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“People Have Nowhere to Go”: Stakeholder Perceptions on Sustainability of Funded Community Sport Programmes

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Abstract

Overstated promises of hosting the Olympic Games to deliver sustainable participation legacies have been a common occurrence, and a lesson that the UK did not learn from London 2012. Despite this, schemes like Sportivate that sought to distribute public funds to community intervention initiatives have emerged to promote long-term engagement in physical activity and sports. This research aims to build further understanding on sport programme/intervention sustainability. Stakeholders of recipient organisations of Sportivate funding through London Sport offered insights on aspects that aid sustainability of their programmes. Semi-structured interviews took place with 33 board chairs, board members, CEOs, project officers, and coaches positioned at 12 different Sportivate-funded organisations. For analysis purposes, the organisations that these individuals represented were categorised into Target Achieved and Target Not Achieved to indicate success in meeting Sportivate key performance indicators. Analysis suggests the relevance of policy remodelling, capacity, funding, programme fit, leadership, communication, and social bonds as key areas in achieving sport programme sustainability. However, Target Achieving organisations portray signs of strength in some of these sustainability areas, unlike Target Not Achieving organisations. The complexities of sustainability as a multi-layered construct provide a starting point for further study, while recognising the relevance of organisation type, capacity, and staff roles in influencing sustainability perceptions.

Keywords

community intervention programmes; participation; physical activity; public funding; sustainability

1. Introduction

Community sport programmes are often used to increase mass participation levels, and to achieve sustainable benefits for the recipients, whilst the longevity of such programmes is an indicator of their success (Berg, 2016; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012). An example of such a scheme is Sportivate, which was created to encourage sedentary youth to embrace sport and physical activity (PA) following the London 2012 Games (Thomas et al., 2018). Sportivate, as one of Sport England's flagship Olympic legacy projects, commenced in April 2011 securing a national funding allocation of £56 million over a six-year period until March 2017. Sport England channelled National Lottery money to local communities via 45 County Sports Partnerships, or Active Partnerships as they are now known, across the country (Sport England, 2014). While initially directed at inactive individuals aged 14–25 years, the scheme evolved to focus on inactive young people between 11–25 years of age, women and girls, and disabled youth (Sport England, 2014).

By focussing on these traditionally hard-to-engage groups, programmes like Sportivate aimed to actively address participation issues, while emphasising the significance of age and other demographic factors towards sustainable outcomes (Seefeldt et al., 2002). In so doing, and similar to Belgium's approach (Theeboom et al., 2010), a range of providers including voluntary sport organisations (VSOs) were encouraged to apply for Sportivate funding to run programmes and stimulate effective participation interventions amongst difficult-to-engage target groups in sports (Ikramullah et al., 2018). As has been successful in other nations, to stimulate sport participation demand, correct market failure, and support the role of sport as a public good, expanding the range of organisations that meet public funding criteria can aid in the development of sustainable community PA interventions in the UK (Theeboom et al., 2010).

Unlike Sportivate, which awarded funding to organisations delivering 12 weeks of activity, Sport England has since been able to manifest this approach through Satellite Clubs, which provided funding for 30 weeks of programme delivery. This scheme has also concluded in 2022, which was 12 months later than anticipated due to the Covid-19 disruption. However, despite changes in policy-dictated programme delivery, which as Berg (2016) recognises can positively influence the sustainability of community-level programmes, there is still a need to understand how different programmes influence perceptions of sustainability amongst stakeholders at organisations tasked with their delivery. Indeed, those in charge of implementing these interventions highlighted programme termination as one of the key reasons for failing to meet sustainable outcomes, especially when the issue they aim to address persists (Pluye et al., 2004; Schulenkorf, 2017).

Despite this consensus, programme sustainability is underpinned by multiple underlying dimensions, with varying importance depending on the context. Scholars have argued for the relevance of factors that include project design and implementation, innovation, context, processes, the broader community environment, resilience and the urban commons, leadership, staff involvement, community understanding and participant empowerment, political support, developing partnerships, and programme adaptability in understanding the sustainability of community intervention programmes (Edwards & Rowe, 2019; Koutrou & Kohe, 2024a; Mancini & Marek, 2004; Schulenkorf, 2017; Whitley et al., 2015; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012).

While acknowledging the complexities of prior research on community programme sustainability, this study aims to ascertain stakeholder perceptions on the elements influencing the sustainability of community intervention programmes targeting youth in sport after their funding cycle has ceased. To achieve this,

semi-structured interviews with strategic and delivery staff from organisations that received Sport England's Sportivate funding in London to run sport and PA interventions in 2015–2016 (year 5) were conducted to inform this case study. Understanding the elements that may influence the sustainability of community sport programmes following a mega-sport event could aid future host cities in determining leveraging strategies and funding priorities in an effort to achieve sustainable, long-lasting sport participation legacies, while at the same time ensuring that such interventions both meet their objectives and are long-lasting.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The UK Context and the Emergence of Sportivate*

The strategy of leveraging major events like the Olympics seeks to foster long-term community outcomes by engaging stakeholders (Chalip, 2018). The London 2012 bid promised ambitious sport participation legacies; however, these expectations may have been overstated (Bloyce & Smith, 2010; Reis et al., 2017). Sportivate, which was run between 2011 and 2017, played a specific role as an Olympic legacy funding scheme designed to promote activities for inactive young people and encourage a lifestyle of sport and PA, despite past Olympic failures in fulfilling legacy claims (Thomas et al., 2018).

Importantly, lessons from previous Olympic games suggest that successful funding schemes like Sportivate must create genuine community engagement opportunities, addressing facility inadequacies and other obstacles that hinder youth participation in sports (Bauman et al., 2013). Ultimately, while social impacts from improved facilities are vital in driving behavioural change among inactive populations, a lack of local stakeholder involvement in policymaking undermines the potential of event legacy schemes like Sportivate to effectively address the specific needs of communities in London and the UK (Dowling, 2024; Preuss, 2007). This gap indicates a critical need for policy coherence by aligning local strategies with national policies to ensure sustainable sport participation legacies post-Olympics (Dowling, 2024; Girginov et al., 2017). Indeed, four key components were identified as instrumental for the sustainability of Sportivate-funded projects and as necessary to be included within each application: investment in exit routes, club memberships, relationships with sport and PA providers, and local insights to understand community demands for PA provisions (Ikramullah et al., 2018). Recent data suggest that children and youth PA levels in the UK are unchanged from 2021–2022 and pre-pandemic levels (2018–2019) with 47% or 2.3 million of youth engaging in 60 minutes or more of PA daily ("Children's activity levels hold firm," 2023). This has prompted an ongoing need for community intervention programmes to secure funding and address inactivity in young people (Owen et al., 2024). But what does the broader literature on community programme sustainability highlight as the essential elements that underpin their longevity?

2.2. *Programme Sustainability*

Programme sustainability has been defined as the continuation of activities after the input, funding, and resources originally provided to create a programme have subsided (Scheirer, 2005). As a multi-dimensional framework, research has attempted to identify and clarify its underlying components. Systematic research on the maintenance of PA/sport programmes after their funding period ends is still in its infancy (Blom et al., 2015). Indeed, programme termination appears to be ineffective when proposed interventions fail to

address persistent or recurring problems (Schulenkorf, 2017). Regardless, programmes may be effective in meeting their objectives yet unable to ensure their longevity (Lindsey, 2008).

Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) identify four main areas that influence programme sustainability including innovation, organisational context, processes, and internal/external organisational capacity. Shediak-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) proposed that programme sustainability depends on elements related to project design and implementation, the organisational setting, and the broader community environment. Mancini and Marek (2004), in the context of family-related community intervention programmes, developed the Programme Sustainability Index. This Index is a three-dimensional framework that includes seven sustainability components: leadership competence, effective collaborations, community understanding, strategic funding, programme responsiveness, staff involvement and integration, and demonstrating programme results. When these components are present, middle-range programme outcomes like effective sustainability planning, assurance of programme survival, satisfaction of participants' needs, and ultimately programme sustainability are achieved. Mancini and Marek (2004) emphasise that sustainability elements are within the control of leaders and stakeholders and can directly lead to programme sustainability; however, contextual factors including funding cuts and the introduction of new interventions may affect the programme's longevity.

Mancini and Marek (2004) refer to leadership competence as an important factor that could affect programme sustainability. Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) also highlighted leadership competence in relation to the broader context as influencing programme sustainability. Mancini and Marek (2004) point to the role and responsibilities of leaders to develop a programme vision and ensure all supporting activities are appropriately delivered for those helping meet sustainable outcomes. Shediak-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) also emphasise the role of a programme champion from a mid to upper level of managerial position within organisations working towards delivering sustainable programmes. Interestingly, Shilbury and Ferkins (2011) also found that CEO-board dynamics were crucial in enhancing strategic capability in the pursuit of rational management objectives for sporting organisations.

Effective collaborations are also integral to programme sustainability (Mancini & Marek, 2004). Effective leaders are essential in fostering relationships, particularly in organisations dedicated to sustaining new practices (Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012). Mansfield et al. (2015), in their evaluation of the Health and Sport Engagement intervention, further underscore the necessity of cross-sector collaborations. These collaborations within community interventions play a crucial role in cultivating a social environment that enhances participant benefits (Dearing, 2003). However, Misener and Doherty (2012) argue that the effectiveness and longevity of community sport club partnerships in meeting organisational objectives is contingent upon the nature of the participating organisations, which often demand diverse partners, resources, and services.

Another aspect that contributes to programme sustainability and interacts with other sustainability elements is understanding the community who participate in intervention programmes (Mancini & Marek, 2004). Schulenkorf (2017) suggests that contextual understanding facilitates the development and execution of more culturally relevant health interventions. Similarly, Whitley et al. (2015) note that effective sport/PA interventions are culturally sensitive and incorporate community and contextual knowledge. This can be achieved through empowering programme beneficiaries to take charge of their creation, execution, and

evaluation. Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) advocate for a collective partnership approach to gain insight into participants to deliver interventions that are tailored to their needs. However, Mancini and Marek (2004) specify that understanding the community encompasses not only programme participants but also the socio-economic and political background of stakeholders. Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) affirm this by highlighting the importance of maintaining core elements of community intervention programmes once initial support has ceased, suggesting partnerships and understanding the community are congruent objectives in achieving sustainability.

Measuring the success of community intervention programmes poses significant challenges but remains crucial for overall effectiveness (Mancini & Marek, 2004). These programmes necessitate evaluations that address both processes and outcomes, in addition to a thorough examination of how organisations define success (Poulin et al., 2000). Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) assert that the ability to achieve and measure programme outcomes relies on indicators such as implementation fidelity, decision-making functionality, and coordination among stakeholders. This further illustrates the interactivity of latent constructs that make up the framework of sustainability (Mancini & Marek, 2004). Strategic funding emerges as a critical factor in programme sustainability, particularly for smaller organisations engaged in collaborative agreements with larger entities, as it requires considerations of potential cutbacks, policy changes, realistic cost identification, funding stream diversification, and service variety (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Whitley et al., 2015). To ensure programme longevity, organisations must cultivate relationships within their communities to diversify funding and sources of support. This calls for flexibility by matching program objectives to the mission, values, strategic focus, and capacity of possible partners while maintaining the programme's integrity (Whitley et al., 2015). Nonetheless, funding strategies must be tailored to organisational types, as smaller organisations face greater risks over larger entities to maintain programme control. Harris and Houlihan (2016) caution that partnership strategies can result in intricate patterns of resource dependency and might reflect a culture externally imposed and controlled by the government.

Scholars further argue that staff integration and involvement in decision-making and implementation is integral to sustainable programmes and reflects an organisational culture that values positive internal relationships, strengthens an organisational sense of belonging, and encourages human resources to take ownership of programmes (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Whitley et al., 2015). However, others note that staff attributes reflect workforce stability and are more closely related to capacity rather than organisational culture (Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012). Indeed, fostering capacity building for all programme partners through training, education, and leadership development so that they can take charge of the initiative could aid in meeting programme objectives and guaranteeing sustainability (Ooms et al., 2019; Whitley et al., 2015).

Another element of sustainable community interventions is programme responsiveness. This refers to the extent an intervention programme could be modified to address the changing needs of the recipient community, while considering the underlying social structures and the programme's beneficiaries (Akerlund, 2000; Whitley et al., 2015). However, Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) expand on this concept, suggesting that responsiveness is just one aspect of programme innovation characteristics, which also include suitability and effectiveness.

In considering the sustainability of expanded delivery networks, it is crucial to examine the impact at policy, strategy, and delivery levels. Policymakers play a significant role in influencing PA participation programmes

(Berg, 2016). Johnson et al. (2004) emphasise the importance of building administrative policies and procedures to sustain programme innovations. However, challenges can arise when policymakers do not ensure policy coherence by consulting and involving local stakeholders in the design of policies, do not provide substantial ongoing delivery support, or fail to consider the context of delivery and the potential mechanisms for change, as exemplified by the Sport Action Zones programme, which sought to promote social inclusion in areas of socio-economic deprivation in the UK (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013).

Regardless of variations in terminology, there appears to be consensus among scholars on the elements that underpin programme sustainability across different community settings. By examining the insights of key stakeholders involved in the delivery of Sportivate-funded programmes/interventions in London, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the unique characteristics of sport and PA programmes and identifying elements perceived as essential for achieving sustainability beyond their initial funding cycle.

3. Methodology

The research employed purposive sampling by inviting strategically positioned individuals within the setting from 12 separate organisations that were identified as receiving funding for Sportivate programmes. From the 12 organisations, five were selected as “Target Achieved” (TA) organisations and another seven selected as “Target Not Achieved” (TNA) in the 5th year of the Sportivate funding scheme. This is largely due to data accessibility provided by London Sport for the last complete set of participation data for a full year of Sportivate, at the time of research. Categories for TA and TNA groups were made from secondary data supplied by London Sport which highlighted every organisation that had received funding for the 5th year of Sportivate, and either met (TA) or missed (TNA) their programme’s participation targets. Three members of each organisation were targeted for interview across the strategic levels of the organisation: the board chair (BC), a board member (BM), and the CEO. Two additional interviews were sought amongst the delivery level of the targeted organisation: project officers (PO) and coaches (COA). There were no differences in the questions posed to each level of an organisation. By addressing the strategic and delivery aspects of organisations, further insight was offered into the varying influences on sustainability. From the shortlisted organisations, 33 interviews were conducted with 18 individuals from TA organisations and 15 from TNA organisations. The decision to include organisations that were not meeting their participation goals would offer a greater understanding of organisations benefiting from receiving funding for the delivery of their community intervention programmes (Mansfield et al., 2015). Furthermore, this aided the study’s credibility through the triangulation of data sources from a range of organisations that met the Sportivate case study criteria (Yin, 2009).

The authors’ affiliated institution at the time provided ethics clearance to conduct the study. The interviews were conducted by the lead author in person over a period of five months and ranged from 30 to 49 minutes depending on the amount of explanation offered by participants. Semi-structured interview questions comprised themes relating to the benefits of being part of the Sportivate programme, intra- and inter-organisational relationships, the climate surrounding organisational capacity for intervention programme delivery, individual autonomy, national and regional sport policy, and evaluation and feedback measures. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed manually by the lead author. Interview responses were then triangulated with London Sport Sportivate-related data and programme

sustainability literature to allow for relevant themes' interpretation that accurately captured broader sentiments in relation to the theoretical framework around sustainability. Once the interviews were completed, codes were assigned to each participant to anonymise the collected data, in addition to omitting information related to the nature of the programmes that the interviewees run. This is considered important for data anonymisation as responses can sometimes lead to the disclosure of an interviewee's identity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Transcriptions were inductively analysed, and thematic analysis was employed to identify relevant themes, whereby the authors undertook a process of thematic coding, organisation, and evaluation using intra-coder reliability and inter-coder consistency checks to develop a consensus on the conceptual coding framework and data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

To analyse the data, information was broken down into three stages of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These three stages were: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This process not only aided the familiarisation of data transcripts, which allows researchers to be more aware of repeated themes within the data, but also ensured that relevant data were not overlooked (Sobh & Perry, 2006). Nonetheless, the emergence of certain themes aligned with the previously reviewed theoretical framework of sustainability.

Initially, the data were inductively coded line by line to generate as many ideas and codes as possible based on ideas, phrases, and words repeated by multiple participants (Murchison, 2010). The initial coding process produced first-level codes that emerged for not only the theme of sustainability but also the themes of formulation, implementation, evaluation, and perceptions of the PA programmes. With the assistance of two independent researchers, the codes were grouped or categorised to identify important issues and determine whether the data were saturated (Royse et al., 2015). Each transcript, regardless of TA or TNA category, was coded in the same manner to ensure consistency in the approach. This was important as the themes aligned with the previously reviewed understanding of sustainability.

Such member-checking increases validity by asking colleagues or participants to look at preliminary results and offers suggestions or ideas that might have been missed before accurate conclusions can be drawn (Goulding, 2002). The codes were then blended into broader themes and, finally, the most relevant materials and themes were identified (Draper & Coalter, 2016; Ringuet-Riot et al., 2014). Additionally, as data analysis was carried out by the researchers, thematic saturation was met from the 33 interviews, where no new themes emerged (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024), particularly where these themes aligned with themes reviewed in the theoretical framework of sustainability. These more specific themes are presented below.

4. Results

Findings indicated six overarching themes and related subthemes that were developed inductively from the data, and they are presented in the following section: policy remodelling, resources, programme adaptability, appropriate partnerships, strong leadership, and rapport and two-way communication. These themes represent those areas participants identified as crucial to influencing the sustainability of Sportivate-funded community sport/PA interventions and they are discussed below in detail accompanied by exemplar data quotations.

4.1. Policy Remodelling Impedes Programme Delivery

Stakeholders from both TA and TNA organisations expressed concerns that the favoured top-down approach of policy implementation and funding distribution lacks consideration for smaller organisations and community intervention programme delivery. As noted by one interviewee:

It gets rather confusing. Policy changes but then the delivery needs have not changed that much. Whatever the name of a policy or funding scheme, the short-term measures to get a certain number of people through the door in limited time remains. (TA-CEO5, VSO)

Representatives from smaller organisations also expressed discontent with top-down policy implementation since it places those working with fewer resources at a disadvantage:

Policy creates too many hoops to jump through. Big money tends to go to more established organisations, but more money should go to smaller organisations working on the ground who do far more to engage local communities. (TA-BC5, VSO)

Equally, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the increased administrative requirements that follow the introduction of new policies and impede access to funding to support programme delivery. In their words:

The amount of work involved in monitoring requirements seems non-worthwhile. Most definitely there was a lot of bureaucracy thanks to modern-day policy for added workload. (TNA-CEO7, VSO)

Policy can change but how much does it really help? We still suffer. Times are uncertain and public funding is becoming scarcer due to political measures in place. (TNA-BM6, VSO)

As such, representatives from both TA and TNA organisations emphasise that a one-size-fits-all approach to policy fails to take into consideration the various organisations that work towards sustainable sport and PA participation.

4.2. Resources Integral to Programme Delivery and Organisational Viability

4.2.1. Funding Issues

From a managerial standpoint, to ensure that a programme is sustainable there needs to be sufficient financial and human resources and sustainable administrative processes in place. Indeed, concurring with Whitley et al. (2015), participants stressed the importance of securing funding to ensure sustainable engagement of participants and the longevity of programmes. One participant commented on how funding allocation impedes programme growth:

We get an allocation from the NGB [National Governing Body] and if they cut back then we will suffer. We had a cutback of 9% of our workforce grant which severely limits the development of our programmes. (TA-BM3, Regional Governing Body [RGB])

The lack of funding has been more prominent with interviewees who operated at TNA organisations. Clearly, TAs have also suffered with funding cuts; however, the difficulties stated by TNA organisations can point to how some organisations struggle to deal with a loss of funding. The following quotations vividly capture the impacts of funding loss for the community sport sector:

We have actually just lost a large amount of funding, so the reality is that we have not got that money from the public purse, so it's at the forefront of what stops us developing new programmes and continuing existing ones. (TNA-BC4, NGB)

The money is reduced and reducing still from the government. Over the last few years, the corporate support has lessened too. The market has shrunk since the financial crash and it's organisations like us that suffer. (TNA-BC6, VSO)

4.2.2. Staff Capacity

Echoing past research from Girginov et al. (2017), staff capacity and time stretches were highlighted as a significant burden, which potentially damages an organisation's approach to programme delivery and subsequent organisational growth:

We would need to find volunteers to go out and run programmes so there is a balance that's needed because it's no good having that money but no real capability to spend it. (TA-BM1, RGB)

Other participants commented about the nature of projects that require temporary/short-term contracts and staff having to undertake more than one role, which impedes longevity:

We can only bring on specific people for a specific funding delivery. We're agile in what we do. There's no person hanging around just not doing much. We wouldn't be able to afford it. (TNA-BM6, VSO)

I have to manage programmes even though as a CEO I shouldn't [have to]. I even cover sessions if I must because a coach may not show [up] or fall ill. It's a capacity issue more than anything. (TA-CEO5, VSO)

Representatives from both TA and TNA organisations also alluded to the strength of people on the ground when it comes to the delivery of community intervention programmes and the need for the strategic level of the organisation to further support their work to meet organisational delivery objectives:

One is the strength of our people on the ground. The knowledge and enthusiasm of our staff across their specific roles is huge. The other aspect is the fact that the board can get behind these people and assist them. (TA-BC3, RGB)

Another participant summarises this point by noting:

The people really drive the benefits for the participants. We give up a lot of free time to make it happen. The effort from the start has to be there, the knowledge to know where we can go play, and develop relationships too. (TA-BM2, VSO)

Others also emphasised the importance of their volunteer workforce in delivering and sustaining their sport programmes:

Volunteers are brilliant. They are the lifeblood of the sport, and they are essential to the success of any grassroots participation. (TNA-PO1, NGB)

This recognition by both TA and TNA respondents of the invaluable role ground-level staff plays in ensuring the delivery of programmes and sustainable engagement of beneficiaries has also been explored by past research (Koutrou et al., 2024; Ooms et al., 2019). Furthermore, in line with Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012), interviewees emphasised the need for the strategic level of organisations to support the work of delivery staff in meeting organisational objectives. Equally, funding dependency and the diversification of funding sources to ensure longevity were also acknowledged as issues that impede programme delivery and sustainability (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Whitley et al., 2015; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012).

4.3. Adapting Programmes for Sustainable Outcomes

A short-term mindset about Sportivate was apparent in participants' responses, with some respondents lacking foresight towards opportunities to foster long-term and consistent participation through the Sportivate scheme. In their words:

Sportivate's programme was just too short and could only be an introductory thing. Especially if we're trying to promote a healthy lifestyle. Six to eight weeks just isn't long enough unless there is a follow-up somewhere along the line. (TA-BM2, VSO)

It doesn't have an end date and is an immediate mechanism to get people playing, but beyond that you cannot really do much. (TNA-BC4, NGB)

Another participant recognised the lack of exit routes for participants following the intervention, which inhibits sustainable sport engagement:

It's no good telling people go play sport for a number of weeks and have nowhere to go after. (TNA-BC6, VSO)

However, it was apparent that some organisations, particularly from TA groups, recognised the need to adapt their projects to ensure longevity:

We didn't always have the same project. It was adapted according to the needs of the audience and how to get them participating long-term. (TA-PO4, NGB)

There are some minor differences between TA and TNA respondents, indicating that TA organisations prioritised long-term objectives from the outset by proactively tailoring programmes to the needs of their beneficiaries and the context, rather than concentrating solely on the project's short-term nature.

4.4. *Appropriate Partnerships in the Delivery of Programmes*

The forging of strong relationships with community partners for programme sustainability was highlighted by individuals in TA organisations echoing past research (Ooms et al., 2019; Schulenkorf, 2017):

Our role in that respect is to assist our partners to meet the requirements to obtain funding. We have done that fairly successfully over a long period of time. It comes back to having strong relationships. (TA-BM3, RGB)

In line with Schulenkorf (2017), who emphasises that managerial know-how and effective collaborations are critical towards sustainable outcomes for sport for health programmes, interviewees commented:

It's about sharing resources and being efficient. Also, we get to share ideas and build common platforms to expand the impact of our programmes, helping them to become more sustainable. (TA-BM4, NGB)

Having those initial links with our partners helped us tick over the initial stages into this long-term project which is now still running here today. (TA-COA3, RGB)

In some instances, relationships were formed to cover an area towards sustainability that TA organisations could not fulfil by themselves. One participant suggests:

I think from our perspective we will work with anybody that allows us to work in a capacity towards the sustainable goals we want to achieve. (TA-BC5, VSO)

Another participant highlighted the value of effective collaborations towards longevity:

Partnership work is massive. Without facilities, without activators, without volunteers, without coaches we just wouldn't have sessions. We have to share that burden to succeed with long-term plans. (TA-COA3, RGB)

Another participant stated:

We can't do all of that ourselves so it helps us to meet targets when we can work with organisations that have already accessed funding, and we help support the delivery of their programmes with our expertise. (TA-PO3, RGB)

Individuals in strategic roles at TNA organisations pointed out instances in which their desire for sustainable outcomes had been hampered by incompatible values with their collaborators/partners:

Well, there are plenty of networking opportunities organised by UK Sport and Sport England where they do workshops or lunches with other chairs and CEOs, but sometimes it feels everyone is out for themselves. (TNA-BC4, NGB)

TNA participants were sceptical about collaborations that compromised their autonomy or programme and sport control echoing past research (Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Misener & Doherty, 2012). As one interviewee notes:

We have no particular hang-up about working with others. Where we have a hang-up, I suppose is where others appear to be taking over the work we do. And once the independence of an organisation is compromised then people will walk out. (TNA-BM1, NGB)

The above suggests that effective collaborations are integral towards sustainable programmes and are an element that seems to differentiate TA and TNA organisations in their ability to initiate, develop, and maintain strong relationships with their partners to benefit their programmes and participants.

4.5. Strong Leadership a Necessity

On a strategic level, both TA and TNA organisation representatives expressed consensus that the board take the lead, whereas on a delivery level leadership would sit with the CEO. Interviewees note:

That would be with the chairman for the strategic direction of the organisation but the overall leadership for the delivery of the strategy sits with me. (TNA-CEO1, NGB)

The leadership on delivery is definitely with the CEO. They direct the ground-level staff on what is expected from the programmes they develop. (TA-BC5, VSO)

By recruiting a CEO from within the organisation, it was generally believed that a greater understanding of the role, alignment with the organisation's values and objectives, and sustainable programme delivery could be achieved. Both TA and TNA representatives note:

Most of that comes from the CEO. We have had quite a recent change in CEO who has worked from the development officer level right through the ranks to the top, which helps as they understand the work needed for our delivery to be sustainable. (TA-PO3, RGB)

It would probably come to me and the sports director to see if the programme was compatible with our aims and objectives for the organisation. It helps that I used to be a coach and project officer here before being CEO. (TNA-CEO3, NGB)

Interviewees also emphasised that instances where there was a lack of understanding by leaders on the role of delivery staff impeded their efforts to fulfil sustainable objectives. In their words:

Some of the work is quite difficult because the board aren't fully aware of everything that goes on. Some of them come from business backgrounds where it's all about profit, but our services are about growing the sport, not the finances. (TNA-CEO3, NGB)

There is a huge gap between a project starting and setting out to meet sustainable outcomes. Sometimes the board don't understand what it takes, but they dictate what the CEO can and can't do which affects my work down the line. (TA-COA, RGB)

There was also consensus on the need for better communication and joint decision-making for different leadership strands to minimise the negative effects on delivery staff's efforts to meet sustainable objectives through community intervention programmes:

For me, it has to be a kind of partnership between the board and myself. Everyone needs to know their roles and their function. Perhaps the board have to take the overall lead as they hire me, but really, it's a joint leadership. (TNA-CEO3, NGB)

Broadly speaking it's the CEO that needs to be supported by the chair and board. That's why we have multiple management committees, so areas of responsibility have their own expertise and leadership. (TA-BM3, RGB)

Sometimes it feels like it's me. But I feed the organisation's performances into the board who hold me accountable. I don't mind that, because there's a sense of joint responsibility to lead the organisation to sustainable success. (TA-CEO5, VSO)

Concurring with past research (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Shediach-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011), participants asserted the need for dual leadership with clearly designated areas of focus according to expertise. At the same time, it was emphasised that better internal communications between the strategic and delivery strands of leadership would facilitate sustainable outcomes.

4.6. Rapport and Two-Way Communication Important for Work Efficiency

TA respondents acknowledged the importance of rapport and two-way communication as a characteristic of more successful groups. In their words:

I don't feel confused and there is a clear direction. If anything changes, we are always aware of it quite quickly from management. We meet regularly and are quite open to conversation about life in general. (TA-COA1, RGB)

I speak to my manager most days on the phone for a catch-up. Sometimes it's just a social call. But at least I know, if I ever need anything, I can rely on management for support. (TA-COA4, NGB)

Positive internal relationships, clear communication, and leadership were also noted as integral in fostering an environment conducive to effective and sustainable delivery of community programmes:

We are fed reports from everyone monthly, and it's fair to say we are very happy with the general direction we are heading in. Plus, the meetings feel like a bit of a social event at times as it's nice to get together and catch up. Our strength comes from that. (TA-BM3, RGB)

Interviewees also acknowledged the value of a positive internal environment in knowledge exchange and cross-over of expertise to ensure effective programme delivery:

So now in the development team we had people covering different areas, but they would cross over. To get a session set up, we would need to communicate and cross over. (TA-PO3, RGB)

Ultimately, the perspectives here illustrate appreciation for an interplay of elements that contribute towards the sustainability of community sport/PA funded programmes in London. In doing so, participants' experiences point to ways in which this conceptual multitude may also contribute to organisational longevity and viability.

5. Discussion

This research aimed to identify the determinants of the sustainability of community sport programmes delivered by Sportivate-funded organisations in London. Interviews with the strategic and delivery levels of funded organisations infer six key elements of sustainability. These themes highlight the remodelling of policy, resource sufficiency, programme adaptability, the use of partnerships, strong leadership, and rapport and two-way communication within the organisation. Findings suggest that the sustainability of community intervention programmes is complex and involves input, negotiation, and interaction between stakeholders (Hill & Varone, 2021). While the administration of funding is important, the ability for ground-level project planners to adapt to community needs is also considered a necessity for programme sustainability (Koutrou et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2015). Concurring with Dearing (2003), our results demonstrate that organisations responsible for delivering community intervention programmes must adopt a socially engaging approach to strengthening internal (trust and leadership) and external (partnerships) relations.

Policymakers' positions in the UK are subject to frequent changes due to successive UK Government cycles. As such, policy for enhancing PA is periodically redesigned, given their influence over community sport programmes (Dowling, 2024). Findings, however, indicate that individuals at funded organisations believe this dynamic political landscape may be harmful to sustainability. Interviewees emphasised administrative and bureaucratic challenges facing smaller organisations that hinder their ability to offer input on future policy, despite research that highlights the need to develop administrative policies to support the sustainability of community PA programmes (Johnson et al., 2004). Although the notion of enhanced administration was intended to promote sustainability, participants alluded to this creating a hurdle for smaller organisations to operate since programme delivery is less emphasised. Interviewees further stated that "policy creates too many hoops to jump through" (TA-BC5, VSO), concurring with Bloyce and Smith (2010) who argued that 2012 Olympic legacy commitments were exaggerated when attempting to satisfy sustainability objectives. Furthermore, since a thorough understanding of delivery needs is important for programme implementation, Dowling (2024) also emphasised the need for policy coherence between local and national-level strategies, as community sport programmes can create hype and help leverage mega sport events for wider benefits.

Nonetheless, the load this creates on organisations may be connected to a lack of ground-level capability. Respondents expressed concerns that regardless of funding, there are still issues with staff availability to support sustained delivery of programmes. Respondents further underlined the relationship between increased administration and staff capacity since they have limited time to engage with added loads of bureaucracy. These findings support Whitley et al. (2015) who highlight the necessity of allocating funds for staffing resources. Most importantly, for Sportivate-funded organisations, one of the key strengths of their programmes was the staff who engaged with their delivery. Strategic-level staff from both TA and TNA organisations frequently emphasised the qualities of project officers and coaches, referring to ground-level staff as "the lifeblood of the sport...essential to the success of any grassroots participation" (TNA-PO1,

NGB). This concurs with Shediak-Rizkallah and Bone (1998), who claim that organisations led by individuals who appreciate the work of delivery-level staff can achieve effective and sustainable results. Echoing Mancini and Marek (2004), respondents also noted that staff involvement needs to be combined with skills and attitudes to make sustainability objectives more attainable.

Reiterating the idea that leadership is responsible for organisational culture, Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) indicated that effective leaders are more inclined to encourage partnership models to maintain new practices. TA groups stress the value of appropriate collaborations as the sharing of resources and expertise has allowed the sustainable delivery of their programmes. This success can partly be attributed to organisations' readiness to establish long-term partnerships that grow over time, as opposed to forming fast collaborations to secure funds for short-term projects. Indeed, scholars argue that successful collaborations for programme implementation require a positive social climate (Edwards & Rowe, 2019). This cannot always be the case, though, as short-term collaborations and initiatives are still common in community sport. TNA groups highlight this by mentioning how certain collaborations lack the necessary resources or experience, making it more difficult to accomplish their sustainability goals. This is caused, in part, by the desperate need for funds, which promotes partnerships based on a culture of freedom regulated by the government (Harris & Houlihan, 2016). This implies a connection between policy, capacity, and partnerships, all of which, when appropriately utilised, may result in sustainable outcomes. However, TNA groups have found it difficult to recognise the usefulness of partnerships towards increasing the sustainability of their community interventions when these are not created to suit community needs.

Another concern with policy relates to the implementation of community programmes that should be realised by focusing on both short-term impacts and long-term legacies (Preuss, 2007). According to respondents, Sportivate encouraged quick-fix solutions, which deters young people from engaging in sustained PA (Sport England, 2014). Additionally, this lack of sustained engagement deviates from the priorities of the funder (London Sport), which emphasised the need to identify activity exit routes as a crucial step in the funding application process. Echoing Schulenkorf (2017), participants emphasised the importance of meeting local community needs as integral to any programme's creation and sustainability. However, interviewees expressed that programmes like Sportivate are "immediate mechanisms to get people playing, but beyond that you cannot really do much" (TNA-BC4, NGB). Similarly, Pluye et al. (2004) contend that one of the main causes of participants' dropping retention rates is the termination of an intervention. Coalter et al. (2020) emphasise the value of long-term sport-plus programmes in achieving wider social externalities beyond sport. Therefore, when a programme is completed and people "*have nowhere to go after*" (TNA-BC6, VSO), the suggestion to modify community projects to support ongoing local needs becomes obsolete (Akerlund, 2000; Koutrou et al., 2024).

Since programme implementation depends on ground-level staff, funding cuts have made it more difficult for both TA and TNA organisations to satisfy sustainability goals, particularly in relation to "developing new programmes and continuing existing ones" (TNA-BC4, NGB). Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) point out how funds for staffing requirements can be creatively allocated; therefore, cuts will inevitably have a detrimental effect on programme growth since staff will have limited ability to meet community demands. TNA organisations discussed the failure of several collaborations created to mitigate the impact of budget reductions, which is consistent with Warner and Sullivan (2017), who found that the loss of programme control outweighs the benefits that may be obtained from collaborative interventions. The relationship

between funding and capacity implies that smaller organisations have joined forces due to their need for resources, underscoring their significance as a sustainability element (Harris & Houlihan, 2016).

Both TA and TNA stakeholders further recommended the appointment of leaders from inside the organisation to enhance sustainability. Appointing CEOs who have developed through the ranks and have experience with programme delivery, understand their communities, and adapt delivery to meet their needs can ensure that programmes align with the strategic objectives of the organisation (Koutrou et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2015). Regardless, while sport has been recognised as fostering experiential learning and soft skill development (Coalter et al., 2020; Koutrou & Kohe, 2024b) and such opportunities are important for staff commitment and identification, scholars argue that organisations need to invest in upskilling their workforce through provision of training, mentoring, and provision of clear pathways for leadership development to ensure programme goals are met and human resource legitimacy and longevity (Coalter et al., 2020; Koutrou et al., 2024; Ooms et al., 2019).

Some interviewees also felt conflicted between the board and CEO on who had greater influence in steering towards meeting sustainable goals, which indicates situations in which leadership was not evident. Organisational stakeholders that perform better in this area note that having clearly identifiable leaders for the strategic and delivery sides improved the accomplishments of sustainability objectives. This supports Mancini and Marek (2004) who note that leaders' responsibilities include establishing a vision and warranting appropriate delivery of supporting actions. Respondents' accounts evidence the appointment of different leaders for the strategy and delivery aspects of their organisation. The board predominately assumed responsibility for the strategic vision, whilst the CEO undertook "overall leadership for the delivery of the strategy" (TNA-CEO1, NGB). This dual leadership, whilst complex, designates a leader for specific components of running funded programmes, indicating the necessity for a programme champion at the organisation's mid to upper level of management to align delivery to strategic objectives (Shediak-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). However, there were a few cases where the TNA joint-leadership declarations clearly differed from the TA organisations' strategies. For instance, unlikely TNA respondents, TA stakeholders acknowledged the positive role of internal collaborations and the appointment of individuals with clear areas of expertise to lead on programme implementation. This confirms the idea that in trying to comprehend the dynamics between the CEO and the board, strategic capabilities and rational delivery targets should be highlighted (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011).

Rapport and two-way communication, as one of the sustainability components that emerged out of this research, acknowledges the complexity of relationships within the social structures that hold an organisation that runs community sport interventions together. Koutrou and Kohe (2024a) emphasised the importance of the social environment in forming partnerships and fostering relationships. TA organisations highlighted how improved communication and clear leadership have made information sharing possible and supported ongoing delivery initiatives. This is especially pertinent when adjustments are needed, as "if anything changes, we are always aware of it quickly from management" (TA-COA1, RGB). This refers, in part, to the focus on establishing supportive settings within the work environment, in meetings and formal conversations. As TA stakeholders also note, a positive social environment also helped individuals to "communicate and cross over" (TA-PO3, RGB). This implies a level of readiness to go beyond their workload to fulfil tasks within the organisation. This supports Johnson et al.'s (2004) assertions that cultivating a positive work environment among staff is essential, as planning, delivering, and evaluating community

programmes necessitates a collective workforce. Thus, the role of leadership in encouraging clear and open communication and a positive work environment can enhance staff motivation and performance.

6. Conclusion

This study offers insights into the perceptions of key informants surrounding the concept of sustainability in community sport and PA programmes. Interviewees from 33 TA and TNA organisations who received Sportivate funding highlighted factors relevant to their interactions and how each one can play a role in understanding programme sustainability. This is one of the few studies that compared organisations that differed in their ability to meet community sport programme targets in order to determine the elements that contribute to their sustainability. Our findings suggest that policy remodelling and the shifting priorities of successive governments limit the sustainability of funded community sport/PA programmes, particularly when failing to integrate the perspectives of ground-level implementers in policymaking. Furthermore, despite the evident consensus in participants' voices, TA organisational representatives portray certain elements of their programmes as signs of strength in meeting sustainable outcomes, whereas TNA organisations acknowledge certain elements as hindering their ability to achieve their own organisational and programme objectives. This differing level of emphasis placed on sustainability components suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to funding, resource allocation, and evaluation of success is not appropriate for implementing organisations. However, lessons can be learnt from both TA and TNA organisations and their efforts, albeit of varying success, to align their organisational objectives to meet programme sustainability targets.

Echoing previous studies (Edwards & Rowe, 2019; Koutrou et al., 2024; Mancini & Marek, 2004; Schulenkorf, 2017; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012), this research contributes to our understanding of the determinants of sport/PA programme sustainability and identifies similar elements that underpin it. Nonetheless, given the complexity of the interaction between these key themes within community sport and PA interventions, future research could explore how differences within the context, dynamics, and sociodemographic make-up of organisations may also influence how stakeholders at all levels of the organisation perceive sustainability. Such variables of interest include organisation type, organisation size, and staff role, which a qualitative approach could not experimentally determine. Furthermore, in addition to understanding how these demographic disparities affect sustainability variables, further investigation and validation of the sustainability determinants that emerge from this research can be helpful. Subsequent studies may also seek to draw insights on both implementers and participants' perceptions of the sustainability elements that support community sport initiatives run by their organisations.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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