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## Christine Parsloe: public servant of the year

**Christine Parsloe, leisure and culture development manager at the London borough of Merton and now Guardian public servant of the year, spoke to *The Leisure Review* about her career, the Guardian award and what this recognition might mean for leisure in her borough, for leisure in general and for her personally.**

Newly recognised as the Guardian public servant of the year, Christine Parsloe admits that she is very fortunate but not just in being recognised with a national award. "Leisure and culture is highly valued here in Merton," she explained. "And although we've taken year-on-year cuts, as everyone else across the organisation has done, we are still here and we are still at the forefront of quite a lot of work. The council does value our services."

The award came at the towards the end of 2013 but was a reflection of her achievements over a longer timeframe, taking in Merton's involvement in the London Olympics and the Queen's diamond jubilee.

"Throughout 2012 we were given some real challenges, particularly around the Olympics and the jubilee, but we delivered and these challenges added weight to what we do," she said. "That has been important for us and it is important for the leisure and culture industry that we continue to punch above our weight. That's what we constantly try to do: put ourselves out there, doing things with a high profile and doing things that matter to local people so that our local residents are happy and satisfied."

Following Parsloe's selection as Guardian public servant of the year, the London borough of Merton had further cause for celebration in the shape of its own award, the Municipal Journal best achieving council award. Given that the MJ award reflects public satisfaction with their local authority's service, Parsloe is confident that leisure and cultural service played its part in this success.

"Although we've taken spending out [of the budget], surveys show our residents are still satisfied with our services," she said. "I think the council has realised that leisure and culture is a vehicle for community engagement and a service in which good things can be made to happen. If people are happy other issues seem to become less important in their lives, so fear of crime drops, overall perceptions improve and their general health and wellbeing improves."

While leisure often has to work hard to point out these wider positive impacts to non-leisure colleagues and constituencies, Parsloe has been pleased to find that her award has gone some way to making some of these debates a little easier. "Some doors have been opened," she said. "There are some doors now ajar that were perhaps closed before, and some people who may have been behind closed doors are now saying, 'Hang on, let's have a look at this and let's be a little more open-minded.'"

Looking at the possibilities for partnerships and new relationships is, Parsloe explained, a real opportunity. While the concept of partnership is commonplace, at Merton they consider it a genuine strength across

**"Being a leader is a totally different thing to being a manager. People can manage but they don't always lead."**

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their operations. The borough has won awards for its work with the voluntary sector but Parsloe is adamant that such relationships are built and nurtured over years rather than overnight.

“I would say that more than partnership working it’s about relationship-building and learning how to get on with each other,” she said. “We’re all different and we all have different goals and ambitions. It’s about how we help each other to achieve the goals we each want to achieve but doing it together; and doing it together in a trusting, respectful and understanding way. You can’t build that overnight. That’s why I’m so pleased about this award. It’s not about what happened in 2012. For me, it’s about a lifetime in an industry.”

If not quite a lifetime in Merton it has certainly been a lengthy stay. Parsloe has now been at Merton for 18 years but had previously worked for the borough before this. She is confident that this connection with Merton has helped in building partnerships and relationships across all parts of the community as well as all the agencies and statutory bodies with which anyone in local government has to interact if they are to succeed.

“It does mean that if you need something or someone to help, you can pick up the phone,” she said. “In 2012 everybody wanted to help but they didn’t just help, they went far beyond the call of duty. Everyone really stepped up to the mark. Out of that we’ve been able to open the doors even wider.”

By way of example she explained how her team’s approach to encouraging volunteering continues to pay dividends for the borough. Working with Merton’s volunteering council and recognising that people minded to volunteer were often daunted by the prospect of a long-term commitment, they began to recruit people to volunteer for specific events with a clear, time-limited involvement. Many of these volunteers then signed up for programmes linked to London 2012 and have since been involved in the borough’s regular, one-off events such as firework displays, carnivals and Ride London. Now there is a whole band of people who are aware of what is involved and are happy to contribute. Similarly, at the water sports centre young people are volunteering, being trained and the best of them are being employed as summer staff.

“It was great that the award was for 2012 but meant more to me than that,” Parsloe said. “It was the culmination of so many projects, so many proposals, so many innovations that we have been working on here, all of which we were able to pull together in 2012 to massive success.”

While determined to acknowledge the role of her team in her award, Parsloe agreed that there are implications of such recognition for her personally. “For me this is the start of a new beginning,” she said. “I’ve been in the industry for a long time and worked on lots of projects: the London Cultural Improvement Programme, I’ve worked for Sport England, I’m busy developing Merton’s cultural framework, which is a new way of looking at an outcomes-based framework for work around the strategic outcomes Merton wants to achieve and how sport and leisure can help deliver those. I hope that the success of the award will be like a springboard to take me into other projects that we are already working on. I hope that it will open other doors beyond Merton to make sure that some of the great work we have done here can be shared more widely.”

As an alumnus of the National Culture Forum’s Leading Learning Programme, Parsloe is pleased to be able to acknowledge the role that the programme played – and continues to play – in the development of her career.

“I remember looking around that room on the first day and seeing so many talented leisure professionals, all learning about the strategic

agendas and where leisure sat within all of that. We can tend to get a bit introverted in our approaches but here we were opening minds to a much wider world. I think the greatest thing I took from that programme, apart from gaining so many friends and colleagues who have so much expertise, was that it opened my eyes to the rest of the world and enabled me to see how our industry could operate in years to come in that world.

“Another thing was that the programme made me stand up and be a leader. Being a leader is a totally different thing to being a manager. People can manage but they don’t always lead. I think the Leading Learning Programme really opened my eyes to the difference between good management and good leadership; and when you need to show good management and when you need to show good leadership. I get thrown all sorts of things now because I’ve shown that I’m a leader and I can take those leadership skills and use them elsewhere. The Leading Learning Programme is an excellent programme and one that I’d recommend to anybody. Those that are good managers still need to go on it.”

With all controls available to local and national government apparently set to austerity for the long term, is it possible for someone with such a commitment to the service of local communities to remain positive about the future of leisure services within local government? It is a question with particular resonance given we are speaking shortly after the publication of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report that predicts that the disappearance of much of local authority cultural services by 2015.

“I’m positive from a Merton perspective,” she said after a brief pause to consider her response. “But in the last three years or so my staff team has been cut by a third and I’ve cut my budgets by more than that, so we constantly take the cuts and find ways to do that by doing things cheaper and doing things in different ways. Whether [leisure] remains in the public sector, in terms of local authorities, I don’t know. I think that’s questionable but I would argue that if it’s not the best place for it to be let’s make sure that it’s embedded in the best place.”

The key to protecting leisure and cultural service, Parsloe argues, is in making sure these services are able to survive as a continuous service: “Within my areas of work we’re now looking at the water sports centre and what the business model might be. Our leisure centres are contracted to GLL. Our two arts officers and two leisure development officers are looking at how we ply our trade over the next few years. Some things may stay in the public sector; they may go out to the third sector, the commercial sector or social enterprise. However, what we need to do is make it strong enough to survive whatever market it is in.

“We’re looking at what services we might be commissioned to deliver – or what services our partners might be commissioned to deliver – but still keeping a culture and sports service here locally under local management and leadership. It is still needed. We started this conversation by saying our services are still needed by local people to keep them happy, to give them a sense of place, a sense of purpose, a sense of wellbeing about their lives. If we lost that we would lose a massive amount. It would be a massive regression. People wouldn’t feel good as good about themselves, perceptions of crime would go up, local engagement would go down. It doesn’t bear thinking about really.”

**For further details of the NCF Leading Learning Programme visit [www.ncfleadinglearning.co.uk](http://www.ncfleadinglearning.co.uk)**

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