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## **Emerging school sport development policy, practice and governance in England: Big Society, autonomy and decentralisation.**

International interest in developing mass sports participation through systems of school and community sports development has become a growing field of public leisure policy interest. This research paper considers the policy change from School Sport Partnerships to the new 2012 School Games model of networked partnerships to establish characteristics of the changes in governance modes and implications from practice in England. The research project is based on a regional case study drawing upon in-depth, face-to-face interviews with key public policy stakeholders to inform an analysis of change. Initial findings indicate that the emergent networks are characterised by more networked-based modes of governance than previous hierarchical models present under UK New Labour. The study also shows the fragility of a reliance on partnership structures and the potential implications for incongruence in delivering policy outcomes and improving access to physical activity and school sport opportunities.

**Keywords:** Big Society      school sport      Sports development      governance

### **Introduction**

This research paper aims to examine the implications of policy change and decisions taken by the incumbent United Kingdom government on restructuring of the School Sport Partnership (SSP) programme in the current era of austerity amidst the policy mantras of Big Society and localism. This is a dynamic example of a case study in school sport and physical activity policy and programme analysis aimed at addressing youth sports participation levels in England. Nicolson et al (2011) suggest there has been a growing interest in sports development but that many studies have yet to examine in detail policies focused on sports participation. This ‘significant gap in the research literature’ (Nicolson et al, 2011; 1) sits alongside the more established interest in elite sport policy (Bloyce and Smith, 2010a; Green, 2007; Houlihan and Green, 2008). Internationally, this pressing concern with mass participation in sport is closely linked to the interest in its instrumental use as a vehicle for building social capital (Nicolson and Hoye, 2008; Devine, 2012; Karaktas, 2012) and also potentially addressing obesity (Nicolson et al, 2011). Van Bottenburg (2011) has discussed the turbulent evolution of Dutch sports policy as a complex interplay and governmental pull between elite and ‘sport for all’ resources in Holland. Likewise, Petry and Schulze (2011) map a detailed examination of sports

participation policies in Germany where there is a largely autonomous 90,000 strong sports clubs at the heart of the sport sector where they argue ‘the state interprets its role as that of sponsor who merely creates the framework that facilitates autonomous sport’ (p.52). Thus in a European setting individual countries have considerably different sports development systems between school, local government and community. Finally, it can also be seen that lessons can be learnt from this study for those that aim to build upon existing understanding of policy and programme design in sport policy in Australia (Hoye and Nicholson, 2011), New Zealand (Collins, 2008; Sam, 2011) and Canada (Thibault and Kikulis, 2011). This paper sets this analysis within this international context of school sport policy and existing understanding of programmes established to develop mass participation through school-community linkages, club development, after school club and coaching support linked to the school Physical Education (PE) curriculum. It will also consider the implications and areas for policy learning that arise from this case study of policy change in England for other international settings, policy makers and leisure providers in the current era of austerity for public policy.

The need to develop sporting activities and physical activity for young people is a key international public sector policy concern (Devine, 2012; Green, 2007; Green, 2011; Nicholson et al, 2011; Van Bottenburg, 2011). This is not to assume that PE, physical activity and sport are interchangeable terms and areas of related provision. Indeed, the language and conceptual clarity around these terms is increasingly complex (Green, 2011). Internationally, schools are increasingly being asked to work across the three areas with more regularity and the conceptual and philosophical distinction between them is beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear in relation to PE in the context of this study is that this refers to school-led curricular activity and much of the governmental focus on increasing mass participation at present is driven through youth participation in sport and sport-specific physical activity outside the curriculum (DCMS, 2012). Furthermore, there are parallel examples in Belgium, the region of Flanders, where ‘sports academies’ were developed as specific sites for multi-sports after-school clubs to address some of these concerns (De Martelaer and Theeboom, 2006). These ventures indicate the parallel international concern for schools to links into their wider civil society clubs and community organisations to gain incremental gains in the levels of sports participation. The processes involved in developing improvements in school sport delivery and community programmes that aim to achieve this are a significant international concern (Curtner-Smith et al., 2007; De Martelaer and Theeboom, 2006, Eime and Payne, 2009). Eime and Payne (2009) identified some of the collaborative issues that faced programmes in Australia, in particular the

importance of capacity of schools and clubs to accommodate such policies and programmes. Although, none of these past studies have given attention to patterns, systems and modes of governance in sport and physical activity field of public policy management. Nicholson et al (2011) have also called for a renewed, deeper understanding of international perspectives in sports development programmes aimed at increasing sports participation.

This paper will consider the emerging implications of some of these changes from transition between School Sport Partnership (SSP) network to the 2012 School Games within the policy domain of PE, school and community sport development. This policy domain is one that Houlihan (2000) refers to as a ‘crowded policy space’ defined as encompassing the intersection of curricular PE, after school clubs and wider school sport (intra-school and inter-school competitions and non-competitive sport) and ‘traditional’ community sports development practice. It will also suggest areas of policy learning for other international providers and fields of practice in leisure and sport development. Finally, the paper aims to contribute towards current understanding in exploring the potential vacuum left in the wake of policy actions, decisions and reorientations that form part of the wider context of public sector austerity measures (HM Treasury, 2010).

### **Big Society and public sector change in England**

Some authors have suggested that the recent recession is probably the worst recession in 100 years (Murray, Erridge and Rimmer, 2012). Furthermore, it has been established that governments across the globe are desperately seeking answers to public sector financial constraints, without significantly reducing the quality and quantity (Hood, 2010; Liddle, 2010). However, economic stringency does offer public agencies the opportunities to be more creative and innovative in service delivery, and to display how they uniquely understand and influence their citizens (Walker, 2009:6). The consequences of the international financial and banking crisis still dominates public discourse across Europe and North America (Diamond and Liddle, 2012 forthcoming), but the UK’s level of public debt is smaller than most of its European trading partners. The Age of Austerity became official as the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review in plans for government expenditure for the next four years (Coote, 2010), and responded to the global crisis by imposing 20, 25, 30 or even a 40% cuts on future public sector budgets.

With regard to sports budgets, the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) cut £88 million during 2010 (Hewison, 2012), but, in the previous 15 year period there had been a stronger sports lobby and growth in both community sport and elite sports (Bloyce and Smith, 2010; Devine, 2012; Houlihan, 2011). However, a changing policy environment led to an abandonment of social inclusion agendas and the Big Society heralded a decline in both sports development and closure of sporting facilities (Houlihan, 2011). Prime Minister's Cameron's 'Big Society' idea promised a move from Big Government a radical change in central-local relations; a Comprehensive Spending Review ushering in austerity and retrenchment; and, radical change in policy direction for some of the key local partners in delivering public services. Devine (2012) has suggested that this may translate into a 'big sporting society' that may encompass devolving sporting provision to primarily civil society and have considerable implications for school, community and local government sport and leisure. In particular Devine (2012) identifies the removal of England's £40m Free Swimming Initiative, cancellation of the £55m school building programme, suspension of the £235m plan to build 3500 playgrounds and the focus of this article the phased cancellation of the £162m PE and School Sport Strategy as features of a new public policy paradigm that reflected the move from Big Government to Big Society in England.

Clearly, the space for intervention is quite different in 2012 to what it was during earlier periods of expansion and growth. At its heart the outcome is to improve overall performance for citizens and other stakeholders. But, as some have argued in the context of sport 'the further deregulation of schools and the lottery are likely to impact significantly on the sporting infrastructure, and return sport to the realm of the exclusive, private and voluntary, rather than the public sectors' (Devine, 2012; 4). The Coalition Government extended UK New Labour ideas on communitarianism with the Localism Bill (2011) now enacted as the Localism Act (2012), and the 'Big Society', which includes the core elements of a long term reform programme to radically the nature of public services to give communities more local powers; encourage people to volunteer and take an active role in their communities; transfer power from central to local government; support the development of co-operatives, mutuals, charities and social enterprises; and publish government data to enable citizens to challenge decisions (Liddle, 2010). The Big Society key idea is a fundamental alteration to relationships between the state and citizens (Liddle, 2010), as the following quote illustrates:-

'You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society. The Big Society is about a huge

culture change... where people, don't always turn government for answers to the problems they face ... but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help their own communities' (David Cameron, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010).

Opinion is deeply divided on whether or not The Big Society is a meaningful policy for sports development policy and provision (Devine, 2012; Mackintosh, 2012). Few people believe that UK Prime Minister David Cameron has entirely clarified the concept to enable it to work in practice. Implementing The Big Society will present significant challenges for public managers who work alongside communities to engender sustainable communities. Many commentators and voters are still struggling to comprehend how The Big Society will work in practice, despite reassuring policy statements and Ministerial support. Nowhere is this more evident than in school sports policy, as the following section reveals.

### **PE and school sport development policy and governance**

Whether the London 2012 Olympics will deliver a genuine long term legacy through its school, PE and wider sport policy has become an increasingly contested notion, especially linked to grass roots 'delivery' programmes (Boardley, 2012; Charlton, 2010; Coalter, 2007; Devine, 2012). The historical shifting sports policy 'sands', policy narratives and intertwined strategy contexts of England have been well documented elsewhere (Devine, 2012; Philpotts, Grix and Quarmby, 2010). However, where there is still much more to learn is around the implications of the recent changes in England in terms of their effects on practitioners and ultimately on policy outcomes such as increasing sports participation for young people. The previous SSP system and its new format the 2012 School Games are examples of schemes aimed at delivering such outcomes (Mackintosh, 2012). The wider theoretical context for this paper is the growing academic and political interest in the movement from ruling through government to steering and enabling through governance (Goodwin and Grix, 2011; Green, 2007; Philpotts, Grix and Quarmby, 2010) and the mantra of 'Big Society' discussed above (Devine, 2012; Liddle, 2010). Governance relates to the way in which the policy process is organised, governed and discussed. Whilst as a term, concept and field of academic endeavour that had attracted increasing attention in recent years, in the area of sport policy analysis it has assumed less significance and remains under examined (Goodwin and Grix, 2011). It remains an elusive concept although some have argued that it is about governance modes and governance shifts (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998).

Partnerships have been identified as a crucial and increasingly important feature of governing and managing public management programmes (Goodwin and Grix, 2011; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Philpott, Grix and Quarmby, 2010). As has been argued by Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) within such analyses it is important to recognise the distinction between organisational form from the mode of governance (network, market and hierarchy). This study will use the archetype framework proposed by Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) to shape understanding of the changing modes of governance in PE and school sports development in England. This study will draw upon data from such evolving partnership structures to examine the case of PE, school and community sport as a case study. Whilst the examination of the management and organisation of partnerships in public sector sport has attracted increasing attention in recent times (Lindsey, 2006; McDonald, 2005; Mackintosh, 2008; Mackintosh, 2011) this article draws the distinction between partnership working and the relationships it involves and the delivery of policy goals and objectives in PE and sport through a networked mode of governance.

As Kooiman (1993) argues this places *governance* as the central emerging pattern as opposed to *governing*. With three core modes of governance classified as market, hierarchy and network. At this point it is important to recognise that recent research has recognised the specificity of the sport sector in England in relation to other areas of public management such as health, regeneration and social care (Goodwin and Grix, 2011). Here it has been argued that sport policy differs from other policy communities as a field characterised by reduced autonomy and increased reliance upon the centralised machinery of the state. So whilst Rhodes (2007) has argued that the hierarchical centralised executive narrative is less relevant Goodwin and Grix (2011) found to the contrary. This theme will be examined in more detail later, using the framework of Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) as a conceptual typology between market, hierarchy and network as the analytical reference point.

Date	Public policy	Key features
1992	National Curriculum for Physical Education launched	Standardised NCPE and stressed importance of competitive team games
1995	Sport: Raising the Game published	Continued focus on traditional team sport, competition and a narrative of nationalism
1997	UK New Labour elected	Refocus on sport for social good over 'sport for sports sake'
2002	UK New Labour publish Game Plan	Argues for a redevelopment of the infrastructure of English sport
2003	PE, School Sport and Club Links Strategy (PESSCL) launched	School Sport Partnership (SSP) and Specialist Sports College system put in place
2010	Michael Gove (education minister of New Coalition government) announces partial dismantling of SSP system	Initial removal of whole SSP system followed by partial u-turn to part fund 1 day of PE teacher release until 2013
2011	2012 School Games system established Localism Bill (2011)	Refocus on competitive opportunities in school setting to run 2011-2015 as a direct 2012 Olympic legacy.
2012	Localism Act (2012) launched  August 2012 David Cameron (prime minister) announces compulsory competitive sport in primary school	New Coalition Bill establishing Big Society public policy vision for the public sector and civil society

**TABLE 1: Outline of key public policy changes 1992-2012 in England**

The 1980's and early 1990's in England saw the school sport become a complex battleground for a core tension between PE and the need for competitive team sport (Houlihan, 2000; Houlihan and Green, 2006). Table 1 above illustrates the historical evolution of key policy announcements and strategy documents in England that relate to this area of public policy. The National Curriculum for Physical Education published in 1992 renewed interest in PE and school sport. The national strategy publication *Sport: Raising the Game* produced in 1995 further strengthened the policy narrative of increased importance for competitive team sport in school and PE (DNH, 1995). Here, future elite performance, medal success and success was made a stronger priority within PE and school sport. It also ignored the important contribution of local government sports provision in building a national sporting infrastructure (Devine, 2012). As the UK New Labour government came into power in 1997 this generated a significant policy departure from 'sport for sports sake' into 'sport for social good' (Bloyce



and Smith, 2010; Devine, 2012). The government established *Game Plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002). The SSP programme origins were established in *Learning through PE and Sport* (DfES/DCMS, 2003) as a summary of the Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy. The SSP initiative formed one strand of eight key programmes within this vision with the overall objective ‘to enhance the take up of sporting opportunities by 5-16 year olds’ (DfES/DCMS, 2003; 2). This programme included an investment of over £755m in the PESSCL strategy between 2008-2011 (DCMS, 2011) and a £686m in associated school sports facilities through the New Opportunities for PE and Sport (Mackintosh, 2012).

As explanatory background the system of governance of each SSP had a specialist sports college at its logistical heart closely overseen by a Partnership Development Manager (PDM) in overall control of the management of the SSP comprising between four and eight secondary schools and their associated cluster of feeder primary schools. Each secondary school had a School Sport Coordinator (SSCo) employed for up to a total of two and half days a week working in partnership with a Primary Link Tutor (PLT) in each primary school setting. From 2003 the central policy vision was to establish 400 Specialist Sports Colleges and SSPs, 18,000 PLTs and 2400 SSCo (Mackintosh, 2012). It is this system that has been partially dismantled post December 2010 and is now evolving into a new vehicle for delivery and set of more competition-led programmes under the new Coalition government branded as the 2012 School Games initiative.

The SSP programme as a network now looks increasingly disjointed (Pitt and Rockwood, 2011). It seems to represent, from the perspective of government an inherited and ineffective feature from the past New Labour administration as they propose a new refocusing on competitive sport (DfE, 2010a). Unfortunately, as has been suggested by Smith and Leech ‘robust evidence in support of the effectiveness of the SSP programme is scanty’ (2010; 343). This is not to say that a monitoring and evaluation system was not put in place around the PESSCL strategy. Numerous large scale surveys were undertaken (DCSF, 2007; IYS, 2006; Ofsted; 2006) to establish and track the phased impact of the developments on the range of targets in the PESSCL strategy. Evidence of the potential impact of the SSP programme includes the last of these surveys which was conducted in 2010 that identified 64% of pupils were participating in at least three hours of PE and out of hours school sport, an increase from 57% in the 2008/9 survey (DfE, 2010c). Intra-school competitive sport saw a continuous year on year increasing participation trend and goes to further illustrate the potential tension with the incumbent government arguing for the removal of the SSP programme to improve levels

of competitive sport (Devine, 2012). Thus the evidence presented by the government evaluation surveys shows positive trends in many key target areas of the SSP programme.

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) the charitable organisation behind the management and delivery of the previous SSP system has since 2010 announcement (DfE, 2010a) been working towards the implantation of a new collaborative system of school sports development governance. This governance model is based around the delivery of the School Games model. Table 2 below outlines the new model with the four tiers of competitive opportunities from level 1 (intra-school), to level 2 (inter-school) to level 3 (district) and level 4 (national) (YST, 2012).



**Table 2: School Games organisation model (source: Youth Sport Trust, 2012)**

The new model is based around a total of £138 million of investment between 2010-2015 the breakdown of this funding is outlined in Table 3 below:

Funding partner	Investment	delivery role
Sport England	£35.5million	Lottery investment in programme
Department of Health	£28.4million	SGO roles/C4Life clubs
Department for Education	£65million	secondary PE teacher release
Sainsbury's	£10million	Private supermarket (sponsor)
Adidas	unspecified	Official kit sponsor

**Table 3: Breakdown of partnership funding of national School Games model infrastructure 2010-2015 (Source: Youth Sport Trust, 2012).**

The principle of the new network model structure has a School Games Organiser (SGO) employed 3 days a week (on average) at the heart of a local network of secondary and primary schools, supported by a one day a week (optional) day release secondary PE teacher release post. This is further supported by voluntary collaborative organising committee comprising a range of local community sport and PE partners and young people. It is up to local head teachers to allow staff to take this role with the money devolved to them locally. It should be recognised that it is very early in the implementation of this new coalition government policy change but that recent funding announcement in the publication *Creating a Sporting Habit for Life* by DCMS has secured funding until 2015 (DCMS, 2012). Reactions to change and the policy and practice implications are very embryonic. However, early reactions gauged by a survey of practitioners in one region indicated very strong resistance to the policy shift (Mackintosh, 2012). This is not to suggest that the School Games has not had a significant impact with the year one data identifying '450 School Games Organisers and 46 Local Organising Committees are in place to run the School Games locally, with 64 county multi-sport festivals taking place in the summer of 2012, which will include 112,000 young athletes and 15,000 young volunteers' (Youth Sport Trust; 2012; 11). It is the transition towards the new model for collaborative governance of school and community sport that will be examined in the findings of this paper.

## Methodology

This research project is based on a detailed case study of one English county (Nottinghamshire) in England. Case study here is taken to represent “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009; 18). In this case the context and the policy changes that are being experienced by those in the region are difficult to separate and thus clearly justify the use of a case study approach. The case study focused on in-depth face-to-face interviews with seven key strategic stakeholders in the evolving new system of school sport governance. These interviews were undertaken in January and February 2012. Two were with officers at the County Sports Partnership (CSP) four were lead officers in the remaining dismantled school sport governance system that has remained post-2010 decision to remove the SSP system. All interviews were anonymous for ethical reasons and due to the sensitivity of the project. To build upon the strength of the case study the interviews were supplemented by background secondary sources, literature and policy documents from district partnership area officers and were also analysed and evaluated as part of the project design (Yin, 2009; Swanborn, 2012). This gave a greater depth and context to the interview questions and allowed further triangulation of emergent themes from the data. Findings from this initial stage one practitioner survey (Mackintosh, 2012) were also used to shape interviews conducted in phase two to triangulate findings, identify research themes and potential areas of policy implementation issues.

Qualitative analysis was undertaken using a thematic analysis methodology (Gomm, 2008). All responses to the qualitative open questions used in the survey were transcribed and then analysed using coding techniques to explore thematic issues within the data. Here, codes were defined as ‘tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are usually attached to “chunks” of varying sizes – words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994; 56). The initial phase of coding involved reading and re-reading the verbatim interview transcripts, with additional memos or notes made to signify significant observations or analytical developments. Upon returning to the raw data after the initial phase of coding and categorising searches were then made to consider similar, different or paradoxical statements. Finally, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Gomm (2008) initial codes were re-evaluated and potential causal relationships, analytical features and patterns explored to move beyond data description. As has been suggested elsewhere, this stage then also aimed to seek to build connections between categories, codes and concepts that emerged from the data (Gray, 2009).

It is recognised that the study has limitations in that it is based on one detailed regional case study and could have benefitted from analysis across different regions. Likewise, the early transitional nature of the policy changes at the time of the research also limit the study from a deep understanding of the more longer term shifts and implications of new governance networks. Finally, it is also recognised that the voices of young people are excluded from the study as the policy recipients and ultimate subjects of much of the policy rhetoric. Thus, this aspect of the implications on delivery changes is beyond the scope of this research. This weakness is driving planned future research projects aimed at building upon the exiting policy evidence and growing data emerging from this rapidly changing policy field (Kirk et al, 2011; Pitt and Rockwood, 2011; Mackintosh, 2012).

## **Discussion of findings**

Figure 1 below illustrates a model representing the transition from SSP to School Games network and the changing characteristic features of the new system of governance of PE and school sports development that is evolving. It is recognised that it is early days in the development of the new model. But this section of this paper highlights some of the emerging trends and features of the new model that are present within the embryonic system. As has been highlighted in relation to other partnership based governance structures in sports development fragility is a common theme (Lindsey, 2006; Mackintosh, 2011). Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) highlight three modes of governance from markets and hierarchy through to network based models. It seems that within this research there is a movement away from hierarchical modes of governing to a more loosely based self-governed set of structures in the field of PE and school sport development.

**Partnership system SSP network (2003 – 2010)**  
2012)

**Government** New Labour – ‘Third Way’ ideology

**Olympics School Games network (Dec 2010 -**

New Coalition (conservative and liberal) ‘Big Society’  
and Localism

Key national partners	Youth Sport Trust/DFES	Sainsbury’s (private sponsor), DoH, YST and DCMS.
National network	SSP x 450	School Games Officer (SGO) (3 day post in each district)
Partnership Development Managers (PDM)		
x450 full time officer	partial SG organising committee in some regions - voluntary	
Sport College hub for each SSP and national network network	Abolished Sports College Status/national network	
	Plus locally defined SG sub-committees and volunteers	
Local partnership		
one SSCo in all Secondary PE departments within each of the 450 to make F/T	SGO post (plus optional partnership funding to make F/T)	
SSP networks (£34,500 PDM post)	3 day coordinator (£23,500 per post ) and post local budget (average £1000)	
2 day full release secondary PE teacher post ‘buy out’	Head teacher has to opt into network and can determine local degree of ‘buy out’	
£200,000 budget for local network staff (some can do more)	1 day (optional) buy out of secondary PE	
12 days teaching compulsory release Primary School link Tutor (PLT) 0.3post per cluster of primary schools	Variation in local support from 2 days to	
Network characteristics		
Funding		
Centrally reliant, resource heavy and strong accountability	Central defined but with minimal local budget	
Accountability		
Hierarchical command and control	No requirement to sign up to network/ability to opt out of local delivery	
Strength of partnership		
Weekly/monthly meetings, strong operational ties, co-dependence	Fragile/loose network with areas of potential ‘non-coverage’ in structure	
Sport policy priorities		
school leadership, curricular (2hr PE) and E/C sport, school-club links	Competitive school sport fixtures with locally defined optional priorities	
Monitoring		
National annual survey and local monitoring system checks	No national system or requirement on monitoring - competitions as outcomes	
Model		
Fixed national operating model in every region (PDM-SSCo-PLT)	Basic national framework with considerably varied locally defined priorities	

## **FIGURE 1: Comparison of network characteristics and structures between SSP and SG systems**

This project also needs to be set within the wider public policy austerity setting of England, and other international settings. At a regional level one respondent summed this up,

‘Local authorities are struggling to maintain their infrastructure. The private (sports) sector is certainly not growing as rapidly as it has done in the past. I think that’s always been the government’s idea, and not just in sport and leisure, but they want to shrink the public sector and shrink their outgoings and hope that the private, commercial sector would pick up the pieces. There have been cuts, we have lost roles, the County Council, City Council, some of the Districts have lost bits and pieces’.

(Director, County Sport Partnership).

Such comments provide a useful context to consider the emerging model outlined in Figure 1. The forthcoming themes within this discussion provide further depth to the emerging environment of school sports development policy field.

### ***A new ‘mixed economy’ network model for PE and school sports development***

In the case of the transition from SSP to School Games network the loss of the national system, partnership model and uniform delivery system has created a number of challenges. For example, increased freedom and individual school flexibility has reduced the ability of partners to work collaboratively face-to-face. One current School Games organiser highlighted a recurrent issue across the new networks,

‘So in terms of coordination and management of a programme across a district it’s very difficult to get them in the same room at the same time. In the years before they met every other Thursday morning, so they’ve gone from meeting twice a month to meeting not at all’.

(School Games Organiser 4).

Here, the importance of communication and strong relationship building is identified as a core weakness in the new networks limited by the wide range of flexibility each individual partner has. This was contrasted with the previous SSP system where it was presented that,

‘I think the network approach was good, the principles of it were good, to have that infrastructure, you had that infrastructure of the PDM to the SS Co, an element of accountability back to the PDM. That’s the change now, radically. Even in the old system they were still employees of the school but they so they weren’t technically line managed by the PDM, they were called their functional managers. Now they are quite within their rights to go sorry we are going to do our own thing because of the way the way the funding and the structure is now’.

(PE and School Sport Manager).

Increased accountability, flexibility and independence for schools within the new networks appear to have generated some real challenges for those striving to work in partnership. However, it was this movement away from a national structure and locally defined networks that the government used as justification for closing the SSPs (DfE, 2010a). This core characteristic of the new networks as identified in figure 1 is further evidenced by the following statements,

‘In the old system you could almost force it onto them (laughs). Because of the way it was set up, because they were obliged to whereas now it is very much down to choice’.

(Youth Sport Manager, County Sports Partnership).

‘There isn’t any (*power*) it’s more of a group collective desire to make sure that you’ve got a good competition structure and a good school sport structure within your area’.

(School Games Organiser 3).

‘This is totally reliant on schools and teachers to in essence give up their own time after school to bring another group of kids to another competition to give them an opportunity which has implications on the school in terms of finance. So we are very lucky we get massive commitment, but, it is very much reliant on the goodwill of teachers and finance to make that happen’.

(School Games Organiser 1).

These statements begin to build a picture of the developing system that is filling the policy vacuum left behind the former SSP system. Its characteristic features whilst in the very early



stages of evolution are identified within wider context of the model presented in figure 1. They also have considerable implications for patterns of PE and school sport delivery and equity as experienced by both practitioners and young people. This will be explored in more detail later.

### ***More autonomous and divergent patterns of provision***

The embryonic mode of governance of PE and school sports development seems to have at its very core a reliance on partners that can opt in or out and shift commitment to delivery of shared policy outcomes. Increased partner autonomy as opposed to accountability to line managers and potential fragility of the network relationships seem to be an emerging characteristic of the new School Games network. This mirrors what the government argued for in their new approach to PE and school sport development where they embraced focusing on ‘decentralised power, incentivising competition and trusting teachers’ (DfE, 2010a; 1).

Alongside increasing autonomy there also appear to be widening gaps in delivery, provision and the diversity of support provided within the new networks. This is not to suggest that the previous SSP didn’t have varied impact. Evidence from past evaluation surveys would suggest the presence of regional disparities and hence variations in impact between different SSPs (Lindsay and Houlihan, 2008).

‘The way things have panned out is that we now have a real mixed economy, we’ve got three of the nine PDMs are still in roles, two of them are SGO’s with other bits and one of them is a strategic PE and School sport manager in the City. We’ve now got nine SGOs. So we have got county-wide coverage, but it is a mixture, some are working 5 days a week some are working, some of them are working 3 days a week some of them are term time only’.

(Director, County Sports Partnership).

This is amplified as a widening gap when considered in relation to other regions in England where there have been different approaches to maintaining or developing the old SSP system. In the case of a regional neighbour it was identified that,

‘In some counties the CSP were very proactive and brought in, on a county basis, brought in some extra resource, and in Derbyshire for example they were able to maintain the network’.

(School Games Organiser 2).

Thus, across the two regions there are considerable further degrees of variation in both what remains and what support is offered to users of the current network. This perhaps links to the earlier theme of increasing independence of schools within the network and a widening range in choice and delivery. One School Games organiser argued,

‘Schools can now access a broad range of activities across a broad range of areas including the PE curriculum, out of hours, leadership, inclusion, competition support...whereas in other parts of the County and the country they won’t have those broad opportunities. In some cases they’ll just be delivering the very narrow School Games. If they are saying all you can have is those 3 days then that’s all we’ll do, we’re not touching the rest of it because you are not giving us funding to do it’.

(School Games Organiser 4).

The PE and School Sport Manager that covers the work area of two School Games organisers reflected upon this loosening of membership requirement of the current network compared to the SSP system,

‘The theory of the government is that all the money is in the school’s budget now and we are not ring fencing stuff, you choose what you want...what you get is some schools that take everything they can because they want to add value then there are other schools that just do nothing, don’t take part in any competitions don’t take advantage of anything that is offered to them. What experience are those kids having in that school? I think there is a potential widening of the gap – the haves and have not’s’.

(PE and School Sport Manager).

This point was reiterated by two School Games organisers who identified the current dilemma they face in the sub-regional mix of levels of involvement, uptake and engagement that ultimately may impact on delivery and provision patterns. They stated,

‘So the money has gone into school for that but is not ring fenced, so six out of seven have chosen to do it. Yes so they could use the money for whatever they wanted. You’ve got no obligation to us, there’s no come back to say how have you spent that money. The money is there for your teacher release but you don’t have to spend it on that’.

(School Games Organiser 3).

‘I think everyone will be completely different, in terms of each individual school and what happens I don’t think there will be a template. I think it will be what suits our school and I think there is the flexibility to do that – it comes back to capacity’.

(School Games Organiser 1).

The shifts in increased diversity of levels of support and potential implications for practice in PE and school sport development are clearly points to be examined in more detail in any future studies of this policy field. As further regional and local models evolved the differentiated impact of such models needs to be explored.

### ***Transition from SSP to a ‘School Games Olympics legacy’: some initial concerns***

As one of the key vehicles for delivering an Olympics participation legacy it is too early to make comprehensive assessments on the impact of changes in the governance of PE and School sports development under the transition from New Labour to the new coalition government in England. Although other emerging studies have expressed concerns over the potential fragmentation and job losses caused by the changes (Kirk et al, 2011). Pitt and Rockwood (2011) recognise the potential for a narrowing of competitive focused curricular and extra-curricular opportunities is also a concern. One key issue identified as a core concern from interviews undertaken was the lost momentum and continuity due to the change in policy and loss of the SSP system relationships, partnerships and localised practice knowledge. This parallels other research conducted that identified very strong levels of resistance to the dismantling of the SSP networks and concerns over the transition arrangements (Mackintosh, 2012).

‘In Nottinghamshire we had nine SSPs, out of those there are now only three of us that are in the PDM role. In some cases that has meant a huge loss of continuity and you’ve lost all that momentum and you’ve got no resource to bring to it’.

(Director, County Sport Partnership).

‘In Nottinghamshire because there was nothing on the horizon and vastly reduced jobs ...there is a big void in between and people are trying to pick things up and lost

momentum and limited capacity people on three days a week rather than 5 days a week’.

(School Games Organiser 2).

There was still a resounding resistance to the removal of the SSP networks in 2010 that had been in place since 2003. As a more specific concern for those involved in the transitional arrangements was the lack of policy priority and funding resource given to support primary PE. This again mirrored earlier research by PE and school sport practitioners (Mackintosh, 2012). Concern was expressed as to the fundamental importance of such networks supporting primary PE and school sports development,

‘If there was no network at all, there was nobody in a PDM type role, no SS Co money and no PE coordinator. Bearing in mind schools are more and more independent, like Academies. I think we’d end up with a barren wasteland of kids getting no experience of PE and sport. Particularly with PE in primary schools getting lower and lower on the agenda, lower in terms of the time they are given and the quality they are given’.

(PE and School Sport Manager).

However, in contrast to this the Director of the CSP suggested that the impact may not be so significant, paradoxically and simultaneously highlighting the total lack of support they now receive,

‘The impression I get is it is 80-90% have still retained the SS Co role, what we will have lost is that PLT role in the primary schools, because we lost funding for that. That said I am sure primary schools will continue to defer or designate to that particular person that was previously there. So, they’ll still undertake PE coordination role within the school because that’s what they do, although there’s no funding to give day release or time to train or whatever’.

(County Sports Partnership Director).

It is this key capacity building role at primary school level that has been lost that is perhaps of most concern to some. Initial concerns over how the support systems in this new model evolve must be a priority for future research in this area.

## **Conclusions**

This study has clear relevance for sports development policies in other jurisdictions across the world. Internationally public sector leaders are facing difficult choices on staff deployment, redeployment or redundancies. Leaders are also radically rethinking the rationale for organisational existence, any potential re-configurations, and levels of sport and leisure service design and delivery. This project has illustrated some of the specific challenges resulting from the austerity measures associated with the UK Coalition government Big Society mantra in the case of school sport and transition from SSP to School Games systems. In particular this research has identified key themes including increased autonomy and diversity in provision, an emerging 'mixed economy' models of delivery and policy and practice impacts and implications resulting from the recent transition to School Games. Programmes designed to utilise partnership networks are fragile under current funding regimes (Mackintosh, 2011). Where governments reconfigure systems such as the English SSP framework to less heavily state funded systems there are clear knock on ramifications that may limit the coherence of delivering improved levels of sport and physical activity for young people.

Sports provision in England, as in other areas of the world is undergoing considerable change in parallel to other areas of public policy as part of the global downturn. Furthermore, the programmes and structures at the heart of this study are closely linked to the rhetoric of a mass participation legacy from the London 2012 Olympics event. This makes them important for potential policy learning for other nations and policy makers in international settings that may aim to use mass events as vehicles for sporting and physical activity behaviour change. It is not the purpose of this paper to open the already well documented debate around the conceptual and critical narratives around whether London 2012 will generate a legacy. Much has already been established that there is a highly contested foundation for such a youth sport 'legacy' (Boardley, 2012; Bullough, 2012; Griffiths and Armour, 2012; Silk, 2011). Indeed, recent research by the Sport and Recreation Alliance (SARA) has shown limited impact on voluntary sector sports clubs in terms of additional membership, volunteering or coaching in the first few months directly after London 2012 (SARA, 2013). From this research in October 2012 with around 400 sports clubs 66% of amateur clubs perceived that they have not benefited from the London 2012 Games. When asked what the Government could be doing around 50% referred to either school sport and/or facility issues as key issues limiting the potential legacy. This said, measures of medium to long term legacy and the interactions with school sports development evolving governance structures are only very embryonic at this stage.

Instead what is clear is that a system that had took seven years to embed itself and integrate into the wider sports infrastructure of local government and civil society has now been dismantled. More recent announcements to ‘Inspire a Generation’ through £150m ring fenced funding provided for primary schools provides the next challenge for researchers in this field to establish how this next layer of policy will impact on the existing divergence in levels of provision identified in this study (Inside Government, 2013). If this initial information provided is correct, then schools will have considerable flexibility in how such money is allocated. In addition, to the varying levels of dismantled school sport systems across different regions this may generate further tiers of inequality between those young people and practitioners accessing such support. Schools are under pressure to deliver a range of other educational targets and the extra resources and support allowed them to work towards the sport and physical activity aspirations of government. If governments are to address mass sport participation priorities identified internationally (Van Bottenburg, 2011; Green, 2011; Nicholson et al, 2011) then careful consideration has to be given to the design of programmes linking schools, civil society and local government. The challenging local government context in England is a good example in this case study of where restructuring, downsizing of provision and removal of support for sport in, and beyond schools may lead to limitations for School Games style initiatives effective implementation. It is too early to comment on the longer term impact of these changes in governance and support.

However, what this case study has highlighted are the recognition of changes in governance networks characteristics between the old SSP system and the new School Games model. The hierarchical, centralised and top down characteristics of sport policy under UK New Labour (Goodwin and Grix, 2011; Philpotts, Grix and Quarmby, 2010) appear from the data in this study to be shifting towards more autonomous, flexible and locally defined networks of looser connections under the new Coalition government. An emerging model of new governance centred upon self-regulating and self-organising local networks (within a broad national overview framework) as identified in Figure 1 is evolving. This model builds upon the work of Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) presented earlier to begin to map an emerging framework for understanding this more divergent and mixed economy model of school sports development in England. It also stands in contrast to the previous more centralised structures and national uniform model of the SSP under UK New Labour. Whether this parallels the situations and policy landscapes of other international settings remains a potential avenue for future research.

Other international sport policy makers need to be aware that where power relations are devolving to more local levels with associated increased choice in the level of collaboration, the nature of partnership relationships and degree of autonomy may leave the new models reflecting a more network-based model of governance than the previous hierarchical top-down management systems left as a legacy of UK New Labour. Decentralised power and regional autonomy in sports policy in this case related to school sport has led to emerging discrepancies and increased variations in models of delivery. Some primary schools in particular exist with more minimal support having arguably significant knock on effects on the provision of high quality sporting opportunities for young people. Practitioners also noted that a ‘mixed economy’ of school sport provision was developing. This parallels concerns expressed by Devine (2012) and Pitt and Rockwood (2011) in terms of the public policy impact of Big Society on sporting infrastructure in England. As argued by Goodwin and Grix (2010) sport remains an under examined policy field from a governance perspective. But, as has been illustrated by this regional case study in England, lessons can clearly be learnt both for understanding effects upon PE and school sports development policy outcomes and as a potentially fruitful, rich empirical field for addressing wider questions around public sector governance and shifts under the banner of Big Society.

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