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## **Means as well as ends: some critical insights for UK sport policy on the impact of facility ownership and configuration on sports participation**

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## **Means as well as ends:**

### **Some critical insights for UK sport policy on the impact of facility ownership and configuration on sports participation.**

The effectiveness of sports facility provision in increasing participation is debated internationally. The impact will be mediated by the sport delivery system, the welfare system within which sports policy might operate and the culture of sport. Change in the political persuasion of recent UK governments has followed a broadly consistent neoliberal policy direction of moving from big government and public ownership, to outsourcing and governance through networks. The intended aim: to more effectively achieve policy objectives, such as subjective well-being (SWB), health and social capital. A case study of participation in sport and fitness activities in a County Sports Partnership (CSP) in England is presented to examine if different ownership types and configuration of facilities that have emerged as a result of the policy direction, has influenced participation and policy targets. Regression results reveal that the ownership and configuration of facilities has no effect on the duration of activity and consequently no impact on policy outcomes. The largest influence on participation occurs in using facilities with others that were previously met there. The results also suggest that participation in facilities combined with other sport and physical activity can have an impact on health and social capital, and indirectly SWB. These insights are strongly indicative of the co-creation and interconnectedness of participation and suggest that policy should focus on network development more than specific forms of ownership and provision in seeking to achieve policy objectives. The research casts new critical light on the role of neoliberalism in sports policy.

Keywords: Sport participation; fitness, facilities; health; well-being; social capital

## **Introduction**

In Europe, the need to drive participation in physical activity features heavily in public policy discourses (Vandermeerschen and Scheerder, 2017). In the UK context the publication of the last sports strategy ‘Sporting Future’ (HM Government, 2015) argues that there is a need to increase sport participation to achieve outcomes such as physical wellbeing; mental wellbeing; individual development; social and community development; and economic development. This strategy maintains an ongoing policy commitment that government should focus on *enabling* participation more than directly *providing* opportunities to participate through the public ownership and operation of facilities. This is the latest statement of an ongoing process of neoliberalisation of the sport delivery system in the UK (Stenling, 2014) with an erosion of the public sector and the establishment of rapidly developing private sector providing sport and fitness facilities (Mintel, 2007, 2015; Downward, 2011). In UK policy discourse therefore, public-sector priority is to harness and direct resources through County Sports Partnerships (CSPs) acting as coordinators of networks of stakeholders, including the remaining public-sector fitness centres, local authorities, schools, National Governing Bodies, charities, sports clubs and Primary Care Trusts (Philpotts et al., 2011)

This raises the research question: does it matter who provides facilities in delivering participation for the achievement of policy objectives? Focussing on a CSP area in the Midlands of England, this paper addresses this question by drawing on a survey of participants of sport and fitness facilities. Data measuring their behaviour are matched to objective data connected with the ownership and configuration of the facility that they use. The aim is to examine if ownership of provision, controlling for the configuration of what is offered, influences the frequency of participation and, in turn, does the frequency of observed participation contribute to policy objectives of

subjective well-being (SWB), health and social capital as currently measured and discussed in the UK. This is important because facilities delivered by neoliberal outsourcing are expected to lift participation and its outcomes because of a general presumption that marketisation and reduced regulation always delivers better outcomes (Ashworth et al., 2009) as it redirects service delivery to users' needs (Andersen and Jakobsen, 2011; Morgan, 2013; Hodgkinson et al. 2017a). However, there has been no formal examination and test of the relationships between the form of facility ownership, controlling for the configuration of services, on sport and physical activity participation and consequent outcomes.

The next section of the paper briefly charts the development of UK sports policy and its emphasis. This is followed by an outline of the neoliberal theoretical foundations of the current research which, it is argued, underpins the recent development of the focus upon and measurement of the outcomes addressed in this paper. The theoretical approach adopted has led to the development of a quantitative literature exploring sports participation and policy outcomes, which is reviewed in the next section. Attention is focussed on the influence of facility provision on behaviour. The remaining sections of the paper present the data, the methods of analysis and results, implications for theory and practice, and draws final conclusions.

### ***The UK policy context***

It is well documented that following the Second World War, sport emerged as a branch of social welfare policy (McIntosh, 1980; Coalter, 2007; Downward et al., 2009), and that in the UK and across Europe by the 1970s a 'Sport for all' policy initiative led to the Council of Europe publishing the European Sport for All Charter. Suggestions for achieving 'Sport for All' in the charter included a high level of government intervention

in the form of support from public funds, a planned approach to facility development, administrative machinery to develop and co-ordinate policy, and finally, a willingness to use legislation. In 1991 the European Sport for All Charter was replaced by the European Sports Charter which was subsequently revised in 2001 (Green, 2006). In the UK, a typical aspect of the policy was large-scale public investment in facilities and particularly in swimming pools in the 1970s (Gratton and Taylor, 1991).

By the 1980s, however, as documented by Houlihan (1997) and Henry (1993) a strong ideological desire to cut public spending, and to encourage private sector provision in all aspects of the economy occurred with a shift from a Keynesian to a monetarist approach to economic policy (Hall, 1993). This led to the privatisation of nationalised industries and the outsourcing of public sector provision of services, including local authority leisure services through Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT). This began in 1989 following the Local Government Act 1988 (Coalter, 1995). The aim of CCT was to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of delivery, though it has been argued that it led to a focus on financial savings and cut backs, and a decline in customer service (Stevens and Green, 2002). Over the period, decline in publicly funded participation in sport and particularly in school provision of sport occurred.

Change occurred in the early 1990s (Houlihan, 1997). The conservative government led by John Major, under the strategy of 'Raising the Game' (DoNH, 1995) increased investment in sport, particularly in schools, drawing upon funds from the newly established National Lottery in 1994. As Stevens and Green (2010, 2012) argue, the subsequent arrival of Tony Blair's New Labour Government in 1997 can be seen to represent broad continuity of this policy thrust. Although CCT was replaced by 'Best Value', continued outsourcing of service delivery remained prominent (Ashworth et al. 2009). Collectively, this broad public policy paradigm of modernisation was driven by

New Public Management (NPM) reforms that led to ‘changing modes of sport governance’ (Green, 2009). Over this period a rapidly developing private sector also emerged (Mintel, 2007; 2015; 2017) which, as Downward (2011) argues coincided with rising consumer incomes, and increased demand for more standardised and casual time-efficient provision of sport as ‘fitness’.

The development of the private sector and the general embracing of the market provision of sport was encouraged and fully expressed in the New Labour strategy document ‘Game Plan’ (DCMS/SU 2002), which led to a focus on the twin sports policy objectives of delivering elite sport success and encouraging more grassroots participation (Grix and Carmichael, 2012; Houlihan, 2011). The general sentiment was that whilst,

‘There are benefits from sport which accrue to individuals, communities and the nation as a whole...this is not a sufficient argument for government intervention in the market for sport ... In the competition for scarce resources, ....sport must face up to the challenge of justifying, in more tangible ways, why public money should be invested in it...Government does not run sport – and nor should it.’

(DCMS/SU, 2002, p76)

The normative expectation was that any public money should be prioritised towards only resolving market failures and inequities, otherwise the private sector should supply sport, and is likely to do this better.

From the perspective of the public sector, in 2004 the strategy document ‘The Framework for Sport in England’ (Sport England, 2004) sought to rationalise the remaining publicly funded initiatives associated with grassroots sport and this led to the

formation of the CSPs, which now manage networks of public sector partners, charities, educational institutions and National Governing Body affiliated clubs in delivering sport in the community (Philpotts et al., 2011). Charitable organisations also developed to deliver sporting opportunities, particularly to disadvantaged communities in meeting governments equity policy (Kelly, 2013). Though they have access to public funds, they increasingly seek other funding streams in the light of austerity (Bingham and Walters, 2013).

Current strategy consequently does not seek reform of the multiagency approach to sports provision, nor seek radical overhaul of who provides sport. Indeed, it reinforces the existing focus by emphasising the need to achieve outcomes rather than the means by which they are achieved, retaining the normative presumption that the market delivers the best outcomes; i.e., more participation and its consequent impacts.

It has to be emphasised that the above development reflected a UK policy response to facilitating ‘sport for all’ as expected by EU policy. It is well-known that other countries embraced different approaches both within Europe – with a Nordic model (Bergsgard et al., 2017) – as well as others outside Europe (Nicholson et al., 2011). However, focussing on the UK case does provide an opportunity to statistically assess the more general efficacy of the prioritisation of the private sector as championed by neoliberalism. The policy lessons and evaluation consequently have a more general theoretical implication. The next section outlines the theoretical foundations of neoliberalism and shows how this also drives the focus on the current policy outcomes that are targeted.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The neoliberal policy emphasis in the UK derives its theoretical inspiration from

neoclassical economic theory. Here it is assumed that individual consumers exercise free choices to allocate their income and time to activities that maximise their utility; if individuals are allowed to operate as such in free markets this will maximise social welfare. Consequently, the policy presumption is to allow, where possible, free markets comprising private individuals and firms to organise behaviour (Downward et al, 2009). Markets will expand where they meet consumers' needs, which means that a growth in activity is to be expected e.g., in sports participation.

The neoliberal approach maintains that the monetary value of market transactions represents a 'revealed preference' measure of social welfare and is why, for example, the level and distribution of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has historically been emphasised in policy discussion. Following Stiglitz et al. (2010), however, theoretical attention in economics has shifted towards measuring social welfare directly by asking about an individual's utility expressed as subjective well-being SWB (Frey, 2008). As a result, in the United Kingdom (UK) SWB is now considered to be an important concept to measure in evaluating alternative policy outcomes and investment (HM treasury, 2011).

SWB is recognised to be complex and multidimensional, thus, personal well-being, health and the neighbourhood community are dimensions that have now been prioritised in official statistics (e.g., Office for National Statistics, 2015). Consequently, measures of SWB and social trust now accompany longer-standing measures of health in official surveys. Examples include the British Household Panel Survey, which has become absorbed within a new larger survey called Understanding Society; and, also The Taking Part Survey and the Active People Survey, which has transformed into the Active Lives survey, that were commissioned to monitor sport participation by the DCMS and Sport England respectively in 2005.

In this research, therefore, the focus is upon the possibility of, and extent to which, the interrelated policy outcomes of SWB, health and social capital might flow from sports participation. In turn, participation is hypothesised to be necessarily contingent on the ownership and configuration of the facilities that provide the opportunities to participate. The research gap that is addressed is, as indicated below, that the role of the supply of participation opportunities in influencing participation and policy outcomes has been under researched statistically. This is despite the centrality of supply opportunities, as discussed above, to policy and broader policy discourse (Nicholson et al. 2011).

### ***Participation in sport***

There is now a widespread quantitative literature that focusses on the statistical identification of drivers of participation and its outcomes with respect to policy objectives. Quantitative analysis is typically undertaken on large scale secondary data sets and tends to examine the decision to participate or not in sport over some specified time period; for example in Downward (2007), Hovemann and Wicker (2009), Van Tuyckom et al. (2010), Vandermeerschen et al. (2015), Lera-Lopez et al. (2016), Borodulin et al. (2016), and Marques et al. (2016). Other research also accounts for the actual frequency of participation, measured either as the minutes of participation or the number of times that it occurs as, for example, in Downward and Riordan (2007), Humphreys and Ruseski (2011, 2015), Muñiz et al. (2014), Caparrós Ruiz (2017), Cheah et al. (2017), Downward et al. (2011), and Downward and Rasciute (2015). Across this literature the association of sports participation with socio-demographic, income, time and behavioural characteristics, household structure and environmental factors has been investigated.

There is less literature that examines how the provision of sporting opportunities is associated with participation based on quantitative data, though there are some notable exceptions. Wicker et al. (2009), for example, show that lower levels of participation coincide with there being less sport facilities in an area. Deelen et al. (2016) argue similarly based on the distance to indoor sport facilities and the desirability of the neighbourhood. Eime et al. (2015) also show that the results can vary for different types of sport. More indirectly, Humphreys and Ruseski (2007) show that higher state spending on parks and recreation is associated with higher participation in the US. Similar results are found in European countries in connection with spending on health and education (Lera-López et al., 2016). However, this is not found to be the case for lottery funded capital expenditure in the UK (Kokolakakis et al., 2017). Only one study addresses similar issues to the current research. Hallman et al., (2015) examine the influence of the number of state-provided, non-profit sports clubs provided, and commercial provided sports programmes in 25 urban districts of Munich, on the participation decision of individuals. It is shown that the ownership of programmes does not influence the overall incidence of participation, but there is evidence that the number of commercial opportunities available is negatively associated with the incidence of participation in non-profit sports clubs. This is consistent with the arguments in Downward (2011) that in the UK the private sector's share of participation has grown at the expense of the public sector, which may be due to the outsourcing of supply generating greater customer satisfaction with the overall experience of using a facility (Ramchandani et al., 2018). These claims are, however, not tested.

As well as exploring the factors associated with sports participation, large scale data analysis of the impacts of sport on SWB, health and social capital outcomes has emerged. It is generally shown that sports participation is positively associated with

better health (Lechner, 2009; Humphreys et al., 2014; Sarma et al., 2015) and SWB (Rasciute and Downward, 2010; Becchetti et al., 2012; Huang and Humphreys, 2012; Dolan et al., 2014; and Downward and Dawson, 2015). However, Downward et al, (2017) identify no association between sports participation and social capital, but that the outcomes of health and SWB are strongly correlated. There is some evidence that sports-club membership is associated with the promotion of social contacts, even though Downward et al. (2014) show that being associated with a sports group can reduce generalised trust in others; with trust being a central characteristic of social capital.

An important feature to note of the studies above in exploring the outcomes from sports participation is that, with the exception of Downward and Dawson (2015) and Downward et al. (2017), binary measures of sports participation are used. Consequently, in the current study the focus is on the extent, in minutes, of participation on outcomes. This is to allow variation in participation of facility users to be identified as part of an assessment of the role of ownership types in increasing participation and meeting policy outcomes. Moreover, unlike Hallman et al., (2015) the effect of facility provision upon participation is addressed by directly matching facilities and users. This provides the context within which the maintained hypothesis of neoliberalism, that the private sector will better deliver policy outcomes by promoting more participation, can be assessed whilst controlling for the configuration of the opportunities that individuals have to participate.

## **Data and methods**

### ***Data Collection***

The data for this study came from three sources. The main source of data is an online

survey of users of facilities within the CSP. These were drawn from a historic sample frame of approximately n=20,000 individuals who had at some time in the past been in contact with the CSP. The questionnaire was to be completed by those identified as primarily using one of 17 privately owned, 3 publicly owned or 10 other facilities in the CSP. The other facilities included ownership by a Leisure Management Contractor (LMC), where a private agent manages a local government owned facility; and, non-profit facilities which are intended to be independent of local government and are generally set up as either Industrial or Provident Societies or as Companies Limited by Guarantee (Audit Commission, 2006). The set of facilities were randomly chosen from a database of sports and fitness provision undertaken in a recent audit by the CSP to represent the full range of facilities on offer in the area.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the configuration of the facilities as well as the tariff for use of the facility was then obtained directly from the organisation. The effective price per use of the facility could then be calculated from the tariff and the reported use of the facility by individual users in the survey.

The dependent variables investigated in the questionnaire included participation at the facilities as well as the policy outcomes desired from sport and physical activity participation. In the former case the total minutes of use of the facility in the last four weeks was elicited. To derive this variable, and to directly link to policy discussion, the questionnaire drew on the Active People Survey (APS) questionnaire and asked about the use or not of the facility, the frequency of use over the four-week period prior to the survey and the typical minutes of duration each time. As well as questions investigating the use of the facility similar questions were asked to identify organised and informal sport activity outside of the facility. The International Physical Activity Questionnaire

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<sup>1</sup> The list of facilities that were chosen were cross-checked against expectations of their representativeness by senior staff of the CSP

(IPAQ) was also drawn upon to measure physical activity at work and in active travel. Office for National Statistics questions were then utilised to measure the SWB, health and social capital outcomes targeted in policy. In the latter case this was a measure of generalised trust. As well as the ownership and configuration of facilities' variables, other covariates typically associated with sports participation in the literature were included, as discussed further below. Finally, because causal insights were sought in the cross-sectional research design, and because of the potential endogeneity between sports participation and the policy outcome variables, and between the policy variables, other questions were also asked of respondents to obtain data to act as instrumental variables. Endogeneity means that whereas we might hypothesise that sports participation promotes an outcome like health or SWB or social capital, it could also be the case that either of these outcomes can also, in turn, influence sports participation. If statistical analysis is undertaken without accounting for this complexity then biased estimates (i.e., systematic error) will occur.

### *Sample Characteristics*

All variables and their definition are indicated in Table 1, together with descriptive statistics. Although the standard deviations have little relevance for the binary variables, the means indicate succinctly the sample proportions of the characteristics investigated. The total sample size elicited from the survey was n=403. This yields a response rate of approximately 2%, which is relatively small. However, the accuracy of the historic sampling frame was relatively uncertain and even allowing for missing responses to some questions, which yielded a sample of n=361 for analysis,<sup>2</sup> the sample size is very

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<sup>2</sup> 358 observations were available to analyse participation.

close to the recommended  $n=377$  based upon a 5% confidence level and 95% confidence interval.

The descriptive results reveal that typically respondents engage in 8 hours of participation at the facilities over the four-week period, though there is a skew in behaviour that is to be expected. In addition, between 3 to 5 hours of other physical activities in the four-week period are also undertaken by respondents. Moreover, respondents report that on approximately two days a week some physical activity at work is undertaken. On balance high levels of happiness, general health and trust in the neighbourhood are identified with values that correspond to the literature (Stubbe, et al., 2007; Pawlowski, et al., 2011; Downward and Rasciute, 2011; Huang and Humphreys, 2012; Ruseski et al., 2014; Schüttoff, et al., 2018; Ulseth, 2004 and Delaney and Kearny, 2005). There are however, approximately 24% of the respondents who have some form of longstanding illness or disability.

Most facilities are shown to be multi-activity based and have a swimming pool and typical activities undertaken by respondents include weight training, cardiovascular activity, activity classes and swimming. Approximately 60% of the sample is female, the age range is typically between 59 years and 32 years of age. Approximately 22 percent of the sample is single, with household incomes ranging from approximately £51,000 to £22,600. Individuals typically belong to households of 2 adults and, if present, one child is more likely to be the case. Between 30% and 35% of the respondents visit the facility with family and existing friends, but approximately 20% of the sample attend the facility with people that they have met there. Approximately 93% of the sample is White British and 86% drink alcohol. However, only approximately 6% of the sample smoke. Approximately 8% of the sample attend live sports events each week, but approximately 63% watch sport once a week on television or by other media.

It is important to recognise, particularly given the small response rate, that these characteristics are not unusual for the CSP area analysed. For example, it can be shown that the sample has characteristics that are not dissimilar to the nationally representative Active People Survey. Though the number of comparable variables is small, for 2015 to 2016 in the same CSP area, and for similar sports and fitness activities, participation comprised of 61.4% females, 90.7% of white ethnicity, a slightly higher age range of typically 69 to 37 years of age, households of typically two adults and typically one child if they were present.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Data Analysis***

To assess the impact of facility ownership and configuration on the frequency of participation, and the potential impact of the latter on the policy outcomes of SWB, health and social capital, two linear regression models were estimated. The first model explores the impact of facility ownership and configuration on the frequency of participation. Included in the analysis are variables that control for typical activities that are undertaken, to examine if specific activities contribute to participation. Access variables are included to explore the impact of distance travelled to the facility and the effective payment for a session of use. Standard socio-demographic variables are included as indicated in the literature as being important to understand participation. Variables measuring the respondent's attendance at sports events and watching sports are included to capture potential substitutes from passive sports behaviour, or a general interest in sport. For this reason, variables measuring the minutes of participation of the respondent in both formal and informal sporting activity are also included, as well as if

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<sup>3</sup> The average number of children is, however, higher, which is consistent with the higher average age in the range of 53 years old.

the respondent undertakes work of a moderate or vigorous physical intensity. Lastly, variables that measure the policy outcomes of health, SWB and social capital are included. This is because the literature recognises the potential endogeneity of these outcome variables with participation (Lechner, 2009; Humphreys et al., 2014, Sarma et al, 2014; Pawlowski et al. 2011, Downward and Dawson, 2015; Downward et al., 2014; Schüttoff, et al., 2018). This means that as well as being policy outcomes, these factors may also influence behaviour. As well as potentially influencing participation, the literature also recognises that the policy outcomes are also mutually related. The second model that is estimated, consequently, explores the impact of the frequency of sports participation on these outcomes jointly.

Because of the potential endogeneity of relationships, the empirical strategy adopted in both cases of examining participation and the impact of participation on the policy outcomes involves, first, testing for the endogeneity of the relationship between the outcomes as an influence on sports participation in exploring the impact of facility provision on the latter and, second, exploring the endogeneity between the outcomes and sports participation as an influence upon them. If endogeneity is present an instrumental variable estimation strategy is then employed. Whilst theoretically it is to be expected that the relationships will be endogenous, what matters for the empirical estimation is the presence of sufficient endogeneity to bias the results.<sup>4</sup>

<< Insert Table 1 approximately here >>

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<sup>4</sup> Although not removing bias an instrumental variable estimator yields consistent estimates with some loss of efficiency relative to OLS. If there is no endogeneity present OLS provides unbiased and efficient estimates and should be preferred. This is particularly important in the current context as there is a (relatively) small sample.

## Results

Table 2 presents the results of the regression of the frequency of participation in activities at the facilities. At the bottom of the table the insignificance of the endogeneity tests reveals that OLS regression results are to be preferred as there is no evidence of endogeneity between the outcome variables of SWB, Health and Social capital and participation. For robustness, however, IV estimates are also presented.<sup>5</sup> In this case it is shown at the bottom of table 2 that in regressions of the potentially endogenous regressors on the independent variables and the instruments, the latter are significant in the first-stage regression results.<sup>6</sup> The Hansen test also indicates that the instruments are independent of the errors of the equation. Consequently, in meeting these conditions, the analysis employs valid instrumental variables. The results are very similar across the specifications, so commentary concentrates on the OLS results.

<< Insert Table 2 approximately here >>

The major results to report are that the ownership of the facility and its configuration has no significant influence on the frequency of participation. These results are important as they provide the first test of the assumed greater efficacy of the private sector in stimulating participation – with a consequent impact on policy outcomes – as assumed in neoliberalism, controlling for the type of facilities that are on

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<sup>5</sup> The focus is upon the relationship between participation at the facility being influenced by the policy outcomes. The relationship between forms of sports participation are explored further below.

<sup>6</sup> The instrumental variables were collected as part of the questionnaire and included the height of the participant and whether or not they were happy, anxious and could trust neighbours when growing up.

offer. This demonstrates that these dimensions of the current ‘means’ by which to achieve policy ‘ends’ are not relevant. There are, however, several significant variables influencing participation. Various specific activities that are undertaken contribute to the frequency of participation, these are: time intensive activity classes like body pump, spinning, circuit training, as well as the use of outdoor courts for racquet sports. Though these specific activities are associated with higher frequencies of participation, it is important to note that an F-test of the exclusion of *all* the activities can be rejected, as indicated at the bottom of Table 2. This implies that the activities are *jointly* significant and is indicative of individuals undertaking portfolios of activity within the facilities regardless of how they are configured, and that specific activities might distinctly raise participation.

Consistent with the literature, the results also indicate that males tend to undertake higher frequencies of activity than females and, this is also the case for individuals that do not drink. Moreover, the implied cost per use of the facility and the distance travelled to use it are negatively related to participation, which is to be expected for economic reasons. If the respondent also engages in organised physical activity elsewhere, this also reduces the frequency of participation. This suggests that more informal fitness activity is a substitute for organised sports and vice versa, as suggested by Hallman et al., (2015). A result of interest in this regard is that the largest impact on the frequency of participation is attendance at the facility with those that were met there. This suggests that the socialised co-creation of engagement is extremely important in encouraging more participation and that this can offset any losses from more organised activity being curtailed.

Table 3 reports the results from a three stage least squares (3SLS) regression analysis of the impact of sports participation on the policy outcomes of SWB, health

and social capital. This analysis directly accounts for the interrelationship between the policy outcomes as identified in the literature (Downward et al. 2017)<sup>7</sup> as well as their endogeneity with sports participation and walking and cycling. Consequently, each of the two remaining policy outcomes are included as explanatory variables in an equation explaining the impact of sports participation on the other remaining policy outcome. Tests revealed the presence of endogeneity between SWB and the other outcomes and between sports and the other physical activity variables.<sup>8</sup> This is consistent with SWB being an important overall outcome and determinant of behaviour in the literature (Frey, 2008).

<< Insert Table 3 approximately here >>

In this analysis the (confounding) covariates used in the previous regression were included apart from those connected with the supply and use of the facilities as these are nested within the sports participation activity. The effects of a measure of all sports participation was also constructed and examined, because it is likely that sports participation will be a portfolio activity (Downward and Riordan, 2007). Consequently model (1) reports the analysis conducted in which separate aspects of sport and physical activity are examined. Model (2) reports the case where the minutes of all forms of sport and physical activity are aggregated, that is including those outside the facility. For brevity, commentary concentrates on the policy outcomes and sports participation.

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<sup>7</sup> As well as the instrumental variables noted above the distance to the facility used as added to help to identify the model as this is more likely to be related to participation than the outcomes.

<sup>8</sup> Considering the outcome variables and also Gym minutes OrgPAototmins InfPAototmins wlkcyc, the Durbin test is:  $\chi^2(6) = 18.5904$  ( $p = 0.0049$ ) and the Wu-Hausman test is:  $F(6,334) = 3.02231$  ( $p = 0.0069$ ). With just the outcomes the resulting tests are:  $\chi^2(2) = 7.00171$  ( $p = 0.0302$ ) and  $F(2,338) = 3.34264$  ( $p = 0.0365$ ), respectively.

An important result from the analysis, particularly for model (2) is that sets of the policy outcomes are shown to be complementary. Health and SWB, in particular, are related in a simultaneous way as indicated in the literature (Downward et al, 2017). In addition, social capital is shown to have a positive influence on health and hence SWB but also health can reinforce social capital further. This suggests that the achievement of one outcome – particularly health - will help to enhance the other outcomes. Policy stimuli may thus have a *direct* influence on a specific outcome, but also an *indirect* influence through the other outcomes.

Overall, the results reveal the key finding that participation in the sports facilities addressed in the research in conjunction with other physical activity directly enhances health. This can then indirectly improve trust but also SWB. The results also show that sports and physical activity can also directly reduce trust *controlling for the impact of other outcomes*. This is consistent with the arguments made earlier that sport may be becoming more casual and individualised. However, the results also show that positive health outcomes can subsequently improve trust. Coupled with the finding that the amount of participation is much higher for those that attend facilities with people they met at the facility, demonstrates that facilities have the potential to impact social capital in an emergent way through co-creation, despite perhaps, a different explicit objective motivating participation.

## **Discussion**

Focussing on a CSP area in the Midlands of England, this paper addresses the question of does it matter who provides facilities in delivering participation for the achievement of policy objectives? This is achieved through an analysis that investigates if participation is influenced by a variety of sports facilities of different ownership types,

whilst controlling for the different configurations on offer. Moreover, the analysis addresses if participation affects the policy outcomes of SWB, health and social capital.

### ***Contributions to theory***

Two main implications of the research can be identified for theory. First, there has been a large policy literature that has documented the role that facility provision has on sports participation; noting that participation depends on the sport delivery system, the welfare system within which sports policy might operate and the culture of sport (Nicholson et al. 2011). However, there has been little literature that has formally tested if the supply side of provision affects the participation behaviour of individuals. In Germany, Hallmann et al. (2015) show that the availability of private sector facilities in the environment around residents provides a substitutable opportunity for participants relative to state-run facilities, but the facility ownership does not affect the overall incidence of participation. The current study focusses directly on the *amount of* participation that is undertaken by users of different types of facilities, rather than treating participation as a binary variable, and for the first time tests if ownership type influences behaviour by examining the facility actually used by the individual. In doing so, this study moves the policy administration discussion away from generalised concern for the outcomes of efficiency, effectiveness, and equity (Andrews et al., 2011) to a domain specific outcome: participation behaviour and its associated policy outcomes of SWB, health and social capital. An extension of the policy literature is, therefore, provided through investigating more specific consequences of ownership at the domain level, addressing public value issues at the disaggregated level (Bozeman and Johnson, 2015).

This is linked to the second contribution of the paper concerning the impact of ownership. The ownership–performance relationship has been a central feature of public policy investigation over the years with many conflicting findings reported as to the merits of publicness and privateness (i.e., who should provide what), but this has not been examined within the context of sport and physical activity participation behaviours. As Andrews et al. (2011: 317) state, the inability “to conclude with any confidence that publicness makes a positive or negative difference to organizational performance...is hardly a happy state of affairs for a research topic that is so central to the discipline of public administration”. The assumption made under NPM, which has driven service delivery externalisation among many developed economies and is dominant in the UK, is that external providers better meet the specific needs of a heterogeneous society relative to public providers that simply seek to satisfy the median voter (Amirkhanyan, Kim, and Lambright, 2008). This is argued on the premise that external providers are incentivised to meet the varying demands of users for market survival (Andersen and Jakobsen, 2011).

However, the empirical tests offered directly confront the normative presumption of the neoliberal approach to public policy that has dominated NPM, underpinned by the neoclassical economics assumption that markets better deliver consumer needs. This presumption suggests that once you control for the configuration of facilities and other key socio-demographic factors, private sector facilities should encourage greater participation in order to deliver the desired well-being, health and social capital objectives of government. The empirical finding that the ownership of facilities does not lead to greater participation of users contradicts this normative presumption of neoliberalism. Thus, the assumption that new organizational forms lead to better results (Ashworth et al., 2009), as championed since the rise of the New Right

in the 1970s and the pursuit of New Public Management from the 1980s onwards (Andrews et al. 2011), appears misplaced. ‘Privateness’ does not appear to be an appropriate mechanism alone to achieve policy objectives and, therefore, the opinions, assumptions, and normative biases that have driven service externalisation (Anderson and Taggart, 2016) warrant significant academic challenge.

### ***Policy implications***

While managing citizens’ physical activity is a central priority of the UK government narratives (as witnessed by the number of government programme interventions directed at this cause, such as ‘Healthy Lives, Healthy People’; ‘Mend, Exercise, Nutrition and Do It!’; ‘Change4Life’; ‘Moving More, Living More’), public sport and leisure provision in the UK has faced significant budget cuts. This is despite current UK policy pushing for the promotion of sport and wider physical activity at the local level, where “local authorities have, and will continue to have, an absolutely crucial role to play in delivering sport and physical activity opportunities” (HM Government, 2015, p. 13). As a mechanism to reach the citizenry at large, then, public sport and leisure services are perceived to be a key conduit to maintaining and increasing levels of physical activity. However, a dominant response of local authorities to the fiscal demands of delivering sport and leisure services directly is to outsource provision to non-profit and private agents.

This study contributes to the long-standing debate about the relative value of these different ownership types that span the public, private, and third sectors and their relationship with ‘performance’ (Andrews et al., 2011) in three ways. First, as noted above, the findings contradict the maintained assumption that the private sector should provide sporting opportunities as it will enhance participation through meeting

consumer needs more effectively than public providers and hence contribute to the achievement of policy outcomes (DCMS/SU, 2002; HM Government, 2015). The current research indicates that the emphasis on ownership and configuration in recent policy discourse in the UK appears misplaced, since there is no evidence that the preferred ownership type (allowing for variations in service configuration) increases participation frequency. Empirically, this is important because as it is argued by Nicholson et al. (2011) in the international context "...It is unclear what the direct impact of the facility provision has been on participation rates, although it is clear that access to sports facilities is an important aspect of effective national government participation policy" (Nicholson et al., 2011, p.303). The current paper provides clear evidence that neoliberalism, as indicated in the private ownership of facilities compared to their public ownership, cannot be assumed to better deliver outcomes; though it is clear too that it is not worse, as has been levelled at an increasingly neoliberalised delivery system (Coalter, 1995).

Second, the analysis shows that having the opportunity to engage in a portfolio of activities does increase participation frequency and the achievement of desirable policy outcomes. Moreover, the main driver of participation frequency is shown to be going to facilities with friends met at the facility. This suggests that it is the general availability of space and portfolios of activities in which to network and co-create the sport and fitness activity that takes place that is of most importance as a policy lever. These results indicate that the consequentialist neoliberal position that is embedded in 'Sporting Future' (H M Government, 2015) the means to achieving a policy outcome *do not* matter is only correct in viewing the means of achieving policy in terms of ownership. The current research shows that having means that allow individuals to engage with one another to co-create activity does matter.

Third, particularly as policy now focusses on outcomes such as SWB, health and social capital stemming from sports participation, it is demonstrated that participation in sport and fitness activities can influence health outcomes and consequently SWB and social capital. This occurs when facility activities are part of a wider external portfolio of behaviour; i.e., connected with participation in organised and informal activities *outside of the facility*. Therefore, it can be argued here too that the means to achieving policy aims are important in meeting the outcomes suggested by Sporting Future. Collectively, then, it is this network of opportunities and not a presumed superiority of the private sector, to both engage with others and engage with a wider portfolio of activities that CSPs should seek to foster and develop.

This study thus calls for a fundamental shift in the sport policy discourse connected with participation of the last several decades, particularly in the UK. Specifically, sport and leisure has come to be defined by a transactional relationship between service users and service facilities in the delivery of a ‘public good’ (Hodgkinson et al., 2017b). In contrast the research shows that it is the informal interactions and social exchanges across an internal portfolio of activities that are core to the user experience which matters most, not the ownership of facilities (i.e., process and not product). In other words, the sport delivery system must become customer-centric and relational for contemporaneous service production and consumption (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This resonates with growing calls for the adoption of service logic in the delivery of public services, such as sport and leisure, where users become service co-creators actively engaged in producing what is valued (Hodgkinson et al., 2017b; Osbourne et al., 2015). The means of achieving policy outcomes through the provision of appropriate customer-led opportunities and interactions provided in facilities is thus important, regardless of ownership type. This insight for policy

contradicts the neoliberal assumption that private provision will lead to better outcomes, which has been observed to drive past policy discourse on participation.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

There are of course limitations to the study. It involves a small sample, on a single English CSP in a cross-sectional context. Although, in the latter case it is shown that causal claims can be made from the data from appropriate testing and the use of instrumental variables, it follows that more longitudinal data is needed to explore the transitional arrangements that are suggested in the paper, particularly with respect to social capital formation. Clearly too, other CSP contexts need to be examined and there is a need to integrate the supply features of the other sports activities that are shown to be related jointly with the outcomes. This, however, might prove to be challenging in trying to match actual organisations to individuals across a range of organisations. This is, of course, why Hallmann et al (2015) had to explore the general contextual environment.

Based on a primary data survey of the frequency of participation at a range of sport and fitness facilities within a Midlands CSP, this paper shows that the ownership and configuration of the facilities does not influence behaviour. However, meeting friends at facilities can increase activity substantially and this is within the context of undertaking an intra-facility portfolio of activities. Moreover, such participation can contribute directly to the health of users when part of an extra-facility portfolio of engagement in formal or informal activities. Indirectly, such activity contributes to SWB and social capital. The results are, consequently, strongly indicative of the co-creation and interconnectedness of participation. This suggests that CSPs can be flexible with respect to the sectors that they work with in seeking to provide opportunities to

participate in sport and, in an era of financial constraint, CSPs should prioritise the development of possibilities in which users can engage in social interaction in sport and fitness. Developing the potential links for users of such facilities to engage with other possibilities of taking part in both formal and informal sport should also be a priority.

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