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'Our survey says'…

Local authority leisure services are facing unprecedented changes. Rob Bailey discusses the results of APSE's UK wide 'state of the market' survey of managers' views

The only sure thing is change. This is certainly true in the sports and leisure sector. Providers of local authority sports and leisure facilities were already bracing themselves for major upheavals to the way in which their services are funded before the recession started. So what is their outlook now the economic downturn has taken hold?

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE), which represents some 260 front-line service providers in local government across the UK, including sports and leisure, conducted a 'state of the market' survey to find out. We polled leisure managers during February and March in an on-line survey, which asked them about: funding sources, participation, management, staffing and sustaining activities on offer. Importantly, the survey explored where they think the future of public sports and leisure lies.

Funding

Firstly funding. Directly delivered local authority sports and leisure services and Trusts are already aware that their traditional funding sources are in decline. But, as my previous article in *Recreation* magazine demonstrated, the most forward-looking professionals have been making the most of new opportunities resulting from an increase in health-related funding.

We found that 95% of respondents in our survey expected the workload of the leisure section to increase over the next year. But the majority – 64% – expected the overall leisure budget to decrease. And 13% of these forecast a substantial reduction.

There is a marked expectation that the composition of leisure funding will change substantially over the next year. A total of 80% of respondents in our survey forecast a reduction in the budget provided by the host authority. A total of 60% see an increase in funds from their Primary Care Trust and the health sector.

Despite current free swimming initiatives, 58% expected funding from central government to decrease – with only 14% anticipating an increase.

Opinion on income from charges was equivocal. Responses were evenly spread amongst those seeing an increase, a decrease and those who thought it would remain about the same. A small number (16%) expected to receive funding through Sport England, and Section 106 planning gain contributions, although the latter has become tenuous due to the current pressure on the construction industry. A total of 17% saw other sources drying up.

Parking has been use by some councils as a revenue stream and 23% of authorities currently charge to park at least one of their leisure centres. Charges vary widely from between 20p per hour to £1 or more. Half of those centres where parking is charged for recognise the fact within the centre admission fee and refund a proportion of the parking fee.

Participation

Much focus has been placed in recent years on attracting a wider range of users to participate in sports and leisure. This is a trend that is likely to receive greater emphasis as health funding becomes more dominant.

The survey asked whether there was active encouragement of participation from particular groups. Perhaps as a direct result of the free swimming initiatives, 99% of respondents actively encouraged the over 60s and 94% the under 16s. A lesser number (56%) targeted people from minority ethnic groups. Our survey revealed that 75% specifically target women and 79% target unemployed people.

Who manages the services?

The survey asked who currently manages sports and leisure services and gauged the expectation of who would manage them in 12 months time.

A total of 65 respondents were currently part of an in-house team and 53 expected to still be in-house in 12 months time. Of these, 34 were currently part of a Trust and seven expected to be joining a Trust within the year. Of the eight using a private contractor, the figures remain static. One authority reported that it was looking to bring the service back in-house. In several cases, there is a mixed economy in leisure with community groups, Building Schools for the Future and Private Finance Initiative completing the leisure offering.

Another APSE report: *Insourcing: A guide to bringing local authority services back in-house* found that providing services directly enables greater control and flexibility and this option is a growing trend across local authority services. The Trust option continues to enjoy certain perceived tax benefits and therefore remains the principal cost driven alternative solution for leisure. However questions remain about how Trusts can provide long term financial stability, particularly where there is a need for renewed capital investment. Contracting out to private companies is not being pursued because it is not necessarily a financially beneficial option.

Staffing issues

Our survey also sought information on staffing issues in sports and leisure. We found that: 66% of leisure organisations had completed job evaluation; 27% had not; and it did not apply to a small number (7%). Of those who had implemented the results of job evaluation 74% had seen an increase in wage costs and 38% of these saw the increase as substantial.

The median average hourly wage for leisure attendants was £7.45 per hour. These figures may have been subject to a rise from April 1st.

Views on staff absence are varied; with 15% regarding absence as too high, 26% as slightly above average and 32% as about average. It is encouraging that most organisations appear proactive in promoting staff training and gathering customer feedback service quality. A total of 93% conduct regular staff training and appraisals and 83% regularly conduct customer satisfaction surveys. Of the respondents, 66% are Quest accredited and 59% hold the Investors in People award.

Sustainability of activities on offer

Of those who expressed an opinion, the majority – 58% – disagreed or disagreed strongly that free swimming for over 60s was unsustainable. Interestingly, 88% also disagreed that 'traditional swimming pools are doomed'; although anecdotal evidence reflected elsewhere in the survey suggest that there is a fall off in casual swimming.

Sports pitches have had mixed fortunes over the last few years, with some councils viewing them as potential building land assets. The respondents were collectively responsible for over 2,600 sports pitches and 39% had established new ones over the last two years. Only one authority realised a profit from their pitches and 45% said that some subsidy was required. A further 24% said pitches 'cost a fortune' – possibly reflecting a more underlying concern over whether they were sustainable in the longer term.

What the future holds

To test the views of leisure managers, a series of statements were tested to gauge strength of opinion on various issues. A total of 83% agreed that the future of leisure lies in its integration with health. Of the respondents, 75% saw the Building Schools for the Future programme as benefiting local sports provision. Unsurprisingly given the sample, 95% agreed that it was right to subsidise leisure.

Reflecting the anticipated changes in funding, most respondents listed health matters as the area that would drive leisure growth in the future. The drivers included tackling obesity, encouraging the elderly, the young, the over 50s, and families to participate in sports and leisure and stimulating participation through club membership.

Views on those areas where work might decrease were more pessimistic. Many saw casual participation in dry sports as declining (this mainly means racquet sports including badminton and squash). Casual swimming was mentioned by several as being in long term decline; although government initiatives may stimulate that sector in the medium term.

Gym membership was expected to reduce as a direct consequence of the economic downturn. But this is only expected to be a temporary setback; in the longer term there may be an increase in uptake if private gym membership is relatively expensive and requires a long-term contractual commitment. Those youth activities related to sports development were similarly likely to reduce as funding streams are not renewed. Surprisingly, adult team sport, including adult football on outdoor pitches, was mentioned by some as being in decline.

The turbulent times we are experiencing mean that the pace of change is likely to accelerate further. The latest APSE survey provided a snapshot of where things were at this Spring and opinions on how they are likely to develop. We are, however, aware that the unpredictability of the recession and responses to it means a different picture could emerge relatively rapidly. We will therefore be repeating the survey to assess the impact of the economic downturn among other factors. APSE will continue to monitor the changes within leisure and seek, in particular, to obtain further detail on those areas where concern has been expressed. The survey will be repeated in early 2010. We look forward to sharing those results.

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