



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

Summary report

Research for Sport England

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Introduction

The restrictions to combat the Covid-19 pandemic created a unique context for sports volunteers and organisations. 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).

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 affiliated clubs and groups. This research was designed to identify the challenges and opportunities for volunteers, CSOs and NSOs during the pandemic and to analyse innovative responses. The aim was to compile a typology of innovations, share examples of good practice and understand the innovation process.

In this research, 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). Organisational context is important, and innovation can be revolutionary for one organisation but appear to be ‘established practice’ in another (NESTA 2014, p38).

Research

We carried out qualitative research through surveys with ninety, volunteer-led sports organisations. Seventy-four CSOs completed an online survey (Snapshot) and 8 CSOs took part in detailed case-study interviews. Thirteen NSOs completed in-depth interviews. We analysed the qualitative information collected looking at themes. More detail can be found in the [full report](#) which is published on the Sport England website.

Findings

In the thematic analysis of the innovations adopted by volunteers and NSOs and CSOs surveyed we identified 6 themes:

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

The full report details those findings and illustrates them with quotes and case studies. These provide ideas and practical examples that may be useful to other sports clubs and organisations who are seeking to innovate or engage differently with their volunteers or participants. However, another key objective of this research was to better understand the process of innovation. This is valuable if we are to understand how to encourage innovation. The rest of this summary focusses on reflections about innovation and how it may be encouraged in the future to help volunteers and clubs rebuild better.

Reflection on innovation

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

Policy directives and local responses

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 are a few detailed examples in the [main report](#) where CSOs did use national campaigns to innovate. 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. Overall, the local context of CSO innovations is extremely important and ownership of the solution or innovation (most often at the local level) influences the commitment to seeing it through. 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.

Embracing innovation

During the pandemic, we have seen innovation 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.

In some cases, innovations were initially a response to Covid-19, but then had other benefits. In one CSO, 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 went 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 sport 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 any kind of activity. The process of innovation was also aided by the fact that volunteers and participants were living in the midst of constant change. In CSOs and NSOs there was 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.

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 evidence for the case for change. Thus, 'covid... provided the leverage, if you like, to move it forward'. In other cases, 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.

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.

In two case studies 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. Earlier research found that CSOs often wanted to **"get back to normal"** (Findlay-King et al. 2020, Nichols et al. 2021). What 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**, led by volunteers with innovative mind sets, perhaps with ideas 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**. One CSO 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. The club's volunteers had a degree of autonomy,

and 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. A 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.

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. Sometimes 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. They 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. Experience and confidence in using technology were conducive to successful innovation, although some managed to learn as they went along. 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 one CSO with an older volunteer age profile, volunteers had been lost because they could not cope with the new online booking system. This illustrated a human capacity tension between taking other volunteers along with the innovation or losing 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.

In this research, digital skills were highlighted particularly as the CSOs completed an online survey. We have not been able to report on those CSOs that were not digitally engaged during the pandemic. Some CSOs were sensitive to digital exclusion of their members and volunteers, so retained non-digital technology alternatives alongside new digital solutions. Where clubs had an older volunteer base, there was recognition that digital changes should be made slowly with patience and accompanied by training. In many respects, this was recognition that it was necessary to build capacity where it did not exist.

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. 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. The innovations documented can be shared and offer inspiration and practical examples to other organisations. However, the strengths-based approach to the research means there are unheard voices. CSOs that had not innovated did not respond to the survey. There was also little evidence of NSOs and CSOs increasing the diversity of their volunteers, nor focussing on that as an important consideration for the inclusion agenda.

One important 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). In the *full report*, we have made suggestions and recommendations to 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 these could be a useful way for NSOs and Sport England to think about facilitating future innovation in CSOs and volunteering.

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