

Leisure facilities: don't waste this crisis

The UK has been building leisure facilities for more than a century and while there has been a wide variety of approaches it could be argued that examples of innovative change have been relatively rare. Adrian Hill suggests that now is the time to think differently and act in pursuit of tangible outcomes.

In the 15 years that I have been involved in the leisure sector I do not think I have ever seen so much glum reporting, pessimistic scaremongering and general feeling of sorrow. While I have not been living in a dark box for the past few months, am I alone in thinking that this change of government, and the subsequent reduction in general central government spending, is perhaps the biggest and best opportunity that we have to truly modernise the sector, particularly its facility provision?

It is true and clear that local government's significant reduction in funding for the period 2011/15, alongside a cap on the community charge, will have very significant implications for non-statutory services such as sport and leisure. Thankfully, the sector has some of the most dedicated professionals working within it, from local authorities and leisure management contractors to private health clubs, who are taking the lead, using their own ideas and those of industry leaders, and fighting hard to maximise leisure's corner.

However, has the sector been its own worst enemy over the past few years? Has local political decision-making got in the way of strategic thinking? Have we simply tried to provide too much for too many activities? Should leisure facilities be such a heavy burden to local authorities' revenue budgets? Is this a big opportunity? And why, in reality, are we still building the same facilities today as we did 40 years ago?

With the answers to such questions unclear, I decided that a 'thinktank' was required to provide some positive answers and thinking. Therefore, at the invitation of Willmott Dixon Construction 30 senior leisure professionals gathered at the Barbican in October. This is a summary of what we thought.

- This is the opportunity to strengthen, widen and improve the sector so that it does not face a similar crisis ever again.
- We need to act swiftly and positively or the sector will get slashed.
- Co-location and rationalisation has been around for some time but we need short, punchy evidence to demonstrate the worth.
- Co-location can only really work if the partners involved are fully signed up to working together for the same gains. Compromises have to be made.
- New and/or refurbished facilities are more cost-effective to run and in some cases can generate a surplus to which capital funding can be accessed.
- We should take a much more commercial approach to our facilities to ensure they make money rather than trying to provide for all.
- The private sector will invest if it is allowed to make money. Again, commercial decisions need to take precedent in terms of facility mix.
- Council members must start to look strategically at projects.
- If you are looking to do something radical, go for it! Do not let the planning tools say no. Just ensure that it stacks up financially.
- Quality facilities will strengthen the sector's relationship with the community if they are community-driven not guideline-driven.
- Cross-border provision: we are likely to see more sharing of management services but it is time that we considered shared facilities more often.
- Incentives to use facilities: isn't it time we actually gave the public something useful, perhaps teaming up with supermarket loyalty cards?
- Facility space needs to be more flexible in its use and design.

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So what does all this mean in reality? Let's look at some of the above points in more detail.

Co-located and rationalised facilities is not a new idea; in fact there is evidence of this going back 20 years. However, more recently we have seen some higher profile examples, such as the Eltham Centre in Greenwich and Rotherham's programme of leisure. What is lacking is some brief evidence from the projects which demonstrates how they are saving money. The thinktank concluded that it would like to see some short, punchy, factual evidence from a collective of such facilities demonstrating 'before and after' savings from the capital investment. I will endeavour to do this for the sector.

Taking a commercial approach to leisure provision, when we are planning a leisure facility does it have to meet the needs of everyone? Think of the private sector health clubs. They have to make money and as such provide activities that bring in income. While I am not suggesting that the whole sector should follow suit, what I am suggesting is that facility planning should begin with the mindset of financial sustainability rather than meeting the needs of every potential user. If this is coupled with commercially minded design a more efficient solution can be delivered rather than an expensive one which will add to the burden.

Private sector investment should be encouraged. They are out there if we are keen to embrace them. Investors will invest in leisure if they are allowed to make some money. We cannot expect the private sector to invest in traditional facilities: they do not make any money. Let's consider what makes money for the private sector and ensure that the facility mix can cater for that need. It may mean upsetting some groups but sometimes that has to be an easier decision than witnessing the closure of the whole facility.

If you are planning something bold, go for it. Do not let so-called strategic planning tools say no to you. Just make sure whatever it is you are planning is flexible enough to be light on its feet and is supported by a commercial approach. In essence, if you can make the facility stack up financially and it has overwhelming public support does it really matter what the tools and guidance are saying?

Let's be honest: most of the above is common sense. The spending cuts will put severe pressure on leisure facilities because in simple terms they are the biggest expense. Doing nothing is simply not an option and will only result in closures and loss of services and interventions. Having said that, the shift in the way in which local government will operate should give the sector an advantage. There will, for example, be more local choice and decision-making. Local authorities will be less bound by guidelines, targets and central government but they will be much more accountable to their local communities and will have the ability to define their own priorities. This should provide the opportunity for the sector to break free and drive through some real innovation in facility provision, particularly if the evidence is made available. There will also be community choice. Leisure will always be given high priority and as such will always have overwhelming support. Even if radical rationalisation is needed to ensure financial sustainability the increased quality of subsequent provision will result in higher levels of community satisfaction and participation, as we have seen in Elmbridge and Rotherham.

In summary, the thinktank members were unanimous in their thoughts. Facility provision in the sector simply cannot continue to be provided in the current format. Consideration must be given to driving up financial sustainability and quickly, as the new funding regime simply cannot support it. My company is one of many who are willing to support the sector as it takes these new steps. In addition to providing some evidence of rationalised and co-located projects, we will continue to research and develop, with our partners, sustainable approaches to energy use and facility design. I shall be back soon to share the outcomes.

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