



STRATEGY  
FEASIBILITY  
PROCUREMENT

# A year in the life of a sport & leisure consultant...

## Learning points for the Sport and Leisure Industry from the consultant's perspective

**Toby Kingsbury, Managing Consultant  
The Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy**



"This year's just flown by...!" A phrase we hear all the time but one which resonates loudly with me as I reflect on my first year in the once mysterious world of leisure consultancy. And what a year it's been! I've learnt more in the last 12 months than I have in the previous 12 years and have been exposed to the best, and unfortunately, the worst, of the industry that I love. One thing's for sure, I've never looked back!

I joined SLC just over a year ago having worked in leisure operations and then client side management, all for local authorities, for 15+ years. Every one of these roles was enjoyable, rewarding and driven by a desire to improve the customer experience. That commitment to a quality experience hasn't changed. The difference now is that I can help *shape* the future of local authority sport and leisure provision in ways that previously were beyond my control (or pay grade!!)

In the space of 12 short months I've found myself managing three Leisure Procurement projects, four Feasibility Studies, a Sport & Physical Activity Strategy, a Leisure Facilities Strategy and a Needs Analysis. Each one has had specific challenges, nuances, complexities and opportunities but the one consistent driving force behind each one has been to secure better outcomes for the client, and ultimately, the customer.

I'd like to share my top three learning points from my (so far) very short consultancy career...

### **1. Most existing leisure management contracts are uninspiring and too often not fit for purpose.**

Procuring new management arrangements for clients inevitably involves a review of existing contracts. I'm continuously amazed at how weak contracts, constructed c. 10 years ago have often left Councils struggling to get their operators to provide best value management fees, meaningful data on outcomes and co-operation on exit management when the contract is re-tendered. The last

point has been a real eye-opener for me. The behaviour of some incumbent operators has been frankly disgraceful. Resistance to providing information for re-tender purposes and not providing membership data free of charge at handover is costing Councils (and taxpayers) £000s of public money. Unfortunately, naively constructed agreements that do not protect the Council's interests in the event that the relationship breaks down, have left many officers with red faces and most importantly, caused disruption to services for customers.

SLC are campaigning to stop this type of behaviour and are putting in place new contracts with robust exit management clauses which properly protect Councils and customers against such issues in the future.

## **2. Newly established leisure management contracts can be 'game-changing.'**

Happily, the future looks much brighter as the sector continues to witness some outstanding results for local authorities, not just in terms of improved management fees and investment in facilities but through the delivery of wider health and social outcomes.

East Northamptonshire Council for example, have not only saved £350,000 pa on their management fee but have also been able to secure a new outreach service which will have a lasting impact upon physical activity levels across this rural district over the next 10 years. We often hear the term 'service transformation' bandied around in local government – the result for East Northamptonshire is a real-life example of such transformation.

Westway Trust in London have outsourced their leisure operation and secured an improvement to their revenue position of c.£1M pa. This includes a major capital investment scheme to improve the current facilities and increase participation levels of local residents.

As 2017 unfolds, SLC expects to secure similar results for the five clients that we're currently supporting with their leisure procurement projects.

## **3. Investment in new facilities transforms and protects sport and leisure services**

The sport and leisure market is strong, really strong, and the sector is making great strides to capitalise on this. Helped by an increasingly accepted view that physical activity has genuine health benefits, more and more people are seeking ways to be active. This demand for activities and a willingness to pay for them can create valuable income to help make facilities more sustainable. Providing high quality facilities and services translates into more profitable leisure contracts to help Councils deal with wider budgetary challenges.

Rather than scratching their heads preparing for the next round of salami slicing, Council officers should look to the strength of the leisure market as an opportunity to help meet these challenges!

So, what's it like being a sport & leisure consultant? Well, it's hugely challenging – and rightly so! Soon after joining SLC, Managing Director, Duncan Wood-Allum told me that to be a successful consultant you need to "*be at your very best every single day.*" Although initially daunting, this approach to producing the very best outputs for clients is enormously satisfying.

When I'm asked what my work involves, I used to find it tricky to answer without giving a lengthy explanation. Now it's simple – I help to clients save money on their leisure services and provide better outcomes for customers. Not so mysterious after all!

SLC are currently recruiting, so if you think you've got the right skills and are up for the challenge why not take a look at our website and get in touch? [www.slc.uk.com](http://www.slc.uk.com)

Toby can be contacted at [toby@slc.uk.com](mailto:toby@slc.uk.com)

**Toby Kingsbury**  
**Managing Consultant**  
**The Sport, Leisure & Culture Consultancy**  
[www.slc.uk.com](http://www.slc.uk.com)

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