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## Upping our game: facilities for sport and physical activity

**When it comes to the state of our sport and leisure facilities, Tim Dent sees much to applaud but fears that the scale of the challenge has been underestimated. Here he explains why future success is at risk and what should be done about it.**

My early memories of public swimming pools in the mid-1970s were far from positive. School swimming lessons at our municipal pool were to be avoided and a parental sick note – real or forged – was the order of the day. The pool environment like many at the time was unwelcoming, uninviting, cold and dirty. The building was badly maintained, with broken ceiling tiles, broken toilets and a diving board which was always out of order. Remarkably, despite this experience and a PE regime which would not have been out of place in a prison, I was not dissuaded from swimming or sport in later life; however, I wonder about the other 80-90% of kids who were either ambivalent about sport or who openly disliked it. Is it more or less likely that they went on to become active adults and active role models for their children, helping to create a virtuous cycle of activity? Considerably less.

While we have come a long way in facility design and operating standards, there are still a multitude of facilities well beyond their shelf life and in need of overhaul, closure or replacement. While there are many shining examples of fantastic facilities, the poor quality of far too many actively discourages attraction and retention, particularly among the young and the millennials whose expectations are shaped by their 'actual' customer experience, at out-of-town shopping centres, cinemas, bars, restaurants, clubs and designer shops, and their 'virtual' experience viewed through TV, film, gaming, digital and social media.

So fast forward 40 years from the 1970s. Both Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation and Sport England's strategy Towards an Active Nation have been well received. For the first time many can remember, issues and actions that industry commentators, practitioners and service providers have been highlighting for years are centre stage. While there is much to applaud, I worry that remedying the state of the nation's facilities has been underestimated and could undermine future success.

Sporting Future recognises that for most people "the type, suitability, quality of infrastructure and opportunity to take part will have a huge effect on the chances of them trying a sport or activity for the first time and then coming back to it regularly". Social good can only occur if more people are more active so this is a good starting point and a bold statement that sums up the importance and rationale for public investment. Therefore, it is perhaps surprising that the strategy does not go further to bring about the transformational change that most would agree is required.

There is no doubt that the traditional view of what constitutes a facility is changing. Demand for outdoor activity in parks, on roads, at beaches, waterways and the countryside is increasing and the support infrastructure is growing. Commercial gyms, adventure centres and other private sector, active leisure sites continue to be rolled out. However, this should not obscure the fact that the quality of the publicly funded, built infrastructure is also vital to achieving the UK government's ambitious, active nation aims

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**“While there are many shining examples of fantastic facilities, the poor quality of far too many actively discourages attraction and retention”**

## State of play

As we know, the situation on the ground is patchy. For every recent new-build there are dozens of facilities that are old, in poor condition, costly to run and woefully inadequate.

Fifteen years ago the situation in Scotland was described as “a ticking time bomb”. The follow-up 2006 national facilities audit estimated the upgrade or replacement of the indoor and outdoor stock would cost £110 million for the next 25 years. Multiply this by the number of sites in the rest of the UK and we start to get some idea of the scale of the problem and the level of investment required – which has little prospect of being met in these straitened times.

In recent years local authorities have been adept at securing private sector partnership agreements to support capital investment and accelerating community asset transfers of failing facilities to sports clubs. While these initiatives are welcome and showcase adaptability, they can only be a partial cure to the problem. Private sector investment only tends to follow significant returns on investment (typically fitness), which will be elusive when targeting low-income groups. Likewise, community transfer arrangements get a big tick in boxes marked ‘localism’ and ‘community engagement’ and can help shift heavily subsidised facilities off balance sheet but typically decisions are reactive with little or no capital investment available to improve the ‘customer experience’.

The current position echoes the excellent Facilities Inquiry report (2010), chaired by John Inverdale, which concluded that there are enough sport facilities in the UK but too many are in poor condition or are simply not available to the community. Although six years old, many of the report findings are still valid. Two recommendations in this report stand out, recommendations that the government and Sport England should be minded to take forward:

1. schools must be obliged to open their premises for out-of-hours school sport
2. greater research is required to understand the current location, condition and usage of facilities – only then can investment be directed where it is most needed.

With regard to the potential impact of schools, the investment in the school estate dwarfs that spent on sport and physical activity. While most new schools have excellent sport facilities and despite Sport England’s prompting and encouragement, there is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that the level of community use in schools is well below potential and, more surprisingly, that sport and physical activity professionals are still not being included in school new-build planning and design teams. There are estimated to be approximately 3,850 secondary schools in the UK and while we don’t know how many hours of community use are available, consider this. Let’s assume 3,000 schools are in an acceptable or good condition and could provide a good-quality sport and physical activity experience. If these schools offered an average of just five additional hours of community use per week during term time, this equates to over 585,000 hours of use a year. Based on a conservative estimate of 10 users per hour, this could be in the region of 5.8 million more attendances a year, more than enough capacity to meet demand from a more active nation.

The Facilities Inquiry report also highlighted that local authorities must not be afraid to rationalise facilities where they are no longer fit for purpose. As we know, when planned, this can release funding for

enhanced facilities serving larger catchments. Most would agree that a policy of fewer but higher quality facilities is the most realistic and sustainable way forward; however, the current approach of closure by stealth with no contingency or planned replacement can leave gaping holes in provision.

The new Facilities for Future Generations report by the Welsh Government picks up on these themes and suggests a “rationalise to secure improvement” programme supported by a nationally coordinated awareness campaign to increase public awareness of the costs and challenges, facing facility providers. It also proposes “national support for local decisions”, to provide support for local authorities and key local delivery bodies who make important and sometimes difficult decisions. These are progressive steps addressing common barriers to progress which would benefit the whole of the UK.

### **In praise of strategy**

The need for strategic planning at a local and regional level has never been greater. The APSE report Sport and Recreation Services – Where Next? (2012) informed us that only 61% of local authorities in England had a sport and recreation services strategy; experience tells us that the number with indoor and outdoor facility strategies is likely to be even lower. It is striking therefore, that there are no sticks or carrots in the latest strategy to oblige councils to commit to strategic planning.

Strategic plans are important because they enable us to look at what we have, determine what we need and assess how we are going to get there. They also enable managers to reflect local and national priorities, obtain sign-off from leaders and decision-makers, which ultimately means there is a better chance the plan will be followed through. Another important by-product for a beleaguered and marginalised sport and physical activity sector is that it provides visibility and ensures sport and physical activity can confidently sit alongside other priorities, which sends out a strong message to the public that this matters.

### **Call to action**

If we agree with the statement “everyone should be able to easily access an appropriate range of local, high-quality indoor and outdoor facilities”, how can this become reality?

- 1. Set up a national facilities audit**

I would echo the key recommendation in the Facilities Inquiry report that a UK facilities audit is required to establish the extent and quality of current provision. Only then can we have a national conversation about how to address the shortcomings and plan accordingly.

- 2. Local authorities should be required to have a sport and physical activity strategy which includes a facilities plan**

Councils should be obliged to demonstrate they are meeting sport and physical activity needs and have a current facilities strategy covering indoor and outdoor facilities. This should provide a complete picture of sport and physical activity provision. A consultant arguing for more strategies is akin to a lawyer urging the retention of legal aid but surely evidence-based needs assessment is the only sensible way to demonstrate local priorities are contributing to national outcomes, identify how provision gaps will be resolved and ensure scarce resources are used in the most effective way.

- 3. School and college facilities to be designated as community assets, not just educational establishments, and designed and built accordingly**

Sporting Future rejects a mandatory approach to enforce co-

location arrangements (without saying why) with Sport England preferring “to encourage” this approach. While a top-down approach is unfashionable, there may be occasions in support of the national interest, where making policy a compulsory requirement is beneficial. To achieve true best value, every school and college project should be required to ‘design-in’ community use for sport and physical activity from the very start, enabling them to be used during the term day, evening and weekends. School and college new-builds may be the only investment in built infrastructure a community sees. When capital funds are thin on the ground, there can be little justification for omitting community use or only considering it as an afterthought.

**4. Conduct a national review of public-private partnership (PPP) and private finance initiative (PFI) contracts**

This is of particular interest in Scotland, which has the lion’s share of buildings managed under this regime (40% of the total UK PPP/PFI projects yet only 8.5% of the population). Of pressing concern is how school contracts can act as a barrier to community access owing to PPP/PFI providers passing on additional costs to customers to open at weekends and holidays, as well as operating a slew of other outdated contract restrictions. This means great facilities can lie idle because they are too expensive to use or too costly to be adapted. It is surely time to reappraise and remedy some of the one-sided contracts signed off many years ago.

If we are really serious about ensuring facility decisions are truly customer-focused, that places for sport and physical activity make a positive impression on children, cementing a commitment to lifelong activity and participation, we need to figure out now how the extensive publicly owned facilities stock will be managed, maintained, enhanced and funded for the next 25 years. Developing a master plan now will help secure our active nation of the future.

***The Leisure Review, September 2016***

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