

Unravelling the challenges and opportunities in UK sports governance

The challenges

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1. The volunteer burden; a hidden challenge

Across the sector, particularly at grassroots level, individual sports clubs tend to rely very heavily indeed on volunteers-the unsung heroes who sacrifice time, effort and often personal resources to keep the sport about which they are most passionate alive. Research has shown that sustainability of grassroot sports relies heavily on the dedication of these individuals who form the backbone of most clubs and organisations.

2. Making volunteering attractive

When it comes to high profile events, volunteering is seen as a great opportunity. You only have to think of the support provided by thousands for volunteers to the Olympic Games in London 2012 to see how widely that was embraced. Day to day however, at grass roots clubs, the perception of volunteering is often very different, It is time to change the perception of the burden, transforming the narrative around grass roots volunteering.

At our round table session there was consensus that with the right communication, there is an opportunity to highlight the personal benefits of volunteering to individuals. Not only are they promoting and advancing the sports and clubs that are important to them and their families, but also they are learning new skills, building networks and gaining a sense of fulfilment. By creating an environment where volunteering is not simply a duty, but an enriching experience, sports organisations can cross fertilise, attract a diverse range of volunteers and alleviate the burden on particular long-standing individuals.

“Getting volunteers in at an earlier point to say that volunteering will potentially give you a skill set that you can transfer both within and outside this organisation.”

“If you get your governance right and you get the right people on boards, you do better as a business. So it’s a real win-win.”

3. Inclusive governance; the power of diversity

Research consistently underscores the positive impact of diverse boards on organisational performance.

Studies show that clubs with gender balanced young and ethnically diverse boards, committees and memberships tend to outperform their counterparts. In the context of sports governance, inclusivity ensures a wider range of perspectives, fostering innovation and responsiveness to the involving needs of diverse communities and drawing from the widest possible pool of talent.

4. Passionate people, robust policies

The key to good governance lies in engaging sporting enthusiasts at all levels whilst at the same time, not being afraid of bringing in board and committee members who may not come from that sport but bring in other skills.

By ensuring a psychologically safe environment, where individuals feel their voices are heard and ideas are valued, organisations can ignite a passion for policies that transcend the administrative realm. It is important to create systems and structures that empower individuals to contribute meaningfully.

“Why would somebody who doesn’t see themselves within that club want to join a club?”

“One major UK NGB has just gone through a very massive grassroots change where the big risk was that our volunteers would leave because we’ve imposed a lot more governance. Everybody said, “That’s it. You’re going to lose so many volunteers. This is going to fail.” But we have managed and it has encouraged a lot more people to come forward and want to be involved.”

5. Balancing turnover and stability

Navigating the delicate balance between a dynamic turnover of board members and the benefits of seasoned long-standing contributors is crucial. While fresh perspectives are vital for innovation, experienced board members can, with the right attitude and curiosity about the future, bring institutional knowledge. To strike a balance, organisations can implement mentorship programs, ensuring a smooth transfer of knowledge whilst infusing new ideas.

6. Sponsorship and insurance as a catalyst for change

Sponsors, often seen as benefactors, can leverage their influence to drive rapid change by aligning sponsorship with governance initiatives. Big brands know the power of diversity and have their own core values. Bringing these to the table, sponsors can catalyse a shift towards more accountable, inclusive and forward-thinking governance structures.

The challenges in UK sports governance are opportunities waiting to be grabbed. By turning the idea of the volunteer burden around, embracing inclusive governance, fostering a passion for policies that provide psychological safety that benefits the players themselves, and leveraging the power of sponsorships, sports organisations can not only overcome challenges, but thrive in an environment that celebrates diversity, innovation and sustainable growth.

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Contact



Sarah Erwin-Jones

Partner

Sarah.Erwin-Jones@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)115 976 6136