

**Sport, Community Action and Autonomy;**  
**The prolific endeavour of The Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls sport and social club.**

**By Mick Totten.**

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### **Introduction**

The Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls sports and social club is more than just a sports club. It is a uniquely vibrant hotbed of pioneering community activism and an inspiration for others who seek to challenge the orthodoxy of sport. Sport is often criticised for what is perceived to be its inherent conservative nature. This applies to both its structures of governance and grassroots culture. Despite its reliance on buoyant voluntary leadership, participation is often a passive consumer experience.

The capacity for sport to challenge conservative values and demonstrate its transformative potential is in some doubt. There are few examples of sport engaging in radical community development and of sustainable community-led initiatives in this regard. This results in many community development initiatives having only temporary benefits or creating a dependency on statutory agencies. And more broadly this leads to a perpetuation of the status quo and dominant hegemony in sport. The Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls are a noteworthy exception to this trend.

This article aims to critically examine what is unique about the club and why it has been such a successful community-led organisation. It is principally based on research conducted with key activists within the club, but also on informal observations of the club in operation over fifteen years. The words in italics herein are the authentic ones of those club activists. They reveal a large inner city multi-sports club of more than twenty years standing with distinctly leftist political leanings and a commitment to a radical DIY (Do It Yourself) philosophy.

The Easton DIY model puts a premium on cultivating critical consciousness, collectivist ideology, grassroots bottom up leadership and self-empowerment. The club has built social capital and capacity over time and engages in a prolific and exciting range of activity at home and abroad including tournaments, tours and political campaigning. This article will offer an initial profile characterising the club, then explore its politics and identity. It will reveal a profoundly democratic organisation which engenders a strong sense of community. It will consider the clubs relationship with its local community, highlight the nature of its community action and activism, and offer conclusions why it has been so successful.

### **A Profile of Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls**

#### **What distinguishes the club?**

Formed in 1992, the Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls are a large inner city multi-sports club based in the Easton area of Bristol. Their home base is “The Plough” pub and there are about 200 male and female members who play mainly football, cricket, netball, and basketball. They also have a very active social scene as well as children’s activities, including camps. They play in local leagues, organise more informal activities, and are especially active in organising and participating in international tournaments and tours. They are far more than just a sports club and include non-sporting members who are equally valued. But what particularly distinguishes them are their left-wing social and political outlook and activism;

*We have had in the past (and will hopefully continue to have) ambitious ideas in terms of how the playing of those sports can be vehicles for social, cultural and political change on some level.*

They are particularly associated with the rally call of “Freedom through Football” which conveys an overtly *political message* which has since been adopted by others too (see Totten 2011, and 2013). But the slogan was designed so that it could also flexibly encompass other activity too such as

“Freedom through Cricket” (which it has done). Freedom through football conveys important aspects of the club’s values;

*It’s the freedom to be yourself within a group or a community that’s supportive and enjoyable, ..it could mean different things for different people, but it’s certainly not freedom to do something negative. Its freedom to do something positive.*

The history of the club is well documented (see Simpson and McMahon 2012) and under the Freedom through Football/Sport banner they have engaged in a range of ambitious and amazing ventures including hosting alternative football world cups for a network of international allies, and attending similar events worldwide. Their activities have taken them across Europe, to North and South America, North Africa and the Middle East, and are too numerous to mention all here (see Simpson and McMahon 2012, and Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls 2013a) but include; cricket touring linked to a homelessness project in Compton, Los Angeles, and football and basketball tours to the rebel Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico, and to the occupied territories in Palestinian. They have initiated all these activities themselves and overtly pursued them as part of a political agenda;

*We are opposed to any inequality; no racism, sexism or homophobia.*

### **Social and Political Links**

The roots of the original Cowboys (women’s sport began much later) come from links into both the local Punk and radical Anti-Fascist subcultures. The club’s disposition is heavily influenced by their anti-establishment values and go it alone mentality. This springboard has allowed the club to profit from unorthodox political initiative;

*What those people gave us was a network to draw upon, and the experiences that they had, but also I think it is confidence, and you can push on and do that kind of thing.*

The club has been a key player in the establishment of an international network of like-minded anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-fascist organisations who congregate at summer tournaments. Although the network has no formal name, and there are nuances of difference in identity between members, they broadly sail under the flag of “Freedom through Football”. Amongst others, these notably include the Lunatics from Antwerp, ICE Neckerstrasse from Stuttgart, FC Sankt Pauli women’s team from Hamburg, Republica Internationale from Leeds, the 1in12 club from Bradford, and Los Autonomous from Sao Paulo. And the club supports a variety of other causes too;

*Primarily most Cowboys and Cowgirls are independent, left leaning, and this translates into a general interest and sympathy with the underdog.*

Groups or individual members have been able to raise awareness and draw support from the broader club, or within its sections, for a variety of campaigns. Club members formed an off-shoot, “KIPTIK”, to support Zapatista Solidarity (see KIPTIK 2013) and create clean water systems in Zapatista villages. There is a group involved in the struggle for Palestinian freedom campaigning against Israeli occupation of Palestine. The club supports projects in Palestine and has a twinning arrangement with a sports club from Tulkarem in the West Bank. In Bristol, the club rallied support to attempt to retain community use of “Packer’s Field” a local village green. And the Cowgirls are closely associated to anti-homophobia and have had close links to the wider gay scene in Bristol for more than ten years. Many Cowgirls also see themselves as part of a wider movement to address the lack of opportunities for ordinary women to play football beneath elite level, and created a

“casual league” to support this. In all these ventures club members have seized initiative, gained support, and offered a platform to address issues;

*I see this as a positive as it gives us a chance to talk to people who were previously ignorant of many of these subjects and make people aware of many issues.*

Despite relatively humble inner city origins, the Cowfolk are prolific fundraisers too. In ten years KIPTIK astoundingly raised over £100,000 for Zapatista water projects. And the club has also raised money in support of the Palestinian cause, to combat breast cancer, in support of South African women at risk of “corrective rape”, and for street kids in Sao Paolo. Though not exhaustive, these examples illustrate the profligacy of activity and the potential power of the club;

*Not everybody will have the same concerns or backgrounds, but under the Easton Cowboys banner we all come together*

### **Involvement and attraction**

*I arrange for people to get in touch with like-minded people, offer support and advice, support at games, help at every do that we have ever had, put my own money in, fundraise for things. That is basically what being a Cowboy or Cowgirl is about; supporting those teams on the field. I have of course very occasionally donned the shirt!*

Participants described a variety of motivations that drew them to join the club but each shared an attraction to something perceived as “cool” and “alternative”;

*I was looking for somewhere to play Cricket in Bristol and somewhere where I wasn't surrounded by racists and posh people.*

Many were referred by friends, some had serious sporting backgrounds and others were simply enthusiasts, but each shared a yearning to rekindle a sporting interest in an inclusive and tolerant environment;

*I had kind of fallen out of love with football, for want of a better phrase. I was looking for something that would still give you the same thrill of playing football without all the kind of macho nonsense. .. I was just looking for something a little bit different and the Cowboys came along.*

Others who may not initially have been that interested in sport succumbed to the allure of the social scene, got involved in organising things, and later developed a new interest in playing sport. And others were firmly attracted to the political sub-culture;

*Coming from a punk rock background I liked the DIY, do it yourself, nature about the Cowboys. ..along with the anti-racist nature that fitted in with my ethics in a nutshell. Having met them, they are pretty nice people.*

Participants described how involvement could change over time. Some may initially have been part of the social scene and more on the organisational periphery, but felt themselves being drawn further in. Others may have initially taken on sporting roles but then became more attracted to the political and cultural side;

*It's an interesting group of people. The politics is interesting. The get up and go is interesting and it's a great bunch of people, so I wouldn't really want to play sport for anybody else now.*

Others may initially have been cultural organisers who later became sporting ones. But the process resembles something of a vortex whereby positions may change over time but inevitably people were drawn towards the centre of energy;

*I got involved but kind of quickly realised that there was a lot of fun and they were doing a lot of interesting things.*

Participants described how their continued involvement was founded on a sense of shared history, friendship and a feeling of community, a positive influence in life. And some older members also described how their involvement eventually diminished after they were sucked through the centre of the vortex;

*We have done so many great things. It feels like a really positive and embracing thing to be involved in. So I have stayed involved even though I don't play as much football any more.*

### **Politics and Identity**

#### **Political Outlook**

*It's not just about scoring more goals than the other teams in the league. It's about how we conduct ourselves, and opportunity, and how we behave around each other.*

The club has no overtly defined political position yet so much of what it does is obviously political. There is a vehement reluctance by many members to be boxed in and labelled politically. But also a pride in the club's political credentials, which are undeniably leftist;

*Animal rights and certainly anti-fascist action is a big part of the Easton Cowboys political heritage.*

Even if it does not fit neatly into a conventional political box, the subcultural texture of the club is politically saturated. It is as if those special political ingredients are ever overtly revealed then the club recipe may lose its magic. So understanding the body-politic of the club is a delicate interpretation of overt remarks and covert signals. Many expressed difficulty in surmising exactly what the club's politics are;

*The actual politics of the Cowboys are really hard to break down.*

Some believe that as the club has grown over time it has become less overtly political, and some do not consider it political at all. There is a general consensus that politics is seen as personal, rather than an institutional possession, and the club accommodates a range of different individual views;

*It's how would you lead your own life? Not; how would you want everyone else to lead theirs? Things in the politics is personal, rather than we are going to try and change, rather than what is happening in Bristol. So, what we are going to do is lead honest lives ourselves as far as we can.*

But there is a political culture within any organisation, and members engage keenly in a variety of political activities, so the club does manifest an overall political direction which is independent of any individual or factional control. Despite this ambiguity of position there are certain issues that are not in dispute and unify the club.

*You can't argue with it being an anti-racist club though, so there is a political stance, whether it's not out there on the streets political stance; that is a political statement.*

Anti-sexism and anti-homophobia are also prominent, and there is a championing of democratic ideals. It is also important for members to be seen to be leading by example embracing political outlook as a credo by which to live your life;

"We value our social lives and ethos as being as, or even more important than, our sporting activities. Ideas and commitment are the lifeblood of our community. We think big and act on it." (see Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls 2013b).

There is an acceptance of diversity, an intolerance of any oppression, and a desire to raise awareness through club activity and to challenge attitudes. There have been some difficulties integrating new members into club culture and a welcome leaflet clarifies the club's disposition;

"The Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls are a club who recognise the fundamental equality of all people, irrespective of age, class, culture, disability, gender, race, religion, or sexuality. We seek to enjoy sport as part of strengthening local and international solidarity, performing to the best of our potential, and enjoying being part of a team. We seek to further mutual understanding and respect for all people and to challenge discrimination. The club will not tolerate prejudiced or abusive behaviour." (see Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls 2013c).

There is a desire to disassociate from conventional politics and there is certainly no truc with conventional party politics. *Politics with a big P* is frowned upon; *we are political with a small "p"*. There is a desire not to impose dogma, but this should not be confused with pure ambivalence;

*Unless you can grasp and live with the general political atmosphere you don't hang around the Cowboys but it's not fundamental.*

There is a general consensus around some aspects of overall perspective. This is expressed as radically libertarian with aspects of *resistance politics*, very left wing, and *non-aligned*;

*Its' that left leading politics outside its mainstream, if you like, and it's a difficult one to kind of define.*

### **Do it Yourself (DIY) philosophy**

In keeping with its libertarian ethos, the most emphasised aspect of the club's identity is its proactive "DIY" culture;

*Trying to value everybody and their input so the idea is that you can change things by getting involved really. As long as other people want to do it with you we can make it happen.*

There is a sense of pride through personal and collective empowerment, and recognition that, although it is not always the most straightforward way to do things, method is as important as outcome;

*That ability to go it alone, as it were; and to do your own thing. ..Part of the pleasure of what we have done is having done it on our own without the help of the lottery and others. The journey and transition is the reward.*

Many aspects of the DIY philosophy are underpinned by anarchist ideals. A significant number of the original founders of the Club considered themselves anarchists at that time.

*We were all involved in politics and protest politics and that had kind of hung on. ...I think if you were to say to people now it was anarchist politics...I just don't think that they would be as happy with the title as they were say maybe 15 – 20 years ago.*

Although very few in the club would overtly define themselves as such now, the early anarchist influence has endured. Despite its coherence as a political philosophy, an element of anarchist influence also disassociates itself from political convention and defies political positioning by its outsider status and otherness to experienced norms; *it's apolitical politics*. A more *relaxed political stance* is described now along with a reluctance to be defined as anarchist;

*When we were out in Brazil people kept mistakenly saying we are anarchists, but we are not. We are just an anti-racist football team, some of whom are probably anarchists. I think mainly what it is probably because we are not as tight knit because of the sheer numbers and amount of people that we have.*

But there is an acceptance that a lot of the club's disposition is strongly derived from anarchist thought. And much club activity acts in line with this even if people are not conscious of an anarchist framework;

*People are obviously doing it without actually thinking about it, and having any anarchist thought about it, so I would put it down to anarchist thought, ..People are just taking on board things that they are doing without actually analysing and commenting on what they are doing.*

### **Gender and Identity**

The original Cowboys from 1992 were all male, and although there were women active on the growing social scene, despite earlier attempts women's football did not really take off until 2002, and netball from 2004.

*It is a sports and social club which has evolved out of a small group of men playing football then discovering the anti-fascist football circuit. Now it is a much more polymorphous affair with lots of different teams under its umbrella and involving men, women and families.*

So, in parallel to the overwhelming male dominated nature of British football elsewhere at that time, the Cowboys were effectively a male club for their first decade, but with some very active female support. Although these men were predominately pro-feminist, their maleness is reflected in the engendered nature of their original name; Cowboys. Under it, they established themselves and their reputation grew, so much so that, even now, the term Cowboys is still often used generically to refer to the club as a whole even though the club name changed to "Cowboys and Cowgirls" (albeit still retaining an engendered dualism).

*It was great the Easton Cowboys club changed its name to Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls because the club really embraced women being involved and I think the club is better for it.*

There are some differences in culture between the women's football and netball teams, and a degree of separation. They have different views when it comes to women's emancipation and dealing with sexism. The women's football team were always titled the "Cowgirls" whereas the netball team were initially titled the "Crackwhores";

*They see sexism in quite an ironic way.*

There was some concern about a rumour that the netball team planned to raise money with a “bikini car wash”. And although the event did not take place, footballing Cowgirls reacted with some dismay;

*They were saying no, not in our name. We cannot have this sort of thing associated with us; we were here first kind of thing, and we don't want to be associated with that. That is just an example of women seeing things in different ways, and that was something that the football team wouldn't ever consider.*

Some differences aside, there is a strong relationship and cross-pollination between the women's sections who have worked together on many events. And there is respect from the footballers and others for the organisational drive and unique creative ability of the netballers who have helped to transform the club;

*I've got a lot of respect for the netball girls at the moment. They organise things very well. You wouldn't believe it! The décor and things that they put up in The Plough; a lot of energy.*

The Cowgirls football team illustrates the distinctiveness of the women well. Although mixed football is encouraged at many tournaments, men and women effectively play their sport separately, even if socialising is far more mixed. And in addition to perpetuating the club's alternative vision and overall struggle, the women faced the additional struggle initially establishing themselves in male dominated sport.

Women had travelled to tournaments supporting the men, but began to notice other women playing with men, and women's football teams started emerging from the network from 2001. Many of the female players were new to football and some of the “Cowboy women” were encouraged enough to join in. Having enjoyed the experience they took the initiative themselves to start training and form a Cowgirls team;

*I was thinking of getting people who had never even kicked a ball before to get involved. ..My initial motivation was to try and open up football to women who have never played before. ..It was really about getting women to want to do something and to meet each other and learn something new,*

The women were largely supported by the Cowboys but their formation reinvigorated the club to consider gender issues more prominently. Some teething issues were experienced early on in relation to sexuality but quickly confronted as the men adapted to and accommodated the women. And some of the new women also had to look beyond the liberating experience of playing football and adapt to broader club culture;

*The club realised that we needed to reaffirm what our values were. If you were part of the club you weren't just coming and playing on a Sunday, benefitting from all the organising other people had done and gone away. There was a lot expected of you as a member and the way you would behave. ..Remember that we have got an ethos and make sure that people are being respectful to other people even if they are different to themselves.*

Ability has been a greater issue amongst the women compared to the men. Many women had seldom played before and drew inspiration from the other network teams;

*It wasn't sport like you were at school where you got picked. It was like; come on have a go, winning is not as important as you having a go and getting on with it and putting your boots on. It was that kind of attitude that I found so inspirational really, I've never been really into sport or competitive sport before that.*

From their inception the Cowgirls have resisted discriminating on ability and tried to make their football more inclusive;

*No matter how you play and, if you are in that team, you are in that team and we will support you all the way. I'd expected that culture to dissipate all the time but it's very much that the roots of the Cowgirls are still there*

The situation has changed more recently as younger women who had played previously at school, but lost the opportunity afterwards, or others who have played at a more committed level have joined the club;

*The Easton Cowgirls has evolved too. Over ten years ago we set the club up as a way of enabling women to play football, often for first time, as a fun thing to do. Nowadays we are much more about reintroducing women to football giving women who can play, but have no opportunity to play, a chance to do so.*

The composition of the Cowgirls has changed too as more gay women have been attracted to the club. This is unlike the netball team or the men's teams which are much more overwhelmingly heterosexual. And more women have joined the club from further away in Bristol too. The less formal emphasis on ability has been maintained and the Cowgirls have even formed a "Casual League" for the whole city. But it is still harder to attract female members than male, and the women have had to work harder at recruitment;

*Our profile is just raised because of all that activity that we did then on Facebook, the web and things like that. Where people are looking for a football team in Bristol they tend to find us, so that's been really successful and because it has been successful it has brought energy to the club recently*

The outlook on funding is also more distinctive within the Cowgirls, which has sometimes attracted criticism from the men. The men have doggedly applied their belief in autonomy to mean they never apply to statutory bodies for funding. But because women's football faces more barriers and has been harder to support, the Cowgirls have pursued some funding from the Council;

*We had a big "Wanted" recruitment campaign and we got some funding for that so we didn't have to use the club's money to experiment really, to see if we could perhaps get the club going again, so we did this big group campaign and got lots of Cowgirls involved; it was fantastic,*

### **Democratic Organisation**

*It's a tiny bit ramshackle but wholly effective.*

#### **Federal Structure and Composition**

Apart from some council funding for female recruitment the club is entirely self-funded in all its operations from a local to an international level. It has no overall constitution although this has been attempted in parts. The men's football had drafted a constitution around 2001, but it was never ratified and largely forgotten. The men's cricket, women's football and netball have individual constitutions but plans for a club one are still unresolved;

*There has been a constitution but it is hardly ever referred to. There's no mission statement other than stating that we are against racism, sexism, homophobia and discrimination in general terms.*

When the club was smaller there was more of a sense of everyone being together and part of one entity and organs like the old fanzine "The Gunslinger" appeared to speak to the club with one voice;

*It used to be quite a small club and small community, and it was a very diverse community lots of different people in it, but I felt like it was one community,*

As sport activity expanded into different areas and developed more constituencies, the club has also evolved a more federal model of operation. Different sports and teams are free to plot their own destiny, organise their own affairs, hold their own meetings, and plan their own tours;

*They are fairly autonomous under the larger Cowboys umbrella.*

Their relationships can be complex and this is exacerbated by sports having different seasons which sometimes barely overlap and key focal points are spread throughout the year;

*There is stuff which is a little bit out of sync because of the nature of the sport, but there is a close relationship I think at all levels across all the teams.*

And the size of the club has also created sections with slightly different identities, so it is harder to sustain a consistent political view across the board;

*The overarching ethos still remains but it's not as clear and strong as it once used to be. We used to have quite a political ethos, and we used to have quite an anarchistic view, and I think that's not so evident now*

Despite these distinctions there is keen interest between the different sections on how each other are faring. And there is still a significant mixing of members across different sections;

*There is a lot of people involved in Cricket and football, so that is one obvious way so it overlaps, and like the Cricket team was formed by members of the football team essentially way back when.*

And the development of childrens' activities has also led to some cross fertilization;

*You get people who are involved with the children's cricket and the football, and the netballer's children and vice versa.*

## Roles and Organisation

*Leadership is a bit of a dirty word, isn't it really, because it's based on a hierarchical organisation.*

The notion of leadership is problematic for the club as its authoritarian connotations conflict with its libertarian tendencies. There is a denial of formal hierarchy but there are also elected roles with leadership responsibilities and influence;

*There is none, but at the same time there clearly is some. .. It is as democratic as it can be.*

Nearly all roles relate to the basic organisation of sports teams; Managers, Secretaries and Treasurers. But these roles are confined to sport and they do not have a direct influence on the overall direction of the club. Different sections organise their own meetings to plan their own affairs

*Certainly the Cricket team have got its own little democratic structure of regular club meetings and cricket committees taking day to day decisions. .. The football club are the single decision making body for all of those teams, and the netball team does the same. So each sport makes its own decisions about how it's going to conduct itself within the context of the Eastern Cowboys and Cowgirls.*

There are also important bi-annual meetings, when the whole club can come together, to discuss matters of shared interest and consider the overall club.

*When we get asked for money and we can make a donation to something, or when we are organising a tournament, so the whole club gets together for that. .. That's a Cowboys/Cowgirls decision. What are we going to put our name to? What are we going to donate our money to, and what are we going to do as a club?*

Two members are encouraged to attend these to represent each section and, importantly, make sure the meeting is representative of the whole club, but an important principle for the club is that all meetings are open to attendance by any club member;

*It is still those who are passionate and committed to the club who are driving things forward, but I guess having the opportunity to be part of the meeting is always there; you just have to turn up to meetings and have a voice.. ..Everybody's voice is completely valid and that is why they have completely open meetings. .. There is this kind of attitude that if you are a member of the club your voice is absolutely as valid as anybody else's. And all you need to do is come to the meeting and have that voice heard. So I think it is a very unusual way of making decisions but its worked pretty well for the club so far.*

But Chairs are also appointed to run club meetings and although they may have an influence in shaping agenda, it is stressed that decision making is collectivised;

*It is a very unusual club in that it doesn't really have a leadership structure.*

There are also more temporary roles created, and committees, in response to impending socials and tournament hosting, and people with expertise are sought out voluntarily;

*There are no leaders just people taking on allocated roles within the club.*

Roles are regularly rotated in an effort to spread organisational responsibility and experience;

*People are dipped in and out, we are not one of those clubs who have had the same Chairman for the past 25 years. ..rather than hang onto them, ..you have to take your turn. ..Next time I play cricket most people on the Cricket field will have been a Skipper, Treasurer, or Secretary. They would have taken on some role within the club at some point.*

The original Cowboys' organisation had no real structure at all and on principle the club has resisted creating internal power structures and bureaucracy. But over time, as the club as grown bigger and more complicated, procedures have developed organically to cope with organisational demands;

*Professional is the wrong word, but it has become quite slick and I think in the early days a lot of people couldn't quite get their heads around having a meeting with a Chairman and having a club Secretary. .. But obviously as things changed and things became larger, having those kind of meetings was kind of crucial. But, then, people also understood the need for them to be quite formal.*

New technologies have since been embraced; utilising internet forums and message boards to circulate information and create discussion, and the "Peashooter" (a monthly "e-zine") informs members of up and coming events and issues.

*In the early days we would have a handwritten newsletter that we would print up every few months with a bit of news in and a bit of chat and that would be it. .. So I think it has changed enormously.*

There is also a minority who articulate a personal preference for more structured organisation and representation, but equally an understanding by them that this goes somewhat against the grain of club culture, and many others would be uncomfortable with that;

*I would like it to be a little bit more structured, more like other voluntary organisations where you have got different bits of the club who have got representatives, would listen to what other members of the club said; then feed it into the meetings. Then decisions would be made by those people who had been elected. The Cowboys have never embraced that model at all. They are much more anarchistic. ..I would like to see people representing other people but that has been very strongly resisted in the Cowboys. ..It would be better if they had channels of communication where you were the voice of your bit of the club, and you were expected to go and represent them, and to have listened and consulted with them, but as I say that's not how the club wants to be.*

### **Partnerships, Relationships and Influence**

There are various organisations with which the club has close links. Their home base, the Plough Pub, is at the centre of club culture and over the years this relationship has been of immense importance and of mutual benefit to both host and patronage. There was at one time an attempt, driven by club members, to initiate a community buy-out of the pub, but this collapsed and the more commercial relationship remains. The pub has supported club events, as has "Essential Foods" Cooperative, the largest local suppliers of Fairtrade and Organic produce, which emerged itself from the club's DIY culture. Both organisations have gifted the club funding, kit or produce for tournaments and other events. "Bristol Radical History Group" is another organisation to emerge from the club and maintain close association, along with "The Hydro" bookshop. And previously it has been described how the KIPTIK charity grew from club tours to Chiapas, Mexico, to support solidarity with rebel Zapatista communities.

Significant relationships are maintained with the other twenty or so other teams from the alternative football network that emerged principally after the Cowboys 1998 Alternative World Cup. Some clubs perhaps have more influence than others within the network, but it is fair to conclude that the Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls have had more overall influence than any other. A leading role has been earned through prolific endeavour as the Cowfolk have shown the initiative and organisational nous to pioneer exciting new international ventures, frequently and energetically host others, and have become role models for many of the other teams.

*It's probably easier for our club to work bigger due to numbers. But that said, we wouldn't be able to continue if the other clubs didn't exist. ..(The reason it) is easier for us is perhaps that we have around 200 members whereas other teams have a lot smaller members. We also have a lot of experience of the old guys, but we also have a lot of new ideas coming through to keep us fresh. So I think it will be easier for us sometimes to come up with ideas and to go places and have the numbers to go places*

In terms of what influence the other teams have on the club, the situation is more ambiguous. There is recognition that the very early tournaments hosted by others inspired the club to do like-wise;

*Certainly in the early days, other clubs from abroad, Germany and Belgium. ..I think that they have had a big impact on how the Cowboys have progressed and kind of formed themselves.*

But the extent of this influence appears mainly confined to the sphere of hosting events. And aside from the support and inspiration drawn from other clubs in the formation of the Cowgirls, the club appears quite autonomously self-determined in more general aspects;

*I'm not sure that other teams have an influence on the way that we organise. ... I think really we just follow our noses in some respects really.*

### **Leadership; Core and Periphery**

*There is a core group of interested people who are driving things, but that is just through sheer motivation rather than just being put in that position; people who want to help and achieve things. ..They are the people who will turn up to meetings and vote on things.*

Aside from elected roles there are others who informally offer cultural and ideological leadership within the club. Their numbers are mostly estimated to be between 30 to 50 people, but some think there may be an inner-core within that, though others disagree;

*There are maybe about 8 or 10 above people who make all the decisions, ..Over the years you will find that you have got about a dozen people getting involved in decision making because they are the people with the motivation and the time etc. to push on with things.*

This influence may be consciously or unconsciously exercised. Sometimes certain people are sought out for advice or guidance

*There are people that with over time develop respect within that organisation. ..They have been at the club a long time and have that kind of respect.*

By definition then, these are likely to be older members, but there are some that believe that younger members who still play sport more regularly, and may have organisational roles, are potentially more influential;

*They are the ones in a very influential position. They can shape things and do things for the future should they wish.*

But there are also others who are more proactive in organising to influence, and who communicate and organise outside conventional club structures;

*Well we have got a funny email group called Heads of State which is a bit ironic. Anyone can put themselves on it but it's clearly people who are interested in the club and its development. So that works in quite an informal way to discuss things between meetings.*

Over time the distribution of core activists in the club may ebb or flow, but they are spread relatively evenly across the different sections of the club. The club works hard to fabricate its structure and cultivate its democracy, but ultimately it is much harder to control the flow of cultural capital;

*There is a kind of overall sense that some people are "leaders". ..You put mechanisms in place and there are some people who will get wholeheartedly involved in something, and some people who won't, and it is very difficult then to put their pull on an equal footing, and it's also very difficult to then to reign in that influence that those people have.*

The main difference between the core and the periphery appears that the core is more politically motivated and have a deeper and more active connection to the club, whereas the periphery have a more superficial engagement primarily based predominantly around leisure activity;

*Too many people who are the Cowboys who just play football on a Saturday, basically, and that's it; they don't take any kind of active interest in what the rest of the club is doing. ..There are a lot of people who just come along and just play sport as it were.*

The influence of the core is fundamental to the unique culture, identity, and reputation of the club; *definitely a crucial part to things*. And there is a strong desire from them that others become more active too;

*The vast majority of people these days are not very politically motivated. I think there is a core of Cowboys that are. .. Unfortunately, I would say that that isn't something that is as prominent now that we are in a bigger club,*

For many of the core, they may have inherited some influence, but they do not hold it possessively. They hold a strong ideological belief in collectivism and perceive that the sustainable future of the club depends on that;

*Because we were recruiting a lot of new people into the club, they sort of saw us as the organisers and were asking us what was happening and we were like; well you are what's happening! You need to get involved. Which bit are you going to do? ..It's that whole thing of collectively trying to achieve something, and not just having somebody who are the organisers, and that people are the recipients of the services. It's much more than that; it's the idea of people achieving something together and making things better as a result.*

There are different views of the core from the periphery. Some appear simply to tolerate the activists from a relatively detached position. But for others, although they may not be so active

themselves, they are proud to be led by and associated with the core as they lend credibility to the whole club;

*For certain individuals; very important, for other individuals they are probably glad it exists but won't take part themselves. That's the way it will always be. ..Until the pressure is really on some people don't participate. Some people are quite happy being really active and some people are uncomfortable with it.*

### **Democracy, Freedom and Control**

*We all have our individual thoughts and they still have successfully not pulled us all apart and I am proud of that; that democracy!*

Club members are broadly supportive and proud of the democratic nature of the organisation. And despite the heightened influence of core activists it is strongly asserted that the broader membership is ultimately in control;

*I think that no one is in control of the Cowboys really; I don't think it's a body that any one person can control. It can be influenced but I don't think it can be controlled.*

There is a strong sense of accountability that appears to supersede the influence of any particular individual or faction;

*There are essentially people with strong personalities and strong convictions, but fortunately I think that there are enough people and mechanisms to kind of control that. ..It is very difficult for one person or group to impose anything. ..We have come up with mechanisms to deal with that. ..It seems to balance itself out. There is also an element of self-regulation if you like; people know that you cannot overstep the mark.*

These processes even extend to keeping elected officials on a tight rein and gifting them a very temporal sense of mandate;

*Those who are the most active and busy play the most important parts and will be shaping the direction of the club, but the wider membership is robust in not accepting things it doesn't like. So if things aren't going in the right direction it does get sorted out very quickly and Captains get recalled. All of our posts are recallable by the membership. So you are not elected for a year, you are elected for now, ideally for the season, but if people don't like the way things are going then they let you know quite quickly. ..Decisions are challenged frequently and there is not much scope to turn the tables into your own creature.*

There is recognition that there are some issues whereby club democracy could or should be further enhanced;

*Some people aren't always available on certain given nights, or don't always have access to computers. If they haven't got access then they might not know about things, or it could be too late for voting before a meeting.*

And there are important principles which underpin decision making and how the club's democratic franchise should be managed, and possibly extended;

*The most recent sort of democratic issue that has come up in my experience; that has been about how do we widen the amount of people involved in the number of decisions we are making? If someone is a regular supporter and we are going to change our ground to a mile further away, if they are going to come and watch us, then they should be involved in the discussion about how decisions are made. That is the basis of the democracy; who is affected by this decision we are making, and those are the people that should be involved in making a decision.*

There is also recognition that open meetings do not guarantee that everybody has an equal say or influence. And that club members are better and worse at functioning effectively in that environment;

*My own worry really is that sometimes only the loudest voices are heard*

But most are satisfied that the club procedures work quite well and strike the right balance between promoting freedom and exercising control;

*Beyond forcibly dragging people to meetings or having some kind of text voting system, I don't see how it could be improved.*

The club is prepared to put its democratic principles in front of organisational expediency to the extent that process is as important as outcome;

*If anything the club kind of bends over backwards to be democratic, not to its own detriment, but I think it can definitely be a frustration when you see it is good to have a decision passed. A meeting needs to be quorate. I've been to quite a few meetings on a rainy Monday evening when there have been 10 people there, and we need 15, and people want a debate and have a motion passed and it's just not possible. Sometimes people are frustrated with that system, but they see the logic behind it. ..We realised that it's all very well having those meetings, and having the same old faces turning up to those meetings, and the meetings needing to be representative as a club as a whole; and that needed proper numbers.*

### **Club as Community**

*The Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls do build an amazing community and once people are drawn into that we can achieve a lot between us. It's nice to get a mix of different people with a core purpose of trying to help other people into and enjoy football and do other things that they might not have expected to do.*

### **Characterising Community**

Community, as will be discussed, is not simply about place but the Easton name appears in the club name and is an important point of reference. Club members characterised Easton as a diverse multicultural inner city area which, although not being affluent and having significant socio-economic problems, may be in the initial stages of gentrification.

*There is a history of it being essentially a working class neighbourhood peripherally built on mining communities, not the kind of mining communities that we know in say Wales or Yorkshire but essentially the same kind of thing; so you know it's the problems that filter back down through there and it is hard to know why. It is a funny area Easton; ..right in the centrifuge of the M32 which I think was built in the early 70's or late 60's and it split that area in two, so you have got St Paul's on one side, which has got its own problems as we all know, and Easton on the other side; and I think that certainly didn't help. I lived in Easton in the 80's and it was always a difficult area.*

Members estimated that more than a quarter of the population are drawn from Black minority ethnic groups; a mix of Caribbean, African and Asian; Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Easton has a younger than average demographic, with many families from different backgrounds living side by side. And in addition to the indigenous white community, there are many other younger white people who were attracted to Easton because of its relatively cheap housing and bohemian, alternative image. Many Cowfolk are drawn from, or into, this alternative scene;

*People from elsewhere in UK who move here after discovering that they love the cosmopolitan feel of the area. I also feel that it has an independent aura about it not felt in other parts of the city.*

The nearer an individual is to the core of the club, then the more likely a sense of community is strongly felt. And the further away, or even the newer the player, the less likely this is. In line with the expansion of the club, the complexity of these constituencies has increased, and there is less likelihood that a unified sense of community is perceived by all. Equally, the intensity of a sense of community may have diminished;

I don't know if everyone shares as much anymore. ..I might share something with a certain amount of the Cowboys. ..Say we have got 200 or whatever, I might have a shared experience with 50 in another sector, and like a lot of the new players I don't know as well. ..Not 100% shared if I am being truthfully honest.

But in terms of the club and its sense of community, it has to be understood that this encompasses multiple and overlapping sub-communities and that individuals may feel part of a community in more than one sense. This sense of community manifests itself in relation to five components; place, interest, experience, process, and imagination.

### **Community as Place**

There is a strong sense of community associated with different places that include the fields where the teams play, The Plough pub, and the area of Easton itself. The pub is described as "headquarters" and as a social hub where all manner of activity takes place. People can go at any time and expect to meet other club members. The situation of the club in Easton, and the residence of many members in the area, extends that sense of community to Easton itself;

*There is a very strong identification with Easton as a place. I even know that the club attracts people from all over Bristol. There is very much a sense that we are from Easton and Easton is our sort of spiritual home as it were, but I do think that there are a lot of people who don't live in Easton.*

But the attraction of the club to those from outside Easton may be leading to the depth of connection to Easton itself changing over time;

*I think that when the club first started ..the links felt closer. I think essentially all the people who were involved in starting the club in the beginning were from Easton. It has now spread and is much bigger and much wider and therefore the link feels a little bit more tenuous.*

### **Community as Interest**

A sense of community through shared interest was felt in relation to a passion for community based sport, an interest in the party atmosphere of socials, an interest in lefty politics, and the fusion of these strands as an interest in the club itself;

*All 3 of those will draw people in to a great/lesser degree. It's sort of primarily a sports club. I think in my experience primarily it's a sports club, secondly it's a social thing, then there is politics.*

In terms of the sporting interest, this can be further subdivided into the different sections;

*For example the cricket team have got an interest in cricket. I would say that probably lots of them aren't interested in football, but they still feel part of the Cowboys; but they are passionate about cricket and not football.*

But the blended interest of sport and politics was felt to be more significant;

*It is very difficult to separate the two when you are talking about the Cowboys because I think it very clear earlier on that you may be interested in cricket for instance or one of the football teams, but if you are not, if your politics and your interests differ enough, then it's very clear very quickly that you are not going to fit in. So there is a kind of unwritten shared interest.*

And beyond the seriousness of the politics that there was a complimentary interest in more hedonistic relief;

*People know that we are an anti-racist team, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic team. ..It is just accepted that; it's a sort of given ...We are well known for having a party atmosphere as well. .. That's very important so as not to burn out. I think on a whole we mingle and merge together.*

### **Community as Experience**

*Well it is a shared experience undoubtedly. ..Being part of the club, sharing experiences, doing things and going places as part of a team; it consolidates out identity around us .. Anyone who has been in a team situation...you feel more bonded with people, you have done things.*

A sense of community through experience was particularly valued;

*It's important that we collectively enjoy ourselves together to feel like we all belong to each other. I think that that is very important. You don't necessarily get that if you are just playing your sport against other teams. ..There are social opportunities, and particularly travelling away for tournaments and going to other things are important bonding opportunities. They are important; to collectively experience something else, and hopefully see something positive at the same time.*

All agreed that shared experiences in the club created a sense of community and that some of the more significant experiences were beyond sport itself;

*It's not just about playing football or playing cricket. It's actually part of a wider thing that we are a community, that we do this together and have fun together. ..It's more obvious that it's a community at social events and tournaments and things like that, or when you go to the pub afterwards and you see oh there is the B team come in and they have been playing, or thinking of that shared space to notice those things sometimes.*

It was thought that experiences would be more strongly felt by core members more immersed in club activity and more closely aligned to club political identity; *it's a bit intuitive and radical. ..that's the ethos.* But there was a perception that growth may have diluted this sense of community in direct correlation to a dilution of political activism;

*Maybe in the early days when we got together there was a sense of a kind of politics behind it were clearer and I think now, as with a lot of politics, its fuzzier and less easier to define and therefore peoples experiences are different. ..more tenuous now than it was then.*

### **Community as Process**

*There is always some project or other that people can get involved in; be it the big international football tournament we are organising, trips to Mexico, getting forms together or the various social events that go around it. People get involved in planning and organising and putting those things on. There is sort of a continual process, I am not sure that there is a journey as such because I am not sure that we are going anywhere with it. ..I don't know that there is much strategy around it.*

A sense of community as process relates to people having an active involvement, beyond a consumer experience, in the production of cultural activity. This, to an extent, is dependent on the depth of engagement;

*I am sure that any woman just joining the Cowgirls who played and then just went away would not benefit from the community of the Cowgirls. ..They would treat it like they had just gone to aerobics. ..that must happen somewhere else apart from when you are just doing sports. ..There are people in the club who are not engaging with any of the community aspects. ..It is possible to be in the Cowboys and not realise that there is a community at all because you are not part of any process, but I think that people get drawn into the club when they realise they can be involved in the process of achieving things and everyone is given that opportunity.*

In this regard, it was recognised a sense of community as process may not be as obvious to members, especially new ones;

*It might happen in a more sub conscious way, ..There is definitely an inherent level of it happening in sub conscious.*

But the range of complex activities that the club engages in provides many opportunities for this sense of community to emerge. The club cultivates creative project planning and organisational skills through its DIY approach to activity. Trips and hosting tournaments are especially significant in their development;

*Acquiring and developing skills, lots of new people involved in that, and there was a great collective spirit there. People were working beside people that they had never worked beside before and I think that is really good and they have got a mutual respect that comes from that.*

But once again there was a feeling that it is core members who share the strongest sense of community, especially in relation to process;

*Yes, definitely without a doubt, I mean I would say again that applies to people; 30 – 50 activists. They have been through that together and kind of feel a part of it all together.*

### **Community as Imagination**

*It's quite perceptive that some of the Cowboys are part of something special, so there is a sense in that being one of the Easton Cowboys you are setting yourself apart a little bit from everybody else, and it's a tribe. In that sense I think you are part of a tribe.*

The sense of community as a shared imagination within the club is firmly accepted, but crucially this may only apply for some members, and not all. Shared imagination relates to the club's values and vision, especially about DIY and self-empowerment;

*Because the Cowboys have a sort of aspirational element to it, so it's that thing of you want to try something; do it and let's see what we can achieve. So I think that captures people's imagination, you know, when they come into the club, ..when they get what it's about, they find it exciting that you have got all these people who are being imaginative and are trying to achieve something.*

But a sense of shared imagination appears to relate directly to the degree of engagement and immersion in the club. So it is more likely to be perceived in the core than the periphery, and some believe that those with that imagination attempt to propagate it in others;

*Certainly in the early days people use to try ..to kind of push their own ideals, and ways of doing things. But I think it is certainly stronger within the core group, as they have got more invested in it because they have been involved for a long time, and maybe they can see the worth of that.*

But there is also a sense of tolerance and of valuing diversity such that those views are not imposed;

*A lot of us may have the same imagination; ..40 or 50 with a shared imagination, what we perceive as Cowfols, (but, also) I think it is quite healthy that there are different views on what we are about.*

A sense of vision is important but also that, over time, it has been realised and evidenced through experience. So imagination is earthed back to reality even if it exists as an entity in its own right;

*We are 20 years into this now and it gets to the stage where we are like; we are the Cowboys and Cowgirls and we are like this because we do certain thing. And yes, like I said, like a sort of mythology build up over time.*

### Club and Local Community

#### **Local Social and Political Issues**

Club members were able to identify a series of issues which affect Easton; *one of the poorer communities in the city of Bristol*, which might create an unappealing image, but they were also very quick to add that these issues are common to many inner city areas;

*The same as most inner city areas – street crime , drug addiction , shootings , prostitution, alcoholism, some poverty and occasionally friction between some of the ethnic communities. Also housing is not as cheap as it used to be here a few years ago. Police are also not particularly liked, and in some cases with good cause.*

They also drew attention to poverty, high unemployment, high benefit dependency, poor private sector rental housing, negligent landlords, high migration from overseas, and the additional problems that those migrants commonly face. They felt that problems were compounded because people living in such circumstances are either outside the view, or outside the interest, of those with power who may be able to do something to alleviate them;

*The major political problem will be that none of the major political parties will either understand or represent these issues effectively; so many locals will be disenfranchised.*

But members also felt that Easton has many good qualities that make it a desirable place to live, and that some of its reputation is unfairly earned;

*Stapleton Road in Easton was described by one politician as the most dangerous road in Britain; though I am sure it isn't. It is culturally diverse and cultures seem to rub along together really well and Easton is seen as a rewarding and interesting community minded place to live.*

#### **Club and Locals**

*The Cowboys are very at home in Easton. Lots of people know about the Cowboys. In fact I don't think there would be a huge amount of people in Easton who wouldn't be aware of them. Easton is a very diverse community and a very accepting community. There are lots of different people rubbing up alongside each other and getting along pretty well. I am not sure that some of the stuff the Cowboys do may be appreciated if they were hosted in other bits of Bristol.*

Because of its unique culture and politics it cannot be expected that the club is representative of, or includes, the entire local community. Some are already firmly part of the club, some may find it a curiosity, some others may be unaware, but the club feels that it is generally well known, accepted, and enjoys a good reputation;

*The fact that they are still based in Easton, inner city Bristol, means that they have strong ties to the local community and by and large are thought of highly.*

Originally a higher percentage of the smaller club lived in Easton but its membership is now drawn increasingly from further afield. And Easton itself is described as having quite a transient population, but locals are generally aware of the club's idiosyncratic identity and of its activity worldwide. And the club are conscious that they also offer a local service;

*Sporting and social opportunities in a 'deprived' and multi-cultural inner city neighbourhood.*

However, some were also conscious that there may be ethnic barriers to how well the club is known or understood;

*How much people actually know of us within our own community? It's like the Somalian community; I don't know how many people live in the Somalian community that know about the Cowboys!*

### **Ethnicity, Whiteness and Anti-Racism**

The anti-racist credentials of the club are beyond dispute. And yet, like many other anti-racist organisations, membership is predominately white, despite the multi-cultural nature of Easton. Ethnicity and associated cultural differences, constructed in broader society, and apparent in Easton can result conflict between black ethnic groups;

*The only racism I have ever discovered has been Somalians or Jamaicans communities; they don't always get on so well.*

Although sport is attractive to many from non-white ethnic groups, ethnic pride and struggles for cultural distinction may manifest themselves in a desire to distinguish through sport, and not to integrate with the club;

*There are also other teams in Easton predominantly from a Jamaican background; a very longstanding successful team at our level, in fact probably a little bit higher. People may gravitate to them, and some people may get put off by the politics.*

And yet there is a desire within the club to embrace greater ethnic diversity which is not always realised;

*It may just be uncomfortable for them coming from a different background. I would love to get more involved, and know of other people who would love to get involved with refugees and people of that status.*

And there have been proactive attempts to recruit more from black ethnic groups, utilising potential role models from within the club, with some success;

*We tried to sort out all the Cowgirls from BME (Black Minority Ethnic) background, younger women, and we have had to sort of pick that and involve them in the campaign. And we did a big push and it really has been tremendously successful.*

But the limited proportions of non-white members are the result of a number of factors. These may be characterised as a combination of push and pull. Pull factors are incentives which make other options than joining the club more attractive for some ethnic groups like playing in the Jamaican team. But push factors are largely the result of unconscious exclusion on the basis of cultural difference whereby the club projects an identity at odds with some ethnic cultural norms. So despite being incontrovertibly anti-racist the club may still unwittingly reinforce some ethnic barriers. And one participant remarked;

*Obviously we do have quite a few none white people. Some communities are harder to approach; I can honestly say that I don't know any Somalians! I think that language does sometimes play a barrier. (And) I think maybe the fact that we are based in a pub.*

So ethnic difference constituted elsewhere may be re-constituted more locally. Some aspects of club culture, like alternative dress sense, hairstyles, body adornment, punk music and heavy drinking, project a counter-cultural signification at odds with other ethnic reference points. Effectively the club may promote a sub-culture ultimately associated with “whiteness”. But it is also important to stress that the club is not mono-cultural and embraces diversity, including aspects of Caribbean culture such as reggae and dub music. Nevertheless, those distinctive aspects of club culture associated with whiteness may actively perpetuate ethnic difference even if this is at odds with aspects of the club’s ethos. And some club activity may reinforce a sense of ethnic difference to outsiders, an “otherness”, or “them and us”;

*There were some Easton Cowboys t-shirts that said anti-fascism, and on the back “if you are not anti-fascist fuck you”. And I was like ooohh!; you can’t have Easton Cowboys wearing fuck you on their backs. Think of them walking around Easton and the message you are sending the Easton community. Can you imagine an Asian woman walking along with her two children and thinking I don’t want somebody swearing at me. ..They were really popular on the tournament scene, but I didn’t think that was being considerate of the community in which we operate.*

### **Local Community Influence**

*We have always been antiracist. Now we are more spread out over the city and beyond. ..People join due to word of mouth and as we are antiracist; but not necessarily from the local community.*

It has been stressed that Easton is a diverse multi-cultural community. So any notion of local community cannot be seen as homogenous. A sense of community is as complex and diverse in Easton as it is within the club itself;

*It is one of the communities that co-exist in Easton. I think there are lots of different communities in Easton, Muslim families being another, another being the alternative post squatter community of Keble who do lots of positive things to promote social change but have nothing to do with sport.*

Yet the club is still “hosted” in Easton and its relationship with local non-members, and the influence of that relationship, is interesting. The club is part of the tapestry of local community activism. Its overt proclamation of anti-establishment activity and DIY resistance cannot be ignored;

*We are just trying to be a positive influence in Easton. We are just trying to celebrate all the good things about what Easton is. We are trying to say that we are proud of living in Easton, that we like it here. We like the diversity and we think it’s a good place to live.*

It signifies solidarity with locals in the face of oppression and offers an inspirational template for self-empowerment. It implies unity in adversity;

*I think Easton is crucial to the character of the Cowboys. Although sometimes the contact from the everyday community might seem tenuous, both sides take something from the “underdog” situation they find themselves in.*

But apart from the broader influence that the club may have locally, there is also the influence of the host upon the club;

*Maybe it’s made us more open to new ideas and people from different backgrounds than, say, a mono-cultural sports club in Kingswood or Clifton.*

But perhaps the biggest influence of locality upon the club is that it is a product of Easton. It owes its existence to its genesis amidst the local cultural milieu. And it owes its continued prosperity, in part, to its continued acceptance. It is an icon of the local cultural landscape;

*I can't imagine Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls flourishing in other areas in Bristol where there is not such diversity and a way such tolerance of difference and 'alternative' lifestyles. So I think the community of Easton must be one where clubs like Cowboys can flourish, where in other areas we would be suppressed or complained about.*

### **Community Action and Activism**

*Everybody who gets involved with the Easton Cowboys begins to realise that they have got potential. You don't wait for the bosses or the people in charge to organise things. If you want them to happen you just get on with it and do it yourself. And I think that has been a huge learning curve for a lot of people who have got involved with the Cowboys.*

### **Critical Consciousness**

Many of the club heartily engage in community action and activism. And activism is largely fuelled by a sense of injustice and a critical consciousness of its causes. Earlier some of the issues affecting Easton were discussed and participants had no hesitation in linking those problems and their solutions to wider structural socio-political processes;

*I don't think the problems are unique to Easton. Unfortunately they are mirrored in similar areas of the country.*

Most of Easton's problems were attributed to economic inequality, a lack of social mobility and ultimately poverty;

*Division in society which makes young people think they don't have anything to lose; Non progressive drugs policy (prohibition) which plays into hands of criminals, the government's failure to tackle unemployment and low pay. Lack of opportunity for young people, boredom, gang culture; which gives disaffected youth a sense of belonging to something. Lack of support for low income families, welfare system based on myths; that the unemployed and those living in poverty are somehow responsible for their own unemployment and poverty.*

Despite once being more affluent Easton has a history of poverty but poverty was not seen simply as something that people inherit. Its' perpetuation was attributed to active social processes in a contemporary context, and the cause and effect of more specific social problems were derived from that;

*Most of those problems are chasing down to poverty aren't they? You find poverty and you often find drugs and alcohol and friction between communities.*

Participants described how places, like Easton, could become trapped in cycle of deprivation and how communities could deteriorate into sink estates; how there was flight amongst those with the economic or social capital to do so, whilst others were left behind; to either accept their situation, or fight back;

*We live in a capitalist system. ..If you are born into something historically that was a poor area then the possibilities of getting out or moving on; ..essentially what a lot of people want to do is get out ..There seems to be an issue of wanting to remove yourself from there rather than make a place better. Obviously there are a lot of people who live in Easton and want to improve the community and have been there all their lives, but ..a lot of people don't want to hang around, and move on; and they can see an opportunity so they go.*

Participants were very critical of capitalism and somewhat fatalistic of its consequences;

*Well it comes down to money basically! ..It goes back to capitalism really; they are the losers historically aren't they.*

And participants were very critical of the complicity of government in perpetuating inequality inherent in capitalism;

*This big society thing is all very well but they are basically already disadvantaging all the people that are already disadvantaged in the system. They are not supporting people on low income, young people, local business; a wide variety of things. ..The root cause of those problems is economic and equality and the government not doing much about that.*

There were mixed views about the power and capacity of the national and local government to address issues convincingly. Some thought the potential power for change existed but there was a lack of interest or willingness to carry it through;

*They definitely have the power to solve those problems because they have solved them for themselves but they are not interested in anyone else. I think if the government had been interested in solving problems for people they would have made more of an effort to do it. I don't think they are terribly interested. So no, I don't think there has been a particular effort to get on and make Easton a better place and certainly from the major statutory agencies.*

Another somewhat fatalistic view was that even when those with the willingness to do something attempted to influence within conventional political structures; they were ultimately co-opted by the hegemony of dominant interests into perpetuating inequality;

*I don't know why people go into it but they certainly lose track of why they did. I think that they get elected to office on the basis of moral and social responsibility but the whole process kicks that out of them quite quickly. I have certainly seen people, good solid people, been elected to Councils, and then they are bogged down in minutia, and you never get near to the real problems; and get sucked into a process which is designed to keep people much the same as they can and not change them.*

There was concern about a democratic deficit whereby the views of those opposed to the dominant hegemony were marginalised and not represented in the seats of power;

*I think that anyone with radical ideas, representative politics doesn't seem the place to express those and get anything done; it's only in very strange circumstances. I don't think that's what representing equality is about changing really, and then anyone that does want to change things finds out that they can't. They find out that they are compromised and accommodated and all those sorts of things.*

It was felt that for equality to be addressed significantly, the dissolution of vested interest was necessary with a genuine devolution of power back to the people;

*The government has not given the reigns to the people that it should be. They are too busy trying to create things and make sure everything is okay for the people who are in power. It's silly! I just think that if we made a more equal society, everybody would benefit. I think all of the problems would be reduced if the division was made less.*

But there were also views that even a radical reform was inadequate and that a more revolutionary approach was necessary;

*I would have class warfare! ..Take the money back and redistribute the wealth; put money into communities, put money into drug treatment programmes or anti-racist programmes or something like that. I mean there is always money in offshore accounts. What is it; £200 billion?! Take the money off all these people who are rich and have avoided paying, put it back into the communities instead of harrowing the communities, which are quite vibrant places really, and just get forced into a miserable place because of the rich! ..You need proper revolution.*

### **Sport Activism**

*When I first started it was just having a laugh and kicking a ball about really but now it has become something completely different. ..It has become something none of us could have conceived. ..It's more than just men's football as it started out at the beginning. It's more than just kicking a ball around.*

There was an understanding that sport helped to build a sense of community and other community benefits. Some of these benefits were inherent to sport but there were other indirect spin-offs that were also valuable beyond sport;

*It encourages us to do something healthy and social which is good for wellbeing. Individuals can try different sports too. It has attracted many people who might otherwise be isolated people with mental health problems, socially isolated, those new to area, gay women. Lots of friendships and support networks have developed. Lots of relationships, children and marriages have resulted from having a wide likeminded community.*

But there was also an understanding that the benefits of sport were not unconditional;

*Sport is fun and healthy. The social stuff is fun also, but not always so healthy!*

The opportunity for social or political activism through sport, sport activism, was important to the club, but there was a feeling that it was more likely amongst the core members and perhaps that collectively it had diminished over time;

*I think that is probably less of a shared vision of things than it was 10 – 15 years ago.*

And there was acknowledgement that the club, as elsewhere, encountered a mixture of apathy and activism;

*A kind of microcosm of society; and you have got people within a group who are driven and want to do a huge amount and essentially, want to do a lot of selfless work, and then you have got people in the group who essentially do very little. ..Essentially, we all have a certain amount of responsibility for the way that things are and we all get dealt slightly different hands.*

But there was an enthusiasm for what the club did beyond sport, its volunteering, DIY culture, and the use of sport as a community development tool;

*Trying to break down boundaries through sport; it's not just a sports club, it's a sports and social club. So it's really about trying to reach out to other communities, to find common ground and create opportunities for other people to sort of meet each other and share experiences through sports. I think that happens locally, in Europe and internationally. We achieve lots with a little, which shows what can be achieved through volunteering and by doing it for ourselves.*

It was felt that the club offered a vibrant community hub, inclusive supportive atmosphere, and springboard for empowering activity;

*We benefit from having a rich and diverse social and cultural life that many others do not have. People have had opportunities to do things; e.g. put on events, travel, perform in front of others, fundraise, travel and meet other communities. That would have been impossible for them to do as individuals without the club.*

### **Opportunity and Empowerment**

*The combination amongst the Cowboys/Cowgirls of 'can-do' and DIY has made many things happen over the years, and encouraged any amount of 'social entrepreneurship', self-expression and community self-organisation.*

There are many examples of how the club has created opportunities for empowerment. These are linked directly to the core values of DIY, and for some; anarchy. Core members express great pride in seeing others develop and achieve things;

*We have always said encourage people to do things and take on responsibility. You know the famous thing of if you say you are going to do something; then do it, don't wait for others to organise your club for you, do it yourself, put the ideas out there and not be afraid I think. That's the general belief, you don't wait for people to organise stuff; you do it yourself.*

A strong emphasis is put on providing an inclusive supportive atmosphere which encourages people to think ambitiously, take risks, and take responsibility;

*There is an atmosphere, an environment there, that if you have an idea there are people around who are going to follow it and buy into your idea. And then those that buy into your idea are going to be prepared to put some time into it. If someone comes up with a mad idea, don't immediately dismiss it as a mad idea. ..With the Cowboys they say; well if we want to do that how do we go about it?*

Creative freedom is encouraged, there are different interest groups, and support is generous;

*By in large, it's unconditional. ..People are pretty free and easy, within fairly wide parameters, to say and think what they like and the support runs pretty deep. I think also because of the size people are able to find their own position. With that, if you like, there are circles within circles and that filters down throughout the club. And it's possible for people to find a place within that or maybe find more than one place within that.*

Through the mixture of organisational activity; running sports teams, arranging trips and tours, hosting tournaments and socials, the club enables people to build skills and confidence;

*Everybody has skills but these are often untapped and never given the chance to flourish. But I believe (the club) gives people the confidence to; A) speak up at meetings B) the chance to use these skills, ..to interact with people who are initially strangers.*

The club is perceived as both social and educational, a welcoming atmosphere which also stimulates people to think critically, raise awareness, and take action;

*The group encourages people to take action, use their talents and energies and get involved play sports, socialise, have fun, make friends, keep fit... We have had people who have had their eyes opened to things. I have certainly had my eyes opened to all the wider political agenda when I joined the club.*

Some are conscious of being social entrepreneurs and building social capital and capacity;

*Social entrepreneurship would be establishing 6 football teams, 3 cricket teams and 3 netball teams, and that whole social universe that surrounds all of that. You could say that the people organising all that, setting it up and getting it running, could be social entrepreneurs. So you are looking at the social capital, which are the people that you have got, and you are looking to see out of that; social capital.*

### **Empowering Individuals**

*I have seen people gain in confidence, like being part of a group and being respected within that group, then feeling they can take on responsibility and engage in taking on responsibility. And they feel like they can gain respect and grow in confidence. I can see people who have been through that process and have gained confidence and grown as a person, you know, and I have seen it amongst a huge amount of other people as well.*

There is a big emphasis on confidence building as a building block for self-esteem and personal empowerment;

*People have come in really quite under-confident and have really grown in confidence since they have got involved in things, either their sporting ability, or just getting involved in putting something on, or an event, or just kind of volunteering, or someone asking them to do something and then taking it on. So we have had people here in the Cowgirls who have been very low emotionally or lonely or suffered from mental health problems and I think have really benefited from being part of a community where they have fun playing football, have a pint and meet people. I think it's a very embracing club.*

And many examples where that has been witnessed or experienced;

*I was able to write some stuff up about the club and get various media involved. .. As time has gone on I have grown in confidence more personally and within myself.*

And there is an awareness of support to cultivate and share skills to enhance personal development;

*They have got the club behind them and I think you have people trying to do things and they haven't done it before. ..Skills that they have got from elsewhere. ..You can achieve quite amazing things at times. ..It gives people a lot of freedom to try things, and to grow and to get better at things, and take things on, perhaps that you wouldn't get elsewhere in your life to do.*

There is awareness that the club offers people opportunities they might not ordinarily get in everyday life;

*The club allows individuals to take on positions of responsibility that maybe they wouldn't otherwise get in a normal job. People are encouraged to get involved and take on responsibilities.*

And many of the skills people have developed have been transferable back into their paid work, and some have had their aspirations raised to create new careers and businesses;

*You can go into your proper working life with more confidence having organised things, and actually helping to organise your own life maybe a little bit better or, your work life better having got that confidence.*

There are examples of people who have had their lives transformed through the club. These include some who have managed to get life back on track;

*The most obvious way that it has changed people is that they might be total dope heads or speed freaks and party animals, then they get involved with the Easton Cowboys, and suddenly they find themselves organising things.*

Someone who only joined to play football, but *had his eyes opened*, subsequently developed the skills necessary to later run a significant annual civic film festival. The club has played an important role offering individual empowerment;

*Definitely changed people's attitudes as to what they can do and what they can achieve as individuals. I think, just by seeing what has been achieved by a bunch of ordinary people getting their heads together to make a good idea work. And I think that is possibly the way it has changed most people.*

So the social capital built within the club has significantly enabled many individuals to improve the quality of their lives;

*Some of the netball women got involved in setting up the 2007 tournament and got involved in the licensing side and learnt how to make a licence application and learnt how to ensure it was all legal, etc. I think some of them have gone on to work in licensing off the back of that experience. You know its mundane in a way, but it is like a concrete example of where experience with the Cowboys have given people skills, confidence and those sorts of things. Once you have seen a bunch of your mates turn over a planning application then you are not afraid of what local government or authorities are going to come up with, because you are part of an organisation that will resist it if necessary, and will challenge and stand up for itself.*

## Empowering Communities

*What would Easton be like without the Cowboys? Good question! I'm not sure I can answer that question really; I don't know to be honest.*

There is overwhelming evidence of the extent to which the club has empowered individuals. And to an extent, if enough individuals are empowered, social capital and capacity built, then whole communities are developed and empowered;

*..It's nurtured definitely. In terms of capacity building then, a lot of capacity has been built within the Easton Cowboys that they can take forward into their family, working and community lives.*

The club itself, as community, is certainly empowered, but there is some ambivalence on the extent to which the club may have contributed to the development of Easton;

*There may be ways in which Easton carries on itself regardless of the Easton Cowboys and I am sure there are many other ways in which Easton has been influenced by the Cowboys.*

But the club have been an influence on many, and an inspiration to some, beyond their own confines both at home and abroad;

*Even the Cowboys/Cowgirls league; we have only found one other one in the country so far where we have been able to make opportunities to play competitively outside of the sort of competitive leagues etc. or out of school. So I think; by example its ordinary people achieving a lot. I think that is something that has then inspired other communities. ..The Cowboys and Cowgirls club has achieved some amazing things like going over to Mexico and Palestine, putting on really big events ..teams come over and use the good ideas that people have had or thought to do and they have actually happened so I think the club has inspired people elsewhere to do things,*

The club are particularly proud of their achievement abroad, the impact that has had, and dismiss any notion of superficiality;

*I don't think it is just political tourism, and I have met political tourists, those sort of people go places once; tick it off the list. ..to raise money for Zapatistas over a decade now, Palestine over half a decade now still, partnerships planned ..I know what you mean by political posturing.*

As stated previously, the club off-shoot, KIPTIK, has raised over £100,000 for Zapatista community water projects; *Quite a few communities have running water now!* And whilst in the communities, club members also acted as human rights observers. They have helped to draw attention to the Zapatistas cause, boost their morale, and let them know they are not alone in their struggle. But the club does not blow its own trumpet too loudly about Mexico or Palestine as it is conscious of the possible implications;

*You have to be careful about how much publicity you can get out there because it can endanger people getting too much publicity.*

## Impact and Sustainability

*I am fascinated, and still fascinated about this whole thing (from) the start. It's a big experiment really; a social experiment to see what we can do, really. It might well die in the next 10 year. I don't think it will and I think it will still be around in some shape or form; and yes just to see how it develops?*

When considering what impact the club has made, some conclusions were made in relation to providing opportunities for sport. This may seem relatively mundane when compared to the more spectacular initiatives the club has taken, but sport is the bulk of club activity. And it has been an ardent passion for many, a focal point for much other social activity, a sense of community, and is defended in its own right;

*It gives people a chance to play sport, socialise, and forget for a moment at least their problems in life. These may to some sound trivial but to me are very important.*

But the impact of the club has been felt far beyond the realm of sport. It has offered a credo and exemplar for life; *A local model for getting things done without relying on anyone but themselves*, the legacy of a "can do" attitude; *born out of the DIY nature of the 80's*. In some respects that is a lesson about ethics, methods and process. When the club took a leading role, alongside the local community, to resist development on local playing fields, the campaign did not entirely succeed in achieving its aim. But that does not mean the campaign was entirely a failure;

*They learnt a lot about not accepting and taking council drivel, excuse me! They fought it saying no it's an open space land and things like that, even though we lost I think that they are quite proud of their efforts.*

The club has fostered local pride; *I'd like to think that we give Easton a good name*, and motivated people to organise activities;

*It also helps to inspire. ..Others sometimes take up the baton and do things themselves. ..We do a lot of political stuff as a group or as individuals like being involved with refugee tournament teams or anti-racist tournaments.*

It has raised awareness and inspired individuals to take more control of their lives, and make changes; like the chiropractor who, after joining the club, decided to offer a free service for homeless people;

*That is having an impact from an individual out to a group; .. something the political government is ignoring. So that is a sort of political statement in a way.*

The club has been running for more than twenty years, has achieved an incredible amount in that time, and continues to innovate, but there are still threats to its sustainability. There is little complacency, but some harbour a somewhat melancholy fear that the club may might slide into a terminal decline;

*For me it has been a great ride. And I actually said a couple of weeks or months ago that it has come to a bit of an end at the moment and maybe this is the end? I don't know. But I don't regret it. I am really pleased that I have been involved. I don't feel that I have wasted my time. I think it has been a very worthwhile project to have been involved in and I have met loads of great people and had a very good and enjoyable time. It has been good! Who know it may be the end? At the moment I feel quite*

*detached from it, but not in a negative way, just that things have changed. I am proud of it and it has been a great thing to have been involved in. And when I say it, I kind of mean the Cowboys but I also mean the wider community; which is the people that we have met along the way.*

Previously, the Plough pub has been under threat. Some believe the club's prosperity is strongly linked to the pub's continued existence;

*It has been the central pub ever since the start. If that shut down, that meeting place, that magnet sort of thing where people go, whether they have arranged it or not arranged it; it's a meeting place of the team. That has always been where we have had out parties and things like that. I think that might be detrimental to a catastrophic degree. ..I don't think the Cowboys realise that the Plough plays a vital core part of their business.*

There is also some concern that the club is simply getting too big;

*It is far easier when you are small to keep common issues and keep decision making fair and make people feel involved and consulted. I think that the bigger you get that harder that is. ..It's harder to be that kind of club when you have got just so many people in it. ..So I think sheer size is one of the main sorts of challenges really.*

This issue relates to a perceived dilution of the club's political roots. Many feel the club is not as political as it used to be and, although still broadly left-wing, is now more social in nature;

*Going back say 20 odd years historically, it was hard left politics like class war and various other groupings like that. And that's the politics it kind of came out of. And I think that somehow the Cowboys have kind of managed to hang onto that, even though I would say a lot of people that you may talk to within the club would not necessarily put themselves in that box now.*

Another significant issue is the aging of the original core membership. Although many others have joined the core since, there is inevitability twenty years on that many of the influential early members that did so much to give the club its values, identity and impetus are moving on. This may be due to some moving away, others finding new passions, but mainly to the consequences of aging in competitive physical activity. There was some anxiety from those concerned that the club might not survive without them;

*A few years ago there were a few of us, and I would include myself in this, but we were kind of reluctant to sort of let go most of the time because we felt if we didn't keep it going the way it was going then it would fall apart. I can't remember the details but I do remember a particular meeting where we just felt we have got to kind of let this go and let other people run with it and if it dies it dies and if it doesn't great, and it hasn't and it doesn't show any signs of doing that, at the moment. There is too much enthusiasm.*

And there was some concern that maybe those founders had not done enough to recruit the next set of leaders and regenerate the club;

*The people that have been there all the time are in their 50's and I was concerned about 4 or 5 years ago. ..I raised concerns that it was the same bunch of us organising things and setting things up that had done the one previously and that we hadn't done enough to involve newer and younger members of the club.*

There was recognition that for a new core to emerge the original core might need to create the space for successors to emerge;

*All we can do, the older people in the club, is to allow them to come through and encourage ideas and take a step back really. ... to encourage people to put their own ideas in there really.*

So the originals, conscious of their limited longevity, have been also active in developing their successors;

*We kind of had a peak and then dipped and dived, but I think at the moment you have got kind of two generations at certain points in the club now, you know Fathers and Sons involved, and I don't know if you have got Mothers and Daughters, possibly, but you have got that kind of history to it. I think that a lot of people who were involved early on have gotten people involved and they see the value of it and they have kind of picked up the mantel, I think, going back to the idea of leadership.*

So despite some initial pessimism, the club appears to have safeguarded its immediate future;

*We have seen a new generation of Cowboys and Cowgirls, many of them children of members, younger brothers etc, getting involved in the club and being proactive.*

The issue has also created learning that regeneration is a process that continues perpetually;

*The bunch of people that are now in the Cowboys are in their 30's and late 20's primarily and a lot of us involved 5 – 10 years ago are a bit more peripheral. There is definitely something there that we need to keep recruiting new people and if we don't involve them in our activities and get them to see how thing can be achieved then things could die. We are into the second generation now though. My son is playing cricket, so a lot of us have had kids and a lot of our kids are Cowboys and Cowgirls. So there is something there for the future definitely. The future doesn't just happen though, it needs some thought put into it.*

So the club has embraced the challenge of ensuring its sustainability and identified that its long term future requires constant regeneration;

*It's not always been easy but it's still going strong. ...You can never rest of your laurels; It's a healthy organisation.*

### **Hopes and Aspirations**

In line with club values and its sense of project and ambition, there was a desire that the club's ideas might be adopted more broadly elsewhere;

*I would like other ideas to catch on amongst clubs in the professional game. ...It would be great if professional teams would allow women to play at the same level as men. I can't see that happening any time now, but the dream would be our ideas to be taken seriously.*

A number of aspirations were expressed for the sports club and its membership related to sustainability. There was an overwhelming desire that the club could acquire its own ground and club house within Easton;

*I would love for the Cowboys to have our own ground, a bit of open ground. I would love to be able to create a cricket pitch and football pitch in our local community... If that happens we could have a greater impact in the local community than what I think we have had, because more people would see the ground and be attracted to us. That would also be quite beneficial in keeping people from getting into trouble. Sport does have that benefit.*

There was a strong desire that the club subsequently regenerates enough to continue to build on the good work started by its founders. And that the club builds on its inclusiveness, recruits more non-white people, and is able to raise funds to subsidise more travelling to international events;

*Equality of opportunity; ..that is what we are about; trying to give anybody, no matter what their background or skill level, an opportunity to be part of a club and play. ..that no matter what your ability or who you are, we would hope that you would be able to be in our club.*

But, given the nature of the club, aspirations were not confined to football and much desire was expressed for equality of opportunity to be extended to a fairer society and the eradication of poverty. There was broad agreement that this was not something that was likely to happen by reform within the current political system; *Something far more revolutionary is required.* Many saw what they were doing as part of a wider struggle, that connected the local to the global, a long game of resistance allied to revolutionary aims;

*Raise a people's army and seize control of the state. ..We don't condone capitalism and in fact it would have to be a global thing. ..You dismantle capitalism piece by piece. So you would be looking at a 150 year project to turn the world into a sustainable way of supporting itself, I would hope, and it would be anti-racist and anti-sexist and all those sorts of things.*

### Conclusions

The Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls sports and social club have created something truly unique. The achievements can be assessed as outcomes in terms of activity and events, but also the methods through which this has been achieved and by the values that underlie them. As an inner city sports club they have built a large, and growing, vibrant community with a number of different teams within a variety of sports for both sexes. They have also campaigned politically and taken their activity worldwide, toured troubled hotspots, and cultivated a supportive network of like-minded organisations worldwide who take inspiration from the Club's exploits. And they have managed to sustain this over more than twenty years.

These activities have grown from the seeds of the club's philosophy and political disposition. And perhaps the greatest achievement has been the veracity of the club's method and organisational process. From its punk and antifascist origins, the club has maintained an autonomous Do It Yourself philosophy. Its anarchist and leftist influences have located the club within a broader struggle of resistance and cultivated critical consciousness at its core.

The club's uncompromising, self-determined, go-it-alone DIY drive has led to ambitious socio-political and community activism. And its by-product of supportive creativity has enabled vision and imagination. The commitment to democratic, bottom up, community-led activity has created an empowering culture within the club which has inspired individuals and built greater social capital and capacity to impact well beyond the club's confines.

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The club has been tenacious in holding to its values and robust and rigorous in plotting the integrity of its journey. The durability of the club has been enabled through a perpetual and virtuous cycle of self-development with organisational skills built from within. A strong core has been sustained and regenerated through an adherence to empowering others to step forward and a lead. The Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls sports and social club is a shining beacon for community action and activism.

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