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Broader health outcomes required



A new government in Westminster is forming, elected by an increasingly unhealthy electorate. The Brits just can't help eating too much and exercising too little. They need help and if they don't get it, the NHS is going to implode. That's one big, fat, expensive problem.

With a tsunami of austerity cuts heading every town hall's way, the only sustainable high ground will be through a combination of health / adult social care funding and / or the mainstream marketplace itself. Here lies the dilemma facing policy makers, commissioners and public sport and leisure facility providers. Who is their customer?

So far our industry has proven we're ok at keeping c 15% of the population occupied and active and have focused all our efforts on optimising market share from this relatively small population; hardly a sustainable strategy for growth!

But strategically, this will not put a dent in the big, fat expensive problem so eloquently highlighted by both Nigel Wallace (Feb 15) and David Minton (May 15) in their recent articles in Bodylife.

Public sport and leisure providers can use the 'cross subsidy' argument from their gyms and swimming lessons to maintain a status quo of traditional wet and dry facility 'public' provision for a little while longer until it's time to replace them.

Those fortunate enough to finance new facilities through land deals / developer contributions or prudential borrowing will fare a lot better than those who cannot. I predict that leisure facility closures will accelerate in line with increasing waistlines over the next five years.

There is another way. The public sport and leisure can start delivering broader health outcomes for targeted groups within the 85% of the population we've pretty much ignored.

This means keeping people away from costly health interventions dealing with diabetes, heart disease and depression. The problem is that we're just not very good at playing our part in it - but we could be.

CIMSPA and its partners can play a key role in upskilling the sector in readiness for this shift in focus, which is long overdue. However it is the industry itself that needs to drive this change. The major leisure operators I speak to regularly could invest in this if they wanted

to, but there is still an understandable hesitancy to commit to this major transformation. Why? - because the return on investment is still very unclear.

Directors of Public Health talk of the sector as still being relatively immature and yet to demonstrate they can be trusted with the serious money. Similarly many Public Health teams are still grappling with how to commission and lack of capacity in the market.

When it comes to credibility, the public sport and leisure sector's values are not helping win over our clinical friends.

Selling 'crap' and seeking to balance this with 'healthy options' isn't cutting it with the clinicians who are the people trying to close fried chicken and chip shops near schools – go figure.

Similarly the sector's lack of expertise on diet and eating disorders is inversely proportionate to our vast physical activity expertise in meeting the needs of the 15%.

Here's five ideas that I believe will help public providers of sport and leisure services find high ground:

1. Invest in public health professionals who understand how to develop programmes and interventions that can deliver demonstrable results for targeted communities.

2. Re - train your people on the ground to provide lifestyle support for customers throughout their life journey. Keep investing in their development.

3. Reposition your organisation as a serious partner in health and wellbeing – not just an occasional player. Show you mean business with your future partners in health.

4. Stop selling 'crap' in your facilities – walk the talk.

5. Lobby hard to ensure that Councils retain the capacity to commission public sport and leisure intelligently taking full advantage of the opportunities of working more closely with public health and adult social care.

Stop kidding yourself that public sport and leisure is immune – look behind you – that wave's coming your way.....

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