

The Leisure Review Futures Summit

In the second of a series of summits bringing industry leaders together to discuss the future of the sport, leisure and culture sector The Leisure Review looked to the issue of leadership and from where the next generation of leaders might emerge.

The first summit hosted by The Leisure Review involved a general exploration of the issues likely to affect the sport, leisure and culture sector over the next decade or so. One of the key questions that emerged from the discussion was from where the future leaders of the sector might come and this prompted the suggestion a future TLR summit might usefully consider the subject in more detail. It seemed a sensible idea and so, with the support of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and England Squash and Racketball, The Leisure Review Futures Summit was convened at the Lansdowne Club in London in early December 2009.

The premise of this gathering was not only to discuss the issue of leadership but to enable some potential leaders within the sector to air their own views of what their industry should be doing now to secure its own future. Invitations were made around the TLR network, including the suggestion to some of those who had attended the previous summit that they might like to "bring their future with them", and an eclectic group representing various specialisms and levels of experience across the sector gathered around the TLR table. A menu of discussion points set the conversational ball rolling, with topics up for debate including the development of future leaders, the prevalence of innovation within the sector and whether the sector's claims to be able to deliver increased participation in physical activity are realistic.

With Martyn Allison of the IDeA once again serving as facilitator, the first course was served and the first question was posed. Growing our own leadership is critical to the future of the sport, leisure and culture sector but are managers doing enough to support emerging leaders and are potential leaders doing enough to develop themselves? Some of us, Martyn noted, are, or will be, exiting the sector so surely it is important that the sector builds its own future?

The first response to the initial question was a qualifying question: "What do we mean by 'leadership'? Are we clear about the skills of leadership that will be needed for 2010 and beyond?" There was a broad consensus that different times inevitably required different skills but less certainty about how such skills were gained and how leaders were identified. Where once senior people within the leisure sector had come up through the ranks on an identifiably linear career pathway, now the correlation between working hard and climbing the ladder seems less clear. Given the number and breadth of the agendas on which the sport, leisure and culture sector needs to position itself, a distinct and defined career path is far less likely. Leisure professionals now need to be able to span boundaries and operate across a whole range of fields but, it was argued, this should not necessarily be seen as a negative aspect of pursuing a career in the sector.

"As a sector we should be looking inside and valuing the skills and abilities we have," one contributor argued. "We have a huge confidence issue, showing little confidence in our own abilities and skills. For example, we have brilliant customer experience and great financial experience, largely because we don't usually have any money."

While confidence was one issue, the extent to which people should be encouraged into leadership proved to be another. Leadership, it was suggested, was not for everyone and it was a mistake to push people onto a career path for which they were unsuited or for which appropriate posts may not be available. The counterpoint was that all staff should be encouraged to fulfil their potential, something that would only be feasible in a mature organisation. It was noted that the difference between management and leadership was significant but also that the sector has no coordinated continuing professional development programme to build the appropriate skill sets and promote achievement within the sector. Nor, as someone pointedly remarked, was it likely to arrive in the near future: "Whatever happened to the professional institute we were promised?" One of the potential leaders around the table nodded in agreement: "I don't know what I have to do to become a leader in this sector and I don't think that's a lone view. If you don't give people somewhere to go they will go elsewhere." This was predicated on the assumption that a functioning professional association would both signpost career paths and strive to develop them, and without this way-finding role being filled people are following paths out of the sector.

Additional worries included a sports development sector that was fragmented and



The future: under scrutiny from all sides



Getting to grips with the debate

"As a sector we should be looking inside and valuing the skills and abilities we have," one contributor argued. "We have a huge confidence issue, showing little confidence in our own abilities and skills. For example, we have brilliant customer experience and great financial experience, largely because we don't usually have any money."

yet still somehow dominated by a very small number of self-interested parties, a tendency towards senior leisure managers becoming increasingly risk-averse in the context of additional financial pressures and a significant number of people within the sector still unable to comprehend the non-silo context in which they need to be working. The reverse of these concerns came in the form of examples of leisure professionals who were beginning to understand that the economic crisis would mean that they would have to be innovative and prepared to take some risks if their services are to survive. Bad organisations, someone noted, do sometimes give rise to good leaders, a point supported by a colleague whose experience of other sectors suggested that leisure was not alone in these concerns. "Don't get too depressed," he said. "All this fear and uncertainty about the future is happening in every sector. I still believe that good leaders will emerge."

Arrival of the main course heralded another topic for debate. If innovation is about radical change in the way we work, does the sector have the capacity to be innovative and, if it has, will others be prepared to learn from it? Posing the question, Martyn Allison noted that next year will bring major changes in public services with a greater focus on delivering better for less.. Innovation will be the key to survival but is the sport, leisure and culture sector ready?

On the subject of innovation the first response was positive – "The sector has the capacity to be innovative, and has been proved to be so, but it doesn't have the capacity to advocate" – and while there was agreement about the paucity of advocacy the issue of innovation proved more contentious. "We're kidding ourselves if we think we are innovative," said one contributor. "I'm struggling to think of examples of genuinely innovative practice from the past few years." Some around the table thought this harsh but one noted that a recent Sport England award had recognised a sports development officer for delivering a simple sports development process: "Surely they can't think that counts as innovation?"

One contributor from the sports sector noted the irony of state-sponsored innovation. Where national agencies are on one hand encouraging innovation and risk-taking, on the other they are issuing guidelines and standards. "It doesn't quite work," he said. "Many funders are not prepared to take a risk. In our own sport we are trying to be as innovative as possible but we can't be bureaucratic and innovative."

One counter argument was that things are happening all over the sector but we're not telling people about it. Numerous schemes had been developed, particularly in response to the physical activity agenda and improving access to leisure and cultural services, but a continued proclivity for working in silos and the sheer weight of the tasks in hand had hampered their impact beyond the individual projects. One suggestion was to engage the academic sector, tasking them with thinking around the problems identified by the sport, leisure and culture sector. Other sectors, including the creative industries, could be engaged to help the delivery of specific targets.

At least one contributor thought this to be a negation of the sector's achievements. "I'm constantly irritated that we have to look outside for solutions," she said. "We're crap at marketing and joining up but we need to be celebrating what we do instead of running ourselves down." Challenged from the chair as to whether the sport, leisure and culture sector had the ability to be innovative, even if it was not currently able to promote the fact, those around the table agreed that it did, although their assent fell some way short of a ringing endorsement. The consensus was that innovation was possible and there are examples but more capacity and energy have to be found to innovate within a system that tends to stifle it.

For one contributor, the solution to the problem is in the sector's own hands. "A lack of innovation is about a lack of leadership," he said. "Good leaders are brave leaders and if you lack leadership that's your fault. People do amazing things. If you can't harness that then there's something wrong with your structures. Politicians are gagging for advice and ideas. They want input from people who can innovate. If you're frustrated about what you see and passionate about what you do you will find a way. As Tim Smit at the Eden Project says, 'if you've got someone negative in your organisation, kill them'." Although everyone desperately hoped that Mr Smit was speaking metaphorically, the point that organisations need to be ruthless in their pursuit of positivity and achievement hit home.

With the arrival of the custard came the next question. For many years the sector has claimed that it can increase participation in culture and sport but, now that we have the ability to measure participation, the early results across the sector are not encouraging. Should we blame the recession or have we finally been caught out?

"Our figures have gone up so I don't agree with the premise," noted one. "Our participation has gone up but not according to the national indicators," said another. "There seems to be a disconnect with local and national evidence. We need other ways to demonstrate our services." There was also the suggestion that local authorities should pay less attention to national government and concentrate on doing the right things for their communities. However, while a disregard for the transient flavour of the month might be healthy, authorities still need to know who their customers are: "Some local authorities still cannot tell you how many people are coming through their doors. If we're that naïve we deserve to fail."

One contributor noted that trading across London was down but that they did not

www.theleisurereview.co.uk



The summit contributors on parade

Pictured from left to right above:

Liz Blyth

Cultural strategy and improvement manager, Leicester City Council

Martyn Allison

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

Nick Rider

Chief executive, England Squash and Racketball

Ian Jackson

Senior competition manager, Suffolk

Georgina Siddall

Project coordinator, IDeA

Carol Boswarthack

Support services manager, libraries, archives and Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London

Mark Williams

Regional manager - east, England Squash and Racketball

Chris Hebblewhite

Regional manager, GLL

Duncan Wood-Allum

Director, the Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy

Kim Wright

London Borough of Hackney

Nick Reeves

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

Momentarily out of sight:

Mick Owen

Managing editor, *The Leisure Review*

Jonathan Ives

Editor, *The Leisure Review*



The Leisure Review is supported by:



have figures for footfall. With different companies and organisations in the sector measuring their success in different ways, comparisons are notoriously difficult. In the sports environment investment in measurement of participation has enabled one sport to look at the people who play, revealing that 40% of the relevant facilities are owned by local authorities, a sector that had historically been ignored by the governing body in favour of targeting resources on private clubs. This had now changed with new development plans for public facilities.

London 2012 looms large over the sector and, as someone noted, the afternoon's first mention of was long overdue. The baton was quickly taken up: "This sector has been hanging its hat on 2012. If we can't deliver an increase in participation after an Olympic Games then yes, we have been caught out." It was noted that post-2012 will be the ultimate test but there are indications that participation among young people is increasing. There was general agreement with this statement but the point was made that the sector needs to be gearing up to demonstrate that it has made a difference to participation rates. Analysis currently seems thin on the ground but the group was able to rattle off various examples where a growth in numbers has been demonstrated. It was felt that there is a "commitment to the idea of measurement" but it should be "about courage and delivery... Bureaucracy is an enemy of innovation but we need bureaucracy to ensure measurement. The challenge is to manage that ambiguity." The apparent contradiction of expending resources on measuring the provision of a service in need of resources was a case in point: "Too many people spend too much time counting things and writing it down, and that gets in the way of delivery."

Coffee and just time for another question before the afternoon wound to its close. The devolution of government means that we now have four different systems for providing culture and sport. Does this provide yet more fragmentation or new opportunities to stimulate innovative approaches from which we can all learn?

It was noted that all the major political parties have said that they are committed to a future of devolved and empowered local government, which would be encouraging if it had not been said at every single election of the past thirty years and followed on each occasion by a government that strengthened central control. However, perhaps this time the national politicians mean it. Wry smiles gave way to a critique of the home nations structure. It was felt that regionalisation had created layers of bureaucracy where people "said and did the same things but with a different regional accent". Providing local services was difficult in any environment – "What works in one ward will not work in the ward next door, let alone at the other end of the borough" – but it was felt that local strengths and differences could be positively exploited. Scotland, for example, has a fantastically vibrant sports development scene and Wales provides a credible model for sustainable development.

These local strengths, it was argued, offers the sport, leisure and culture sector a real opportunity: "The government talks to us but we need to be able to provide solutions. We need to set ourselves up to ride out the recession and that may well require an enabling structure to prevent people from repeating the mistakes other people have made." The point was made that there are good things being done in the sector but the sector needs to have confidence in itself: "We need to say that people could learn from us. I've been asked to help with business planning in another department far removed from our sector. I gave them a copy of Towards an Excellent Service in advance of the first day of discussions and they were really impressed by it. There's big stuff we're doing but we're not shouting about it."

For all the strengths and challenges evident with the sport, leisure and culture sector, it was agreed that there was one inescapable reality: that the sector has to mobilise over the next twelve months so that it can make a clear national impact in 2011, through 2012 and beyond. Leaders will be required and they had better be ready to deliver.

The Leisure Review, February 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.