Community sport in England is characterised as a complex and multi-faceted policy field, partly due to the number of agencies involved (Charlton, 2010; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Houlihan & White, 2002; McDonald, 1995; Roche, 1992). At the same time it is growing in financial stature and political salience. Between 2012 and 2017 a total of £1 billion of public money will be invested in the community sport legacy (Sport England, 2012). This does not include the over £500 million earmarked for elite sport during the same period (DCMS, 2013).

This paper has two purposes: first, it utilises a combined theoretical framework consisting of policy analysis tools, power discourse, implementation theory and partnership literature to evaluate the London 2012 community sport legacy. This approach provides not only a lens, but a structure, to facilitate a deeper, more accurate analysis of the policy process. It is used to analyze the reality of the community sport policy process from the perspective of those involved in managing the implementation of policy, and it gives voice to National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs), the lead agency responsible for policy implementation through the development of Whole Sport Plans. County Sport Partnerships (CSPs) are also included in the study as they are sub-regional agencies funded by the Government to provide support to NGBs in implementing community sport policy. Finally, local government sports development managers are included, as many authorities retain a role in implementing community sport policy and supporting local community sport organizations (e.g. voluntary sport clubs, local sports networks, facilities, charities and trusts). The second purpose of the paper is to use the empirical exercise to review the utility of the meso-level policy analysis tools in evaluating the sport policy process with a view to recommending a framework for future analysis.

Rooted in a critical realist paradigm (Bhasker, 1979) the study uses a mixed methodology comprising a questionnaire followed by a case study approach utilising documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. Phase one of the study consisted of a questionnaire that was sent to all 49 CSPs and to the 44 NGBs in receipt of whole sport plan funding from Sport England. A total of 47 CSPs (96%) and 27 NGBs (61%) responded. The results from the questionnaire provided contextual information regarding the structure and strategy of key agents and thus helped with the selection of CSP-based case studies in phase two. A total of three case studies were developed each involving a total of 14 participants: the Chairperson, Director and NGB lead officer of the CSP; representatives from eight NGBs; and representatives from three local authorities. The interview guide was developed to reveal the range of attitudes and perspectives toward the implementation of the London 2012 legacy for community sport. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by the interviewee. The transcripts were analyzed using principles from grounded theory. In particular, open coding was used to label and categorize the data and axial coding was used to relate codes to each other through a process of inductive and deductive thinking (Glaser & Straus, 1967). The findings confirm the hierarchical, top-down nature of the community sport policy process, represented by competing coalitions rather than a joined-up, epistemic community (Haas, 1992). This fragmentation is largely the result of resource dependency, differing values and beliefs regarding the role of sport, the diverse structures within which agents’ operate (Betts, 1982) and, not least, the storylines (Fischer, 2003) that galvanise and reinforce the identity of the policy community. The empirical exercise concludes with an overview summarizing the factors that characterize the policy community, the barriers that prevent effective policy implementation, and recommendations for future community sport policy.

With regard to the second concerning the review of meso-level frameworks, theoretical pluralism is favoured over a single framework as it provides a more complete and coherent analysis of the policy process, overcoming the limitations associated with single frameworks. It also guards against the Rashomon effect, where accounts of the same event are different, depending upon the theoretical frameworks applied (van der Heijden, 2012). Such an approach is highly instructive for community sport policy as it illustrates the nature of relations between specific interests and the state and thus the privileged position of some interests; the rhetoric of decentralised power as compared to the reality of state control, albeit through different means; the interplay of structure and agency at the
meso-level; and how network interactions, resources, skills, learning and the social conditions that permeate it all affect the beliefs and values of individuals at the micro-level. In this way, macro-level structures and micro-level attributes shape the meso-level policy field, and to ignore this is to accept a partial or incomplete analysis of the policy process.