Innovation during the Covid-19 pandemic: Volunteers and voluntary sports organisations in England

Case Study 3: Using a survey of members to spark modernisation

Research report for Sport England

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Using a survey of members to spark modernisation

Sport: Bowls

Size of club: 130 (although had been as high as 280 pre-covid)

No of volunteers: 30

Own premises/land: No, lease property

Age Range: Average age is 75

Paid staff: None

What is the innovation?
During the Covid-19 lockdown the club conducted a survey of member satisfaction. The survey sought views on the club and recommendations for taking the club forward (looking forward to post-lockdown). Members responded and suggested that the club should modernise. For example, some members asked that the club implement an online bookings and payments system.

As a result of the feedback, the club took steps to implement changes. As well as implementing online bookings and payment system, they also upgraded their website. The new website sought to present a more vibrant image of the club, with the showcasing of the activities and events within the club (e.g. leagues, open sessions, social events).

Why was this innovation implemented?
The club realised that the membership of the club was predominantly older, white and middle class. There were major concerns that older members would not return to the sport after the Covid-19 pandemic. The club realised that it had to attract new members if it was to have a long-term future. The member survey provided a mechanism for opening up the debate. For example:

> " *It was the questionnaire that highlighted how dated [the website] was, and then it was undoubtedly Covid that provided the leverage to move it forward.* "

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?
The online booking and payment system streamlined the booking process and made accounting easier. It also meant that the club was able to comply with UK government Covid-19 regulations when they re-opened after the lockdown. For example, they could take online payments and therefore avoid using cash.

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?
Although the club's volunteer base shrank, the implementation of technology meant volunteers could be more efficient. An enormous amount of time was saved by not having to make bookings manually and handling cash.

Some of the most elderly volunteers stepped down from their volunteering duties because they were either reluctant or unable to use the technology. For example, the club lost a lot of Green Stewards who had previously been involved in managing bookings and payments.

> " *The biggest challenge was for the Green Stewards who had always just taken the money of people put it in a bag and put it in the safe. Suddenly, it's right, could you click this on the computer to say that they've paid… but I mean honestly it, it's really hard … we lost a lot of green stewards because they didn't make that leap.* "

What were the challenges of implementing this innovation?
There was resistance within the club to the changes. As one volunteer in favour of the changes said, 'it's been hard'. Even though some members have since accepted the changes once they saw it operate in practice, their acceptance was still 'grudging'.

> " *[Given the choice], I think some would still go back.…. the older ones would be happy to see it go back.* "

There were also challenges in bringing volunteers on board with the changes. Some volunteers stepped down. That said, good communication helped to keep as many volunteers on board as possible:

> " *Don't underestimate the impact on your traditional volunteer and you might need to think about a new way of managing volunteers, which we have done.…. Where its volunteers, you have to be mindful that it presents real challenges because people could just walk away. They can say "I don't want to do this anymore". So, I think it's about bringing people with you. It's really important that you communicate as you do it, so that everyone's in the loop as much as you can while you're developing it and what the aims are why you're doing it. Set out why we're doing this.…and why it will be good for the club. I think you've got to win the hearts and minds of your volunteers.* "

For those volunteers that remained, it was also important to provide them with training. For example, the club provided training on how to use the new technology.

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?
The volunteer demographic and a hesitancy to adopt change, especially digital technology were a barrier to change. It was difficult to build any sort of consensus for change.

Eight short case studies that showcase innovative practices in sports volunteering:

Case Study 1: Introducing technology to enhance participation

Case Study 2: Forming buddy groups to enhance engagement

Case Study 3: Using a survey of members to spark modernisation

Case Study 4: Using social media to attract new members

Case Study 5: Purchasing own land to offer an outdoor format of the sport

Case Study 6: Getting involved in the local community

Case Study 7: Implementing club membership management app

Case Study 8: Increasing Volunteer Inclusion and Diversity