

- [home](#)
- [news](#)
- [features](#)
- [comment](#)
- [letters](#)
- [advertise](#)
- [subscribe](#)
- [about us](#)
- [contact us](#)

Imagine there's no money, it's easy if you try

As the sport, leisure and culture industry waits for the details of the comprehensive spending review to be announced on 20 October, Adrian Bradley takes time to reflect upon the state of local authority sport and leisure, and its readiness to meet future challenges.

Liam Byrne's parting gift to his successor at the Treasury handed the incoming administration the easy answer to almost any criticism: there is no money. It's a cry echoing around town halls up and down the country as we head inexorably back to the pre-1997 era. The decade-long growth of our sector and workforce looks certain to end in the face of unprecedented public sector cuts. With the coalition government emboldened enough to announce reforms absent from either party's manifesto or even their own coalition agreement, the first months of the new regime have seen the dismantling of regional government, regulatory frameworks and national performance targets and the abandonment of 700 school building projects, housing targets, the comprehensive area assessment and the Place Survey. The decentralisation and localism bill will take all this further and define new powers for local communities to take over public services and community assets.

Local government is faced with making sense of deep contradictions: more freedom to make choices but less real scope to do so; greater financial flexibility but a central objective to freeze council tax; strengthened localism but a drive to work across boundaries; a stronger role for local authorities in local affairs but also more power and independence for both schools and GP consortia. Councils are being given new responsibilities and a more complex strategic role at the same time as being forced to find huge savings and innovative ways of maintaining frontline services.

These contradictions and tensions are also being played out in leisure where the importance of local accountability remains strong but trends point towards larger leisure trusts and a lessening of the influence of councils. There is a need for a coherent and consistent 'single' system but local decision-making and solutions are inevitably adding to the intricacy of the mosaic; the challenges are national but the solutions will continue to be local.

The Big Society concept suggests that the rolling back of the state will prompt an expansion of civil society, a great wave of volunteering that will remove the need for public sector bureaucracy, but who will build the capacity, skills, and confidence of the third sector? If we have learnt anything in sport over the past 13 years it is that community development work never ends and that some communities need more help than others. Councils have been committed to working with the third sector for many years but, like other public bodies, have, on the whole, been fundamentally poor at realising the true potential of the approach. Central and local government have been big on the values and intentions of 'localism' (the 1998 Compact and its 2009 refreshed version, the comprehensive area assessment, and Total Place for example) but poor in the execution. We have all seen council departments consult merely to justify the decisions they have long since taken, or criticised schools who consider their 'community' to be a collective of other schools.

Sport has effectively piloted some aspects of the Big Society concept for the past 25 years and we should be able to tell our counterparts in other sectors a thing or two about the pitfalls and critical factors for success. We have been blessed with more than our fair share of 'active citizenship' – British sport is built on it after all – but we have been relatively inefficient at harnessing it and may not have done enough to justify our continued existence.

In the August issue of The Leisure Review, former county sports partnership (CSP) director Steve de Wint set out his personal vision of what sports development needs to offer but fell short of identifying how it should be delivered. Steve calls for a consistent core offer to build the capacity of sport and the sub-text for his article is that local authorities are not well placed to provide what sport really needs so county sport partnerships are the vehicle in which to concentrate our resources.

In theory at least, good sports development has always been about capacity-building but we live and work in less than perfect times. Local circumstances and pressures facing the lone sports development officer or small team have led to provision being inconsistent. Local authority leisure, much maligned in some quarters (and in some cases deservedly so), has developed a multitude of approaches to meeting the needs of their communities. A simple database of job titles across councils is very revealing and tells you much of what you need to know about the local expectations, variations and priorities. The terms 'health and well-being' feature far more often www.theleisurereview.co.uk



In a big society challenges are national but the solutions will continue to be local

“The potential of councils to work alongside the voluntary sector still remains largely unrealised... The shape of the available support structure has evolved to suit us as professionals rather than the customer.”



Adrian Bradley

than 'sport and recreation'.

Sports development professionals are the archetypal mixed bag, asked to deliver an ever wider spectrum of services. This has made it hard to establish a clear identity for the profession. Steve is right in saying that we ask sports development officers to advise on marketing, health and safety, child protection, fundraising, business planning, and workforce development (to name a few) when we cannot possibly expect them to have the necessary depth and breadth of expertise. This is all the more misguided when experts in those fields exist in departments across councils with their knowledge and competence being directed internally at the affairs of the authority itself. The potential of councils to work alongside the voluntary sector still remains largely unrealised. The voluntary sector wants clear, practical, relevant and reliable help (and some money) but, as often as not, we have given it a complex maze of bureaucracy and opaque systems to negotiate. The shape of the available support structure has evolved to suit us as professionals rather than the customer.

Whether or not county sports partnerships are better equipped to offer what is required is open to debate. Leisure managers in some (but admittedly not all) areas still have doubts over the performance and worth of CSPs and, despite the clouds hanging over their own council services, retain more confidence in their own ability to deliver benefits to their communities. The truth is there are good and bad local authority leisure departments just as there are good and bad leisure trusts and good and bad county sports partnerships. These disparities look likely to be exacerbated by what is to come.

Can sports development still hold a place in shrinking public sector provision? The signs are not good. Commentators suggest that central government funding to councils will fall by a third by 2105. The government's sweetener to sport – the increased rise in lottery share from 16.66% now to 18% in 2011-12 and then 20% in 2012-13 – will not take full effect until after the Olympics and by that time local authorities will be very much smaller than they are now.

Over the past month a cross-section of local authorities in the midlands and south west have been surveyed on their readiness for what is to come, the severity of expected cuts in their council and the approach they will take and, unsurprisingly, there has been a very mixed picture of problems and responses. Council finance directors are planning for the worst case scenario which might prove to have been optimistic. Some local authorities are hamstrung by the lack of housing development, a reduction in car parking revenues and the increased costs of pay reviews and statutory safeguarding responsibilities; some are coping with all four.

Having attempted to make itself indispensable by pursuing a more integrated approach to working with health, education and social services, the leisure sector now finds there is no safe haven. Managers do not need telling they must adapt if they are to survive and grow – those chameleon instincts have got us this far and are coming to the fore all across the country. Some have convinced politicians we can deliver their agenda, some have appealed to their vanity or forthcoming election hopes. Consequently there remains, in some areas, a political commitment to this most high-profile of local services that would surprise many observers. Elected members have come to know and like their sports development officers and what they contribute. Reports of their death have been exaggerated.

Some senior managers, in their own eyes at least, have reached the final tipping point where savings must become service reductions. They see no option other than to cut and cut deeply. In many authorities grant funding will all but disappear, some are contemplating leisure centre closures, outsourcing of one form or another, or even complete asset transfer. Accountancy-driven efficiency processes divorced from the needs and priorities of the community are common, elected members are in denial about the choices they really face, local elections in 2011 are already influencing decisions and customer confidence remains stubbornly low. Elsewhere some sports development officers are even offering up savings in their most traditional of responsibilities – the Christmas lights switch on – so look out for the headline-writers' dream "Council scrooges cancel Christmas" in a local paper near you.

The survey indicates that authorities fall into a broad range of categories. Sport continues to enjoy some protection in regional cities and major metropolitan boroughs, particularly where sports events are bound up with reputation management and national and international profile. Some rare authorities are enjoying a capital receipt bubble offering some short-term protection and hope of new investment in facilities. In some areas leisure finds itself at the heart of town centre regeneration schemes. Proximity to 2012 venues, for obvious reasons, appears to make a significant difference. However, away from these enclaves of positivity, swathes of the country are served by councils with little or no prospect of keeping leisure services fully intact.

Local authority leisure has tended to concentrate on measuring satisfaction with what it currently offers rather than the importance or value that residents attach to provision. Consequently it will not justify its continued existence, let alone investment or growth. Resident surveys are springing up across the country, some with fantasy budget exercises, and the best leisure can strive for is a top-four finish and a place in Europe. Cuts are only one side of the equation and cannot achieve the solutions in themselves. Local authority leisure will depend, just as the economy as a whole

will, on consumer spending and generating increased revenue; increasing customer spending (with what remains of the local leisure offer) amid more job losses, as real incomes continue to fall, as VAT rises and winter starts to bite.

Where sport will really miss local authority investment will be in tackling disadvantage and under-participating sections of our communities. Real commitment to equality (or fairness as I learned to call it under a Conservative administration) is looking like a forlorn hope in some areas. This time it is hard to see consumption and resource-intensive work continuing in the no-frills, Ryanair model of local government. In my last authority our efforts at behaviour changing social marketing were deemed socialist.

Local government has a major role to play in making the Big Society work and, whether you see it as a fundamental philosophy or empty rhetoric, one thing is certain: it is being espoused at the same time as cuts which are very real indeed. In response to Big Society and Big Cuts we need Big Thinking. Sector leadership has never been more vital and, arguably, never less visible. Many leisure professionals see Sport England as entirely dispensable, some remain confused by the role of county sports partnerships. A naturally diverse sector has never seemed quite so disunited. In more than one county, several councils are pursuing trust status but are doing so entirely independently and with little or no regard to what is happening on the other side of their borders. A future beckons of shared services (not just support services but frontline leisure), enlarged trusts and a trend almost resembling corporate mergers and acquisitions. Who is looking at the big picture? There is a case, a strong one, for councils to invest in people rather than places. The outsourcing of facility management has become almost obligatory but should ideally be accompanied by something more fundamentally significant, an investment in supporting the contribution made by voluntary organisations. There are too many facility strategies that ignore the role played by them.

It's never been more important to be clear and decisive about what leisure services seek to achieve and intend to provide. The clarity and potency of the vision, and the political support for it, will be tested as never before. What remains of public sector leisure provision will very much depend on our ability to hang on to what matters and to find a new model on which to base it. The services that survive will have refused to be a victim, will have diversified revenue from public sector to commercial sources, will have invested in people as well as places, and will have invested time and effort in sound strategic planning.

After nearly twenty years in local authority sport, leisure and culture Adrian joined Sport Structures as senior consultant in July 2010.

The Leisure Review, October 2010

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.