

## SUMMARY REPORT

# **The Use & Management of Local Authority Sports Halls & Swimming Pools in England (1997)**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This summary report presents the findings of a national survey carried out by Sport England which examined the use made of local authority sports halls and swimming pools and the different management approaches adopted by the centres.

The survey was carried out in November 1997 on behalf of Sport England by Public Attitude Surveys (PAS) and involved two elements:

a survey of users (carried out at 155 centres across England); and  
a survey of programming and management practice (involving around 330 centres across England).

## **MAIN FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS**

### **Management & Programming**

Over two thirds of centres operated peak time definitions, with mixed sites (those with a hall and a pool) most likely to have policies relating to peak times whilst wet sites were least likely to.

Almost all centres operated a concessionary charging scheme.

The over 60s were the group most likely to benefit from concessions with almost 9 out of ten centres operating concessionary schemes for which they were eligible. Centres also generally operated schemes that targeted disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed, people with disabilities and those receiving income support.

A thirds of centres restricted the use of concessions to residents within their district boundaries.

Local authorities should also examine whether placing restrictions on the use of concessions by non-residents is denying disadvantaged groups access to halls and pools, for example those whose nearest facility is in a neighbouring borough. In these cases local authorities should consider whether arrangements can be made with the neighbouring authorities to share the costs of concessions or develop policies that produce reciprocal benefits.

Almost 9 out of 10 centres had use by schools written into their contracts whilst a similar proportion had specifications relating to casual use. Provision for sports clubs, those with disabilities and young people were also part of the contracts for more than three quarters of centres. However, asked whether centres were set any throughput targets relating to provision for the different user groups only 39% of centres did.

In order to monitor and evaluate the performance of halls and pool local authorities should be encouraged to set measurable output targets in their contracts to ensure that policies, such as the provision of programme time for different groups, achieve the outcomes required.

The activities most likely to be provided in sports halls were badminton (which was programmed for 14% of the time), football (12%) and school/college sports (10%). Halls stood empty for 39% of the time whilst 3% of the available time was taken up by non-sporting.

With sports halls under-utilised for large periods of time centre managers should be encouraged to take a creative approach to the programming of space in order to attract a greater level of use, particularly amongst those groups in the community that are under-represented.

Swimming pools had a less diverse range of sports activities than sports halls. Almost two thirds of the activity that took place was classified by centre managers as 'general swimming'.

However, for a quarter of the time the pools were not used, mainly due to closure early in the morning, later in the evening or to temporary closures throughout the day.

Centre managers need to determine whether pool opening times are responsive to customer needs and whether extending opening times is cost effective and will create more opportunities. Further analysis of the survey results is required to determine whether those pools with extended opening hours are able to attract greater levels of use.

### **Participation In Sports Halls And Swimming Pools**

During one week in November 1997 a total of 600,000 visits were made by 490,000 people to local authority owned/managed sports halls in England and 1,130,000 visits were made by 806,000 people to a local authority pool.

Twenty-seven per cent of hall users who participated in a hall activity at least 4 times in the previous 4 weeks made up 62% of visits. Similarly for pools, 31% of users who participated at least 4 times in the previous 4 weeks made up 67% of visits.

On average each visitor to a sports hall made 2.4 visits over a 4 week period whilst the average visit rate for pools was 2.9.

The majority of visits to halls and pools are made by a relatively small number of people. Local authorities need to consider whether they are happy to continue to subsidise the few or to make greater efforts in encouraging use by others in the community so that more people can benefit.

Males were slightly more likely to use sports halls than females whilst females were slightly more likely to use a swimming pool.

The profile of users of sports halls and swimming pools was young in comparison to the population for England as a whole whilst sports halls tended to attract users from a younger age group than swimming pools.

The use of sports halls and swimming pools is dominated by the non-manual socio-economic groups. Swimming pools tended to attract a greater proportion of their users from the professional and managerial classes (AB) (47%) whilst halls tended to attract theirs from an intermediate and junior non-manual background (C1) (39%). The use of sports halls and swimming pools by those with a disability was fairly limited. Compared with 22% of the population as a whole who have a long term illness or disability limiting their daily activities or work, only 7% of users of sports halls classified themselves as similarly disabled along with 11% of pool users.

Ethnic minorities are well represented in the use of sports halls with 5.3% of users being from either a black or ethnic minority background. This compares to a population profile of 5.2%. However, black and ethnic minorities were under-represented in their use of swimming pools with only 2.8% of users classifying themselves as non-white.

The use of sports halls and swimming pools is dominated by those working full time or by students.

There are clearly inequalities in the use of halls and pools, particularly in terms of social class, ethnicity, disability and work status. This begs the question as to whether these kinds of inequities can be overcome by innovative management or whether there are wider cultural factors that impact on behaviour which traditional sports facility management cannot overcome. Further analysis of the data relating to individual centre performances and linked to their catchment profiles is planned and this should help to highlight those centres which seem to be achieving better results in attracting minority groups.

The most popular activities undertaken in a sports halls were badminton and keep fit/aerobics/step/yoga which each accounted for 24% of visits. These were followed in popularity by 5-a-side football (18%), martial arts (6%) and bowls (6%).

The use of swimming pools was far less diverse than sports halls with the majority of visits being made to take part in general swimming (95%). The other notable activity was aquafit which accounted for 3% of visits.

The majority of sports hall and swimming pool visits involved journeys of less than three miles (61% of visits in the case of halls and 66% in the case of pools). In both cases around 80% of visits originated from within a catchment of 5 miles.

In terms of the length of journeys, the majority of visits involved journeys of 10 minutes or less (60% of visits to halls and 58% of visits to pools). In both cases around 80% of visits came from within a catchment of 20 minutes and the average journey times were about 12 minutes.

Twenty-seven per cent of sports hall users and 28% of swimming pool users held a discount card for the facility that gave them a reduction in price or priority booking access.

Despite the almost universal availability of concessionary schemes at local authority facilities most users do not use them, possibly due to a lack of awareness about what is on offer. Local authorities and centre managers should monitor the level of take up of schemes in their own facilities and, where levels are low, try to increase awareness, and where appropriate, the accessibility of the schemes.