

Where next for parks? The Leisure Review round table

With national government restating its commitment to austerity and local government facing unprecedented cuts to their funding, the Leisure Review convened a round table to consider the future for parks and the value of the ongoing campaign to draw attention to the importance of our open spaces.

Around the table:

Martyn Allison

Consultant with extensive experience of strategic change management and leadership development across the sport, leisure and culture sector

Paul Bramhill

Consultant with extensive parks experience and formerly chief executive of Greenspace

Ian Brooke

Head of leisure, parks and communities at Oxford City Council

The Leisure Review reported on a new campaign for parks, Make Parks a Priority, in October 2012 and again in October 2013 in the context of the demise of Greenspace, the organisation most obviously promoting, supporting and representing the interests of parks and those engaged in parks management. With the Leisure Review winter conference bringing together senior figures from across the sport, leisure and culture sector, we took the opportunity to convene an impromptu parks panel to ask what another campaign for parks might hope to achieve.

From his perspective as a seasoned campaigner on behalf of parks, Paul Bramhill could see the need for promoting parks in the current political context "because of the position of parks in local authorities and within government. Huge cutbacks have got to be made. and it is left to local people to raise the issue of parks with local government. There is no central funding and there is a policy vacuum about how people might do that."

He also suggested that the disappearance of so many non-governmental organisations had further undermined the recognition of parks as an essential and valuable public asset. With little funding for government agencies, non-governmental organisations are either being closed or losing their ability to develop policy and support local government strategy. Where once there had been around 80 organisations with an interest in parks and open space as part of their remit, those able to be supportive of parks has declined dramatically.

So is a national campaign to highlight the importance and circumstances of parks relevant to local authorities? Ian Brooke explained that the research and data from such campaigns were invaluable. "I still use data from the CABI Space document, Making the Invisible Visible," he said. "That has data that is very helpful but it will start to date and we need to think about how we continue to get this information."

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UK parks professionals increasingly look to the USA for research and strategic thinking, including work by the Trust for Public Land [see footnotes]. Although there must be caveats with foreign data, the principles and strategic messages are frequently applicable to UK environments.

“We need to dig down locally to demonstrate value of parks, whether that means working with health or Sport England,” Brooke said. “We’re doing that in Oxford to make sure we have a voice. Looking nationally, Oxford is a city district so we don’t have many of the challenges being faced by many local authorities, such as the big unitaries. Parks have remained strong here for lots of reasons – political will, the work we’ve done, strong partnerships we’ve been able to create – but there are other authorities without this support and parks have drifted down the agenda. Stories we hear of the likely impact on parks across the country are really disheartening.”

For Martyn Allison one of the key issues has been the reluctance within the parks sector to embrace the improvement agenda. “While I was working with the Improvement and Development Agency there was attempt to get parks to catch up but even with help of CABE Space and Greenspace we struggled to get practitioners to modernise,” he said. “While sport and even the arts started to look at the improvement agenda, parks never made similar progress and therefore they were bound to be vulnerable when another crunch came.”

Allison also suggested that any campaign for parks would require something to provide a focus. “I’m not sure what the current crisis is around parks,” he said. “We hear the stories in the Leading Learning Programme but parks do not get mentioned in the crisis conversations, although playing fields do. If you probe, the reaction tends to be that parks can’t be changed because managers don’t know what to do with them. Therefore parks are facing top-slicing [of budgets] rather than radical change.

“The parks sector needs to take responsibility for not getting as far as they should have done but I’m not sure how far they are confronting the issues that other parts of the sector are facing. We’re certainly not hearing of sale of parks en masse so are we looking at top-slicing and a bit less maintenance? If we don’t know what the crisis is, why have a campaign?”

Bramhill explained that there is likely to be further current data regarding UK parks published soon and that in the US there is a much greater appreciation of the need to contribute to such data projects. While agreeing that the parks sector had failed to embrace such improvement tools such as the Towards An Excellent Service (TAES) initiative, he did suggest that the financial situation for parks, particularly in the UK’s major cities, was a case of “mega-slicing rather than top-slicing”.

Allison offered the example of a local authority currently piloting a peer review system for health and leisure that involved a programme to transform the authorities services. From the outset it was apparent that the parks service had no connection to the process. “We tried to find out why parks were not being seen as a provider of health and wellbeing to underpin the community engagement offer. There was huge investment going into this process but parks were nowhere. They knew they should be involved but didn’t know how to get in. In this particular authority parks seemed to be disconnected, both in policy and operational terms.”

This disconnection struck a chord with Ian Brooke, who has been disappointed by the apparent reluctance within the parks sector to embrace the health and wellbeing agendas. “Parks are nowhere near as advanced as other areas of our sector but with the cleaner, greener agenda there are massive opportunities and huge potential,” he said.

"This means parks has become a functional direct service operation. They'll cut the grass, reduce the maintenance and leave it available for the public, which is OK but we should be seeing parks, green spaces and countryside, and even cemeteries, as a real opportunity. The question should be: what could you do to really bring that to life as a community arena?"

While there are exceptionally motivated and talented managers achieving excellent results within parks, there is little shouting done to promote such success. Could it be a natural modesty? Martyn Allison demurred.

"We have had endless campaigns that never got delivered," he said. "TAES and other initiatives showed that the parks sector was not mature enough to turn campaigning into practical change. I think it's much deeper than modesty. There's a sense that if you remain invisible nobody will ask you to change. It's more a fear that 'If I try to argue my case someone might force me to change; let's get back in the greenhouse.'"

It was agreed around the table that the capacity to think differently and enable new ideas and approaches to be explored and implemented was an issue that needed to be addressed. Few local authorities now have the scale of operations to warrant a parks department and regional collaborations between authorities have proved difficult to develop. With parks-focused operations being made smaller, the challenge is how to build the capacity to innovate within the sector. Thinking bigger and thinking differently is essential to the process.

Allison continued: "In the 1980s CCT [compulsory competitive tendering] took away the concept of parks maintenance and parks management being an integrated concept. That had a huge impact on the demoralisation of the parks service. Then the campaign for parks played a part in people starting to reinvest in them and parks started to look nice again. We entered this recession with parks not in a bad physical state but it will take three or four years of maintenance reduction, with flower beds and playground equipment disappearing, before we'll be back to similar circumstances of the 1980s. But if you shut a library people see it and people talk about it; the impact of the cuts are visible very quickly. The impact of cuts in parks is delayed, not least by the passion of the people working there and their determination to keep things going."

Brooke concurred but also stressed that there are local authorities working hard to counter the situation. While there is good, innovative work being done within the parks sector, the processes to share best practice need to be improved. One of the sector's strengths is its engagement with volunteers and this area offers an opportunity to mitigate some of the impact of declining resources. "If we're not sharing and working hard with volunteers, the picture you've painted will become reality," he said. While this drew general agreement, Paul Bramhill suggested that the ability of local authorities to invest in the public realm will never return to pre-austerity levels. With no national impetus, only local initiatives will have any impact.

Local initiatives may succeed but for Allison leadership holds the key. "People will find operational solutions and salvage at a local level," he said, "and this will be better where there's leadership. The big gap is the strategic gap. It is interesting that Birmingham is now seeing parks as a much more efficient way of delivering their health and wellbeing offer than through their leisure centres. They are seeing parks, canals, the walkways as a huge platform for a local wellbeing offer because it's cheaper. But in other authorities that link has not been made so the big challenge is how to make these links. It is clearly not going to come from a government department. Only through the industry itself will some sense of a strategic voice be recreated."

However, getting the industry to create this voice and embrace the concept of change will be a challenge. Bramhill found it difficult to envisage: "After the demise of ILAM and Greenspace, it is really difficult to galvanise the parks sector into change. I have to say that I can't see anyone doing it at the moment. You need an organisation to build up the expertise and deliver a framework. It doesn't have to be big but it does have to have consistency. Is that a professional institute? Other organisations can come together to campaign but they don't have the resources to deliver."

For Ian Brooke the focus needs to be local. "It is essential to have a solid local strategy to mitigate all the things we've talked about," he said. "Within that you would include access, quality and how parks work with other key agendas. The document would be created with partners, such as the health and wellbeing boards, so that you can use it to promote key messages, as Birmingham has done, that parks are a relatively low-cost solution to some massive problems. If you've got that local strategic document in place I think you've got a fighting chance but without it a local authority could really struggle."

Allison remained adamant that an organisational solution is not realistic in the current political climate. While the sector needs a voice, it will need to be more creative in creating it.

"That's the challenge," he said. "Campaigning to save our parks will not work. It's too blunt an instrument against the scale of the challenges we face. The libraries sector believed that if they put up a poster saying 'Save Our Libraries' they would be saved. They haven't been: there's been the biggest rationalisation of libraries ever seen. Some quite innovative solutions to the delivery of services have emerged from that – some of them I like, some of them I don't – but the innovation appeared when it was realised that the campaign wasn't going to work. If people think the starting point of this new movement is a 'save our parks' campaign I would argue that they are wasting their time."

References:

Making the Invisible Visible, published by CABE Space

Document available from the CABE Space archives. Published February 2009.

Trust for Public Land

The Center for City Park excellence
Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System

The Leading Learning Programme

The National Leisure and Culture Forum Leading Learning Programme, offering the highest quality leadership training and mentoring for senior local authority cultural services managers from across the UK.

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