

## The London Cultural Improvement Programme

**With phase two of the London Cultural Improvement Programme underway, The Leisure Review went to talk to the leading lights of the London Cultural Improvement Group about the status of culture in the capital and the thirst for improvement among its cultural managers. Jonathan Ives reports.**

Culture is a big part of London's identity but the fragmented nature of local government structures – there are 32 boroughs plus the City of London in the capital – has meant that the delivery of cultural services for the city has not always been as co-ordinated as it might have been. For the past three years the London Cultural Improvement Group has been working to take the message of service improvement to all the boroughs in London, building networks and changing minds as it goes. Working with the support of the regional cultural agencies, the group is delivering the London Cultural Improvement Programme in two phases. The first phase set an ambitious agenda, a list of topics that included: the culture and sport improvement toolkit (CSIT) and peer-led challenge; the local authority museum improvement programme; the London cultural data access review project; measuring social outcomes; advocacy; and the London library change programme. Phase two, now underway and running concurrently with phase one, brings six new work strands: working with children's services; the heritage change programme; the London events network and training; marketing culture for the visitor economy; improving fund-raising capability; and FilmApp.

In this second phase the London Cultural Improvement Group has acknowledged that local government is working within an increasingly difficult economic environment and the programme's stated aim is to help cultural services to "deliver value by striking a balance between process and efficiency" and provide "effective services that are aligned closely to wider outcomes and local area priorities". All this ambition arguably had its roots in a series of secondments to Sport England around 2004. When a block of cultural indicators was being included within the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) for local authorities, Sport England established a network of individuals seconded from their day jobs to provide a lead for culture in each region. Christine Parsloe, who now chairs the London Cultural Improvement Group, was brought in from her post as leisure and culture development manager at the London Borough of Merton as one of two national leads.

"It was our job to look at the indicators being considered for inclusion within the CPA from a sports perspective," Chris Parsloe said. "Although Sport England were only interested in the indicators that they were actually measuring, local authorities were already using indicators measured by the annual residents' survey. I and the other national lead, Roger Pontefract, persuaded Sport England to take a local government perspective rather than purely sports perspective. We realised that if you were trying to help local government you would have to understand the totality."

This change of thinking quickly gave rise to an understanding of the need to engage local authorities in the processes of self-assessment and service improvement. When Chris went back to Merton Sue Thiedeman took over regional implementation and, having continued the work of building a strong network of individuals and organisations interested in the improvement process, found that the value of a post to manage the cultural improvement process within London had been recognised. With the secondment period officially ended, Sport England, Arts Council England, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Commission and Capital Ambition (London's regional improvement and efficiency partnership) found the resources to maintain the post.

With plenty of experience working within local government cultural services, Sue understood the problems that her colleagues in the London boroughs were having to face. "The challenges of the CPA and principles of service improvement were completely new to many local government officers working within the cultural sector," she said. "They hadn't done anything like it before and they were struggling to catch up. They needed information so we set up the London Cultural Improvement Group. There was already a strong CLOA [the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association] group in London and thirty people came to our first meeting. My job as London cultural improvement manager was then to lead the group, work with local authorities that needed help and drive improvement."

The nature of the CPA and the system used by the Audit Commission to rate local [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)



Improving culture in London: Christine Parsloe (left) and Sue Thiedeman

**"It's a whole new agenda that means we will have to reinvent ourselves again. We'll still have our same portfolio of work but the way that we do our business will be different."**

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authorities' performance meant that the London Cultural Improvement Group frequently found itself pushing at an open, or at least unlocked, door. Any local authority with any service area rated as 'one star' could not be awarded an overall rating any higher than 'good' and when quite a few London authorities found that their overall rating was being adversely affected by poorly performing cultural services the spotlight quickly fell on the performance of culture.

Chris Parsloe admitted that Merton had been a case in point. "I have to say at that time that was us," she said. "But what then happened, which had not really happened for the culture sector before, was that chief executives, leaders and members were starting to say, 'Hold on a minute, this service is dragging us down.'"

From a national perspective London had some of the poorest scores for culture among some of the best scores for other services and, shocked by the comparison, many within London local government saw culture as a priority target. The London Cultural Improvement Group put in a funding bid to Cultural Ambition, saying that it could help address the issue of under-performing cultural services across the capital. A grant of £200,000 was secured and the London Cultural Improvement Programme was born. With other contributions the programme was able to set about providing access to skills and support structures that they would need to engage the process of improvement that was needed. Working closely with the London CLOA group and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), the group was able to develop a programme around the Towards an Excellent Service improvement initiative and the Culture and Sport Improvement Toolkit (CSIT), all supported by more conventional training modules looking at subjects such as marketing, communications and advocacy, all delivered without charge to delegates.

As Chris explained, the benefits of this growing network quickly became apparent: "This started to bring people from the cultural sector together for a module of training that was going to be useful but also, with everyone you wanted to reach in a room, we could start to drip-feed the messages we wanted to get over. It also got them to start networking, bringing people together who wouldn't usually engage. People from sport, for example, were talking to people from the arts about marketing."

The strength of engagement with the London Cultural Improvement Programme was demonstrated by the fact that 31 of the 33 boroughs were involved with CSIT, a far better level of engagement than any other region had managed. Using a version of CSIT with the London boroughs' local museum services also proved successful and training in marketing and advocacy was backed by a grant of some £5,000 to the boroughs' museum service to implement aspects of the improvement programmes they had developed. Marketing training for officers running and promoting local events, provided in partnership with Visit London, proved popular and led to the development of an events group that now meets regularly. That the office of the mayor of London came to the London Cultural Improvement Group for help with approaching chief culture and leisure officers to contribute to the development of its cultural strategy was further testament to the connections that the group had developed.

"We have found that phase two of the programme has been even more responsive," Sue said. "People want to change the way they work. They want to work more collaboratively, they want to work differently and they want to be more innovative. So within phase two we have strands such as how to work with children's services, getting ready for commissioning, data collection and measuring outcomes." Chris Parsloe is convinced that these new strands are vitally important to the future of culture within local government: "Cultural services are working on so many different levels but the challenge for us going forward is that we can be all things to all people. We can address many of the health agenda issues. We can deliver the positive activities agenda for children, schools and families. We can deliver things out in our parks, tourism, economic development, creative industries. Because we have put ourselves in the spotlight our next challenge is that there are now more demands on us to deliver on, say, reduction in obesity, youth crime or young offenders. Of course, we can do all that but it is likely that we will have to bid for commissions to do it. It's a whole new agenda that means we will have to reinvent ourselves again. We'll still have our same portfolio of work but the way that we do our business will be different."

She suggested that those with enough experience to remember the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering will see a number of similarities with the current situation: "There's a huge drive to externalise services again but in a different way to compulsory competitive tendering. There's a great campaign about the third sector and social enterprises at the moment but, while the solutions may now have different names and it's a different generation, we are having to look at some of those same issues in a different way. At the same time the other departments – children, schools and families, health, adult social care – will have individuals able to spend the money from their own care packages. Are we ready for them to spend with us? Are we ready for people to say, 'I'm not going to spend my time down at the day centre, I'm going to go down to the leisure centre and meet people there.' Or 'I'm going to use my money to go to the library and learn a new language.' They will have choices and so we are suddenly facing the situation where we have to hold what we already have but we still have to keep improving on it and building in all these other layers. All this within the context of a declining resource."

With all these challenges for culture professionals to address, Chris is certain that

the improvement process and the work of the London Cultural Improvement Group is as relevant as ever. "What's quite interesting is that this process is totally empowering to people" she said. "The only thing that will really drive improvement forward is if you empower the people to believe that they can change and make a difference, change the service and improve it. They have to believe that they can make these changes."

**For more details of the London Cultural Improvement Group and the London Cultural Improvement Programme visit [www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/networks](http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/networks)**

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