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## Which way now: the response

Following his article in the August issue of *The Leisure Review*, in which he suggested some radical options for leisure service delivery, Duncan Wood-Allum sifts through the comments he received in response to his challenge to colleagues to join the debate.

I have been delighted by both the quality and quantity of responses to the initial challenge in my last article. These comments add real depth to this debate and, if you have not read part one, I urge you to do so before reading this article. I would not suggest we are anywhere near an answer but my ambition for these two articles is to encourage leaders and elected members at least to start asking the right questions. I think the contributions from colleagues have been heartening, challenging and in some cases intimidating but you will be able to judge for yourself.

### Time for a rethink in provision of universal services?

Several contributors, such as Richard Kotulecki, an independent consultant, support the call for a complete transformation in thinking. Richard writes: "I think we need to rethink completely how we 'do' sport and leisure in the UK. This applies at national, regional and local levels. At present, in the majority of cases, we operate variations of a tired old model of provision. As a starting point we often seem confused as to why we want sport and leisure provision. If we can answer this question then we can move on to develop proper and effective delivery strategies. At present many sport strategies are not much more than a series of ill-defined aspirations backed by a series of well-meaning but ineffective initiatives.

"A time of austerity should signal an opportunity to be creative and inventive; that's how it works in business. Our sector, however, is set up to be, at best, resistant to genuine innovation and, at worst, hell-bent on preserving the status quo. It is an irony in sport in the UK that at the excellence end innovation is championed, with elite competitors continually striving to squeeze the next 0.1% improvement in performance, while at the grassroots level, where it all begins, genuine innovation is frowned upon and our system insists on preserving ineffective operating models."

This radical shake up is supported by Malcolm Wallace, director of Inova Marketing, who is critical of the traditional centralised sport delivery systems: "In this country we have a basic problem with our strategy in delivering sport and leisure development programmes. We start off with a big pot of money and then we proceed to divide it up into smaller pots with each pot having a layer of management to fund. Then we have the strategic committees and the planning groups. Finally we get someone to start the ball rolling with a pilot project, then we run out of money because we have spent it on layers of management followed by another layer of management followed by a strategic planning group and finally some poor soul whose job it is to make it work."

So it looks like we need a fundamental mindset shift to support a radical transformation in the way services are delivered. However, who is going to set this direction of travel? I sense it will not be HM Government. I feel the answer lies with all of us.

### Joining up thinking, services and facilities

Some positive ideas around better use of facilities and more efficient services did emerge from feedback from article one. Martin Dowland, projects officer at the faculty of creative and cultural industries at Portsmouth University, brings an interesting angle to this challenge, highlighting the design of typical culture and sport facilities by calling for greater coordination and integration of services into hub facilities. This is starting to happen across the UK but still we are hearing of

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large-scale, single-use facilities being commissioned.

He follows this up with a belief that the potential to merge functions and staff in previously held 'specialisms' in sport and the arts can be combined to create a joined-up service with efficiencies to boot: "Not only would this allow some services to continue or new services to be established but a greater understanding of the broader value of each to each would be more likely."

I have experienced first-hand the lack of synergy between specialists within our sector. Librarians sharing a staff room with lifeguards? Come now! My view is that we may need to recast roles and develop multi-skilled staff who can deliver a number of specialist services on the ground. This will upset thousands of passionate sector specialists, particularly those with a large proportion of their career ahead of them, but this is the reality we are facing.

It appears that we have not found the magic formula of converting funding into outcomes in the most efficient way just yet. We can all look to lessons from the past to see where things did not quite work the way they were originally intended but that is the easy bit; or if it is the easy bit why, with the benefit of hindsight, have we got ourselves into this mess and not made progressive changes?

### **Tools locked in the shed?**

David Albutt highlights with some frustration that we had the tools but failed to use them: "It's frustrating that the sector has designed its own tools that seek to encourage the fundamental review required – TAES, for example, and now the Culture and Sport Improvement Tool (CSIT) – and the latest advice on commissioning and demonstrating impact. Using either of these does strongly impress the need to consider whether what is currently delivered works (often it doesn't) and therefore how it can be changed, or even abandoned. CSIT improvement plans can be more or less challenging; understanding what commissioners want and how to deliver will also lead generally identify the need for fundamental changes. But, given that we all helped to design these tools on behalf of the sector – or at least we all had the opportunity – and did so partly in an attempt to secure a sustainable future for us all, it is a fact that too few people have used either, let alone both."

My own involvement in the local government and central government improvement agenda over the last decade has shown me that many colleagues in our sector just do not like change and most of them will look after number one before they take any action for the benefit of their own organisation or indeed their customers. In common with those lovely people in the City of London, one of the key contributing factors to lack of change was that people never thought the good times would end. Well, they have and with fears of a double-dip recession ringing in our ears, we really do need to accept this new reality and start doing something about it.

### **Investment in social capital is key**

Many contributors picked up the point I originally raised about councils' obsession with buildings and their failure to back up this investment with investment in people. Bernie Jones, a highly experienced operator at Trafford Community Leisure Trust, said, "The councils can no longer afford to provide everything themselves. Yes, there is an abundance of old facilities being managed under long-term agreements but when councils try to close facilities there is usually public uproar, which often results in councillors backing down. Many 'sports development' jobs appear to have gone without a whimper but in the long term without the help of the development officers how is community sport, the real backbone of sport in the UK, going to survive?"

"Often there are too many people and organisations with vested interests. If we approached sport and physical activity in a much more holistic way and embraced true partnerships, I'm sure a lot more could be achieved. Wouldn't it be far better in some areas for a council to pay the private sector to subsidise a number of memberships for the most disadvantaged sections of their community, rather than provide an unsustainable and expensive facility themselves? Isn't it better to support and help the community sports clubs thrive and develop? Isn't it better to ensure all school facilities are opened up? Isn't it better to ensure that we have the people in place to motivate and enthuse our children? Yes, we need facilities but we also need people."

**"Universal provision of our parks, pools and museums was borne out of hardship and social injustice and has withstood 100 years of wars and recessions. There is a strong and compelling body of evidence which demonstrates the value of our services."**

**"One size will definitely not fit all but localism should not be a byword for chaos."**

## **Is the alternative approach compelling enough?**

Victor Le Grand, a consultant, follows on from Bernie's points with a note of caution: "How many councils, if somehow freed from their commitment to operate ageing and inefficient facilities, would then channel the resources into alternative forms of provision? In such a challenging policy (and political) climate, I think we should be careful what we wish for."

"As an alternative, and picking up the point about the loss of sports development capacity for example, how about focusing more on what those contracts deliver and asking more of operators than that they keep the doors open at the lowest possible cost? If the facilities in question are clearly incapable of delivering the kind of community benefits which justify public subsidy, that's another matter; and of course we should be looking more actively at the potential for crossing boundaries, in terms both of policy agendas and delivery arrangements but this is a multi-dimensional problem, which needs a multi-dimensional solution."

Victor suggests that we can do a great deal with what we have so is it not time to start recasting management contracts to reflect the needs of local people for whom the market cannot provide? I am sure a number of operators would say yes but in the same breath would say, "But someone's got to pay for it."

The challenge for us is to ensure that the value of outcomes delivered through different delivery mechanisms is strong enough to attract revenue funding. This leads us nicely into the opportunity that is gathering momentum: commissioning. Heidi Bellamy from Culture First suggests that "freeing up resources currently committed to maintaining ageing assets would allow them to focus on innovative ways of increasing participation among harder-to-reach groups, tackle embedded health issues and work collaboratively through consortia to engage a broader range of service providers in the commissioning process." She adds: "Councils may well be best advised to work with/encourage the private sector to respond where [the councils] are no longer able to provide facilities that meet the universal needs of their communities. There is a growing number of 'budget' providers who aim to offer a quality experience at an affordable price – Klick Fitness is an example – and also those seeking to instigate low-cost delivery models that are not 'asset dependent', such as Parkrun, in more localities."

## **Ask the commissioner**

So what do the health commissioners think about this? Carl Bennett, a "sector friendly" health commissioner, highlights some powerful realities for us to consider: "Local authorities cannot do it all themselves and the private, voluntary and education sectors have a crucial role to play in this agenda. Being a NHS commissioner, I procure services from all these sectors and it works well. I'd argue (convincingly) that we are all in this together and it's about time we recognise it. Local authorities will soon become commissioning organisations and their ability to provide or deliver direct services will be reduced to those that 'cannot' be delivered by others."

Returning briefly to the points made by Richard Kotulecki and Malcolm Arnold, who challenged the entire structure of sport, Carl had this to say: "Sport is a part of the physical activity continuum. We need to recognise this and develop progression routes into opportunities that allow an individual to reach their desired frequency, intensity and time for activity. Sport may be a beneficiary if progression routes are appropriate. In many instances 'sport' actually prevents progression. How many clubs have you been to that encourage a person to come along even if they are no good at it and probably would benefit from doing something else? It would take a strong coach to suggest a multi-sport or multi-activity approach within a cricket club, for example. Also remember that many can only access sport on predetermined days, eg five-a-side football every Friday evening, badminton club on a Wednesday, rugby on a Thursday, etc. In many cases sport prevents a person from achieving the desired time, frequency and intensity for health benefits to be achieved. And we still have some who think that sport once or twice a week is enough."

"The second point I would make is the most important: there is approximately 65% of your local population inactive. They are doing nothing! From a health improvement perspective these are the people we should be targeting. So, as many have highlighted, the usual offers operated from traditional environments will not work in the future. Change of offer is crucial if you are to really tackle the difficult health issues and make 'real' claims that physical activity (sport) makes a contribution to the health agenda."

To summarise, it appears there are plenty of leaders out there who can see the opportunities ahead but with the pragmatic view that achieving transformational change will take time and require the sector, government and all the multifarious stakeholders to align their direction of travel.

William Brown provides an interesting cautionary note to the gathering momentum of change: "There is no doubt a need for a radical rethink across the cultural sector around the role of local authority input. However, I would urge some caution in stampeding to offer solutions that are politically expedient rather than considered responses to the 'market reality' (which is multifarious). As contributory leaders in this area we need to have a handle on the longer-term impacts of decisions made and be dutiful to core values, of which we are custodians as well as shapers."

Tim Dent, a consultant, also flags up a note of caution to full transformation: "...in the haste to demonstrate how good we are at doing things differently, we should be cautious we don't replace one broken structure with another. There is a thin line between creating an uber-efficient, cohesive, multi-partner approach which delivers innovative services to those who need them most and a Frankenstein's monster of fractured, de-professionalised provision characterised by wasteful duplication and increased internal competition for fewer customers who are entirely confused. In this brave new world I would argue it is essential we retain a meaningful, strategically planned and integrated service.

"Most would agree that officers and elected members have to prioritise and be far bolder and innovative but I am not sure we need to move away completely from the direct provision of universal services and funding. Is there a queue of private sector operators wanting to invest and fill the facility void in our disadvantaged communities? Can community groups rely upon an enthusiastic army of volunteers for the long haul and do a better job than before? A world of higher (affordable?) prices for displaced users who have to travel further and voucher schemes (means tested?) for target groups might be more cost-efficient but will it really help us increase participation and help improve the nation's health and well being?

"Universal provision of our parks, pools and museums was born out of hardship and social injustice and has withstood 100 years of wars and recessions. There is a strong and compelling body of evidence which demonstrates the value of our services. In the wake of recent social unrest expect a national debate on the important role our services play in helping to provide hope, guidance and being the glue which binds us all together, irrespective of age, class and race."

### **Thoughts from abroad**

What about an international perspective on these issues? Peter Burley, a leading adviser to the New Zealand Sport and Leisure sector, identified some interesting parallels where the role of local authorities in New Zealand are being challenged. With reference to local authority services, Peter comments that "they seem to be rather universal and generalistic and not niche or community-specific. Here in New Zealand [councils] cannot access grants so they miss funding streams. They work to financial models that limit their value to certain communities of interest and often do not deliver what is actually needed. So 'snap': in some respects we have similar issues here in New Zealand."

### **Conclusion**

When I embarked on this call for debate I was expecting quite a bit of flak. Despite some organisations in our sector not wanting to be seen to be associated with the timing and type of this thinking, in the main I have been surprised by the positivity and support from a broad range of contributors. I would like to thank them for putting their ideas forward and enriching the debate.

So what now? From my perspective, this starts with recasting the strategic direction of local government sport, leisure and culture services; and from that the development and shaping of the approach to achieve desired outcomes. As a consultancy SLC will continue to work with those authorities who require support in shifting their own direction of travel. We will also continue to support others in the sector in working out which direction they want to head, acknowledging that one person's vision can be another's nightmare.

One size will definitely not fit all but localism should not be a byword for chaos. It will increasingly spawn a broad range of approaches to delivering local

services with, no doubt, differing levels of success. But that is the joy of our sector: we never get it completely right and will constantly need to be challenging our approach to value for money, improvement and achievement of real outcomes.

I encourage others to pick up the threads of this debate and take it forward in their own organisation, with their elected members and communities.

**Duncan Wood-Allum is director of the Sport Leisure and Culture Consultancy**

**'Change has come – but which way now', the first article in this series, was published in the August issue.**

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