

CEO perspectives on the first twenty-five years of Football Community

Club Organisations: challenges, developments and opportunities

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CEO perspectives on the first twenty-five years of Football in the Community: challenges, developments and opportunities

Purpose: This paper explores the perceptions of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) at Football in the Community (FitC) organisations associated with English professional football clubs regarding developments and changes over the 25 years since their inception. Of interest was how the schemes might/might not reflect the original underpinning ethos, aims and intended outcomes.

Methodology/approach: Ten CEOs participated in interviews designed to explore their perceptions of the challenges, developments and opportunities in the industry over 25 years.

Findings: Thematic analysis revealed four main issues facing the sector: security and sustainability of delivery and funding; the importance of growth and diversification; engagement with multiple agendas and agencies; ‘professionalisation’ of the workforce; and brand values and awareness. For CEOs, success of their schemes was measured both in terms of financial security of programmes and social impact within the community.

Practical implications: The sustainability of FitC schemes is inextricably linked to the success of organisations, contributing to social policy objectives.

Research contribution: Through the identification of strategic and organisational factors that have underpinned the development and outcomes of FitC, the paper addresses the gap in the literature by considering the perspectives of CEOs.

Keywords: Community Engagement; Football in the Community; Sport for Development; Social inclusion

Introduction

As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of the advent of the English Premier League (EPL), the fundamental changes to English football are multitude; for example, in relation to finance, media and communication, and the demographic of its participants and consumers. No less significant, but arguably operating much more in the background, are the connections of football clubs to their communities. Over the last two decades, several studies have addressed the impact of the work of Football in the Community (FitC)¹ organisations (as part of wider sport for development structures). These have mainly focused on the end users, such as the “beneficiaries” of policies and schemes (see, for example, Brown et al [2006]; Carone et al [2016]; Parnell et al [2013]). Moreover, research has focused primarily upon health improvement, including mental health (Pringle, 2009), weight loss (Rutherford et al, 2014) early onset dementia (Carone et al, 2016) and overall health profiles more generally (Pringle, McKenna & Zwolinsky, 2013; Pringle, McKenna et al, 2013; Pringle, Zwolinsky et al, 2013). Whilst it is useful to look at participants’ experiences, focusing on end users does not identify strategic and organisational factors that have underpinned the development and outcomes of this sector. In this paper, we address this gap in the literature by considering the perspectives of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) who lead and oversee the strategic direction of FitC organisations. The purpose of this research is to understand how these organisations function and to identify and analyse what is seen as best practice within the industry. In particular, we focus on their reflections on, and evaluations of, the changes, developments and challenges over the first 25 years of these initiatives.

Locating FitC organisations in football and social policy objectives

The role that sport can play in promoting social inclusion and addressing broader social objectives has been increasingly embraced internationally (Spaaij et al., 2014, Suzuki, 2017) and in the UK (Coalter, 2017). Community sport systems or networks incorporate stakeholders who have interests in the performance of local organisations such as government departments,

¹ A key recommendation of the report *Football and its Communities*, to improve levels of engagement between football clubs and communities, was that Football in the Community departments should convert to “outward facing” independent community organisations (Brown et al., 2006, p. 23). Community trusts are also sometimes called community foundations or community organisations and have run Football in the Community schemes or programmes. During 2018, the term Club Community Organisations (CCOs) was added to the nomenclature. It refers to all organisations that operate as charitable trusts. A small minority retain ‘Football in the Community’ or ‘<name of club> in the Community’, with others identifying themselves as ‘Foundations’ or ‘Trusts’. Whilst the most appropriate and commonly used terminology is, at the time of writing, Club Community Organisations, the terms *Football in the Community (FitC)* and *FitC organisations* most accurately reflect the era covered by the paper and, therefore, are referred to hereafter.

national sports organisations and non-sporting agencies. Community sport continues to be perpetuated as having the ability to work with stakeholders to promote social and cultural benefits, as well as developing social capital and bringing communities together. In the UK, sport has been an increasingly important element of community development since the late 1970s. For three years until 1985, the Action Sport initiative represented one of the first formerly evaluated projects regarding sport and community development. It noted, “there is an important role to be fulfilled in providing a *range of opportunities and services* for those who are disadvantaged” (Rigg, 1986, p. 3; italics in original).

From the 1970s, UK football clubs began to develop individually organised community schemes, which sought to respond to social and sporting change by placing the relationships between clubs and 'their communities' on a more formal footing. These schemes helped to inform the development of the national FitC initiative which was launched in 1986 by the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) through the Footballers Further Education and Vocational Training Society (Brown et al, 2006, p. 9). FitC schemes had an initial focus on traditional children's coaching schemes to widen access (Mellor, 2008). Williams and Taylor (1994) proposed FitC schemes as a model of global best practice, and called for the expansion of the provision in six areas: education initiatives, the national profile of FitC, the purpose of schemes within and for clubs, resourcing and capacity, work with minority ethnic groups, and the possible need for an annual conference. FitC schemes steadily grew during the 1990s but that they had become “one of football's best kept secrets” (Watson, 2000, p. 122). These schemes, however, generally faced a challenge if they continued to move away from 'traditional' football development activities (i.e. improving players' skills and aptitude) to playing a part in addressing wider social policy goals through football and sport generally in local communities (Watson, 2000, pp. 122-4).

FitC schemes became organisations constituted as charitable trusts. The model of community trusts began with the advent of Greenwich Leisure Limited in 1993, a not for profit organisation that managed leisure services in the borough of Greenwich in London (Sesnan, 2001). FitC organisations range in size, scope and reach; but because of the high profile of football as a sport they, in turn, are some of the highest profile and most visible Third Sector Sports Organisations (TSSOs) in the UK. A community trust is constituted as a not-for-profit charitable organisation with structural and strategic independence from a football club, headed by its own board of trustees who are responsible for setting strategic direction. The trustees

appoint a chief executive to implement strategy (Jenkins and James, 2012; p. 8). Although financially, structurally and strategically separate from a football club (Walters and Chadwick, 2009, p. 52), the direct association between a community trust and a football club ensures any initiatives in key areas, such as health or education, have a high degree of significance among community stakeholders. The trusts link to the clubs through licensing agreements, have their own Board of Trustees and are governed by an Executive team that develops and implements the club's own programmes. They are also responsible for schemes developed and largely funded by the English Premier League, the English Football League and respective stakeholders (Walters and Panton, 2014). Trusts may undertake the community work of the club, but remain a separate entity with their own staff and offices, and in many cases their own brand, identity and separate website.

In the context of political enthusiasm for sport's potential impact on welfare, employment, education, health and social policy more generally (Coalter, 2007; Collins and Kay, 2014; Houlihan and White, 2002) sport received unprecedented investment under the Labour government between 1997 and 2008. FitC schemes became focal points of community networks and partnerships through which to address these complex issues (Parnell et al, 2013; Sanders et al, 2014; Watson, 2000). Partnership approaches are a critical component of a broader policy approach that aspires to secure increased sport participation (Houlihan and Lindsey, 2008). The wide variety of types of relationship that are termed partnerships raises a definition question as to what defines a particular relationship as a 'partnership' (Lindsey, 2011, p. 518) but by its nature partnership working in sports development involves the sharing and pooling of resources across different policy areas. Thus while there has been ambiguity in the development of FitC schemes, in that no two organisations implement programmes alike, it is apparent that the development of FitC schemes utilised embryonic social networks at individual, group and organisational level to develop shared relationships around the respective programmes (cf. Hamblin 2019). During its second term of office, 2001-2005, the Labour Government situated sport more explicitly within its social exclusion and health agendas, fuelled by concerns over anti-social behaviour, youth crime and increasing levels of obesity in the general population (McDonald, 2005, p. 593-4). Politicians sympathetic to the case for improving community sport and raising its profile higher on the policy agenda required a politically acceptable proposal to legitimize, and provide a focus for, their personal enthusiasm. FitC schemes, based in local communities, but with the association of the professional football club, clearly provided such a focus and had grown into "... mature and sophisticated

organisations developing sport from grass roots to excellence, tackling serious social issues and working in partnership with both the private and public sectors” (Watson, 2000, p. 446).

The most recent Government strategy for sport, *Sporting Future*, identified five key outcomes (HM Government, 2015): physical well-being, mental well-being, individual development, social and community development, and economic development. Coalter (2013), however, argued that sport does not contribute to increased ‘social inclusion’ and suggests that various aspects of social inclusion precede participation. The fundamental challenge of a domestic sport policy, namely increased participation and the associated social and economic benefits, is both difficult to achieve but even more salient for nations where community sport policies are considered as being well developed. Public policy has been characterised by a ‘shopping list’ mentality with a succession of programmes and initiatives - often politically driven - that have little, if any, sound theoretical thinking or evidence to support them (Rowe, 2015). Consequently, public policy has misdiagnosed ‘the problem’ as one primarily of opportunity deficiency rather than one of individual capacity building, motivation, enjoyment and empowerment. The biggest failing has been to approach community sports development with a limited understanding of the business it is in, which, according to Rowe (2018) is the business of behaviour change and behaviour maintenance. Paradoxically it is often characterised, defined and measured by non-sporting outcomes. FitC schemes have often been characterised with engaging participants in programme interventions, which provide resources for participants to make better choices as citizens as a means to solving social problems (Brown et al, 2006). FitC schemes in the early 21st century were thus often characterised by tackling crime and anti-social behaviour (such as through the Positive Futures programme), health improvement programmes including drug awareness education, study support (such as through the Playing for Success programme), and social and employability skills (the latter often linked to youth unemployment and adult learning).

Professional sport teams, more so than conventional private businesses, are potential vehicles for Corporate Social Responsibility delivery given their established community presence and social significance. The actions of professional sport teams represents CSR if they, “are driven by (a) normative expectations of executives or stakeholders, (b) a response to wider social agendas, or (c) potential economic benefit” (Hamil & Morrow, 2011, p. 143). FitC organisations engage people in a way that few other organisations can. Stakeholders and partners choose to work with trusts due to their access to a variety of social groups and settings

because football clubs are in a unique position to potentially influence, engage with and impact on community lives, especially young people. Engaging with the community and undertaking community work is both a way for the club to ‘give something back’ to its community and to engage with current and future fans away from match days and stadia. Despite this profile, the role and impact of schemes run by FitC organisations remain variable and vulnerable across the sector. Walters & Tacon (2011) demonstrated that resource constraints and securing funding were two of the most significant challenges faced by football clubs, and that only a small minority measured and quantified the benefits of community work. In the English Premier League, there is recognition that measuring and quantifying benefits is of key importance to community programmes, and while progress has been made in this area, it still provides a major challenge.

Whilst independently funded, FitC organisations often receive some financial and/or in-kind support from the club but each relationship differs. FitC organisations reflect the increasing trend through which the third sector is becoming increasingly central to the local delivery of sport (Hayton & Walker, 2018) in an era of austerity, which has seen cuts to local services, the disappearance of sport development departments and teams in all but the largest of local authorities (King, 2014; Widdop et al, 2018) and changes to school provision, particularly outsourcing provision at primary age delivery (Parnell et al, 2017). Reflecting football’s popularity, FitC organisations are perhaps the highest profile collective range of organisations that are increasingly filling the policy vacuum created by significant budgetary constraints in non-discretionary services, including sport development and community recreation. Furthermore, people from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to use and depend on local authority provision as opposed to commercial providers or non-profit sport sector providers (Widdop et al., 2018). Walker and Hayton (2017) spoke to 16 CEOs and directors of Third Sector sport organisations to find out how the impact of cuts in public services. They discovered that cash-strapped local authorities are increasingly relying on sporting charities to deliver what used to be core local authority sport services. Those sport organisations, however, are often ill equipped to cope with demand due to a drastic reduction in their own funding streams, yet it is potentially the larger organisations who have the flexibility and capacity to survive.

The current landscape for FitC organisations

Community sport policy in the UK and globally, has come to be characterised by the term sport for development (SfD). The popularity of SfD lies in “its ability to capture or ‘hook’ a large number of people - particularly those interested in sport and physical activity - and use the momentum in and around sport as a strategic vehicle to communicate, implement, and achieve non-sport development goals” (Schulenkorf et al., 2016, p. 22). Whilst conceptualisations of SfD are globally contested and defined, the UK has witnessed a number of terminologies that have been and still are used interchangeably and somewhat nebulously: for example, sport development, community sport development, sport for social change and the development of communities through sport. Cultural and sporting opportunities have intrinsic value, and can inspire personal success, but to view them narrowly negates the potential impact of sport on positive outcomes in health, education, criminal justice and urban regeneration.

Within this environment, FitC organisations face three main challenges. First, aligning programmes and schemes with such a broad range of overall policies diverse population groups is challenging (Parnell et al., 2017). Specific programmes such as Primary Stars, which provides curriculum-linked teaching resources for schools, Kickz, a national programme in the UK which uses football to engage young people in deprived areas, and Man v Fat, a programme addressing obesity and mental health in older males (The FA, 2019), illustrate the challenging scope and remit of FitC organisations. Second, the capacity to effectively work in partnership with stakeholders whose primary remits are in in both sport and non-sport policy domains reflects the point alluded to earlier on the importance of networks and partnerships. For example, under the banner of London United, all the CEOs representing London based FitC organisations meet every three months to swap ideas and share good practice. Third, the ability to engage in a strategic planning cycle which ensures consistent levels of funding for projects, and with due regard to performance measurement, the measurement of social impact and contribution to social outcomes is a critical factor in order to demonstrate the impact of organisational performance and each individual scheme within the overall community programmes. For example, Albion in the Community (AitC), the FitC organisation associated with English Premier League club Brighton and Hove Albion, has claimed its work has an impact on the local community worth more than £28 million a year (AitC, 2019). Coalter (2002; 2007; 2010) identified a classification of sport for development initiatives. First, sport in its traditional form is a means to an end for participants. Second, using the term ‘sport-plus’, sport

can be adjusted, modified or conducted with other programmes to achieve broader development goals. Third, applying the term ‘plus sport’, sport is the hook to attract participants into programmes to achieve other outcomes, primarily relating to a range of social policy domains. It is in these areas that FitC organisations now have a prominent role to play. All English professional clubs within the English Premier League and English Football League, and many semi-professional clubs outside of that structure, now have community schemes. The size and scope of the sector continues to grow despite funding and organisations often being on a precarious footing.

The EFL Trust is the charitable arm of the English Football League (EFL). It was established in 2008 to oversee the remarkable and diverse work of EFL’s FitC organisations. Subsequently, the Premier League Charitable Fund (PLCF) was set up as an independent charity in 2010 to support the delivery of the strategy of its FitC organisations and other partners. As the EFL Trust states:

Each of the 72 English Football League clubs, through their charitable organisations, provide unique reach and cost-effective solutions to national and local government around a huge range of policy areas, especially in Education, Health, Community Engagement and Sports Participation. The network has proudly secured funding to invest more than £100 million into local communities, with over 2,400 employees in place (EFL Trust 2018, p. 2).

Indeed, the EFL claimed its FitC organisations were the largest network of sporting charities in the UK, with the EFL and its clubs investing £80m into communities in 2018. The EFL Day of Action in March 2019 highlighted EFL clubs supporting the work undertaken to tackle social issues. Examples included Middlesbrough’s Move and Learn project as players helped explain the importance of a healthy and balanced diet, and sessions at Luton Town and AFC Wimbledon supporting the respective Trust’s disability groups (EFL, 2019). Yet the increased prominence and profile of these community organisations has occurred alongside austerity measures in sport policy – typically associated with budgetary reductions in services, staffing and, most significantly, sports development and community recreation (King, 2013; 2014) – which have necessitated the reduced contribution of local government to local sport provision. Consequently, FitC organisations are now often the catalyst for local delivery of projects that local authorities used to be.

Within this environment, FitC organisations are increasingly producing annual reports in order to demonstrate their social impact and value for money. In 2017, Charlton Athletic Community Trust announced a social return on investment of £6.89 to every £1 spent and a net benefit of over £31 million (CACT, 2017; 2).² In 2018, Albion in the Community claimed to have engaged over 43,000 people across its projects (AitC, 2018, p. 10-11). The Liverpool Foundation worked with over 28,000 people in 2017-18, whilst Everton in the Community, through its 120 full-time staff and 160 volunteers, offers more than 40 programmes covering a range of social issues including health, employability, anti-social behaviour, crime, education, dementia, poverty, youth engagement, youth justice and disability, and supports over 2,500 other charities in each year. Taken alone, the figures sound impressive but they are clouded by a mixture of self-interest and amplification, which tend to reduce the role of research to an affirming belief, wherein research and data functions to prove that organisations do what they say that they do. As Jeanes and Lindsey (2014) have noted, in having to legitimise and perpetuate their own worth, SfD organisations provide positive evidence that is often quantifiable and demonstrates value for money. Such measurement becomes highly problematic because of the complexity involved in measuring the issues and the extent to which organisations reproduce the structural conditions which require self-publicising their own achievements (Lusted, 2018; Chen, 2018). Consequently, evidence often functions to reflect the perceived efficacy of programmes by respective organisations; yet, concomitantly, such evidence illustrates the key point that programmes implemented by these organisations are rarely, if ever, delivered in isolation (Daniels et. al., 2018; Harris, 2018).

Method

In light of these developments, it is timely to explore the direction that football community foundations/trusts have taken, and to analyse the benefits, challenges and opportunities for social change arising from them. This investigation is necessarily shaped by alignment to current government policy, partnership working relationship with stakeholders, and the need to constantly source funds to demonstrate impact in local communities. As noted above, the majority of research in this area has looked at outcomes of specific groups or schemes. As such, it is difficult to judge overall impact. To this end, the research employed a qualitative design

² Social Return on Investment is a recognised approach for charities to measure their impact by attaching a financial value to the achievement of the organisation. Net benefit is the total social value (in £s) that charity produces for the local community minus the amount of money invested into the projects. Whilst virtually every FitC organisation now publishes an annual report citing SROI values, the research is often carried out, under contract, by consultancy firms or academic institutions

to explore the views and perceptions of CEOs from FitC organisations in order to acquire information about the strategic directions for the future based on the experience of the past.

There is a need and opportunity for FitC organisations to demonstrate the role and value of sport, but there is also a need to inform stakeholders of this role and be clear how to exploit opportunities to create a mutually beneficial future. To ensure the best use of resources it is important to have a clear rationale for the practice of FitC organisations in order to enable stakeholders, including the organisations themselves, to better capitalise on their position and the associated opportunities. This exploratory study employed a qualitative research design, which is best suited when the researcher needs to understand more from the participants perspective before designing more predictive or causal studies (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 2009). The study is set within the social constructivist tradition, in that knowledge that individuals gain is created through their interaction with the environment (Pollio et. al, 1997). Face-to-face interviews provide an opportunity to develop a strong contextual understanding through accessing local knowledge, policies and practices from respondents and develop understanding of their beliefs, fears, ideas and interpretations (Yanow, 2000).

Participants

A purposive sample of ten Chief Executive Officers (CEOs, or equivalent roles) of FitC organisations, consisting of nine men and one woman were invited to participate. All had been in post for at least five years and many had been involved in the industry for much longer. The sample was drawn from some of the largest FitC organisations and EPL clubs to a CEO associated with an EFL league two club with little budget. The sample was drawn from the first author's established contacts. Author a, having worked in the industry for nearly 30 years, purposively identified people who embodied a vision of a CEO role which whilst overseeing all aspects of the organisation, also demonstrated: stable leadership, strong commercial acumen, knowledge of funding streams, strategic and critical thinking in partnership working and also a clear sense of the community based responsibilities of their organisations. The lead academic institution, with a consent form that complied with data protection and current GDPR guidelines, obtained ethical approval. Care was taken to ensure a range in terms of size of the football clubs and type/history of their community schemes, and to include organizations from different parts of England. FitC organisations and CEOs were all anonymized.

Data collection/analysis

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to investigate how these organisations function and to identify and analyse what is seen as best practice within the industry. Each participant completed a 30-minute semi-structured audio-recorded interview with the first author. The second and third authors transcribed the manuscripts and then crosschecked each other's manuscripts for consistency. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling a coding of the data and the identification of common themes. Authors b and c, trained in qualitative analysis techniques, individually read and coded each transcript individually, starting with line-by-line analysis, then memo writing, and finally selecting appropriate quotes to summarize each participant's perspective. The two researchers completed this task separately to improve the reliability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another team member (author a) reviewed both sets of themes and identified consistency. As patterns developed from the data, the findings were checked for cross case comparisons between the different clubs.

Results

Governance, accountability, and engagement with multiple agendas and agencies

The community club organisation CEO role has traditionally included engagement with multiple stakeholders and trustees. Changes within the industry have further increased the need to engage with, and respond to, multiple agendas and agencies, primarily: their own board of trustees, the football club itself, other foundations/trusts, and other 'social good' agencies. CEOs are accountable to stakeholders, including boards of trustees and the football club itself with respect to branding and position with the community. There was a strong perception that, while there have been changes to club ownership over the past 25 years, relationships with the football club have remained positive. The relationship between the club and the charity is generally considered collaborative rather than top-down, with the executive and senior managers making influential decisions and then trustees ratifying this.

"Broadly [the strategy has] been decided by the executive and senior team, the officers that run the organisation, and then agreed or ratified by trustees, rather than trustees deciding on the direction and passing that down." (Participant 6)

"I've always found that the relationship that we have with the senior management team is a phone call and after sensible discussion you normally come to a decent compromise."

(Participant 3)

Nonetheless, in some organisations, it was felt that there has been some shift away from community engagement due to financial constraints, and a re-prioritisation of aims and objectives.

“The relationship with the club has changed dramatically over the years depending on who the leader of the organisation is.... During that time personnel has changed and behaviours have changed because finances allocated to the club have been restricted from huge levels of debt where community and charity [work] is not a priority.” (Participant 1)

“It’s a challenge because we’re all at different levels. But around support, governance and guidance I still think there’s a little bit of work to be done in respect of what the biggest clubs can do and how they could help, lobby and work alongside the Football League and the Premier League.” (Participant 2)

In this context, participants noted opportunities in working with, and learning from the best practice of, other foundations/trusts. As with relationships with other trusts, the relationships with other charitable agencies have positive and negative implications. The positive aspects include joining agencies together to create consortia of support for young people, with the opportunity to share resources and best practice. In recognition of the need to share best practice a number of strategic alliances have been formed.

“I think that’s been the most successful part of my time in football really, valuing the support and the partnerships, and working with other trusts.” (Participant 5)

“You buddy up with people you respect in the way that organisations conduct themselves, as people, because of the projects they’ve got, how you compare the demographics for the projects you have or how they address particular challenges, whether that be ownership at the football club or whether that be funding challenges or whether it be just good people but do some good practice.” (Participant 1)

“As infrastructure has got bigger you are looking at more and more strategic alliances, and more and more local and governmental needs, and where we can play a bigger part in that. I think that what clubs are doing. What clubs have moved away from is this very isolated work into a more partnership led work.” (Participant 2)

Conversely, the increase in other agencies providing similar services and diversification into other sectors has increased competition for funding with private companies, other charities and local authorities.

“I think in our case its leisure trusts perhaps. They have had to diversify themselves. They were obviously generally part of the old council sports development and leisure centres, but they have become independent charities.” (Participant 6)

“The town supports the club. That is a different dynamic. The charity there was pretty much non-existent for a number of years. So for it to go from nought to a two-and-a-half million [pounds] turnover charity in four years there’s a lot of positives to that. But that also creates some fear within the charity sector and the community sector from other providers who see that as a threat. So that has been a challenge” (Participant 6)

Challenges and developments

a) Security and sustainability of delivery and funding

All participants noted funding changes over the past 25 years. Schemes are now generally funded through a combination of, for example, the Premier League, local and national government grants, self-generated income, charitable/private donors, and fundraising.

“Financial issues are a big thing; whether we have reserves, the level of security behind us financially, a restricted income, so [we need to be aware of] all the salient points around running a charity.” (Participant 2)

“[Our funding is comprised of] probably slightly more private and donor funding, almost in a traditional philanthropic sense, in that local people, even club directors, give to the charity or will fund projects that the charity run that they have a particular interest in.” (Participant 6)

“We have set up a fundraising arm of the charity to make sure that we can continue to deliver the disability project. So we have set up a fundraising team and run about 10 different events to make sure that money comes in.” (Participant 1)

With an almost endless supply of funding streams (especially funding from education and health sectors), participants widely agreed that it is no longer possible – or, indeed, desirable – to rely on one source of funding. In this context, the strategic decisions taken are frequently a reflection of the need to ensure *security* and *sustainability* of funding.

b) The importance of growth and diversification

One of the main challenges is ensuring that schemes can keep running in the face of pressures on funding. It was accepted by participants that FitC schemes needed to diversify their offer and find multiple sources of funding in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of their programmes. While diversification was felt by some to be necessary for survival, it was recognized that it provides an opportunity for growth and development within the industry too. This can entail moving into activities and programmes traditionally provided by other agencies and sectors.

“One of the things I did was to look at local strategies and how we could walk into any meeting or any council strategy discussion and say, ‘we can do that, and we can take that on’”. (Participant 2)

“There’s not a great deal of funding we’ve been bringing in over the past two years because ...we’ve been delivering our growth strategy which is to develop our own facility.” (Participant 1)

Diversification strategies can, perhaps understandably, be driven by agendas where there is more funding available, such as within the alternative education sector.

“I think there are huge gaps in our current programme. We are quite well funded within a Further Education context, but we are funded in a traditional sense as the sport provider. I think there is a space for us to evolve into providing end-to-end [experience], providing the education. Alternative education provision, youth service provision.” (Participant 6)

“Things have moved away massively from old-school football in the community. ... [with] ex-players being appointed as FitC officers to what I think we are now, where we are an alternative provision.” (Participant 2)

c) ‘Professionalisation’ of the workforce

There has been a shift toward formal qualifications and training for those working within FitC programmes. Participants viewed this as a positive as it has enabled staff to achieve recognition for the skills they are learning, many of which are applicable to other industries.

“I think it is the core ones such as the importance of safeguarding and training. That has dramatically improved and that has been good.” (Participant 1)

“So we're also giving the people that are engaging with us the opportunity of expertise outside of our field as well. So we were arming them with the things that they need on that development road that they want to go down, if that makes sense.” (Participant 9)

Further, the increased knowledge developed through the increasing professionalisation of the industry has led to programmes becoming more targeted to meet the specific needs of the communities they serve.

d) Brand values and awareness

The football club itself, and more specifically the club brand and its values, plays an important role in the strategy taken by the CEO. There was perceived accountability for actions taken and success derived from those actions. This was important due to the increasing number of projects being delivered within the foundation/trust umbrella. It is necessary to ensure that each of these were legal and compliant with governance. Increasing diversification of programmes brings with it a higher need for engagement with other agencies and increasing accountability from the club itself to ensure programmes are in line with the club brand.

“The strategy is using that club brand and the power of that club to effect change through the five main areas of work: sport, education, health, inclusion, community facilities.” (Participant 6)

“We are accountable to a number of different people but obviously being a representative of the football club as well, we are accountable to the football club as the main stakeholder and their brand values. There is a lot of accountability across a number of different spectrums because we are delivering a lot of projects but, ultimately, to make sure we are legal and compliant.” (Participant 1)

“You will always have the, as we know them, “white van man”, the little pop-up coaching clinics and franchises - which are not the way forward - clubs shouldn't be looking at doing things like that in terms of brand awareness” (Participant 2)

Measuring success

There was variation in participants' definitions of success and how it was measured. The *social* impact of success was widely cited, namely the idea of stimulating social change and improve young peoples' prospects. In line with this was the understanding that the ultimate beneficiaries of the work being conducted were – or *should be* – the local community.

“The headline is to deliver change in our local community. It’s very much focused on the local community first.” (Participant 6)

“The strategy, for us, falls into a number of different areas. Ultimately it is making a difference to people’s lives.” (Participant 1)

“Certainly the work I have found at [clubs] ... again, simplifying for effect, if you think of society as being 80:20, where 80% of society are independently resilient and get on, and 20% need extra support, I think in theory our work should be targeted at that 20% that need extra support.” (Participant 6)

Success was also defined in monetary terms. Strategies need to ensure that schemes are effective in delivering the outcomes they are promising and also that they are bringing in sufficient funding to allow for the day-to-day running (i.e. their sustainability) of the project, and indeed other projects, over a number of years.

“We completed the social impact report that demonstrated two years ago that our value to the local community was up to about £13 million.” (Participant 1)

“Our own award scheme, and soccer programmes and summer courses, came together to be a hundred grand income, which was that kind of level of income that supported other things. As time moved on, and competition was out there with other agencies, and the fact you’ve got to have an infrastructure to grow that kind of strand, then you are looking at funding, you are looking at bid writing.” (Participant 2)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore Chief Executive Officers’ (CEOs) perspectives on the development and progress of FitC schemes and organisations. It is important to note that what started out, 25 years ago, as small areas of work within small departments of clubs (often with only one full time member of staff) is now reflected in the work of (often) large registered charities. According to published accounts on the UK Charities Commission website, the turnover of 42 of the 92 foundations/trusts is currently in excess of £1 million per annum, and for ten it is in excess of £3 million. As an industry deeply rooted in the third sector, there is no sign that this significant growth is likely to decline. This increase in turnover has undoubtedly been partly due to the input from the Premier League through its Charitable Fund. The expenditure for this fund has increased from £14m 2014 to £35m 2018, with those organisations linked to the Premier League often benefitting most. Funded programmes include

Primary Stars, Kickz and Inspires, all of which are based upon helping young people. In some cases, the contribution from this fund can be as much as 30% of their financial turnover. Whilst this is clearly of benefit, it can also lead to over reliance on one stream of funding which can make organisations vulnerable to over dependence on the Premier League. As participants in this study identified, there clearly is a need for all to diversify their funding streams as much as they can. The EFL Trust has also had a major effect on helping FitC organisations to grow, particularly by sub-contracting programmes such as through the National Citizen Service (NCS). In some cases this has significantly helped financial turnover of some of the smaller organisations. None of these funding streams, however, is without risk. The funding from the Premier League may be reduced if the parent club is relegated. For the EFL, national contracts such as NCS are normally gained for a finite period, and failure to be awarded new contracts could result in a massive reduction in the funding available, particularly in the current political climate where initiatives such as NCS are under heavy scrutiny. Further, the valuable support from the PFA could be at risk depending upon the outcome of the current independent review

The main themes arising from the study identified both structural and organizational factors. The participating CEOs were generally positive about the future of FitC organisations, though there were several issues in the way that the CEOs described the schemes. A main feature was the measurement of success, which was varied. It seems likely that in the future, proof of successful delivery through social impact assessments will play a crucial role when applying for funding. Previously, organisational success and achievement has generally been measured by financial turnover and the number of people that the FitC organisations engaged with. Engagement in itself is difficult to quantify as it could entail a one-off presentation by a member of staff in a school assembly or, to the other extreme, delivering an educational qualification, which could last over 100 guided learning hours. Social impact assessments have become a more accepted way of measuring success for charities. This is of particular concern when going through an economic recession, where non-statutory government funding, for example from the youth services, is often the first type of funding to be reduced. With the FitC organisations having no or limited means of producing social impact assessments, the gap between the larger and smaller organisations is therefore likely to increase. There may be a temptation for some to produce a social impact report that would not stand up to rigorous examination due to a lack of understanding or lack of funding and resources to produce a high quality report.

All the organisations use football as the main vehicle for delivery. With the larger organisations, football's importance decreases as delivery diversifies, through additional activities based upon education and health improvement, neither of which are necessarily associated with football. However, all rely on the brand of the parent football club. Respondents generally work in harmony with their club, but one should not underestimate the problems that can arise if the vision of those that run the club does not align with those that oversee the respective FitC organisation (both staff and trustees). As registered charities, FitC organisations have to be independent. This can be challenging when a private sector organization like a football club may be tempted to dictate the direction of a charity, regardless of the latter's association with the parent club. It is the responsibility of the trustees to ensure that lines do not become blurred, as, despite the size of the foundations/trusts, they would need to return to be a department of the club rather than having the benefits of registered charitable status. Finally, it should be noted that over the past 25 years a large percentage of FitC organisations have grown so much in stature within their community that they are regarded by local and national funding agents as reliable deliverers of programmes which are often in no way connected to football. This, in itself, highlights the opportunities ahead for these organisations. It is, however, crucial that they work in partnership and not in competition with other local charities in order to maximise the benefit for their community.

Conclusion

This paper offers new understanding on the motives, manifestations and outcomes of FitC organisations as a means of addressing social exclusion. It complements and expands the research literature that has addressed participants' experiences and focused on the perceptions of end users. In doing so, it provides a more holistic analysis of this sector, identifying the strategic and organizational factors that have underpinned its development. While in the eyes of some a relatively peripheral aspect of the overall operation of football clubs – at the top level at least – this paper has identified that football in the community is characterized by a similar magnitude and significance of challenges, developments and opportunities as the playing and business areas of professional clubs. The findings of this paper reveal four main issues facing the sector: security and sustainability of delivery and funding; the importance of growth and diversification; engagement with multiple agendas and agencies; 'professionalisation' of the workforce; and brand values and awareness. For CEOs, success of their schemes is measured both in terms of financial security of programmes and social impact within the community.

The move away from schemes aimed at football or other sport as a means of doing this is significant. It is the case though, as it has always been, that the majority of schemes are supported on short term funding from different sources. Clearly, the football clubs running FitC organisations are committed to and the continuance of schemes over 25 years might be seen as a sign of success. If FitC organisations are to continue to grow and support communities, it is necessary for a common framework to be developed to support them.

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