



Community Sports Clubs' response to covid-19

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Summary

This report, on how community sports clubs have adapted to the restrictions imposed during the covid-19 crisis, is based on interviews with representatives of 13 clubs in England and Scotland, conducted in late July and early August, 2020. The sample was selected to contrast clubs which owned facilities and those which leased or rented them; close contact sports and ones where participation can be distanced; and indoor and outdoor sports. As anticipated, these factors made a considerable difference to the influence of covid-19 restrictions on clubs.

After lockdown and before clubs could reopen, the main activity was virtual meetings using zoom, both for committee meetings and club social activities. At the same time, if a club owned or leased a facility it would need to maintain this. In most cases this work was done by volunteers.

Volunteers aimed to return the club activities as closely as possible to pre-lockdown.

This involved considerable work in adapting the sport, adapting the facility, interpreting frequently changing government guidelines and assessing risks. Volunteers had to cope with considerable uncertainty. Guidance from their national governing bodies proved valuable. The variety of sports makes it difficult to generalise the adaptations between them. As examples, rugby was adapting a low-contact version of the sport and squash was trialling a version where players only used one side of the court. Golf and tennis used new booking systems to minimise contact. Some riding for the disabled groups could not operate at all because social distancing was impossible, but others with abler participants could reopen. Hillwalking could only return in groups of 6. Sailing had to restrict the people able to share a boat. Each sport was different.

A common factor was the need to try and maintain the rewards of membership. Some adaptations of the sport may not offer the same rewards. Social rewards of membership were restricted by reduced social contact and social facilities. Clubs had to try and reassure members that risks were limited, but at the same time accept that members had different perceptions of risk; meaning that not all would want to participate in the adapted activity. Similarly, clubs had to appreciate that members had different technological preferences for communication – for some zoom and WhatsApp might be an innovation too far.

The financial sustainability of clubs varied by circumstances. Clubs might face reduced income from membership fees, reduced number of people in sessions to maintain social distancing; cancelled

competitions; closure of catering, café or bar facilities; reduced fundraising; and reduced functions using the facility. At the same time, costs of facility maintenance remained and increased costs included sanitising the premises and equipment. The impact on clubs varied considerably, depending on if they owned a facility and if they relied on large numbers of junior participants paying for instruction. Some have been supported by grants, although these were one-off. The worst affected club in our sample was a gymnastics club which would normally have 750 junior participants per week, and maintained its own facility. The least affected was a mountaineering club with 83 members paying an annual subscription of £35 and a peppercorn rent for a meeting room.

Volunteer numbers and effort was being sustained, despite the challenges. However, if the clubs are less able to provide the social rewards it may become harder to recruit new volunteers. This may also apply if junior participation is restricted as parents are a major source of volunteers.

The clubs aimed to return as closely as possible to their previous activity, but did not have the extra resources, and possibly the inspiration, to adapt to new opportunities offered by the pandemic.

This is no criticism of the volunteers involved; they were working hard just to help the clubs survive.

None of the clubs interviewed were in danger of imminent collapse but the future looked extremely uncertain. A second lockdown may be fatal to those in the most precarious financial position. The infrastructure of clubs needs to be valued as a national resource, as if lost, it would be unlikely to be replaced.

It would be valuable to repeat these interviews with clubs in 6 months' time, and widen the sample, as the circumstances of clubs are changing quickly

1. Introduction

1.1 Community sport clubs

This report describes community sports clubs' (CSCs) responses to the restrictions arising from covid-19 in England and Scotland. These are typically small clubs, based in a particular location, allowing members to play a sport and meet socially. Whilst it is difficult to survey a representative sample of this type of organisation, two recent reports found roughly similar results (1, 2). In England in 2018, there were approximately 72,117 community sports clubs (1) with an average of 100 adult participants; 77 junior participants; 44 non-playing members; and 24 volunteers. The situation is similar in Scotland. About 85% of CSCs in England are single sport and 57% use public facilities (3). The clubs are managed and delivered almost entirely by volunteers. In this sense they are each a mutual aid organisation; that is, people acting together to share an enthusiasm for a particular sport. However, while they do not aim to make a profit, they may still need to break even. The main volunteer roles are treasurer, chairperson, coach, and secretary. Some coaches may be paid, and other paid staff are normally bar staff or grounds maintenance (1). The reliance on volunteers rather than paid employees may have put clubs in a stronger position to adapt to the covid-19 related

lockdown of economic activity; although the volunteers would have needed to retain motivation. In England, clubs which own their facilities or hire them will not have been able to use them until they were allowed to reopen on 25th July. Different opening dates applied in Scotland. If clubs own facilities, they will have needed to maintain them while they were closed although those who rented them will have saved these costs.

1.2 Covid-19 restrictions and the impacts on clubs

On 23rd March the UK was put into lockdown. Only essential travel was allowed and people had to work from home if possible. It was illegal to take part in any public gathering involving more than two people. In England restrictions were eased from 10th May. Outdoor recreation was permitted although it was still not possible to take part in any public gathering involving more than two people. From 1st June up to 6 people were permitted to meet outdoors. From 25th July gyms and leisure centres were permitted to open. Indoor swimming pools were also allowed to open then, however Swim England estimated only 20% were able to do so due to financial and operating restrictions (18). The Scottish Government's 'phasing' approach tended towards a more cautious return to activity and re-opening of facilities than in England. The Government's 'Active Scotland' division worked closely with sportscotland to provide guidance to sports governing bodies who, in turn, advised clubs. Activity started to resume with small numbers of children active in mid-July and gradually increased with adults permitted to return to full contact training on 24 August and gyms and pools re-opening, with restrictions, on 31 August. As restrictions were eased, clubs had to react and adapt to changes in the guidance from their national governing bodies (NGBs)

The particular circumstances of each community sports club determined how they reacted to the restrictions associated with covid-19 and their response to these lifting.

This may contrast with the reactions of commercial and public providers of sport and leisure opportunities. The reliance of CSCs on volunteers may be a strength (4). The increase in covid-19 related volunteering in community support groups, and to support the NHS may offer an opportunity to grow the number of club volunteers (5) and recent government aspirations to improve the nation's physical and mental health may offer an opportunity to increase membership. On the other hand, resource challenges may be evident. For example, a survey of sports clubs in Australia, conducted 2 months into lockdown, found major drops in club income while costs of facility maintenance remained or increased. It showed that one in four clubs listed organisational solvency as a major concern (6).

1.3 Explaining sports participation and the role of sports clubs

Covid-19 related restrictions have affected sports participation generally. Nine waves of a survey carried out for Sport England weekly, between 3rd April and 25th May, 2020, and then monthly from June 2020 onwards, showed a sustained increase in walking, cycling, and running / jogging (7). This is expected, as during that period, people could only leave their house for essential shopping or work or for exercise doing one of those activities. However, these activities are consistent with previous trends away from team sports and towards time-flexible sports and participation in smaller groups or as individuals (8). The weekly Sport England surveys showed a very small increase in the

proportion of the population doing 'any physical activity' in the past week. An initial increase in 'home fitness' was not sustained.

One way of understanding sport participants and their changes in behaviour during the covid-19 crisis is through the concept of sporting capital. This explains that an individual's level of sports participation is determined by their stock of 'sporting capital' which supports and motivates an individual to participate in sport and sustains that participation over time (9). This has three dimensions.

- *Social*: social connectedness, including family, friends and colleagues who play sport
- *Psychological*: self-confidence, self-efficacy and sport as part of one's identity
- *Physiological*: physical health and competency, as well as an understanding of the sport

Those with high levels of sporting capital have a high probability of getting and staying involved in sport and are more likely to be resilient to changes in circumstances which would deter others from continued sports participation. This could explain individuals that were more easily able to switch from sport to other forms of physical activity such as walking, cycling, and jogging in lockdown. Those sport participants with high levels of sporting capital will include members of CSCs. On the other hand, those with low sporting capital will have more barriers to overcome. A future research question could consider whether sports participants returned to CSCs after restrictions eased or whether the covid-19 crisis accelerates the identified underlying trend towards more individual physical activity participation (8).

Sports clubs can make a major contribution to boosting an individual's 'sporting capital' by providing social connections with others who play; developing confidence and competency to play sport, especially for juniors; and developing a participant's sense of identity as someone who plays a specific sport, or has a general commitment to health and physical activity. They can provide a range of opportunities that people can move between; both as sports participants and volunteers, as their personal circumstances change. They are therefore resilient sport participation hubs. However, there has been a trend away from participation in sports club activity towards more individual independent physical activity outside of sports clubs and this is something requiring more research at this time.

Sport is one of the most significant areas for volunteering in England. Within this, the majority of volunteering is associated with clubs.

Sports volunteering is closely linked to sports participation. Volunteers in clubs typically become involved from players or parents of junior participants. Commitment to volunteering in a club grows in the same way as sporting social capital; in that the bonds between volunteers in the club, identification with the club, development of specific skills and rewards of volunteering all develop with experience (10). This means we would expect the key volunteers in the club to remain committed to keep the club running.

For some people sports and physical activity participation has been negatively affected by the covid-19 crisis. Using other surveys conducted through the pandemic, new analysis for Sport England (11) identified 'three consumer themes as key factors influencing people's current relationships with physical activity'

- People who feel worried or anxious about contracting coronavirus for a prolonged period
- People disproportionately affected financially as a result of coronavirus
- People experiencing a greater burden of care because of coronavirus

These reasons preventing people taking part in sport and physical activity may overlap. It is not clear if they apply equally to people who were participating before the covid-19 restrictions or to potential new participants. They need to be overlaid on the sporting capital model to show they are additional challenges for the committed sports person to overcome, or barriers for the non-participant. Financial constraints and caring responsibilities will have existed before the pandemic and been accentuated for some people.

2. Methods.

Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of 13 clubs. These took place in late July and early August 2020. Clubs were sampled to give a range of: those which own facilities and those which lease or rent them; close contact sports and ones where participation can be distanced; and indoor and outdoor sports. It was anticipated that these factors would influence the clubs' responses. The majority of clubs were in England with five in Scotland. Interviews were recorded and the research team reviewed them to agree the themes running through them. These were used to code the interviews and structure this report. The research was conducted under the ethics policy of the University of Northumbria. The sample is described below.

Sport / Club	Description before lockdown
Badminton (Scotland)	Hires 4-badminton court hall in a public leisure centre. Weekly sessions: 1 hour for juniors (24 members) and 2 hrs for adults (50 members). 12-24 attend on any given night. Adults subscription is £20 per annum and £5 per night hall fee. Junior subscription is £90 for the season. The season is September-March. Adult members meet informally over the summer with a Whatsapp group and one person arranging informal court bookings. A small volunteer committee (5), with one leading member who is key volunteer coach for the juniors (2 other occasional assistant coaches).
Bowls (England)	Owns a club house with 4 indoor rinks and 6 outdoor greens, a bar / social area and a car park. The indoor section has 230 members. The outdoor section has 120 members. Competitive matches with other clubs, as well as games between club members. A social evening once a month in the club house. A 'president's tour' for a week in the summer. Subscriptions are £52.50 for men and £47.50 for ladies per season. Or A combined fee of £85 and £75 respectively. The facility is used by a group from Age UK and a special needs group of adults. A core of 12/15 volunteers, with others helping with teas.
Football (England)	Leased pitches and club house, developed specifically for the club. Also leases other local authority pitches for match days and some winter training. 22 junior teams, one senior team and one disability team. 260 playing members. 30 - 40 volunteers, including a new Board of Trustees, having attained charitable status in recent years.
Golf (Scotland)	Golf club owns the golf course, par 3 course and clubhouse. Club has 700 members approximately (not quite full). Men's section is approx. 600 and ladies section is approx. 100. Competitions, internal and with other clubs; social golf. 5 volunteers for the ladies' section; 12 volunteers on the management committee of the club. Paid bar and ground staff.
Gymnastics (England)	Facility leased from local authority. 100% rate relief and no rent. The club has to meet considerable maintenance costs. 500 junior members attend a weekly, general gymnastic session. These are organised termly. 250 people, aged 5 - 20, attend competitive training, between 2 and 5 times a week. One adult class, of 12, which meets once a week. Four other community groups attend for special sessions; a programme to reduce youth crime - two sessions a month, September to April, using the gym's instructors; a council run introductory gymnastics class for year 1 and year 4 children, November to March; a youth club, meeting weekly; and a mother and toddler group, Friday mornings. 3 volunteer coaches and 28 paid coaching staff. Most teach 2/3 hrs per week; 8 full-time staff who coach 10 hours per week. 3 volunteers run a friends group, with about 20/30 volunteer helpers.
Hockey (England)	Rents playing facilities from a university and meets socially in a pub. 11 senior teams and one veteran's team.
	Teams play once a week in the season and train on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Friendly games in the summer. 14 volunteers on the executive committee, 11 team captains, 8 volunteer coaches, 2 paid coaches.
Mountaineering (England)	Rents a club room from a pub. Minimal maintenance costs. Hill walking, cycling and climbing. Meets twice a week; using public access land and a commercial climbing wall. Social meets in the club room approximately monthly. 83 members. 14 volunteers are on a committee managing the club.
Riding for the disabled (England)	This group pays a fee to a riding school (some groups own premises and horses). 10 disabled participants who ride weekly. 19 volunteers, 10 trained to lead ponies, 9 as side walkers. 2 of the volunteers are trained coaches. Six of the volunteers are committee members and 4 are trustees.
Rugby (England)	Owns a ground of 35 acres and a clubhouse. 100 senior members, 400 youth players, 90 in a girls' section, and ladies touch rugby: 600 members in total. 100 volunteers, most involved in coaching and running the teams. Full-time groundsman and a part-time cleaner. The facility is rented to a junior football club, a tennis club, and the club house is also used for community bookings e.g. celebrations of births, marriages and deaths. Other major sources of income include festivals, rallies, caravan bookings and car boot sales.
Swimming (England)	Pool swimming in a public leisure centre and open water swimming in the sea and river from April. Swimming lessons to 180 children every Saturday night, and competitive & development sections on Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights for approximately 100 swimmers. Masters and open water sections. Responsible for administering the county league, which six swimming clubs compete in. 59 volunteers who do not swim - including the main committee, six sub committees, and a range of tasks to support swimming galas.
Squash (Scotland)	Owns own facilities; a pavilion, which is a prestigious venue for functions; and 5 acres of grounds in an affluent area of a city. Squash is one of four sections of a club, including cricket, tennis and hockey. The whole club has about 700 adult members. It is possible to have social membership, to use the club facilities, but not play sport. The squash section has 230 adults and 30 juniors. It runs 7/8 teams. Players may compete in leagues or social games. Volunteers take roles of: president, vice-president, league organiser, competition organiser, team organiser, accounts, and junior coaches. Other paid staff include a groundsman, bar keeper and cleaner.
Tennis (Scotland)	Own 5 courts (Roodie) and a clubhouse. Membership - 146 adults and 219 juniors in 2019. Activities include club nights, matches, competitive teams, training sessions, coaching sessions and social activities. Club has at least 46 volunteers - committee, team captains and other support roles. Three paid staff: membership, grounds, cleaner.
Yachting (Scotland)	Owns some boats and a clubhouse. Long lease on the slipway and dinghy park. Membership 290 adults, 10 juniors in 2019.
	Calendar of events planned from the end of March to mid-December 2020 included up to 9 events a week in mid-summer. Yacht racing, dinghy racing, yacht cruising, and fun sailing in dinghies.

3. The initial impact of lockdown

All sports activity stopped except where members could take part by themselves or in very small groups informally and outdoors. This applied to the mountaineering club where members could continue walking, climbing outdoors or cycling locally. After much discussion, using a zoom meeting, the club committee decided that WhatsApp groups would be set up to allow members to contact each other to arrange this, although there would be no formal meetings of the club. Similarly, some members of the yachting club were able to begin sailing early in the easing of restrictions if they had their own boat.

4. The financial impact on clubs

The clubs most negatively affected financially were those with the largest turnover and which owned or leased a facility they had to maintain.

In summary, for these clubs, income was reduced from:

- membership fees, if these were not renewed (or regular payments paused)
- reduced number of people in coaching sessions to maintain social distancing, leading to higher instruction costs per person
- cancelled competitions
- closure of catering, café or bar
- reduced fundraising from club events and volunteer activity, such as bag packing at supermarkets
- reduced hiring of facility for functions
- Additionally, future sponsorship was vulnerable

At the same time costs of facility maintenance remain.

Increased costs include:

- Sanitising premises and equipment
- Travel to away games as seasons start – as transport cannot be shared.

Grants were available from Sport England. A small business grant and a discretionary business grant were channelled through the local council (UK-wide). Additionally, some clubs received grant support from their governing body and rate freezes from local authorities.

These negative financial implications were illustrated by the gymnastics club which was the most financially vulnerable. The club would normally have 500 junior members attending a weekly

gymnastic session; organised termly; and a further 250 members, aged 5 – 20; attending competitive training, between 2 and 5 times a week. A friends' group of 20/30 volunteer helpers raises funds through four competitions a year, further fundraising events in December which normally raise £20,000, and bag packing in supermarkets. A café, used by the parents, also provides a source of income.

All of this activity had to stop between 23rd March and 25th July. Income from the gymnasts and the café was reduced to zero. Staff were paid in full up to the end of March. Twenty-four of the 28 coaches were furloughed. The 4 who were not, were not eligible, as they were under 16. Gymnastic competitions were stopped. Easter courses were stopped, losing £1,000. The 250 competitive gymnasts usually pay a monthly fee. This was stopped from the end of March. The 500 gymnastics who pay by the term were offered a refund for the three weeks left. About thirty-five percent took this, the rest donated it to the club.

The club manages a facility owned by the local authority. It has 100% rate relief and has to pay no rent, however it has to cover maintenance costs on the 1980's building. The bills for running the facility were £4,000 in April, £3,000 in May, £2,500 in June and £3,500 in July.

The club applied for, and got, a sport England grant of £7,000. They were not eligible for the small business grant as the rateable value of the club was over £50,000. In June the local council was able to give a discretionary business grant to bigger businesses. The club became eligible, applied, and was awarded £25,000. £3,500 was given in donations.

Since reopening in July continued losses include: Income from the café, £1,500 per month; 19 competitive gymnasts who have not returned, £1000 a month; fees for the 500 termly gymnasts, £25,000 and £30 – 40,000 from cancelled competitions.

When the termly gymnasts return in September the numbers will need to be reduced from 500 to 350, which will reduce income by £2,000. Capacity will be reduced by having to have 30 minutes between sessions to clean and Hoover; which is done 3 times a day. Other extra costs include hand sanitiser, cleaning products and disposable rolls of paper; which together amount to £100 per month. Funds raised from the competitions, events and bag packing will be lost. This was used to support coaches to accompany gymnastics to competitions, pay for disclosure and barring service checks and safe-guarding training for coaches.

This gymnastics club is fortunate to have reserves from its fundraising, and no rates or rent, however it thought other clubs with these costs will be in a difficult position. This club did not think it would be financially viable to continue with restrictions in the long run and a further lockdown would make it unsustainable. The financial situation of this club is closest to those in the Australian survey (6).

Similarly, the rugby club in our sample, although losing little of its season to lockdown, was losing income from rent from other sports clubs, facility hire, festivals, rallies, caravan bookings and car boot sales. The major lost income is from these outdoor events on the pitches in June and July totalling about £67,000. The club does not make a lot of money out of the clubhouse and money taken on match days pays for the cost of the first team travelling to away games, as they compete

nationally. Although the club had not started playing again at the time of interview, if it does, the costs of away game travel will be multiplied as players will not be able to share transport.

In the short term the rugby club is financially comfortable. At the end of the season it lost two games at home but five away, so it saved the travel costs of the away games. One of these involved an overnight stop, so would have cost about £3,500. The club received grants of: £400 from the Rugby Football Union; £25,000 discretionary business grant; £5,400 from Sport England emergency funding, and raised £20,000 from members' donations. It was given a holiday on rates that equated to about £12,000 across the year. If play resumes as normal this season, the major increase in costs will be travelling to away games; which could go from £2000 to £4000 as two coaches will be needed instead of one. At the same time income will still be reduced from restrictions on possible game play, large events and meeting group sizes for the pitch and facility hire, so this club, like the gymnastics club, is in a financially vulnerable position for next year.

Similarly, the football club was in a comfortable financial position at the moment: *We do know that there will be people who want refunds for the bit of the season last year that didn't happen, although most people have not requested those and I think most are appreciative of the fact that we still have all of our overheads and things like that. But anybody who was in a financially difficult position we will process refunds. But we've had quite a lot of assistance through various things that have been run by the football Association, the county football Association and grants that have been available to us. And so we've been able to get all of those. And because this year we managed to get our finances up to the point where we could request gift aid or get gift aid back from HMRC we're actually perhaps in a better financial position than we would have expected to be. So it hasn't had a major effect.*

At the opposite end of the financially vulnerable scale to gymnastics was the mountaineering club. The only costs of this club are the lease on a building; £337 p.a. Eighty-three members pay an annual subscription in January of £35; approximately half of which contributes to affiliation of the British Mountaineering Council. Subscriptions contribute to subsidising social events, and potential losses on bookings of mountain huts. Thus, financial turnover is very small with minimal costs: really the club is run on a minimalist money in, money out basis.

The club interviewed in the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) was in a similar position as it did not own ponies or premises; so had no fixed costs. It also had substantial reserves and a very strong fund raising group: *we had a really good push on fundraising last year and we don't need any more money at the moment.* However, within the RDA, other groups will have these fixed costs, so will be reliant on reserves.

Other clubs reported financial viability for this year, but concerns if membership fell next year. For example, the yachting club reported: *We're going to make a significant surplus because we've got three quarters of our usual billing come in. And an awful lot of our expenditure hasn't gone out. So, this financial year, I'm not worried about the money. It's next financial year.*

Thus, the financial sustainability of clubs varies considerably according to their individual circumstances.

The situation does not correspond to the conclusion of the Australian survey that community sports clubs 'are at a crisis point and thousands need urgent and co-ordinated financial support to survive'. Some clubs; squash, bowls and tennis; had significant reserves which could cover losses for this year. The golf club reported an increase in membership. Other clubs had also received grants, similar to the gymnastics and rugby clubs. We consider the differences with the Australian survey findings in the conclusions.

The approach to membership fees differed. Some clubs had refunded membership fees to account for some of the season being lost. Some had reduced fees for the forthcoming season, or had not implemented planned increases.

5. The impact on volunteers

Unlike a commercial sports provider, CSCs are managed and delivered largely by volunteers: an average of roughly 24 per club. In general, this will make subscriptions to CSCs cheaper than membership fees of comparable commercial providers. During the pandemic, clubs could benefit from the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme for the few paid employees (this paid 80% of salaries). For example, the gymnastics club had taken advantage of this. Government support through this scheme was reduced from August and tapered down to October. Some paid staff had to be retained; for example, ground maintenance staff in bowls, golf, tennis and rugby. At the time of our interviews clubs had not had to consider reducing numbers of paid staff.

However, the continued contribution of volunteers is critical to the club. The motivations of volunteers in clubs vary. The volunteers in core roles; who contribute most of the work; are motivated by enthusiasm for the sport, the club, and enabling others to participate (10). Our interviews were conducted with volunteers in these positions. The main impact of covid-19 has been to give the volunteers a lot more work to get the clubs' activity back to what it was pre-lockdown.

In general, while the core volunteers were *shocked at what had happened* (tennis) they were all enthusiastic to help the club adapt and return to activity as soon as possible.

Typically, football reported that: volunteers ... are just raring to go and get back into the swing of things and most have been encouraged by all of the activities that have been going on during lockdown (the football club had been improving the facility).

In some clubs, such as football, hockey and swimming, the break in activity had helped volunteers step back, review how activities are organised and take a more long-term strategic view; instead of just dealing with routine tasks. For example, the head swimming coach had been able to review how swimming is developed by planning sessions to account for different levels of competency and duration. In football; *it's allowed a lot of other stuff that gets put to one side because you're busy talking coaching stuff. It's allowed a lot of other stuff to happen. So we had coaches volunteering for*

a steering group that was looking after another site. We've done an awful lot of tidying up it up and making plans how best to make it more attractive to people when they come to train and visit there, so there's been a lot of maintenance going on in the background so that's been really what we've been focusing on.

While in some clubs the volunteers were able to take a break and plan strategically, there were other tasks to do. Committee meetings had to be arranged to plan an immediate response. These were normally conducted by zoom – see section 8 below. Volunteers had to close the facility down, which might involve locking areas and displaying signs. They had to maintain the facility while it was closed; for example, checking fire alarms, water supplies, pipes in the bar from beer barrels, etc. Members had to be communicated with, usually by e mail but in some instances by personal telephone. Refunds on membership fees had to be administered. There were then further jobs to adapt the facility for re-opening;

I'm sure we'll have to do more, much more, on health and safety and be much more particular on. I don't know, actually logging, the cleaning of places and various things around the clubhouse. Not sure about what will happen about helping yourselves for tea or coffee and things. I just don't know. We'll just have to be very careful wiping down the surfaces of everything we use.

There is some danger of volunteer burn out, as the extra work has been taken on by the same core volunteers.

Some clubs had considered appointing a 'covid officer' to overview adaptations following NGB guidance, but none mentioned this being a new volunteer – it was more likely to be an expansion of an existing role.

Only a few volunteers had left the sports club. This was attributed to the new situation being a catalyst for natural turnover. However, a common way for volunteers to develop within clubs is from volunteers who are initially motivated by being parents of juniors (9). If junior participation is curtailed this will impact the flow of new volunteers. In contrast a respondent in yachting noted: *I suspect, we're in a relatively good position, because our volunteers are all participants. So the whole club is run by people who participate in the sport. Whereas a lot of clubs, particularly those that work with children and youth etc. The volunteers aren't actually participating they're enabling others to participate ... I suspect clubs like that have different more difficult issues than maybe we do.*

6. Adapting the sport

Please follow these steps first...

1. Read our training protocol document
2. Complete our contact form
3. Download the Heja app
4. Use the app to confirm whether you're attending training each week

Documents and links have been sent to all members, and also available on our website.

Message us for the code for our Heja group!

Training principles

These are outlined in full in our training protocol document, but here are some key points:

- We will split into smaller groups or 'bubbles' of 6-8 players
- Sign up by 7pm on Monday each week to be allocated to a group
- Some drills involve contact, but keeping a 2m distance at all other times
- Let us know if you'd prefer to keep a distance, one group will be doing non-contact drills only

A task for volunteers was to adapt the sport club to match the government guidance for a “return to play”. Each sport and each club setting required different adaptations. Differences included how much physical contact was involved, how close players would normally be to each other, if it was indoor or outdoor, and if any special facilities or equipment were required. The guidance on activities was given by NGBs following government announcements about the easing of lockdown.

In the mountaineering club the same activities could be taken part in but not in the same groups. Members could still meet outdoors; initially in groups of 2, and then 6; to walk, climb or cycle. Formal club ‘meets’ of unlimited numbers, or collective bookings of mountain huts, could not continue. The major debate in the committee was if any formal club activity could continue, or if WhatsApp groups could be used for members to get in touch with each other.

It was decided the WhatsApp groups, and the membership list on the club website could be used; because the club really exists to help like-minded people get in touch with each other But it's not going to be a formal club activity because we don't want the club to be seen to be doing something that isn't supposed to be the right thing under lockdown.

This remained the situation in mid-August as changed guidance from the UK Government and the British Mountaineering Council did not alter the situation. Similarly, the yachting club was able to allow individuals or groups of two who owned their own boat to sail from the club premises, but without opening any of the club facilities. Once sailing resumed it could only have one person on a safety boat instead of two – this limited sailing in bad weather as; *hauling people out of the water isn't a safe activity in present circumstances and therefore we want to reduce the risk of the safety boat driver having to do it.* The open-water swimmers had continued to meet in small informal groups; using the sea and river. This is advertised on a WhatsApp and Facebook group but these groups had to ensure their own safety. This is not an alternative activity for the pool swimmers as it is a different discipline, with different skills. Tennis was initially able to open just playing singles. It had to *set up a booking system and comply with 14 pages of LTA /Tennis Scotland guidelines.* Bowls adapted by using every alternate rink, using two jacks so players didn't have to share handling them, and playing as pairs rather than as fours. Several sports changed booking times and procedures to limit contact between participants. For example, the golf club introduced teeing off times at 10 minute intervals and the squash club was planning to allow a period between games.

Other closer contact sports or those indoors were not able to operate at all until restrictions were lifted, but once they were, they would have to adapt. Club volunteers speculated about how the sport or club might have to change. The rugby club was considering a modified version of the game; promoted by the Rugby Football Union; taking out close physical contact of scrummaging and upper body tackling, and only tackling below the waist. *I can see the youth section restarting and the seniors want to use it but only as a way of improving their training. ...it would get them back to some proper type of training rather than just plodding up and down and getting bored out of the skulls. Guess it depends how long the effects last and the restrictions.*

Of indoor sports; the squash club were considering a possible adaptation to the sport where players stayed on different sides of the court, and maintained a distance from each other. The club volunteer thought this might be a close substitute for the full game, but it had not been allowed or tested. The swimming club anticipated that when the pool was open it would have 3 lanes rather than 6; with ten swimmers per lane. If sessions were reduced to 30 minutes from an hour, this would allow the same number to swim, but for less time. In gymnastics participants were going to be in smaller groups to maintain 2-meter distance; thus reducing the number of participants. Two weeks before reopening the gym, on 25th July, it would have been possible to run outdoor sessions, but these were not practical because of bad weather and a complicated risk assessment. The badminton club thought perhaps they would need to reduce numbers at junior sessions from 24 to 12, which might make hiring the facility unviable.

Within the RDA the club interviewed did not think it could operate until social distancing was not required. The potential for clubs to adapt depended on the nature of the disabled people they were helping. RDA policy is for helpers not to wear face masks as the children may find this disturbing. A participant may require someone to lead the horse, which could be 2 meters away, and two side-walkers to help keep them on the horse. These people would need to be close, and so would a helper to get the participant mounted. They could be the children's parents. On the other hand, an abler participant may only require someone to lead the horse, or might be able to ride it themselves. This meant some groups might be able to run and some would not.

Overall a consideration is how close an adaptation is to the original sport, and if this will satisfy participants.

Will walkers be content to take part in small groups and miss the companionship of the larger meets? Will squash or rugby players be satisfied with a restricted game? Will implications of reduced numbers, as in gymnastics, threaten financial viability? Will tennis players join a club when they are not able to play socially, compete against other clubs or travel to tournaments? Can the sport adapt if indoor sports halls or swimming pools are not able to open again?

6.1 Difficulties of interpreting changing guidelines



A general theme was that clubs did not have to adapt the sport just once – they had to react to each change in government guidance, that was then interpreted by their governing body; and this might still not be clear. The process of reacting to changed government guidelines was cumbersome. In Scotland, changed government guidelines would be interpreted by sportscotland, who would then convey this to NGBs. NGBs would then develop guidelines for clubs, which would be checked back by sportscotland, who would in turn, check them with the Scottish Government. If no changes were required the government would approve them with sportscotland, who would inform the NGBs, who would then pass them down to the clubs.

Thus there are several levels of interpretation of the guidance and of risk assessment.

The mountaineering club illustrated how club volunteers had to react to changed guidance.

Walking and climbing had to adapt from guidance that two people could take part together, which then changed to 6 people; and was slightly different in England, Wales and Scotland. The British Mountaineering Council issued guidance on 6th August, in England, *'that you can walk with people (up to 30) from your own household or social bubble. For people outside of your household or social*

bubble, walking in a group of up to 6 (in England) is OK as long as you are sensible and stick to social distancing principles. Guidance varies in each country in the UK. Some team sports and organised events can however take place under controlled conditions with up to 30 people from different households attending'. This was difficult to interpret at the club level. The club in our sample interpreted this as meaning they could only have informal groups of 6 while another club in the same area interpreted this as enabling them to run meets of up to 30 people. It is not clear how a club could define a 'social bubble' – could club members constitute a bubble?

The yachting club gave another example of advice interpreted by their NGB: *On July the 13th the guidance we got from the RYA in early July, was the Scottish Government announcements meant that we could start doing organised dinghy sailing from July the 13th as long as on any one boat, it was either one person, so a single hander or it was people from the same household. This allowed members to compete, if they met these conditions. It's not clear how the club could ensure that any two people in a boat were from the same household.*

A difficulty was that clubs were restricted to five households per session, but for any formal activity there would be people on the shore, launching, and retrieving the boats. If a club had junior members, aged 12 – 17, guidance in Scotland would have allowed a 'bubble' of them to sail in the same session, but again, how could social distancing be maintained on shore?

So both mountaineering and sailing illustrated how the national governing body had to interpret changing government guidance, and the clubs had to make their own interpretation of this. This created more work and anxiety for club volunteers. Another difficulty interpreting guidance was reported by tennis; if their clubhouse was a pub or restaurant it could open, but not if it was run by volunteers. This may affect clubs who rent out their facilities for social functions, such as the squash club in our sample.

Clubs had to adapt quickly to changes. For example, the tennis club had four days to react to the announcement they could open the courts on 29th of May.

This presented volunteers with a lot of work in a short period of time; including: we had to un-padlock the gates; and a few of us had to make notices; we had to set up a booking system because we had to follow LTA /Tennis Scotland guidelines ... each time there's a change. And... some of them are a bit contradictory because they've got bits for venues, bits for players, bits for coaches ... you've got to really go through them and find what will work ...

The same club had to react quickly to change in guidance on coaching: But then the rules changed overnight ... it was there wasn't to be allowed to be any coaching. I had notices on four gates to change. At that time, it was stressful.

Thus not only did clubs have to interpret changed regulations, they then had to implement them at short notice; adding to work and stress for volunteers.

7. Adapting the facility

Volunteers also had to adapt the facility, if they owned or rented it, to comply with covid-19 restrictions.

A common concern was how to manage toilets, including when they could be open.

At one stage the golf club was open for play, but could not open the toilets: there were a whole lot of issues around not having toilet facilities initially when we were just playing, that kind of meant you had a strong bladder, or going in the woods.

Other concerns were, how many people could use them, extra cleaning and how often they had to be cleaned; the provision of sanitiser; possible employment of a professional cleaner and managing their use by juniors. For example, in the tennis club: *Well, the most recent guidelines that came out when we couldn't play doubles on the 10th of July, it said that we can't open the clubhouse, except for toilets but it's up to the venue to decide whether they're opening them or not. Yes, the executive have been meeting a few times. just to talk it through. The new clubhouse is laid out so that yes, the toilets are just at the main door. But if you actually let people in and it's a new refurbished clubhouse, we didn't want them wandering all over the clubhouse. So we have still not opened the toilets, but there are camps and children's camps next week and the coach is going to have a break in each one and a half to two-hour camp and will allow access to two of the toilets, which a volunteer is going to clean each day before and after all the kids have been in and we've left all sorts of sanitisers and wipes and hand wash all over the place.*

The bowls club illustrated a set of adaptations similar to other clubs. Toilets were professionally cleaned each morning; the club room was still not open; bowlers restricted their use of the benches, for example only 2 people shared one for leaving clothing, etc.; some brought their own hand sanitiser; as players all have their own bowls the only shared equipment is the bowling mat, and the two jacks, these were sanitised between games, and as many times as players wanted to; medi-wipes were provided at the end of the greens. Looking ahead, when the bowls clubhouse is opened in September it will not provide meals; previously teas after games were a major social aspect of participation. The bar may be adapted by using bottles and cans. A card machine will be used to take contactless payments. The use of the clubhouse for social events will be restricted.

Another concern was how to implement a record of users for purposes of tracing potential covid -19 contacts. The tennis club described: *we're also meant to trace who actually plays on the court. The problem with our clubhouse is that there's nobody there all the time. Opening and shutting of the clubhouse, it relies on members having a code to get in and out and realising that closing it as well. So ... you don't know who's gone in and out. tracing and contacting people.* This might have been solved by a new on-line booking system, provided by the Lawn Tennis Association but it originally only allowed one person's name on the booking sheet. It was then developed to record three people on a court, *but the club members are not quite getting it.*

All of these adaptations provided extra work and concerns for volunteers to manage.

8. Technological innovation

Considerable innovations involved in adapting the sport are described above. The main technological innovation was running virtual meetings, which all used Zoom.

All clubs had used these for committee meetings; with the exception of the golf club, who met while 'socially distancing' in the club house. *It probably wasn't strictly by the letter. But some people had to be there to check the premises and things like that.*

No difficulties were reported with virtual meetings and advantages were meetings being more efficient in reduced travel time, and organisation. For example, the yacht club volunteer explained *committee meetings have been on zoom, since beginning of lockdown. And being mean, it's not the professional version. So we've mostly been limited to 40 minutes. And most of the committee want to keep on meeting like that and having 40 minute meetings instead of two and a half hour meetings. Perhaps That's another positive.*

These advantages were the greater for regional meetings; as in rugby; Prior to this, meetings were normally held somewhere around X or off the motorway. And for somebody who's got to go to 2 and a half to 3 hours' drive for a meeting that only last an hour, attendance is probably not guaranteed.

However, some volunteers did wish to return to face-to-face meetings and the tennis club volunteer explained that it was a local club and as all volunteers lived within 10 minutes of the club then they would be keen to return to meetings in the clubhouse.

Most clubs had introduced Zoom meetings to provide social events for members. For example, the mountaineering club: *arranged almost weekly zoom meetings that club members have logged into and for some club members this has been very popular and we just organise this on an ad hoc basis and we've had things like slideshows on different climbs people have done talks on different places people have been to - that's a new innovation really we've never done that before and that is actually proved quite successful in a way because ... we've got some members who have moved around the rest of the country and they've been able to attend these virtual club meets and they wouldn't have been able to normally so that's been quite good and we are considering maybe keeping one of them maybe once a month when the whole thing changes.* Squash, bowls and yachting had similar events.

Other methods of communication, which were an extension of those used before, were e mails and Facebook. As noted above, WhatsApp groups had been set up to allow members to communicate informally. Some clubs, especially those with older members, realised the need to ensure all members were being communicated with. For example, the RDA Chair and the bowls club secretary telephoned older members who they knew used e mail rarely, to make sure they kept in contact. Another example of technological support for older members was golf: *our committee has been very good teaching, the older generation basically you know that hadn't bought the smartphones, showing them how to do it, and finding the apps.* Golf had also introduced a system of members sending their scores to the membership secretary by photographing their score cards and sending

them electronically - *I can only think of ... two ladies maybe, in all our membership playing that really struggle with it, you know, and all they do is they phone the handicap secretary to put their name in or phone the pro to get their name in and they get their results by word of mouth.* Similarly, a mountaineering club member had asked friends on the committee to guide him through use of WhatsApp.

These efforts to include those unfamiliar with new technology reflect the importance clubs place on meeting the needs of all members.

There was some evidence of screen fatigue: one club volunteer responded that he: *couldn't be arsed to attend the NGB regional zoom meeting, as he'd been on the computer all day and wanted to see daylight.*

Some coaching was offered on-line at the initiative of individual coaches. Examples were in football, hockey and rugby. The only example of virtual sport was e-sailing: *through the RYA ... the international yacht racing union made available software that meant that we could run ... virtual races and we've been having one a week of those from quite early in lock down. And one of our people qualified for the Scottish championships on it...*

Clubs did not mention the need to have an electronic media officer – again this role seems to have been taken by existing volunteers. There was also no mention of using electronic media to change the organisation of volunteering. In voluntary sector studies there has been speculation that micro-volunteering; that is small discrete tasks; might be facilitated by electronic media, thus allowing people to volunteer who only wanted to give a little time at irregular intervals.

9. Keeping the social rewards of membership

A survey of sports club members in England in 2015; albeit the most committed ones; found that for 62% 'the club was one of the most important social groups I belong to' (12). Members placed a higher value on companionship and conviviality than on sporting success and competition. Thus the social rewards of club membership are very important. They may be lost if social interaction is restricted.

The importance of social rewards will vary between members but was emphasised in most of the clubs. The bowls club have an older membership, several of whom are single through bereavement. They run a social evening once a month in the club house. Members would normally be able to have refreshments after a game. The club runs a 'president's tour' for a week in the summer, when members take a coach to a resort and stay in a hotel for a week; playing bowls during the day and with social events in the evening. This is extremely popular and for some members is their main annual holiday.

The social rewards were also very important in the mountaineering club where: *Quite a lot of the members are fairly elderly ... we've got one group that meets every Thursday and does a fairly short walk locally but that's very popular because many of our members are retired and meeting socially*

through that context is very important for them and I think will gradually lose that benefit from the activity if they're not able to continue in those sort of slightly larger groups. The big thing we are missing is the ability to meet together in larger numbers which allows club members to interact with more club members ... the social thing is really important to members. We would normally have five weekend trips where we'd share accommodation and a meal; including a Christmas meet. Other social activities would generally be based at the club building and they tend to be more so in the winter so that we keep people together so with our AGM in the winter will have a little party afterwards sort of tea and buns sort of affair.

In the yachting club: Our Club has a lot of people who are retired. We're just desperate for things to do. So there's a group that go down every Tuesday and try and find things to do that will be helpful. They're continuing to do that. But if we can't see start yacht sailing they're running short of jobs to do.

Similarly, RDA UK surveyed their volunteers during covid-19 restrictions and found: it's impacting on volunteers, who are missing the social interaction, they're missing the connectivity of people and to a degree you need your 'horse fix', volunteers do get very fond of equines. Some people volunteer just for contact with horses, they may not be that interested in the riders, but everybody has a will to help and to ensure that people who are perhaps disadvantaged in a physical or mental way do you have the opportunity to fulfil all their potential.

As noted above, electronic communications; e mails, WhatsApp groups and zoom events; were used to keep people in touch in all the clubs. For example, in the golf club: *my handicap secretary was instrumental in setting up a WhatsApp group for all the players that wanted to join that generally played on a Tuesday. Yeah, the separate one set up for the Saturday players, and the amount of stuff that was going around you know just supporting each other and sending fun stuff to each other throughout the time we were locked down, checking on the older ones and making sure that they were all right, one or two of the members were going in doing shopping for some of the older people and that kind of thing. So that was really nice and I think it's brought out a little bit more community spirit in this, in the whole ladies' section.*

This illustrates a positive outcome of the club social networks being used to provide other support to members.

It will be interesting to see how successful these methods of keeping the social rewards of membership are. Will they be enough to retain members and attract new ones?

10. The impact on membership

In relation to financial sustainability we discussed the threat of reduced membership, for example, in the gymnastics club as a combination of a few participants losing interest, and the limitations of space with social distancing. Members with high levels of sporting capital are likely to remain members, as long as they can play (9), although if their income falls, or if they have more caring responsibilities, such as looking after children at home while trying to work as well, this may force them to leave (11). However, the impact of covid-19 restrictions is uneven. Those with no caring responsibilities, a wage and working from home; may now have more time and disposable income.

The impact on membership was clearest where the lockdown restrictions had overlapped with a new season. Thus in tennis: *quite a few people who played in our leagues have not actually re-joined us because our membership fees were due at the end of March ... only 84 children out of 200 plus have actually re-joined the club so the membership is way down.... Of the 30 who did not re-join at least 10 if not 15 were team players because we had 8 teams.* In this example the loss of competitive play had led to members not re-joining, and this applied in other sports. On the other hand, sports such as hockey which had not yet restarted the season did not anticipate a drop in members.

In some cases, the adaptations to the particular sport may affect membership.

The RDA club in our sample reported it just could not operate, although a small number of RDA clubs could. This depended on the disability of the riders. The rugby club may lose members if they do not want to play to the adapted code, partly because this will take out the competitive edge, particularly for adult players. Similarly, squash club members may not want to play a restricted form of the game.

The yachting club had lost 75 members this year; which was 25% compared to the usual 15%. It had gained 5 new members and would normally hope for 60. However, it hoped that as it moved away from competitive sailing towards cruising, and just sailing for pleasure, it may attract more members who favour this variety of the sport. The golf club had also attracted new members from people who had visited the course for the first time during lockdown as a walking venue. *Because everyone was allowed to go out, asked to go out walking and decided to go out walking on the local golf courses - loads of people have got come and walked round the golf course and seen how beautiful it is ... And so we've actually had a lot of new members on the main course. And on the little course - people just coming to join and play the nine-hole course and ... learn to play basically.* Post lockdown this club has gained 45 new full members and 20 new members for the 9-hole course.

Thus it is difficult to generalise the impact on participation. The Sport England surveys (7) suggested a steady underlying demand for physical activity, so perhaps if some sports are unable to reopen participants will divert to others.

11. The role of national governing bodies of sport (NGBs)

All clubs commented on the clear and regular guidance from their NGBs. In many cases this included a phased approach to reopening the club / sport. For example, England Hockey gave a four stage plan to coming out of lockdown, which the club in our survey found useful.

In some cases; such as the RDA; there was two-way communication between the clubs and NGB to inform guidance.

Especially where clubs managed a facility NGBs would provide a covid-19 secure reopening checklist. Clubs found this valuable, although possibly onerous. An example was the bowls club.

NGBs had to re-issue guidance in response to each new government change in regulations.

As the regulations became increasingly open to interpretation, the NGBs would have had to spend more time interpreting them for their clubs. This became more complicated as the home nations diverged – so an NGB such as the British Mountaineering Council would need to produce separate guidance for each country. In this case its affiliated clubs may decide to visit mountains in any of the different countries.

Regional and county levels of NGBs might also organise competitions, which would also be run by volunteers. Our research did not explore this directly but the swimming club reported that these competitions were expensive to run, because of the hire of the facility, but also raised income. In swimming the regional competitions required competitors to qualify through timed club swims. As none of these had taken place, the regional competition structure, even when pools opened, would not be viable. The impact on competitions will again vary by sport.

12. The impact of assessments of risk

12.1 Theoretical understanding of risk

Sport England's recent review (11) implied that risk of contracting the virus may reduce sports participation. Risk is subject to subjective assessment. Individuals can be placed into one of four categories which is reflected in their approach to risk (13, 14).

- Individualists think they are relatively free from control by others. They strive to gain control over their environment and people in it. They favour self-regulation and are more willing to accept risks taken by society and by themselves.
- Hierarchists think that social relationships are defined by strong hierarchical relationships. They prefer a social organisation which emphasises the maintenance of authority. They approve of risks taken by society only to the degree that they are sanctioned by those at the top of authority structures: for example, 'expert' scientists.
- Egalitarians have strong group loyalties, and favour equality of outcome. Trust in information sources is limited to those which can be seen to be concerned with positive outcomes, where all benefit, rather than particular interest groups.
- Fatalists feel they have minimal control over their own lives, are resigned to their fate, and see no point in trying to change it.

Further, risks may be subject to social amplification (15) at the transmission and the reception of the communication.

These insights could be used to analyse government advice over covid-19 and the public response. For example, at the start of the pandemic, government emphasised the risks, to reinforce compliance with its lockdown. Later, to boost economic activity, the risks of meeting in pubs and returning to workplaces were downplayed, contrary to the advice of medical experts. The main points are that risk is subjectively constructed and will vary between individuals; and that it can be

amplified or reduced by messages from government, from NGBs, from clubs to members, and between members.

As soon as government advice diverged from the simple; 'stay at home, only go out if it is essential, stay 2 metres from other people'; to allowing for more interpretation this created a greater subjective element in club regulations.

12.2 Managing risk; NGBs, clubs and members.

As we have seen, NGBs have needed to interpret government guidelines for clubs, clubs have had to interpret them for their members, and each member will make their own decision on the acceptable level of risk. This is much more their own free decision than returning to work, where they may be pressurised to do so by their employer and the need to earn a living. Club members are participating entirely voluntarily, and so are the volunteers supporting the clubs.

At the level of the club, a committee may be keen to act responsibly, and be seen to be doing so.

Thus the mountaineering club had extensive discussions over if it could promote any formal meetings of the club. It decided that it could not, and would discourage members from placing information on their activities on public Facebook pages; but could allow members to meet together informally in small groups. However, the other mountaineering club in the same town decided it could run meets of up to 30 people. This may have been a misinterpretation of the guidelines, but may also have been a collective willingness to take more risks. Of course, a feature of mountaineering is the inherent acceptance of calculated risk, and this was reflected in BMC guidance which gave as much information as possible for the individual to make up their own mind. For example, when indoor climbing walls opened at the same time as leisure centres, the advice on the risk involved concluded with; 'obviously, it is up to each person to make an individual decision about engaging with specific activities'.

There may be divided views in the club committee. There was clear consensus on a low level of risk in the mountaineering club, but in the yachting club: *I suspect in most clubs, there are some people on the cautious side and some people who want to absolutely charge ahead and push any guidance that comes out to the absolute limit, etc. there's a move afoot for various members to self-organize some informal yacht racing, not using any club facilities because as a committee we said they shouldn't, when that was coming to be considered by a committee they said they quite like to use a sort of race box thing that we've got. And I actually felt that if the committee had agreed to that, which was clearly contrary to the guidance the RYA had issued, which had been agreed with sportscotland and the Scottish Government, I would have found it difficult to remain a director of the club. So it's been that sort of feeling not stress but simply feeling that if our decision making wasn't sensible, I would feel I had to consider my position. Fortunately for me, it always has been sensible so that's fine.*

The club will take into account its responsibility to others especially juniors to whom it has a duty of care. For example, the badminton club: *I actually closed my club before the centre actually made the decision to close, Anyway, when you're dealing with 25 juniors, you need to make sure that you're safer.* This was repeated later when she explained that the responsibility for juniors was more

onerous after lockdown ended: *because if I open it and say the juniors are open, then I'm taking responsibility for those children to come along and play.*

This duty of care was very apparent to the RDA club: it really would not be safe because the children you know are from all kinds of areas and while you may be in an area with your riding school that had no Covid-19 cases, those children might be being shipped out from the centre of [local city], who knows.. That is the problem, we do have a duty of care, not only to the participants and ponies, but to our volunteers. Without them there is no RDA

On the other hand, the gymnastics club felt that if it complied with guidelines it could safely open to a large number of young people. The football club has started training for adults and juniors; the adult team wanted to start earlier. They feel they have taken all the required precautions, but was aware of other clubs whose idea of PPE is running a session with a table with hand sanitiser on and that's about all they've got.

The rugby club might be started using an adapted form of the game with juniors, but starting this training with the seniors is as much an economic decision as they will not be able to open the clubhouse.

At the level of the individual, risk will reflect person circumstances and the individual's approach to risk. The yachting club volunteer explained: *I must admit, personally, I won't be going out on a yacht this year. But that's my personal view of the risks involved to me. until we reach a stage where whatever help they were giving is clearly safe, the vaccine or whatever, that there will be a proportion who will be more cautious than we're allowed to be. And to some extent I'm in that category ... I've been sailing single hander and not going near other people, arriving changed, going out, coming back in, getting back in the car and going home. ... talking to a few people at a distance in the car park. That's been about it. And as I've said, I don't see myself yacht sailing this year. Partly because I've been shielding.*

A member of the mountaineering club who was 70 had the same attitude: *look I've done it all there's no point me sticking my neck out with other people when I don't have to do it I'll just call it a day until it's safe to be getting back to it.*

The main concern of the squash club was that members would not return to the sport because they thought it was too risky. In the RDA: *we also have a lady who is in her 80s and she's brilliant, she's fit, she is well but there is no way she'll come back because her family don't want it.*

Thus the perception of risk will vary at the NGB level, at the club level and between committee members and volunteers; and the level of the individual members. All of these will influence a return to sport. The club will need to reassure members and cater for different perceptions of risk between members.

13. Conclusions

Our sample was only of 13 clubs, but was selected to contrast them by: those which own facilities and those which lease or rent them; close contact sports and ones where participation can be distanced; and indoor and outdoor sports. As anticipated, these factors made considerable differences to the impact of covid-19 restrictions, so make it difficult to generalise across clubs.

The clubs were not as financially challenged as those in the Australian survey. They were differently impacted depending on their individual context. For example, the golf club had gained new members and the tennis club had lost members. Others had lost complete revenue streams, but received considerable grant funding.

It was common that clubs identified “next year” as a potential crisis point.

The commitment of volunteers remains strong. They want the club and the sport to continue, and adapt if needed. To do this volunteers have had to take on more work, react quickly to changes in guidance, and evaluate the risk to their members. A theme through volunteers’ responses was coping with uncertainty and stress. An example response was: *going forward for the club is like going into a future that you can't see ... we don't actually know whether the sports centres are going to be open, whether there's going to be a spike in this virus, whether we're going to end up on lockdown again, or whatever.* It will be interesting to see the extent to which volunteer commitment can remain if the club reopening is constrained, or put back by a further outbreak of the virus. At the time of the research; some clubs; such as Riding for the Disabled and mountaineering, did not plan to return to activity under present guidelines. Volunteer commitment is essential to maintain the structure of clubs.

The clubs are also held together by the social bonds between members and particularly, the volunteers. This reward of membership, as in the bowls club; is very important. It may be harder to adapt the club to meet these rewards than it is to adapt the sport. Possibly the members who benefit the most from these rewards; such as the older participants in the bowls club; are the ones who may be most reluctant to resume activity because they perceive the risks to be higher. On the other hand, social bonds made within the club may become even more important as social interaction in society is more restricted. If they can be retained virtually, this will still prove valuable. However, for some the focus on responding to covid-19 had brought them closer together for example in the football club committee: *it wasn't something we were expecting to have to deal with. But actually I think it's helped us to come together more as a group of trustees because we've had to get on together and get this done. So yes I think it's had its benefits definitely.*

Clubs rely to varying degrees on other providers of leisure facilities. For example; the hockey club hired pitches from a university and met socially in a pub; the swimming club hired a local authority pool; the badminton club and football club hired local authority facilities, and the mountaineering club hired a pub out-building. To this extent, clubs do not control their own destiny. If a local authority delays opening a facility or applies extra restrictions, the clubs will need to comply.

A common innovation was to run zoom meetings for committees, social events and coach continuing professional development (CPD). This has benefits of making committee meetings more effective and allowing more people to attend and will probably change practice in the long-run. Other innovations included adaptations to the sports to meet covid-19 restrictions, usually guided by NGBs. These included booking systems for tightly defined participation slots and adapting the sport to reduce physical contact. These adaptations were to get the club running as close to how it had been before. They required considerable effort from the volunteers to design, risk assess and manage.

Other potential innovations which might have adapted to changes in patterns of sports participation or the new opportunities presented by the virus were absent.

- The sports were not being adapted to meet the changed demand for time-flexible sports participation in smaller groups or as individuals.
- There was not a consideration of how to adapt the club to meet the new needs of the community for physical and mental health. This could involve opening up the facilities to new user groups. This might capitalise on the government's concern with increasing the nation's health. The clubs with facilities showed the potential to do this; for example, the four community groups who used the gymnastics facility – one free of charge; and the two groups which used the bowls facility. It is probably easier for a club to let a community group use its facility than it is for the club to adapt its membership or activities to engage with new individuals. The nature of clubs is that people join, and volunteer, because they share enthusiasm for the sport and clubs welcome members for these reasons (16). Clubs don't try to recruit members to help them meet their physical or mental health needs: the exception being riding for the disabled which exists to do this. To do this the club would need to change its purpose.
- There was no consideration of potential links to the 3,500 new covid local support groups, or the new volunteers for the NHS.

Instead it was all about returning as close as possible to what was there before (or would have been there at that time in the year). This is not a criticism of the volunteers running the clubs. Rather, an observation that they had enough extra work and stress to just try and get the club back to near what it was doing before lockdown. To do more it would need inspiration and help.

Much more broadly; as the capacity of the state to meet society's needs is stretched, and local government is forced to focus even more on providing essential services; the voluntary sector could take a bigger role (5). The network of clubs can be regarded as a valuable national resource. It emerged from the late 19th century onwards. It has proved very resilient (12) and is part of a strong voluntary sector tradition. It is particularly suited to developing the sporting social capital which promotes sports participation (9), especially when this needs to adapt to changed circumstances. Clubs provide organisations in which volunteering can take place and the development of a commitment to volunteering, and possibly providing services in an alternative way to the commercial market (10). Maintaining this resource justifies support.

However, the challenge presented by covid-19 restrictions is unprecedented. Our interviews were conducted in July and August, 4 months after lockdown in March. In general, clubs were still sustainable, financially and in terms of volunteer engagement but were very concerned about how they will survive over the following 6 months, and especially if there is another lockdown. Grants have been one-off. Volunteers face increasing difficulty adapting the club. Membership may fall as the clubs cannot offer the same sporting or social experience; and the trend away from club participation may be accentuated (8). Local government will have even less resources to provide sports facilities which some clubs rely on and the challenge presented by covid-19 is also unpredictable.

We did not ask clubs what support would be most valuable, which would be a useful question in further research. They all found the existing support from their NGB to be useful. This suggests that advice on how to adapt to changing covid-19 related regulations could be best channelled through the NGBs to the clubs. The grants to clubs, from NGBs, Sport England and via local government, were all helpful. They may be required next year too, as some larger clubs such as rugby and gymnastics were very clear about. Clubs reported no guidance or inspiration on how they could adapt to meet the broader challenges of how they could work with other community organisations to meet society's needs. Exploring how this could be achieved is another research question. Learning from the past suggests it might require inspirational role models. In the past, sports development officers and specialist volunteers have helped clubs recruit new volunteers from outside the club, although these officers and volunteers were exceptional (17). In the same way community or sports development workers embedded in local communities could make the links between organisations to achieve synergy. The growth of this type of worker was seen in the 1980s but as local government funding was cut from 2010 they could no longer be afforded. Grants to clubs could be made to support this type of innovation, but grant giving power would need to be at the local level to ensure it met local needs.

In a much broader sense the challenge of covid-19 presents an opportunity to consider: how best to meet society's needs; what those needs are, and the balance between the private, public and voluntary sectors in meeting them. As a commentator has concluded (5, p134): 'The coronavirus crisis may be creating the conditions for a new and comprehensive social contract, akin to the social and economic reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War. What roles might the third sector and civil society play in advancing, but also in some cases resisting, this process?'

14. Recommendations

It is difficult to make recommendations because the 13 clubs in this study were so different and the future is so uncertain. The results of our interviews reflected the seasonal nature of sports.

Clubs need to consider how they can adapt the sport they offer to keep it as attractive as possible to participants. It will be especially important to emphasise this new 'offer' before the start of the new season to maintain subscriptions. Clubs need to let members know how they have reduced the risks from covid-19, but if possible, to offer different levels of participation for members with different perceptions of their own risk. Clubs need to maintain as far as possible the social rewards of membership – in the end zoom meetings cannot compensate for social contact. Clubs need to appreciate the ways in which different members need to be communicated with, depending on technological familiarity. An example was the bowls clubs, in which the secretary phoned older members personally.

Sport England, sportscotland and government need to appreciate this could be the biggest challenge the network of clubs has faced. They need to be helped through this, to preserve them as a valuable resource; contributing to physical and mental health, and to the wellbeing of communities. Possibly clubs could be helped to take a broader role in doing this, but the priority should be to just maintain their present contribution from being lost.

It would be extremely useful to repeat the interviews with clubs in 6 months' time. This would show how sustainable the clubs are; financially, in terms of membership, and in the effort required from volunteers. The seasonality of sports and subscriptions will mean that the impact on membership has to be seen over a whole year. The commitment of volunteers will be stretched if they have to cope with changes in the way the club can run over a further 6 months although this period may enable further adaptations. The 13 clubs interviewed provided a good contrast but an expansion of the sample could include more than one club in each sport, and a wider range of sports. The differences in government guidance between England and Scotland did not appear to make a lot of difference to clubs at the time of interview. If government guidance diverges more significantly between the countries; and Wales and N. Ireland; this may also justify widening the sample.

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This report can be accessed on the network site at <https://sports-volunteer-research-network.org.uk/> and at Observatory for Sport in Scotland resource library:

<https://www.oss.scot/will-sports-volunteers-come-back-after-covid/>

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