



Essays in sports governance: 4

November 2024

# Organisational governance & grassroots sports clubs:

## The 7Fs Framework

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## Foreword

This series of essays aims to provide a deeper dive into topics of interest and relevance to the Sports Governance Academy (SGA) community. Authored by experts in particular disciplines and by practitioners in sports governance and management, they will give the reader a closer look at current themes, best practices and initiatives in the sector.

By inviting authors to present their topics in essay form, we want to give them the scope and freedom to explore more deeply areas of governance affecting sports organisations, predominantly in the UK, but drawing on comparative international examples where appropriate. The approach taken will vary from essay to essay. Some will provide a case study to help the community get to grips with developments in the sports governance landscape. Others will present the results of original ongoing research. Others still will offer intriguing perspectives on governance debates, approaching familiar topics from a different angle.

We hope that you find plenty in the series to get you thinking and to help you and your organisations in your approach to governance and in facing the challenges ahead of us. Through the SGA website, you can access further essays in the series as they are released. There you will also find our knowledge base, a library of trusted, free resources to help you get to grips with governance and start to develop good practice. Visit <https://sportsgovernanceacademy.org.uk/>.

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In this essay, Chris Gunn from the University of Central Lancashire and Geoff Walters of the University of Liverpool provide a distillation of Chris' doctoral thesis. The research focused on three grassroots sports organisations and aimed to take a fresh, in-depth look at the governance practices of voluntary sports clubs.

These organisations are the sort of local grassroots clubs with which we are all familiar and which are a bedrock of the UK's sporting, social and cultural life. They are often our first point of contact with both the delivery and administration of sport. They are also subject to changing attitudes to governance and are uniquely vulnerable to a range of pressures: policy, societal, economic and environmental, to name a few.

This essay looks at some of the ways in which grassroots sport is responding to these challenges, the extent to which the improved governance practices that we are increasingly accustomed to seeing in larger bodies are manifested further down the sector's ecosystem, and what this looks like in practice for clubs with little resource and which rely so heavily on volunteers to function. For those of us involved in promoting and embedding good governance across and throughout our sector, the findings offer some cause for optimism.

**Craig Beeston**  
**Sports Governance Academy**  
**November 2024**

## Section 1: Introduction

It has long been acknowledged that voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) are the 'lifeblood' of sport provision and participation, affording opportunities to play, volunteer, compete, socialise, and develop valuable life skills. In Europe there are in the region of 700,000 VSCs (Seippel et al., 2023), and the Sport Recreation Alliance suggests there are around 151,000 in the UK, with others estimating they comprise forty per cent of the overall voluntary sector.

While these figures alone imply ubiquity, growing pressures have created an increasingly complex environment, jeopardising the existence of some VSCs, with research claiming that club numbers declined by approximately twenty per cent between 2002 and 2009. While certain authors have recognised their durability and resilience, many others have also observed the difficulties in ensuring local sports club survival. This suggests a range of challenges for clubs' governing officials: those vested with responsibility for the organisation's governance, management, operation, and continuity.

Good governance is advocated as a potential panacea, able to help alleviate some of these pressures. It is widely held that good governance can contribute to an organisation's effective and efficient operation, legitimacy and reputation, financial solidity and, ultimately, sustainability. In recent years, organisational governance (OG), 'a central issue for the sector'<sup>1</sup>, has become a salient and fertile field for academic and professional research. Nonetheless, and somewhat surprisingly, few studies have focused exclusively on grassroots sports clubs' governance, neglecting the local perspective, despite the argument that it is 'equally important for the grassroots sector'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Lowther et al. comment that 'true grassroots clubs do not seem to be accounted for in a realistic and practical way in current [sports] governance arrangements'.<sup>3</sup>

Concomitantly there has been increased political, stakeholder and academic interest in the sports sector, owing partly to frequent revelations of adverse and unethical practices, resulting in publication of myriad prescriptive governance codes. The impact of these on VSCs in particular, however, has been questioned with debates about their applicability and suitability to volunteer-run sports organisations.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, voluntary sector and grassroots sports club governance has often been perceived pejoratively: described as reactive, dilatory, cumbersome, and amateurish. Some academic research, predating the more recent UK government and Sport England/UK Sport calls for improvement in the governance of sports organisations, argues for the need to be fit for purpose, particularly in this increasingly challenging environment. In combination, these growing pressures, and the dearth of studies in this sector suggests a need for more research into this highly valuable yet under-theorised context. The intention of this research was to focus on contemporary governing practices within VSCs, seeking to derive new knowledge of benefit to both practitioners and academics.

The research was influenced by the conceptual works of a number of academics who have adopted social practice theory (SPT – see below for a definition) to investigate various organisational phenomena. These studies have demonstrated how SPT can focus attention on organisational, group and individual practices within situated contexts, while also acknowledging the agency of practitioners and external forces.<sup>5</sup> This theoretical approach allows close scrutiny of what practitioners actually do, and the various governing processes involved, helping to accurately identify, describe and explain complex social action.

With the above in mind, exploratory qualitative research involving multiple case studies was undertaken. This provided opportunity to gather extensive empirical data. The aim was to

develop a critical and comprehensive appreciation of governance in these organisations. Observations, individual interviews, focus groups and document analysis were utilised to collect context-specific data. Three reputable and long-standing local voluntary sport clubs were selected, seeking to discover what they do, how and why.

This essay proceeds by firstly providing some additional context to the study, followed by an overview of the theoretical framework, before briefly describing the research design. It then discusses findings, and their significance, culminating in conclusions and presentation of the 7Fs Framework ©.

## Section 2: Voluntary sports clubs and their environment

VSCs have been characterised by an amateur ethos and reliance on voluntary input and resource.<sup>6</sup> Profits are neither a primary purpose nor distributed to members, but typically reinvested in facilities. Structurally, organisation usually takes the form of a democratically elected committee that pursues collective interests, codified within a constitution, underpinned by a culture of tradition and informality, and operating relatively independently from external influences. Changes, such as formalisation and professionalisation, have been observed by some taking place partly as a result of the interplay between sports clubs and social, cultural, political, legal, technological, environmental and economic forces. For the purposes of this study, VSCs are defined as local, self-governing, membership-serving clubs where (mainly) volunteers collectively provide various sporting and social opportunities at amateur level.

For some time, the increasingly challenging environment confronting VSCs has been recognised. In 2015, the Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA) warned clubs of the progressively competitive environment for funding, consumers, volunteers, and members. More recent research from the Alliance confirms these findings, revealing difficulties recruiting and retaining members and coaches, maintaining facilities, and impacts from the 'cost of living crisis'.<sup>7</sup> Increased costs of energy and facility hire, combined with austerity policies, alongside reduced membership income have negatively impacted clubs' finances, capacity, and provision of programmes and services. Authors have observed a diverse range of responses among clubs, including prudent financial management practices, income diversification, innovation, external partnerships, enhancement of internal capacity and increases in programmes or services offered in attempts to facilitate survival.<sup>8</sup> Research has shown how sports clubs' fortunes can oscillate, depending upon prevailing conditions in the wider economy and external environment.

A further significant factor, within the macro environment, is the growth of political attention upon the sport sector and, more specifically, recognition of the potential of VSCs to facilitate political, health and social ends. As Sport England said in 2008 'a modern network of sports clubs will be the centrepiece of peoples' sporting experience'. Concerns, however, about the fragmented nature of sport in the UK, led to various policy developments targeting the sector, including its voluntary arm. Improved administration, governance, accountability, and efficiency were sought. Funds were made available, albeit with strings attached, for 'well-run' sports clubs to improve youth sports participation.

Other challenges include 'social shifts', such as changing lifestyles with work and family constraints, and consumption trends, including the growth of e-sports. Just as significant are moves from formal and time-consuming traditional sports to shorter, more informal or individualistic formats, as well as changes in volunteering habits. These and other issues can affect member recruitment and retention.<sup>9</sup>

The above pressures are compounded by growing legal and regulatory requirements, including stipulations relating to safeguarding, tax, employment, insurance, and health and safety. Similarly, more frequent adverse weather, triggered by climate change, can impact playing opportunities, affecting income generation and, ultimately, financial sustainability.

Macro challenges are complemented by those emanating from national governing bodies (NGB), leagues, and other clubs. Quality/Clubmark status, a requirement by some governing bodies to attract funding, can be a resource-intensive process. Equally, NGB participation

and policy initiatives, such as All Stars (ECB) or Kids First (England Rugby), also represent further perceived 'burdens', especially when funding is based on compliance. It has long been voiced that the bureaucracy associated with running sports teams or clubs has increased exponentially, deterring some from volunteering.

Finally, reliance on voluntary resource can carry its own risks. While volunteers may enable VSCs to compete on price and value for money, they may also in some circumstances lack reliability, innovation and consistency and, in the process, compromise quality. Heightened member or consumer expectations imply a shift from a volunteer to a professional approach, requiring changes in ethos and culture for clubs and their governing officers.

In combination, these circumstances represent a difficult conundrum for those in VSC governance positions. Meeting performance and bureaucratic conformance demands while simultaneously addressing increasing member expectations with volunteers' goodwill offers potential for overload or 'burnout'. In turn this suggests supplementing capacity with (increasing) paid resource, but with the accompanying financial ramifications. Irrespective of the source of the pressure, many advocate good governance as a mechanism to address these challenges, asserting better returns on investment and benefits for both clubs themselves and their stakeholders can ensue.

The importance and significance of VSCs as a sporting, cultural and organisational phenomenon, capable of various positive yields, seems unequivocal. However, it is also recognised that they exist in a turbulent environment: one which requires careful navigation through stormy waters. Arguably, good organisational governance – the manner in which VSCs are led, directed, and controlled – can prove crucial to clubs' perpetuity. This research set out to critically examine voluntary sports club governance, believing that a more in-depth and specific focus on grassroots governance has never been timelier and more needed. Given the pervasiveness of VSCs across the sporting and communal landscape in the UK, it is hoped that an intensive study of contemporary governance practices within selected, reputable organisations would prove illuminating, and of interest to practitioners within the non-profit sporting sector.

## Section 3: The project & methodology

### Social Practice Theory

While organisational governance research has grown considerably in the last twenty-five years, there has been criticism of the partial or restricted accounts and revelations produced. Often there has been a lack of attention to what governing boards and relevant stakeholders – or in this case committees and members - actually do when governing. As LeBlanc and Schwartz comment, ‘most research on OG has failed to open the ‘black box’ of board process’.<sup>10</sup> The sport OG research which does exist often attends to commercial, public or inter/national governing bodies, rather than grassroots clubs.

Intending to respond to these issues, the aim of the research - to develop a critical and comprehensive appreciation of local sports clubs’ governance – suggests a need for close attention, ‘zooming in’ on not just what should be done, ‘good governance’, but also what is done. It sought to identify and analyse governing practices and provide some explanatory insight. Social practice theory (SPT) was considered an appropriate theoretical lens, offering a means to engage in a direct dialogue with practitioners and study individual, collective and organisational practices to advance ‘theoretical understanding in a way that has practical relevance for managers and other organisational members’.<sup>11</sup> This enables theorising of practical matters for the benefit of practitioners.

### STP – key concepts

Social Practice Theory can be esoteric. Translating it into more operational terms is no easy endeavour. SPT authors often refer to a distinction between practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance. In basic terms, the former focuses on how practices should proceed and be conducted. Practice-as-performance, however, draws attention to what people say and do in real-time governing events and activities as they unfold. This distinction, therefore, offers insights into what should happen but also what does happen. These concepts are presented in tabular form (Table 1) and are adopted to shed light on governance practices in the case studies. It is proposed that SPT offers potential to open up this ‘black box’ of VSC governance, furnishing opportunity for comprehensive scrutiny and analysis.

Table 1: Social Practice Theory Concepts

Concept	Interpretation for empirical purposes
Practice-as-entity	<p><b>Practical understandings:</b> ‘know-hows’ e.g. knowing how to chair a meeting effectively, take accurate minutes.</p> <p><b>Rules:</b> written and unwritten ‘oughts’ and norms.</p> <p><b>Teleo-affective structures:</b> the inherent purposes, motivations, and emotions within a practice.</p> <p><b>General understandings:</b> broader principles, ideals, and concepts, e.g. democracy, that underpin and frame practices and behaviours.</p>
Practice-as-performance	<p><b>Audible and visible ‘doings and sayings’ of live, unfolding practices.</b></p>



## **Research design & data collection methods**

Research began prior to the Covid-19 pandemic with further data collected subsequently, enabling some checking and verification of initial themes and ideas that began to form from earlier analyses of the data. For these reasons, it can be considered a longitudinal study.

In undertaking the research, it was assumed that the events observed during governance practices are influenced not only by traditions, ideals, and norms, but also current circumstances, interpreted by people who make sense of these influences within real-time instances.

A multiple case study was undertaken, enabling comparisons and contrasts across different settings. Qualitative data were sought, providing rich information about complex social events. Semi-structured individual and group interviews, non-participant observations, and analysis of documents such as constitutions, handbooks, minutes, records, and online sources were used to collect data. These methods supplement one another and help to clarify processes, concepts and attached meanings.

The sample comprised clubs that were geographically accessible and shared some similarity in age. The latter consideration was believed significant given the potential to uncover traditions and therefore changes in governance practices and arrangements over time. Differences, however, also existed, including locality, whether multisport or single sport and size (membership and income). Committee members, 'key decision makers', were interviewed based on possession of relevant knowledge, experiences, and institutional memory.

## Section 4: Findings & discussion

The research uncovered each case study's structural characteristics. Revealing was the commonality across the cases (see Tables 2 and 3). It is noteworthy that each club is over a hundred years old, suggesting deep-seated practice traditions, owns extensive grounds with sporting and social accommodation, and employs a small number of staff supplemented by casual bar persons and numerous volunteers.

Table 2: Structural characteristics

Criterion	Club A	Club B	Club C
Founded	1855	1909	1909
Club Type	Multisport (from late 1960s)	Single sport	Multisport (from 2021)
Trustees	Yes (5)	Yes (5)	Yes (4)
Tax Year	1 Sept – 31 Aug	1 Apr – 31 Mar	1 Oct – 30 Sept
Income Indicator	£200K pa	£142K pa	£225K pa
Net Current Assets	£65K + £45K approx. charity account	£35K	£22K
National Governing Body Affiliation and Accreditation	Yes	Yes	Yes
Staffing	1 FTE; 1 PT; 1 seasonal; numerous volunteers	2 PT; 1 seasonal; numerous volunteers	1 FTE, 1 seasonal; numerous volunteers

All three clubs are encountering a range of internal and external challenges. Club A is seeking to build a new clubhouse, a significant undertaking with cost implications. Club C has recently acquired adjoining land with plans to create a new pitch and extend their current clubhouse and changing rooms. Club B is also aiming to improve its social accommodation but without a specific deadline.

Table 3: Governance practices

Criterion	Club A	Club B	Club C
Defined Governing Body (Committee)	Yes Executive Committee	Yes	Yes General Committee
Appointed Trustees	Yes (5)	Yes (5)	Yes (4)
Regular Meetings	Yes Monthly	Yes	Yes Monthly
Minutes of meetings taken	Yes	Yes	Yes
Matters arising and actions assigned followed up	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sub-committees	Yes Various	Yes Various 'sub-groups'	Yes Various
AGM conducted	Yes	Yes	Yes
EGM conducted	Yes As/when required	Yes As/when required	Yes As/when required
Constitution (formal written governing document)	Yes	Yes Club Rules	Yes Club Rules
Annual elections	Yes	Yes	Yes
Policies	Yes Numerous	Yes Numerous	Yes Numerous
Assigned roles and responsibilities	Yes Not for all positions	Yes Not for all positions	Yes Not for all positions
Independent auditors, Accounts published and provided to members	Yes	Yes	Yes

Three key themes were identified, common across all cases, which form the basis of this section:

- communicating and engaging with stakeholders
- addressing finances and facilities, and
- reviewing and planning, which represent and capture the most significant and consequential elements of governing practices evident across all cases.

## Communicating & engaging with stakeholders

In each case, significant effort was dedicated to communicating and engaging with stakeholders. There was regular communication with, and consultation of, members, occurring across a range of formal and informal, regular, and sporadic practices.

During AGMs (**performances**), stakeholders were appraised of business outcomes, significant achievements, concerns, and upcoming developments and events. Verbal reports and dissemination of documentation, such as audited accounts, included analysis and interpretation with opportunity for questions. Stakeholders scrutinised and asked for clarification and/or explanation of progress and decision-making, often in relation to resource allocation. This was provided whenever sought. There was also evidence of direct stakeholder inclusion in all procedural elements, for example nominations or elections. Committee meetings incorporated expression of stakeholder perspectives through appointed representatives. There were also informal stakeholder engagement and communication practices, typical within VSCs, often in the form of spontaneous face-to-face encounters with committee personnel who continually interact with members, responding to questions usually concerning committee progress or decisions about facility developments.

Other linked stakeholder communication 'doings and sayings' include member handbooks (all), newsletters (clubs B and C), programmes (all) and notice boards (all). While the latter is a more traditional example of communicating with stakeholders, the previous three are more recent developments within these clubs. These are supplemented by other methods. Email is a common practice, but much communication now occurs through various social media, informing of club news, upcoming matches, social and fundraising events, or the outcomes therefrom. Prevalent across all cases was use of websites, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and X (Twitter). Predictably, previous findings that 'upper' or 'well-resourced local clubs' have a more developed and sophisticated online presence is supported within this study.

Practitioners seemed very competent in terms of the know-hows - **practical understandings** - of communicating and engaging with stakeholders, particularly in terms of how this can be constructively incorporated within real-time practices. Committee members demonstrated comprehensive knowledge of how to ensure members were informed and given space and chance to participate, using these various media and means appropriately and supportively. On all occasions, events and meetings proceeded amicably and purposefully, suggesting mutual acceptability to all. As alluded to, the advent of technology had supplemented traditional means of communication and engagement, increasing interaction opportunities considerably. Previous research suggests different members will respond to different communications and media, something which the case study practitioners seem to recognise and attend to. The distribution of relevant documentation prior to meetings gave stakeholders advance information, opportunity to prepare and invitation to participate and give voice. All these practices seemed influenced by tradition, but also with cognisance of the organisation's formal rules.

There was identifiable influence of these club **rules** within these meeting performances. Many governance processes and requirements were enshrined within their constitution which codifies what ought to happen. That AGM (and EGM) performances, for example, comprised both information dissemination and stakeholder interaction demonstrated compliance with formally prescribed instructions and ensured adherence to these stipulated procedures. During interview, practitioners revealed thorough awareness of their club's constitution, explaining how rules informed responsibilities, processes, and actions, and cited examples of previous EGMs whereby members were given votes on significant issues.

Interviewees outlined the need for a democratic vote on such matters, but also talked of the importance of the “checks and balances” these rules afforded.

Alluded to above was indication of **general understandings** - more generic abstract values and principles, for example transparency – that enable and constrain stakeholder communication, inclusion, and engagement practices. Practitioners, practices, and rules seemed informed by notions of a fiduciary responsibility, referring to an obligation to ensure governance practices aligned with the best interests of members and the organisation, suggesting evidence of altruism whereby the self-interests of individual practitioners were presupposed by those of members which took precedence.

The influence of a democratic orientation was evidence across all practitioners and cases. Inclusion of the stakeholder voice was viewed, by almost all interviewees, as a necessity, enabling greater understanding of organisational issues and problems, subsequently informing governing and decision-making. Open elections were held annually with opportunity to be nominated and selected for governance positions. When asked how their club was governed, comments included: “There’s only one word I can use for it: democratically. ... every member is entitled to have their say. ... that’s the bedrock really”, being “honest” and “truthful”, “open and inclusive”, needing to explain the “rationale behind decisions”, and being responsive to members and trustees and their questions. This reflected understandings not just of democracy but also of accountability and transparency, especially to those affected by decisions. As one interviewee said, “In governance, really the key element is about honesty really, and integrity, and being truthful with your membership”.

Among interviewees, keeping members “happy” seemed a prevailing motivation. When asked how this could be achieved, practitioners united around similar responses. Club B treasurer said “... making them feel like it’s their club, which it is” and by “improving facilities and communicating things” with others saying, “by listening to them” and keeping them “informed”. This suggests governing in this context assumes a responsive and facilitative role.

Evident from the above, and throughout interviews and observations, was a strong stakeholder orientation with member engagement conspicuous during performances with the ‘participant voice’ heard through elected representatives. Substantive organisational issues, necessitating member consultation demonstrated evidence of direct influence on decision-making, offering an element of stakeholder control. This seems to address the concern that stakeholder engagement can often be tokenistic and bear little impact on direction.

Thus, this research has shown how these VSCs keep members informed and ensure stakeholders have an active involvement in decision-making and outcomes, effectively incorporating them within governance practices and structures. The suggestion that organisations benefit from the inclusion of broader perspectives and that input from various constituents improves decision making seems borne out in this research. Players felt supported by their committees and were positive about their representation with their views communicated and acted upon. Clubs also made investments and changes at members’ behest.

## **Addressing finance & facilities**

There was considerable focus on the themes of finances and facilities within all governance practices. During all AGM and committee meetings (**performances**), treasurers gave a financial report, detailing income, expenditure, and accounts data accompanied by some analysis and comparisons with previous years or “periods”. Members scrutinised information and asked questions, receiving clear, informed responses. Chairs also provided a report at

AGMs, referring to achievements, events, concerns, and facility improvements/developments, framed very much by an economic lens. All chairs referred to rising costs, mirroring previous VSC studies.

The above alludes to other key themes addressed during all meeting performances: facilities and the maintenance/development thereof; and social/fundraising activities. Outcomes from the latter were reported to members, at AGMs, with chairs and treasurers speaking of their “positive” impact upon overall club finances and requesting continued future member support. Additionally, income from private hires and functions was discussed, often stressing the resultant income generated. Chairs (and treasurers) commented on how the various income streams combine to support continual investment in infrastructure. All chairs also provided updates on links with numerous external bodies and progress thereupon, with these usually relating to funding opportunities, sporting provision, or facility developments.

In terms of **practical understandings**, it is widely recommended that important topics are scheduled early in meeting agenda, ensuring sufficient time for discussion. This was apparent in all AGMs and committee meetings, at all clubs, whereby the treasurer’s report was timetabled early in proceedings. Also apparent in meetings was that fundraising practices took myriad forms, reflecting previous VSC research. That these events were successful and lucrative reveals evidence of practical understandings of effective promotion and execution. Similarly, know-how was also demonstrated in the capacity to successfully diversify income streams, through forging new external partnerships, acquiring new sponsors or finding new funding and grant opportunities which all clubs had achieved in recent years.

In relation to financial and accounting practices, each case revealed conformance to internal **rules**, unwritten norms and external regulations which provided guidance and structure to governance proceedings. Recommended formalised constitutional prescriptions, for example appointment of external auditors and provision of annual accounts at the AGM were adhered to in all cases. Other common financial practices across all sites included various financial controls such as segregation of responsibilities, internal scrutineers, and the aphorism “nothing spent without approval”, especially for expenditure on facility developments. Furthermore, each site had quotation procurement procedures, required two signatories on cheques, as well as appointed trustees to provide additional oversight. Interviewees were fully cognisant of the various controls adopted, recognising these as prerequisites and non-negotiable, providing appropriate checks and balances. The constitutional edict that profits or surpluses must be reinvested in club programmes and facilities was strongly evident; this being a very apparent purpose of practices. Interviewees also talked of the benefit of having qualified accountants as treasurers who had transferred knowledge and experience from their professional practices.

Equally apparent was agreement among practitioners about other certain norms, for example a reserves policy or “rainy day amount” was maintained in the organisation’s account. More formal, agreed arrangements and financial processes were explained in detail by treasurers, from the software used to the choice of tax year end which, interestingly, differed slightly across the cases. When probed about this there was explanation and rationale for their choice, partly influenced by particular local circumstances and traditions, although the other auditing and accounting practices undertaken shared many similarities. Club B’s treasurer referred to a “partnership approach” comprising “a group of knowledgeable people who all have their roles and can see what is going on.” Club C’s treasurer spoke of a similar arrangement and suggested continual analysis of finances helps to “concentrate the mind”, enabling recognition of when losses are incurred. Club B observed that it helped having three qualified accountants on their committee, who bring their professional expertise to practices, a sentiment echoed by the officers of the other clubs studied.

Regarding facility developments, these were always analysed from, and influenced by, economic considerations. Expenditure authorisation was dependent upon what was mutually acceptable and potential positive financial outcomes. Club C's treasurer explained "it's a question of what sort of payback, what sort of return there is on that investment". The strive to improve facilities was not just informed by tradition and constitutional objectives, however, but also a wider, **shared (general) understanding** of the need to provide a comparatively good quality product and improved customer experience. The continuous enhancement of facilities through investment was regarded partly as a competitive response, enabling clubs to retain or attract members. Several authors have denoted the competitive environment for players, volunteers and customers, and advocated or observed adoption of more commercial and contemporary business approaches. This was emphasised by various individual and group interviewees who talked of operating on "a more commercial footing" or needing a "marketing strategy" to help their club compete. There are also evident links here to the wider notions and principles – **general understandings** - of transparency, democracy, and stakeholder inclusion, "keeping members informed" (Club B treasurer). Another interviewee (Club C) talked of the need to be transparent with the membership, especially regarding major facility developments and accounts, which was echoed also by Club B practitioners and considered good governance.

From the evidence, a common inherent aim of governing in this context is financial security or "solidity". The early timetabling in all proceedings of the treasurers' report indicates paramountcy, with practitioners and stakeholders appearing unified in the prominence of, and attention given to, club finances: "Obviously, financially, we need to be stable, that's the underlying, the bottom line, we have to be financially stable" (Club C focus group). Club A's chair summarised the hierarchical significance of this objective when saying,

*"So, the single most important factor ..., always, is keeping the money sorted, keeping everything in check with the bank balance side of things. I will always ask ... at every meeting what's in the bank account ... do we have any nasty surprises? We can try and do whatever we want, but if we run out of money we're knackered. So that for me, always, has to be the main aim, to make sure we're financially stable."*

Interviewees regularly made the link between financial stability, profit generation and facility reinvestment: "the main aim ... is to get a new clubhouse and being financially secure" (Club A treasurer) with another commenting about their priority being "to ensure that the club makes a profit, so that it can invest in the facilities and developments" (Club B). These purposes of practices appeared universal across the cases.

The well documented financial challenges encountered by many VSCs was replicated within this research. All chairs raised concerns about rising costs. Practitioners also admitted to historical cyclical periods of financial instability, within the last decade and previously. Club A's treasurer recalled examples when he had provided his own financial support on several occasions to enable payment of outstanding invoices. These downturns arguably partially explain the more recent sustained focus on finances (and fundraising) which, according to Club C's treasurer, helps to "concentrate the mind".

Changes in related practices were equally apparent and remarked upon, including becoming more "business-like" or "commercial". All cases had raised prices of products and services while also implementing cost reduction activities. Similarly, all now placed greater emphasis on fundraising, held more social events, and were more proactive in seeking grants and sponsorship.

Interestingly, while there was ample evidence of a more coordinated and pro-active fundraising approach, it was no longer purely internally oriented.<sup>12</sup> What appears different

from this research is a greater boundary spanning focus: all three cases have undoubtedly become more outward facing, seeking to develop external links. This included aiming to grow membership through new cohorts, services, and programmes, generating income via new partnerships and sponsors and closer, more regular contact with the governing body, county foundation and leagues. Clubs reported increased external investment and success in acquiring new sponsors and/or grants from funding applications. In combination, these efforts have led to a position whereby all clubs now report “healthy” or “solid” financial positions with reserves in bank accounts (Table 2). Club A’s treasurer declared “the club at the moment is probably in the best financial state it’s been in, virtually ever” which was reiterated by counterparts at Clubs B and C.

This greater focus on financial status, strenuous fundraising efforts and a desire to provide a competitive product suggests this research supports previous findings of grassroots clubs’ activities. The case studies now operate stringent financial management, including various checks and balances, to ensure compliance, rigour, and transparency. Doherty and Cuskelly<sup>13</sup> found financial management is now a strength for many local sports clubs, an observation arguably borne out by this research. All cases sought to grow income while also continuously monitoring their financial position and expenditure. Financial security is now prioritised within governance and seems strongly endorsed within this study’s findings. Furthermore, these financial practices resemble many of the prescriptions of good governance and attest to how such can support positive outcomes in voluntary sports clubs.

## Reviewing & planning

Within observations of **performances**, particularly noteworthy was the attention accorded to reviewing performance (sporting and business): a perpetual endeavour considered from various perspectives. Mentioned previously was that during AGMs, chairs and treasurers critically reflected upon and analysed the preceding year: progress and achievements would be identified; concerns and challenges highlighted; with mention of foreseeable future developments. In committee meetings individuals would enunciate brief reports, updating colleagues on progress, recent events, or outcomes while secretaries would habitually review matters outstanding and record actions completed. One interviewee summarised such, saying “I suppose we review performance virtually every meeting. We debrief on events ... like the beer festival ... how can we improve it.” Interviewees also recalled other practices reviewed in recent times, including meeting, governance and expenditure processes and income generation opportunities.

During data collection the key role of sub-committees also became apparent. One interviewee at Club A described the cricket sub-committee’s practices “planning ahead or reviewing progress in the cricket, looking at what we need in terms of facilities, or equipment, or the ground.” This alludes to an equally prominent and related practice: planning, often concerning facilities (ground and/or clubhouse), fundraising and events, and sporting provision (teams and related infrastructures). Much planning activity was carried out by these sub-committees concerning their specific operational locus. Reviewing and planning therefore seemed an intrinsic element of all meetings.

Typically, general and sub-committee meetings followed a very similar pattern, proceeding prosaically and undemonstratively through established agenda items. Contrastingly, however, during some planning elements discussion became quite vigorous with disagreements surfacing, for example, on what facility or development should assume priority or the order of works’ execution. However, while definitely more animated, it was also observed that these never became acrimonious or too time-consuming and provided



valuable insights into 'what matters' and the passions and motivations that could arise within these practices.

These episodes provided further evidence of **practical understandings**: knowing how to conduct meetings that seemed acceptable to all, in both content and process. Chairs demonstrated capability to ensure proceedings did not become inexpedient, lose momentum and focus, or become hijacked by individuals, never lasting beyond recommended 60 to 90-minute timespans. This had not always been the case historically with interviewees at all clubs recalling meetings lasting three hour plus. Additionally, meetings occurred in separate areas or rooms: suitably conducive environments, and at convenient times. Relevant documentation and reminder communications being sent beforehand was appreciated by attendees. Agenda items were consistent, providing some stability and focus to proceedings, and were commensurate with club objectives and assigned (sub-) committee responsibilities; issues that 'relate to needs of the organisation'.

Checking progress on assigned actions was common across the cases, enabling identification of matters completed and those still outstanding which would be carried forward until resolved. Practitioners commented on the value of this practice helping ensure outstanding matters were more likely to be completed. The review and progress reports given provided practitioners with information and a holistic overview of their club's current position. There appeared a collective understanding to share relevant information, succinctly. When asked how this was achieved Club C's chair cited application of practices acquired from professional experience. Other interviewees also alluded to implementation and/or adaptation of recognised employment practices which they considered helpful in knowing how to: chair governing activities effectively; plan and execute events; expedite administrative tasks; minute meetings; or review financial performance.

Planning typically comprised practitioners being asked for and offering contrasting perspectives and differing solutions. Alluded to above was the vigorous debate that could ensue, but it was noticeable, however, that although discussion could be robust, it was never negative or personal. Whenever planning-related discussions became too protracted or inert chairs would request an 'action point' to be made, assigned to an individual and with a timeframe attached. Other adopted strategies included deferring a decision until more information was provided, delegating to a sub-committee, seeking a consensus, or using a democratic vote to engender progress and decision-making. These shared **practical understandings** seemed to enable performance of reviewing and planning practices to proceed in manner acceptable to, and appreciated by, other attendees.

In terms of formal, written **rules**, constitutions did not contain explicit instruction to conduct reviews other than the need to scrutinise annual accounts (internally) and also appoint external auditors. There was, however, written prescription requiring chairs and treasurers to provide reports and accounts at AGMs. The content, arrangements, and topics of AGMs, across all sites, revealed much homogeneity, albeit with some slight variation in timing (Club B early April, Clubs A and C early and mid-December respectively).

This suggests some confirmation of the contention that constitutions direct how sport organisations should operate and conduct their affairs, inferring a prescriptive and normative character and essence. Constitutions, as collections of rules and 'oughts', seem to firmly guide, structure, and inform what should or should not be done, alluded to by various interviewees, and adding credence to the claim that 'rules often have great influence on action'. Contrastingly, whereas constitutions specify in some detail AGM content and processes, there was no such prescription for committee meetings. Nonetheless, the practice of updating committee colleagues and reviewing progress in reports seemed more a blend of tradition, accepted norms and 'rules of thumb', providing a stable reference point for each event.

Together, these activities illustrate the existence and influence of both **formal and informal rules** which, when combined with the other elements of **practices-as-entity**, engender understanding of what makes sense to practitioners to do at that time, enabling and constraining future instances. Constitutions do not explicitly stipulate specific planning practices although there is a written requirement that practitioners 'manage' and undertake duties commensurate with the aims and objectives of the organisation. This is exemplified by Club B's constitution which states the committee's role is to provide 'leadership, policies and strategies to enable the effective management of the club'.

Among interviewees there seemed an interpretation that these edicts necessitate planning and reviewing, inferring a wider **general understanding** of the concept of managing: one that relates to perceptions of classic management theories whereby planning is a core function.

Practitioners unequivocally perceived reviewing and planning practices as necessary and significant, devoting substantial time and resource, and contributing towards an ultimate shared end: organisational sustainability. An interviewee at Club A described all the planning taking place, saying "Yes, because of the [clubhouse] development. That's the strategic focus of the club. This planning predilection was confirmed by others at Club A. Clubs B and C also engaged in various planning practices, involving ground or facility development.

Organisations use a variety of indicators to evaluate themselves and this was reflected in this research. Reviews of sporting performance and provision, combined with stakeholder input, had led to new formats and programmes being effected. The case study clubs have adapted provision, seeking to cater for new and different demographics and membership categories, providing evidence of responsiveness and flexibility.<sup>14</sup> It could be argued this has also contributed to improving clubs' attractiveness, fomenting their sustained membership growth in recent years.

Furthermore, outcomes from critical evaluations of governance processes were equally discernible. A noticeable and necessary change, according to interviewees, is decision-making speed, ensuring more expedient responses to circumstances. Also, meetings are now shorter than hitherto with Club B also holding fewer than previously. The observation that shorter, well-run, and interesting meetings can encourage attendance and motivation seems supported in this research. Meetings now had an outcomes- and action-oriented ethos with matters outstanding pursued, encouraging their resolution. Interviewees commented favourably about these changes. The positive attendance patterns overall are also a possible outcome of these changes. With most or all having a contribution and each reliant on another for relevant information, more inclination to attend might be engendered.

That all clubs invested significant time in reviewing activity suggests additional credibility to Shilbury and Ferkin's assertion that 'sport organisations have recognised the need for due diligence in monitoring performance and conformance' (2011). Given the range of outcomes it implies continual inwardly focused critical reflection has proven consequential. Interviewees were also appreciative of the outcomes from planning practices which included references to a more deliberate approach to facilities (maintenance and development) and the improved services provided to members.

Thus, there seems growing evidence of a future focus within the clubs studied: a more considered and strategic orientation. Traditionally perceived as a weakness of sports organisations, the literature often portrays sports clubs/organisations as too myopic, reactive and operationally focused. This does not seem fully justifiable given the findings and outcomes of this study. It also lends weight to similar research carried out in New Zealand and suggests support for the observation that 'strategic activities are future focused with an

eye to the external community' with clubs' practices devoting greater attention thereupon.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, this too supplements research by the SRA in 2016 which revealed 82% of clubs engage in long-term planning.

While the tradition of each organisation to be governed by a single ultimate, elected decision-making body has been maintained, also evident is growth of the number of sub-committees. These dedicated groups enable delegation of, and attention to, specific operational or functional elements while overseen by a general committee. This structural arrangement is equated with better governance, providing a clearer focus of roles and remits, more streamlined decision-making and more efficient use of committee time.

Furthermore, contentions that a weakness among sports 'boards' being too operationally focused does not seem fully applicable in the cases studied. Meetings seemed aligned with clubs' and members' best interests, addressing both strategic and operational issues, a 'balance', and contingent upon the circumstances at the time. This supports the contention that 'governance is primarily driven by context' (March and Olsen, 1989) as cited in Gammelsæter.<sup>16</sup> This research, therefore, complements previous observations whereby committees focus predominantly on policy matters, but were also involved in some operational aspects. While this pragmatic dual focus, typical of smaller non-profit organisations, does not strictly adhere to good governance/policy governance stipulations, it seems to ensure each committee has an intimate understanding of problems with concomitant positive implications. These reviewing and planning practices also indicate evidence of professionalisation.

## Section 5: Conclusions & practical implications

The aim for this research was ***to develop a critical and comprehensive appreciation of voluntary sports club governance***, drawing on three case studies. While previous studies were somewhat critical of grassroots sports club governance, this research has revealed evidence of more contemporary approaches to governance that provides some contrasts. Findings revealed that clubs do encounter a range of challenges and aim to address these through a blend of formal and informal, regular and sporadic practices. Drawing on social practice theory concepts has opened up the 'black box' of governing processes, revealing examples of governing in its current form and providing a broader understanding of the context to practices, effectively uncovering what is done, how and why. It has also provided some explanatory insight and evidence of what seems to work and be consequential within this context and highlighted evidence of 'old and new ways of doing things'.

Interestingly, each case study's practices were more extensive than anticipated, comprising a comprehensive bundle of activities that were more organised, purposeful, and expedient than alluded to by some. The homogeneity across the sites was a little surprising. All have constitutions and a vision, with short, medium, and/or longer-term plans for significant facility developments, at varying stages of fruition. Similarly, all have a tradition of an elected ultimate decision-making body, that meets regularly to address matters relating to their mission, supported by a web of sub-committees.

As mentioned above, there was much evidence of change. Committee meetings had been modified in style with enhanced foci on specific issues and activities. According to interviewees, they are now shorter, more decisive and outcomes oriented. Researcher attention to these live events facilitated identification of 'what matters' and significant practices, such as how clubs address finances, fundraising and facilities; all of which were universal endeavours. Interviewees perceived these issues as receiving more assiduous and channelled effort and attention than hitherto. They also made the link between these activities and subsequent investment in facility maintenance and improvement, trying to ensure members' needs are met without jeopardising financial health. Social practice theory helped reveal these understandings and their linkages to motivations, goals, and purposes, and how governing was informed by prescribed rules and traditions. The research also demonstrated the significance of certain values and principles, for example accountability, fiduciary, democracy, and transparency which seemed highly influential in guiding practitioners and their behaviours in performances.

Other changes included more sub-committees and their increased usage, partly to accelerate decision-making but also to attend to specific operational issues. Equally noticeable was the introduction of new products and services, indicating diversification and innovation. Examples include more events targeting wider demographics such as family-oriented social events, or programmes for women's and girls' or younger and older age teams. Some of these initiatives were undertaken after members' requests, revealing a responsive, flexible, and facilitative governing ethos, and has helped increase membership numbers. There is now more regular communication and interaction between committee members and stakeholders, using a variety of media. Additionally, there is heightened focus on fundraising, and seeking new external clients, sponsors, or funding agencies, further helping to diversify and grow income. All clubs now declare improved financial stability with "healthy" reserves, contrasting markedly with earlier eras, enabling the ongoing investment in social and playing accommodation and pitches.

In combination, these advances engendered positive stakeholder reviews. All were highly complimentary of the committee, its individuals, and their communication efforts, especially in relation to responses to member suggestions.

Much of the above suggests these cases are formalising and professionalising in various ways, complementing some previous authors' studies of the voluntary sector. Combining traditions with influences from other contexts - the application and adaptation of professional practices from different workplaces - to beneficial effect, there is much that suggests these clubs are well governed. Many practices align with recent governance frameworks, such as the Code for Sports Governance and the SRA's Principles of Good Governance for Sport and Recreation. The claim that governance is a relevant, fundamental, and critical activity for any organisation to function, 'properly and legitimately', seems strongly borne out in this research.

Finally, from the research, a governance framework has been formulated, comprising 7Fs: a mnemonic to aid practitioners in their governance of clubs. This is considered particularly original, summarising the key aims, purposes, and activities of practices within a memorisable model. The conceptual SPT framework facilitated identification of what mattered and what was perceived significant and consequential, attracting heightened focus and seeming to provide motivation to practitioners. The 7Fs have been conceptualised as fields of action, thought or influence that aim to capture and epitomise the ethos, key activities and purposes of practices and what was conceived as most valuable to the overall end of sustaining and growing the organisation.

## The 7Fs Framework

	Explanation
<b>Finances (conformance and fiscal frugality)</b>	Continual monitoring of financial position Checks and balances implemented Tighter controls on spending Overheads reduced Compliance with regulatory frameworks and constitutional requirements
<b>Funding &amp; fundraising</b>	Regular social and other internally- and externally-focused fundraising activities Embracing new ideas and opportunities Income diversification Proactivity in seeking funding sources and opportunities
<b>Facing outwards</b>	Seeking partnerships and (closer) links with others for purposes of mutual support, aid (intellectual, financial, physical resources) or assistance/guidance
<b>Facilities (improvements and developments)</b>	Ongoing reinvestment and upgrading of facilities: spectating, playing and practice, social/hospitality and changing rooms
<b>Future focus</b>	Looking ahead, identifying potential problems, planning future developments Investment in junior teams and infrastructure
<b>Families &amp; Friendship</b>	Providing a friendly, welcoming and inclusive atmosphere A more family-oriented environment – informal and fun, partly through new programmes, events and social activities
<b>Facilitative, Flexible &amp; Functional</b>	Listening to and responding to members and stakeholders Embracing innovation, new ideas, new products, new teams and new programmes Linked to club mission/objects

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Ferkins, Shilbury and McDonald, 2009, p.246.
  - <sup>2</sup> Transparency International (Kirkeby), 2016, p.88.
  - <sup>3</sup> King, 2016, p.81.
  - <sup>4</sup> Hill, Kerr and Kobayashi, 2016; King, 2016.
  - <sup>5</sup> Theodore Schatzki and Davide Nicolini and others such as Ahrens, Chapman and Khalifa (2010), Heisserer and Rau (2015), Meier, Warde and Holmes (2018) and Mardahl-Hansen (2019).
  - <sup>6</sup> Seippel et al., 2023.
  - <sup>7</sup> See Seippel et al., 2023 for a cross-European analysis.
  - <sup>8</sup> See Corthouts et al., 2024 for examples.
  - <sup>9</sup> See Buser, Schlesinger and Nagel, 2024 for a discussion of Swiss sports clubs.
  - <sup>10</sup> LeBlanc and Schwartz, 2007.
  - <sup>11</sup> Golsorkhi et al., 2015, p.3.
  - <sup>12</sup> Kay, 2013
  - <sup>13</sup> Doherty and Cuskelly, 2020.
  - <sup>14</sup> See also Corthouts et al., 2024 for further discussion.
  - <sup>15</sup> Ferkins, Shilbury and McDonald, 2009, pp.162-3.
  - <sup>16</sup> Gammelsæter, 2010, p.570.

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