

Recharging the Battery: a New York view of leisure

Having always harboured the desire to see how other countries deliver their sport, leisure and culture services, Duncan Wood-Allum recently took the opportunity to visit New York City. In the first of a series of reports, Duncan discovers the cultural diversity of the city, meets an old friend of The Leisure Review and talks about the key challenges facing the city's recreation facilities and services with the people who know what makes the city work.

Why New York? The sheer scale of the city and its five boroughs, its diversity and the parallels with London are hard to ignore. City of New York Parks and Recreation is the steward of about 29,000 acres of land (14% of New York City) including more than 5,000 individual properties. The department also operates more than 800 sports pitches, nearly 1,000 playgrounds, 550 tennis courts, 66 public pools, 48 recreational facilities, 17 nature centres, 13 golf courses, and 14 miles of beaches. It cares for 1,200 monuments and 23 historic house museums. It looks after 600,000 street trees and two million more in parks. It is New York City's principal provider of recreational and athletic facilities and programmes. It is also home to free concerts, world-class sports events and cultural festivals. At the height of the summer operating season the department has more than 10,000 employees.

My first point of contact was Deputy Commissioner Kevin Jeffrey of the City's Parks and Recreation Department, who had responded very positively to my request for help with a study tour. With the visit in mind, I spent some time talking to colleagues and clients within the UK culture and sport sector and I was keen to explore a number of areas, including: finance and fundraising, partnerships, community development, NYC's approach to joined-up service provision, the department's contribution to health, wellbeing and lifelong learning, the role of volunteers and how the city approaches events. From these areas of interest Kevin and his team prepared a fascinating and extensive week-long itinerary.

To walk through Central Park to meet Kevin at Parks HQ on the first day of my tour was to witness a little piece of parks heaven. A glorious park, beautifully tended borders emitting a powerful scent of spring flowers, no litter, people of all ages and backgrounds enjoying the afternoon sunshine; large pieces of public art to make you stop and take a moment to enjoy; good signage promoting a non-profit parks organisation; and, to my amusement, a row over 20 park benches with the names of wealthy donors etched on steel nameplates, names that included Donald Trump. It was a reminder that this tour was not just about celebrating the world's most admired park, an open space surrounded by some of the wealthiest – and most charitably minded – people who overlook it from some of highest-value property in the world. This tour was about normal New Yorkers and their families living in a variety of areas ranging from the deprived areas of the Bronx and Brooklyn to regular neighbourhoods, some of which have housing density values to rival that of Hong Kong. Most people in New York do not have gardens, which I was to learn has been a dominant factor in shaping the city's response to improving the quality of life for its citizens.

Kevin Jeffrey has the look of a man who knows his vocation and has earned it the right way. I was later to learn that Kevin was one of the original park rangers recruited in 1991 and had risen through his organisation to become a major champion of New York recreation. I was welcomed into his spacious office which is filled with the memorabilia of a long and successful career – achievement and recognition awards, photos of teams, events, parks and facilities, plus dozens of Parks and Recreation baseball hats of various colours, all identifying the breadth of his experience. Kevin was raised in Crown Heights, Brooklyn and was appointed Parks and Recreation's deputy commissioner for public programmes in April 2002. The phrase 'public programmes' encompasses the operation of 44 recreation centres, 17 nature centres, central recreation (the physical activity programming city-wide), urban park rangers, parks enforcement patrol, Partnerships for Parks (a major non-profit organisation supporting volunteers) and central communications.

I had sent Kevin A Tale of Two Obecities, the report that highlights the similarities and differences between New York and London's response to the childhood obesity epidemic. He told me that as yet there is no magic bullet for tackling obesity in his

www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Central Park: just one of New York City's many open spaces and cultural facilities

“We covered a number of areas that I was keen to explore from his perspective: how to manage year-on-year budget cuts, partnerships, the role of volunteers, active transportation and Mayor Bloomberg's 30-year sustainability plan for the city.”

city. There is, however, a clear strategy to address it, a strategy in which Parks and Recreation as a department is playing an important role. Although additional long-term funding is hard to come by and many programmes were exploratory or pilot schemes, he highlighted work being done by his and other NYC departments educate people and change the way they think in relation to exercise and healthy eating. He provided me with a summary of education and physical activity programmes in recreation centres and community gardens that were addressing this very issue. I was to see these programmes for myself later in the week.

Discussing the issue of pricing, I was heartened to hear that the city and its partners were investing significantly in physical activity and health, with many activities free of charge. Kevin explained that his team had undertaken a strategic analysis of high levels of obesity in the five boroughs, linked to locations of working and decommissioned swimming pools and school playgrounds. In a programme called Schoolyards to Playgrounds, the city is opening up its school outdoor space for the community. To date 65 school gates out of 295 had been unlocked to the community with improvements made in relation to safety and security on those sites. With open space at a premium in many neighbourhoods every square metre counts.

However, Kevin was keen to point out that proximity does not resolve the issue of access for many people, demonstrating that he understands the complexity of the challenges linked to people in inner cities changing their habits. He highlighted the Shape Up programme for adults, which is a collaborative approach between Parks and Recreation and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) to combat the city-wide obesity crisis. Commissioned by DOHMH and delivered by Parks and Recreation, this is a free, year-round programme that has been running successfully for eight years in 16 targeted areas of poor health in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan. One of the latest developments was a major partnership with Equinox, one of NYC's largest commercial fitness operators. Equinox will provide fitness instructors to add an additional 22 sites to the Shape Up programme. This was another example of the department's ability to court the private sector effectively and develop mutually beneficial programmes. Shape Up classes are led by experienced fitness instructors and feature a wide variety of aerobic activities to suit different ages and ability levels. Kevin described this programme as preparing the "ready to be fit". Participants can turn up and be supported in developing healthy lifestyles, including a demonstration of how to prepare healthy snacks and meals in the kitchen facilities that are in each facility running the programme. In partnership with the Department of Health, Parks and Recreation also runs Step Out New York City during the summer, a major walking fitness programme for individuals and whole families who live adjacent to social housing projects. They recently secured \$150,000 from Blue Cross/Blue Shield (a major health maintenance organisation) to expand to 30 locations. Participants meet at these locations around the city to take part in organised two-mile walks. They receive a pedometer to track their mileage and a T-shirt to highlight their commitment to fitness.

Suitably impressed, I touched upon the sometimes sensitive and awkward issue of monitoring and evaluation, something with which we in the UK are increasingly becoming obsessed. Kevin was quite open, saying that in the early days of Shape Up the emphasis was on getting people moving, not overwhelming participants with monitoring and registration requirements. That said, the programme has now evolved and good monitoring information is available. He also explained that quality management information on 150,000 members of the recreation centres is now proving invaluable. By way of example we discussed a children's summer camp programme that ran the previous summer in partnership with a local hospital. This programme provided solid evidence on the children's health and fitness improvements linked to improvements in body mass index (BMI), blood pressure, strength, reduction in resting heart rate and weight loss. Kevin spoke passionately about evidence of children with higher levels of fitness performing better in their academic studies. Clearly this was a man focused not on sport and physical activity for its own sake but rather for their ability to contribute to a child's complete development.

When the conversation turned to water safety for children I was surprised to hear that swimming is not a compulsory subject on the curriculum, as it is in the UK. The city runs a year-round learn to swim programme at outdoor and indoor venues but I was shocked to hear that drowning is the second most prevalent cause of death for young US citizens, behind car accidents. However, the City of New York, which I was later to discover has a fascinating and proud history of public swimming, is seeking to introduce water safety to as many children as possible through its Swim to Safety indoor swimming programme in term time. Over 22,000 second grade (7-8 years) children per year participate in the programme over the summer. This costs only \$100 per child but significantly reduces the risk of children drowning. The department is working on attracting funding to extend this to cover all 74,000 children in the second grade by broadening the range of facilities involved in the programme. This would be in partnership with other pools providers in the city.

Changing tack, I asked Kevin about how the city approaches joint working and, as we say in the UK, cross-cutting issues. In answer he cited an initiative where Mayor Bloomberg swapped his senior commissioners around the different departments for three weeks to encourage more partnership working. The commissioner of the board of physical education sat in at parks and recreation, an experience that has further strengthened relationships, with a number of impressive joint initiatives operating between the two. There are some real challenges being faced by the department of



Green spaces are an integral part of the city

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:



education when it comes to delivering its physical education curriculum to some students. Acknowledging the potential of Parks and Recreation to support this area, PE Passport has been developed which will enable students to earn academic credits in physical education within parks and recreation facilities in school-time or their own time; these credits will be validated by PE staff through a web-based programme. Nine PE administrators are now assigned to 24 Parks and Recreation facilities across the city. Their role is to develop and deliver wider joint-working opportunities to benefit students as part of an ongoing programme.

On every major Parks and Recreation facility and sign, there are two names under the London Plane Leaf logo – Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and Commissioner Adrian Benepe – which is a striking statement about the way New Yorkers expect and receive accountability for their services. Adrian Benepe was appointed by Mayor Bloomberg in 2002 but he started his career with Parks and Recreation in 1973 as a teenage seasonal helper in East River Park on Manhattan's Lower East Side, picking up litter and mopping locker rooms. By 1996 he was managing Manhattan's green infrastructure of more than 300 parks, playgrounds, and malls as the Manhattan borough commissioner, a position he held until promoted to his current post of commissioner of parks and recreation.

Looking fit and sharp, Adrian was instantly engaging. He presented me with a Parks and Recreation baseball cap and a book on New York's trees. I in turn presented him with a London 2012 badge which he accepted with an ironic grin, mentioning that following the credit crunch maybe it was not a bad thing that NYC missed out on the Olympics. We covered a number of areas that I was keen to explore from his perspective: how to manage year-on-year budget cuts, partnerships, the role of volunteers, active transportation and Mayor Bloomberg's 30-year sustainability plan for the city, titled PlaNYC. I explained some of the challenges being faced by the culture and sport sector in the UK and he responded by playing back the reality being faced by New York: budget reductions of up to 40% over the last three years, cuts that will continue in the future. However, I got no sense of negativity when Adrian spoke about this. It seemed that this was just another challenge to be overcome, another plate to which Parks and Recreation will 'step up'. Adrian's three-way approach to this appeared simple. First, reduce costs where you can by prioritising your expenditure and, if necessary, stop doing some things that you believe are no longer core to the service. Second, increase revenue where you can. Third, reduce variable costs wherever you can by reducing the number of seasonal appointments for the summer. However, over the years Adrian and previous commissioners had foreseen the fiscal challenges ahead and radically altered their approach to working with partners, particularly those in the dynamic New York non-profit sector.

He cited two partnerships – two of the 12 major non-profit partnerships heavily involved in the city's parks – that are now delivering services that the city could no longer afford to deliver itself. First, Partnership for Parks, an organisation that Adrian described as a world leader in volunteer development. They provide the eyes and ears for the parks service through friends groups and providing several thousand volunteers to clean, prune, sweep, lock and unlock playgrounds and parks facilities. In terms of lobbying and fundraising, he described them as a 'Fifth Column' with the commercial freedom to attract funding and sponsorship way beyond what a local authority could do. Asked to summarise the secret of Partnerships for Parks' success, he responded instantly by saying that you need great outreach co-ordinators to support, energise and enable volunteers to develop their commitment, confidence and skills. It was all about training and empowerment. The scale of volunteering in the city's parks is phenomenal: over 55,000 registered volunteers, collectively contributing 1.5 million person hours per annum, acting as a catalyst for ensuring the city's neighbourhood parks and open spaces are flourishing. This army of volunteers has been created and supported by the city to ensure that the parks service could maintain and develop its services in the future from other sources of revenue.

The second partnership was the City Parks Foundation, established 21 years ago. It offers park programmes throughout the five boroughs of New York City in over 750 parks city-wide, presenting a broad range of free arts, sports, and education programmes, empowering citizens to support their parks on a local level. Their programmes and community-building initiatives reach more than 600,000 New Yorkers each year, contributing to the renewal of neighbourhoods throughout New York City.

PlaNYC, the city's sustainability plan, is a long term strategy to address the challenges of future growth linked to ensuring New York becomes the world's most environmentally sustainable city. The promotion of cycling is one of the key strategic objectives in the transportation plan and there is a commitment to the city's 1,800-mile bike lane master plan. This plan includes 504 miles of separated bike paths and 1,296 miles of striped bicycle lanes or markings reminding drivers and cyclists to share the road. To date, 420 miles have been constructed. Later in the week, I witnessed for myself the wonderful Greenways built around Manhattan to enable New Yorkers to bike, skate, walk and run around the entire island free from traffic, all linked to the city's parks system. Phase 2 and beyond will complete the remaining bike lanes, resulting in 1,800 total lane miles of bicycle facilities in New York City. Adrian also mentioned the pioneering work being done by the Department of Transportation to close off entire road networks at times to encourage more cycling and raise awareness in communities who would not normally seek to use the

Greenways to get on their bikes and ride. Adrian delighted in telling me, "The Department of Transportation can't stop building cycle lanes!" I am pleased to see that, in London at least, Mayor Johnson is taking note.

Duncan Wood-Allum is the director of the Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy. Further reports from his study tour to New York will appear in The Leisure Review.

Read The Leisure Review's March 2008 interview with Adrian Benepe.

The Leisure Review, July 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.