

# Sport Facility Asset Transfer and the Creativity of Volunteer-Run Public Facilities

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**Abstract:** Influenced by the world economic environment, many sports facilities expenditure after the Games will bring a heavy economic burden to the government. It is very important to deliver sports facilities to the community and the local government. This article aims to use literature analysis to critically analyse the argument that the asset transferral of the local government sport facilities to volunteers could transform sport services by stimulating creativity in local communities. It mainly uses the concept of social innovation and the Big Society to recognise the challenges and benefits during and after the sport facility transfer.

**Keywords:** sport facility, creative, transfer, volunteer

## 1. Introduction

In the UK, due to the catalyst of the government budget reductions and the influence of the economic crisis, some public facilities like sports centres, museums and libraries provided by the government sector are now being transferred to local volunteers through changes to ownership, management, governing and delivering (Nichols, Forbes, Findlay-King & Macfadyen, 2015). Since 2010, the UK government has been encouraging citizens to increase their social responsibilities through volunteering in community or public services to build a Big Society (Crisp, 2015; Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012). The policy of the Localism Act (2012) aims to reduce the intervention of the government and stimulate the development of voluntary groups' power and responsibility (King, 2014). Forkert (2016) thinks that with volunteers replacing qualified staff in leisure facilities, the local citizens can use their ingenuity and creativity to face and solve the issue of public service closures. Similarly, Williams, Goodwin & Cloke (2014) state that asset transferring can create more opportunities to develop enterprises that can better meet the demands of local citizens. However, Nichols et al (2018) found that the asset transfer should be in areas with high levels of social capital, education and skills, and if such social and economic conditions are not met, that the leisure centres will struggle to fight closures, such that communities will not be empowered.

## 2. Social innovation

“Social innovation” has been defined as “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations” (Forkert, 2016, p.13). This is different from the traditional perspective on innovation that sees it as more closely related to technological ideas. Thus, according to Forkert (2016), social innovation can be regarded as a form of problem solving within society and involves the mobilising of the intelligence of ordinary citizens as a resource that can enable the transferral of the welfare state's responsibilities to individuals and the private sector. Therefore, the asset transfer from local government sport facilities to volunteers is a kind of a social innovation used by the government to promote citizens to take more responsibilities in areas of public investment.

The reason why public services need social innovation is because social problems occurred such as unstable economic management, the shrinking of the middle class in the UK and the increasing wealth gap between the rich and the poor (Chadha, 2016). For example, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government spent 40.5 per cent of the national income on public spending between 2010-2015 and in 2016, it planned to reduce public spending to 35 per cent (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2015). Within this context, social innovation was seen as a means to foster creativity and for recovering missing

citizen participation in social responsibilities.

### **3. Asset Transfer of Sports Facilities**

Sport asset transfer refers to public sport facilities transferred from the local authority to volunteers (Nichols, et al, 2015). These transfers not only include the material assets like the equipment and buildings but also the immaterial assets like the management of the organisation and the provision of the sport-related services. To conclude, the transfer is the combination of transferring the ownership, governance and delivery.

According to the Sport England report (Groom, Taylor & Nelson, 2014) for volunteering, the motivations for people to engage in the voluntary sector are mainly the love of the sports, the involvement of children, career aspirations, social connections, etc. However, the barriers mainly lay in the time required, financial constraints, bureaucracy, professionalization, recruitment and retention. In the following part, this article will critically evaluate two main outcomes of the asset transfer from the state to volunteers.

### **4. Ositive Outcomes of Asset transfer**

#### ***4.1 Preventing the Public Sport Service Closure***

The main impetus for volunteers to get involved in the asset transfer is that by taking over the facility, it can stay open. Reid (2012) suggests that the more deprived the area is, the cheaper the voluntary service will be. For example, Shaftesbury Recreation Centre was transferred to the Lower Ormeau Resident's Action Group (LORAG), who helped the recreation centre stay open longer, provided low cost memberships (maximum £ 25 per month), meet the local citizens' demand, developed the usage of the dance studio, main hall, pitches and the gym through a wide range of community activities (Murtagh, 2015). Nichols et al (2015) also find that the asset transfer of public leisure facilities can enable family members to benefit from collective goods. In their study, they found that parents are prone to be volunteers in these public services if their children are involved in the sport facility, which therefore the parents regard as a means of building family relationships or community belonging.

#### ***4.2 Strengthening relationships within the local community***

The next motivation for volunteers to get involved in the facilities is that they can meet the real needs of the local community. Nichols, Taylor, Barrett & Jeans (2014) found that local citizens find it difficult to get access to the facilities to hold a community sport competition as there is a 5-year waiting list which is allocated for government use, and also that little money is spent on maintenance. Nichols & Forbes (2014) suggest that the sport facilities managed and the public services delivered by volunteers may become much more proactive and innovative. For example, the volunteers redesigned the service time of the Shaftesbury Recreation Centre from only 30 hours per week prior to the transfer to seven days a week from 9am to 7pm (Murtagh, 2015). Therefore, such innovations can bring more members and an increasing income level for the facility, due to volunteers putting more energy and enthusiasm into developing the public service.

#### ***4.3 Reduced Running Costs***

As mentioned earlier, the main reason for the transfer is the lack of funding from the government. Thus, the main aim for the transfer is to reduce the cost of running public services. These facilities also received some forms of indirect funding, including rate relief, subsidies, peppercorn rents or no rents (Nichols, et al, 2018). According to GOV. UK (2018), if the asset is transferred successfully to volunteers, they can deal with a minimum 80 per cent non-domestic rate relief. These volunteer-run facilities will be eligible for grants by themselves rather than be seeking help from the local government funds.

#### ***4.4 Social Capital Enhancement***

Nicholson & Hoyer (2008) conclude that sport is a means to promote the creation, social development and enhancement to maintain social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital means 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of

more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (p. 248). Nicholson & Hoye (2008) identify that the magnitude of the social network can have a great impact on the acquisition of social capital. This means that being volunteers in the sport facilities can engage more volunteers who used to work as professionals to set up a social network for the public service. The larger the network is, the easier to mobilise the social capital (Sieppel, 2008). In the case of the volunteer-run sport service centre, volunteers use their network to promote the local connection within the area, which, to some extent, enhances the social capital (Morgan, 2013). However, Putnam (2000) says that bonding social capital usually includes a homogenous group of individuals and it tends to exclude the extraneous group and limit the number of people who can be engaged in the public service. This means that voluntary sports clubs may only benefit a small number of volunteers who share specific interests, rather than the general public (Morgan, 2013). Therefore, the public service tends to be outsourced to private providers.

#### **4.5 The Big Society**

The Big Society is the UK government's idea of social policy. In general, it aims to change the role of government towards public services and encourage local citizens to take over the facility, taking responsibility for better local needs (Such, 2012). According to the Conservative Party (2010), the Big Society policy has the following objectives: 1. Give communities more powers; 2. Encourage people to take an active role in their communities; 3. Transfer power from central to local government; and 4. Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises.

The party characterised society as needing much higher levels of individual, professional, civic and corporate responsibility to solve social or local problems and improve the quality of life. The proponents think that the Big Society has the potential to improve the relationship between individuals and the state, through which individuals serve the public service voluntarily and save the state wealth for more valuable usage (Morgan, 2013). As a result, the Big Society is the final destination of social justice and a society for well-being. However, Such (2013) argues that it is difficult to build the so-called Big Society in the 21st century, as people do not have enough time to volunteer and even if they have time, it is in small packages which is tough to coordinate. Nichols (2016) suggests that the audit of the progress towards the Conservative Party's ideal of Big Society was conducted negatively and fewer citizens think they can have an impact on government decisions, they are disappointed with the remaining extra political system in the volunteer-run facility and the community are less strong both economically and politically. After asset transfer, the power of reforming the public services, transparency and responsibility is in the hands of the private sector providers but not with the volunteers and the local community. Kisby (2010) says that the reduction of the government budgets was not set in a considerable context and there is a disproportional cut on economically disadvantaged communities.

### **5. Negative Outcomes of Asset transfer**

#### **5.1 Who Knows Community Much Better?**

Harris, Mori & Collins (2009) find that one of the main challenges that the volunteer run facilities face is the increasing bureaucracy involved in the management style, especially at the stage of raising funds and resources, when volunteers tend to be overwhelmed or even deterred by the presence of more assertive volunteers. In contrast, private enterprise sectors have more financial benefits than the cheaper public services. The private sporting organisations have more entrepreneurial strategies to attract sport participants. Therefore, the public sport service sectors are immersed in the vicious circle of lacking the local sport participants and the fund raising. Therefore, the inception of the Big Society seems to serve the private sector better than the altruistic sport organisations (Harris, et al, 2009). In addition, the volunteer-run facilities are facing a great difficulty in recruiting good quality volunteers, especially in deprived areas. Morgan (2013) concludes that young people, the most common volunteers in public facilities, are more likely to devote their free time to paid commercial private sector organisations rather than volunteering in public facilities for no money. Further, Enjolras (2002) explains the relationship between sport consumption and sport participation. He indicates that sport club members value "high quality service" and "value for money" more than merely sport participation. Therefore, although the voluntary public service can help with the maintenance of sport facilities, the private sector seems more familiar with the mass market.

### **5.2 The need for the cooperative relationship**

Hence, in order to be more competitive in the market and make the public service more sustainable, Morgan (2013) suggest that the government and volunteers should cooperate with a reciprocal relationship to make decisions and deliver the public service, which can then use the creation and experience of the volunteers to build the public service into what the local community really needs. However, the asset transfer usually happens within a tight time frame due to the financial cuts in the leisure facility (Hastings, Bailey, Gannon, Besemer, & Bramley, 2015). Therefore, not only the voluntary sector but also the local authority lack the appropriate advice during the transferring process. They also noticed that the speed of cuts and the speed of transfer can restrict the potential innovation, as volunteers need time to think of the ideas on how to develop the asset in a sustainable way. After operation for a period, the voluntary leisure centres may face difficulties in meeting the market conditions to operate continuously, causing the lack of liability transfer (Nichols, et al, 2018).

### **5.3 Who comes to volunteer? What about the former staff?**

Recruiting and retaining qualified volunteers is another big challenge faced by the public organisation. Unlike other voluntary services, according to Nichols, et al (2014), the running of sports facilities requires qualifications. Clubmark, an accreditation scheme for community sports clubs, along with participating parents and their children demand that all the coaches should have a coaching qualification, which implies the professionalization of the voluntary sector, especially when children are getting involved in the facilities. The biggest group of volunteers, students, do not have enough money to get the expensive qualifications and the sport organisations cannot afford to pay for its volunteers to get them. Nichols et al (2018) suggest that the failed transfer was because the society lacked dedicated, confident and skilled volunteers. Further, they they found in a community with a less stable population, for example in an area with a large immigrant population, the decreased sense of community ownership has weakened the capacity of volunteering. When considering the long run of a facility's development, Nichols & Forbes (2014) find that it is easier for the smaller voluntary sports clubs to be vulnerable to losing the core running members and the clubs also lack the next generation of the core volunteers. Therefore, the policy of community volunteering should be considered.

During the process of transferring, the organisations also have to consider the relevant legal regulations. There is one regulation that is called the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment), also called TUPE. This regulation, to some extent, increase the difficulty of the asset transfer, if the volunteers consider continuing to employ the former staff, as they are familiar with the running of the same facilities. The law requires that the same terms and conditions of the current employees should be maintained by the new employers (Nichols, et al, 2015). This means that the volunteers have a responsibility to the former local authority employees to provide them with the same wages, salaries, etc. Moreover, Nichols & Forbes (2014) state that there is no example of the former staff being re-employed by the voluntary managing organisations. The local authorities, in order to transfer the asset in a quick way, are more likely to make staff redundant before transferring. Thus, the former staff face the situation of losing their jobs [and the volunteers to provide them the same terms and condition with the TUPE] .

## **6. Conclusion**

Having discussed whether the asset transfer from the government sector to the voluntary sector will harness the creativity lying within local communities, this article found that as a result of the state budget reductions, sport facilities often instigate the local citizen to take over, driven by a sense of compulsion to save the sport resource (Murtagh, 2015). The motivations for maintaining the facility will usually start with the rational self-interest of citizens and concern for their families (Morgan, 2013). Later on, through the process of the volunteering, the innovation that exists among the volunteers may come into effect to influence the local citizen, who can benefit from the adjusted running methods enabling their real needs to be met. The improved facilities can bring more people to be engaged in the activities held in the clubs, the whole society, where the ideal of a responsible citizen can be shaped. However, not all the asset transfers lead to good results. It has proved difficult for volunteers to utilise their creativity to solve the problem of the closure of sport facilities. Difficulties can include the threat from competition with private organisations, which can better meet the demands of the sport participants, the lack of volunteers to devote their energy to run the facility and the legal factors that increase the difficulty of the transfer.

In short, volunteering in sport facilities can bring benefits from the creativity lying in the local community. However, the asset transfer has to consider that volunteering is a mixture of self-interest, philanthropy and the spirit of altruism (Nichols & Forbes, 2014). In order to achieve the ideology of the Big Society, the government needs to consider how to maintain the government funding to the sport facilities and at the same time support the transfer to be more successful and sustainable.

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