

Deciding the ISRM's future

Members of the ISRM met at Braunstone Leisure Centre in Leicester on 24 February to hear the results of the vote on the future of the Institute

BY WARREN CLARK

The Special Meeting, held at Braunstone Leisure Centre on 24 February, was called to provide an opportunity for members to give their feedback on the recent vote and ongoing discussions surrounding the proposals for a new professional body involving the ISRM, ILAM and NASD. The results of the vote were announced at the meeting, and an overwhelming 91 per cent of respondents believed the ISRM should continue its discussions to become part of this new professional body. A secondary question on the voting form asked whether the new body should deal with sport exclusively, or have a much wider remit incorporating culture and leisure (arts, parks, countryside, playing fields, play, playgrounds, tourism, libraries and museums) as well. More than two-thirds (67 per cent) voted for a 'sport-only' model, with 29 per cent suggesting the broader incorporation of culture and leisure.

The afternoon began with an informative presentation by chief executive Ralph Riley, who brought members up to date with discussions thus far. He explained the background to the process, beginning with a call from Sports Minister Richard Caborn back in October 2004. Caborn wanted to create an improvement agency for sport, and wanted to work with just one professional body in this area. Accordingly, discussions have been ongoing since then, including NASD, ILAM, ISRM and Sport England.

One of the major reasons for beginning this process was CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment), a method by which councils can measure the delivery of services for local people

and communities (a replacement for Best Value). Initially, sport had not been included in CPA, and therefore funds were being directed away from sport and leisure and into those services, such as health and social services, which were being assessed.

A driving force for creating the new professional body was to create an improvement agency for sport and a lobbying force that would ensure sport was included in CPA. However, this has now happened without the body being in place, since the Audit Commission has included sport and leisure as a sub-block within the culture block of the new CPA guidelines. This is recognition that local authority services are about more than just emptying bins, and that cultural services are important to the fabric of society, for they have a major influence on the quality of people's lives. The suggestion is now that the new professional body will be key to ensuring that sport remains a part of CPA for the foreseeable future.

Another role of the new professional body would be to set qualifications, standards and health and safety requirements – things that the ISRM already does.

However, in the discussions, the Sports Minister proposed that the core values of each

of the merging bodies should be maintained and, with the wider interests represented by ILAM, this has led to the proposals in the consultation paper that went to the members of all three bodies. These proposals suggested that the new body should incorporate much more than sport, and that there should be common standards that extend to culture and leisure (parks, libraries, etc.).

The ISRM has concerns that it would be impractical for other bodies within culture and leisure (including libraries, which has its own chartered institute of 25,000 members and the Museums Association with 5,000 members) to be covered by the same qualifications and standards and, moreover, that these other bodies would not necessarily want to wrap themselves up in this new professional body.

The Trustees are firmly behind the aims and principles of the new body, but believe that it should be concerned with sport alone – that is, all forms of physical activity that aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels – and its continued place in CPA.

There are three possible models for a way forward. First, a dedicated professional body focused on sport (not too dissimilar from the

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ISRM Chair of Trustees
Gerry Montgomery.

existing ISRM) with qualifications based upon national standards, but with a much wider remit that would include parks and outdoor sport, health and fitness managers, managers of voluntary and private sport clubs etc; second, a sport strand sitting alongside other strands such as libraries, museums etc, all of whom fall under an overarching Institute of Culture; and third, as favoured by ILAM, a body that comes up with a common set of generic management standards for all aspects of sport, culture and leisure.

Following the presentation and the announcement of the results, there was an opportunity for questions from the floor. A number of points were raised but the feeling at the meeting reflected the vote, in that the majority of those present supported the Trustees and Ralph Riley in their views to date.

Andy Bagshaw asked about timescales. Ralph suggested that Charity Law requires that Trustees can only act in the best interests of the charity, which means that a full evaluation of the proposed new body must take place, together with an examination of the existing assets and liabilities of the merging charities. Only once they had decided on the model could they proceed, and it would take a process of three to six months for 'due diligence' to take place. Gerry Montgomery, chair of Trustees, reminded members that the ISRM had committed to providing services to its members for at least a further 12 months from now.

In welcoming the change, Jim Ingram said that he believed it was important for the new body to preserve its qualification entry scheme, rather than become an 'open to all' member body.

Denis Freeman Wright asked why others were not part of the discussions, such as lifeguards, teachers and coaches. Gerry reminded him that

the discussions concerned a new professional body and therefore did not involve governing bodies, such as existed in those other areas. Ralph also said that many people who train and qualify lifeguards were already part of the ISRM through the recently-launched lifeguard qualification.

Eric Hitchings asked what would happen to those students currently involved in qualifications, should the ISRM no longer be around when they graduate. Gerry said that this was something uppermost in their minds during the discussions and that an 'exit route' would be devised by the time it was necessary.

Finally, Alan King from the Wales Region questioned Caborn's influence on anything other than the English Sports Council and asked: 'Are we just jumping through hoops for the purposes of a politician whose influence does not extend to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland and who may not be here in six months?' Gerry and Ralph felt that there were many more reasons for continuing with discussions than just keeping the Sports Minister happy, such as the drive to keep sport in CPA, driving improvement in sport and raising the profile and influence of sport.

The Special Meeting then concluded with a vote of thanks to Paul Edwards and Leicester City Council for hosting the event.

Speaking immediately after the event, Ralph added: 'The proportion of people voting in this poll should not be misunderstood. Prior to this Special Meeting today both Gerry Montgomery and myself and have made presentations to nine regional meetings, including Scotland and Wales, and received feedback first-hand on these proposals. I am also overwhelmed that so many people could turn out to discuss these proposals today. People have come from all areas of the

VOTE RESULTS

Total number of questionnaires sent out: 1655
Total number of questionnaires received: 576
Response rate: 35.8 per cent

Supporting the principle of ISRM becoming part of a new professional body

In favour:	526	91 per cent
Against:	46	8 per cent
Spoilt papers:	4	1 per cent

Wishing to see the new body principally concerned with culture and leisure, incorporating arts, parks, countryside, playing fields, play, playgrounds, tourism, sport, libraries and museums

In favour:	165	29 per cent
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Wishing to see the new body principally concerned with sport, including all forms of physical activity in line with the European definition of sport

In favour:	386	67 per cent
Spoilt:	25	4 per cent

country to listen and to take part in this debate on one of the worst days possible to travel. This speaks volumes to me, both of the quality and commitment of our members and also their sincerity in addressing this issue. The Trustees and myself are convinced that in the formation of a new professional body, this has to be about change for the better. There is no sense in standing still at this time when sport has so great a profile, so we are intent that this new professional body should seek and achieve chartered status, for this, we believe, would send a clear signal that sport as a profession has come of age.

'This was not just a vote about forming a new professional body for the benefit of the profession. The whole basis for a new professional body is to ensure that sport can continue to flourish, particularly in local authorities, and provide a valuable service making a difference in people's lives. The new professional body, by bringing together all three existing sporting professional organisations, can create a platform for improvement and regulation, which will help local authority sports services in meeting the new performance criteria that CPA will demand in 2005. ISRM can make a unique contribution to this process that will help to ensure the future for sport services and for the role of sport in people's lives. Sport and physical activity can contribute so much to our health, well-being and quality of life; it has a vital role to play in our public services. The new professional body will help to ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities that sport and physical activity provides.' ●