

Will leisure make the cut by 2020?

With the LGA predicting the potential loss of leisure services by 2020, **Duncan Wood-Allum** explores the potential of this popular, but embattled sector to reinvent itself

Public leisure – in its broadest form – has provided us with parks, amenities and services which have contributed to our sense of identity, health and wellbeing, generation after generation.

Libraries, leisure facilities, museums, the arts, sports centres, parks and open spaces form a valuable element of the fabric of our community life.

Historically valued for their own sake as a 'good thing', since the 1980s, many of these services have experienced significant change. But, with the Local Government Association (LGA) forecasting the end of non-essential services by 2020, can leisure and culture reinvent itself to prevent as low, painful demise?

In the 1970s, the key, universal message was about inclusion and participation – remember 'Sport for all'? Recreation departments grew as the political will to invest in communities took hold.

During the 1980s, the drive for better value for money shaped sport and leisure services through compulsory competitive tendering, which won no prizes for innovation and joint working but did save some money and sharpen operations.

From the 1990s, Lottery money was poured into parks, sports facilities, museums, libraries and the arts. In hindsight, many of us stopped worrying about addressing its long-standing issues and spent many happy years chasing and spending the free cash.

The growth of the not-for-profit trust sector heralded a brave new dawn, bolstered by still-questionable VAT and national non-domestic rates benefits.

Twenty years on, the results are mixed, and many smaller trusts are suffering from poor economies of scale and are slowly being swallowed up by

larger trusts which have competitive advantage over a frustrated private sector, courtesy of HM Revenue and Customs.

Let's face it, many of our services have stuck with the knitting and, for a variety of reasons, have not established more sustainable, integrated, relevant models of delivery. Elected members have often avoided the tough decisions to rationalise tired facilities on their patch. Decisions which should have been made years ago are now being rushed through, resulting in some top-quality 'bodges'.

Authorities such as Brent LBC, have already begun the process of divesting in leisure provision, and this has been met with howls of derision from sectors of the communities affected.

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Divestment will continue to be time consuming, emotive and messy. The future implications of this approach are, unsurprisingly, being ignored for the time being because, after all, isn't it all about efficiencies?

A number of services have experienced some real success in, first, making the case for investment, and second, delivering innovative solutions based on prevention and early intervention. Birmingham's 'Be active' scheme has stood out, with

more than 300,000 residents taking part.

With public health back inside the tent, examples such as this present significant opportunities for the sector to play a leading role in enabling positive changes in citizen behaviour and achieving targeted outcomes.

Over the next few years, there will be winners and losers as the cuts gather momentum. Some services will be in a position to find higher ground, some will inevitably get caught as the big waves sweep in.

Key causes of drowning will be inflexible, long-term contracts and tired, costly asset portfolios.

The Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association, composed of heads of services, is bravely leading the charge in

advocating what the sector can contribute to today's challenges. It is in the process of broadening its membership base to include leaders from the private and third sectors, sensibly gearing up for the reality of a mixed landscape of provision.

Supporting this change of focus, there is a growing argument to let the private sector, sports governing bodies and voluntary sector to support the physically active 20% of the population. Two years ago, the *Marmot review* was published – in 2008, Sir Michael Marmot was asked by the then secretary of state for health to chair an independent review to propose the most effective evidence-based strategies for reducing health inequalities in England from 2010. His report highlighted the need for more citizens to take more responsibility for themselves and fund their own leisure time.

Asking most councils and their operators to let go of this 20% customer base will be like taking candyfloss off a chubby three-year-old and offering them a carrot instead.

Escalating costs of care are the driver for a shift in support away from funding the active 20%. Invest in and direct it towards the 30% to 40% of the population who will bankrupt the nation if we fail to work with them to get moving, eating more healthily, and easing back on the fags and booze.

It will take time for health and wellbeing boards to settle and resources to become more flexibly directed towards prevention and early intervention. An ideal opportunity for leisure to provide some alternatives to expensive pill-popping and bariatric surgery?

It's the inactive, stupid. ■

Duncan Wood-Allum is director of Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy Ltd