

At the heart of sport: a new future for the Sport and Recreation Alliance

The Sport and Recreation Alliance is developing a new approach and a new focus to its work on behalf of its members. Jonathan Ives spoke to Sallie Barker about the process of deciding what to change, what to change to and how to make change happen.

The Sport and Recreation Alliance has committed itself to change. With an interim chief executive in post, the organisation is going through the process of seeking and appointing a new chief executive officer, who will be asked to act upon the new directions and expectations identified by an extensive review of the Alliance's role and purpose.

While this review may not have altered the organisation's essential function as an umbrella body representing the interests of national governing bodies of sport and other sports-focused organisations, it would appear to be an acknowledgement that the social, commercial and political environments and contexts in which all sports operate have been transformed, certainly since the organisation was formed in 1935 and arguably since it changed its name from the CCPR to the SRA in 2010. With sport changed and changing, sports bodies have had to change too and it seems a racing certainty that whoever takes the helm at the Alliance will be steering a new course in some very choppy waters.

The current review notwithstanding, the workings of the Alliance have served to illustrate how the world of sport has evolved. In the late 1990s, to take a seat in a meeting of one of the Central Council for Physical Recreation committees discussing the issues of a particular sports sector (as your correspondent was occasionally invited to do) was to witness the arcane workings of a sports administrative process that seemed becalmed en route to moribund. The contrast between this organisation and the current incarnation, which aspires to, and pursues, a leading role in policy-making, legislation and regulation, is reassuringly stark. Where the CCPR might have been representative of an age in which sports administration was a gentlemanly process, the work of the Alliance reflects a landscape in which commercial considerations and effective business practices have become central to the success of any sport.

Having joined what was the CCPR in 2002 from Sport England, Sallie Barker is as well versed as anyone in the ways of sport and sports organisations. As head of services for the Alliance, she has also been leading the organisation's change process, which began towards the end of 2012 and will continue with the appointment of a new chief executive. Any change process, the Leisure Review suggests, usually begins with two questions: from what and to what are we going to change? Was this the Alliance's approach?

"It was," Barker says. "We'd always been pretty clear as an organisation about what we were trying to do – representing our members and providing services to them – but I think it's fair to say that over the past few years the messages had become a bit muddled and perhaps we were guilty of mission creep; we weren't clear about what our fine purpose was and what our focus was. So in November 2012 the board had a strategic away day to look at what it was meant to be doing and what it was trying to achieve. It set up an internal team to do the transformation process, to speak to our members, to ask what they

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thought about us, what we were doing well, what we could improve. It has been a long consultation process, led by the staff, which has helped us redefine what our future vision should be, what our mission should be.”

Barker describes a process that involved a “cross-organisational team” working with the board’s own transformation team as a check-and-challenge group but she stressed that speaking to the Alliance’s 300-plus member organisations was central to the process.

“Our key members will always be the governing bodies of sport,” Barker says. “We now have two categories of membership – those that are responsible for sport and those that use sport to deliver their objectives – and we reviewed all our processes and what we were able to do for whom. We realised that our key members, our ‘full members’ as we call them, are the governing bodies that represent a sport or an activity, and those that use sport to deliver their objectives now become associate members. This means that we can be clear that we can work with the whole spectrum of governing bodies but we also want others in membership so we can help them deliver their objectives, because they are delivering sport and recreation as well.”

Asking for feedback always carries with it the risk of some harsh truths and it seems that members were prepared to be frank. However, Barker maintains that this was an important part of the process.

“We really appreciated how honest they were,” she says. And were they brutally honest? “In some cases but that was fine and, if I’m honest, some of the things we had already suspected. Some [members] were really quite clear: ‘We think you’re a nice organisation but we’re not really sure what you do.’ So there was a nice feel-good factor but if they had to go and defend their membership they couldn’t really explain it. We really did listen to what people had to say and we had eight or nine strands to look at but member engagement is at the core of all of it.”

If the question of what to change was largely provided by considering and engaging the organisation’s membership, the question of what to change to was influenced by the various certainties and uncertainties familiar to anyone working in and around the public and NGO sectors.

“We’re looking at increasing commercial revenues,” Barker says. “We have the contract with Sport England but we want to start raising our own income from our own products and services so that we can become the truly independent voice of sport. It’s a big challenge. The contract is there and it is honoured but if you’re looking at government budgets we recognise that it could be challenged so we want to be sustainable via our own efforts for the long-term future of the organisation.”

Discussions with Sport England about the Alliance’s refocusing have explored the issue of support for the non-funded sports and how these smaller sports bodies might be assisted, particularly in the increasingly complex world NGB governance.

“So we want a clearer direction,” Barker explains, “with members at the heart of everything we do but a recognition that we need to raise money to do that.”

She agrees that the process of deciding what the organisation can do also requires some clarity about what it is not able to do: “Our new vision and mission says, ‘We are at the heart of a world-leading sport and recreation sector.’ The board is saying that it wants to be the glue that holds the sector together. It is not about being the heart or the only heart. We want to work and have relationships in the sector, being clear about what we’re doing and what they’re doing to avoid duplication.

"I would like to get to the point where we have a clear vision that we are all prepared to sign up to, so that when we're speaking to government and other agencies we can say, 'This is what we do.' I think that's going to be really important post-2017, when everyone will be talking about funding cuts. We've got to get out and sell the message about sport and recreation, and what governing bodies can do. It's not just about participation targets: it's about mental health, social cohesion, sport being at the heart of the community, volunteer development, and all those other things. We've really got to start selling what we do and I think if we can get a clear message that everyone can sign up to then hopefully we can persuade government about how good sport is. But to do that we need to know our stakeholders, we need to have good relationships with them, we need to sort out how we're going to work together. That's what we want to achieve with our vision but we also want to support our members to make it a world-leading sport and recreation sector.

"Leading is one of our core functions but it's not about leading the sector. We received clear messages from some of our members that they don't want us to be leading it; sometimes they want us behind the scenes. So we need to recognise different ways of operating and we thought that best articulated by saying we're at the heart.

"So we've looked at the mission, which is about being the independent voice, championing and advocating, representing the sports sector but being clear about what it is and why we're representing it. I think we've got a long way to go to get there but we want to provide leadership and deliver great services to the sector."

The aim, Barker explains, is to continue the core membership services that provide guidance, support and assistance to a diverse range of sports organisations but supplement this offer with additional services that members might also choose to buy into. This will be a new direction for the Alliance and will involve greater dynamism and a higher profile. Barker is confident that the commitment and the passion of the staff will, along with a stronger culture of performance management and a renewed clarity of purpose, create a strong and sustainable organisation capable of representing and campaigning on behalf of a sport and recreation sector facing uncertain times.

With a new vision for the organisation now signed off by the board, the process of appointing a new chief executive has begun in earnest. The board hopes to have the right person identified and in post by September. And might that person be Sallie Barker?

She laughs. "Who knows? I may well say that I'm best placed to take it forward. I know what we need and I have the trust of the staff. They know what we're trying to achieve and we've a shared vision."

While the board decides who will take on the role, the business of representing and championing sport and recreation continues. Having been at the heart of the organisation's transformation process, Barker is confident that the new objectives and clear vision of the future will succeed in putting the Sport and Recreation Alliance at the heart of a world-leading sport and recreation sector

And is she happy to say so? "Of course!" She laughs again. "When the board asked me how it was going, I said, 'I think it's going really well!'"

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review.

The SRA Sports Summit 2014 will be held on 5 June at Stamford Bridge in London. For full details visit the SRA online at www.sportandrecreation.org.uk

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