

IN DEPTH

PROFILE



# TIME FOR CHANGE

*Duncan Wood-Allum, a CIMSPA Chartered Fellow and founder of the Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy, tells Caroline Roberts why councils need to take a smarter approach to leisure commissioning, and shares his priorities for the sector*

**D**uncan Wood-Allum wants to see the sector he has worked in for more than 25 years transformed. The starting point? A smarter approach to leisure commissioning. Too many leisure contracts are about efficiency and numbers through the door, he says, so they give operators little financial incentive to engage inactive people and those facing barriers to participation. But things are changing. “We’re now starting to see more enlightened councils commission on an outcome basis, encouraging and rewarding operators to reach out to targeted communities,” he says. The next step is for these councils to show how they will work with deprived communities

where people don’t have the same access to leisure facilities. “People need enabling support – little nudges and easy pathways into healthier lifestyles,” he says. “Often that needs highly motivated community leaders on the ground. Sadly, those people are the soft underbelly of the sector that’s been ripped out by the last two government administrations.” There are, however, glimmers of hope: one local authority in East Northamptonshire recently voted to invest in an outreach function as part of its next leisure contract, for instance. We must also avoid the “one size fits all” approach, he adds. “The

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large operators have fixed business models [so] some are not very good at adjusting their proposition to meet a particular community's needs. Once you've set that contract running, there's not much potential to alter it unless there are breaks and reviews built in – and a lot of old or existing contracts don't have those. Then the council feels they don't have control over what the operator is doing.”

#### MORE HIGH QUALITY GRADUATES

Although starting at the bottom is good for gaining experience, top graduates expect fast track opportunities. “A number of leisure operators have graduate training schemes, which I fully support, but I'm still not convinced that when somebody comes out of the likes of Durham, Exeter, Loughborough or UCL, this sector does a particularly good job at attracting them. You don't often see our sector represented at careers fairs.

“My concern is that we're encouraging people to come in with a low level of education and do manual work and then expect them to have the skills to do management level work in the future. They can't all make that jump. We need to start setting out our stall differently and that's where the role of CIMSPA is absolutely critical.”

Budget constraints are part of the problem; pay hasn't changed much in the last 20 years. But, says Wood-Allum, there is business case: “If you have smarter people running your services, they'll perform better financially as they'll be able to attract and retain more customers, so it will create a virtuous circle.”

#### A CONTINUED DRIVE ON CPD AND DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

“Senior leaders need to start committing to their own transformation as managers so they can stay relevant, and their staff need to continually evolve and improve



their skills sets to meet the needs of clients and the community,” he says. “Chartered status can help them achieve this.”

Having a career framework in place is a good way to get talented people through to management level, where they can act as policy drivers and strategists. “I don't think our very able graduates should be spending a huge amount of time poolside. They should be spending some time there, but they should be getting more exposure to community development, public health and social policy, understanding the demographics of the area and the health inequalities. They can then work with their teams to adapt what's being offered inside

and outside centres to optimise the impact of the service.”

#### TAKE THE WHOLE-SECTOR APPROACH VERY SERIOUSLY

Local authorities, their suppliers and partners need to start adopting a whole system approach to tackling health problems such as obesity, he says. Too many leisure facilities are selling foods with high saturated fat and sugar content next to posters promoting fitness classes. “We need to convince health commissioners that this is a sector to do business with and we can use public money effectively to tackle health inequalities. But we're not going to be taken seriously if there's a smell of chip fat when

you walk into a leisure centre. I believe local authority commissioners should take a stand and even prevent operators from selling this rubbish. But also operators should put their money where their mouth is and take junk and high calorie drinks out of vending machines. Why don't we make leisure centres and anything to do with sport and physical activity unhealthy-food-free zones? It would send a very powerful message out to our partners about how serious we are about people's health and wellbeing.”

#### SHARE GOOD PRACTICE

There are examples of good practice all over the country when it comes to outreach, but Wood-Allum believes

the sector needs to be better at scaling and replicating it. “I think this is a key thing for organisations like CIMSPA to champion. There's a lot of information out there about what works and what doesn't, but what's still weak is the evidence based interventions that would meet the needs of clinical commissioners in health. They require a different level of evaluation and analysis than the sector is used to providing.”

#### PRESS FOR A BETTER GOVERNMENT SPORTS STRATEGY

Finally, the sector can't do it all on its own, he says; it's up to the government to establish an effective conduit for funding. At the time

## DUNCAN WOOD-ALLUM

► Aged 17 worked as a lifeguard for Leicester City Council while studying for a PE and Recreation Management degree at Loughborough University.

► Spent the '90s gaining experience in operational roles with local authorities and schools, setting up two new leisure facilities.

► After completing an MBA in 2000, Wood-Allum spent three years at PMP Consultancy running the Quest Quality Scheme, Sporting Champions and supporting a number of consulting projects.

► From 2003-2009 at Capita Group he established and led a team delivering high profile consultancy projects for clients such as Sport England, the London 2012 Steering Committee and the London Development Agency.

► Founded the Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy - a strategic advisor to the sector - in 2010, after a global study tour including visits to New Zealand and New York City.

► Former England Schools Hockey International, Southern Premier League umpire and currently coach to Mid Sussex Hockey Club.

of writing, the new sports strategy (see p28 ) was still in development, but Wood-Allum hopes that it will include a complete redefinition of Sport England's role so that it focuses completely on community sport. “The obsession with working through sports governing bodies has been a huge distraction and has taken resources away from local authorities, which I believe are still a major force for change and for increasing participation at grassroots level.”

But whatever the outcome, he says, the sector must continue to make its voice heard and press for a strategy that has a real impact on public health and wellbeing. ●