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A vision of the future

When an Indian summer was still making autumn seem a distant prospect, the National Culture Forum invited the leisure sector to London for a conference on the future of culture, tourism and sport. Jonathan Ives watched some of the auguries at work.

In the capital in mid-September cultural stories were making headlines: exhibitions and openings, London 2012 and budgetary concerns, Boris Johnson in New York goading his hosts with tales of his city's cultural successes. And at a conference venue just round the corner from Broadcasting House the National Culture Forum, a grouping of many of the leading organisations within the sport, leisure and culture sector, welcomed delegates to its fifth annual event.

Councillor Stephen Castle, deputy chairman of the Local Government Association's culture, tourism and sport board, began the day by suggesting that local government was still a key player in the delivery of cultural services and experiences to the wider public. Changes will come – libraries are likely to look very different with the continuing impact of technology, for example, and many people are likely to access leisure services in different ways and for different reasons – but local government is still likely to be the biggest investor in the sector. Free swimming, he noted, had been an excellent initiative but it represents a big cost for local authorities. "We need to be reassured that when funding comes to an end we won't drop off a cliff," he said. This will represent a significant challenge for the government, whichever party has formed the new administration next year. Having mentioned the coming election, Castle made a plea on behalf of the leisure sector. "We do have to make sure that culture is at the top of the agenda," he said. "People are passionate about it because it affects their ability to enjoy and celebrate their lives."

Martyn Allison, the Improvement and Development Agency's national adviser on culture and sport, picked up the theme of local government's contribution to the delivery of cultural services. Having stood to address the issue of "understanding the potential of strategic commissioning to contribute to positive outcomes beyond service boundaries", he conceded that this might not be the most exciting brief with which to work. "Why am I here talking about something as boring as commissioning?" he asked. "Because it is part of the process of moving to where we want to be. It could be the process to generate innovation and new ways of working. And it could generate new income streams."

Culture and sport had, Allison argued, made huge strides in the past five or six years. In June 2008 90% of local area agreements had improvement targets related to sport and culture. The 2009 place survey showed positive levels of satisfaction with libraries (69% of respondents satisfied) but less so with other leisure services. A better understanding of the commissioning process could make a profound difference to the sector. For example, one half of one percent of the government's total health spend could bring a 45% increase in local authority spending on culture and sport.

"We say that we can improve people's health," Allison said. "Why don't we ask to be paid for doing it? It could be done via commissioning and some authorities, for example Wigan and Sefton, are already doing it." However, the sector will need to get organised to engage with the commissioning process. "The challenge is that we need to change the way we work rather than expect them to change the way they work."

Allison was blunt about the leisure sector's need to meet the expectation of those commissioning services. Commissioners do not understand how leisure services are organised, they do not understand local fragmentation and leisure will have to provide evidence that we can make a difference.

"We still go into commissioning meetings looking for money to deliver our services," he said. "We need to understand the commissioners' point of view. We can improve what we offer by bringing together what we have been doing so far. If we can do it properly the next three or four years might be the biggest opportunity the sector has ever had."

As the Tories' shadow culture minister, Ed Vaizey MP has made detailed plans for the next four years and, with many assuming that the Conservative party will be forming the next government, his vision of the future comes with added value. Having held the cultural brief since 2005, Vaizey claimed experience of the sector and assured his audience that his team believes in the value of the sector: "We're on your side," he said. First on his list of priorities will be the reform of the national lottery: "We're committed to returning lottery spending to the original good causes rather than pet government projects." A Tory government will also be committed to a mixed arts economy and to free access to museums. Time will not be wasted on reorganising quangos but there will have to be a



Culture: people are passionate about it

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Martyn Allison: "biggest opportunity"

debate with Arts Council. Vaizey assured his audience that the arms-length principle of management of the arts will be honoured but that any Tory government “would want to see the Arts Council stretch itself further”.

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Vaizey explained that the Conservative Party is not planning to make cultural services statutory but the shadow team is devising plans for what he described as a “much clearer cultural education offer through local authorities”. A libraries advisory unit has been mooted and the shadow minister is of the opinion that one of the biggest problems facing the libraries sector is that their good work is not being shared among local authorities. Heritage will enjoy a renewed focus and tourism, an area which, Vaizey argued, has not been adequately represented in parliament, will benefit from a dedicated tourism minister and a review of tourism infrastructure under a Tory administration. Sport will be expected to be delivered efficiently with empowered local authorities central to the process. Looking at the London Olympics, a legacy task force has been set up and the shadow team will also be looking at the cultural Olympiad, which, in the shadow minister’s opinion, is still too biased towards subsidised arts.

Vaizey had sought to walk the wavering wire between the twin stances of the radical and the reassuring, making a success of such an apparently contradictory task as only a Cambridge-educated barrister latterly employed as a public relations consultant could. As The Leisure Review slipped from the conference hall and headed for other appointments, confident that the speculating and predicting would continue for the rest of the day, it was the prospect of securing one half of one percentage point of the health spend for sport, leisure and culture, a tantalus in sight but as yet out of reach, that had stuck in the mind.

The IDeA has published a discussion paper and guidance on improving strategic commissioning in the culture and sport sector. Documents can be found on the IDeA website: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=9202260>

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