

COUNTY SQUASH ASSOCIATIONS

FIRST ANNUAL REVIEW

1. Early in 2012, Mike Burchell, an ESR Board member and then Chair of Kent CA, proposed to the ESR Board that it undertake a fundamental review of the relationship and respective roles of England Squash and Racketball (ESR) and the County Associations (CAs). As Chair of Yorkshire CA, I wrote in support, stressing the need for ESR and the CAs to complement and support each other, and criticising the 'top down' approach taken by ESR in attempting to promote the game.
2. The review was agreed by the Board in December 2012, and Mike B and I circulated a questionnaire to the CAs to build a picture of current areas and levels of activity, which was completed by 37 out of the 38 CAs. (The analysis is on the CAN website). The ESR Council and Board confirmed in May 2013 their support for the proposal that CAs should play a greater role in promoting participation at a local level and that systematic communication between the CAs was needed to help drive the process forward. In view of Mike B's other commitments, I offered to service email communication, and Mike B came up with the title of County Associations Network (CAN).
3. In February 2014 I circulated a paper headed 'The Anatomy of a County Association' making some specific suggestions for the role of CAs in promoting participation, developing competitive opportunities and furthering coaching and refereeing. I also suggested that, to improve communications, we needed to consider regional meetings of CAs, plus regular meetings of representatives of each region.
4. The main funders of ESR, Sport England, having considered the latest results of the Active People's Survey showing that the hoped for increase in participation had not happened, informed ESR of a substantial cut in funding, and strongly criticised the effectiveness of its management. Consequently the CEO of ESR, Nick Rider, left the organisation.
5. The Board then appointed Keir Worth, a former member of staff, as CEO. I emailed Keir on 4 September 2014, congratulating him on his appointment, and saying that I hoped he would make it a priority to talk to representatives of CAN about the ways in which ESR structure could be adjusted to ensure that our respective roles complemented and supported each other. Keir replied saying, in effect, that he wished to sort out the internal organisation first and that he looked forward to discussions 'in due course'.
6. In January 2015 I had a meeting with Mark Williams, who had been appointed Director of Participation, in which we discussed, inter alia, the establishment of a Joint Action Group bringing together representatives from CAs in each of the eight regions, with meetings serviced jointly by CAN and ESR staff members to demonstrate a commitment to partnership. At the ESR Council meeting on 6 December 2014, Mark had referred to the need for 'ESR to become enablers, working through partners' and Keir Worth had reiterated ESRs commitment to work with the CAs.
7. However, in February 2015, Keir, in an article in the Squash Player magazine, referred to the CAs as 'customers' alongside County Sports Partnerships, leisure providers and the education sector. I consulted the CAs through CAN for their views on being called 'customers' and reiterated that my original proposal for a central Joint Action Group and (eight) regional meetings of CAs along with relevant ESR staff still stood.
8. The response from the CAs was strong and virtually unanimous, that they saw themselves as Prime Partners of ESR, and, although I didn't ask for this, they also expressed widespread

dissatisfaction with ESR saying, in essence, that they could not detect any change to its traditional 'top down' and staff based promotion of participation ie the same strategy which had failed in the past.

9. I conveyed these views to Keir and Mark and to the Chair of ESR, Peter Goldson and to the Board member leading on Participation, Phil Collins. Consequently, we had a joint meeting on 20 March involving myself and three other CA representatives with the Chair and Phil Collins, plus one of the Participation Managers, John Davis. Keir and Mark were unable to be present. The summary of the meeting, written by John Davis, records agreement that CAs are seen by ESR as key partners, and John also put forward a proposal from ESR that eight Regional Forums of CA representatives be established, involving other key partners when appropriate, and that they would 'appoint a representative onto a central action group which will meet regularly with ESR staff to discuss operational matters which need co-ordinating or planning at a national level'.
10. It was my intention to convene a special meeting for CA representatives to share the outcome of the meeting and to progress the establishment of the Regional Forums and the Central Action Group. However, I was persuaded by the Chair that this could be accommodated within the Council meeting on 13 June, and the summary of the 20 March meeting records that there would be 'opportunity at the Council meeting for CA representatives to discuss these proposals and other relevant matters'.
11. When the Council meeting agenda came out, the only relevant item was 'Regional Forums', and I had to negotiate with the Chair space within this item to raise the other outcomes of the 20 March meeting, and to suggest that CA representatives met over lunch to progress membership of Regional Forums
12. With the initiative being taken by ESR staff, most of the Regional Forums met for the first time in mid August. Two regions – SE and NW – already had established meetings, and ESR recommended the NW agenda as a template for the others. Unfortunately, as it comprises a strong group of CAs, there was nothing on the agenda about supporting and strengthening the weaker CAs in the region, a topic which should have been a key issue for most meetings. I stressed this in the first CAN newsletter in May, and supported it with a paper of ideas for strengthening CAs (also on the CAN website).
13. A word about Regional Forums, hailed as an 'exciting new programme' by ESR. They are being tasked by ESR with handling some funds for which CAs can bid (successor to the Grassroots Development Programme previously administered by ESR); setting up bank accounts for this purpose; running regional (junior) tournaments previously organised by ESR Regional Officers; and in general (I quote from the proposal drafted by ESR) 'to devolve appropriate responsibility for the development of squash to regional level'. Unfortunately, the only organisational resource available to the Regional Forums is their members, in most cases the Chairs of the County Associations in their region, all volunteers who are already heavily committed with their counties. In any case, it is obvious to all the volunteers involved with CAs that sustainable promotional work is most effectively done at a county and local, not regional, level. In most regions, the most valuable role of the RFs should be to support and help grow the weaker CAs in their region, so that there is consistency of operation at a county level.
14. The Central Action Group, convened by ESR staff, met for the first time on 19 October, seven months after the agreement to establish it. Its name was changed by ESR staff to National Forum, although this was agreed without demur by the five Regional Forum representatives who were present. It was also agreed that future meetings should be chaired and serviced by ESR staff, and that I should attend on behalf of CAN. Most of the items I had suggested

for the agenda were not included. The meeting was not minuted as such, but 'Action Points' were circulated by John Davis.

15. The second CAN newssheet was circulated in July 2015, with headings covering the June Council meeting, Regional Forums, Strengthening County Associations, and the forthcoming ESR Board elections. Since then, independent consultants paid for by Sport England have criticised the performance of the Board, saying that it does not meet the stringent requirements of a 'high performing' NGB Board. More details were given in a letter from the ESR Chair, Peter Goldson, dated 10 October and circulated through CAN, in which he reported that, because of the shortage of time, it would not be possible to go through the election process in time for the November Council meeting, and the Board had therefore agreed to propose to Council that the current members should continue for a temporary period of some months. I and others had to point out to the Chair that this contravened ESRs Articles of Association, and a variation was agreed whereby Yorkshire and Kent CAs would propose to Council that the retiring members were re-elected pending further elections in the spring. I have heard expressions of concern about whether Sport England are exerting undue influence over the governance of ESR – in the end, funding should be decided on performance in increasing levels of participation – and we need to bear in mind that it is the CAs as Council members and according to the Articles, who decide on who to propose and vote for as Board members, including the Chair, and whether to support nominations made by the Board for the remaining places.
16. On behalf of CAN, I have also been active in pressing for progress on the Affiliation and Membership criteria, partly because I believe it is important that ESR is seen to have the support of the majority of venues with courts and individual players, but also because the rebate on fees for CAs forms in most cases a substantial proportion of our income, and directly affects our ability to promote squash in our areas. I also pressed for a review of the Inter-County Championships (another item I failed to get on the agenda of the National Forum), again because of the financial implications for many CAs of assisting with team travel and accommodation costs. As regards A and M, I was informed that this is now being actively taken forward by the ESR Director of Marketing, who regards the priority to be given to this topic by ESR as 'absolutely crucial' and the role of the CAs in promoting A and M as 'essential'. In practice, this has not happened.
17. Since its inception, CAN has performed a number of roles. It was first established as a representative body for the CAs, to express a shared view on the 'customers or prime partners' issue, and remains available to fulfil that role as and when appropriate. Secondly, CAN has acted as a hub for the gathering and sharing of information specifically relevant to CAs, and for that purpose set up a website (www.countysquashassociations.co.uk) which has a major section called Shared Documents, links to CA websites and, more recently, basic contact details for the Regional and National Forums. We are indebted to Marc Thomas for designing and managing the website, which has now been taken over by a volunteer from Northumbria CA, Colin McNestrie. Thirdly, CAN has acted as a channel for disseminating information and in some cases seeking feedback, which has been used by a number of members of staff of ESR and others outside the organisation.
18. Sadly, it is in the area of partnership in promoting participation that we seem to have made little progress, despite Keir Worth saying in the ESR Annual Report 2015 and elsewhere 'the relationship with the County Associations is of vital importance to us....and is one which we are keen to strengthen'. However, in the section of the Annual Report headed 'Increasing Participation', there is no mention of any joint working with CAs, and in fact the emphasis is on the direct work being done by ESR staff with venues with squash courts. There is

reference to the establishment of the Regional Forums, but that is not a substitute for the role of the County Associations, and could well be seen as diverting time and energy of volunteers already committed to their CAs. There appears to be a culture within ESR which is comfortable with a top down direct action way of working, and which finds it difficult to comprehend, much less accept and implement, the concept of genuine partnership.

In May 2015, I drafted and shared with the ESR Director of Participation a protocol which could guide the participation Managers relationship with County Associations. This included practical matters, such as being kept informed of and invited when relevant to CA Committee meetings, and also included agreement to 'share any information about planned or current work in (county) so that we can complement and support it (and demonstrate to the 'customers' that we are working together), using our local knowledge, contacts with coaches, sources of local funding etc. and to build in succession activity to strengthen ongoing sustainability'. On 12 November, in preparation for a forthcoming Yorkshire Committee meeting, I asked the ESR Participation Manager for the NE and NW for any information about ESR planned activity in the county, and received a reply that ESR was already active or planning to be active in five areas within the county, without giving any further details of the specific activities or venues involved, or making any suggestions for joint sharing in accordance with the agreed protocol. I doubt whether I would have received even this minimal level of information if I hadn't asked, which hardly demonstrates any commitment to full consultation and the spirit of joint working.

19. It is a pity to end on this negative note, but it comes back to the original stance taken by the CAs when they were described as customers of ESR – that the top down approach to promoting participation (the Big Hit etc.) did not succeed in increasing the numbers of people playing the game, hence the cut in funding from SE – and that a more viable approach would be a partnership with the County Associations, the only other bodies, along with ESR, whose sole reason for existence is to promote squash. Maybe CANs next priority should be to ensure the election of a Board which is committed to turning ESR rhetoric into reality.

Mike Clemson

16 November 2015