

## Holding the ring: *The Leisure Review* symposium

***The Leisure Review* hosted a 24-hour symposium to provide an opportunity for senior practitioners and thought-leaders within the sport, leisure and culture sector to explore the future of the sector within the context of national policy and funding priorities. This is what happened.**

Wadham College has a history of nurturing progressive thought. It educated Christopher Wren, fostered the Royal Society and such was the left-leaning nature of the student body in the 1970s that part of the college was known as the Ho Chi Minh Quad. Whether by accident or design the editorial team of *The Leisure Review* (TLR) could hardly have picked a more intellectually conducive venue for their first symposium for colleagues from the sport, leisure and culture sector. With ivy-clad buildings on all sides, ringing flagstones underfoot and the portraits of scholars and thinkers on every wall, the setting was perfect for the 24 hours of “discussion and debate” within “an environment for new and challenging thinking” that was promised in the brochure. As the magazine’s editor, Jonathan Ives, suggested in his opening remarks, whether such aspirations were to be realised remained in the hands of the delegates. To organise an event for an industry in such flux, in such a depressed market and to then hand over all responsibility for its success to the body of the kirk has to be considered very brave or very foolhardy. TLR will claim that, given the way the short event turned out, they are within their rights to claim the former adjective and add ‘visionary’ and ‘radical’ to the list, although these descriptors should more accurately be associated with the symposium members.

As Ives handed the reins to Martyn Allison to chair the first session there were over 30 members of the industry’s top management class in the room waiting to find out whether their investment of time and resources were to have been wisely invested beyond giving them what one had already welcomed as “space to think”. Allison’s first job was to call two of them to the front to kick off the debate using prompts he had culled from his position at the centre of the sector. Richard Hunt from Suffolk County Council and Peter Ackerley from the Football Association are both operating in the eye of their respective storms and it was to the former’s arena that Allison first turned. Hunt explained that by this time next year there will be no ‘departments’ within his authority; instead services will have been commissioned from a variety of suppliers. With this the debate quickly turned to the mishmash of issues thrown up by the big society agenda, not least the expectation that communities will be able to take control of services locally pre-supposes that they have the capacity so to do. The conundrum was posited that to be “fit to compete, fit to collaborate, fit to innovate” community groups would first need to be trained, resourced and supported but that the capacity to do all this was currently being stripped out of the infrastructure to create the savings imposed by government. Ackerley wondered whether even sports’ governing bodies will be able to react quickly enough to “grab what opportunities are out there”. The fact that a commercial five-a-side centre is being built “in the shadow of the arch” was a clear warning of the dangers if people failed to “think differently”. There was a clear sense in the room that beyond the high walls and calm atmosphere of Wadham the world felt chaotic with some very hard messages being sent and received throughout the public sector.

At times like these people look for leadership and it was argued that there is less of this in the sector than there should be. It was felt that at a local level there is no leadership vacuum but that nationally and politically there is. We work in a disparate industry that fosters a silo mentality and while a guarded welcome was given to the new institute, it was not felt that simply bringing two failing bodies together would solve the much wider problem, which one delegate diagnosed thus: “We are lacking a systematic development of leadership”. This was a thesis which came back under the spotlight later in the event, reflecting the significant level of concern.



Wadham College: home to *The Leisure Review* symposium

**“The first day of *The Leisure Review* symposium had served to establish the principle of a discussion-led programme and illustrated the many challenges currently being faced by the sector’s senior management professionals”**

A natural break brought a refreshed panel and, with a process owing more to the X Factor than its authors might care to admit, both the panellists and the topics for debate were chosen by the symposium members. Lloyd Conaway of Team Beds and Luton was joined by CSP Network colleague Lee Mason and the chief executive at Legacy Trust UK, Moira Swinbank. The first of the questions suggested by delegates was whether the fire had gone out of sports development. Swinbank suggested that the shift towards measurable targets would be positive, while Conaway feared a continuing downwards pressure on sport. Having noted that so many people were claiming credit for saving the community sports partnerships, Mason hoped that they would be able to demonstrate a genuine reason for their continued existence. While the climate of cuts clearly presented a risk, there would be opportunities for sports development to be leaner in its operation. Taking the discussion to the floor brought suggestions that there would be competition for aspects of what sports development is able to do, raising the question of how quality can be maintained across the development process. With reference to a recent survey that suggested local authority sports services were in line for significant cuts, there was comment that the fire had indeed gone out of sports development, tick-boxed out of existence.

The question as to whether trusts and private sector contractors could ever work effectively together raised the temperature of debate with claims that it was happening already and that there was potential for greater collaboration. While it was suggested that collaboration on procurement, particularly for health-related projects, might accelerate the process, it was noted that members of the Leisure Management Contractors Association were not growing the market. Indeed without a reassessment of the trusts' VAT advantage, it was argued that the private sector in leisure management might disappear. However, it was noted that the government was extremely unlikely to extend VAT advantages to the private sector.

Acknowledging the widely accepted need among those in the room for leadership that could both inspire the sector and deal effectively on its behalf with government, the question was posed on behalf of the new management institute that was scheduled to be incorporated the very next day: what should be this organisation's priorities? Suggestions came thick and fast, starting with leadership, developing people, credibility, recognition, advocacy and evidence. It was argued that the sector needed to be able to offer solutions to government rather than continually look to government to solve its own problems but, as one contributor experienced in the ways of Whitehall noted, sport, leisure and culture is a very new sector in terms of government. "The top of government is like a game and it's played rough. It's more like chess than football and the senior sectors know how to work in it. You have to play by its rules and you have to have people who can play well."

This stark reality, coupled with a plea that the new institute should "not be a club for the hard-done-by", brought the opening session to a close, sending delegates into the evening's programme of events suitably enlivened and challenged. The evening programme comprised *The Leisure Review* lecture, delivered by Sam Jones, an associate of the respected thinktank Demos [see the accompanying article in this issue], and the symposium dinner. Both the lecture and the dinner made the most of Wadham's most impressive spaces, the panelled Knowles Room and the Grand Hall respectively. Sam Jones's lecture provided a highly articulate argument for a reassessment of the role of culture in government policy-making and the following discussion, facilitated by Duncan Wood-Allum of the Sport, Leisure and Culture consultancy, served to demonstrate the ability and willingness of symposium members to engage with the complex issues of defining culture and its importance to society. Over dinner delegates deconstructed the day's debate across the benched table until Richard Ward, a former canoeing development manager turned NHS commissioner, used the after-dinner slot to offer some wit and wisdom on the subject of the interface of health and leisure. Anyone who lives in a village called Sandford and sets up a healthy activity group bearing the obvious acronym clearly has a developed sense of the irreverent but Ward's contribution to the day was commensurate with what preceded it: informed, enlightening and pitched perfectly for the audience.

If the first day of *The Leisure Review* symposium had served to establish the principle of a discussion-led programme and illustrated the many challenges currently being faced by the sector's senior management professionals the second day set out to continue the process of debate but with an emphasis on solutions and action. Sue Isherwood, director of the National Culture Forum Leading Learning Programme and former chair of the National Association of Local Government Arts Officers, had agreed to apply some open space

[www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)

*The Leisure Review* is supported by:



*The Leisure Review* is written, designed and published by:

**tlr.comms**  
TLR Communications Limited

technology to the symposium's final session.

Open space technology is a systematic approach to recreating the chaos fundamental to creativity and then harnessing it. One of the few professional creatives on the delegate list, Sue Isherwood, led the morning exploration both of the technique and of the ideas brought to the table, or more accurately to the floor, by her colleagues. As Isherwood explained to the assembled delegates, "There is a huge amount of expertise and knowledge in the room and open space is a technique to bring that out." Apparently the technique can be used by thousands of people over a number of days but a more manageable three groups spent a constrained ninety minutes debating an industry approach to the NHS, the need to embrace social media and, what had become the leitmotif of the event, leadership. The gist of the responses have become part of the symposium communiqué pulled together by Rob Wallis, director of the Press Red consultancy, as the last act of the 24 hours at Wadham [see the separate communiqué article in this issue]. Wallis' session also teased out a number of other specific actions and, as the debate continued to the last minute allowed to it, the mood in the room moved from talking about the sector's challenges towards doing something about them.

Presented as "a new way of thinking" for the sport, leisure and culture sector, *The Leisure Review* symposium had provided space for the sector's thought-leaders to think. The agenda had been set by the people in the room and debate had been allowed to flow in response to the challenges and questions that emerged. The facilitated discussion sessions were interrupted only occasionally, for a lecture or a meal, and, as one delegate remarked, "This is so much better than being talked at for two days." The commitment to action as articulated in the symposium communiqué was also extended to an enthusiastic endorsement of *The Leisure Review* symposium as a welcome addition to the sector's calendar.

***The Leisure Review* symposium will be held in Oxford on 12 and 13 April 2012. Bookings have been, and are now being, taken.**

***The Leisure Review, April 2011***

© 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.