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## **Sport volunteering, active citizenship and social capital enhancement: what role in the 'Big Society'?**

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This position paper addresses the issues surrounding the development of active citizenship and social capital through volunteering in sport. The present UK Government has aligned much of its policy intent with fiscal constraint and identifying alternatives to balance the 'shortfall' of public provision. One such policy idea, 'Big Society' extols the need for citizen engagement through volunteering, to benefit both the individual and wider society. However, the basis for such social advantage has been uncritically determined, and as such, this paper will address three main concerns. Firstly, the notion that activities such as volunteering contribute to an individual's accumulation of social capital will be critically examined. Secondly, the extent of government involvement in facilitating community engagement will be articulated, to determine whether ideas and policies such as the 'Big Society'—which emphasise liberation of the individual and limited government involvement—are instrumental to social capital enhancement. Finally, the paper will offer a critical commentary on how the 'Big Society' may be realised through volunteering in sport, outlining key messages for those involved in the delivery of community sport as to how they may best position themselves to profit from current Government thinking.

**Keywords:** volunteering; social capital; neo-liberalism; big society; sport

### **Introduction**

The enhancement of social capital through active citizenship is a dominant discourse in the rhetoric of much social policy intent. In the United Kingdom, the formation of a Conservative-majority Coalition government, following the 2010 General Election, which has prioritised deficit reduction through restraint of public expenditure, may bring into question the level of direct investment that will be prioritised for social capital development for citizens in this country. Central to the policy direction of the Coalition is a 'rolling back' of the state and the promotion of the 'Big Society' ideology (Alcock 2010; Evans 2011; Purkis 2011). In essence, the economic condition of austerity has removed the platform for investment into social capital through traditional methods, such as formal education, and replaced it with more informal opportunities, such as

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volunteering, for citizens to contribute to their communities and enhance their social capital.

One social policy area where the 'Big Society' concept may have salience is sport. Not only has this policy concern become a more prominent aspect of a maturing welfare state (Nicholson, Hoyer & Houlihan 2011), but in addition, the sport sector is the largest contributor to voluntary action in the UK, accounting for approximately a quarter of all voluntary activity (Delaney & Keane 2005; Doherty & Misener 2008; Harris, Mori & Collins 2009). The potential for sport to contribute to the 'Big Society' ideal, and in the process augment social capital accumulation, is not lost on policy-makers (Alcock 2010; Stott 2011). For instance, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has, in their most recent sports strategy for young people—'*Creating a sporting habit for life*'—pinpointed volunteering as pivotal to addressing the long-standing issue of attrition in sport participation on leaving school (DCMS 2012). Further afield, the European Commission (2007) has also identified how opportunities in non-formal educational pursuits, such as volunteering in sport, have the potential to unlock the attributes of active citizenship and reinforce social capital development.

Therefore, it would appear that the area where sport volunteering and active citizenship intersect is ripe for examination in assessing how, in a moment of political uncertainty and economic austerity, these two actors could combine to firstly, meet policy objectives, whilst secondly, developing the social capital of sport volunteers. Consequently, this paper will address three key concerns. Firstly, to what degree does participation in sport volunteering contribute to the construction and maintenance of social capital and what factors within this context optimise social capital enhancement. Secondly, in light of the current government's insistence on 'rolling back the state', in favour of promoting the 'Big Society', to what extent does state involvement and government ideology encourage active community engagement. Finally, the paper will critically examine how the 'Big Society' ideology could be realised through volunteering in sport, by highlighting the salient and necessary conditions that may require implementation to achieve this vision.

Critically, while the sport context is a common and much applauded site for the development of active citizenship and various forms of capital through volunteering, the evidence to support the positive relationship between volunteering and social capital

formation is not extensive (Nicholson & Hoye 2008). Moreover, despite the 'Big Society' concept appearing to offer hope to the voluntary sector, against a backdrop of spiralling public deficit and economic downturn (Evans 2011), the uncritical acceptance of the benefits of voluntary action, both to the individual and the broader community, requires scrutiny. Therefore, the question to be posed is: to what extent can the Coalition government's concept of the 'Big Society' foster social capital development through voluntary activity related to sport?

### **Sport volunteering and the development of social capital**

As noted, policy rhetoric, both locally and globally, highlights how volunteering in sport provides attractive potentialities for social gain (European Commission 2007). Indeed, as Nicholson and Hoye (2008) observe:

“Even a cursory examination of public discourses that relate to sport and leisure reveals that politicians, academics, sport administrators, policymakers, journalists, athletes and commentators are convinced [of] the idea that sport is a vehicle for the creation, development and maintenance of social capital” (p.2).

It, therefore, appears pertinent to examine this rather unexplored assumption that surrounds the connection between active sport involvement and social mobility, through the accumulation of capital or resources that are valued in a particular field. Bourdieu's (1986) much cited work on the notion of capital defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 248). While it is axiomatic to suggest that engagement in sport may optimise the aggregation of social capital, Nicholson and Hoye (2008) warn of three specific issues that germinate from Bourdieu's definition.

Firstly, the magnitude of a relational network will limit the potential for social capital acquisition. Put simply, the larger the network of connections, the higher the propensity to mobilise social capital (Nicholson & Hoye 2008; Sieppel 2008). In a sporting sense, it could be deduced that an individual whose network traverses regional and national borders is likely to generate more social capital than one that is more localised. Secondly,

and more crucially, in addition to the quantity of relationships, a qualitative component is a key feature of social capital attainment. As Portes and Landolt (2000) observe, the relative 'wealth' or socio-economic status of the mutual acquaintances who reside in an individual network will impact on the power of the social capital that is obtained. Undoubtedly, with the sport context being a site for significant social inequality (Coalter 2007), social capital manifestation are likely to vary between and within sports, which suggests that notions of social capital acquisition through sport cannot be universally applied. Finally, as Bourdieu (1986) concedes, network construction requires significant expenditure of time and energy, and is enhanced over a considerable duration and through active engagement in multiple activities. In sport, the propensity for sports clubs to operate in isolation (Skille 2011) and concentrate activities around one specific sport (Harris *et al.* 2009), suggests that, firstly, sports clubs may constitute a fragile basis for social capital enhancement (Collins 2008) and, secondly, opportunities for social capital creation are occasionally neglected.

Significantly, this inclination for sports clubs and organisations to operate in a largely secluded manner aligns appositely with Putnam's (2000) distinction of three forms of social capital. The first of these—'bridging' social capital—may refer to traditional notions of social capital enhancement in that it encompasses the connection of disparate groups in society through a largely instrumental and positive means. In essence, membership or involvement in a specific activity, such as sport volunteering, offers a conduit for relational network development across horizontal social divisions (Putnam 2000). In semblance, the concept of 'linking social capital' has positive connotations of social capital enhancement as it refers to the activity (sport volunteering) offering opportunities for vertical connections to be created between diverse social strata—fundamentally social mobility (Putnam 2000). Sport's potential to integrate different social classes in a common endeavour (Collins 2008) evidently connects to notions of this form of social capital. However, in contrast to the previous two forms of social capital, the concept of 'bonding social capital' has a more sinister undertone. According to Putnam (2000) this form of social capital development involves a tightening of relations within a homogenous group of people, further excluding those who are extraneous to the main group and limiting the quantity of people who can access additional resources and accumulate social capital. Critically, on this basis, it could be argued that membership and involvement in sport actually debilitates the construction of

social capital or at the very least prioritises the development of bonding social capital, given the convention of many sports clubs to concentrate on competitive, ‘on-field’ performance and prominence in league tables through processes of elitism, selection and exclusion (Collins 2010; Skille 2011). In addition, as mentioned above, Coalter (2007) highlights how the type and size of a sports club may influence the degree to which social capital is accumulated. While research in the area is scarce, Eitle and Eitle (2002) indicate that the social and cultural assumptions attributed to some sports, and the people who participate in them, implies that differential amounts of social capital can be acquired through sport.

Clearly, as Nicholson and Hoye (2008, p.11) identify, the multifaceted and complex nature of sport engagement is “likely to have an impact on the type and utility of the social capital that is created, developed and maintained” by individuals who partake in sporting activity. Furthermore, the uncritical view that surrounds the positive impact of sport volunteering on social capital enhancement that is evident in the rhetoric of much policy discourse is unequivocally dubious. Therefore, it would appear necessary to examine the role of sport as a means of generating social capital, or locate what type of voluntary involvement would optimise social capital enhancement.

As a starting point, there is evidence to suggest that the depth of involvement in sport is a strong determinant of social capital development. For example, Putnam (2000) observes that membership of a sporting organisation has to be active and involved to have social capital benefits. Similarly, Nicholson and Hoye (2008) note that individuals have to be engaged through playing, facilitating or watching sport in a committed fashion for any social capital to be accrued. However, both authors agree that volunteering in sport has the requisite level of active engagement to facilitate social capital enhancement. Nevertheless, as Harvey, Levesque & Donnelly (2007) discovered empirically, the relationship between sport volunteering and social capital is contingent on the duration of the engagement in volunteering. Importantly, engagement needs to be longer-term to accumulate social capital and even where an individual inherits a relatively high level of social capital this needs to be reinvested, exchanged and developed to maintain it.

These findings raise two further points of interest. Firstly, the voluntary activity that is undertaken needs to comprise far reaching or altruistic intentions rather than be

commenced for short-term personal interest, in order for social capital to be acquired. For example, Harvey *et al.* (2007) observed that many volunteers in sport engaged to accentuate the immediate advantages that their children would receive from their voluntary work rather than the more intangible consequences that longer-term volunteering would convey. A second, related issue identified by Harvey *et al.* is the need for inherited social capital to be continually reinvested to maintain its value. This suggests that Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus may have less influence on the maintenance of social capital than initially posited. However, as Bourdieu (1986) would argue individuals who inherit a substantial stock of social capital—via their habitus—would expect to possess the informal knowledge and skills, along with the initial connectedness, to capitalise on opportunities to reinvest their social capital. Empirical research by Bradbury and Kay (2008) concurs, suggesting that within youth volunteering projects, those individuals with a pre-disposition or pre-existing active involvement in a sport club were more likely to be attracted to volunteering, and expand their existing social connectedness. Collins and Nichols (2005) reinforce this perspective, stating that the tightness of the sporting network between well-connected 'stalwarts' acts as a potential barrier for those beyond this narrow, exclusive association of volunteers to access and exploit voluntary and community focussed opportunities. Ostensibly, these conditions create a social inequality (Apple 2001), which allows those with considerable initial social capital to access more episodes for further capital reinvestment and, consequently, accumulation.

In profoundly unequal societies, such as the UK (Wilkinson & Prickett 2009), the opportunity to engage in voluntary action is, therefore, also unequally distributed (Evans 2011; Coote 2011). A brief glance at demographic evidence of volunteers in the UK underscores this point. According to both Stott (2011) and Smith (2011) volunteers are typically degree educated, middle aged, and of higher social class. Other comparative studies conducted in similar nations concur with these findings (Cuskelly 2008), which brings into question the effectiveness of sport as an instrument to enhance social capital, particularly the more positive types of bridging and linking capital (Putnam 2000). Furthermore, the advantage that those who possess less restricted access to experiences such as sport volunteering gain over their lower class, inferior-connected contemporaries is reinforced, with social capital accumulated further and life opportunities increased in a circuitous fashion for those who have higher initial stocks of social and economic

resources (Coote 2011). The challenge for governments, who continually advocate and extol the virtues of sport and volunteering as positive and instrumental in reducing social inequality, developing active citizenship, and enhancing social mobility in their policy rhetoric (Nicholson *et al.* 2011), is to be explicit about how this can be achieved in practice. In the UK, the change in government, from one where welfare state expansion was prioritised to one where public expenditure has been restrained (Smith 2010), opens a debate for how government intervention can best accentuate the link between active community engagement through sport and social capital accumulation.

### **State intervention in the development of social capital through sport**

With regard to sport in the UK, intervention by government through policy and funding has developed markedly in recent years. While Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, Nodland and Rommetvedt (2007) suggest that sport is not an obvious concern of welfare policy, they do concede that “the maturation of the post-war welfare state which accepted leisure time as an important aspect of social welfare...[has] confirmed the place of sport and recreation as a legitimate aspect of the welfare state” (p.53). In the liberal welfare regime that is present in the UK, government intervention into sport has fluctuated, ranging from the incomprehension and disdain of the Thatcher government of the 1980s, to the more prolonged and intense commitment to sport of the Major government, and latterly the Blair and Brown government’s of New Labour (Bergsgard *et al.* 2007). Indeed, as Smith (2010) reminds us, at the conclusion of New Labour’s time in office, the role and reach of the state had expanded considerably, with the fruits of economic growth that were realised in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century reinvested into the welfare system.

During this time, in the sport policy area, there has been unprecedented financial investment, with the contribution of the state appearing to be significantly more substantial than would be expected of a neo-liberal economy within a liberal welfare regime (Bergsgard *et al.* 2007). However, much of this investment has been apportioned to the elite sport domain, which has benefitted from an improved quality and quantity of training facilities, the widespread employment of support staff, and personal grants to identified elite athletes (Grix & Carmichael 2011; Houlihan 2011). Therefore, elite sport has thrived under the ‘Big Government’ interventions of New Labour, with the right to



host the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, the pinnacle of these intentions, and an underlining of the central priority of elite sport in the policy intent of recent governments.

Youth sport, predominantly through school provision, has also been a major beneficiary of government intervention in recent times. At the heart of this investment has been the objective of creating more opportunities for young people to participate in a wider range of sport and physical activity experiences; the promotion of a broader range of competitive opportunities in which young people can partake; the provision of more widespread access to coaching for young people to facilitate more enjoyable sporting engagement; and the generation of a network of opportunities that are external to the formal school curriculum by developing links between schools and community sports clubs (Bloyce & Smith 2010).

The twin emphasis of elite and youth has permeated the sport policy rhetoric of the last 15 years. Indeed, within this period, with the exception of *Gameplan* (DCMS 2002), every sport-related policy document produced by central government, irrespective of political complexion, has emphasised and prioritised elite success and enhanced provision for young people, while community sport, in comparison, has been largely neglected (Bloyce & Smith 2010; Houlihan 2011; Bush, Silk, Andrews & Lauder *in press*). Such investment into elite and youth sport has exhibited some considerable positive outcomes by way of return, which ostensibly has catalysed the further outlay of funds (Bloyce & Smith 2010). For example, within hours of the closing ceremony at the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games, David Cameron had announced that UKSport would receive £500 million for the subsequent four years to maintain support services for elite athletes—a direct response to the medal success achieved by Team GB (Mulholland 2012). Moreover, with regard to youth sport, under the previous Labour government, the perceived success of the Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy, prompted an increased investment into youth sport development to £783 million to underpin the Physical Education and Sport Strategy for Young People (PESSYP) (Bloyce & Smith 2010).

In addition, these two segments of the sports sector collectively possess a number of skilful and vocal advocacy groups to lobby politicians, in comparison to the community

sport division (Houlihan 2011). Consequently, while elite and youth sport have flourished as a result of 'Big Government', at the community level, despite good intention, a determination to address active involvement in sport and the implementation of a plethora of initiatives (Coalter 2007), recent evidence from Sport England's Active People Survey (2012) indicates that sports participation in adults has, at best, stagnated and that social inclusion policies have been largely abandoned (Collins 2010). Clearly, for community sports clubs, who survive on the input of the voluntary sector, the landscape appears potentially problematic, with very little of the policy intent being steered towards increasing the voluntary opportunities that are paramount in the policy rhetoric of enhancing social capital. It should be added, that while an expansion of the welfare state through government intervention has the purpose of creating opportunities for more individuals (Smith 2010), paradoxically, in sport, the preoccupation on elite and youth sport has tended to focus resources on an elite few, rather than mass involvement in sport, and potentially created in young people a sense of entitlement that encourages an inward looking perspective of citizenship rather than a wider, community based stance (Stott 2011).

While the relative achievements of the significant, possibly profligate (Scott 2011), investment into sport that has arisen in recent years is open to debate, the paradoxical nature of much of this investment has provided ammunition for opponents of a broad welfare state and 'Big Government' to challenge the efficacy of 'top-down', deterministic approaches to government intervention and advocate welfare reform through increased social responsibility, community empowerment, devolving policy action to localities, and above all reducing state control and function (Blond 2010; Alcock 2010; Stott 2011).

The current Coalition government in the UK, influenced heavily by the policies of the Conservative manifesto, has proposed the 'Big Society' concept to embody the devolution of political power from the centre to the local with the intention of revitalising communities (Stott 2011). As Evans (2011) explains, this 'bottom-up' vision aims to "nurtur[e] people's altruism, generosity of time and spirit, and sense of agency to change the things they feel most strongly about" (p.165). Against the milieu of a spiralling expenditure deficit, the constant threat of recession, and savage fiscal restraint, the 'Big Society' vision will attempt to engage communities to act upon the issues that confront them, using the voluntary sector as the drivers for this change (Evans 2011).

While Scott (2011) reminds us that volunteering actually reduces during times of recession, the present government view this austere moment as an opportunity to transfer ownership of welfare services from public bodies to voluntary, or third sector, organisations (Alcock 2010), and provide a potentially cheaper alternative to providing these services, whilst unlocking potential opportunities for citizens to enhance their social capital through community activism (Evans 2011; Stott 2011). While opponents to the 'Big Society' contend that it is merely a narrative composed by government to deflect attention away from the problems that will accompany a retreating state (Coote 2011), Scott (2011) acknowledges, that the clear shift of focus at least recognises the function of the third sector and places them at the crux of the policy and funding agenda. Consequently, this could create opportunities for voluntary organisations that have not previously existed and offer them a clear pathway to assert themselves and influence what happens in their community (Wood & Brown 2011).

Proponents of the 'Big Society' allude to its potential to unlock a reciprocal arrangement between individuals and the state, whereby certain publically provided services are undertaken voluntarily, saving the state valuable resources and creating a 'hidden wealth' of trust between community and state (Stott 2011). Consequently, by encouraging individuals to deploy their financial and physical assets in the cause of civic good, a more progressive society could be realised. As such, the 'Big Society' could achieve social justice and individual well-being for all, particularly for those who are marginalised, by encouraging people to make contributions to community projects, either major or minor, but crucially, within their means (Coote 2011).

The centralised position of the 'Big Society' within the priorities of all government departments and the continual amplification of this ideology from David Cameron, suggests that the 'Big Society' will inevitably be a 'political football' on which debate will continue to rage. As such, Chanan and Miller (2011) observe that the burgeoning 'Big Society' "will need to steer a careful course if it is not to be strangled at birth" (p.52). Consequently, these authors offer three criteria by which the 'Big Society' could be assessed to examine the contribution of this policy idea to the inner strengthening of community life. Firstly, the idea could be assessed against the extent to which the 'Big Society' enriches democracy within a community, highlighting the contribution that this ideology has in fostering community cohesion. Secondly, the efficacy of the 'Big Society'

could be considered by its propensity to develop social capital, which, as mentioned, aligns cogently with much of the current policy rhetoric of governments in capitalist states. Third, and finally, Chanan and Miller (2011) propose that the effect on public services could be measured, to gauge the quality of services that were once reliant on exchequer funding but would now be delivered by community organisations. With these three interactive criteria in mind, the work of Coote (2011) may provide insights into where the 'Big Society' notion may have flaws or at least requires revision within the detail of its policies.

In terms of community cohesion and enrichment, Coote (2011) warns that a reliance on the voluntary sector will only benefit those with most resource to offer, hence widening social inequalities between and within communities. Clearly, this perspective offers support to the earlier highlighted position that the typical profile of a volunteer encompasses a narrow and exclusive group of well-connected individuals, who are able to reinvest their considerable stock of social capital for further social gain (Collins & Nicholls 2005; Bradbury & Kay 2008). Moreover, of greater concern, Coote (2011) posits that increased competition for resources to provide community activities could create a situation where "citizens and local groups [will be] pitched against each other to compete for diminishing resources and access to depleting services" (p.86)—a scenario which could polarise, rather than bind, sections of the community and lead to increased social dissonance. Milbourne (2009) concurs, outlining how a continued emphasis on competition for resources may undermine collaborative community work and offer short-term answers rather than durable solutions to the social challenges that are confronted. In addition, given that most voluntary organisations, in particular voluntary sports clubs, are specialised in their interests and reach (Skille 2011), suggests that services may benefit small pockets of individuals who share this specialist interest as opposed to addressing more general interests and assisting a wider proportion of the community (Coote 2011). Consequently, social inequality may be exacerbated as public services are 'outsourced' to private and voluntary providers.

In relation to social capital accumulation, Coote (2011) contends that while the 'Big Society' may appear to encourage volunteering—and, consequently, the ascribed benefits to social capital that voluntary action may bring (Putnam 2000)—this argument is potentially defective on the basis that access to funding and resources is more

conditional, formalised and complicated than it once was. As such, the commodification of voluntary action may become a barrier to volunteering and subsequently detract from the accumulation of social capital. Indeed, as Harris *et al.* (2009) report, the increased bureaucracy associated with managing voluntary sports clubs, particularly when attempting to source funding and resources, has overwhelmed existing volunteers and deterred potential volunteers. Moreover, the increase of bureaucratic processes that are necessary when acquiring resources to provide sporting opportunities may, by contrast, advantage organisations who are already more entrepreneurial in their operations. Consequently, private enterprise organisations, such as private sports clubs, may benefit more from the inception of 'Big Society' initiatives than the more value-driven and altruistic sporting organisations found in the voluntary sector (Coote 2011). Therefore, it could be concluded that while the 'Big Society' message is to promote voluntary action, the stringent processes by which resources are to be obtained may, conversely, allow the private sector to establish itself with greater velocity. This outcome could constrain the voluntary sector further and limit the extent to which social capital can be accumulated through volunteering.

Finally, with regard to the quality of service provision, while it is difficult to propose with accuracy how services will or may be affected, Coote (2011) implies that any service delivery needs to be cognisant of its economic, social and environment sustainability, suggesting that the quality of services must be measured against its longer-term costs as well as short-term impacts. For many voluntary sports clubs, providing sporting opportunities season-by-season, maintaining membership and merely surviving (Harris *et al.* 2009) may be more of the focus than any broader long-term objectives. Therefore, private sector organisations, who have become accustomed to assessing the economic, social and environmental impact of their operations (Hoye, Smith, Nicholson, Stewart & Westerbeek 2009), are more favourably positioned to respond to this aspect of community enhancement than their voluntary sector counterparts, further illustrating how the 'Big Society' may indeed benefit private over voluntary organisations.

Evidently, as the role of the free market becomes even more prominent in the rhetoric of government policy, a potentially debilitating constraint on voluntary activity is the continued unconscious and uncritical acceptance of neo-liberalism as the dominant political and ideological mechanism for economic development (Brown & Lauder 2001;

Brenner & Theodore 2002). Over the past 30 years neo-liberalist thinking has taken a global foothold, shifting from philosophical project to ‘new religion’ (Peck & Tickell 2002). In the UK, objectives in many areas of society, including sport, have been subject to the expansion of the free market, reinforcement of competitive structures, and a significant reduction of government responsibility for social needs (Apple 2001). Neo-liberalism has, as Olssen (cited in Apple 2001) observes, allowed governments to construct individuals into enterprising and competitive beings who are accountable and appraised on their responsiveness to market conditions. Ostensibly, neo-liberal forces have encouraged and emphasized a focus on individual concern, possibly at the expense of a concern for the wider community, a potentially problematic position for voluntary organisations that rely on community-based support for their survival.

Within the context of sport, the impact of neo-liberalism—through a modernising agenda with its predilection for target-driven management of related agencies—has infiltrated the sector. While such an approach has offered clarity to a historically incoherent and indecisive sector and has ensured that there is some accountability for the significant fiscal investment into sport (Houlihan & Green 2009), it has compelled sporting agencies, in particular National Governing Bodies (NGBs) for sport, to compete for funding and align their own policies closely with those of their fiscal masters (i.e. Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) and the Government) leading Harris *et al.* (2009) to suggest that the sports sector now consists of “funded sheep and unfunded goats” (p. 420).

Of perhaps more concern is that modernisation has been transferred further down the chain of service provision to organisations and institutions that are much closer to the delivery of community services (Houlihan & Green 2009). In the sport sector, local authorities and voluntary sports clubs are the focal point for much of this transference, with pressure applied to these agencies to conform and deliver the outcomes of the target-driven paradigm (Garrett 2004). Consequently, the onus has been placed on voluntary sports clubs and local authorities to raise participation rates, increase opportunities for voluntary action, and maintain spaces for these activities to occur. As Harris *et al.* (2009) report, the increase in bureaucracy and the battle for scarce resources to support sport provision has significantly hindered the recruitment of volunteers to community sports clubs, a particularly problematic situation given that the capacity to

contend with additional burdens in the sport sector is often dependent on the quality of the volunteers at an organisation's disposal (Hoye, Nicholson & Houlihan 2010).

Moreover, the pervading influence of neo-liberal ideologies may cast its shadow on other forces that are impinging on volunteer recruitment. For example, Harris *et al.* (2009), indicate that young people, in particular, are more motivated to undertake paid, part-time employment in service industries, than commit their time voluntarily for no financial gain in a sports club. Clearly, self-preservation and self-interest, rather than altruistic, community focussed action, appears prevalent in this case. Moreover, where voluntary action is undertaken, often it is short-term in nature with the express intention of benefitting immediate others (such as family) rather than wider sections of the community (Harvey *et al.* 2007). The neo-liberal message also manifests itself within the expectations of amateur sports club members, which Enjolras (2002) explicates as a relationship of consumption rather than participation, with members anticipating 'high quality service' and 'value for money', to further burden the voluntary sports club volunteer. Pressure exerted by private health clubs and gymnasiums in particular, has been the driver for this change in expectation (Nichols, Taylor, James, Holmes, King & Garrett 2005), a further indicator of neo-liberalism's invisible hand (Apple 2001).

For sporting organisations that rely on voluntary involvement for their governance and operation, the 'Big Society' ideology would appear to speak to their aims, intentions and purpose. As the largest provider of voluntary service in the UK, the sport sector would appear to be firmly in the sights of policy makers to implement the 'Big Society' vision. However, evidently, the landscape is not quite as uncomplicated as the rhetoric would have us believe, meaning that as the 'Big Society' notion becomes implemented through an assortment of government policies and initiatives, voluntary sports organisations will need to be explicitly aware of how they can contribute to the 'Big Society' ideals, yet ensure their own survival. While voluntary sports clubs are no strangers to burdening responsibility for the delivery and achievement of government policy objectives for sport (Garrett 2004; Harris *et al.* 2009), an analysis of the sport volunteering context will offer an insight into current constraints and pressures that may undermine the current Government's vision of the 'Big Society'.

### **Implementation issues in the current sport volunteering context**

The external pressures on the voluntary sport sector in the UK are varied, yet extensive, encompassing political, legal, technological, social and structural mediators (Nichols *et al.* 2005). From a political and structural slant, as highlighted above, the influence of government policy and the objectives of centralised sporting agencies (e.g. NDPBs and NGBs) is the most explicit form of pressure on the voluntary sector. Similarly, a combination of a more litigious society and recent increases in legislation imposing constraints on certain physical pursuits to avert risk, have impacted on volunteering uptake. Of less prominence, but nevertheless still influential, are technological advancements, such as facility provision and quality, and social mediators of time pressures and dwindling enthusiasm to volunteer (Nichols *et al.* 2005). The need for voluntary sports clubs to adjust to these external demands inevitably incurs financial outlay, adding a further layer of complexity and constraint on an already overburdened and laden sector (Nichols *et al.* 2005; Harris *et al.* 2009). Clearly, for voluntary and community sports clubs to survive and continue to provide services and activities, including increased voluntary opportunities, access to continued and adequate levels of funding becomes a major necessity. As noted, while the vision of the ‘Big Society’ emphasises volunteerism and community activism, “operationalising this cannot be fuelled by goodwill alone...[and] will require some real, hard [financial] capital” (Bell 2011, p.185).

Since 2008, Sport England has invested approximately 75 per cent of its government apportioned financial capital into programmes designed to sustain and grow participation in sport (Sport England 2008), much of which is provided to point of delivery organisations such as voluntary sports clubs. However, in the face of the most dramatic cuts to public expenditure seen for generations, the current funding model for voluntary sports clubs in the form of government grants via preferred NDPBs, will at best, become more competitive, and at worst redundant. The introduction of legislation which permits the government to claim, collect and distribute funds from dormant bank accounts to finance social enterprises, charities and other civil society organisations (Bell 2011) has been heralded as the solution to any funding shortfall that the increased reliance on the voluntary sector incurs. While this fund will offer a sustainable stream of financial support to organisations that engage in community based activity, funding from these



dormant accounts will be in the form of repayable loans or equity investments (Bell 2011), as opposed to the traditional form of grant funding. As Bell (2011) further highlights, for grant-dependent organisations, such as voluntary sports clubs, the future will be one of struggle for survival or the requirement for a drastic adaptation of their business models.

As Scott (2011) reminds us, where state intervention and resourcing is reduced, a hybrid of private sector investment and civic engagement is a necessary direction, which suggests that voluntary organisations may need to fashion alliances with commercial enterprises as one option to support and finance their activities. Voluntary sports organisations in the UK may need to heed the plight of their counterparts in the United States, where a dearth of federal government policy and funding for community sport has obliged them to rely on the free market for economic survival (Bowers, Chalip & Green 2011). Indeed, in many cases, professional sports leagues (such as the NBA, NFL and MLS) have developed charitable arms to their organisations to offer an avenue for local sport and recreation associations to access funding for their programmes (Bowers *et al.* 2011). While the limited number of commercially viable professional sports leagues in the UK may mean that a similar reliance is less feasible, government policy to enhance philanthropy and incentivise through tax relief for commercial organisations who engage in social enterprise and enhance societal well-being (Jones 2011) is redolent with similar sentiment.

Clearly, the voluntary sport sector faces several challenges from the prevailing neo-liberal paradigm that may further undermine the accumulation of social capital and the strengthening of communities using sport as the mechanism. However, as Hairston (1982) explains, the dominant paradigm needs to exhibit signs of instability and be unable to offer the solutions to the problems of the day in order for a shift, or scientific revolution (Kuhn 1977) to occur. Similarly, as Andersen, Barker and Chen (2006) observe, paradigms are only abandoned when anomalies accumulate and social events pose fundamental questions that cannot be addressed by the current form of thinking. According to Klein (2007 cited in Scott 2011) the conditions for paradigm shifts in society require “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, using collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering” (p.133). While relatively recent events in the UK, such as economic recession and the

riots in some of England's major cities, may serve as ingredients to challenge the dominant paradigm, as Kuhn (1977) concedes, such revolutionary shifts are relatively rare, and given the acceptance of neo-liberalism by many of the foremost political parties in 'western' nations, may suggest that an abandonment of the dominant political paradigm is unlikely.

That said, proponents of community focussed voluntary activities, such as sports club officials, cannot merely accept this position unconsciously and unconditionally. Instead, they need to appreciate how they can enhance their volunteer workforce and scheme within the highlighted pressures both from local sources and from those further afield, to secure the future prosperity of their organisations. As a starting point, an invocation of the work of Chen (1994) on internationalist localism—which identifies how community based projects could best operate within the paradigmatic confines of the neo-liberal movement—may be advocated. In short, internationalist localism refers to “a strategy that can address...how discourses from *nowhere* (global) are challenged, solidified, intensified, resisted, or reworked *somewhere* (the local)” (Falcous & Silk 2006, p.320, emphasis in original). Therefore, while the influence of the dominant 'western' discourse of neo-liberalism is difficult to resist, at a local, community level, the challenge is to identify solutions that appeal to the neo-liberal populous yet encourage them to engage in altruistic activities like volunteering in sport.

Chen's (1994) vision on the quandary of enhancing active citizenship within the shackles of neo-liberalism, involves the creation of *horizontal alliances*, in preference to vertical ones, whereby like-minded and similarly focussed groups conjoin to create cooperative coalitions that can tackle or rework the problems that face them. In semblance, and within the sporting context, this vision could be borne out through the activation of multi-sport (in contrast to single-sport) clubs (Harris *et al.* 2009), who can pool resources, including volunteers, and meet the neo-liberal challenge facing the voluntary sector as a whole. Moreover, the concept of multi-sport clubs also aligns cogently with many of the factors identified and espoused by the 'Big Society' ideology as optimal to citizen and community development. For example, first and most evidently, the physical presence of a multi-sport club, which encompasses a blend of highly visible sporting facilities, offers a focal point for community activity. In addition, the pooling of resources and facilities coinciding with shared administrative practices allow for efficiencies to be created in both

financial and human terms (Kirk 2005). Furthermore, as Kirk (2005) observes, multi-sport clubs have the potential to reduce the competition surrounding the acquisition and retention of volunteers (as well as other resources) to support the delivery of sport services.

Drawing on the intimations of other theoretical positions on how the 'Big Society' may be implemented progressively affords further stimulus for the establishment of multi-sport clubs to promote civic engagement through sport. For instance, as mentioned, Bourdieu (1986) outlines how social capital can be enhanced via engagement in multiple activities to broaden the relational network that is vital to social capital accumulation. Following this line of reasoning, the opportunity that multi-sport clubs offer to individuals to volunteer across a range of sports provides clear potential to extend social connections and enhance social capital, particularly in relation to the linking and bridging forms of social capital highlighted by Putnam (2000). Similarly Chanan and Miller's (2011) suggestion for community development workers, who act as champions for the acquisition of funding for community projects and mobilise voluntary operations, may be more achievable within the collective framework of human resources within a multi-sport club. These "paid workers with experience, special training and authority to take a co-ordinating role" (Chanan & Miller 2011, p.56) could facilitate club activity, leaving the traditional volunteer to contribute to the front-line delivery of services, such as coaching, rather than being the pursuer of funds.

Finally, and perhaps most pertinently, the notion of co-production, where public and voluntary organisations work together within a reciprocal partnership that shares decision-making and delivery of a particular service, like sport (Chanan & Miller 2011; Coote 2011), resonates strongly with the relationship that multi-sport clubs could forge with bodies and organisations who are publicly funded such as NDPBs, NGBs or local authorities. As Coote (2011) explains, "co-production taps into an abundance of human resources and encourages people to join forces and make common cause. It builds local networks and strengthens the capacity of local groups. It draws upon the direct wisdom and experience that people have about what they need and what they contribute" (p.90).

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the notion of the 'Big Society', like many policy ideas before it, is rich with good intent within its rhetoric. Indeed, within the global age, where the conceptualisation of citizenship has progressed from one of passive conformist to active agent (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough & Halsey 2006), the central tenets of the 'Big Society' that emphasise decentralising power from government to the individual and encouraging social responsibility (Stott 2011) appear to align rationally and positively with the focus of contemporary citizen development. Moreover, the strong emphasis on the voluntary sector, an often neglected area for social policy, suggests that the 'Big Society' has further coherence and pragmatism within a challenging economic environment. Furthermore, for volunteers in sport, the rhetoric of the 'Big Society' appears evidently encouraging. As the largest contributor to voluntary action in the UK, sport would seem to be in the vanguard of 'Big Society' thinking, with the heralding of the 'Games Makers' at the London 2012 Summer Olympics, further testament to the central role that volunteering in sport-related activity can have in making the 'Big Society' vision become a reality. Furthermore, the application of this logic would suggest that volunteering in sport has potential to provide distinct social and citizenship benefits, such as the accumulation of social capital, and attract a broader and superior skilled voluntary workforce.

However, despite this good intent, a deeper analysis of the policy implies that the 'Big Society' speaks more to the principles of the dominant neo-liberal paradigm than it does volunteerism. Most notably, the funding structure of repayable loans from dormant bank accounts, the increased competition for resources, and the increased bureaucracy attached to obtaining such resources (Coote 2011), all corroborate with the neo-liberal stance and heap more pressure on the voluntary sector to keep pace with their private sector counterparts. Moreover, any link to volunteering that the 'Big Society' does attest, appeals to the rational self-interest aspects of volunteering, where immediate others are the beneficiaries, as opposed to the more altruistic, longer-term voluntary work that, firstly, aids a broader section of society, and simultaneously enhances social capital and other key citizenship qualities for the volunteer (Putnam 2000; Harvey *et al.* 2007).

As noted, the concept of multi-sport clubs may provide the impetus for a radical rethink into the manner in which volunteering in sport is delivered to achieve both organisational

and policy objectives. While the notion of the multi-sport club is not novel, and indeed prevalent in many parts of Europe (Harris *et al.* 2009; Petry & Schulze 2011) and Australasia (Sam 2011), in the UK, there is reluctance for multi-sport clubs to be established, based largely on historical and cultural factors (Harris *et al.* 2009; Houlihan 2011). Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine further, it should be noted that voluntary sports clubs in this country may need to reappraise their operations and undertake their own paradigm shift (Kuhn 1977) and embrace the concept of multi-sport clubs as a strategy for their continued existence, as well as mobilise the social capital enhancement opportunities for their voluntary workforce. As both Kirk (2005) and Harris *et al.* (2009) intimate, multi-sport clubs can contribute to progressive ideas for community strengthening by retaining the core philosophy of voluntary sector organisations whilst positioning the delivery of sport and volunteering more favourably to combat, or at least compete with, the aspects of the 'Big Society' ideology that reinforce the neo-liberal creed and advantage private sector organisations. Indeed, multi-sport clubs provide a more efficient mechanism for the acquisition and allocation of resources (Nicholson *et al.* 2011), which may ensure that individuals who wish to contribute to their communities via sport and engage in civic good can do so, whilst heightening their propensity of accumulating social capital by means of volunteering in sport.

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