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Commissioning: 10 tips for a leisure project

Building a new sports or leisure centre is a long and complex journey. KKP's David McHendry offers a 10-point list of things to remember at the outset and a few additional points to keep in mind once the project has begun.

KKP's work with clients includes a long list of successful leisure centre projects. However, even the most responsible of building contractors will try to construct your centre as cheaply as possible and this means that if the process does not get the right level of expert supervision corners could be cut. This then affects the longer-term quality and maintenance costs associated with your building.

With this in mind, we've developed our ten top tips to ensure that your leisure centre is of the quality that you want:

1: Employer's requirements

Ensure that your employer's requirements (ER) documentation is comprehensive and robust. This should include fully dimensioned plans, sections, elevations, and comprehensive room data sheets (ideally a National Building Specification). These are all essential.

2: Contractor's proposals

If the contractor's proposals (CP) don't match your requirements deal with it. Make it justify every proposed change and

3: Risk register

Get a priced risk register for, for example, ground works, services connections, diversions, site variables and any changes to legislation.

4: Standards and regulations

Ensure that your contractor's proposal meets all the standards and regulations you need to conform to: Amateur Swimming Association, Sport England, PWTAG, etc. Although the list can be long, it is worth the effort. Make absolutely sure that these are all written into the agreement and that conformance is monitored and evaluated.

5: Finishes

Get a branding document drawn up with expected level of finishes detailed and highlighted. This should dovetail with and complement your room data sheets.

6: Rooms

Keep a watchful eye on room areas and heights. It is not uncommon as the design development progresses for rooms to get smaller and even, in certain circumstances, disappear.

7: Realism

Be realistic about the programme but, once agreed, monitor closely and very regularly

8: Project manager

Use an experienced leisure project manager who is directly employed by you, the client, not the construction team. The project manager will

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"If the contractor's proposals don't match your requirements deal with it... make sure that what is done is right for you and the long-term quality of the facility."

be your main ally in addressing all of the above issues. Ensure that you employ someone who understands sport and leisure buildings on your project management team. If you don't you may miss things that make a considerable difference to the cost, flexibility and effectiveness of the building operation.

9: Competition

Do your best not to commit to one contractor team too early in the design process; this can significantly lessen your control and financial accountability. Keep the environment competitive for as long as possible to stop cost and scope 'creep'.

10: Test and consult

Returning to point one, undertake extensive market testing and consultation before fixing the brief and the design. Ensure that all relevant experts and stakeholders have had a realistic input.

In addition: 'value engineering'

Not every contractor is out to take advantage of its client but there is no doubt that subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) value engineering to deliver increased contractor profit is all too common. Here is a list of some of the key ones to look out for:

- Store rooms and corridors shrinking and even disappearing, resulting in trampolines and table tennis tables being stored in corridors; or ceiling so low that they affect lighting, ambience and the overall feel of a building.
- Tweaking of tiling specification and heights.
- Downgrading of floor finishes, which can have a significant impact on the ability to keep changing rooms clean, especially wet change areas.
- Windows getting smaller and fewer in number, meaning that natural light is limited in areas where you would most want it.
- External works being downgraded to just basic seeded ground and poor Tarmac with few kerbs, resulting in a poorer than expected 'arrival', which can make a big difference to the customer experience.
- Fixtures and fittings not being included in room data sheets so that the cost of them bounces back to the client. Typical examples are pool hoists, hair dryers, mirrors, etc.
- Complex ironmongery (door closers, handles, etc) not being to the right standard and thus not being able to cope with thousands of opening and closing actions per week over a sustained number of years; this only impacts on the quality of the customer experience.
- Phasing work and business continuity issues must be addressed in a timely manner; not doing so is inviting future problems.
- Insurances being missed. You, your staff and your building need to be covered; the contractor does not cover this.
- Site set up arrangements not being properly discussed and agreed prior to commencement; this is typically overlooked and is an area where substantial cost can then be added.

- Undercooked mechanical and electrical (M&E) specifications, leading to overcooked clientele in your studios and activity spaces.

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