

Managing decline: looking out for parks professionals

With new initiatives and campaigns having been launched to speak out in support of parks as essential community assets, Jonathan Ives wonders where the loss of institutions and organisations leaves parks managers.

Anyone who takes an interest in parks and their role in, and contribution to, the wider context of the sport, leisure and sport sector will probably be aware that a new campaign for parks is currently being pursued by an impressively credentialed community of interest working under the banner of the Parks Alliance. This grouping of the greensward great and the good, which emerged from the Make Parks a Priority initiative launched in 2012 by Horticulture Week, can already count an early day motion and ongoing correspondence with the chair of the Commons communities and local government committee among its achievements. However, its existence as much as its actions is illustrative of the worrying state of representation for parks and open spaces.

From its initial meeting in early 2012 the Parks Alliance moved quickly to recognise the need for a voice for parks and to formalise its own structure and status. Chris Baines, himself a celebrated voice on behalf of the environment and the importance of urban open space, served as facilitator to the meeting and suggested that if an organisation was not established immediately it would have to be invented in a few years time. Thus inspired, the Parks Alliance was founded with a series of objectives, including serving as “a single unified voice for the UK’s greenspace organisations and stakeholders” and standing as “the missing champion of public parks across the UK”. It also acquired a structure to serve its future status role as a not-for-profit body working for the public benefit and a series of working groups to report back to the “parks leadership round table” on a range of issues.

This was an impressively direct and swift response to the perceived problem by a sizeable grouping of people well versed in the issues faced by public parks and the difficulties faced in securing funding and support for public open space in the face of local authority budgetary constraints, the competing interests of profit-driven property development and the often inadequate protection for parks within the planning system. The range of organisations represented and the experience of individuals in the room was an early indication that the Parks Alliance can expect to be taken seriously from the outset. The organisations included the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), the British Association of Landscape Industries (BALI), the Royal Parks Agency, the Institute of Groundsmanship and the Landscape Institute, to name just a few, while the individuals around the table included many names that will be familiar to the parks aficionado: alongside Chris Baines were names of the calibre of Sid Sullivan, Paul Bramhill, Bob Ivison, Peter Neal and, of course, the late Nick Reeves.

Such lists of aims and objectives, organisations and individuals suggest that this new voice for parks will begin its task with the potential for access to areas of influence. The extent to which the Parks Alliance is able to establish itself as a sustainable organisation (submission of funding bids and securing grant aid are among its initial objectives) will be watched keenly by many within the sport, leisure and culture sector but few would disagree that there is a gap to be filled in the list of

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organisations serving as advocates of public parks and open space.

Earlier this year Greenspace became the latest organisation to disappear from the advocacy roll, coming to grief on the vagaries of grant decisions from funding organisations. Other organisations, many of them signed up to the Parks Alliance, have an interest in, and a commitment to, the future of parks and open space but few have a clearly defined remit to support, promote and develop parks managers. A few decades ago the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) was an active and, for a time at least, an effective voice representing the interests and aspirations of open space managers and management. Greenspace itself emerged as the natural home for parks managers from a perception within the parks sector that ILAM had taken its eye off the parks management ball, while in the current leisure sector environment the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA), the bewildered child of an unhappy marriage of ILAM and the Institute of Sport and Recreation Management (ISRM), has publicly stated that it has no open space remit. While it struggles to reinvent and re-establish itself as a viable management institute, CIMSPA has made it clear that the P in its acronym does not and will not stand for 'parks'.

That a new organisation has been formed to pick up and breathe new life into the campaign for parks is, of course, to be applauded but there is a danger that in raising a banner for the value of open space the role of the open space manager gets forgotten. For any current or aspiring parks manager glancing down the roster of organisations with an interest in, and a claim on, the parks and open space sector there is not an organisation that immediately leaps out as a natural home. There are trade bodies for the landscape industry, institutes for landscape designers and associations for those advocating the value of investment in public open space but no organisation dedicated to parks management, a body in which professional parks managers can find dedicated support, advice and career development opportunities among their peers. As one highly experienced parks professional told The Leisure Review, "There is no one who responds to the breadth and depth of the parks manager's career. Parks managers have a balanced view of all aspects of outdoor management and we have ended up losing that overview."

While anyone with an interest in the sport, leisure and culture sector will be happy to add their voice to a new campaign for parks and celebrate its existence, it is worth reflecting on the assets that have been lost as the organisations that have served parks managers have disappeared. Perhaps the losses most keenly felt in the future will be the forums for discussion and debate; the meetings, the events, the conferences that brought open space managers together to share experiences, acknowledge problems and explore potential solutions, whether as part of an audience in front of platform or as part of an argument around a small table.

For all the importance of national advocacy, it is difficult to escape the realisation that the future of parks is primarily dependent on managers within local authorities having the abilities and the experience to argue for public open space and deliver the services required to maintain the public realm and engage the public. But where are these skills, abilities and experiences to be gained and shared?

If anyone would like to buy a ticket for The Leisure Review parks forum, please let us know via the usual channels.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of The Leisure Review.

The Leisure Review reported on the launch of the Make Parks a Priority campaign in the October 2012 issue:
<http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk/articles12/parks2012.html>

The Leisure Review editorial discussed the demise of Greenspace in the April 2012 issue:
<http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk/editorial/editorial62.html>

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