



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

Research report for Sport England

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Executive summary

Introduction

Innovation occurs when an organisation makes a change in the way it operates or what it provides. Innovation is context specific, so what is normal practice for one organisation may be an innovation for another. Covid-19 was a catalyst for innovation in volunteering in community sport. Ninety voluntary not-for-profit organisations described their Covid-19 response through our research detailing innovations they had made. These were 13 national sports organisations (NSOs) such as National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) and 77 community sports organisations (CSOs) such as local sports clubs and other local organisations delivering sport and physical activity.

Innovation

Volunteers in CSOs and NSOs innovated in many ways and the most common were digital or in response to Covid-19 guidelines. Other changes were made within the context of Covid-19, such as utilising different venues or outdoor spaces or contributing to the wider community response. For some organisations the innovations were necessary due to the restrictions but will not continue, for others they are now embedded in their structures. Volunteers and their organisations are inextricably linked. Volunteers were, therefore, central to the innovations made whether those innovations focussed on sport delivery or volunteering itself.

The innovations can be categorised in the following themes:

- [Going digital](#)
- [Innovation in CSOs](#)
- [Volunteer recruitment and retention](#)
- [Volunteer training](#)
- [A changed relationship between NSOs and CSOs](#)
- [Reaching out to the wider community.](#)

Section 4 of this report describes these innovations. The report also includes eight in-depth case studies of CSOs to further illustrate these changes (See Appendix 1).

Reflection on the process of innovation

Our research identified important factors present in CSOs that had innovated successfully. These CSOs tended to have capacity to innovate through a mix of human resource skills, a strong committee or individual leaders and they were positive about change and willing to look at altering their practices. Whilst the impetus was initially a response to the pandemic, this also provided creative opportunities for volunteers. Many came up with their own solutions and there was a sense of cohesion in solving problems together. More than half of the most significant innovations that CSOs had outlined were going to remain post-pandemic, but even in the act of changing “back” they were considering what was the best for their club. The process of reflecting on the innovation and deciding if it should stay is also important.

Previous research had shown that CSOs were resilient. It appears to be their ability to innovate that has supported their resilience and enabled them to survive during Covid-19. Innovation research has also shown that organisations that have either experienced or seen successful innovation are more likely to innovate in the future. Our research indicated that the capacity and readiness to innovate of the CSO were important factors in the process. Therefore, training and communication relating to innovative practice could focus on highlighting successful previous innovations and elements of capacity-building to enable CSOs to develop in the future.

Conclusion

Sports volunteers are passionate and enthusiastic about their sport, CSO or NSO and readily innovated to enable their club or sport to survive during the pandemic. When they identify a problem that impacts on them, their club or organisation or their sport, volunteers can embrace innovative solutions. The report makes some recommendations for Sport England, NSOs and CSOs to consider that might increase innovation.

1. Introduction

The restrictions to combat the Covid-19 pandemic created a unique context for sports volunteers and organisations. By the end of 2020, it was acknowledged that “the pandemic is having a profound impact on people’s lives and work, businesses and public institutions” (UK Parliament 2020). Social, health and wellbeing inequalities were accentuated (British Academy 2021). Within sport, Covid-19 related restrictions led to an overall decline in participation (Sport England 2020a). While surveys showed a decrease in formal sports volunteering, particularly for face-face delivery roles, 71.3% of volunteers continued throughout the pandemic (NCVO 2021, Sport England 2020b). Over the same period, there was a national increase in informal volunteering (i.e. volunteering outside of organisations) which was probably accounted for by neighbourhood level WhatsApp support groups and Mutual Aid (NCVO 2021, Linning 2020).

Volunteers in sport provide the opportunity for others, and themselves, to take part in sport and physical activity and gain health

and wellbeing benefits as a result, including social connections. The dual benefit is that at the same time, the efforts of volunteers provide them with satisfaction and social rewards. The pandemic challenged the status quo for sports volunteers. Volunteers in community sports organisations (CSOs) had to make changes for sports participation to continue and to keep volunteers and members connected. National sports organisations (NSOs) including national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) also had to adjust and find new ways to support their members. As a result, CSOs and NSOs continued to operate, albeit in constrained circumstances. Often, volunteers achieved this by doing something new or different. Volunteers and their organisations are inextricably linked. Volunteers were, therefore, central to the innovations made whether those innovations focussed on sport delivery or volunteering itself. Understanding the innovative response to Covid-19 requires us to understand what changes volunteers facilitating sport made in response to the pandemic, how their roles or tasks changed in response to the pandemic and whether some of those innovations will be retained going forwards.

The most comprehensive survey of sports volunteers in the UK, conducted in 2002, concluded that clubs lay on a spectrum between those that embraced innovation and ones

which did not. That report noted that “an understanding of the culture of individual organisations should influence the approach to supporting them” (Taylor et al. 2003, p22). It has also been suggested that the willingness of an organisation to innovate increases in response to a previous successful innovation or knowledge of one (Winand et al. 2016). From this, there arises the possibility that sharing examples of successful innovations could influence volunteers in CSOs and NSOs to innovate in the future.

When looking to rebuild better after the pandemic, there are going to be further challenges for sports and sports volunteers, which will require them to adapt to “the changing social and personal contexts of participation and volunteering; increased unemployment and inequality, reduced household spending, heightened anxieties about risk and shifting desires for physical/ social contact” (Fullagar 2020).

The research

The aims of the research project were to

- understand how and why volunteers have innovated since February 2020 and the facilitators of this process
- identify innovative practices and share this learning, especially details of innovative practices that lead to more inclusive volunteering
- understand the challenges and opportunities in the voluntary sports sector presented by Covid-19, and how volunteers have responded to these
- capture knowledge of how to rebuild better in terms of sports volunteering.

This report starts with a brief review of evidence about sport volunteers and Covid-19 in section 2. It then sets out the research methods used in this study in section 3. Research findings are presented in section 4. Key reflections on these findings are discussed in section 5. Finally, the report draws conclusions and makes recommendations in section 6. Case studies of CSOs and more details from the snapshot survey can be found in the Appendices.

2. Review of evidence

This is a brief review of what was known about the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and innovation in voluntary sports organisations before March 2021 when this research was started¹.

a. Innovation

i. Definition of innovation

The term innovation has multiple meanings, including the action or process of innovating, or the development of new ideas, products, or inventions. Given the multiple interpretations, it is useful to start with a definition for the purposes of this report.

We use the term innovation to mean something new or different in the context of the organisation. The innovation need not be brand new – just something that is a change in the specific organisation, even if it is an enforced change. Innovations can be incremental with small steps leading to a gradual change or they can be radical and something very different from the status quo (Community Impact Bucks 2018). Since organisational context is important, innovation can be revolutionary for one organisation but appear to be ‘established practice’ in another (NESTA 2014, p38).

ii. Innovation in voluntary sports organisations

There is limited academic research about NSOs and CSOs and innovation. Several papers focused on the area in the last 5 years (Hoeber et al. 2015). The ability to develop community

sports organisations was found to be dependent on capacity building (Doherty et al. 2014), and on readiness or sufficient capacity to innovate (Doherty et al. 2020). Key determinants of innovation include embracing innovation, capacity, and top-down policy directives (Doherty et al., 2020). Similarly, recent data from non-profit sports clubs in Iran, showed that knowledge management and openness to innovation from volunteers were key factors in determining whether an organisation implemented innovations or not (Delshab et al. 2020). Others have focused on innovation in all volunteering. Community Impact Bucks (2018) presented 12 case studies of innovation in the county as examples of innovations and then followed up their work by making practical toolkits available to local organisations to use to implement their own innovations, showing the value of sharing practice. This highlights the importance of considering the process of innovation.

b. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

i. The impact of Covid-19 on sports volunteers

Sport England’s (2020) survey of volunteers showed that 13.5% had significant levels of anxiety about returning after lockdown, although they had a strong concern to maintain the long-term viability of their club. The top three recurring barriers to returning included roles becoming less appealing, personal and family health risks and the possibility of needing more time for other aspects of their lives. 14% of volunteers were ‘at risk’ of not returning

but some of this may represent natural turnover. In general, volunteers’ ties to clubs are strong, which means CSOs tend to be resilient and adapt (Nichols et al. 2021).

ii. The impact of Covid-19 on community sports clubs (CSOs)

Most sports volunteering takes place in CSOs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions on social gatherings, travel and sport led many CSOs to halt or reduce activity. Even when sport-specific restrictions were eased demand was often reduced. Although various sports club surveys have been conducted during the pandemic, many were too early to show the impact on club members and so volunteers often had to report expectations. For example, a survey of 61 grassroots football clubs in August 2020 found that 10% thought they would struggle to survive the next 12 months (Utilita 2020). Large scale surveys of clubs in Germany and Australia reported an anticipated reduction in members and volunteers (Feiler, Breuer 2021, Australian Sports Foundation 2020). Initial expectations were worrying.

The most recent club survey in the UK (Barrett, Coleman 2021), conducted in February 2021, was better able to report on actual changes. Membership had fallen by 60% during the Covid-19 lockdowns, although it was predicted to recover to 75% or pre-Covid-19 levels. It was felt that junior membership would take longer to recover, possibly because juniors were less committed to the sport or the club. Volunteers remained committed to helping the club recover with little anticipated change in numbers. Administrative volunteer roles had continued throughout the pandemic, while those associated with delivery, such as coaching, were reduced. The availability of sports pitches was often a major constraint for

clubs as public or school facilities were closed or subject to restricted use.

The only published in-depth studies of the pandemic’s impact on CSOs broadly matched survey findings, although it provided more detail on how volunteers had been affected. Interviews conducted with a sample of 13 UK sports clubs in July 2020, and repeated with 12 of them in February 2021, found no evidence of volunteers dropping out, apart from some natural turnover (Nichols et al. 2021, Findlay-King et al. 2020). Core volunteers remained committed and responded quickly to changed restrictions and guidelines to maximise opportunities to play sport. Perceived risk of Covid-19 infection was a concern for volunteers but had not affected the amount of volunteering they did. The major constraint was the ability to actually play their sport, which reduced some volunteering time, although it did create some space for improved planning. More time was required to adapt the sport, change booking systems, revise subscriptions and continually update members and parents on the revised procedures. The work associated with a new role of ‘Covid officer’ was taken by existing volunteers. Although a Sport England (2020) survey discovered concerns of ‘burn-out’ among key volunteers, this was not reflected in the in-depth club interviews. That said, the interviews did reveal some clubs were concerned that the loss of parts of the programme would negatively impact the recruitment of new volunteers in the future. For example, since volunteers are often drawn from participants or the parents of juniors, lower participation could see a fall in the pool of potential volunteers. Overall, however, both the club interviews and the club survey suggested strong resilience among sports clubs.

¹ New evidence is emerging, including as we write this. For example, there is already new evidence published later in 2021, which could be considered going forwards (Winand 2021, Byers et al. 2021, Corthouts et al. 2021).

c. The pandemic as a catalyst for innovation in the roles of sports volunteers

The interviews with UK CSOs (Nichols et al. 2021) found that while those clubs had innovated, their main aim was to “get back to normal” rather than to innovate into the future. They just wanted their old club back! The innovations were categorised as follows (led and delivered by volunteers):

- Adopting or enhancing the use of digital technology (e.g. zoom meetings, virtual social events, online training).
- New risk management policies and practices (e.g. limits to numbers taking part, not sharing equipment, sanitising, buffer times between bookings, online booking systems, changed rules of the sport, new protocols for leaving and entering premises).
- Changing the sports offer to meet the needs of existing or new members (e.g. adapting the sport or changing the rules of the sport to minimise player contact).
- Adapting club management (e.g. new membership packages and payment systems were offered, especially where lockdowns coincided with the seasonality of a sport).
- New volunteer roles (e.g. the creation of a ‘Covid officer’ role to ensure compliance with restrictions).
- New external links (e.g. some clubs had reached out to other clubs, or even non-sporting organisations).

d. Digital innovation, inclusion and exclusion

The major change across the voluntary sector has been the use of digital communication to substitute as far as possible for face-to-face contact and to develop services. A review by the NCVO in August 2021 found advantages of this included: the ability to contact a wider range of people or groups, some services could be expanded, and meetings were more efficient through cutting travel time and costs (NCVO 2021). The main barriers, in order of significance, were: the skills of staff and volunteers, the cost of equipment and software, the skills of service users, and the access of users to equipment. This could lead to ‘digital exclusion’, especially of older people. Thus, organisations had to consider if service users and deliverers had the required skills and technology, and if not, how they can be supported to get them. Another report showed how 14 small voluntary sector organisations had used technology during the pandemic (Caffyn et al. 2021). The organisations were selected to illustrate success. Although the adoption of technology was forced, it still required a positive approach. The report acknowledged digital exclusion and listed a set of support services, which might reduce this. It recommended that organisations should be funded to develop digital services and reduce digital exclusion; although it did not specify how they could overcome all the barriers identified by the NCVO report; for example, lack of Wi-Fi access or equipment.

3. Research methods

Our research process is summarised in Figure 1 below. In total, we collected data from a total of 90 volunteer-led sports organisations.

Figure 1: Research methods

Stages	Research activities
Stage 1: Scoping innovation	<p>Focussed desk research to identify existing insights into Covid-19, innovation and volunteering.</p> <p>Interviews with key informants in NGBs (10 – stratified sample) and other national sport organisations (3). All interviews were performed via Zoom.</p> <p>Collating an inventory of innovation through a ‘snapshot’ survey. These mini- surveys were designed to capture basic information on the type of innovations made by CSOs and the way they went about making changes. The surveys collected a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Responses to the survey were sought via an open call to sports organisations and through other umbrella organisations and social media. A total of 74 responses were received. Survey results are presented in Appendix 2.</p> <p>Mapping and analysis of innovative practices Identified what innovation is happening and what it looks like (mapping element across sports, locations, etc.).</p>
Stage 2: In-depth cases	<p>Case studies of 8 CSOs that had implemented innovations. Organisations were selected because they had implemented changes. Some of these organisations had been identified through the snapshot survey and others via the NGB interviews at stage 1. Additional data for the case studies were then collected via semi-structured qualitative interviews with a volunteer from each CSO. The interviews were designed to generate an understanding of the innovations made and the process of innovation. Interviews were held via Zoom. All interviews were transcribed. The CSO case studies are summarised in Appendix 1.</p>
Stage 3: Analyse and reflect	<p>Analysis of the data collected using thematic analysis. Our analysis sought to understand the types of innovations made and the conditions that fostered their adoption.</p>

The research followed all Sport England and Bayfirth ethical guidelines. Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study. Where organisational names are used in this report, we have specifically obtained their consent. Otherwise, those who wished to remain anonymous were allocated a number: (CSO_1 – CSO_77 or NSO_1 – NSO_13).

4. Findings

In this section, we present our thematic analysis of the innovations adopted by volunteers and NSOs and CSOs during the Covid-19 pandemic. We consider six themes around innovation and volunteers which came out in the interviews, snapshot and case studies:

- **Going digital**
- **Innovations in CSOs**
- **Volunteer recruitment and retention**
- **Volunteer training**
- **Changed relationship between NSOs and CSOs**
- **Reaching out to meet wider community needs**

a. Going digital

Across most sports, the Covid-19 pandemic led many organisations to develop digital services and move activities, meetings and governance online. Indeed, it was the second most common innovation mentioned by respondents to our snapshot survey (see Figure 2 in Appendix 2). Given the breadth of these digital innovations, the analysis below breaks them down further into several topics: going digital in how they organise; going digital in how they deliver; the benefits; the challenges; and, the support required.

i. Going digital in how they organise

Many volunteers in CSOs said they had moved committee meetings and AGMs online in order to maintain

governance and communication during the pandemic. Sixty-three of the 77 CSOs completing our snapshot survey said that they had moved committee meetings and AGMs online.

NSOs also moved training and communication online, including online webinars, Facebook groups, digital platform meetings, AGMs, and volunteer award events. This led to increased engagement from community-level volunteers. Fifty-six of the 77 CSOs reported that they had attended an online training session during the pandemic. NSOs also noted increased attendance from moving online. For example, NSO_2 created online training content for existing qualifications (e.g., Level 1 coaching awards). As a result of this change, these training courses were better attended than pre-March 2020. Furthermore, by promoting the use of online social networking, it had been possible to increase volunteer engagement. This was evident through a particular female volunteering project:

“We basically set up monthly [chats], which was a way where women could just come togetherand each one used to attract a minimum of 40 to 50 women who just have a cup of tea and share their love for [sport] but also connect with women on a national level.” (NSO_07)

ii. Going digital in how they deliver

The most frequently reported digital innovation was the instigation of new online booking and payment systems to support compliance with Covid-19 guidelines (53 of the 77 CSOs). These innovations enabled the recording of attendance and the replacement of cash payment systems. Various systems were used (e.g. Clubspark and Teamo). Key volunteers had to research, choose and implement the systems. Case Study 3 and Case Study 7 explore this type of innovation.

CSOs also adopted new digital systems for managing volunteers. For example, a cycling club started using a digital system for recruiting volunteers for their events. They found this to be better than before because volunteers were more committed to the task they had signed up for:

“We use [Spond app] to log volunteers for our race events. This means [volunteers] make the commitment and turn up rather than a vague “I might be able to help”.” (CSO_7, cycling)

In many clubs, volunteers adapted to offer a range of online activities for members (35 of 77 CSOs). Some volunteers kept people active directly through online coaching and participatory events (e.g. virtual duathlons or group recording of training) or through general exercise for fitness and fun. The provision of online content varied – some used apps designed for remote training (e.g. Zwift) or highlighted existing online training content. Others created online content, using a whole range of social media tools (e.g., WhatsApp or YouTube) to deliver sessions. Volunteers spoke of

a desire to keep members motivated, active and engaged in the club. Most clubs spoke about creating online social events and some noted that this meant that a wider range of members could attend than usual. However, few volunteers talked of keeping the online delivery of activity post-pandemic, preferring instead to return to in-person delivery. That said, some CSOs said they would consider maintaining digital innovations in delivery where they brought benefits. For example, Case Study 1 in Appendix 1 describes how a boxing club benefitted from the introduction of virtual reality into boxing training and will continue to use it.

iii. What were the benefits of going digital?

Online meetings meant that CSO volunteers could meet frequently during the pandemic. Many volunteers said that meetings without travel saved time and money, which made them easier to hold more regularly. They planned to keep online meetings post pandemic.

For the same reasons, NSO meetings and online training for volunteers had generated greater attendance and there was a desire to keep some of this moving forward.

“We’ve engaged a lot more clubs and volunteers because they’ve been able to attend. They can do it in their own time, they don’t have to travel, there’s no expense (NSO_1)

So, now.....we don’t have to go out to clubs and meet clubs on the ground all the time. We can do a lot more by doing more virtual stuff.” (NSO_9)

NSOs also described how their efforts to reach out to volunteers via online forums and drop-in meetings had enhanced the support they could provide. NSOs had received positive feedback interaction with community level volunteers. It was noted how NSOs could offer more information and choice through online delivery. For example:

“A lot of new forums sprung up, so suddenly we had a Chair[person] forum and then we had Coach forums and then you had Covid-Lead forums. So, we've got a lot of...what I would call softer meetings happening. But again, because they happen online there's no traveling. There's better attendance and, actually, the range of subjects we're able to cover is bigger.” (NSO_12)

CSOs and NSOs also spoke about the value of online peer-peer support which happened both informally and under the formal direction of NGBs (e.g. a new Facebook group for peer-peer support between volunteers set up by an NSO).

Online meetings with better attendance than ever before, meant that interaction diversified.

“And when we did the conference, we put them into breakout rooms. So, they still were able to talk to people who they wouldn't [normally]...and they still allowed that cross-conversation... The cross-region stuff I think...it's really useful to listen to somebody from a completely different region or completely different county because everybody does certain things differently.” (NSO_3)

Two case studies illustrate how going digital could diversify volunteering. Case Study 1 showed how the introduction of virtual reality into the training programme attracted tech-savvy volunteers who may have lacked specialist sports coaching knowledge.

Similarly, Case Study 3 illustrated how digital transformation attracted younger people into key committee posts.

A common theme in our analysis was the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated change that had already been desirable or needed. This can be seen in detail in Case Study 3 where the Covid-19 lockdown provided the time and space to get on with an online survey of members, which subsequently sparked various club innovations. Similarly, it was noted how it would have been possible to host online meetings before Covid-19, but few had made the change:

“When covid kicked off and we went into lockdown, it would be very hard for you to find club committees that would be happy to jump on a Zoom or Teams call... Turning a computer on ... it was difficult enough to get our sort of demographic to engage with us on an email, but since covid's happened...about 75-80% of clubs are now happy to commit to engaging with us on Zoom and Teams and virtually a lot more, and they've got their head around it...We always knew it was going to happen and we knew it was probably going to be a bit of a slow burner and covid has just accelerated that beyond what you thought would happen.” (NSO_9)

Some NSO staff said they had made assumptions about volunteers' digital ability, which had previously held them back from innovating technologically pre-pandemic. However, many volunteers had coped better than expected. NSOs were now more inclined to press ahead with digital innovation:

“We are introducing imminently an online Facebook Group, essentially for volunteers to connect to one another and get peer support. It is something that we have talked about at the [NSO] for years to be honest, and we've always

been a bit, I suppose, risk averse and kind of worried about moderation and all these kinds of things...But to be honest, because of the way everyone is now working, volunteers have had to become more digital. We are going for it.” (NSO_1)

iv. Challenges to going digital

Going digital presented challenges for many CSO volunteers. They had to adapt and acquire new skills, which often involved 'a steep learning curve' (NSO_12). Only some of the volunteers already possessed the necessary skills.

“We've done some research around digital provision, and there's a real gap between members having the skills and ability to do it, use it and understand it. But those that do, do well, and are doing that more...And then there are also those that ... don't have the equipment or their participants don't have the equipment, so can't access it.” (NSO_8)

NSOs were concerned about the digital exclusion of volunteers. For example, NSO_5 spoke about the demographic profile of participants and how this may affect digital access. Although there was an initiative to implement an online member and player registration system, there was uncertainty over whether club volunteers had the skills to adopt it. They discussed the need for volunteers with 'real expertise in this sort of area' or the development of easier systems.

NSOs also identified that some volunteers were resistant to change. For example:

“I'm trying to be diplomatic ... when people have done something for so long in a certain way, to ask them to change so radically ... it's difficult...But with covid, it wasn't an option, so people didn't have the choice but to change and some have embraced it and have pulled into the 21st century and some haven't.” (NSO_6)

The introduction of digital systems caused significant problems for some volunteers and led them to leave their roles. Case Study 3 (CSO_3) in Appendix 1 provides one such example. Some NSOs thought they had lost touch with volunteers who were not 'technically savvy' (NSO_6). Even those volunteers who had digital skills spoke of how it took time to adapt and make systems work for their needs, particularly with online registration and payment systems.

Some NSOs were also worried that they were making false assumptions about who would and would not be able to engage digitally. For example, one NSO described how young people, although they may be technologically savvy, may not have good internet access:

“They've got phones, but they often go to free hotspot areas because they might not have wi-fi at home. So, the digital access issue became a barrier.” (NSO_2)

Some NSOs were also concerned about the limitations of online delivery. Whilst there were many benefits from going online, there were also disadvantages. The lack of face-to-face contact and networking opportunities was noted by several NSOs. For example:

“You do lose interaction without the face-to-face. I think for volunteers, coming together and networking is very important and, I have to admit, that part of it is missing or less obvious I suppose on a digital platform.” (NSO_1)

v. Challenges to going digital

Support to digitally innovate was both informal and formal. Some volunteers learnt informally by acquiring knowledge from their more proficient fellow volunteers. This was often done within CSOs. For example:

“What we’ve also seen is older volunteers that have the competence to use digital have provided informal mentoring and support to their peers.” (NSO_10)

In other cases, NSOs provided formal training and support to volunteers. CSO volunteers were often keen to avail themselves of this. For example, one CSO volunteer found NSO support invaluable in providing the skills necessary to move the club to an online booking system:

“As Club Secretary, I learnt how Club Spark bookings worked, with much support from Table Tennis England, and occasionally another volunteer. Most players learnt to use online booking, but a minority haven’t, and just text me to book them in.” (CSO_41, table tennis)

b. Innovations in CSOs

Covid-19 was a catalyst for change in many CSOs. We heard about how CSOs adapted their sport and coaching routines and attracted new participants. Indoor and contact sports faced particular restrictions, which they had to adapt to if they wanted to sustain activity. NGBs reported clubs moving to outdoor venues and setting up new facilities for the sport. This is illustrated by an archery club adopting field archery in Case Study 5 (CSO_5), which is presented in Appendix 1. Similarly, swimming clubs that would have used indoor pools moved to outdoor pools and even open-water swimming, whilst netball volunteers searched for suitable outdoor venues.

Other volunteers got around not being able to actually take part (and therefore volunteer) in their sport by moving some activity online, as we saw in the earlier section on digital change. One NSO designed content for participants to do alone in their own space as their sport was not permitted:

“During covid one of the things that we needed to do was give people things to do. So, we created a whole load of (sport) cards that you could just download onto your phone. It gives you something to go and do in the back garden.” (NSO_4)

Whilst not all of these changes to the sport were sustained beyond the ending of restrictions, volunteers felt that some changes would endure. For example, some CSOs realised that adaptations to coaching methods were generating better results. This quote from an archery club volunteer illustrates this nicely:

“The biggest change was carrying out beginners’ classes with fewer numbers (max 4). This has produced better archers at the end and so we, as a club, will take this forward and stay with smaller numbers for the future.” (CSO_45, archery)

Covid-19 also led to many CSOs to adopt new systems that could promote participation and drive-up membership. The move to online booking and payment systems was a particularly common innovation, which usually facilitated easier access to facilities for non-members. One NSO explained that a long-running strategy of encouraging clubs to open-up facilities to non-members had been accelerated by the adoption of online booking and membership systems:

“We’re able to encourage clubs to think a little bit differently about the way that they might organise their membership... covid has weirdly massively increased membership of clubs... Therefore, clubs have then had to think about, okay, well, how do we engage these new people?” (NSO_1)

Case Study 3 also shows how a bowls club, which had lost a lot of members during Covid-19, sought to attract new members. In particular, the club:

- Developed new membership options to attract a wider demographic of members as soon as full return was allowed (e.g. introductory and off-peak memberships).
- Looked at ways to increase the engagement of the community / non-members (e.g. open events and social evenings to engage local people).
- Explored a route to corporate engagement (e.g. offering local businesses regular use of rinks and facilities on a weekday night for a fixed annual fee, so they can plan team bonding/leagues/competitions).

Forty-two of the 77 CSOs completing the snapshot survey reported that they had applied for extra grant funding during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, one archery club accessed grant-funding for equipment for new participants, thus enabling new people to join the club (CSO_5).

c. Volunteer recruitment and retention

Our research discovered many innovations around volunteer recruitment and retention. Some NSOs and CSOs talked about an increase in new volunteers, although some had lost volunteers during that period. Two

types of new volunteers were mentioned – those who were younger and more digitally orientated, and those with a safety or safeguarding background stepping forward into covid/safety officer roles. For example, in one NSO, 800 of its new Covid-19 officer roles were filled by people new to [sport] volunteering. One small netball club explained how they had found a way to involve new volunteers from their playing membership: ‘We set up a Covid Task Force, which saw additional new volunteers come forward’ (CSO_36). Since some clubs lost older volunteers, sometimes because of the introduction of new technology, it was important to attract new volunteers. Case Study 3 provides an extended example of young people moving into volunteer roles at a bowls club, where older volunteers had given up because they could not operate the new online booking systems. More generally, the provision of free online training supported growth in volunteer numbers from amongst the membership of NSOs and CSOs. That said, there was concern about how momentum could be maintained with newly recruited volunteers and how they could be utilised in clubs. Digital systems often improved volunteer recruitment. Case Study 7 provides an example of a BMX club that had used an application (app) to improve the process for recruiting race day volunteers:

“Using the Spond app to ask for volunteers is so much less traumatic than walking round the members pleading for volunteers – we asked 170+ members in one simple post if they would like to be on the volunteers list and around 20 said yes so now one simple post to those 20 that they can read and reply to with a simple click makes finding the 10 we need for a race day quite easy.” (CSO_7).

Some NSOs had considered how their own organisation and CSOs needed to be more inclusive. There had been some outreach work to groups that represented diverse voices, although this had not yet seen any impact of growing volunteering among under-represented groups. Instead, the growth in volunteer numbers experienced by some NSO and CSOs tended to be through those new to volunteering but already part of the organisation. That said, efforts had been made to examine how volunteering could be transparent and inclusive at all levels:

“And so covid has shone a little bit of a spotlight on some of the things that could be done better.....and so there will be a big drive...about making sure that committees and counties are more inclusive and diverse, and all that sort of thing. And then we would hope...that would then filter down to a club level as well.” (NSO_1)

Efforts to improve inclusion included NSOs working with existing volunteers, which became easier to do as meetings were now online. This ranged from involving grassroots volunteers with the creation of updates to volunteer recruitment campaigns, club guides, awards and virtual clubs. We only found evidence of a CSO actively targeting new volunteers from a specifically diverse population in Case Study 8 – for female volunteers, and this was to relatives of existing members. More research is needed to bring out case studies of innovation that leads to increased diversity of volunteers. Some NSOs acknowledged that they needed better records of who their volunteers are, before they could reach out to all. There were fears that some had been excluded from communications because they were not on a formal list and that this needed to be addressed.

There had been time to work on greater volunteer recognition. This ranged from considering the language used with reference to different volunteer roles within a sport and the perceived status of these, to careful recognition of volunteers across the NSO, including revised award ceremonies.

“[Someone who]...helps take ticket money or...clean up or...whatever they do, they're still giving up hours of their time. They are still a volunteer, and we're trying to kind of flatten ... the curve in terms of coaches seen as the Gold Star... You know we're trying to bring up that... without any of those sections, it doesn't work. [Sport] doesn't happen.” (NSO_6)

The BMX cycling club (CSO_7) found that the increased communication and ease of identifying volunteers had given them an improved sense of worth and value, making it easier to ask them to take volunteer roles. This applied especially to parents of participants who now felt more engaged among volunteers, who seemed happier to put themselves forward for roles they may previously not have undertaken (e.g. volunteering for kitchen duties which meant they would not be able to see their own child ride the track).

d. Volunteer training

NSOs made various changes to the delivery of training in response to Covid-19. Training was made bespoke to meet Covid-19 related needs, including on the topics of digital and information technology, online safeguarding, mental health and wellbeing developments. Transferring to digital, managing safety during Covid-19 and returning to activity were the most popular training topics. For some NSOs this was about looking at their core volunteer and participants' welfare needs:

“What we have seen is the importance of well-being to women and...for support and understanding of both physical and mental well-being. ...Some local organisations have done mental health awareness training and offered that to volunteers. We...have tried to ...look at the whole woman physiology...You know having...open discussions around periods...topics like that... impact of pelvic floor on exercising... to almost not shy away from that...as a participant or a volunteer.” (NSO_2)

The move to online delivery also afforded NSOs the opportunity to develop better training for volunteers in a variety of areas, beyond return to sport. One way this was done was through online help guides with a user-friendly video or demonstrations:

“...I've been here for three years and I barely understand the membership system or how to use it. So how would you therefore expect a volunteer to do it? And now we are going to create a very simple 90 minute “this is the basics of the membership system” - this is all you need to know to get your membership returns done.” (NSO_12)

Delivery of training and information sessions via online channels also improved the flexibility of what could be offered and the size of audience that could attend.

“We've been able to give them a choice on what they want to do. So, for example, previously we would have a forum where we'd be talking about how to grow your club's membership. Whereas this time we've been able to say we've got six different modules, six different topics that you can learn about, so one might be membership, one might be diversity, whatever it might be, and that's been received very well.” (NSO_1)

The movement to online delivery of some coach and volunteer training programmes suited some elements of coaching award work well. NSOs found that theory sections were more likely to be completed by participants when offered online. There were also some unique examples of training innovations:

- NSO_2 provided 'youth at risk' training to young volunteers with action planning for community safety.
- NSO_9 developed online software that diagnosed clubs support needs, which fed through into an e-learning platform. The software also helped the NSO to identify clubs in need of more intensive support.

e. A changed relationship between NSOs and CSOs

As a consequence of the pandemic, and with a greater sense of the importance of their volunteers, some NSOs sought more direct communication with volunteers to keep them engaged. In some cases, NSOs changed the tone of their communication with volunteers; choosing to emphasise how important volunteers were. For example, NSO_10 said:

“[the Covid-19 pandemic provided us with] the raw learning of who is critical to the delivery of the game, which perhaps wasn't as visible when you're just stuck in the motions of delivering community support... We also needed to engage with volunteers to make sure they felt supported - to either promote the virtual club if they couldn't do something locally, or feel that they could be developed and supported as individuals to deliver differently.”

The pandemic created more time for NSO staff to develop relationships with volunteers. Time saved on other work (e.g. event management and travelling to meetings) had been used to do this. This allowed time to develop online services and hold online meetings with regional and club level volunteers. However, what was particularly striking was the amount of informal and open communication between NSO senior staff and grassroots volunteers. For example, at the start of the Covid-19 restrictions, NSO_13 offered every volunteer the opportunity to talk to a paid member of staff for support. This involved about 2,000 forty-minute calls made by about 20 NSO staff.

This opening of wider and direct communication was accompanied by greater collaboration between NSOs and the grassroots. Some of this was collaboration with intent to involve grassroots volunteers in the re-design of volunteer resources and systems (e.g. in the reward and recognition, of volunteers, or in the setting up of new regional meeting structures). However, as we saw earlier, there was also more informal communication that enabled CSOs to influence agendas. For example, NSO_2 set up popular “coffee and a catch up” online sessions for CSOs which kept them abreast of issues, problems ideas and innovations, which the NSO then acted upon.

Direct communication with volunteers was indicative of a closer relationship between NSOs and CSOs. Some NSOs felt their changed approach had improved the volunteers’ perceptions of the NSO. In the snapshot survey nearly half of CSOs felt there was increased contact between them and their NGB (Figure 2). However, as we noted earlier, a few NSOs realised they did not know how many volunteers were involved at club level or. If they did not know who

they were, they could not ask for their input. Consequently, there were plans to improve or introduce a volunteer registration process.

f. Reaching out to meet wider community needs

During the Covid-19 pandemic, some volunteers were able to reach out to their wider community. For example, they did this by delivering food and activity packs, offering outdoor activities in streets and parks, and opening up their own outdoor facilities to others. Some CSOs also used their spare time to think more carefully about how they could reach out into their community in the future. Volunteers also stepped into other organisations to assist with the crisis response, although we have not documented that here.

i. Activity packs and food parcels

One NSO explained how CSOs had reacted quickly to requests from other agencies to reach families in need. The CSOs had an existing volunteer infrastructure and already knew local families. The NSO were therefore able to get involved with creating packs, delivering food parcels, providing some physical activity ideas cards and keeping in contact with those vulnerable families.

“What’s really come to the forefront has been our understanding of the issues and the challenges the families and young people face, especially the realities of the pandemic..... it’s impacted those living in poverty more adversely than other areas.” (NSO_2)

In Case Study 1 (CSO_1), we feature another club described as “an absolute pillar of the community” by their NGB. This club went to great lengths to support its members and their families in the wider community during the

pandemic. These innovations went far beyond the sport itself and included:

- Cooking instructions for simple meals.
- Respite fitness sessions for kids (parents got a break while kids worked out)
- Bedtime stories online to get kids away from gaming
- 3-minute TikTok fitness sessions for families to do together (CSO_1).

Similarly, volunteers who had participated on an NSO led development programme, became prominent activists in their local community. For example:

“We had one volunteer in Bradford who was recognised as like a neighbourhood hero because she started to cook meals and she started to support the vulnerable and do the shopping and she’s never done that before. And she’s even said to us that she wouldn’t have done it if she hadn’t volunteered in [sport].” (NSO_7)

ii. Sport being delivered in the community

During the pandemic, the context of sport delivery changed. Long-held assumptions about when and how sport should be delivered were challenged. This led some NSOs and CSOs to take sport out into the community, rather than expecting the community to come to them. For example, one NSO told us a story about how local volunteers started to knock on doors until 5 participants had been found and then run a dance class for them in the street outside. The NSO reflected on this change in delivery:

“We’re never going to bring them to our centre again.....We’re gonna keep sending our coaches around the city and now dance tutors doing stuff in parks and open spaces and bits of grass at the end of the street.” (NSO_2)

iii. Space to think about wider community

We heard several examples of the Covid-19 pandemic causing organisations to consider more deeply their role in the wider community. For example, one NSO told us how they considered issues of inclusion and diversity, which was previously only on their wish list. They formed an inclusion group and recruited a communications specialist with expertise in diversity. Importantly they said:

“None of that impetus would have been there without this covid space in the game. We would still be running round trying to book pitches for ... (tournaments)... and trying to get umpires. You know the space has given us to do so much of what we wanted to do, but you could only ever do a small sliver of it because the day job, if you like, got in the way.” (NSO_4)

Similarly, an archery club began to think more deeply about long-term sustainability and how they needed to engage more with younger people in the wider community:

“The things we needed to do to financially survive the pandemic have highlighted the need for progression planning. The influx of new, younger, members allows the club to develop these members to ensure there will be the skills in club for it to continue for the years ahead. Applying for funding was an identified need but it has led to looking at other ways the club needs to develop and starting to address them.” (CSO_58)

iv. Opening up facilities to the wider community

While restrictions in the pandemic generally resulted in caution and sports facilities being closed, some clubs who owned facilities opened them up to other groups. For example, a volunteer from Case Study 5 listed several initiatives that it enacted during lockdown:

- Invited clubs without access to use their modified facilities.
- Invited individuals from other clubs to coaching sessions.
- Hired out their field and woodland free of charge to a safeguarding organisation so they had access to a secure area for recreation.
- Allowed the prison service to use their field to exercise sniffer dogs as they lost access to their normal facilities.

Another CSO, which owned a large water sports facility, offered neighbouring indoor swimming clubs the opportunity to use their lake for open water swimming. It also allowed triathlon clubs to use the lake for their training (CSO_25).

This opening up to the community was not just physical facilities. One junior cycling club (CSO_76) made available its newly developed online provision to members of other clubs who did not have anything similar. By working with their NGB to publicise this, they drew in participants from around their region and further afield.

5. Reflection on innovation

In this section, we consider what we have learned about the conditions in which community sport volunteers are likely to innovate. In particular, we examine the determinants of volunteering using the headings of policy directives, embracing innovation and capacity (Doherty et al. 2020).

a. Policy directives

Many directives about Covid-19 safety measures and the return to sport came from Government and NSOs. Although the prescription of mandatory safety measures dominated this narrative, the sharing of good practices from the top down in other areas e.g., technology and volunteer communication, was also influential. When CSOs spoke about safety measures they referred to NSO guidance and the need to be compliant. That said, top-down instructions often varied in detail and the way in which CSOs interpreted and implemented directives depended on local context. Beyond this, most other innovation was motivated autonomously and not explicitly setting out to implement NSO suggested practice. Although there were a few CSOs using NSO campaigns to innovate, for example in mountaineering for recruitment and netball for volunteer mental health and wellbeing training. Most of the innovations we examined in depth show CSOs creating and implementing their own solutions at a local level, and in some cases sharing this practice with others.

The impact of NSOs on local innovation depended on the capacity of CSOs to respond to the suggestions and

support available from the NSOs. The desire to make changes suggested by NSOs was also driven by whether the CSO perceived the idea to be of value to their local setting. For example, one NSO had for some time promoted the use of a facility booking application and whilst many clubs used it, others resisted it. During the pandemic it became necessary to register who was using facilities, the experience of using it showed that it had other benefits for these CSOs:

“Other clubs have now had to embrace it and recognise actually this is a really good way of managing not only their own membership, but also bringing in others as well.”

There was also a sense of keeping up with other local CSOs and using all the best options available to achieve this as one volunteer in Case Study 5 said:

“Our driver put something in place to continue attracting the people, the other driver is, we want to be better than everyone else. We want to win all the tournaments, have the best facilities, win every competition, get every grant we apply for. And if we're going to continue to do that, we need change.” (CSO_5)

Overall, the local context of CSO innovations echoes the earlier sentiment that ownership of the solution influences the commitment to seeing it through.

b. Embracing innovation

During the pandemic, we have seen innovation in CSOs across the spectrum of sport. Perhaps this was to be expected given the unprecedented circumstances and the imposition of

mandatory safety measures. However, pandemic safety restrictions were only one driver. The challenges of Covid-19 were also seen as an opportunity by some CSO volunteers to make changes that they had already been thinking about pre-pandemic. They spoke about having the time and space to think differently and strategically, and to act. Two quotes illustrate this:

“It focused the innovation. We were a bit scatter gun, you know, it'd be nice to do this, nice to do that, and all of a sudden, we knew we needed to do this...” (CSO_5, archery)

“This is something we had been considering doing for some time but had never found time to implement.” (CSO_77, tennis)

In some cases, the innovations were a cross-over between what helped overcome Covid-19 problems, but also had other benefits. In Case Study 5, the provision of outdoor options for playing their sport met the needs of those concerned about being indoors, but also offered another way of participating which appealed to those looking for individual activities without commitment (a growing group in society). So, whilst response to the pandemic was the impetus, this turned out to be a creative innovation to grow membership. In other instances, innovations were beyond what was needed to adapt sport in the pandemic, such as facility and programme development. At CSO level, innovation has often been process or administration related, rather than programme or technology related (Hoeber et al. 2015). However, now there was a more even balance of innovation. This was because many CSOs were forced to adapt their sport and volunteering activity so that it could continue.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a greater acceptance of change. Innovation was willingly embraced by key individuals and a positive attitude to change was even seen among the wider groups of volunteers in CSOs, driven by a desire to get back to normal with their sport. There was more willingness to tolerate change as it was believed to be necessary to facilitate sport or physical activity. The process of innovation was also aided by the fact that volunteers and participants were living in the midst of constant change. There appeared to be more acceptance of trying out changes, to see if they would work. Decisions were made quickly, aided by more regular online meetings and the ability to get the right people on screens at the same time.

“Well, I said right [at the] beginning I would only do it, if I could present to the Board at the same time. I felt that was important and then quite quickly we moved on to having joint meetings so that we could agree something there and then ...” (Case Study 3 (CSO_3), bowls)

There were also efforts to push through innovation whilst change was being tolerated. Member surveys used to gather views on the impact of Covid-19 sometimes provided the underpinning evidence to help make the case for change. Thus, ‘covid... provided the leverage, if you like, to move it forward’. In other cases, some volunteers did not wait for committee agreement and instead went on with changes: ‘The club, you know if I ask them I'll be waiting for next year, so I just went ahead and did it. How I manage my section is how I manage it.’

Some changes were more radical than others and this varied across CSOs. Perceptions of change were also relative. For example, WhatsApp messaging among volunteers was a major innovation for some, whereas it was embedded practice for others. Many volunteers mentioned how change was made incrementally, and in this way it was tolerated. For example:

“The change has been more organic rather than forced. In fact, I doubt some members have really seen a change. That’s doesn’t mean it hasn’t worked though.” (CSO_29, netball)

“I think do things slowly, bit by bit, introduce our new members to new measures and slowly. So we did have a Facebook page, but then I introduced a Facebook group and that communication and saying Okay, this is the differences, this is how we use each one.” (CSO_4, mountaineering)

Valuing the club’s future was integral to planning for long term impact of innovation. For example, changes to the club’s image and the recruitment of younger volunteers should attract new members and volunteers, although it may take a while to see the results of this change. Others spoke of focusing the wider volunteers and members on the long-term view:

“We’ve got to make a decision, which says, we can see the bigger picture, which is 10 years from now, we will need these sorts of facilities, the current members may not benefit from it, but a future of our club ... will benefit from it...” (CSO_5)

In Case Study 1 (CSO_1, boxing) and Case Study 3 (CSO_3, bowls) there was a sense that innovation, although difficult to achieve agreement on, would provide the impetus to keep going through the remainder of the pandemic and beyond.

However, our snapshot survey also uncovered evidence to suggest that NSO volunteers were looking to return to the way things were pre-March 2020. For example:

“We will revert back to pre-covid shooting, as the changes will no longer be necessary if we reach a stage where covid is part of us, like the flu is.” (CSO_62, archery).

“We are going to ‘trial’ going back to the old system in August, if it proves unsuccessful, we will return to the online system.” (CSO_28, tennis)

Earlier research found that CSOs often wanted to “get back to normal” (Findlay-King et al. 2020). What actually happens in the long-term to Covid-19 inspired innovations would merit further investigation.

The embracing of innovation was also enhanced by the way volunteers planned the changes they made. Whilst advice was received from NSOs, with increased forums and discussions, many CSOs came up with their own solutions, volunteers with innovative mind sets, with cross over from changes in other sectors. The innovations from volunteers also fostered a greater sense of club identity, camaraderie and support. In general success required the motivation and deployment of volunteer effort. Case Study 5 (CSO_5) had developed a ‘men in sheds’ group who met to do repair work at the club and went on to construct a new field archery course. By awarding the club’s volunteers with a degree of autonomy, this led to a sense of ownership, dedication and commitment to the club. Social connection was able to continue between these volunteers, supporting each other ‘share[ing] ailments, illnesses, situations relevant to us’ and this provided a cohesion to the group. So successful innovation relied

on volunteers still receiving other social benefits from their working together.

Finally, research has shown that when an organisation has previously brought in a successful innovation it is more likely to innovate in the future. Volunteers in our study should therefore be ready to embrace further innovation as they are reporting changes made during Covid-19 that have kept their club or sport alive.

c. Capacity

The ability to adapt volunteering and sport provision depends on the resources and assets that community volunteers can draw on. In particular, the human resource capacity of CSOs was pivotal to innovation in the cases we examined. CSOs required skilled and enthusiastic volunteers to achieve change. Many spoke of the time and energy invested in creating change; promoting and implementing innovations; taking them through committees; and, in some cases, overcoming resistance. This also required the use of skills of persuasion, to drive the agenda through a club committee.

Innovation was easier if the club committee included skilled members, a factor identified by several successful clubs. Some CSOs had club chairs, who although volunteers, were retired from paid work and regarded the club management as a full-time job. Often there were key individuals who drove change. They worked to get others on side with ideas, so that the change would be accepted. An example was Case Study 3, where other volunteers had to be persuaded to adopt the innovation by ‘winning their hearts and minds’. Those leading change had to be able to create cohesion among fellow volunteers:

“Where it’s volunteers ...it does present real challenges because people could just walk away, you know? They can say “I don’t want to do this anymore”. So, I think bringing people with you, it’s really important, ... so that everyone’s in the loop as much as you can while you’re developing it and you know what the aims are why you’re doing it ...” (CSO_3, bowls)

Those leading change also had to be persistent in the face of resistance, often from older volunteers. As one volunteer commented, there were ‘too many old people on the committee not willing [to] look at modern processes’.

Innovation also relied on volunteers holding a variety of technical skills or accessing help externally. Successful adoption of digital changes such as applications for managing memberships, bookings and payments required volunteers with the skills, resources, and capability to use them. Case Study 4 illustrated how digital innovation in setting up ways of communicating with members was only possible because one committee member had the skills to do this (CSO_4, mountaineering). Experience and confidence in using technology were conducive to successful innovation, although some managed to learn as they went along. As we explored earlier, developing digital technology that worked for the local context took time and could be frustrating. It could also lead to tension with other volunteers who did not need to be involved in creating the technological innovation but did need to use the system designed. In Case study 3 with an older volunteer age profile, volunteer green stewards had been lost because they could not cope with the new online booking system (CSO_3, bowls). This illustrated a human capacity tension between taking other volunteers along

with the innovation or dropping them if they could not keep up. It was difficult to develop these skills locally. There were examples of NSOs providing support, but in most cases, this assumed a basic ability to access digital applications. There may also have been a reluctance to engage. For example, a key digitally skilled volunteer described how other committee members did not accept offers to support them with learning social media applications:

“It’s me trying to bring everybody up to date. Nobody else has the knowledge and/or insights and that’s the hurdle really.” (CSO_4, mountaineering)

So, ultimately digital skills were needed yet they were sometimes in limited supply. Some CSOs were sensitive to digital exclusion, so retained non-digital technology alternatives alongside new digital solutions (e.g. providing hard copy communications for some volunteers). Where clubs had an older volunteer base, there was particular recognition that digital changes should be made slowly with patience and accompanied by training, as illustrated in Case Study 3 (CSO_3, bowls). In many respects, this was recognition that it was necessary to build capacity where it did not exist.

6. Recommendations and conclusion

Following the data collection, analysis and reflection, we have made some suggestions and recommendations for fostering innovation in sports volunteers and their organisations.

a. Digital skill development

- CSOs need support with digital skills, strategies and online security. A minimum set of social media and communication tools could be offered in a toolkit. Initial training for using these requires an alternative non-digital access version for information technology beginners. Investment in bespoke training for older volunteers should be considered.
- For more complex digital innovation, e.g. website development and booking systems, it is suggested that a programme of support is developed, where professionals could offer expertise through micro-volunteering.
- CSOs should be encouraged to actively recruit volunteers with the skills set and experience for digital technology and to recruit a digital champion, with guidance on role description and promotion.
- CSOs should be encouraged to offer non-digital alternatives to all digital communications/systems.
- Sport England should join with other third sector organisations to tackle digital exclusion in deprived areas which can involve lack of access to wi-fi and smart devices.
- Local networks of CSOs in the same

sport should be developed so as they can support each other.

b. Communication

- Greater collaboration between NSO and CSOs to be encouraged.
- Systems for formally recording volunteers within each sport to be supported. Volunteers who have fallen out of communication lines in the reliance on digital during restricted times, to be contacted by non-digital methods and relationships rebuilt.
- A balance between online and face to face meetings is recommended to allow for convenience of meeting online and the social benefits volunteers may enjoy from meeting in person.
- Informal meetings and forums offered by NSOs should be kept, allowing CSOs to focus on what matters to them.
- Peer mentoring to be encouraged within and across sports, with formal facilitation by NSOs or Sport England.
- Online volunteer training to be continued where appropriate as it can be cost-effective.

c. Volunteer development

- Support should be given on how to keep new volunteers who have joined during Covid-19, for example through modernising volunteering, making it flexible, easier and more enjoyable.
- Maintain the focus on the importance of volunteers in sport in NGBs and other agencies.

- Encourage development of inclusive practices in volunteer recruitment and retention, perhaps focussing on underrepresented groups in future.

d. Process of innovation

- The pandemic created conditions conducive to innovation:
 - justification for and tolerance of change
 - a need for different ways of doing things
 - the cohesion of volunteers in a crisis
 - ability to make quick decisions, the seeing immediate benefit of actions
 - use of support but also ownership of creative local solutions.
- Consider how CSO innovation could be presented as the norm, and how having innovated already can be a stepping-stone.
- Form a network of innovation champions to support others with how to; achieve change, bring others on board, use skills of persuasion.
- Form a mentoring, peer working group for leaders looking to achieve major change in CSOs and keep them connected.
- Consider how to create space for volunteers to create and innovate perhaps by supporting volunteer sabbaticals or projects.
- Offer support with how to create and innovate as simple tools for development, how to make a case to others, ideas or templates.

e. Stand out innovations that could be replicated, scaled up and evaluated

- NSO online peer support forum.
- NSO digital inclusivity tools.
- Case study 2 focus on wellbeing and mental health of volunteers and members through “buddy-up” scheme.
- Softer approaches to digital take up (or any kind of innovation), based on the idea of volunteers wanting to do what they experience (e.g. NSO dropping in digital ideas).
- Process of innovation with reluctant fellow volunteers e.g. case study 3.

f. Gaps in the knowledge

- Most of our research findings were on the process and outcome of operational and technological change. In studying operational and technological change, we touched on the socio-political contexts and processes within CSOs (e.g. decision-making, resistance to change). These micro-processes are interesting features of operation and technological change, but they would also be significant as features of strategic change. There may be scope to focus new research into innovation at a strategic level, e.g., the transformation of core values and culture in CSOs. Arguably, that is where the largest gains can be made in moving forward on Sport England’s priorities, such as tackling inequalities, connecting communities, connecting with health and wellbeing, creating active environments and providing positive experiences for children and young people. Further research into the motivations and processes of strategic change and how volunteers

experience and navigate strategic change would be worthwhile.

- Our research found a few examples of innovations that improved accessibility to volunteering but not many. Further research is needed to uncover more innovations that have tried to recruit and involve volunteers from under-represented groups (e.g. disabled, female, lower socio-economic, culturally diverse communities). Further research would seek to understand the challenges and how these were overcome and to establish the conditions and factors that make innovations in widening volunteer participation successful.
- Our research identified Covid-19 policy directives as a driver of change in volunteering in CSOs and NSOs. We have also previously seen tax systems (e.g., Community Amateur Sports Club in 2002) and legislation (e.g., Equality Act 2010) drive change in CSOs. This suggests that there may be some mileage in researching potential legislative, regulatory, taxation and funding mechanisms to incentivise CSOs and their volunteers to make positive changes.
- Our research took a strengths-based approach to find positive examples of innovation. It is therefore important to seek out, listen to and understand the unheard voices – those that did not participate in this piece of research, perhaps who did not adapt, were not as resilient or would not respond to an online survey. In that way we could start to appreciate what barriers there are to innovation.
- Only one university sports club responded to our snapshot survey, so there is an urgent need to research the impact of Covid-19 on student volunteers in sports clubs – a vital developmental path for future volunteers in NSOs and CSOs.
- Our research highlighted policy directives, embracing innovation and capacity as critical factors in determining whether innovation takes place. This model could be built on to increase understanding of each of those factors and consider development of each one to create more favourable conditions for innovation.
- Our research has listened to the voices of the NSOs and volunteers in CSOs. Their stories are very important, and more work could be done to listen to a wider variety of volunteers and CSOs to understand different perspectives.
- This research was a small qualitative study with 77 CSOs and volunteers. Expanding further research to understand the impact of Covid-19 on many more CSOs at a national scale could provide an understanding of which types of clubs have been adversely affected in particular ways and why (and how can they be assisted).
- We found evidence of clubs wanting to “get back to normal”. What is the impact on volunteers and CSOs if they do not continue with innovations started during Covid-19? Can future innovation be influenced positively or negatively by that decision?

Conclusion

Sports volunteers can be effective innovators when they and their organisations see the problem to be overcome requires a new solution.

Volunteers in sports organisations have innovated in many ways during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of these have been identified and described in the report.

Volunteers and voluntary sports organisations that we surveyed had responded quickly and effectively to the crisis to enable their sport or club to continue or restart. Some had gone further and made other changes.

While the innovations are of interest in themselves, one learning for the future is about the process of innovation and the conditions that enabled the innovations to happen. That is what could help sports volunteers and their organisations to adapt to further external pressures, whatever they might be.

Based on detailed research, we have listed recommendations for actions that could build on innovations during Covid-19 and enhance processes of innovation in the future.

We have used the concepts of embracing innovation, capacity and policy directives to reflect on innovation and we believe these would be a useful way of thinking about facilitating future innovation by sport volunteers and their organisations.

Appendix 1: Case studies of CSOs

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

Case Study 1 (CSO_1): Introducing technology to enhance participation (Boxing)

Case Study 2 (CSO_2): Forming buddy groups to enhance engagement (Netball)

Case Study 3 (CSO_3): Using a survey of members to spark modernisation (Bowls)

Case Study 4 (CSO_4): Using social media to attract new members (Mountaineering)

Case Study 5 (CSO_5): Purchasing own land to offer an outdoor format of the sport (Archery)

Case Study 6 (CSO_6): Getting involved in the local community (Wrestling)

Case Study 7 (CSO_7): Implementing club membership management app (Cycling – BMX)

Case Study 8 (CSO_8): Increasing Volunteer Inclusion and Diversity (Cricket)

Case Study 1 (CSO_1): Introducing technology to enhance participation

Sport: Boxing

Size of club: Figures not available, although typical sessions involve around 30 members

No of volunteers: Unknown

Own premises/land: No, lease property

Age Range: Under 13s, over 14s and adults

Paid staff: Coaches only

What is the innovation?

The boxing club started using a Virtual Reality (VR) headset in their gym. This allows members to box in a virtual environment. Other members can also watch participants on a laptop and cheer them on from outside the ring.

Why was this innovation implemented?

The boxing club introduced a VR boxing game to attract members back into their club after the Covid-19 lockdown. They recognised that some members felt apprehensive about coming back to the club. The club felt that new and existing members would be drawn to the club to engage in the VR game.

“Younger people having spent the best part of the last two years sat in front of their computers, I think they found it hard to jump back into reality, and this provided a nice step.”

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?

The VR headsets have been incredibly popular with members. It provided a useful hook for young people and has boosted participation numbers:

“[The VR] is so popular, we have to give the kids a number. We let them do the VR session, for 3 or 5 minutes, something like that. But then afterwards, we encourage them to get involved in some of the other activities. [VR has created] a brand-new stepping-stone for getting kids involved in our sport, who might be nervous about getting involved.”

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?

The use of VR has created new volunteering opportunities within the gym, especially for those that do not necessarily have boxing or coaching skills. Volunteering to run the VR sessions simply requires the setting up of the VR equipment.

“It is a great opportunity for volunteers, because.... you have to be able to work with software, but in terms of the technical side of boxing you don't have to give a lot of feedback.”

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?

The club said that nothing had prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19. Covid-19 just provided the stimulus to think differently about how they could attract young people to the sport.

What were the challenges of implementing this innovation?

Financing the purchase of the VR equipment was the main challenge. Headsets cost £299 each and so the club approached private companies to fund them.

Case Study 2 (CSO_2): Forming buddy groups to enhance engagement

Sport: Netball

Size of club: 150 members (including 27 adults and 123 under-18s)

No of volunteers: 15 in administration plus 60 match-day

Own premises/land: No, facilities hired by session

Age Range: 8-40

Paid staff: No

What is the innovation?

The club created a scheme called 'buddy up' which involved players from different age group teams joining mentoring groups. The players were deliberately mixed up, with adult and junior members. This meant that all club members could engage with members in other teams. A volunteer set up the technology for signing up to the groups online and a total of 11 buddy up groups were formed. These groups met regularly and supported each other. This was in addition to the normal team training that was maintained virtually.

Why was this innovation implemented?

During the Covid-19 lockdown, the club was concerned that players could be lost to the sport. The club committee met regularly to discuss how they could keep members and volunteers engaged.

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?

Club members stayed involved and most restarted netball when restrictions allowed. Players reported feeling more connected to the club.

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?

Volunteers were as busy with the virtual training, checking Covid-19 guidance and rearranging venues. Although the 'buddy up' system needed new volunteers to run each group, the players in each group became the leaders and are now poised to get more involved in the club.

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?

Prior to Covid-19, the club had not done much to encourage wider engagement in the club beyond the boundaries of each team group. Although senior players occasionally popped into junior training nights, this had been very informal. The club intend to keep the buddy groups going after the Covid-19 restrictions ease.

What were the challenges of implementing this innovation?

Some of the older volunteers were not so tech-savvy, although they learnt to use video call software. Some members also did not have access to information technology equipment, although this was overcome by other members sharing old equipment.

Case Study 3 (CSO_3): 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 it was undoubtedly covid that the 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.

Case Study 4 (CSO_4): Using social media to attract new members

Sport: Mountaineering

Size of club: 35 members

No of volunteers: everyone takes on volunteering tasks on an adhoc basis

Age range: 37-60+

Own premises/land: No, rent them

Paid staff: None

What is the innovation?

The club created a new volunteering role to attract new members using online advertising and social media. The aim was to attract a more diverse age range of members.

Why was this innovation implemented?

The club had a small membership and were concerned that the Covid-19 pandemic would lead to a loss of members, especially since the sport's NGB had flagged up this risk. They wanted to attract new members.

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?

The new volunteer improved the club's online presence. Existing members were also encouraged to engage with the club's new social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram. As a result, the club has received more engagement from women and young people. This was reflected in the club's first new members meeting after the changes were made:

“About 80% of them are women, actually, which was quite a surprise because I selected a big target audience on Facebook of between 15 and 80. And so, yes, it was quite a lot of women coming and people that have just moved into the area that are wanting to join.”

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?

The new volunteer has encouraged volunteers to engage with technology and promoted use of a WhatsApp group. This has improved communication among volunteers.

What were the challenges faced when implementing this innovation?

While all club members agreed that it was important to attract new members, older members often found it difficult to understand and engage with the social media platforms. Older members were hesitant to offer help due to lack of technological knowledge. The new volunteer tried to provide some training, but that often proved difficult. As such, the new volunteer sometimes felt a bit isolated.

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?

The club had always intended to create a volunteer role to recruit new members but never got round to it. The Covid-19 pandemic and the threat of declining membership created extra impetus:

“I think [Covid-19] instigated it, yeah..... certainly the British Mountaineering Council, they lost Members during the pandemic. That's why they introduced this 'Find Your Adventure' campaign... and hence why we wanted to gain new members.”

The new volunteer said that it was important to make changes slowly and to try to keep other members on board, even if they did not entirely understand the process.

Case Study 5 (CSO_5): Purchasing own land to offer an outdoor format of the sport

Sport: Archery

Size of club: c.250 members

No of volunteers: c240 (all members are volunteers)

Own premises/land: Own land

Age range: All ages.

Paid staff: Coaches only

What is the innovation?

After the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the club quickly realised that their members would feel uncomfortable playing archery indoors. The club, therefore, bought their own land to host archery outdoors. With the land, they were able to host target archery, as before, but also introduce a field archery course. Field archery involves walking around a course between targets, which are set at varying distances, heights and angles. Since the club included a 'men in sheds' group, this group of volunteers were able to work on the land and develop the field course ready for when the sport could return after the easing of Covid-19 restrictions.

Why was this innovation implemented?

The innovation was implemented to ensure the club would be sustainable. The club wanted to create a facility that would attract 'pay and play' visitors and new members and allow them to host tournaments.

“The real bottom line was to keep the club sustainable in terms of the income we generate.”

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?

The outdoor facilities, especially the field archery course, have attracted new 'pay and play' visitors and members. Membership has quadrupled.

“The waiting list to attend the beginners' courses is the biggest we've ever had.... The field course appeals to a different type of individual to the boys and girls who don't want to stand on a range shooting the same target for 144 times. They want to go out and explore the countryside.”

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?

Acquiring the land created extra tasks for the club's volunteers. For example, volunteers are needed to regularly update and amend the field course. The club has also introduced several environmental initiatives on the land, which requires volunteers to plant trees and manage the land in a sustainable way. Although there are now more jobs, the club has been effective at recruiting volunteers. The club regards all of its members as volunteers and tries to create a sense of ownership and cohesion. By creating a sense of trust and promoting the

value of volunteering, the club has developed a sense of community among its volunteers. Volunteers are given training across the range of volunteering activities so that they are multi-skilled, which helps to ensure the club is sustainable. There have also been various initiatives across the age groupings.

“Club volunteering spans right across the club. We've got the men in sheds group but we've also got a big group of younger members boys and girls doing their Duke of Edinburgh awards and other programs for schools.”

What were the challenges faced when implementing this innovation?

The main challenge for volunteers was finding enough time to complete the land purchase and develop the outdoor facilities. That said, the club had a board of directors with a range of skills and experiences. Where help was required, they sought out funding and support from various sources.

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?

Before Covid-19, the club had not identified the appetite for field archery. Covid-19 provided a focus to move forward:

“[Covid-19] focused the innovation. Previously, we were a bit scatter gun, you know, it'd be nice to do this, nice to do that. Then, all of a sudden, we knew we needed to do this.”

Case Study 6 (CSO_6): Getting involved in the local community

Sport: Wrestling

Size of club: 400

No of volunteers: Unknown

Own premises/land: None. Club is run through a religious community centre.

Age range: 5 to 75+

Paid staff: Coaches

What is the innovation?

During the Covid-19 lockdown period, the wrestling club diverted their volunteering into supporting the local community. Club volunteers contributed to a food service that provided food to those unable to prepare meals or visit the shops to buy food. The volunteers helped prepare and deliver 300 meals per day to the local community.

Why was this innovation implemented?

The club, as part of the religious community centre, had always engaged with the local community. During the Covid-19 lockdown, it became apparent that vulnerable members of the community needed a food service and so the club got involved:

“Initially, it was obviously a big shock not being able to go to the gym every day and run classes for people ... [We noticed] people who were in need like the homeless ... families with children... and, because we're such a community-based club anyway, ... we took our energy away from the (wrestling) mat and put it back into the community where it was needed.”

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?

By running a food service, club volunteers and members were able to continue to maintain their involvement with the club. The food service also brought increased awareness to the club among the community. It has led to an increase in members:

“It put the club out there, even more so than before, so it wasn't just a wrestling club....We've probably gathered more members. A lot of people realise what you did for them during the lockdowns and so afterwards, they came our way.”

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?

All of the club's volunteers were needed to manage 300 food deliveries per day. This was made possible because the volunteers shared a passion for their club and community. The activity fostered volunteer cohesion and teamwork:

“It was all hands on deck really andbecause our volunteers wanted to do itnobody really thought of it as hard work, because when you want to do something, it's then a lot easier than when you don't.”

What were the challenges faced when implementing this innovation?

The club were aware of how the Covid-19 pandemic threatened people's mental health and that there was a risk of burnout among volunteers. Whilst volunteering was itself rewarding, it was also important to maintain a balance to health and well-being.

“It's just a lot of hard work...[Volunteers] also need to time out. It's important to look after yourself as much as you try to look after everybody else.”

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?

The club have always been community minded, although the energy of members and volunteers typically gets channelled towards the sport. The unusual Covid-19 circumstances meant that the club were able to extend their community involvement.

Case Study 7 (CSO_7): Implementing club membership management application (app)

Sport: BMX biking

Size of club: 174 members (100 junior)

No of volunteers: 20

Own premises/land: No, facilities rented on long term lease

Age range: 4 to 70, with approximately 60% under 15

Paid staff: Coaches are reimbursed expenses

What is the innovation?

The club introduced a club membership management app. The system used was Spond.

Why was this innovation implemented?

In response to Covid-19 restrictions, the club were required to restrict the number of BMX bike riders at any one session. They also needed an effective Covid-19 track and trace system and an electronic payment system to avoid handling cash.

“We used to have anybody could just turn up and we’d find a bike and a helmet and gloves and see how they got on but, because of covid restrictions, we had to set up a more formal process.”

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?

Implementing an online system for registering members and booking sessions saved time spent by volunteers on administration. It also helped improve the accuracy of membership data. Furthermore, the app has improved member communication. For example, the app allowed the club to collate details of all of their riders (including parents of under 15 year-olds) and message them efficiently – “it’s made it a lot easier for us to contact people”.

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?

Club administrators can now use Spond to send messages to members about volunteering events. This has made life considerably easier for club administrators:

“Sometimes it can be difficult to ask people to help if you’re not sure if they’re going to be a volunteer or not.....The secretary used to spend maybe two evenings going around asking people face-to-face or by email if they can help, whereas now it’s done in two or three minutes with a message on Spond and seeing what responses you get back. That has been one benefit of moving to Spond.”

With the app in place, members seem more willing to put themselves forward for roles. It has increased the pool of volunteers and reduced reliance on the same few volunteers to man BMX racing events/sessions.

“[Previously], we didn’t have the process to contact them reliably, which we now have, so we’re getting more people responding.”

What were the challenges faced when implementing this innovation?

The club implemented the app rapidly because of the Covid-19 situation. Whilst the app was easy to set up, the club would have preferred to spend more time testing it before going live.

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?

The club committee had been hesitant to use new technology. Older members of the committee did not understand ‘modern processes’. Covid-19 forced a change, which some more technology literate committee members were able to take forward.

Case Study 8 (CSO_8): Increasing volunteer inclusion and diversity

Sport: Cricket

Size of club: 300

No of volunteers: Unknown for whole club, although 5 female volunteers for girls group

Own premises/land: No, lease playing field from an independent school

Age Range: 5–75

Paid staff: Coaches

What is the innovation?

The club created a new role of 'team manager' for its girls' cricket sessions. The role was created to assist the team coach with non-coaching aspects of delivery and offer general support and assistance to the girls. The club encouraged Mums and other females to fill these roles, even if they did not know anything about the sport of cricket.

Why was this innovation implemented?

The role was created to ensure Covid-19 requirements were adhered to. In particular, there was a requirement to operate coaching sessions in small groups and to enforce hand sanitising and social distance rules. Furthermore, the new role was designed to recruit more women as volunteers and raise the profile of women within the sport.

What impact did this innovation have on the club as a whole?

The involvement of more women as team managers has created a positive, nurturing and supportive role for the girls in the cricket team.

What impact did this innovation have on sports volunteers?

The innovation helped to recruit new female volunteers for the club. It has also increased the 'visibility of women in the game' and helped to overcome the perception that cricket is 'a dad's game'.

“More women are now saying ‘ah there is a role for me to play here, okay, let me get involved’.”

What were the challenges faced when implementing this innovation?

There was some resistance from established coaches and other volunteers who felt that team managers should know more about the sport. Since cricket has hitherto been a male dominated sport, much of this resistance came from male club members. The challenge was overcome by making the team manager a supportive role, not a coaching role.

What prevented this innovation from happening before Covid-19 restrictions?

There was a desire to create a similar role prior to Covid-19, however there was uncertainty about how to implement it. The requirement for small group sessions provided a window of opportunity to introduce the change.

“It was something I had been thinking about, but I didn't know how. How would I go about it? How do I manage it? But because there was this whole concept of bubbles, it was “Oh, wow, that's how I'll do it”. It's only a limited number in the bubble and so that's how I'm going to do it....If there was no pandemic, I think it would have just been a concept, and it would have been “ah, we'll think about this”.”

Appendix 2: Snapshot analysis

The Snapshot Survey was sent to specific contacts identified through the NSO interviews and through NGB volunteering leads. The survey was shared on social media channels, with an open invitation to complete it. Participants could enter a prize draw with the opportunity to win equipment vouchers for their club. Those that completed the survey were CSOs that had some innovation to report – not in any way a representative sample of CSOs in England. Seventy-four CSOs, offering over 30 different sports and activities completed the snapshot. However, of these CSOs, thirty-six delivered archery as one of their activities. This may have been due to a focus from their NGB as they proactively shared the survey in their communications to clubs. No other sports or activities had more than 5 respondents.

The snapshot provides a quick picture of each CSO in relation to the innovations it made over Covid-19. There is more detailed information about the innovation that the CSO regarded as most significant. The information presented below is a summary of some of the findings. Much more detailed information about each CSO and comments it made in response to each question is held by Sport England.

One of the most important parts of the Snapshot was to test what had been discovered in previous research

and in NSO interviews and discover which innovations were happening in CSOs. The most common innovations in response to Covid-19 can be seen in our snapshot survey findings (Figure 2). The most mentioned innovation that CSOs reported was that they “regularly updated return to play protocols” (65). Sometimes the national guidance to CSOs could change daily, but certainly at times in the pandemic it was changing weekly. In addition, the majority of CSOs also “adapted the sport to follow Covid-19 guidelines” (61). Again, this was mostly volunteer-led and regular innovation as the guidelines changed and had to be re-interpreted.

Beyond the majority actively adapting to Covid-19 guidelines, the next most frequent changes were development of digital and online meetings, activity and governance. CSOs had moved committee meetings and AGMs online (62), volunteers had attended online sessions provided by NGBs (56) and CSOs had created or operated new booking and payment systems (53). As the external environment has returned to nearly “normal”, many of those innovations listed in Figure 2 will have been left behind as CSOs aim to return to the way things were before the pandemic. However, this may not be the case for additional innovations listed by 43 CSOs. Some examples of these can be found in Appendix 2: Snapshot AnalysisFigure 3.

There was evidence of the innovations that we expected to find from our previous research and NSO interviews taking place. However, innovations relating to opening up the CSO to the

wider community had least resonance (although they were evident) and specifically only five CSOs said they had worked towards including under-represented groups in volunteering.

The innovations listed (in Figure 2 and Figure 3) require a change in the work done by volunteers compared with pre-pandemic. In some cases, this might be a small change, but for others it represents a shift in way of working.

Figure 2: Frequency of common innovations in CSOs from snapshot survey

	Which of these changes have taken place in your club or organisation or have your volunteers made? During the Covid-19 pandemic did volunteers or your club or organisations do any of the following?	
	Answer Choices. Please tick all that apply. (Answered 73, skipped 1)	Response Total
	Volunteers may have developed new organisational systems and processes. Did volunteers do any of the following?	
1	Regularly updated detailed return to play protocols	65
2	Changed clubhouse or facility monitoring/cleaning/opening routines	51
3	Created or operated new booking and payment systems	53
	Volunteer roles may have changed since March 2020. Can you select how they changed?	
4	Volunteers took on roles previously done by paid staff	5
5	There is more flexibility of roles depending on the needs of the organisation	26
6	Volunteers moved to online or virtual volunteering roles	29
7	An existing volunteer took on the role of Covid officer	45
8	A new volunteer took on the role of Covid officer	6
9	Volunteers moved to totally different roles as their previous roles were not possible during Covid-19	6

	Volunteers may have developed new organisational systems and processes. Did volunteers do any of the following?	
10	Found a new venue for sports and activities	10
11	Applied for grants or funding related to Covid-19	42
12	Adapted the sport to follow Covid-19 guidelines	61
13	Used the furlough scheme to retain staff	7
14	Moved committee meetings and AGMs online	62
15	Delivered sports and activities online (e.g. coaching sessions, social events, quizzes)	35
	Volunteers may have opened the club or organisation to more people or the community. Did the club or organisation do any of the following?	
16	Volunteers moved to totally different roles as their previous roles were not possible during Covid-19	11
17	Opened up to a wider community (e.g. non-members)	17
18	Worked towards including volunteers from under-represented groups	5
	The club or organisation may have become more connected to their sports National Governing Bodies (NGBs). In what way(s) did this happen?	
19	Volunteers attended online sessions provided by NGB (e.g. webinars, training, safeguarding courses)	56
20	Volunteers joined online discussions with other clubs or organisations (e.g. about management, NGB systems etc)	30
21	Volunteers had increased contact with NGB staff or volunteers	31

Each CSO chose one of their most significant innovations (we asked for it not to be zoom meetings) to write about in more detail in the Snapshot. Categories of innovation that arise are:

- **Digital**
 - online booking and social events
 - online sessions where possible
- **Venue**
 - moving outdoors instead of indoors
 - developing space e.g. through floodlighting, resurfacing, outdoor seating
 - team of volunteers allowed to move equipment only,
 - keysafe rather than keyholder system
- **Coaching**
 - adapted numbers and spaces according to restrictions
 - online coaching sessions, personalised plans (when not able to attend), more learn at home activities
 - adapt to covid-safe activities
- **Other activities**
 - quizzes, art, online activities
- **Health & Wellbeing**
 - emphasis on members health and well-being including suicide prevention
- **Finance**
 - contactless payments and direct debits, reduced fees for months of no play
 - actively seeking funding opportunities
- **Marketing**
 - use of social media, design of new website, discounts for family members to join

Of those significant innovations listed by the CSOs, 53 are now accepted normal practice in the organisation and 42 intend to keep the innovation after restrictions ease. The CSOs explained why they were going to continue (or not) and examples of those answers are located in Figure 4.

The process of adopting one significant innovation was charted in the snapshot. While CSOs were asked about stages in the process or cycle of innovation, there was more focus on the description of the actual change to practice (such as recruiting race-day volunteers) and least on discussing who did what to make it happen.

There is more analysis that could be done on the wealth of information found within the Snapshot in further research.

Figure 3: Other innovations (not listed in Figure 2)

Examples of “Other Innovations that were not listed previously” from Snapshot Survey

- adapting the venue e.g. one-way systems
- purchasing outdoor facilities
- new membership options developed
- fundraising drive
- upskilling of volunteers
- trained new coaches
- applied for a grant to build toilet facilities
- made improvements to club facilities when closed
- created voucher system rather than cash
- undertook member survey
- adjusted league format
- non sport related activities for members and parents such as bed-time story time.

Figure 4: Why (not) continue with most significant innovation after restrictions ease

Examples of Reasons for Continuing or Stopping the CSO most significant innovation from Snapshot Survey

Continue

- It is a much more efficient and user-friendly system and really something that we should have implemented sooner.
- It's enhanced our club through togetherness, support and camaraderie.
- It has been helpful to have the one-on-one option for family members who may not do well in a large group. For example, a person with ASD or Anxiety would possibly be overwhelmed with a large group activity.
- The things we needed to do to financially survive the pandemic have highlighted the need for progression planning. The influx of new, younger, members allows the club to develop these members to ensure there will be the skills in club for it to continue for the years ahead. Applying for funding was an identified need but it has led to looking at other ways the club needs to develop and starting to address them.

Not continue

- On-line booking system is time consuming and expensive. Adds no value other than to comply with legislation.
- We are now able to get back to our usual venue.
- Because most clubs we play against won't be doing it this way, it would be too different from the norm.
- In person activity is much preferred by our members.
- Will probably keep online booking for some sessions and return to drop-in for others. We are consulting our membership and our volunteer supervisors who have to manage sessions.

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