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Take a moment

With the sector facing unprecedented challenges, the Commissioner argues that it is time for story-telling, evidence-based decision-making and some very loud shouting, preferably from an elevated vantage point.

These are the most austere of times, with cuts here, salami-slicing there and 'difficult' decisions related to decommissioning left, right and centre. It is therefore more than crucial that we have a champion to fight the good fight. To steer the ship to safe harbour. To stand up and be counted.

The reading I am doing of late has covered many a closure of facilities, reductions in provision and further uncertainties regarding the availability of leisure, sport, recreation, physical activities and culture-related opportunities in what seems an increasingly bleak future for the sector. If what I am reading is true, the future looks foggy at best and extremely dark for the services we are all so passionate about. It is time someone, or something, took the reigns and shouted loudly from the top of the Shard about the tangible and less tangible benefits of leisure-related services and why continuing to invest in them is a bloody good thing for all.

I say all, but we all know that in the main only 20% or so of our population actually engage and touch these services. Is this the real issue?

Providing services that many see as non-statutory to a relatively low number of the population can be seen as a luxury when real decisions are being made about whether or not a meals-on-wheels service is continued or a respite centre for those with learning and physical disabilities remains open. So it comes to us – those in the sector who care enough – to say something, do something (anything) about communicating the value. The calculation of value comes in many forms:

- Return on Investment (RoI)
- Qualy and Daly
- Cost-benefit Analysis (CBA)
- Cost-effective Analysis (CEA)
- Cost Utility Analysis (CUA)
- Social Return on Investment (SROI)
- Economic Impact Analysis (EIA)
- Net Present Value (NPV)

All the above could be harnessed by a simple term: value for money (VfM). This could be used to compare one intervention (service) with another. VfM isn't a simple thing to determine, especially if you are comparing apples with pears or social workers with archivists. We really do need to get a grip of the value of what it is we do. Ultimately it will come down to the achievement of measurable outputs, impacts and outcomes. For me, the sector talks a good talk, and in many cases does good things, but in far too many cases they fail to clearly articulate or communicate the 'so what' – the difference they make, what it is they create.

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We know that it is difficult to compare roses with dandelions or an offender rehabilitation officer with a lifeguard but this is what many heads of service, assistant directors and directors are having to do. It is also worth noting that many organisational/management leaders are competing for the same purse and favour of decision from elected members. It is a bit of a mêlée out there at the moment and in a mêlée there are going to be casualties.

Wouldn't it be great if we all took a step back and thought about this for a moment, or three? Taking time to think through the strategic value and impact of decisions is becoming the norm. No more autopilot. No more flying by the seat of the pants or working to ensure a favoured service survives because that is where you started as a 16-year-old YTS or a summer-holiday casual. Making informed, evidence-based decisions is now the day job. It is weighing up the different organisational benefits of "it's a good thing leisure, isn't it" versus "without a neighbourhood manager it will be difficult to develop a culture of co-production". I think you all understand where I am coming from when I say that we really do need to be smarter about the language we use and the stories we tell.

Having an understanding of the possible outcomes achievable by the sector is crucial. The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) produced a great framework, referred to as the Outcome Framework for Culture and Sport, which is held on the LGA website. This framework provides you with the best opportunity to develop a deep understanding of what your services have the potential to achieve, what difference they make to the population they touch.

Now, add another 20% to those outputs and outcomes and you are beginning to see the impact possible. We really do need to grow the reach of the sector so that it touches a far greater mix of beneficiaries. We need to engage those some describe as 'hard to reach'. There is no such thing as hard to reach: you simply do not understand their needs and what makes them tick.

Growing your reach will grow your impact. Growing impact will grow output generation. Outputs contribute to outcomes. What are you doing to understand how to engage a wider share of the potential market? What are you doing to marry up your offers so that they deliver the big tickets to the right communities? Who are you developing joint offers with so that you deliver efficiencies in service delivery yet improve effectiveness and increase impact?

These are all big questions but they are questions worth asking and understanding. cCLOA has recently produced a guidance document, The Role of Culture and Leisure in Improving Health and Wellbeing, which does a good job of covering many of the bases you will be required to get a handle of if you are going to take this stuff seriously. The sooner you begin to unravel (telecom companies call it unbundling) the various strands of impact you are making day in, day out, the sooner you can start to generate a more informed picture of what it is your services are delivering and how these are contributing to the strategic outcomes. There has never been a more important time to understand strategy and value.

Take a moment to think and begin to develop an outcome framework that helps you tell the story. There are two things you need to make sure you consider: is it in the joint strategic needs assessment; and am I contributing to any public health outcome framework objectives? Ask and ask again.

I'll leave you with these thoughts. Don't just write a paper to cabinet. Don't just rally the troops to shout on your behalf. Stand atop the Shard and tell one and all of the great work your services do and the

measurable difference they make each and every day.

We all enjoy a good story. Make it believable.

The Commissioner is a senior health improvement specialist with extensive experience of the sport, leisure and culture environment.

Notes:

IDeA Outcome Framework for Culture and Sport is available via www.local.gov.uk

cCLOA's The Role of Culture and Leisure in Improving Health and Wellbeing is available via www.cloa.org.uk

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