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FOOTBALL IN THE COMMUNITY: STILL ‘THE GAME’S BEST KEPT SECRET’ ?

Football in the Community (FITC)¹ is a programme of community involvement sited at all professional football clubs in England and Wales. It is overseen, in general, by the Footballers’ Further Education and Vocational Training Society (FFE&VTS)². The research³ examined the current state of FITC, and was funded by the FFE&VTS. The study reveals that the rapid growth of FITC has already begun to outstrip the resources of the programme’s present infrastructure. A significant strengthening of this infrastructure is urgently required to help realise the great potential that exists for future community impact through football.

Keywords: *Football in the Community, national framework, modernisation, social inclusion.*

Introduction

Watson (2000) notes that FITC schemes have been ‘....a feature of the vast majority of football clubs since the early 1990’s’ and that:

Originally suggested as an interventionist measure in order to combat the effects of football hooliganism as far back as 1975, their recent growth has been extraordinary.

(Watson, 2000, p114)

At the time of the last major research into FITC (Williams and Taylor, 1994), professional football was undergoing significant changes that were leading it into a new, commercially buoyant era. Television viewing was increasing rapidly, sponsorship deals were being struck, the game had become more fashionable and club merchandising was developing strongly. We were experiencing what Williams (2006, p96) called the, ‘...economic and cultural ‘reinvention’ of professional football....a heavily marketized, television driven, version of the sport.’ Also, imaginative educational initiatives were beginning to flourish and there were recommendations

being made to extend this provision. Making an international comparison about the programme as a whole, Williams and Taylor felt then, that the FITC model was the envy of most of our European counterparts. So, what has happened during the intervening years?

Politically, we have of course had a change of government. The present government has, during both its first and second terms in office, clearly committed itself to a policy of social inclusion and a targeting of those groups who have, traditionally, been disadvantaged: ethnic minorities, women, the disabled, those suffering economic deprivation and more (see Caborn, 2001). There has been great emphasis placed upon the provision of systems of education, healthcare, and, indeed sport, where there is to be no exclusion on the grounds of race/ethnicity, gender, religion etc. For those who have ‘fallen through the net’ and not become active, responsible members of society, attempts have been made to re-integrate them into local communities, so that their contributions can be felt and recognised. FITC has too played its part in this regeneration. It is now being acknowledged, although still not widely enough perhaps, that within the field of social inclusion:

Football in the Community projects have played a key role in integrating sections of the community who might otherwise be excluded. Clubs are also becoming more involved in combating anti-social behaviour, such as smoking, alcohol / drug misuse; glue sniffing and making “hoax” (unnecessary) emergency calls.

(Mellor, 2002, p1)

The main conclusions of the 1994 research highlighted primary issues in six main areas: initiatives in education, the national profile of FITC, the role of schemes within clubs, the resourcing of schemes, work with minority ethnic groups and the possible need for an annual conference. We make mention of each of these areas in our current study.

We also acknowledge that one other major report into football and its communities has occurred since our own research, and that this study provides important new information on the community impact of FITC.⁴

Significantly, Watson (2000) makes reference to a common belief among the FITC workforce and one held for many years, that the national Programme is, 'Football's best kept secret.'⁵ While answering this question was not a central part of the research brief, we would hope that, indirectly, the study might go some way to establishing whether such a view still exists.

Method

A multi-method research approach was employed involving both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Detailed questionnaire information was obtained from eighty-five Senior Officers⁶ at Football in the Community schemes. Additionally, semi-structured, individual and focus group interviews were conducted at a representative sample of sixteen schemes. A range of individuals were interviewed including Senior Officers, other Football in the Community scheme staff, club personnel at all relevant levels and a large number of end-users. After gathering information at club and scheme levels, data was then collected from Football in the Community Regional Directors⁷, personnel at the FITC Support Office (Manchester), representatives from The Football Association, The Football Association Premier League, The Football League, The Football Foundation, and The Professional Footballers' Association. Validity was enhanced through data, investigator and analysis triangulation and member checking. Other information was gathered from national sponsors, club scheme websites and, to gain an international perspective, from professional sports teams' community programmes in America. The latter involved analysis of the Sport Philanthropy Project (SPP)⁸.

We used a variety of data-collection methods during this research: face-to-face and telephone interviews, surveys and questionnaires, personal observation, analysis of archival material from previous research and website analysis. All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. Our discussions about our observations and insights into FITC work formed highly important parts of the research. These enabled the research team to focus on the lessons and information gained from each set of interviews or observations, to build an accurate picture of the national programme. As much as possible, we moved systematically and vertically from the level of the club schemes to the Regional Directors. From there we interviewed

personnel at Support Office, national sponsors, and, finally, representatives of the key football bodies (the Key Agencies) with whom FITC must work and liaise on a regular basis: The Football Association, The Football Association Premier League, The Football Foundation, The Football League and The Professional Footballers' Association.

At first our work centred on the individual FITC schemes, as we contacted the various people who could give us the best insight into the day-to-day world of FITC, beginning with the Senior Officers. After completing pilot work at three schemes, we devised and distributed a questionnaire to each club scheme in the national programme. This survey posed questions about a range of issues including work complexity, staffing, core business, training, impact upon end-users and bid making. By the end of the project we had received 85 anonymously completed questionnaires: a 92% return rate.

Based upon this work, sixteen club schemes were selected for a site visit and in-depth interviews with key staff members. The goal here was to build a national picture of scheme activities based upon an indicative and representative sample (i.e. size of scheme, geographic location, annual turnover, etc).

Next, following a format similar to initial FITC research nine years ago (Williams and Taylor, 1994) three schemes were selected for even further in-depth study. The discussions, however, did offer us very useful insights into some of the major issues confronting FITC. At these schemes, we then moved 'across' into the clubs themselves and gained the perceptions of club chairmen, managers, coaches, players and other backroom staff. Next, we moved 'out' into the local communities and asked a number of key professionals and end-users their perception of the impact that the scheme had made upon them or the people they worked with. We stayed in the field at club level until 'theoretical saturation' occurred. That is, we continued asking questions and collecting data until subsequent questioning revealed no further new information (see May, 1997).

Immediately after each round of interviews, our research team met and considered what had been said. As a result of our discussions, relevant issues emerged. If there

were any differences of opinion, these were pursued by re-checking the interview transcripts or questionnaire data and further discussed until consensus was reached. It was important that we clearly identified the major issues or themes that had emerged from the information we had obtained in the field. We have tried, as much as possible, to let the words of the people who spoke tell the current story of Football in the Community.

It is important to note also, that during the research period, the Footballers' Further Education and Vocational Training Society was itself the subject of an extensive review by the management group KPMG. In undertaking this research, we had full access to the KPMG report and its findings (The FFE&VTS, 2003).

Examples of Work in Two Schemes

To provide examples of what work is taking place around the country we begin by examining the day to day existence of two of the larger schemes.

Scheme 1 – Division One Club Scheme, Midlands Region

The first club in question is situated alongside a better-supported, higher division club. The Senior Officer has a background in semi professional football and has lived in the region all his life. He has amassed a range of qualifications, most taken since becoming a Senior Officer. These include coaching, business, First Aid/Health, IT and sport disability awards. He spends approximately 80% of his time engaged in the administrative work that underpins this busy scheme. The scheme has 15 full-time staff. The Senior Officer also employs a scheme manager who looks after the finances and the budget: 'because our budget has gone through the roof over the last 3-4 years.' There are also 2 Senior Officers, 4 Community Coaches, several Youth Trainees and a part-time scheme administrator.

The scheme impacts over 20,000 children each year in terms of coaching. Additionally, over 1000 pupils are involved in disability coaching. Holiday courses account for around 1000 children, with around 2,500 children attending 'after school' coaching and 2,500 attending 'girls only' sessions. Match day visits account for around 12000 children.

The Senior Officer described the Core Business for his scheme as:

- Primary Schools coaching
- Holiday coaching events
- Social inclusion programmes/projects
- Disability coaching plan
- Match day visits
- National competitions
- Girls only coaching sessions
- Stadium tours
- Youth training scheme

Interestingly, the Senior Officer felt that the need to raise income sometimes draws him into areas of activity that lie outside the scheme's Core Business activities. He felt that his work has become 'more complex' since becoming a Senior Officer but was able to cope with this increased complexity 'most of the time'. In particular, since his staffing levels have increased from 4 to 15 he has been involved with more 'managing issues', having to be more 'proactive in generating money/funding to continue operating'. He felt that his management skills have been developed 'in-house', learning 'as he goes', rather than through any systematic training. His scheme now turns over around £400,000 a year and thus the complexity of the financial issues has grown dramatically in recent years.

The scheme also houses an education inclusion project, jointly funded by the Football Foundation and the local Education Service, aimed at educating boys who are permanently excluded from secondary school. There is a well-equipped classroom and two full time teachers who work to improve the pupils' literacy, IT and numeracy skills. The Senior Officer feels that his scheme has a particular talent for working with children with challenging behaviour and that there are good links between the Local Authority (LA), the education inclusion project and the scheme.

Questionnaire data reveals that support from the club is generally thought to be 'Good'. Both the First Team Manager and the Chairman are very supportive of the scheme. First team players get involved with events and, perhaps apart from

directors, there is helpful support in general from all levels. The Senior Officer says that the scheme ‘is treated as one of the most important things within the club...it is a highly valued and fully integrated part of the club’. Also, the support received from the Management Forum⁹ is excellent and considered ‘very effective’ in terms of getting the club to act on behalf of the scheme. The scheme has both private sponsorship and is registered as a charity. Both bodies provide excellent support for the scheme.

Facilities are a major issue for this scheme. The office is well equipped, but ‘for an activity programme we really need something that is multi-use as well.’ The scheme is looking at how it might link in with other sports across the city, particularly cricket. The Senior Officer says that politics often get in the way of such creative thinking but he is striving to ‘make it happen’.

Another essential part of this scheme is its work with the disabled. The Football Foundation have been involved in providing funding for a fully inclusive programme for all ages and categories of disability throughout the county. As partners, the project also engages the LA, the local Further Education college, the YMCA, special schools, and the local Sport Disability Unit.

Politics that Affect the Scheme

It was clear that the scheme had worked hard to now occupy a position within the club where it was highly regarded and able to operate successfully as an independent body. The Senior Officer said that:

Political things at the football club are not a major problem. The fact that finances are separate from the football club is a major bonus for Football in the Community and the fact that we have charitable status now. I think that if the football club blew up tomorrow we could still continue as a community scheme in some way.

The positioning of the scheme within both the club and LA frameworks was still evolving but already quite clearly defined. The Senior Officer stated:

The city council see the football club as being the football club in the city that delivers loads of social inclusion projects, loads of good work and the football club get the benefits from that.

In terms of where the scheme sits in relation to wider politics, the Senior Officer was very aware of where he sees the scheme as being positioned:

From FFE&VTS' point of view, yes we are administered by them, but we have been allowed to drive it in our own direction and that's what created the growth really. I am not going to sit here and say that it's down to whoever is in charge, it's not as easy as that, but I think that what it has become is because it's an individual set-up, that every scheme runs itself, organises itself how they want to do it. Whilst we're heavily involved with social inclusion, someone up the road might have nothing to do with it at all but do lots of holiday courses.

Scheme 2 – Division One Club Scheme, Southern Region

The most obvious and immediate factor affecting the development of this ambitious scheme, is the large, inner-city location in which it resides. One of the oldest schemes in this region, the staff at this club currently deliver programmes exclusively in two, defined inner-city areas. This will increase to three defined areas in the near future. There are large numbers of ethnic minorities residing and working in the community in which the scheme operates, and a growing refugee and 'transient' population. The Senior Officer described the area in which the scheme operated, as being one of 'quite extreme social deprivation,' and the area is a designated Sport England Sport Action Zone.¹⁰ Despite these challenges, growth of the scheme has been 'fairly explosive in the last three or four years' and the annual turnover of the scheme is now around £300,000.

The club to which the scheme is associated has a history of racial tension among its fans and has in the past been tarnished by several well-publicised acts of crowd violence and hooliganism. The scheme is now a limited company and registered

charity, with seven full-time staff and an additional part-time classroom worker who is paid by the Local Council. The scheme has a mission statement and a listed set of objectives and has, over the years, been successful at building a number of public and private partnerships.

The Senior Officer described the core business activities in terms of four major programme strands:

- Social Inclusion programme (Housing Estate Coaching, Women's Football, Over 50s, Work with Refugees and Truants, etc)
- Education programme (Coach Education, Playing for Success, Reading is Fundamental, etc)
- Sport Development / Schools programme (Football and other sports in schools and during holiday periods, etc)
- Facilities / Classroom programme (Facilities Management, etc)

The Senior Officer summarised the scheme's approach as, 'football second, community first.' Without doubt, social inclusion work provides the primary focal point for the activities of this scheme and its staff. Over 80 schools per year take part in coaching sessions. These are predominantly, but not exclusively, in football. While these essential coaching sessions provide a consistent funding stream, these activities are primarily viewed as vehicles to, 'get into schools to pass on other messages, like camaraderie, like citizenship, like how to solve a problem you may have with a team-mate, things like that.' The staff is a close-knit and committed team who are extremely proud of the accomplishments they have achieved, in the areas of urban deprivation in which they work on a day-to-day basis. The staff perceive themselves as 'listeners' who are sensitive to the unique social needs of the area.

With regards to funding and access to new funding streams, the Senior Officer felt that the scheme was 'probably guilty of following pots of money' but that this had been based upon sound financial forecasting. The Senior Officer felt that:

Because of where we are and the deprivation found here, the Government is always going to throw money at it [the area] – it'll just have a different title, a different time-span or whatever. So we do employ staff on social inclusion money; and long term I guess there is a worry that the area might become more upmarket and we haven't got any jobs to do but that's not realistic, not really. We've tended to chase things we know about, like housing estate projects, youth training and urban social development stuff. Families here simply can't afford to pay for coaching sessions and activities that they can elsewhere in the country, so they don't.

When asked if the need to raise income sometimes draws the scheme into areas which lie outside core business activities, the Senior Officer responded with a firm, 'No.'

Politics That Affect the Scheme

Historically, relations between the scheme and its club were described as being very good with the relationship being one of 'highly valued co-operation without integration.' There was, at the time of interview, however, a palpable air of uncertainty surrounding the current relationships between the scheme, the scheme's Board of Trustees and Management Forum and the club. There were concerns that the relationship between the scheme and club was 'about to change – possibly for the worse.' Recently, a new Chief Executive of the scheme had been appointed whose wages were paid, for the first time, exclusively by the club. This development was described by the Senior Officer as 'critical' to the future direction and future success of the scheme. He stated:

I've got to say that all the time that I've been here, we've had a very good relationship with the football club. Historically, the relationship has been very close and very good and the players were heavily involved. The club have understood what we're trying to do – not specifically, but generally they knew that we did good things locally. But we've kept the club at arm's distance. There's been a sort of gentlemen's agreement but there's been a bit of distance too. Financially, the club give us a core grant and they've picked up the tab on this new building for two years, but now that bill is coming back to us and it

will be the responsibility of the Trustees to decide how the scheme meets these bills. You know, our club went into administration in 1995/96 and three-quarters of the club staff lost their jobs. It was only because the scheme was independent that we retained our jobs. Technically, we were sacked, but were then immediately reinstated when they realised we were a separate limited company.

Other Main Findings From the Research

Compared to the time of the previous research in 1994, many schemes are now operating at a greatly enhanced level of provision and are making very substantial contributions to community life in England and Wales. At such schemes, the breadth and quality of provision is unrecognisable from that earlier research period. The range of activities across the schemes is extremely diverse. Many schemes, because of their highly adaptable working practices and ambition, have been able to respond quickly to emerging funding opportunities and have experienced rapid growth.

Staffing

While there has been this expansion, problems have emerged as a result. To state that the Football in the Community Support Office and the national framework are significantly under-resourced at this moment in time appears, on the basis of this research, to be a valid and accurate conclusion.

We strongly feel that the Regional Directors are also clearly overstretched given the genuine needs of the schemes they assist. The ‘personal touch’ that some of the more experienced Regional Directors recall, is disappearing as they too attempt to cope with the changing environment at local level. Just as clearly as the Support Office is under-resourced, the Football in the Community infrastructure at regional level also needs to be strengthened. The return-on-investment of monies provided at these levels of the programme would, we feel, be very healthy, as the effects would be greatly magnified across the schemes.

There is an admirably strong degree of loyalty to the national programme among Senior Officers with the vast majority of officers greatly valuing the role played by the Support Office. We feel this says something about the esteem in which Senior

Officers hold the programme. It also demonstrates that staff at the schemes want to make an input and have ‘things to say’. Senior officers feel that staff from the Support Office recognise the uniqueness of each scheme and value their individual contributions.

However, there is too a perception among some Senior Officers that the Support Office has been unable to keep pace with the rapid growth that has occurred in some schemes. Staff at the Support Office acknowledge that this is sometimes the case, with recognition that resources are fully stretched at most times. There is also a perception from both the Support Office staff and from many Senior Officers, that decision-making at the highest levels has been slow to respond to the dramatic changes that have occurred within the national programme over the last decade.

The Support Office feels that many schemes are now almost fully ‘grown up’ and are close to being totally self-sufficient, without any sense of reliance on the FFE&VTS. Indeed, one or two schemes are almost at the stage of their existence where they wish to ‘challenge’ views, ideas and opinions expressed by outside parties about what they should or could be doing. As more and more schemes develop, it is obvious that the role of the FFE&VTS needs to be re-evaluated and re-considered by asking searching questions. One such question might be whether there should be less direct support or, when necessary, more encouragement/support to access the specialist areas into which the schemes are increasingly likely to move, based on local culture, needs and the drive, energy and skills of the local Senior Officers

Growth Within the Schemes

In terms of the work of the schemes, while there have been some startling examples of schemes that have grown dramatically, some Senior Officers are less confident and less capable than others in accessing new funding streams. This lack of expertise has no doubt limited the growth and provision of some schemes around the country.

Some clubs had very clearly defined mission statements and worked towards delivering them in systematic ways. The majority of clubs knew precisely ‘who they were’, what they offered and defined their core business easily. A smaller number of

clubs either hadn't really considered what their core business was, or felt that it was rather ill-defined at present, given the recent changes in funding, increased focus on social inclusion projects. Marketing at individual scheme level generally, might be best summed up as Senior Officers doing 'what they can' to promote their work locally. Senior Officers perceived a lack of sophistication in this work and would appreciate more specific training.

The definition of 'Core Business' continues to evolve. The top four activities that Senior Officers identified as Core Business, were:

- in-school programmes
- after-school coaching
- soccer schools (including holiday courses)
- Saturday clubs

Football is also being extensively used as a vehicle to meet a variety of important social needs. For instance, work with girls and women, the disabled, minority ethnic groups and other special populations are now central features of many schemes' provision. During the course of our research we heard of many extremely positive examples of work going on with these special populations from a range of end-users. Many Senior Officers now view their scheme's work as inextricably linked with the delivery of services that might be said to be addressing the 'social inclusion agenda'. However, it must also be said that some Senior Officers are still unsure about the sustainability of activities initiated by this type of funding.

In the 1994 research (Williams and Taylor, 1994), comment was made on the 'general welfarist philosophies' of the schemes during the early years 1986 to 1990, and there was recognition that the revision of the schemes' aims and objectives in 1991 meant, at that time, that football was clearly the central focus. It could be argued that there has been something of a return to the general welfare ideas following the addition of social and educational programmes (including addressing the issue of social exclusion) in recent years. Activities appear to be divided into three main areas:

- Mainstream activities (after school sessions, holiday courses, etc);
- Football club centred activities (including tours of the ground, match day visits and Saturday clubs) and,
- Thriving education projects

All of these are now being broadened to include initiatives tackling such issues as crime and disorder, and health and inclusion.

There has been a significant use of Sports Match funding since it first began in 1992; this is now in excess of £3.5m and only a matching figure, for amounts of money in excess of that total have been generated through local sponsorship. Interestingly, the 1994 research mentioned the possibility of employing a ‘Sponsorship Specialist’. The subsequent appointment of the Marketing Director was in response to this report’s findings and has led to significant access to new streams of sponsorship income. This has occurred at both local level, including Sports Match funding, and at national level, via title sponsorship deals.

Communication

However, there are still challenges to be confronted. Communication at scheme level sometimes lacks cohesion and opportunities are routinely lost to disseminate best practice among Senior Officers. There is evidence that highly progressive schemes attempt to do this but the practice is not widespread. Communication seemed to flow ‘up’ to the Regional Director then ‘over’ to another Regional Director and then back ‘down’ to a scheme in another region. There did not seem to be any structural mechanism to enhance scheme-to-scheme communication. We do however recognise, that the recent upgrading of the official Football in the Community magazine is a very positive step in addressing this imbalance.

The general trend seems to be one of improved relationships between the clubs and the schemes, compared to the time of the previous research. Many Senior Officers felt that club officials were now more aware of community relations generally, and knew the positive effects that a good, vibrant scheme can have on the club’s image. Many of the Chief Executives and club Secretaries we interviewed confirmed this

more central positioning of schemes within their clubs' overall operations. There were exceptions, where schemes still felt rather undervalued within the club but equally there were situations where some schemes were so strong that little support was needed from the club, and even fairly negative relations did not affect stability.

Generally, there were perceptions of rising standards of provision in all schemes that we examined. These improvements were found in areas such as increased staff expertise, particularly in work with children, a growth in the overall number of participants and various other examples of enhanced professionalism.

Most of the evidence of the impact that schemes are having on communities is occurring through 'word of mouth'. Often this feedback comes from parents who are delighted with the enjoyment and progress their children have made in coaching sessions. Some clubs are becoming more aware of the need to keep written accounts of achievements, record statistics and think about how the evidence of impact can be quantified and used in local marketing. Some Senior Officers felt that this type of information would also be useful when applications are made to funding bodies. The majority of Senior Officers though, still felt immense satisfaction from some of the compliments paid by end-users and stressed that such performance indicators are notoriously difficult to reduce to statistical terms (questioning whether they ever should be).

The prominence, quality and ease of access of community web pages on the websites of professional football clubs are characterised by a high degree of diversity. Club or scheme success does not correlate well with the quality of website. Most Senior Officers recognise the importance of a high-quality website but do not have the skills or time to improve this provision. Nevertheless, they understood that an informative and attractive website can be a powerful tool for the dissemination of a scheme's practice and the marketing of activities.

Perceptions Across the National Programme

According to the Support Office, the key staff running and working at the schemes have been and still are the most important requirement for scheme development, impact and success. Given the large number of significant challenges that successful schemes have confronted and overcome in their development (e.g. club / scheme relationships, finding community partners, local marketing) it might be concluded that success was only possible with dynamic, well-organised, inspirational and hard-working staff. The importance of this point was stressed strongly by the Support Office and the continuation of trust between the Support Office and Senior Officers was seen as a central feature of future FITC developments. Also, compared to nine years ago, the practice of hiring ex-professional players to FITC positions is becoming less of an issue. Questionnaire data reveals that the Senior Officers describe their three main areas of major concern as being: 'financial pressures,' 'mounting paperwork' and 'staffing/employment related difficulties.' Such concerns perhaps give an insight into the day-to-day issues that are dealt with in this relationship and highlight future areas of priority.

There was also a perception among some southern clubs of a north/south divide in terms of the overall development picture. Upon closer scrutiny and questioning about this issue, geographic location per se was not considered to be the significant factor affecting issues; rather, it was the differences in needs between more complex, larger schemes and smaller, more traditional ones which were found to be the determining factor.

The management forums, in the main, work very well and are seen by most as a vital feature of the Programme. Similarly, the support of Senior Officers for their Regional Directors is very strong. Less consistent though is the relationship that Senior Officers have with their LAs. We were again somewhat surprised that many reported fairly mixed feelings about how helpful their LAs were. Given the strategic importance of the role of the LA to the potential work of the schemes, we would have been interested, had time permitted, to determine why some enjoyed outstanding relationships with staff at their LAs while others seemed to experience only frustration.

We point out too that duplication of service by LAs and private providers is occurring more frequently these days it seems.¹¹ We were also disappointed to hear that sometimes it is the schemes themselves that encroach into others' territory. Knowing the anger and dismay this causes, having spoken to affected Senior Officers, we feel that the Support Office and the Regional Directors perhaps need to give clearer guidelines on this issue. A greater number of regional meetings would also most likely assist this end.

At regional level, the Regional Directors increasingly see their role as support and guidance rather than leading their schemes. This change of focus has been due to the increased knowledge, experience and professionalism of scheme Managers, and the ever-increasing sophistication and independence of FITC schemes. Also, the Regional Directors have their own unique training needs that they require, to successfully meet the increasing complexities of their role. The perceived needs were in the areas of negotiation skills, legal issues, personnel management, strategic planning, financial management and other high level areas. However, equally important is the basic need to reduce significantly the number of club schemes that they oversee in their areas. According to the Regional Directors themselves, the workload associated with their role is normally 'very high' and sometimes 'too much', coupled with travelling needs that are often excessive.

An International Comparison

In terms of an international comparison, the community programmes of professional sports teams in America mirror the diversity of activities, emphasis, relationship with club and impact of Football in the Community club schemes in England and Wales. Although there is no similar national framework in America, many of the club schemes are linked together through the work of The Sport Philanthropy Project. Membership has grown steadily in the five years since its inception, which indicates that members find consistent value in its services. Although still an outstanding example in Europe, Football in the Community is no longer alone in this fast-developing field. New ideas, emerging trends and different models of best practice may be gained by fostering links with the community programmes of professional sports teams in America.

Described as ‘a training ground for community programmes and foundations’, The Sports Philanthropy Project was launched in 1998 by the Robert Wood Foundation – the largest US foundation in the field of public health. The aim of The SPP is to enhance the impact of sports team community programmes by providing strategic assistance and by facilitating ongoing forums, which advance best practice in sports philanthropy. The SPP also works to develop capacity in sports philanthropy by sharing best practices in sports, corporate, public and private philanthropy. This is achieved via the three major services that the SPP offers: 1) an annual conference uniquely designed for the sports philanthropy industry, 2) a secure, members-only website and 3) Community Enhancement Plans (CEPs). Greg Johnson, Chief Executive of The SPP, explains:

The SPP shares best practice in three ways. First through our website which is put together for us by Kintera.com at little cost. We have an annual conference to which all the different community programs from the different sports leagues are invited to participate in along with mainline philanthropies. We offer them expertise. They network at the meetings and finally we offer onsite technical assistance where we’ll send a consultant to sort out the organizational structure and give them an analysis of how they can work more strategically. We’ll partner them as much and as best we can with local agencies, local resources and national philanthropic and commercial resources as well. All these pieces feed and strengthen the other pieces. At an annual conference you can present things in a much more dynamic fashion and you can forge relationships that are personal with folks outside of their immediate field. Participants can come to know their peers and the networking possibilities are immense. It’s also its own communications vehicle so you can feature some of the best practices and some of the examples of the leading programs and pump prime the others to follow suit because you have everyone in the same place at the same time. And finally, you can advertise the other things that you do at these conferences as well. So, it all fits together.

Relationship With The Key Agencies

In terms of our discussions with representatives from the Key Agencies, one interesting observation was that all had strong, clear perceptions about Football in the Community. Each representative acknowledged that there had been areas of past conflict and felt that there were still ‘vested interests’. However, all had a genuine and sincere desire for improved communication and co-operation with the programme. There is though, still the fundamental need to translate all these differing perceptions into practical, constructive working practices that will benefit the national programme and the communities they serve.

It is hoped that Football in the Community at senior level will take the lead in developing even stronger relationships with all of its main football partners: The Football Association, The Football Association Premier League, The Football League, The Professional Footballers’ Association and The Football Foundation. The possible benefits to Football in the Community of these stronger working relationships include:

- improved club / scheme relationships
- better co-ordination of services at local level
- improved marketing of club schemes at local level
- avoidance of service duplication and wastage
- improved access to funding by Football in the Community schemes
- increased opportunities to partner other agencies in bids
- improved flow and dissemination of relevant information
- improved access to a larger pool of experts in specialist fields

The General Needs of Schemes

One of the main areas of weakness that the Senior Officers attributed to their schemes was in the area of training needs, now that the complexity of their work has grown dramatically. In particular, this related to managing staff, coping with administration and the preparation of financial bids. Also, whilst provision is, as previously mentioned, very diverse, some Senior Officers were still aware of target populations that their schemes were not fully reaching. This was particularly the case for girls’

football, the disabled and Asian heritage young people. We heard of plans being put in place at many schemes to meet the needs of these specific groups. Several Senior Officers commented that they were aware of their own failure to find the time to market their schemes. They wanted to do this but felt that they lacked the skills and time to do it well.

There were several issues that re-occurred in our interviews with Senior Officers in respect to training needs. While Child Protection training was now being accessed successfully, Senior Officers generally felt that these improvements were only a beginning. Issues such as employment legislation and discrimination were other identified concerns. Also, the very nature of working with children in the present social climate was perceived as becoming increasingly complex. Football in the Community is a project that has work with children as the central component of its Core Business. Accordingly, help with this and other major training issues were requested, as many Senior Officers recognised the potential vulnerability of staff. For instance, as more than one Senior Officer stressed, one expensive employment legislation claim could effectively wipe out several years of progress at a stroke, particularly at a smaller scheme. We are heartened to see recent progress being made in this specific area, with good feedback from Senior Officers concerning a recent seminar on the topic. Among other main training considerations are: Health and Safety, Equal Opportunities, Child Protection, help with the preparation of financial bids, local marketing and, of course, football coaching qualifications.

Other significant statistics from the questionnaire in relation to training reveal that 98.8% of Senior Officers would like to see greater assistance with financial bid making, even though 78.8% have already made bids. The figures speak for themselves and training needs to occur in this area, as a priority issue.

In the area of marketing, while there are many reasons to feel pleased by the diligent work that is being undertaken, there are also areas in need of greater support. The main national sponsorship agreements clearly work to the advantage of the national programme and we hope that these high profile sponsors continue to support Football in the Community. Where events are organised and supported by national sponsors, these are of high quality and there seems to be advantages gained by all parties.

In terms of communication strategies, we point to the fact that 69.4% of Senior Officers felt that they needed to meet on a regional and national basis either ‘a Lot More Often’ or ‘a Little More Often’. The vast majority supported the concept of staging a national conference. Thus, we would suggest that it is now time to begin to publicise more fully the good work that the programme does. This might involve a national conference and strategic planning towards a more prominent positioning of the programme in general. Competition is increasing locally and clearly, there is a fundamental need to inform as wide an audience as possible about the breadth and quality of the work of so many of the schemes. This aim is supported both by sponsors and by the American sport philanthropy exemplar.

In reference to the comment by one Senior Officer that the scheme was ‘badly underachieving in terms of national sponsorship,’ it is worth considering that moves away from title sponsorship are anticipated by the FFE&VTS, partly because of the success of securing local sponsorships (often facilitated and supported by the FFE&VTS and often matched via Sports Match funding.) This means that significant funding is generated for locally based schemes. We understand from the Support Office that the key issue in terms of national sponsorship is whether to secure an exclusive deal or not. An exclusive deal could generate approximately £1 million per year (to be distributed to the 90+ schemes) but this would prohibit the significant additional funding generated via local sponsorships. A non-exclusive national title sponsorship is proving almost impossible to find, in view of the fact that funding which would be available to the 90+ schemes would be significantly less than that which local sponsorship currently generates, which therefore de-values the impact of the national sponsor. Figures are available at Support Office that confirm that well in excess of £1million per year is already being generated at local level.

Conclusion

As to whether FITC still warrants its colloquial title of ‘Soccer’s Best Kept Secret,’ while we did not feel the need to answer that question directly, we sensed that there is a call from Senior Officers, supported by questionnaire data, for Football in the Community to have a greater national presence. Such an approach seems to be at

odds philosophically with the traditional, understated presence of the programme and the FFE&VTS are perhaps at a pivotal stage here in deciding the best way forward.

Overall though, we must conclude by saying that the research has highlighted the general need for a fundamental re-evaluation of how the Football in the Community programme can best be resourced and delivered in the years ahead. The title, 'Resources and Opportunities' was first mentioned in the earlier national research project (Williams and Taylor, 1994). Nevertheless, it still appears an apt phrase at this moment in time.

Further important challenges lie ahead if this solid progress is to be built upon. The questionnaire data reveals that 92.5% of Senior Officers report their work as having become 'more complex' in recent years. Also, as one Regional Director noted with irony, 'Schemes are not going to get any smaller in the foreseeable future'. The overall effect of this growth on the national programme must be taken into consideration during short, medium and long-term planning. To meet such needs and those of an increasingly diverse national populace, a strengthening of the national Football in the Community framework and introduction of a modernisation programme must occur as a matter of urgency. Again, our research evidence strongly suggests that the 'return' on such investment would be high as the impact is greatly magnified as it spreads out across the national programme. This relates to both the promotion of football among participants and the limitless possibilities for positive social change, which interest in the game can generate. Indeed, the fact that FITC activities address so many different agendas, raised through the present government's clear commitment to social inclusion is, in itself highly significant and impressive. This progress is a fact acknowledged by experienced, academic observers:

Within the field of social inclusion, Football in the Community projects have played a key role in integrating sections of the community who might otherwise be excluded.

(Mellor et al, 2003, p1)

While major issues clearly exist, there are also immense, exciting opportunities for the Football in the Community programme, if such challenges can be successfully met.

Recommendations

From the data gathered, we believe that a fundamental strengthening and modernisation of the Football in the Community national framework is urgently required and would best be served through:

- the provision of regional Funding Officers to assist Senior Officers in the preparation of financial bids. This will enable a more systematic assessment of available funding streams to be made
- other areas of financial advice being made available to Senior Officers. 'Financial pressures' are reported by Senior Officers as being their chief concern and clearly some Officers deal with this situation more easily than others
- an early increase in the number of Regional Directors serving the schemes. The staffing level at Support Office generally, is inadequate to meet the needs of a growing number of schemes. Failure to address these resource issues will almost certainly result in fragmentation of the national programme
- more comprehensive training for Football in the Community staff in specific areas (e.g. employment law, personnel management skills, financial planning) and a structured mechanism to determine future training needs on a regular basis
- ongoing evaluation of national marketing strategies and greater emphasis on marketing at local scheme level. This should include a national conference and the development of marketing strategies, generally. Over half of all Senior Officers felt that their scheme could market itself better in their local communities
- the creation of improved communication mechanisms for sharing best practice and the innovative ideas that are emerging from the work of successful schemes. Such mechanisms may include the staging of a national conference,

more regional meetings and more regular meetings between Regional Directors and other Support Office staff

- continued efforts to optimise communication among all the Key Agencies in football and the initiation of an open and honest debate about how Football in the Community can best be delivered. We feel that this discussion is most appropriately initiated through the Footballers' Education Society and that the views of all agencies should be heard
- re-visiting the concept of 'kitemarking' for schemes where there is a high quality of provision and discuss the potential usefulness of such a proposal
- improvement in website provision to communicate Football in the Community activities at both scheme and Support Office level. Generally, more emphasis needs to be given to Information Communication Technology resources and training. If done wisely, such an investment may also help to relieve the considerable pressures caused by 'mounting paperwork,' which is one of the top three concerns of Senior Officers
- the creation of links and accessing of new information from emerging sports team community programmes and organisations from around the world, such as The Sports Philanthropy Project in America. One such example would be the dissemination of information about new funding streams as soon as they emerge, aided by enhanced Information Communication Technology provision
- greater opportunities for career development within the national framework of Football in the Community. At present, there is a lack of clear progression pathways for those individuals seeking fresh challenges. Often these are key workers who have achieved outstanding successes in their scheme, regional area or Support Office roles. If resourcing does increase, it would be appropriate to build such a programme into future plans from an early stage, so that ambitious individuals are set achievable career goals.

Notes

¹ A small number of Conference League sides also have FITC schemes and we include them in this description.

² The FFE&VTS is funded by the Key Agencies and operates from its Manchester Headquarters.

³ FFE&VTS Football in the Community. Resources and Opportunities. Manchester: The Footballers' Further Education and Vocational Training Society, 2004.

⁴ Mellor, G; Brown, A; Blackshaw, T. and Stone, C. Football and Its Communities. Baseline Analysis of Case Study Football and Community Initiatives. For the Football Foundation. Manchester: The Manchester Institute of Popular Culture, 2003.

⁵ This is a colloquial phrase that we heard from several independent sources during the period of our research. It was used with a sense of pride and dignity that something good was occurring (quietly) within the game, rather than with any frustration that media coverage or public recognition was lacking.

⁶ The Senior Officer is the principal person involved in the day-to-day running of the Scheme at each club.

⁷ The Regional Director (or Manager) oversees the work of several club schemes, often covering a large geographical area. (S)he is the first point of contact for the Senior Officers when issues arise.

⁸ Full details of this international perspective and the primary aims of the SPP can be found in our original report: FFE&VTS Football in the Community. Resources and Opportunities. Manchester: The Professional Footballers' Association, 2003.

⁹ A Management Forum, typically, comprises Scheme and club representatives, plus members of the local authority, business partners and other parties connected to the work of the Scheme.

¹⁰ Such a region attracts additional funding, which this club successfully bid for, to initiate several social inclusion projects.

¹¹ This practice is a type of 'turf wars', where rival schemes and private providers may target the same client group and area for attendance at, say, an Easter Soccer School. Certainly amongst the schemes there is a taboo about encroaching on a neighbouring scheme's territory, whereas private firms do not regard these boundaries as restrictive.

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