

## A view from the bridge

**With the good ship sport, leisure and culture weathering a storm of economic and political upheaval, Martyn Allison offers his informed perspective on the chances of its survival as he looks for a pilot to take the helm.**

Last November I wrote an article based on what I saw on the horizon just after the spending review was announced. Now we are in the midst of the perfect storm and, given my own position is changing, I thought it was a good time to have another quick look out at what is happening.

Much of what I predicted appears to be emerging but it is wonderful to see the level of optimism and resilience across the sector as people are rising to the challenge.

A recent Guardian feature predicted the sector would, this year, lose some £350 million and between four and six thousand jobs from libraries, swimming pools and parks. Arts Council England (ACE) last week announced funding changes to its regularly funded bodies with its national portfolio of 695 organisations replacing its previous portfolio of 849, although 110 new organisations will be brought into the mix. A recent Local Government Association (LGA) survey showed that councils had targeted culture and sport services to make disproportionately large savings but not as great as those in central services and services for young people. In counties and single-tier councils, libraries, culture and community learning have been targeted the most, while in shire districts tourism and sport and leisure have been top of the list.

One of the first signs of change I have seen is the number of senior managers and leaders who are leaving or have left their roles. It is clear that there will be a vacuum for a while until new leaders appear and establish themselves. However, when you couple this with the increasing externalisation of services that is taking place or is planned, it is becoming clear that this new leadership is going to be more fragmented, generally at an operational or facility management level and could be at some distance from the centre of power and influence in councils and strategic partnerships. On the other hand, at the same time the localism agenda means that some of this power is also being decentralised to neighbourhoods, GP practices, schools and individuals thus opening doors for more and new local relationships between local commissioners and local providers of culture and sport.

This means that if the sector is to survive and grow it will depend not on senior managers in councils but far more on operational managers in trusts, those running private contracts and those forming and running new forms of social enterprise and voluntary organisations. These individuals will need to become the new strategic managers and leaders of the sector and will, I suspect, need to raise their game. This change will, I believe, apply equally to both sport and leisure and the wider cultural sector.

The next question is: will these managers be able to fill this space? Have they the management skills and competencies to become more strategic and take the lead? I think my answer would have to be, yes, in part. Again I fear the picture is patchy across both places and services. Some are already in this space and performing exceptionally well to position their services at the heart of the new landscape. Others, I fear, remain quite comfortable with just keeping the facility operating while grumbling about loss of subsidy, grant or lack of capacity.

Although much of the sector has risen to the self-improvement challenge over the seven years I have been doing this job, there remains a hard core who have continued to avoid the challenge. I often call them my 'Woolworths' and, just as Woolworths was found wanting at the start of the recession, so I fear will some of our sector as the squeeze on public funding finally bites.

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Martyn Allison: considering the horizon

**“We will be landing shortly with some older members of the crew missing and the new captains will have to step up if we are to settle and make an impact on the new landscape. We have the infrastructure, providing we work together and do not start fighting for territory and power.”**

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Our professional bodies, particularly the new Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (IMSPA), must urgently rise to this challenge and equip these managers to survive in their new roles. If they don't failure is the only outcome. Professional bodies will need to enter the world of self-regulation by stepping into the space vacated by government. They will need to become comfortable at setting the service standards they believe we should operate to and be promoting and enforcing them through products such as Quest and Green Flag. Then, by setting the professional competencies required by people working in the sector, to meet those service standards and provide the training and development needed to achieve the levels of competence required. For those institutes with chartered status the challenge will then become enforcing these standards.

The concept of 'big society' has created some interesting and sometimes heated debate. What is a fact, however, is that the voluntary and social enterprise elements of the culture and sport sector are already a close second in scale only to the social care sector. We already have a huge footprint in the community and it will only grow. Again, however, the question is whether it is fit for purpose and able to survive in the new landscape. Recent research we published here at Local Government and Improvement (LGID) shows the need to invest in capacity-building urgently in a coordinated and planned way, and our work introduces the concept of brokerage to help address the increasing fragmentation in the sector. This idea has already been embraced by ACE who in their recent funding announcement made £10 million available to 14 "bridge delivery organisations" which will provide a direct connection between the work produced by arts organisations and schools and communities. Could county sports partnerships (CSP) take on a similar role for sport and leisure? We have the infrastructure and it will not take too much to equip and then harness the huge enthusiasm that exists 'out there' to deliver on a wide range of needs and deliver better outcomes for communities and individuals.

You will by now have noticed, I hope, that I have made no mention of national government or non-departmental public bodies (NDPB). The cull of the state has been brutal at national and regional levels and with it has come a reduction in resources, support and advocacy. Sport England remains focused and supportive of a continued relationship with local government, particularly around health improvement, children and young people. They continue to provide high-quality material to support councils and will, I hope, continue to do so once the Olympics and Paralympics have passed. However, we have not seen the scale of growth in participation levels we expected and when judged against the level of public sector funding over the last four years it is difficult to defend their performance.

The situation in culture looks even less positive with the national indicators showing reductions in cultural participation. The big challenge and opportunity will come from a new Arts Council England, now with responsibility for libraries and museums. I believe there is a real desire to have a conversation with local government about the concept of a cultural offer delivered in a more integrated and holistic way. However, how this now happens in a more fragmented local government smarting from resource deficit for the arts and museum and library closures will be interesting to see. It seems to me that sport and leisure are perhaps slightly better equipped for the new business-focused landscape than is culture. The learning gained from compulsory competitive tendering means that the challenge of change and reform is perhaps less daunting for sport and leisure, while cultural colleagues still have some real issues to grapple with before they can grasp the opportunities that are available to them.

I have left little time to comment on the challenges facing parks and open spaces but I remain optimistic that they have now come to a point of realisation about how they must improve both their positioning and performance if they are to make an impact locally. Tourism is also addressing issues of destination management in a new landscape of local enterprise partnerships (LEP) and archives are assessing their new landscape post-MLA (Museum, Libraries and Archives Council). But what has happened to children's play? After making real progress to promote the value of play with the last government it looks as if they could be facing meltdown, losing not only resources but infrastructure and capacity. While their move to the welcoming arms of children's services was the right move for them, the switch of focus in the new government has left them abandoned and somewhat homeless. Perhaps the culture and sport sector needs to reach out and welcome them back home.

So the new landscape is forming on the horizon. We will be landing shortly with some older members of the crew missing and the new captains will have to step

up if we are to settle and make an impact on the new landscape. We have the infrastructure, providing we work together and do not start fighting for territory and power. The tools we have built over the last six years are still relevant and appropriate to the task in hand. The opportunities to show how we can make a difference to people's lives are before us, provided that we can convince people to invest in us and that we deliver as efficiently as possible.

See you on the beach.

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