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## Postscript from the Edge

**When Cumbria County Council offered voluntary redundancy packages in a bid to reduce their wage bill Eddie Edge decided to call time on his life in leisure and seek new challenges outside the system he has helped to build over 37 years in the industry. *The Leisure Review* went to talk to him.**

*The Leisure Review* caught Eddie Edge as his wife left for work leaving him a list of jobs to occupy what was only his third day of freedom. Although still adjusting to retirement from his post as director of the local county sport partnership (CSP), there was no doubt in his mind that he had made the right decision: "I shall miss the team at Active Cumbria [formerly Cumbria Sport] but there were other things happening at the county council that left me, how shall I say it, disgruntled." As a hosted entity, the CSP had experienced the advantages and disadvantages of being a cuckoo in a large corporation's nest and Edge found himself faced with the question, "Do I really want to go through another two or three years of this?" With the enjoyment and the challenge of the work being obscured by the bureaucracy he answered the question and "took the package". Much earlier in his career Edge had been faced with a comparable decision when the Thatcher government of the late eighties, driven by a similar ideology to David Cameron's cohort, decided that council services should be exposed to competition. Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) caused as much angst and upheaval in local authorities as the comprehensive spending review (CSR) and Edge, who had entered facility management through his love of swimming, was again faced with a pivotal choice: contractor or client. He went client-side, which meant his role was to monitor his former colleagues as they managed the facilities, but it was who he worked for, rather than what he did, which made a fundamental difference to the way he went on see the sport and leisure landscape. Edge went to work for Richard Saunders, now the chief executive of the Greater Manchester county sports partnership, GreaterSport, the chair of the CSP network and one of the most prominent sports development practitioners in the UK.

Edge recounts the sequence of his early career: "I started my career at Oldham Sports Centre and was assistant manager when they put the dry side on and then I went to Chadderton, where I was born and raised, to manage a small community facility when CCT came along. Richard came in as client officer and I worked with him for a couple of years." Saunders' approach influenced Edge's perspective, as did a young family, and when a role came up in Carlisle leading the client operation, Edge took his opportunity. "There weren't many client officers around at the time as the role was fairly new and I'd been through it all."

Asked whether sees any similarities between the CCT and CSR processes, Edge is typically trenchant: "It's all about reducing money, and not developing services that can make a difference." He does draw out one key difference: "CCT was about reducing costs across the board in a council's services. Under CSR sport and recreation as a service is having to fight for its funding even harder now and some of it will go. Community sports development teams, for example, are going as councils say, 'We can't afford those any more', although in Cumbria we thought they would disappear overnight and they haven't."

Talk of the state of sports development gets Edge passionate. "We need to make the case that sports development is not just about developing sport. It's not about developing one product. It has to impact on different agendas and we are going round and round in circles because sport isn't seen as a priority any more." Does he believe that sport should be a statutory service? "Yes. It isn't going to happen but it should. Sports development has been around since the seventies, when Action Sport was around and we discovered the 50 plus programme and so on, and in all that time it's been two-year funding, three-year funding. At least this government, or Sport England, has now invested in CSPs for four years, which is unheard of. I don't know if that's because of the Olympics is to be followed by the Commonwealth Games and they are scared to pull the plug with such high-profile events coming along but the commitment

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is welcome.” Edge then looks beyond these two big events and starts to make a case for the power of sport: “The health agenda is going to be massive but we need to convince government of the need for a long-term strategy to use sport and physical activity to reduce health inequality; and of sticking with it.”

It is not only government short-termism which exasperates Edge. Looking around the sports system, he is characteristically honest about things which could have worked better. “No disrespect to people involved in the school sports partnerships (SSP) but most of the managers were in essence teachers trying to do a sports development job. When it’s been a case of trying to work in partnership with some of those people – and I don’t want to label all teachers – they don’t have the necessary people skills to build up relationships, get on with people in meetings or to see the bigger picture.”

Although Edge is careful to reiterate that many of the SSP personnel he has worked with in Cumbria have been very good at their job, he is clearly able to see the problem of using a tool which is not fit for purpose. Asked if the whole sport system meets that criterion, he is more dismissive: “No, I don’t think it is fit for purpose on the whole. It’s still too fragmented. The wheel is still being reinvented. Take Active Sport. The programme was put in place for five years and after three the plug was pulled.” He pauses, and then asks the key question: “How can it be effective with no long-term strategy in place? How many agencies, how many governing bodies, how many quangos do we need, especially as they all seem to be squabbling with each other at times?” He returns to an earlier theme. “Partly because of this I have moved away from arguing the case for sport to arguing the case for health, and how sport and physical activity can contribute to the health of our communities.”

Having touched on many aspects of the way sport works, and fails to work, in England, Edge is happy to answer questions about CSPs and the CSP Network, especially as he is a fan. “The way that Richard Saunders and Lee Mason [director of the CSP Network] have managed to position the network so that they can go into government departments, see ministers and be advocates for sport – and get money out of the system – certainly makes me believe that there is a place for a county body to be that broker, to be that lead for policy at a local level and bring together district networks and local partnerships.” Having accepted that all CSPs must deliver against a core funding agreement, he is adamant that their strength lies in flexibility. “We are not stuck in any way. We have a central specification but a county sport partnership is far more than that, does far more than that. We have always been flexible at Cumbria Sport. You can’t ignore people. You can’t ignore the needs of your clubs and you have to react to what they need.” Quick to defend his own CSP, he is also keen to protect the wider network from criticism. “There may well be one or two weaker partnerships and perhaps one of two directors do need to move on but on the whole the system itself is working well.”

Over the years Edge has been at the forefront of the development of sports development and was a great supporter and advocate of both the National Sports Development Seminar and the National Association for Sports Development but he worries for the future of the profession. “I speak to young people who want to come into sports development with degrees and what have you. Most local authorities take sports development for granted and do not provide good strong leadership to their teams. These young people need better support and therefore need a strong professional body, at a cost they can afford, to look out for them. It seems now to me that we have to hope this new body [IMPSPA] can provide it with good people on that board; people with respect.” Edge, however, is one of many who believe that leaders are increasingly hard to discern. “They don’t jump out at you, do they? One of the things we do need is a Bob Geldof or a Jamie Oliver in sport, someone who can bang on doors and speak to government on behalf of sport. But I don’t see any sporting celebrity who fits the bill, anyone who is passionate enough to speak out loudly and strongly for it.”

As the interview winds down and Edge considers his wife’s ‘to do’ list, he lets slip that he means to “keep an eye” on Cumbria Sport, to offer support if and when they need it, and that we may not have seen the back of him. Anyone in sports development who values passion, commitment and a forthright approach should be grateful.

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