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Running the club for love: Challenges for identity, accountability and governance relationships

The current context of State sport governance and funding structures in the United Kingdom continue to challenge national, regional and local bodies and community clubs' abilities to fulfil ambitions to support participation and competition at all levels. Notwithstanding sport clubs' laudable intentions to support involvement and encourage participation (often with limited resources, guidance and communication from National Governing Bodies (NGB)), clubs face considerable practical, political and ideological constraints that adversely affect their day-to-day operations and ability to translate sport policy in 'action' in meaningful ways. Drawing on data from 21 athletic clubs in England, this paper examines how athletic clubs' relations with the NGB, UK Athletics (UKA), raise questions about the clubs' individual and collective identities, agendas, ideals and overall value to its members.

Keywords: Athletics, grassroots, identity, accountability, sport governance, England, policy

Introduction

The World Athletics Championships in 2017 were a major international event that drew attention to the strength and vitality of the United Kingdom's athletic culture. However, under the surface tensions emerged, highlighted by mainstream media, related to a lack of volunteering, attendance at events, funding, grassroots participation[1] and support provided by the National Governing Body (NGB), UK Athletics (UKA) (Ingle, July 2 2017; Chowdhury

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[1] Grassroots in this article refers to community or foundational level led by volunteers (Cuskelly, 2008; Misener and Doherty, 2013)

and Gwilliam, July 3 2017; Kelner, August 9 2017). In particular, Longmore (August 13 2017) reported that clubs 'were thriving despite the national governing body, not because of it'. Among local and regional athletic clubs within the UK – some of whose opinions are explored in the paper - there was an evident perception that the UKA's focus on short/medium term planning had increased tension between clubs and the sport's professional sector. Such concerns might be easily sensationalised. However, academic analysis and exploration is needed to better understand the crux of these concerns among club sport providers with the sport, their perceptions of roles and responsibilities as distinct from that of the NGB, and the consequences of sport policy and ideology reception and transformation of the national and local level.

To note at the outset, the complexity of sport in the United Kingdom is unique and key organisations include a mixture of public bodies, such as quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (QUANGO's), non-departmental bodies (NDPB's) like Sport England, UK Sport[2], and regional sport boards, local authorities, Higher Education institutions, and voluntary and private sector bodies (e.g. regional, county, local level NGB's, voluntary and commercial clubs) (Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, Nodland and Rommetvedt, 2007; Grix, 2009; Goodwin and Grix, 2011). In practice many of these organisations operate at distance from central government in that they receive state funding, operate within associated regulatory frameworks, and assume varying degrees of autonomy and decision-making capacity. Yet, as Bergsgard et al. (2007) argues, separation and autonomy are purely symbolic. Organisations actually work to more explicit agendas set by the State via the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Not unlike many other State departments, DCMS not only have the

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[2] UK Sport focus on leading sport in the UK to world class success. Sport England's focus is to ensure everyone in England should feel able to take part in sport or activity, regardless of age, background or ability

responsibility for supporting the United Kingdom's sport at all levels, but also for developing policy to set governance agendas, funding and investment priorities, monitoring and evaluation procedures, accountability measures, as well as short and long term strategic visions (DCMS, 2015). DCMS's intentions may be to act in the best interests of all sport entities, yet the translation, adherence and compliance with DCMS at the level of NGB's and the regional and grassroots level cannot be easily guaranteed. The influence, and invariably control, that DCMS holds over sport structures within the UK is formed through control of funding allocations and performance target setting by agencies, such as Sport England and UK Sport (Bergsgard et al., 2007; Grix and Carmichael, 2012). Specifically, funding decisions are based on sports fulfilling government outcomes and achieve physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development and economic development imperatives (DCMS, 2015). Moreover, further scholarly interrogation is of value in demonstrating how clubs' organisational relationships with parent entities weather within in a context demarcated by high performance funding maxims (and related accountability and transparency measures.

To enable this process sport policies (e.g. PE[3] and Sport Strategy for Young People, DoE[4] 2008, and Creating a sporting habit for life, DCMS, 2012) are delivered through a broad spectrum of devolved organisations such as Sport England or SportScotland[5] as well as NGB's such as UKA which is the NGB for athletics but can also be known as British Athletics which is the consumer brand of the governing body. Furthermore, there are further layers of athletics

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[3] PE is Physical Education

[4] DoE is Department of Education

[5] SportScotland is Scotland's national agency for sport and view sport as a way of life as it is at the heart of society and therefore has a positive impact on people and communities.

governance from UKA, to England Athletics, county athletics and then regional and grassroot clubs. All have their various parts to play within how their sport is delivered but for outcomes to be achieved a well-defined relationship between and through these bodies and sport clubs from the grassroots must operate. Grassroot organisations are reliant upon volunteer[6] administrators and are not necessarily well-equipped or supported to implement central policy effectively which in turn creates uncertainty about the future of sport management (Chadwick, 2009; Bergsgard et al., 2007; Hoye, Smith, Nicholson, Stewart and Westerbeek, 2012). The debates here about volunteering and wider research on sport clubs (Cuskelly, McIntyre and Boag, 1998; Østerlund, 2013; Wicker, 2017) raise a number of issues that have drawn scholars interest and these issues include motivations, experiences, rewards and the professionalisation in sport federations as well as the roles and relationships of volunteers and the development of social capital (Cuskelly, 2008; Doherty, Misener and Cuskelly, 2014; Ruoranen et al., 2016; Lucassen and de Bakker, 2016; Donnelly, 2016).

As a context for examining some of the nuances of national sport policy interpretation and articulation at the grassroots level, this study focuses on the sport of athletics (track and field, road and cross-country running). This is for two main reasons. Firstly, the NGB for athletics UKA receives one of the highest funding packages available for Olympic Games success, and for the 2017-2020 Olympic rotation athletics will receive £27,136,245. As the funding figures are relatively high in comparison to other sports, this has resulted in the predominant focus on elite level performance (UK Sport, 2017). Secondly, although England Athletics are the midway agency between the grassroot clubs and the NGB of UKA there has

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[6] Sports Club Survey 2013 reported that the average club (approximately 114 adult members) now has 24 volunteers.

still reportedly been a long history of conflict between the main clubs, athletes, and governing body over issues such as values, governance and policy changes (Talbot as cited in Grix 2009, p. 37). Athletics, therefore, provides a good sight to comprehend the ways in which the structures of sport governance and consequences of complex governance and policy affects the identities and efficacy of sport entities.

We acknowledge that the situation with athletics clubs in the United Kingdom, their parent national governing body and state entities may not be necessarily novel. In many ways, the structure, processes and tensions this paper seeks to evidence in the context of UK athletics are emulated in other sport sectors in the kingdom and further abroad in club sports systems in Europe and beyond (Grix, 2009; Østerlund, 2013; Donnelly, 2016). Across national and international spaces, research has drawn attention to the precarities of state funding mechanisms and frameworks, the sustainability of resources at 'grassroots levels', inefficiencies in resourcing and management that impact upon the effectiveness and productivity of clubs, and tensions that continuously emerge out of/as a result of the hierarchies between the delivery of mass participatory, semi-professional and professional levels (Goodwin and Grix 2011; Donnelly, 2016; Ruoranen et al., 2016; Lucassen and de Bakker, 2016) This paper has value in contributing to these debates and providing strength to the club level voice within sport sector debates.

In highlighting the relationships and power dynamics evident within and across UKA's organisational hierarchy, and by affording voice to athletic club members, this paper offers an alternative perspective of organisational autonomy and identity in sport. Drawing on organisational identity and management scholarship (Mintzberg, 2003; Clegg et al., 2006; Misener and Doherty, 2013; Doherty et al., 2014), the aims of the study are to: 1) discover how national sport policy informs the relationship between the key stakeholders of UKA and grassroot athletics clubs; and 2) investigate how power manifests itself and provide a basis for

organisational identity formation within athletic clubs in England. The paper begins with an outline of the current UK athletics contexts with an emphasis on its volunteer roots, followed by reviewing the prevailing literature on organisational autonomy and identity to conceptualise some of the underpinning concerns evident in the current governance tensions within the sport.

Understanding athletics organisation in the United Kingdom

While UKA may appear an advocate for the unified causes and needs of its members, individual national organisations have expressed their own particular concerns. England Athletics (EA) state that 'the work of volunteers is fundamental to the success of athletics in England (England Athletics, 2017)' and although there is evidence that there has been a growth in volunteering within athletics this may be due to the establishment of 'parkrun[7]' events rather than through registered grassroots clubs where it has been reported that 'the amount of time given on a volunteer basis is absurd and not acceptable… (Nichols et al., 2016, p. 137)'. In England there are over 1200 clubs all of which require volunteers for coaching, officiating and additional roles that require legal, marketing, Clubmark[8], athlete welfare or sponsorship expertise (England Athletics, 2017a). Accordingly, research is required to focus on those at the heart of the delivery process and specifically grassroots level volunteers. As Girginov (2010) suggests, recognising the culture of sport organisations and the implications for the governance and management of sport matters, and this becomes even more important when considering that

7 Parkrun is a free, weekly, 5km timed run which take place across the world open to all abilities.

8 Clubmark is the sport accreditation scheme for community sports clubs and stands for higher standards of welfare, equity, coaching and management in community sports clubs and ensuring the nation's sports club infrastructure is safer, stronger and more successful. Essentially it demonstrates that a club can provide the right environment in considering welfare and enjoyment of life-long participation in sport (ClubMatters 2018).

volunteers are often not involved in any decision-making processes.

As evidenced in existing literature (Slack, 1997; Jones, 2001; Crowther and Green, 2004; Schein, 2004; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006; Clegg, Courparsson and Phillips, 2006), focusing on identity and administrative relationships within sport governance is useful in identifying and understanding tensions and conflict, agenda setting and the causes and consequences of the lack of funding or influence in policy making. In placing an emphasis on relationship forces and stakeholder complexities within particular industry, organisational identity theory provides a useful framework to uncover how the NGB and the clubs interact from the view of participants/agents at the grassroots level (Slack and Parent, 2006; Robson, 2008) thereby providing a lens through which the clubs can formulate and understand their position as a coherent institution. In so doing, the paper endeavours to voice some of the perspectives of those volunteering at the grassroots in athletics and the key debates that underpin their UKA relationship. The interplay between the cultural elements of loyalty and enduring love for clubs, the sport, and its participants provides the basis for continued involvement in grassroots sport (Cuskelly and Harrington, 1997; Doherty, Misener and Cuskelly, 2014). In doing so, the paper contributes further voice to debates about the precarious nature of volunteerism underpinning not merely athletics but grassroots sports writ large.

Forming (athletic) organisational identity and authority

UKA view their governance of athletics as the overseeing of the development and management of the sport from grassroots through to podium and, invariably, fundamental to sustaining participation in athletics (British Athletics, 2013c). However, if UKA are essential to the promotion of its sport, the precise purpose of grassroots athletic clubs has been less well defined. The historical conflict between the governing body for athletics and the athletic clubs has long been contentious over their roles but also the lack of understanding demonstrated

around the fact that grassroot volunteers primarily engage with their clubs because of the love of their sport, rather than any sense of responsibility to deliver policies on behalf of the State. This in particular was raised as an issue in 2002 in Game Plan (DCMS 2002) where it was recognised that the UK has a unique challenge as athletes can compete internationally at two different levels, representing the UK or from the Home Counties of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It has been argued that grassroot athletic club identity has been formed around the time and money from volunteer members and athletes (Cuskelly and Harrington, 1997; May et al, 2012; Hoye et al., 2012). This type of organisational identity based around loyalty and love for the club, the sport, and its' participants is something that is central, distinctive and enduring about grassroots organisations and is central to this study of organisational identity in grassroot athletics. Due to this commitment, it is important to highlight some of the voices within the grassroot athletic clubs to reveal their thoughts and feelings about the provision and organisational structure of their sport. In exposing club voices there exists the potential to reveal an alternate reality to how the sport is organised and clubs negotiate the control, and identity of the sport, with the UKA.

It is useful to consider the conceptualisation and roles of organisational authority when examining the consequences of current sport structures and governance within athletics. Authority, according to Jones (2001), is the power that is legitimised by the legal and cultural foundations on which an organisation is based and is therefore the ultimate source of power within an organisation. Authority provides the knowledge and ability to resolve critical organisational problems but also the right to control production and know-how (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). Notions of authority and power have, however, not been extensively explored within an athletics context but these concepts are useful, for understanding how DCMS and UKA currently exert control in defining the terms of grassroots sport operations and implementation of national policy through organisations such as EA. Although, grassroots

clubs have the authority to run their own organisation in the way that they choose, their operations must still occur within a regulatory framework set down as part of EA membership which forms UKA membership. This formal authority provides a particular conceptualisation of power that is a useful reference point for examining the structural tensions and organisational culture and identity within athletics. Yet, there are further power subtleties that can manipulate and be enacted, for instance, the power of negotiation and resistance (Weber as cited in Slack, 1997; Jones, 2001; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). These power subtleties reside in grassroot organisations because of the clubs' strategic roles in the implementation of athletic sport policy, and the intentions of (some) clubs to assert their own agency which can, in turn, formulate an organisational identity around the core membership and common purpose of their club. The introduction of Key Performance Indicators' and Clubmark accreditation are examples of how UKA authority over clubs has resulted in consistency for the sport as a whole rather than considering the organisational identity of the clubs and their historical development of their role within their local community.

The ways in which the UKA have shaped the organisational identities of athletics has, arguably, been shaped by power relations between numerous athletic stakeholders over a variety of reasons. Goodwin and Grix (2001) for instance argue that UKA's identity has been shaped through its lack of autonomy from Sport England and UK Sport (who respectively dictate the grassroots and high performance imperatives for the State-funded sport sector). This is in comparison to richer NGB's such as the Football Association (FA) which has resulted in the culture of athletics being shaped by central government policy makers and the increasingly dependent nature of funding for sport. Grassroot athletic clubs, according to King (2009) have increasing concerns over the conditional funding arrangements that shape the current governance of their sport. In particular, the resource allocation decisions of UKA which tend to favour elite athletics rather than grassroot athletics development across regional and local

levels (Grix 2009, 2010; Goodwin and Grix 2011). Such regulation has increased the systems of measuring performance and these according to Sam (2009, p. 501) 'ultimately constrain their capacities to balance the multiple demands of stakeholders.' Green and Houlihan (2006), Sam (2009) and King (2009) all highlight the increasing levels of demands made on sport organisations which arguably undermines autonomy, stifles development and innovation within grassroot clubs resulting in tensions surrounding organisational identity. In fact, McDonald (2000, p. 84) contends that non-elite objectives such as mass participation and local club development have become increasingly peripheral arguing that there has been 'a qualitative shift in the sports-participation culture away from the egalitarian and empowering aspirations of community-based sporting activity to a hierarchical and alienating culture of high-performance sport'. The concern here is that such marginalisation invariably has the potential to adversely influence the identity of the club and/or its capacity to negotiate a new identity in the future as priorities change. In addition, in a climate in which club sustainability and economic viability remains tenuous, marginalisation may raise further questions within clubs about adhering to national policy agendas or continue to forge their own path.

Athletic clubs exist for different reasons from commercial and corporate organisations as many were formed through communities and sustained by volunteers for the interests of their members (Cuskelly and Harrington, 1997; Doherty et al., 2014). An invariable consequence of these varied agendas of club is the potential for increased conflict between the government branches such as the DCMS organising and controlling outcomes and targets, the NGB's executive boards and committees pressured to adapt to commercial private sector thinking, and grassroots clubs still overwhelmingly governed by volunteers (Girginov, 2010; Hoye et al., 2012). To note, tensions may, invariably, exist as an innate characteristic of the organisational hierarchies within the sport sector, but also may reside and manifest within the individual and ideological differences between particular members within these organisations. Regardless of

where the tension originates or is directed, the concern within this paper is that athletics organisational hierarchies are, at times, entwined with complex stakeholder relations and personal political relations that cannot be untangled easily. It may thus be difficult, or indeed impossible, to separate individual ideological and identity clashes from the historically entrenched organisational power structures within which they reside. Such complexities withstanding, the work of Harvey and Lévesque (2007) suggest that because identity within a social network such as an athletic club is developed and accrued over time therefore any changes that are imposed from any external organisation (e.g. an NGB) are making unreasonable assumptions about the role of volunteering. Not potentially unlike many other sports operating at this level, this volunteer basis and community spirit gives the athletics sector a parochial ethos that is particularly community-centric. The work of Goodwin and Grix (2011); Green and Houlihan (2006); Green (2007); Sam (2009); Taylor and O'Sullivan (2009) highlight the profound shift in accountability away from traditional stakeholders in grassroot clubs and governing bodies toward the government, its agencies, and commercial sponsors. The suggestion is therefore that the centrally controlled, top down governance and management of athletics has led to increased tension and conflict between grassroot athletic clubs and UKA (Grix, 2009; Phillpots et al., 2010). As such, the study are to: 1) discover how national sport policy informs the relationship between the key stakeholders of UKA and grassroot athletics clubs; and 2) investigate how power manifests itself and provide a basis for organisational identity formation within athletic clubs in England.

Method

This research employed a qualitative multi-method approach utilising questionnaires, personal correspondence and publicly accessible documents from grassroots clubs and UKA (e.g. official administrative documents, organisational archives, press releases and digital/internet

material). The approach undertaken was congruent with the intention of gaining an in-depth understanding of the organisational politics, authority and identity affecting UKA's governance of grassroots athletics in England. As the study involved identifying and selecting athletics clubs that were knowledgeable or had experience in responding to and implementing government policy imperatives, a criterion sampling method was utilised (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Veal and Darcy, 2014). All clubs invited to take part in this study were English athletic clubs and had links to the three main branches of athletic competition which are road, track and field and cross country. All club participants had an active membership in excess of 150 (a medium sized UK athletic club) and had recorded results appearing across local, regional and national levels of competition. These parameters subsequently reduced the clubs contacted from over 1200 to 167. To note, we acknowledge here that the nature of participation in the study may be read against the wider characteristics of the volunteer-based athletic industry whereby volunteers' time is precious and contributions to these sorts of studies are not always prioritised, seen as valuable or meaningful, despite the researchers' best intentions. Nonetheless, of the initial sample, there were twenty-one replies received in total (a response rate of 12.6%) with a total membership of 5800 athletes, resulting in an average membership of 262. All the questionnaire or personal correspondences' were received from the Chairman, Treasurer or General Secretaries of the clubs.

A self-designed open-ended questionnaire was developed with the purpose of discovering clubs relations with their governing body and was based on previous studies (e.g. Green and Houlihan, 2006; Grix, 2009; King 2009; Phillpots et al, 2010; Goodwin and Grix, 2011; Grix and Carmichael, 2012). The questionnaires were framed to gather a personal response from a club perspective enabling data that reflected an expression of feelings, emotions and opinions (Thomas, 2011). The questionnaire itself consisted of five sections; (1) general information, (2) club competition and structure, (3) definitions, (4) governance of

athletics; and (5) the future and included questions on 'does your club provide or not provide opportunity for club athletes to achieve growth and greater levels of participation'; would you consider your club to be a grassroots organisation?'. The research project was granted prior ethical approval at the University of Worcester and all participants provided informed consent and were assured of their anonymity at all stages. As part of this assurance, pseudonyms have been used for specific clubs and individuals throughout.

The personal correspondence and questionnaire data was triangulated to give a more balanced and detailed picture and therefore a thematic framework was constructed following a general inductive approach allowing for findings to emerge from data with the view that this would yield richer data (Thomas, 2003; Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, 2004; Hoye, 2007; Edwards and Skinner, 2009; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Congruent with this methodological scholarship, and comparable work of Draper and Coalter (2013), Ringuet-Riot et al. (2014) and Darcy et al. (2014), the thematic framework model we employed followed four key steps. These included: 1) group and organise data by questions; 2) identify specific segments of information e.g. youth development or funding or volunteers; 3) Blend segments into broader themes e.g. communication, interference, competitions; 4) Reduce and order themes and create model with most important themes e.g. efficiency, identity, accountability. All themes have been derived as a result of the analysis of all club data. It should be noted at this point that due to the nature of the questionnaire and the written communications from the various clubs and their representatives alongside the relatively low response rate that it did reduce the complexity of the data, however the intention was take into consideration all viewpoints and capture their appropriate sentiments (collective or otherwise) in relation to the paper's focus on identity, accountability and the wider context of governance relationships. While not all clubs are represented in verbatim excerpts, we have endeavoured to capture the various sentiments of their voices within our arguments and analysis and build on the conversations from the

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participants with the intention to convey the personal perspectives and draw a line between the academic study of governance and organisational identity to the reality of those involved in grassroots athletics clubs in England.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of club identity

The work of Mintzberg (2003) argues that organisations from a business perspective have a number of layers that have their own role which connect to the next to enable the strategic, the operating, the middle line, the technostructure (the technically skilled administrators), the support staff and organisational culture. Applying this typology to athletics in the UK the structure of UKA, National, Regional, County and club organisations can be seen, but the core ideology and/or organisational culture appears to have been lost somewhere between the top and bottom layers. This has resulted in a lack of loyalty toward UKA from those at grassroot clubs because of the increased levels of bureaucracy between these two levels of athletics delivery, leading to the perception of no common identity or culture which may bind them together. Within English athletics some clubs come to loyalty junctures where they believe their own agenda, values, practices and ideals are not, necessarily, in harmony with the parent organisation (UKA) imperatives.

Reference to identity was especially evident in response to questions regarding 'grassroots' meanings and what the impact therefore has upon the clubs and athletes resulting relationship with UKA. Some clubs appeared to be quite clinical and dispassionate in their responses such as 'the only official function of grassroots...is to seek out potential elite athletes at the expense [or] non concern of others (Cram AC)' or 'entry-level and non-elite athletes (Bannister Racers)' and '…where people begin, and commence their development (Ovett

Racing Club)'. These clubs refer to themselves as being organisations that facilitate the entry level and development of participants only. The vast majority of responses however were focused around clubs being the 'bedrock of the sport (Holmes Harriers)', or 'the club is the athletics family (Chairman, Temple Trotters)'. These more emotive responses from clubs reflect, to a degree, their passionate connection to their sport but also a loyalty and a commitment from people who provide their precious time to volunteer for their sport. These responses are suggestive of a culture of belonging which guides their behaviour and opinions and support findings similar to that of Cuskelly and Harrington (1997), Harvey and Lévesque (2007), and Doherty et al. (2014). Furthermore, Schein (2004) proposes that understanding the desire to belong is fundamental to understanding organisational culture as patterns of assumptions they hold could evolve and adapt to meet external circumstances, such as policy decisions filtered down from government and UKA. This common identity enables the clubs to have a shared vision and add value to the organisation of athletics.

Establishing, consolidating, and reaffirming club identities were found to be a recurrent theme within the data. The clubs articulate that they are places where opportunities are available to 'access … welfare, social, coaching and competitive needs of the athlete[s] (Temple Trotters)', but also, '...to promote athletics, to enable athletes to enjoy their sport and develop into mature and successful athletes (Decker AC)'. One of the prime characteristics of club identity formation evidenced here is the notion or metaphor of family. Orientating identity formation around familial relationship has evidently worked well for many of the clubs within this research and seems to be dedicated and/or rooted to something more subtle than being an organisation that can produce athletes for future Olympic Games. These subtleties within the notion of identity are of fundamental concern for these grassroots clubs if there is to be any possibility of forming a shared organisational identity moving forward and leveraging a collective voice to their concerns. They are indicative of a caring, sharing environment where

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the notion of nurturing athletes from the beginning of their quest into a new sport and supporting them into strong talented athletes is their primary concern. Interestingly, clubs did not necessarily focus on policy and national pride as there was no mention of this within their interpretation of their objectives and focus at the grassroots level. In reality however, the direction of national policy has been heavily influenced by the pursuit of Olympic medals and national pride which has led to a dwindling attention for the grassroots and recreational streams of the sport (Green and Houlihan, 2007; Sam, 2009; Grix and Carmichael, 2012). As far as the data reveal, this seems to have brought the clubs closer together and provides greater clarity to what they view as the club role and identity within athletics.

An organisation, such as an athletic club, must carefully balance both cooperation and competition between all their stakeholders (Jones, 2001). To achieve success as a club, the careful balance of stakeholder engagement and partnership can produce a club that thrives and competes in races and leagues, but also produces successful and competent athletes for the future. These club management issues and resulting successes are directly linked to developing their identity as a grassroots athletics club. This supports the work of Cuskelly and Harrington (1997) and also Doherty et al. (2014) suggesting that sport clubs are viewed as a hub or collective forming a distinctive role in their community. This idea was confirmed by respondents who concur about who and what they are in terms of 'providing competition opportunities (Cram AC)' or 'developing youngsters (Ovett Racing Club)'.

However, there does appear to be a role or identity confusion between what is expected of local athletics clubs from government policy such as focusing on mass participation, elite success and development (to note, in the United Kingdom, while clubs have the capacity to set agendas and policies in their day-to-day governance, funding is provided from state funding bodies and NGBs. Thus, it is in the club's best interest to align themselves and their policies with those of their funders to ensure economic support is maintained) and, whether the clubs

are organisations that enable participation for life or should be serving alternate or more varied agendas. This could be observed as an inability to manage the varied roles and responsibilities which clubs must assume, or alternatively as a lack of leadership from the NGB as to how clubs can negotiate their place within the overall organisation of athletics in England. This identity conflict was a recurrent theme; all clubs seem determined to want to affect and control their agency by establishing a defined and clear identity for grassroot clubs (Clegg et al., 2006; Harvey and Lévesque, 2007). Yet, clubs have found themselves increasingly constrained by structural tensions and negotiations led by policy. Examples provided through personal correspondence from the General Secretaries of Murray AC and also Cram AC was the perception that 'the current competition system is not really concerned with athletes who compete for recreation' and that 'the modern day Olympian now has to compete for an elitist club and/or be coached by an elitist coach – who it seems has to reside where UKA tell them too'.

Although there may be some cultural consensus within and across some clubs with respect to 'who they are', 'who they belong to' and 'what they might be for'. Tradition and successful legacies of participation also appear as defining characteristics of their organisational identity formation. There are many clubs who have a membership of seasoned athletes who have competed for them or as individuals for many years, some over forty years. This issue raises questions about athletes' individual identities throughout their athletic careers and also the clubs understanding of athletes through their development. Clubs indicated that they were there to enable '...access for all to the sport, [but allow] the athlete to develop and compete to the level they aspire to (personal correspondence from General Secretary of Snell AC)'. Indeed, this was an area Doherty et al. (2014) draw attention to in their arguments about the difficulties of getting buy-in from volunteers in relation to achieving a consensus or a common focus to achieve the right goals for the club, its members and the community. The notable internal

struggle between the club (as a team or hub) and the athlete (as an individual) indicates that individual self-interest can affect club efforts moving forward and this reflects the balancing act of self-management required by clubs and is consistent with the notion of organisational politics and the necessity of managing varied stakeholder interest and priorities.

These struggles of identity are more than observable symptoms and, invariably, represent deeper values within club athletics. To engender effective governance relations there is a necessity for UKA to be aware and learn to recognise these dispositions to prevent conflict (Hoye et al., 2012). One club that referred to this internal struggle/conflict was the Ovett Racing Club who strongly believed that although athletics must provide an arena to commence development, there are in reality many clubs, including their own, who have athletes who were past that stage and compete on a regular basis as senior or veteran athletes. Arguably, this tension between encouraging a core ideology of participation and organisation identity within the self-management of clubs will be key to the future focus of athletics in England. As Clegg et al. (2006) suggest the term of identity is one that can be viewed as fluid and ambiguous but, as the data attests, from the club perspective they seem to have an essential characteristic around wanting the best for their stakeholders. Therefore, the suggestion is that grassroots clubs do have a strong culture where their values, beliefs and assumptions about who and what they are is widely understood and strongly accepted at a club level, especially in relation to the clubs being the bedrock of the sport. However, their organisational identity is more complex due to dealing with competing external stakeholders such as UKA (Taylor, 2008; Hoye et al., 2012).

These multiple layers within the organisation of athletics, as Mintzberg (2003) argues, from a business perspective, organisations have several levels which interconnect to develop an identifiable ideology and/or organisational culture. Yet, due to the complex nature of clubs and the numerous stages of athlete development, there may be fragile aspects to clubs' identity construction. For example, the 'lost group' of senior and veteran athletic clubs who for many

club are central to their operations but whose voices are largely under-represented in governance discussions. However, it could also be argued that they have a strong and purposeful cultural identity which is unique to those clubs and suggests an identity formed from a sense of belonging to something more purposeful than their role as national policy delivery organisations. For these clubs, their organisational identities reflect the increasing difficulties that clubs are having in formulating and establishing good working relationships with UKA resulting in a failure to establish a shared focus or core ideology. Clegg et al. (2006) highlight the work of Albert and Whetten (1985) on organisations having collective identities and shared beliefs that are enduring, distinctive and link clearly to their organisation – which in the case of this study are grassroot clubs' collective views and shared hostility toward UKA.   Arguably, and akin to the work of Harris et al (2009) and Harris and May (2011), these clubs manage to grow and survive without the support of their governing body. It is clear that athletic club organisational identity is not something innate to clubs' establishment but instead is something that has developed and evolved through time, place and circumstances of policy and politics formed in contradistinction to the identity and culture of UKA.

Accountability within UK athletics

Providing context for the following section, the following quote reiterates the sentiments exhibited by many participants in the study about their commitment to the future of grassroots athletics and the need for greater accountability at the national governing body level.

> [We]… do not believe that the UKA either represents or supports grass-root athletics. The fundamental problem is that, despite pathetic lip-service, UKA cannot or will not understand that athletics is in the main run by volunteers who are limited in both time and resources. Edict after edict emanates from UKA telling Clubs and their officials what to do. It is all very well those in UKA sitting in their comfortable offices with their company

cars pontificating about what should be done - in my opinion, they are totally out-of-touch

with what really goes on. (personal correspondence from Chairman of Holmes Harriers)

This club was one of many responses referring to UKA as being too bureaucratic, out of touch, at a complete disconnect and/or increasingly autocratic. This perceived interference of UKA's authoritarian position supports the notion of the continued unease of the use of power over the clubs, but also the notion of a lack of negotiation or resistance (Slack, 1997; Jones, 2001; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006).   A specific example provided by the clubs was in relation to the organisation of a long existing national competition. They highlighted that in 2012 'UKA stipulated, without regional agreement, that ... [our] Area Senior championships [were] to be absorbed into the England Championships'. This perceived autocratic interference by UKA resulted in no area championships for many club athletes and emphasised a real and current conflict between UKA and grassroot clubs over the governance of athletics. This should be a real dilemma for UKA but also as a consequence for EA who are the connection between the clubs and the national governing body. UKA's tendency to govern athletics from the top down has been discussed in previous research, as has the fact that voluntary sports clubs do not have an independent and reputable voice in their sport to be able to defend their position (Green and Houlihan, 2006; Green, 2007; Green, 2009). Due to the increased reliance on grassroots organisations such as athletic clubs to implement policy there is a need for UKA to recognise the consequences and impact of decisions made without consultation to reduce the resulting conflict of governance between themselves and the clubs. Moreover, and given the recent pushes by the likes of Sport England (2017) and Sport and Recreation Alliance (2017) to improve NGB and club level accountability, within this conflict there is also the space for clubs and UKA to engage in productive dialogue about the nature of good governance principles, practices and realities. Given the current situation changing with regards to consultation between EA and club volunteers this should be a focus for future research.

To consider this conflict of governance, the question of accountability must be discussed in relation to the current state of competition, policy focus and club athletics, but also why it matters. Holmes Harriers fully believe that UKA is 'too bureaucratic and gives a view that ALL clubs have unlimited money to register volunteers and others on various courses. A grassroots clubs relies on parent volunteers who generally lose interest as their children's change', indicating that 'there is a complete disconnect between... UKA and what is going on at road relays, cross countries or British leagues'. As an example, the current constitution and governance of EA does not allow clubs to input or vote on decisions which affect them, which aligns with the view that both EA and UKA are '… increasingly dictatorial and out of touch (Bannister Racers)'.

There has been evidence that EA are attempting to address this issue with a consultation process to ease tensions. However, it was noted by clubs that they do try to provide comment on their position to UKA, but 'unfortunately, UKA has gained a well-deserved reputation of going against the wishes of the Clubs.... It pays lip-service to consultation processes, then just goes ahead and does [what] it always intended to do, irrespective of feedback' (Holmes Harriers). As Ovett Racing Club suggest, 'there is no accountability ... [and] changes are forced through whether wanted or not, and whether needed or not'. Collectively, the attitude here by the clubs has been shaped by decisions of UKA that have been traditionally club or regional matters.

The sentiments about UKA and the lack of accountability and responsibility demonstrate regarding clubs as major stakeholders highlight the role power can have within an organisation and how structural models of business may impede relationships and agenda delivery in the sport industry (Mintzberg, 2006; Slack, 1997). From the responding clubs perspective UKA demonstrate a lack of transparency in their decision-making processes and use their strength of authority to undermine grassroots clubs. This perception from the clubs in

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turn creates stronger notions of identity which accrue over time within clubs, instead of creating a shared vision or core ideology of the entire organisation of athletics. Indeed, this arguably comes down to the lack of clarity regarding responsibilities and ultimately undermines accountability. According to the clubs involved in this research UKA seem to be unconcerned about how their actions affect the external environment and at least from the clubs point of view, they do not take responsibility for their actions either (Crowther and Green, 2004). As such, UKA's processes of management are now not accepted by many of the respondents and have affected the clubs to such an extent that they now expect not to be listened too. Therefore, any consultation process which may be in place from EA may appear to be too late, especially given the comments by Longmore (August 13 2017) that clubs were thriving despite the NGB.

Increasing systems of audit and performance imposed by DCMS, UK Sport and Sport England appear to have afforded UKA with an ability to govern in a distinct way to ensure policy targets are delivered. Such governance has been interpreted by the clubs as being 'dictatorial' and 'out of touch'. Although it is appreciated that UKA may have a sound rationale for organising athletics in this manner, the clubs feel their autonomy has been undermined. Therefore, if UKA wish to ensure that clubs are front and centre of their Athletic Nation Strategy 2016-2026 (UKA 2016) then the intangible implications of volunteering need to be addressed. It was evident that the majority of clubs felt very strongly that they were being sidelined, and that events which have traditionally been developed and club-run were being 'interfered with' by UKA suggesting that there has been a profound shift of accountability away from the traditional stakeholders (athletic clubs, athletes and volunteers) and toward government departments and target led funding bodies (Green and Houlihan, 2006; Green, 2007; Sam, 2009 and Goodwin and Grix, 2011). If UKA were to recognise club views and acknowledge that their time and hard work are appreciated and understood, then it might be

possible UKA and the clubs could develop a better stakeholder relationship (Crowther and Green, 2004).

Despite the heavy reliance on voluntary grassroot clubs to deliver government policy, the underlying tensions created by deficiencies in communicating clear responsibilities and accountabilities from those governing the sport of athletics will in the long term only result in a decline in a working stakeholder relationship. The club experiences evidenced in this paper demonstrate that in some instances the current inter-relationships between the top layer of UKA and the bottom layer of grassroot clubs are not working efficiently and effectively and in some cases are working to a different organisational agenda that UKA intends from a strategic national position. Arguably, this could be viewed as a centralisation of decision-making by those at UKA as opposed to a decentralisation of decision-making at the club level (Amis and Slack, 2016) and therefore a more efficient business model. Despite this any current exchanges between the two parties from the grassroot perspective is not one based on trust and has created an unwillingness or an inflexibility to adjust, change or adapt to new systems of delivery and design from both sides.

Conclusion

Although some clubs may want to affect and control their agency by establishing a defined and clear identity, the experiences investigated here highlight how clubs have often found themselves constrained by tensions and resistances related to specific policy structures and systems led by UKA such as those raised by Grix (2009). Conflict arise when there is a preservation of invested interests against established authority, and this study has demonstrated that clubs' conflicts effect their ability to formulate clear identities and have meaningful relations and a shared focus with UKA (Clegg et al., 2006). Arguably, this has led to sport policy being directed within athletics more firmly at elite level and mass participation runners,

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and dwindling attention for grassroots and recreational participation.

Goodwin and Grix (2011) highlighted the reduction in autonomy for UKA as a result of centralisation; but, according to the clubs, they too have felt the consequences of these changes. Emerging naturally from the data collection and analysis was the clubs (as far as those participating in this research evidenced) appear increasingly unhappy about their lack of power when it comes to their role in shaping the development of their sport. In particular, many clubs believe that the club competition system has been systematically changed and amended to suit 'elite' needs. Clubs suggest that 'the current system is largely irrelevant to the recreational runner, other than the enjoyment of club membership.' The exercise of power within the organisation of athletics, in this study at least, seems to be in conflict because of a lack of clarity between what the clubs want from the sport of athletics and what UKA and DCMS want to achieve. The grassroot clubs therefore feel powerless and as a result it can be viewed that power in the hands of UKA and to a certain extent EA could be viewed as 'illegitimate, dysfunctional, self-interested behaviour (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 133)'. It could also be concluded here that through the discourse that the organisational identity that clubs have formed for themselves is a direct result of the lack of consultation, respect and authority to innovate. Consequently, the conflict has left UKA and EA with a membership in which many feel disempowered and as a result have shaped and formed their club cultural identity as opposed to a centrally defined organisational identity or ideology focused on central agendas and imperatives. Future research is required to investigate whether this conflict will impact upon clubs, and, whether new strategies of governance and communication could lead to more effective relations between the NGB and its members.

It could be suggested that the way forward for UKA and to a certain extent EA must be to encourage a more balanced approach to power where conflicting views are encouraged and worked on. This may potentially provide a sense of identity back to the clubs to create, solve

and innovate around problem solving rather than such a top-down governance structure which is currently in place. The outcomes of the EA consultation process may be an attempt to try and provide clubs with a 'voice' however, the strength of discussion from the clubs about their feeling of lack of respect from EA and UKA may not be resolved fully and therefore this may be a consideration for future research. Are, for instance, clubs viewed as integral to the decision-making process in the governance of athletics or are they perceived as an unnecessary interference whose opinions are acknowledged but require moderating?

It is acknowledged that a limitation of this study is that UKA's perception of their relationship with the clubs has not been investigated in detail and further research is warranted. There are, too, still suggestions that can be proposed for UKA based on this study. The first is that UKA should begin the process of removing the barriers that prevent clubs from being involved in the decision-making process to try and create some transparency in the policy process for athletics. This does appear to have happened from EA and the proposal for yearly consultation, however future investigation is required to understand the effectiveness of such a proposal and the feedback process to the NGB. The second is to fund, as Spedding AC suggested, across the sport participation pyramid. As Decker AC indicated, there is an 'inadequate connection between the shining lights at grassroots and the elite pathways'. Finally, there is an inherent discourse emergent in the data that the UKA need to recognise that not all clubs want to be a conveyor belt for whatever DCMS want to achieve. As Holmes Harriers pointed out, '… the 'dream' is what keeps both participants and Clubs alive …' which supports the viewpoint advocated by Temple (1980; p.148) that if club competition ceased then '… the sport would be in trouble, the foundations would crumble, and there would be no peak for the ambitious to climb.'

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