

FACILITIES

Exercising the need for local leisure centres

There is a lot of pressure on local authority leisure facilities to combat and re-energise an inactive generation. Duncan Wood-Allum, of SLC, addresses the importance of facility development in local authorities to engage more residents in exercise

Many local authority leisure facilities are reaching the end of their useful life. Built 25 to 50 years ago they are designed primarily for 'sporty types' and are inefficient, energy hungry and poorly laid out; they are costing increasingly more to maintain and operate whilst becoming less appealing to their users.

In a prolonged period of austerity, with unprecedented pressure on revenue budgets, councils across the land are facing the dilemma of what to do with these ageing

assets; develop, divest or demolish? Or should they park the problem for the next administration and in the meantime pay a lot more than they should to provide leisure services? Ironically, the potential for leisure, sport and physical activity to act as a major contributor to the prevention agenda has never

been more relevant and needed to slow rising demands and costs on the NHS.

A BIG OPPORTUNITY?

Despite cuts, local councillors across the land are convinced by a raft of evidence that there is still a strong argument and need for the provision of leisure facilities, open recreational space and support for third sector organisations providing opportunities for the community, particularly those not currently taking part in exercise to get active.

The new Government Strategy for Sport, and subsequently Sport England's 'Towards an Active Nation'

strategy, has signalled a radical departure of funding the mainstream to target the inactive. This focuses on outcomes including mental well-being, physical well-being, individual development, social and community development and economic development. The days of box ticking throughout of 'customers' is over – monitoring and evaluation of targeted populations and users is key.

So after years of trying the same thing and achieving very little in terms of increases in participation rates amongst the inactive (including a London Olympics and Paralympics), Sport England is trying something different to target its investment. The role of local government as the largest investor into leisure, sport and physical activity cannot be overstated.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The first challenge for local authority leisure facility provision is to achieve the right facility and service mix, often in the form of built provision and targeted outreach at nil revenue cost (or a surplus) if possible and to secure lowest cost capital to invest in future provision – normally through prudential borrowing or linked to a wider regeneration project. When given the opportunity to refurbish and redevelop leisure facilities, design and development teams are being set the challenge to build much greater

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flexibility into the building. This will result in greater financial performance, throughput and achievement of wider outcomes.

Leisure facility developments are starting to move away from traditional sports hall/pool gym boxes to incorporate a broader range of multi-generational activities and flexible space. For example, trampoline parks are offering young people high intensity exercise opportunities mixed with fun.

Tired sports halls and underutilised indoor bowls halls with low occupancy rates and a narrow demographic are being converted into a plethora of facilities featuring bouldering, climbing, adventure play, skate parks, flexible functional training and activity space. These new activities are engaging with those who are not interested in formal sport and would not normally visit a typical leisure facility.

CHALLENGE TWO

The sector must shift the emphasis from provision for solely the 20-25 per cent of the population who are active to embracing and including those individuals and communities that traditionally would not set foot in a typical leisure facility. This will impact on service and facility mix, potentially the location of future facilities and possible integration with other local services. The sector is, in the main, responding to this challenge very positively. For example, at East Northamptonshire District Council, elected members recently unanimously voted for the establishment of a sport and physical activity outreach function as part of their new leisure operating contract.

Some new leisure contracts such as London Borough of Southwark are being developed which offer free use to particular target groups at certain times – removing the barrier of price completely. Most smart leisure operators are starting to take the outdoors more seriously through outdoor classes and instructor led groups. Others are entering the sport event market by running half marathons, fun runs, long distance organised rides, and adventure races.

Greater support for organisations involved in community sport such as sports clubs, schools and third sector groups needs to be developed to ensure that volunteers are better supported, enabled and recognised to maintain existing levels of sporting and recreational activity.

CHALLENGE THREE

The final challenge is ensuring the leisure provider market are on board and capable of providing higher cost targeted interventions and industrial scale physical activity interventions that are linked to everyday service delivery for the wider population, which assists in recovering cost of services. The key to setting the strategic direction of services in most authorities is through commissioning.

The Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy (SLC) is working with local authorities



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and crafting requirements which shift the emphasis of leisure contracts from facility management towards encouraging operators to engage with harder to reach groups – often at a higher unit cost. This can be balanced, even subsidised, to a degree by the council's decision to take a lower management fee receipt. Subsidies are also being targeted for those on low incomes with those who are able to pay the market rate. But to achieve this, expertise on the client side is required which is thin on the ground due to restructuring in local government – councils often do not know what they need or how to ask for it.

One key challenge is retraining staff at ground level to be able to support, enable and motivate the less enthusiastic and active into taking part. Physical activity leaders will increasingly start to mirror their target groups (BME, elderly, disabled, LGBT) and have an entirely different but complimentary skill set to the typical staff member in a leisure facility that we see today.

There is a skills and knowledge gap in the training provider sector at present that is being addressed through the recently Chartered Institute of Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) – but this needs significant investment from government to deliver the change needed.

KEY DRIVERS FOR CHANGE

The key driver to shift the capability of the market from aligning itself almost entirely with meeting the needs of active sporty types will come from local government and how they procure their leisure contracts. The procurement strategy is effectively replacing the old leisure, sport and physical activity strategy.

Building in tighter requirements on activities for target groups, insisting on healthy food and drinks to be sold, and the monitoring and evaluation of physical activity interventions will be essential to avoid operators 'reverting to type' and chasing the easy money. The

decision to do this will continue to be the critical success or failure factor in driving greater levels of participation amongst those under-represented groups.

BARRIERS TO BE OVERCOME

There are three key barriers to achieving increased participation from under-represented groups and better value for money from interventions. Not all leisure services can break even or make a surplus. In deprived cities and rural areas, the concept of 'break even' leisure facilities that genuinely meet the needs of local people is flawed. They need investment and some revenue subsidy – but the net benefits in terms of reducing public spend down the line are well documented.

Many councils are still paying far too much for leisure services. We are finding across the country that valuable revenue from councils is being used to prop up small purpose built leisure trusts, many established 15-20 years ago without a competitive tendering process. Councils can be paying much more than they need to due to high overhead costs, salaries for senior managers and no economies of scale. This has been proven by most retendering exercises over recent years when savings of £5 million over 10 years are not uncommon. It has also been compounded by poorly written contracts no influence or control over outcomes.

The sector needs a credible singular voice. Finally, the case needs to be made more strongly by the sector to convince government to invest more in prevention and less in primary interventions. There is still not enough funding available to encourage the market to shift its focus away from the profitable middle class activities and provide a more balanced approach which reaches a greater proportion of the population. So if you can crack the inactive market, imagine what you can do with the active one. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

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