximise the potential number of invitations. A URL (address of a web page on the worldwide-web) was supplied to respondents which provided a direct means

of responding to the questionnaire following the initial invitation. Ethical compliance was ensured via a data collection protocol that made clear participation was entirely voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any point. The use of a password-protected online data collection tool ensured all responses remained anonymous and were not traceable to participants.

**[Table 1 here].**

With an absence of methodologies capable of providing a means of comparing and predicting partnership variables, the present study was informed by a review of conceptual frameworks from the sport development and health promotion literature (Babiak and Thibault, 2008; Butterfoss et al. 1993; Chinman and Wandersman, 1999; El Ansari and Phillips, 2004; Frisby et al. 2004; Goodman et al. 1996; Lachance et al. 2006; Lasker and Weiss, 2003; Lindsey, 2009; Parent and Harvey, 2009). A number of parallels between community health promotion partnerships and CSNs were identified including organisational and demographic diversity, multiple organisational interests and objectives, and an absence of formal authority (Weiner et al. 2002). These similarities guided a review of the health promotion literature which provided a rich resource for validated scales assessing partnership dimensions. This review informed the development of a thematic model (Figure 2). The model posits that a number of structural for example, member involvements, and process aspects for example, leadership and management, are predictive of intermediary partnership outcomes. In conjunction with advice from two advisors (a senior CSP officer and local authority representative), the model was used by the authors to guide the selection of variables and associated scales conceptually relevant to CSNs with which to devise the questionnaire and guide data analysis. To ensure construct validity as far as possible, variables were adopted primarily from the

Coalition Self-Assessment Survey (Kenney and Sofaer, 2001) and the Partnership Self-Assessment Tool (Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health (2002), with additional variables from El Ansari (1999) and Ogden et al. (2006), from whom we adopted a variable assessing sense of empowerment because of its focus on empowering practices. Variables were grouped into predictor variables including operations and processes, member involvement and CSN performance, and outcome variables including synergy, satisfaction, commitment and effectiveness, which provided a basis from which to assess associations between the partnership dimensions.

Objective 1 was to assess associations between pairs of predictor variables assessing CSN structure and processes, and four intermediary outcomes. Objective 2 was to construct regression models for the four intermediary outcomes based on the contributions of predictor variables deployed in the study. The software package Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.16) was employed to calculate descriptive statistics and associations between the predictor variables and the four intermediary outcome measures using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient. Analyses were conducted using aggregated variable scores from across the whole sample rather than at individual CSN level or by geographical area. The variables assessing leadership, function, communication, strategy, empowerment and trust included don't know responses prior to the scale responses to facilitate completion of the survey, whereby it was envisaged that some respondents may not have been familiar with the some of the items. All don't know responses were excluded prior to statistical calculations being run. To facilitate analysis dummy variables were created for the variables assessing function, conflict and benefits-to-costs in order to allow for their inclusion as predictor variables in the regression models. All scale data exceeded the minimum alpha score ( $\alpha \geq .70$ ) deemed sufficient for inclusion in statistical analyses (Granner and Sharpe, 2004). All variables,

excluding sense of ownership (6.4%,  $n = 11$ ) and satisfaction (4.1%,  $n = 7$ ), had less than 5% of values missing. Consistent with the exploratory nature of the study, regression models were constructed using standard multiple regression with the enter method given that it was not clear which independent variables would establish the best predictions for each intermediary outcome. Variance inflation factors (VIF) were computed which indicated that multicollinearity did not bias the regression models.

## **Results**

### *Description of CSN and member characteristics*

Responses were received from CSNs representing all 49 County Sport Partnership areas, the highest being Gloucestershire (15%,  $n = 26$ ), the lowest (0.58%,  $n = 1$ ) including Cornwall, Norfolk and Manchester. CSN memberships included representatives from sports clubs and leisure organisations (15%), local authority sports development departments and statutory agencies e.g. children's services (44%), and health services (8%). Chair and core CSN positions were largely held by local authority stakeholders (58% and 68% respectively) and the mean time spent on CSN activities in the month prior to the study was approximately 13 hours. Overall, half of the participants indicated that their CSN had sufficient representation to achieve its objectives although this was higher for local authority sports development departments and statutory agencies (60%) and those representing sports clubs and local leisure ( $\approx 56\%$ ). Approximately half (54%) reported that their CSN was actively recruiting new members and participants tended to be well rehearsed in partnership working with 75% reporting previous experience. Nearly two-thirds (61.5%) reported that their CSN employed paid professional staff to assist with activities



Approximately 40% of CSNs had been running for between one and two years and the mean length of CSN membership was 19.6 months (Mdn = 18.0 months, SD = 13.7), the majority of participants indicating that Terms of Reference had been agreed (88%). Accountability arrangements were largely in place for the performance and outcomes of the network (72.3%), and nearly three-quarters of participants confirmed that their networks had the capacity to undertake evaluations. Approximately half of the participants indicated that they were very comfortable with their CSN's decision making processes and perceived a relatively high level of personal influence (M = 64.87, SD = 24.42, rated on a scale of 0 to 100, higher scores indicating greater perceived influence in decision making). Overall, there was less conflict than had been expected (56.7%).

#### *CSN outcomes*

Table 2 exhibited a number of statistically significant relationships between the predictor variables and the four intermediary outcomes. For operations and process variables the table revealed strong positive relationships between management and satisfaction ( $r_s = .630$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), communication and satisfaction ( $r_s = .603$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and between strategy and satisfaction ( $r_s = .601$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). For the involvement variables there were strong positive relationships between benefits and synergy ( $r_s = .633$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and benefits and satisfaction ( $r_s = .633$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Strong positive relationships were also observed between benefits-to-costs and satisfaction ( $r_s = .607$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and between ownership and three of the four intermediary outcomes including synergy ( $r_s = .672$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), satisfaction ( $r_s = .687$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and commitment ( $r_s = .731$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). For performance variables a single strong positive relationship was observed between outcomes and satisfaction ( $r_s = .674$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 3 presents the variables selected through the enter regression method for each of the intermediary outcomes. Linear combinations of the predictor variables explained 67% of the variance in synergy, 75% of the variance in satisfaction, 63% of the variance in commitment and 46% of the variance in effectiveness. Communication was predictive of synergy ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and commitment ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Benefits were predictive only of synergy ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), while benefits to costs were predictive of satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Costs were not predictive of any of the intermediary outcomes although outcomes was predictive of satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), commitment ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## **Discussion**

Approximately only 50% of participants indicated that their CSN had sufficient representation to achieve its objectives suggesting that establishing memberships that were perceived as appropriate to the mission and goals of CSNs was challenging. It is possible that this is attributable the relative infancy of CSNs at the time of data collection but it was also evident that the active recruitment of new members was not widespread. The membership can be considered a partnership's primary asset in that each member brings with them different sets of resources and skills (Butterfoss et al. 1993) which is crucial for establishing collaborative capacity i.e. the skills, knowledge, attitudes, relationships and procedures that provide the conditions needed for community change (Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Ratna and Rifkin, 2007). This draws attention to the constitution of CSN memberships which, in the present study, local authority representatives featured largely. A fundamental issue here is the potential for community concerns to be overlooked in favour of those that are perceived as important by more powerful stakeholders as alluded to by Lindsey (2014), who highlights that power sharing

takes place within a strategically selective context in which organisations pursue specific interests in a more authoritative and perhaps traditional sense. Within the context of CSNs therefore, it is apparent that establishing a diverse membership that is both sufficiently representative to achieve the network's multifarious objectives and capable of being managed effectively was a key challenge.

The four regression models revealed a number of prominent variables particularly communication and outcomes that were predictive of the intermediary outcomes. These findings appear to demonstrate that communication played an important role in determining member perceptions of CSN outcomes, as conceptualised in synergy, satisfaction and commitment. Similarly, the predictive relationship between outcomes and satisfaction, commitment, and effectiveness suggested that it was important that CSNs demonstrated some form of impact around their objectives with respect to developing, new initiatives, providing benefits to the community, and bringing benefits to the members themselves. This would appear to underline the importance of developing adequate plans and planning processes in order to ensure the successful implementation of partnership programmes (Butterfoss and Kegler, 2002; Kegler et al. 1998), and the potential to sustain member participation (Hays et al. 2000).

We were interested to see that benefits was predictive of synergy but not of the other intermediary outcomes. The benefits of participation for example, getting to know other agencies, developing collaborative relationships, and getting help from or helping others, has been identified as important for fostering the sense that participation is worthwhile (Butterfoss et al. 1996; Chinman and Wandersman, 1999). The results in this study did not suggest that benefits were predictive of member satisfaction, commitment or perceived effectiveness. Hence, it might not necessarily be sufficient merely to ensure that benefits are present within the partnership as these alone might not ensure members remain satisfied or committed to the

cause. Rather, the findings suggested a potentially more complicated relationship whereby benefits represented one ingredient, among others, that contributed to partnership synergy, and the sense that some form of collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005), was being acquired. This would broadly support the suggestion that benefits are important to stakeholder participation (Chinman and Wandersman, 1999; El Ansari and Phillips, 2004), but also highlight a complex interaction with other partnership factors. Hence, strategies maximising the benefits as a means of promoting partnership synergy would appear to provide constructive management approaches in the present context.

As with research elsewhere (Rogers et al. 1993), communication shared a predictive relationship with member satisfaction and commitment, and appeared to be a fundamental ingredient within the present context. The pervasive and critical role of communication in partnership is highlighted by Butterfoss et al. (1993), who identify its significance to decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution. Given that partnership working in the sport context is notoriously difficult and complex (Babiak and Thibault, 2008. Casey et al. 2009), the findings in the present study suggested that establishing a range of formal i.e. those outlined in Terms of Reference, and informal communication processes that are able to adequately articulate information between members, is likely to be crucial. The lack of predictive relationships between management and leadership, and the four intermediary outcomes was interesting. For management, this might not have been particularly revealing given the construct's focus on meeting management. However, for leadership, it was clear that other operations and processes shared a predictive relationship with the intermediary outcomes including communication and strategy. This might suggest that, within the present context, it was more important to have agreement concerning the role, purpose and overall responsibilities, together with effective communication, than a leadership that inspired members to adopt partnership values and vision, and developed trust, as noted elsewhere (El

Ansari et al. 2008; Goodman et al. 1996). Ostensibly, this is consistent with the original CSN guidance which promoted flexibility and was deliberately limited with respect to outlining specific partnership structures (Sport England, 2007) and supported the notion that less formal arrangements may be preferable to more rigid approaches processes (Asthana et al. 2002). This finding might help develop important practical advice with respect to ensuring the development of clear and agreed CSN plans, and responsibilities for action in order to secure positive outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings suggest that establishing effective communication and partnership strategy, demonstrating CSN outcomes, and sustaining benefits shared important associations with the four intermediary outcomes. By deploying a range of variables from partnership research in other contexts this study sheds light on complex and overlapping dimensions of internal partnership factors, and a number of intermediary outcomes. The potential utility of the findings is perhaps best viewed in light of an increasingly fragmented policy context and continuing austerity (Bolton et al. 2008; Mackintosh, 2013; O'Reilly and Brunette, 2014), whereby it appears that CSNs might still provide useful mechanisms for bringing together local stakeholders to purposefully combine resources and establish plans to promote local participation in sport and physical activity. Further research is warranted to support coordinated and consistent approaches to partnership working at a local level, given significant changes within local government departments and shifts in national policy objectives. Consistent with research in the wider partnership literature (Butterfoss et al. 1993; Chinman et al. 1996; El Ansari and Phillips, 2004) the findings here support the utility of assessing benefits as a means of articulating the effects of member participation, although we were unable to decipher the

precise nature of the relationship i.e. the tipping point at which costs were negatively associated with participation or effectiveness.

While the effectiveness of CSNs for producing wider community level changes is still not known, this study highlights a number of intermediary outcomes that might provide the basis on which to establish indicators that indicate how well CSNs are functioning. Future research in this field might usefully apply a similar methodology to repeat the investigation of CSNs in light of recent changes in policy and the wider socio-political environment in order to update knowledge of partnerships in this context. Additional refinement and testing of the measures assessing partnership factors is recommended in order to further refine the dimensions deployed in this study which were imported from other partnership research contexts. This might help develop approaches that facilitate the collection of data and ultimately provide a more nuanced understanding within the present context. While the dimensions deployed in this study provide a useful heuristic with which to assess where activities might be focused, future research might usefully adopt in depth case studies to explore the outcomes in order to deepen understanding of these issues and their meaning to participation in CSNs.

## **Limitations**

While it represents the first of its type in the sport and physical activity partnership context with regard to the appraisal of specific partnership variables its cross-sectional nature, limited sample size and age of the data mean that the findings should be interpreted with caution. Data were self-reported representing only the perceptions of individual CSN members and the spread of responses were uneven across the forty-nine counties in which CSNs are based, and between the representation groups. Despite the comprehensive data collection survey tool it is

also possible that some partnership dimensions were ignored and that a more refined level of measurement may have generated alternative findings. Qualitative work would help unpack contextual factors in greater detail and identify issues not revealed with the methodology deployed here for example, the role and relevance of leadership in CSNs. Further, the significant shifts that have taken place in the political and economic landscape since the data were collected limit the relevance of the findings and the sample cannot therefore be taken as a reliable representation of CSN members in England, or necessarily transferable to partnerships beyond the sport and physical activity context. However, the partnership concepts assessed in this study might be regarded as timeless concepts in that there is a significant and body of literature across multiple sectors highlighting their significance. Hence, while it is important to recognise the potential methodological limitations, and that CSNs are only one example of local partnership working, the findings provide a tentative insight into partnership characteristics with respect to structure, process and intermediary outcomes. This establishes evidence concerning the potential conceptual relevance of these dimensions to partnership research in the present sport and physical activity context, and a basis for future research.

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Table captions:

**Table 1: Description of variables, means and scale alphas**

**Table 2: Correlations between predictor variables and intermediary outcomes**

**Table 3: Regression models for the intermediary outcomes**

Figure captions:

**Figure 1: The Single Delivery System for Sport**

**Figure 2: Thematic model**

**Table 1: Description of variables, means and scale alphas**

<b>Variable (no. items)</b>	<b>Short description</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Alpha</b>
<b>Predictor variables</b>			
Operations and processes			
Management (22) <sup>a</sup>	Management capabilities at meetings	5.17 (1.02)	0.95
Leadership (15) <sup>b</sup>	Competency of leadership	3.71 (0.48)	0.90
Function (11) <sup>c</sup>	Role and purpose of the CSNs	2.5 (0.40)	-
Communication (9) <sup>b</sup>	Communication strategy and quality	3.93 (0.45)	0.82
Decision making (6) <sup>a</sup>	Quality of decision making processes	5.23 (0.89)	0.71
Strategy (22) <sup>b</sup>	Clarity and agreement on strategy / mission	3.97 (0.59)	0.83
Involvement			
Contributions (4) <sup>a</sup>	The nature of member input	5.15 (1.47)	0.76
Participation (5) <sup>d</sup>	Degree of member activity in the CSN	2.42 (0.86)	0.81
Benefits (13) <sup>a</sup>	The relative advantages of participation	4.77 (1.09)	0.92
Costs (8) <sup>a</sup>	The relative disadvantages of participation	3.24 (1.20)	0.82
Benefits to costs (1) <sup>e</sup>	Perceived level of benefits to costs	3.97 (1.20)	-
Trust (7) <sup>b</sup>	Comfortable working with other members	4.17 (0.40)	0.81
Empowerment (7) <sup>b</sup>	Increased personal competency and confidence	3.71 (0.48)	0.70
Ownership (4) <sup>a</sup>	Sense of pride in the CSN	5.40 (1.31)	0.92
Conflict (1) <sup>f</sup>	Perceived amount of conflict	1.47 (0.60)	-
Performance			
Outcomes (3) <sup>a</sup>	Quality of CSN outputs and impacts	4.91 (0.97)	0.86
Sustainability (3) <sup>a</sup>	Added value created by CSNs	4.93 (1.05)	0.70
<b>Outcome variables</b>			

Satisfaction (6) <sup>b</sup>	Accomplishments, function and outputs	4.43 (1.17)	0.92
Synergy (22) <sup>e</sup>	Success through working together	3.61 (0.69)	0.92
Commitment (6) <sup>a</sup>	Responsibility towards the CSN	5.21 (1.18)	0.77
Effectiveness (9) <sup>g</sup>	Fidelity of key functions and processes	2.93 (0.45)	0.89

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<sup>a</sup> Responses rated on 7-point scale: higher scores i.e. 7, indicate more agreement; <sup>b</sup> items scored on a 5-point scale: higher scores i.e. 5, indicate more agreement. <sup>c</sup> Scored on a 3-point categorical scale: 1 = not a function, 2 = a minor function, 3 = a major function. <sup>d</sup> Items scored on a 3-point scale, higher scores i.e. 3, indicate more agreement <sup>e</sup> Single item scored on a 5-point scale: 1 = there are many more difficulties than benefits; 2 = there a few more difficulties than benefits; 3 = the difficulties and benefits are about the same; 4 = there are a few more benefits than difficulties, 5 = there are many more benefits than difficulties. <sup>f</sup> Single item scored on a single item: 1 = less conflict than expected; 2 = about as much conflict as expected; 3 = more conflict than expected. <sup>g</sup> Item scored on 4-point scale: higher scores indicate more perceived effectiveness.

**Table 2: Correlations between predictor variables and intermediary outcomes**

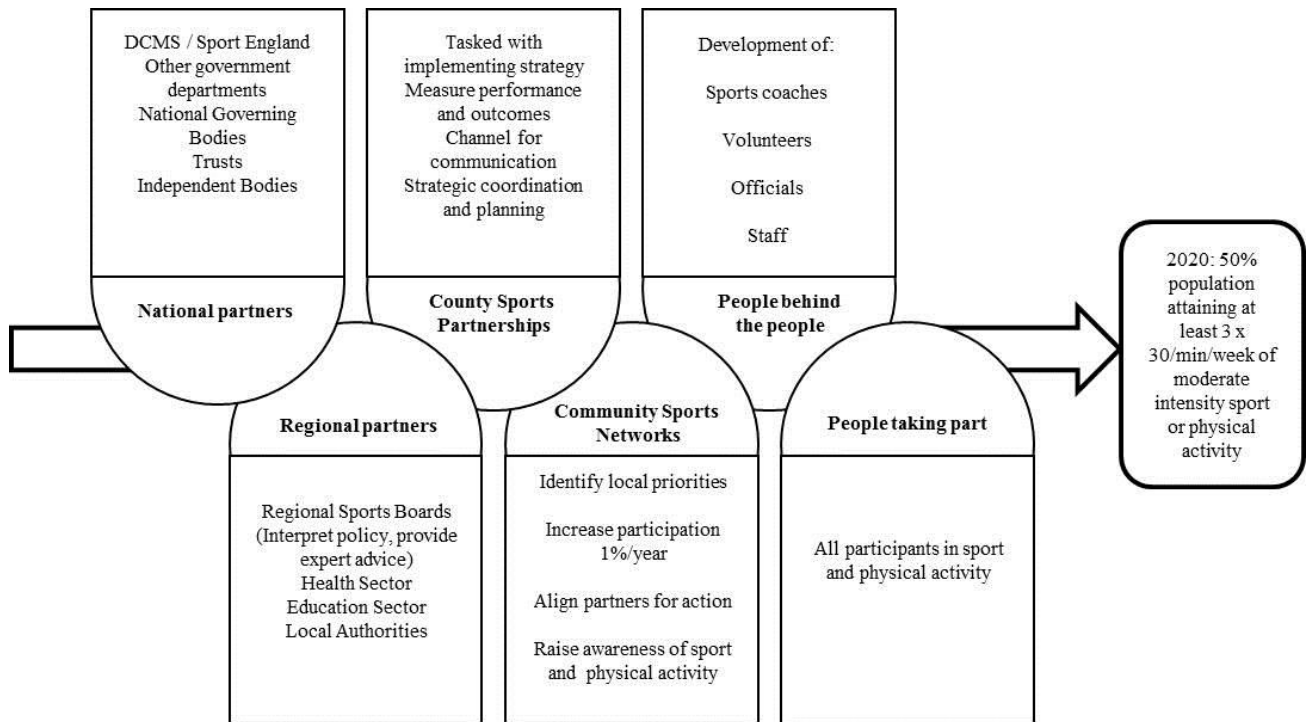
Variables	Intermediary outcomes			
	Synergy	Satisfaction	Commitment	Effectiveness
<i>Operations and processes</i>				
Management	.518**	.630**	.384**	.467**
Leadership	.564**	.580**	.415**	.502**
Function	.345**	.344**	.235**	.239**
Communication	.552**	.603**	.448**	.463**
Decision making	.411**	.443**	.454**	.372**
Strategy	.537**	.601**	.487**	.480**
<i>Involvement</i>				
Contributions	.304**	.255**	.4756**	.265*
Participation	.277**	.237**	.504**	.178*
Benefits	.633**	.650**	.522**	.550**
Costs	-.373	-.492	-.291	-.473
Benefits-to-costs	.567**	.607**	.486**	.478**
Trust	.327**	.438**	.367**	.351**
Empowerment	.537**	.469**	.517**	.301**
Ownership	.672**	.687**	.731**	.555**
<i>Performance</i>				
Outcomes	.563**	.674**	.542**	.533**
Sustainability	.522**	.550**	.502**	.408**

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed). \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

**Table 3: Regression models for the intermediary outcomes**

Variables	Synergy			Satisfaction			Commitment			Effectiveness		
	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	<i>P</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	<i>P</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	<i>P</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	<i>P</i>
Variance explained	0.67			0.75			0.63			0.46		
<i>Operations and processes</i>												
Communication		0.19	<.05		0.23	<.001		0.22	<.001		-	-
Strategy		0.13	<.05		0.13	<.05		-	-		-	-
<i>Involvement</i>												
Benefits		0.24	<.05		-	-		-	-		-	-
Benefits to costs					0.20	<.001		-	-		-	-
Ownership		-	-		-	-		0.37	<.001		-	-
<i>Performance</i>												
Outcomes		-	-		0.20	<.001		0.18	<.05		0.23	<.05

**Figure 1: The Single Delivery System for Sport**



(Source: Crone and Baker, 2009)

**Figure 2: Thematic model**

