



## Only the fittest survive

*With resources tighter than ever, local authority sport and recreation providers must be the best at giving customers what they want and demonstrating the wider social outcomes this can bring. But they are up to the challenge, according to **Rob Bailey**, who reports on APSE's recent 'Survival of the Fittest' conference*

With the recession casting a shadow across the public sector, it was refreshing to hear some more upbeat messages about the future of local authority sport and leisure at the recent Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) conference.

As non-statutory services, local authority sport and leisure facilities struggled to secure sufficient funds even before the economic downturn and subsequent public spending squeeze began. And nobody thinks things are going to be easy in the future. But the mood was surprisingly positive at our 'Survival of the Fittest' event, which took place in Stoke-on-Trent on 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February.

APSE has 260 members from across the UK providing front-line council services including sport and leisure. APSE's latest analysis of trends in leisure, which draws upon a survey of 310 facilities, including those provided by some trusts as well as local authorities, showed that overall use continues to rise, with growth most marked in combined wet and dry facilities. Opening hours and usage are up. Subsidies are lower in real terms compared with our survey last year and there is increased efficiency through recovery of expenditure through customer receipts.

In other words, council sport and leisure facilities are becoming more commercial and more competitive. This is not just in terms of competing for

customers. It is also about demonstrating the social outcomes – such as better health, less crime and greater community cohesion – that can ensue from offering sport and leisure opportunities to as wide a range of demographic groups and community members as possible.

ISRM national president John Wileman, of Nottingham City Council, looked into the future when speaking at the Survival of the Fittest conference and predicted that customers' expectations will be greater, with increased pressure to be adaptable and get the programme of activities right. For example, whereas line dancing was once popular, cheerleading is now flavour of the month and councils should be offering more activities parents and children can enjoy together.

He told the conference there will be less money in the next ten years and councils must look carefully at what they do. He said there are likely to be 'fewer, better quality, accessible facilities, which are programmed to meet the needs of the local community'.

ISRM chief executive, Sean Holt, explained how the creation of a new Chartered Institute of Sport will provide an authoritative single voice to put the case for the profession and influence strategies and policies. He emphasized the importance of working with national sporting bodies.

Constraints on spending will obviously throw up challenges. But local authority facilities can compete with the private sector. This is especially true since the recession has left cash-strapped customers unable to afford private gym membership. Local authority facilities should not be seen as second best to the private sector; they should aim to be as good or better. It's not enough to simply provide facilities and expect people to come however. Surviving, and indeed thriving, in the future is very much about knowing the market and giving customers what they want.

Marketing lessons can be learned from the USA, where facilities have never been subsidized so public sector providers have had to target their customers effectively. Professor John Crompton from the Texas A&M University told

conference delegates 'how to stay important to your community'. Marketing and promoting services is just the tip of the iceberg. Finding out what the client wants comes first, followed by selecting targets, developing services, locating, scheduling and pricing services. Finding out what motivates people is crucial; whether it's ego, self-worth, acquiring skills or a sense of belonging.

'There is economic and social rationale behind supporting urban parks', he said, drawing upon a case study in New York. He said it was necessary to 'reposition' recreation and parks so they were 'perceived as making a contribution to alleviating the major problems in the community identified by taxpayers and decision-makers'.

Examples from innovative councils in the UK show how sport and leisure as a service has had to sell itself internally as well as externally and that investment can earn the authority increased revenue. Ashley Marriott, head of leisure and cultural services at Broxtowe Borough Council explained how his service has been transformed and rebranded, facilities have been refurbished and performance has improved. The profile of sport and leisure has been raised with both the public and with politicians locally. And investment in new fitness studios of £600k has meant revenue has increased by £18k a month.

Jamie Morgans, leisure services manager at Vale of Glamorgan Council, was delighted to receive approval from elected members for £630k to upgrade the authority's fitness studios, which were marketed under a new 'LifeStyle' brand, launched by local celebrities. The council analysed local competition and identified latent demand for leisure facilities and is now taking a market share from competitors, with membership up by 78% to date. Technology is being used to track members and the next step is to tap into latent demand between 3pm and 6pm, deliver education leadership awards in schools and engage local families. The council is also striving to strengthen links between sport and leisure and the health and well-being agenda locally.

Survival in a tough environment is about using social marketing techniques to put messages across in ways that people relate to in order to motivate them

to participate in sport and leisure. Kelly Evans, of the National Social Marketing Centre, described social marketing as 'marketing to influence human behaviour'. She stressed the importance of getting 'the right product, to the right people, at the right price and the right time'. She urged local authority sport and leisure providers to use all the information at their disposal to understand what 'moves and motivates' different target groups and be 'creative, clever, funny, interesting and attention-grabbing' in their approach, using a range of media and methods to get messages across.

She gave an amusing example to show that targeting based on demographics alone is not enough. HM Prince Charles and rock star Ozzy Osbourne share the same demographic profile; they are both 62 years old, twice married, affluent and from well-known families. So a single message wouldn't work for both and it is necessary to find out their habits, motivations, lifestyles and aspirations and target messages that resonate with them personally.

Knowsley MBC has been highly innovative in marketing its leisure offer to the public and also successful in getting 'partner buy-in' from health, education and regeneration bodies and Sport England. Gymn membership increased 208% in the first year of its new Leisure and Culture Park and use of the sports hall increased by 204%. A Culture Plan was drawn up with sport and leisure activities underpinning the authority's Sustainable Communities Strategy.

Getting 'internal buy in' from within the council as well as external customers' buy in is vital. Commissioners need to understand the bigger picture and take social benefits as well as just the cheapest price into account when letting contracts. Sport and leisure has an impact on a host of National Indicators, including getting young people involved in positive activities and tackling obesity as well as that for increasing participation per se.

For example, the Active Sefton campaign has increased uptake of sport and leisure and produced tangible improvements in health and well-being and a 36% reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour. Alistair Robertson, head of sport and recreation at Sefton MBC, explained how the Active Lifestyles

Programme, part of the approach, aims to provide the whole community with the opportunity to live a more active and healthy lifestyle. This provides number of options depending on a person's health, level of fitness and personal interests.

Andy Mudd, principal consultant at APSE, said that the focus of what constitutes 'public value' should not be too narrow. Providing effective sport and leisure opportunities to all sectors of communities is vital in tackling the 'new giant evils' of disease, obesity, social fragmentation, crime and anti-social behaviour and climate change and in achieving local government's community leadership vision. Local government needs to join up its strategic objectives with its business objectives and service delivery. There needs to be a move from short term outputs to long term, joined up outcomes when commissioning services, he said.

In APSE's view, in-house sport and leisure services can best join up strategic objectives, business objectives and service delivery. Having worked so hard to attract customers, councils need to work hard at keeping them and they need to be flexible in order to respond to changing demands. Again, in-house services can provide the flexibility to adapt to those new demands.

The future for local authority sport and recreation will be tough and, indeed, only the fittest will survive. But local authorities with the right approach can rise to the challenge of being the best at both giving customers what they want and delivering the wider social outcomes that high quality sport and recreation opportunities can offer their communities.

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