

The Leisure Review Summit

In recent months numerous conversations about the state of the sport, leisure and culture sector have revealed a string of common themes and shared concerns. Keen to provide an opportunity for debate, *The Leisure Review* invited some senior figures from across the leisure industry to take part in a facilitated debate on the future of the leisure sector. The TLR Summit was born.

Over the course of the past year or so the editorial team at *The Leisure Review* has enjoyed numerous discussions with various colleagues about the current state of the sport, leisure and culture sector, about its future and the nature of the leadership that would be required if the sector is to build on its achievements and respond to the continuing challenges of the economic and political environment. It was not hard to detect some common themes and issues running through these separate conversations, a string of similar questions and concerns expressed by senior figures working in very different areas of the cultural landscape. A number of colleagues shared our feeling that it might be both interesting and useful to get a selection of these people together to discuss some of the issues in greater detail and the concept of the TLR Summit was born.

The inaugural TLR Summit was held at the Reform Club in London in early June. Invitations to individuals across the sector had brought a dozen people to the lunch table and Martyn Allison, national cultural adviser at the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and our facilitator for the afternoon, introduced an appropriately themed menu of topics for a lunchtime debate. The first course was to consider whether the sport, leisure and culture sector was in a position to survive the current recession, the main course would be to ask from where effective leadership for the sector might emerge, while dessert would address the issue of the state of the sector in ten years' time.

Opening with the impact of the economic downturn on the sector, Martyn noted the findings of a recent survey that suggested some 52% of local authority chief executives think culture and sport will be a prime target for spending cuts. The only surprise, he suggested, was that 48% of respondents thought differently. No sooner had he posed the first question – can we survive as a sector and if we are to survive will advocacy or performance be more effective? – than one of the gathering questioned whether we could use the word 'sector' at all. The debate was joined and, while all present could see a commonality of interest and the value of a concerted approach, few were convinced or convincing that this meant a 'sport, leisure and culture sector' could be treated as a coherent entity. As one individual put it: "Talk of 'the sector' is rather highfalutin'."

Although there was no support for giving up on the idea of a sector, the point was made that despite great efforts and no little financial investment, sport, leisure and culture does not have a good track record of working in harmony, something that could be seen to have had a negative effect on the willingness of national government to invest. Most agreed that the sector was fragmented – "never completely disparate but never completely co-ordinated either" – but some argued that a completely co-ordinated sector was an unrealistic expectation and that it did not necessarily impact upon available resources. The sector does have a track record of innovation in response to differing demands and a co-ordinated response is not always possible – or even desirable – in such circumstances.

With central government sure to be looking for evidence of a return on any investment, advocacy and leadership within the sector will be more important than ever, although as one contributor had it: "We will need to be better salespeople as our product is so unwieldy." But selling is not an innovative endeavour and the question was posed: where is the 'thought leadership' for the sector? No clear answer was identified and the fact that this debate had been organised by an independent magazine rather than by any of the available agencies was briefly weighed.

As the debate continued it was widely felt that the ability to identify and nurture young talent within the sector had significantly declined, with advocacy on behalf of the sector declining along with it. There is, it was said, "no vehicle that champions champions" and getting a place for leisure around the new policy tables will take a great effort. Success will only come if we can be sure that we are delivering high-quality services that deliver effective outcomes.

The quality of provision was felt to be a key concern. As one contributor put it: "My fear is that a significant majority of the funding in our sector isn't really delivering quality. Safe and mediocre is not enough if we are going to sit at these new tables. If we've got something good to offer, people will want to buy into it but we need to raise the bar." It was acknowledged that while there are very good local authorities



One side of the debate



The other side of the debate on the other side of the table

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delivering excellent sports and cultural service, some authorities are still performing poorly: "The improvement agenda has to be at the core of everything we do. If what we do is not good we need to admit it but we need more champions to celebrate the best of what we do."

It was agreed that there is much to celebrate but those around the table working outside a sporting environment suggested that a national understanding of what culture in its widest sense delivers to the nation might be effective in demonstrating the sizeable return being made on the investment at a local and national level. A strong voice for the sector as a whole could challenge the damaging effects of political expediency and the short-term approach that often undermines the achievements of cultural services. Others noted that while some national governing bodies of sport, all of which are "on a major trajectory of change", might legitimately feel themselves to be outside a coherent sport, leisure and culture sector, many have demonstrated a willingness to change attitudes and levels of performance in response to changing expectations.

There was some soup spilt when it was suggested that the free swimming initiative offered an example of how damaging an absence of effective leadership on behalf of the sector could be but there was general agreement that opportunities to maximise the impact of investment had been missed. This, it was argued, was largely because there was no one in place tasked with challenging the key aspects of the proposal and explaining the practicalities and opportunities to the DCMS. Lessons had been learned from the Welsh scheme but had not been transferred to England. As one contributor acerbically noted: "That's not learning; that's not even listening."

Learning from experience and communicating that experience was recognised by many around the table as an important function, with one individual noting: "It is not so much whether the sector will survive but in what form it will survive. We have to be able to position ourselves strategically against key national and local government goals. As outcomes become more and more important there is the potential to survive the recession in good shape but we are going to need to evidence the impact of what we do. We have been good at the 'wicked issues' but we need to be able to show the evidence."

The arrival of the lamb heralded a new question: where will the leadership the sector requires be found? It was suggested that local authorities have traditionally looked to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for strategic and national leadership but, while the government department had demonstrated its ability to get people round the table and generate debate, it sees its role as facilitator rather than provider of leadership for the wider sector. General nodding accompanied the rather terse comment: "I don't believe the DCMS are competent to lead national debate. At best they offer knowledge-sharing not thought leadership." For the fifteen years prior to 2007 the National Sports Development Seminar had consistently demonstrated that the raw material from which leaders could be made existed but there were currently few environments where senior and more junior managers could find the time for informal discussion and debate, building the contacts and relationships essential to professional development. The case was made for the Scottish Sports Development Conference, the organisers of which have shown that passion and a commitment to political engagement does still exist within the sector and that it brings its own rewards.

While it was agreed that the talent to lead the sector is probably out there, the group around the summit table also recognised that there is "not one single repository of good ideas" and, of even greater concern, that there is little within the sector to encourage innovation and brave decision-making. It was felt that the sector needs to be able to share knowledge and offer solutions to people under pressure, but this should not be a top-down process: "The future is not about data. Policy-makers like a narrative and for that they need intelligence not data."

Finding out what is being tried around the country, what works and what does not, would currently require lengthy in-depth research. Few individuals operating at a senior level would have the time for this and few feel that they have time for roles that might embrace leadership within and on behalf of the wider sector. In the absence of the leisure equivalent of the CBI, the sport, leisure and culture sector needs to develop and refine a clear message of achievement, a 'Yes We Can' message for leisure. The fact that some of the current crop of highly successful Croatian tennis players had learned to play in disused swimming pools showed what can be achieved with determination and clarity of purpose but the proposal to call upon the LTA to acquire failing municipal baths in central Leeds rather than building clay courts in Roehampton was only briefly considered.

All of which meant it was time for a summer compote and to move the debate onto the theme of the next ten years. Mr Allison started off with the question of whether the sport, leisure and culture sector is a business or a social service, and whether this would shape the next decade of development. It was noted that the question of purpose – what are we for and what are we in business to do – is something that the heritage sector has had to confront, particularly in the many areas not in receipt of government funding. Positioning sport, leisure and culture as the sector that can "cheer people up" may be legitimate in times of economic and social hardship but it might not be enough to win our place at the funding table in the longer term. However, the sector can point to numerous examples of achievement and success to demonstrate its impact upon communities, places and people. As one contributor noted: "Health and wellbeing is the key. We provide the greatest added value of any sector, particularly in pressed communities. The leisure and culture sector will survive because we can deliver health and wellbeing. Whether that can be optimised www.theleisurereview.co.uk



The summitters on the steps, discussion nearly complete

Pictured from left to right above

Nick Reeves

Executive director, Chartered Institution for Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM)

Pete Murphy

Programme director executive education (public services), Nottingham Business School

Peter Cooke

Business development director, National Skills Academy London

Martyn Allison

National adviser for sport and culture, Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)

Bev Smith

Principal lecturer, University of Wales in Cardiff and board member of Sportscoach UK

Nick Rider

Chief executive, England Squash and Racketball

Lloyd Conaway

Director, Luton and Bedford County Sports Partnership

David Minton

Chief executive, the Leisure Database Company Ltd

Duncan Wood-Allum

Director of consulting, Capita Symonds

Rod Giddins

Palaces group director, Historic Royal Palaces

Also around the table but out of reach of the camera:

Mick Owen

Managing editor, *The Leisure Review*

Jonathan Ives

Editor, *The Leisure Review*

is another question . I have my doubts as to whether we'll make the most of the Olympics but people around this table are in a position to do so."

The mood had become pensive but energy levels were lifted by the argument that the UK is a hugely creative nation with exceptional artists, sports people and heritage but "we need to drive the key message that culture and its achievements are central – and essential – to the past, present and future of the nation as a whole". This point was picked up and expanded: "We can't be satisfied with the notion that 'it will occur'. There must be a creative centre, a network, that works to bring out the key message that we can all buy into, that we want to thrive and not just survive." Many felt that sport, leisure and culture needs much better political connections. To some the evidence provided to parliamentary select committees shows a divergent and contradictory sector with no central authority. One response was to suggest "perhaps the equivalent of a chief scientist for sport, leisure and culture" to offer a concerted approach.

Still looking forwards, the tension between the social and business agendas was acknowledged, and there was a consensus that the leisure sector had to embrace both aspects: "What we do is about the social agenda and how we do it is about the business agenda. We have to be business-like but we need efficient and effective service delivery. Our sector will always have bits that have to make a profit and bits that have to be subsidised. People in the sector have these skills but they are often not given the opportunities to explore the possibilities."

Skills development will clearly be important and there was some debate about the match between the skills provided by further education and the skills required by employers. While some acknowledged that the gap remains, others spoke of the excellent standard of recent recruits to their own teams, many of whom showed the potential to develop into the sort of inspirational individuals who could lead the future development of the sector. Too many with similar skills had moved on to other industries all too quickly. With low starting wages, the sector has traditionally relied more on vocation than professional development but this is something that has to be addressed if talent and capacity is to be developed. There was agreement in the room that national occupational standards have had an impact and a muted acceptance that chartered status for a professional body could lead to a structured programme of required learning. However, there was a recognition that in-post opportunities for the development of a cross-sectoral understanding were few and far between. That the development of talent will be crucial to the sector's development and success in the face of new challenges was generally agreed.

But what are these challenges likely to be? In ten years time the sport, leisure and culture sector will be looking back on the London Olympics and, while contributors felt that much of the opportunity for post-2012 legacy had already been missed, all recognised that any benefit to be derived from Games would depend on leaders within the sector looking outside their core business objectives. Society will be facing different demands from an older population and increased pressure on services for children, transport and health, all with greater regulation. These demands will require creative ways of delivering services and the leisure sector needs to consider carefully whether it is developing the experienced and creative individuals who can lead the necessary innovation and change. It was recognised that the sector will need better quality assurance to face new demands from new partners in health, education and social care: "We will slip behind the improvement agenda at our peril."

While the need to improve was widely supported, the point was strongly made that the sector can talk itself down too easily and become a victim when the evidence suggests it should not. The sport, leisure and culture sector is widely recognised among the public as some of the most important local services and a provider of the dynamism, innovation and engagement that has transformed the urban environments of many towns and cities across the UK. There was much to celebrate and many opportunities to be grasped: "No other sector has the flexibility to use resources that we have. We can radically reshape services if we choose to and it is a luxury that we have taken for granted. Let's get on with it."

The arrival of coffee was a signal that proceedings were drawing to a close but the discussion showed little sign of ending.

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