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Article

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Introduction and background

The management of public sector sports provision has grown increasingly complex due to the multiple layers of government that are involved, including local and sub-regional government, national governing body of sport (NGB) organisations, national policy departments and the quasi-non-governmental agencies (Devine, 2012; Green and Collins, 2008; Houlihan, 2005; King, 2009; Sam, 2009). Within this complex landscape, NGBs play a central role in the implementation of the dual, and sometimes conflicting, goals of achieving elite sporting success and mass participation (Bloyce and Smith, 2010; Green, 2009; Hogkinson, 2012; Mackintosh, 2011). The extant literature has focused on factors that determine elite sporting success (De Bosscher, 2006), critiques of NGB governance structures (Taylor and O'Sullivan, 2009), athlete talent development systems (Stotlar and Wonders, 2006), the workforce implications of government policy change (Lusted and O'Gorman, 2010) and strategy and management practices related to organisational performance (Bayle and Robinson, 2007).

This research project is set within the relatively emerging field of literature that has begun to examine the role of NGB programmes in driving forward mass participation. Sport England (2008:13) stated NGB's would be 'the primary drivers' to deliver their 2008-2011 strategy and vision for community sport. Likewise, the new 2013-2017 strategy *Creating a Sporting Habit for Life* identifies the continued centrality of the NGB in implementing sports participation increases (DCMS, 2012). Examples of research that have contributed towards monitoring this trend include the impact of the NGB-led partnership with local government in the Free Swimming initiative (PWC LLP, 2010) and club development and swimming participation research (Collins and Sparkes, 2010). Likewise, other research has considered the politicisation, impact and effectiveness of school club links programmes with athletics and golf NGB case studies in England (Phillpots and Grix, 2012).

The PING! format of table tennis is deemed 'alternative' due to its mode of participation, unconventional audience and varied and diverse multiple locations for engagement. It is also an alternative, 'non-mainstream' sporting activity by its very nature, participation base and minimal infrastructure and network of traditional support structures. 'Alternative' modes of sports participation have become "increasingly central to the physical activity and cultural lifestyles of young people" (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011: 110) and for many they have already

both challenged and replaced traditional team sports (Green, 2010). Midol and Broyer (1995: 210) suggest that for such activities the appeal comes from the fact that "the culture is extremely different from the official one promoted by sporting institutions". To date, an increasing body of literature, commonly referred to as 'sports ethnographies' (Sands, 2002) has emerged, concerning what have been labelled alternative sports, including inter alia skateboarding (Beal, 1995), snowboarding (Humphreys, 1997), windsurfing (Wheaton, 2000), surfing (Butts, 2001; Booth, 2003), Parkour (Bavinton, 2007; Saville, 2008; Atkinson, 2009) and Ultimate Frisbee (Thornton, 2004; Griggs, 2009ab). In short, the alternative nature of these activities often refers to how such sports present a challenge to the traditional way of doing and understanding sport (Wheaton, 2000). What becomes significant for the participants are the complex meanings and importance that these activities represent for their devotees (Wheaton 2004) "for whom participation becomes a whole way of life, one that may be sustained from youth to retirement" (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011: 114). Such sports, their participants and infrastructure sit on the margins of what may be termed 'traditional sports development' policy and practice. They therefore represent a challenge to the traditional NGB mode of sports delivery and policy design.

In this context, PING! is an example of a NGB attempting to work with this social change rather than against it, and understanding the success or failure, challenges and opportunities of the initiative may offer critical insights for other NGBs. PING! was a partnership based project that established multiple site locations for temporary outdoor table tennis locations. Individual sites were managed by local partners and overseen by the ETTA regional development team in each city. Tables were located in high visibility public spaces with on-table bats, balls and spare equipment hosted by the local 'table partner'. A total of 549 tables are currently in England (PING! England, 2013).

This paper presents the results of a national PING! research project as an innovative approach to developing participation by an NGB. Table tennis in England has experienced stagnation in its traditional club membership since the heyday of the 1970's where club and workplace table tennis leagues were common (ETTA, 2010). However, there has been a recent resurgence with a 40% increase in participation between 2008 and 2012 (Sport England, 2012) due largely to these alternative forms of provision. In their strategic vision for the sport the ETTA identify outdoor facilities and PING! to develop mass appeal, increased participation levels and as a vehicle for the future sustainability of the sport in England (ETTA, 2012b). The PING! project ran in eight cities between June and August 2012 amidst the backdrop of the 2012 Olympics. PING! introduced volunteer-led, local 'pop up', flexible table tennis facilities in multiple sites across a number of UK cities including Birmingham, Sheffield, Bristol, Liverpool, Hampshire,

Leicester, London and Brighton. The project was run originally in London as a small initial pilot in 2010 alongside the Outdoor Table Tennis Initiative (OTTI) project and then expanded to include Birmingham and Hull in 2011. PING! and OTTI exemplify the paradigm shift occurring in sports development delivery away from the traditional pathway from the club to elite participation, and towards more organic and 'alternative' modes of sports delivery.

The aims of the research were to build a picture of the programme usage, increase understanding of participation levels and examine user profiles and patterns of involvement to inform future policy development for the ETTA linked to their WSP 2013-2017 . In addition, the shift towards new forms of sports with increasing flexibility and organic nature to participation means that these findings can inform the development and design of similar styles of programmes for other NGBs.

Data and Methods

The research combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies both involving primary data collection. This included a brief, participant survey supported by qualitative ethnographic case studies. The cities of Birmingham and Liverpool were selected by the NGB as the choice of focus for the research as one had been involved in the previous year and the other was a new partner city. Only two cities were chosen due to the constraints of time and resources. ETTA staff and PING! volunteers administered the survey across multiple sites in each city. Questions focused on understanding the participant's profile, satisfaction levels and future participation intentions. A total of 375 valid surveys were collected across the two cities, which were double inputted into SPSS 19.

In addition, the second data set encompassed qualitative ethnographic case studies in Birmingham and Liverpool to include local SDO's, ETTA staff, coaches and volunteers, users and host site partners such as hotels, shopping centres and retail venues. Data here were collected through informal interviews, user discussions and observational data/field site notes over the duration of the event period. Data were collected using a Dictaphone and observational notes collated to build a local picture of site effectiveness, PING! project impact and user/partner perspectives. A total of 30 interviews were undertaken with 40 individuals across each city with data transcribed verbatim and then coded for thematic analysis. These interviews were a mix of participants (individuals, groups and pairs), coaches, volunteer staff and development officers.

Analysis of field notes, interviews and observational data was analysed using thematic analysis across data sources as suggested by Jones et al (2013). Post collection of the raw data and subsequent transcription the researchers undertook familiarisation with the data followed by

reduction into codes and categories to build themes from the raw data itself. These themes were then tested across the research team and returns were made back to the original raw data to establish clarity and internal validity of the central themes that had emerged from the data.

Results and Key Findings

Participant motives, profile and past playing experience

The quantitative analysis was based on 375 responses of which 72% were from Birmingham and the remainder (28%) from Liverpool. Encouragingly, 93% of respondents enjoyed their PING! experience and 88% of respondents would play PING! again. However, only half (53%) would consider joining a traditional club. This has considerable implications for the future development of this format of the PING! experience and how it links, or doesn't, to the traditional sports development 'exit route assumption' (Collins, 2006). Similarly, it also challenges the configuration of some traditional local government sports development team remits. As alternatives to a table tennis 'club' participants identified that work, school/university or the park were more popular (78%, 78% and 71% of respondents respectively said they would play here).

In terms of the profile of the PING! users, 73% had played table tennis before and a significant minority (40%) had participated at a previous PING! event. This potential 40% return participation is also an important research finding, indicating that people come back and play PING! either from a previous year, another city or during the same event. The background of participants' previous exposure to the sport was that 56% had played at school and only 17% had ever played at a club. These figures give an indication of the essence of the PING! audience, which is a community of new participants to the sport, with 44% never having played at school and 27% never having played it in any format/location.

Satisfaction with the experience

Users reported good levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the PING! experience as illustrated in Table 1 but there is room for improvement. Accessibility and flexibility were the most highly rated features, while competitiveness was the lowest rated of the various features of PING! that were measured. The implications are that more work can be done to improve the user experience but also that fun is at the heart of this sport, and high levels of satisfaction may well be the driver behind the 40% of users that had played before. Informal interviews undertaken with participants also identified relatively high levels of satisfaction and only minor areas for

improvement. Potential improvements identified by users included how to easily continue participation and the associated lack of next steps for individuals and groups.

	Mean	Std. Error
Rating of accessibility	3.71	0.075
Rating of flexibility	3.71	0.069
Rating of fun	3.76	0.075
Rating of sociability	3.68	0.073
Rating of competitiveness	3.68	0.071

Table 1: Levels of user satisfaction marked on a scale of 1-5 (with 3 as the 'average', 4 good, 5 excellent) responders rated respective features of the event.

Age/gender profile of users

The profile of the users was skewed towards a mean age of 27 years within a range of 12-79 years. Likewise, it was apparent that young children did also take part consistently at the venues but often parents completed the surveys when asked to do so. Encouragingly, the post 30 year old, 'returner to sport' audience made up a significant proportion of users. The popularity of the game was in the post-16 participation category, notoriously difficult to engage in post-school sport and where many participants drop out from formalised opportunities (Collins, 2006). This was examined further in the qualitative analysis. Gender was relatively evenly distributed amongst the participants of PING!, in itself an interesting finding given that many traditional club settings and the membership data of the ETTA would indicate a strong skew towards males being dominant (ETTA, 2010).

Returning to sports participation and physical activity

A core focus of this research was to examine participant motivations and the nature of their involvement and enjoyment of PING!. A key theme that emerged from the qualitative data gathered was the use of PING! as an informal opportunity to return to sport, but also to physical activity in general. This is also an increasingly key priority for those engaged in this field of

professional practice as it is the non-participants or those that have 'lapsed' that challenge the sports policy maker most in terms of accessing potential latent demand (Bullough, 2012). Examples of this 'return capture of participants' role of PING! can be seen in the quotes below:

> It's got me back into it and I used to play it regularly as a youngster and I'm now well into my sixties and I've been out there playing. I find that table brilliant.
>
> Host site table minder, 63 year old male , Marriot Hotel.

> I played for the first time yesterday. In my youth I played table tennis, but not played for probably twenty years. I enjoyed it, yeah – it just gave us something to do in the lunch hour… I think I'd use this table several times a week for about half an hour.
>
> Male participant, 49 years of age.

A further characteristic of the project was what may be termed the embracing of the activity by 'the non-clubbable sports participant'. For example, one male participant clearly stated:

> It's like if you walk around the corner it's nothing you'd have expected and you think I'll have a quick go of that. Whereas if you were in your house and bored you wouldn't think I'll go and join a table tennis club.
>
> Male, current non-sports participant, 19 years old, Liverpool.

Here, this view and that of others in the qualitative data links closely with the PING! survey finding that although 88% would play PING! again, only 17% had ever played in a club and approximately half would consider playing again at a traditional club. Thus, the high levels of usage in general and then continued interest in future participation needs to be considered in this context. These findings set alongside a relatively UK-wide and sport-wide stagnant club membership (Collins, 2010) should be considered by the ETTA as a potential future direction of PING! style programme development. Traditional ETTA club membership was 37,200 in 2009, but it fell to 35,900 in 2010 (Sport England, 2011). This represents the proportion of table tennis participants that are members of a club falling from 17.5% to 14.3%.

Possible options around these participants and programme innovations will be considered in the conclusions and recommendations section. They also parallel earlier research done around the outdoor table tennis initiative (OTTI) in the lead up to year one of PING! (Mackintosh, 2013).

Building a PING! community

Previous ETTA work and other research studies (ETTA, 2009; ETTA, 2012; Mackintosh, 2013) have recognised the diverse populations that have embraced this format of the game. The

locations, flexibility and accessibility (all positively valued in the PING! 2012 survey) feed into a style of delivery that allows participants to build their own community of participation, on their own terms. This is fundamental to the project success. People played with family, friends or in many cases as observed in this study, with people they did not know prior to involvement in a PING! participation event. For example one local community business partner observed:

> It's literally a mix of ages – children, workmen, the staff from here, there's all the skaters and stuff that usually hang around St James' Street they've been down here playing it as well there's old people. It is literally across the spectrum. Men, women, anyone will just have a go.

> Supermarket Store Manager, Liverpool.

This view was paralleled by an experienced coach who had been working on an outreach, mobile basis on the scheme full time across Birmingham:

> Real strengths are…, I think it has brought people together for cohesion with different groups, different faiths, different cultures. I've noticed a lot of Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Pakistani, lots of different people coming together. It's created a hell of a lot of harmony in my opinion. So I think that makes it a really big success in my opinion.

> PING Coach, Birmingham.

This is as opposed to the traditional notion of the club as the ultimate outlet. If half of people do not want to take part in a club, this has real issues for the traditional focus of sports development. This also parallels Collins (2010) argument that the 'participation demand aspiration' of government in England may not fit with 'non-novice friendly' clubs and the ability of clubs and NGBs to cope with such expansion. A further interesting observation made by one volunteer was:

> Yes I am enjoying it – this is a community. One way or another we all benefit. We are also giving back to the community, we are a community, we are a family...I got involved through me being a Sport maker...the key route is to make sport happen in your community and I vowed to make it happen in the community I am living.

> PING! volunteer, Liverpool.

Here, the PING! 'community' was clearly defined and identified as a central feature of users. This was seen across many sites visited which were characterised by repeat usage, heavy involvement and a core importance to local people. Indeed a repeated concern was the loss of tables post-event. Several informal Facebook groups have formed outside of the remit of the ETTA, and their main national network with up to 250 members (in Bristol and Brighton) and

thus evidences the growing role and importance of such online communities alongside face-to-face opportunities in building sustainable table tennis communities in non-traditional settings. This parallels other developments in other sports such as volleyball (Volleyball England, 2013) and cycling (British Cycling, 2013) that are moving beyond the traditional sports development process and 'traditional settings' by utilising online communities to informally develop alternative communities.

Lack of sustainability in PING! participation

This research has pinpointed a clear need to return to this core delivery question and its associated challenges as numerous sources and participants recognised this as a weakness in the programme. For example, it was identified that:

> If we knew a bit more about where they could do that, or if there are any clubs and things like that then yes. I don't know now of any clubs so I couldn't say. Or even if they had a sign up saying this place does clubs or competitively or anything like that. I think if we were to do it again we'd have some information out there for the customers. Yeah I think we could do a little more to promote where you can go afterwards if you want to play.

> Sports superstore manager, Liverpool.

This key community (private sector) partner identified a weekend footfall of 2000 shoppers in his sports store and fairly sustained usage of the table through the day. To the point where they usually have to ask people to finish when the shop shuts. But, they had no clear operational information or routes to pass interested participants onto. Furthermore, a volunteer in Birmingham suggested:

> I've had quite a few people ask do you know in Birmingham where there are clubs. But not being from here I can't tell them, so with a bit of research somewhere I'm sure there is?
> Volunteer, 20 years old Birmingham.

This latent demand for continued table tennis involvement, either recreationally or in a club was therefore not being met sufficiently in the two cities involved in this detailed research. As to a way forward the main PING! coach suggested:

> We need more information, in terms of the information that can be left on the tables, to let people know where there might be clubs, possible sorts of avenues, leisure centres. Apart from that it's been really, really, good and everyone has really enjoyed it.

> PING! Coach, Birmingham.

"A hidden impact" - workplace sport, physical activity and wellbeing

Whilst not a clear or explicit goal of the PING! project, an indirect and positive outcome was some of the community workplace impacts that the qualitative element of this study identified. There were several tiers to this impact. Firstly, there have been a number of formal workplace events that have run as competitive inter and intra-workplace opportunities. In both cities this has involved a number of diverse workplaces and staff from different settings. In Liverpool for example, there was a PING!-led workplace competition with 32 participants from 25 city centre businesses. However, this does not do justice to the competitive, hidden impact of the programme in terms of informal, regular competitive workplace-based participation. This in fact was a far larger driver of the high levels of usage according to volunteers based at facilities. For example observational data recorded a restaurant in Liverpool that had 15 staff out of 30 in total regularly playing on lunch breaks for the entire duration of PING!. Likewise, a local major hotel chain had informal intra-work challenges, as did a major supermarket. If these, naturally occurring opportunities were more strategically developed then herein lie some significant opportunities for the NGB. This can perhaps be best summed up by two interviews that yielded the following observations,

> We've had a few stores putting teams together and stuff too. The station guard has his team of cleaners too. They all have competitions with each other too. One of the public will come in and one of them will come and play with them. So there is a lot of interaction going on too. Some of our colleagues go out and we can let them play for a bit for staff morale and all that.
>
> Supermarket manager, male, Liverpool.

> The staff have absolutely loved it, they come out after their breaks and play on it and they really enjoyed the tournament as well. We've got about 30 staff and over half have used it on a regular basis – everyday.
>
> Local restaurant manager, female, Liverpool.

This parallels established academic research in France, for example, where in Paris it has been identified that 78 business associations, represent 20% of clubs affiliated to the Paris Federation Français Table Tennis (FFTT, 2011). In other words one fifth of 'clubs' are heavily linked to corporate/private or public sector workplace participation opportunities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research project examines the impact of the PING! initiative which was established amidst an increasingly target driven and evidence-informed performance management culture of NGB's in England (Bloyce and Smith, 2010; Collins, 2010; Houlihan and Green, 2008). This is part of a

wider NGB trend that has also been identified in many other international public policy contexts (Bayle and Robinson, 2007; Piggin, Jackson and Lewis, 2009; Sam, 2009). In England Collins (2010; 374) identifies rather problematically that "increasing participation has been a role for some NGBs, but for many their *raison d'être* has been to win matches and develop performance athletes". Thus this paper is both timely and of significance to the NGBs striving to increase participation in the UK and beyond in international settings.

There was an overwhelmingly positive feedback from users interviewed and surveyed on PING and a clear growing culture of sports participation and 'fit' with ETTA NGB priorities (WSP vision 2013-2017) around this format of the game. This research and research has also started to explore the central question as to why PING! has been a success, who is playing and why, and ways in which the programme can be improved in the future. Implications for NGBs in the UK and beyond point towards the particular positive features of the programme identified through this research have been much of the self-organisation, informality and flexibility of the format of table tennis. These features sit in juxtaposition with the demographic and structured format of traditional table tennis clubs supported by the ETTA. Wider societal trends may well fit well with this style of delivery and how best to build upon the success of the PING! project is the next step for the ETTA. The challenges facing English table tennis parallel those in France (and possibly other countries that are experiencing this global trend). The FFTT (2011a; 8) analysis of table tennis in Paris identified,

> "...the discipline is experiencing a strong trend related to leisure either in the private space of families equipped with a table (in the garden, in the garage), the holiday centres, or in public spaces (square, community centre...). This leisure increase is highly developed, but one that we cannot actually quantify and it is commonly under the name Ping-Pong and is a feature found in other sports such as badminton or even the football sports performance to the highest level structured and improvised games in multiple places with the foremost goal of usability and entertainment. Table tennis is now wondering if it is possible to even attract some of these practitioners to casual clubs and how?"

Thus, it is clear that 'casual clubs', ping pong and recreational leisure based participation in numerous settings is a priority for the FFTT and an opportunity to bridge wider casual appeal of sports such as badminton and football.

In particular the ETTA and PING! team need to consider how better to build upon the appeal of this format of table tennis amidst the wider context of stable or stagnating club membership in England (in their sport and others). PING! is a key programme for an NGB that stands in

juxtaposition to other NGBs that have experienced a trend of declining or stable participation in many sports leading up to London 2012 Olympics (Sport England, 2011; Sport England 2012). Framing the diverse participant voices more centrally within research when examining impact can also provide new and fresh insights into this policy arena. Furthermore, this research project has illustrated that the prior traditional foundations of sports development with the club as the ultimate outlet need to be re-examined. No longer can it be assumed that there is a natural progression through a system when for many, recreational activty that is relatively ad hoc and on their own terms may be what they want. Finally, it potentially offers implications for those working across sports development boundaries in the public sector realm of physical activity and health promotion given the clear appeal this alternative programme has shown. In addition, other sports can learn from this NGB where similar models of innovation in both delivery style and methods of a more organic intervention can potentially help address the wider international concerns with increasing sports participation. It may be at the margins and more ambivalent spaces of traditional sports development professional practice that the real lessons are to be learnt.

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