

## Scrutiny Select Committee No. 1

### Decline in Casual Swimming – Assessing its Impact

*DRAFT* Summary of the review's findings

#### 1.0. BACKGROUND

1.1. Wigan Council's Active Life Service (ALS) was formed in 1999, following a reorganisation within the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (L&CSD). ALS has responsibility for managing all six public swimming facilities provided by the Council. They are located at Wigan International Pool, Ashton Leisure Centre (linked to Cansfield High School), Hindley Pool, Howe Bridge Sports Centre, Atherton Baths and Tyldesley Pool.

1.2. The L&CSD have produced a strategy, which sets out the vision and direction for the development of sport and active recreation within the Borough, which extends until the year 2006. In addition, ALS has produced a Service Plan, which covers the period 2001-2004.

1.3. It is recognised from the outset that if Overview and Scrutiny is to add value it needs to be supportive of the corporate objectives of the Council. These are expressed through the 4P's in terms of Performance, Potential, Place and Partnership. This service area review was categorised under its predominant corporate objective, namely Performance - ***to secure the best possible services to meet the expressed needs of citizens and to continually improve delivery performance.***

#### 2.0. INTRODUCTION

2.1. At the first meeting of the Select Committee on 15<sup>th</sup> August, the terms of reference for this review were established and agreed. The scope extended to:

***Review all current facilities where members of the public can take part in casual swimming activities provided by the L&CSD.***

Casual swimming was defined for the purpose of this review as activity within a pool that was open to the general public without restriction relating to age, ability or gender.

2.2. In addition, the stated objectives were to:

1. ***Determine usage patterns at Wigan's facilities and compare with regional and national trends. Tasks 1, 2 and 3.***
3. ***Evaluate the current provision of casual swimming facilities in Wigan. Tasks 4, 5, 6 and 7.***
3. ***Provide input into the L&CSD stakeholder consultation process. Task 8.***
3. ***Identify existing partnership arrangements and opportunities for further collaboration. Task 9.***
3. ***Establish 'best in class' service providers and identify and report on good practice. Task 10.***
6. ***Provide appropriate recommendations to the Director and Cabinet Member of Leisure and Cultural Services for discussion with the Leisure and Cultural Services Panel, relating to casual swimming.***

### **3.0. METHODOLOGY**

**3.1.** In order to fulfil each of the stated objectives, a series of key tasks were identified which are detailed below:

1. Obtain trend data on usage for Wigan.
2. Obtain trend data on usage regionally and nationally.
3. Compare outcomes of tasks 1 and 2.
4. Compare Sport England recommended water pool provision per head of population for Wigan pools.
5. To assist the review process, obtain a copy of the Asset Management Plan (as it relates to pools and leisure centres).
6. Establish the net revenue cost of provision for individual Wigan pools.
7. Members to visit and evaluate the current provision of pools in Wigan.
8. Identify previous promotional activities and assess their impact.
9. To document the existing links between the pool facilities and other departments and organisations.
10. To undertake a literature search and document best practice.

The remainder of the report details each objective, key task(s), approach deployed, summary findings and series of recommendations that aim to assist the Council in meeting its corporate objectives.

**4.0. OBJECTIVE 1 – Determine usage patterns at Wigan’s facilities and compare with regional and national trends.**

**4.1. KEY TASK 1** - Obtain trend data relating to usage patterns for each swimming facility managed by L&CSD and report.

**4.2. APPROACH** - The Director of Leisure and Cultural Services provided trend data for the period of consideration 1993/94-2000/01, for each of its pools. This data has been presented in the form of graphs at Appendices A to E. In addition, evidence was gathered during interview sessions with key L&CSD personnel.

**4.3. FINDINGS-** This area of the review was divided into to three parts. Namely, Decline, Capacity, and Price.

**4.4. Decline** - Appendix A shows the decline in numbers for total casual swimming at each pool and the overall total for Wigan. The graph shows that overall there has been a decline over the eight-year period examined of 91,500 visits (466,700 to 375,200) or a 20% reduction.

**4.5.** Appendices B, C, D and E show the changes in numbers for each pool in respect of Adult casual swimmers, Junior casual swimmers, school swimming sessions and swimming lessons respectively. **[It must be noted that some of the figures have been distorted due to part year closure. The pools affected are Atherton (1998/1999) and Ashton (1996/97 and 2000/01)].** The main points summarised are:

- Until 1999/00, Wigan pool attracted the most adult casual swimmers. In 2000/01, Howe Bridge attracted the most adult casual swimmers.
- Atherton and Tyldesley pools have always attracted the least number of adult casual swimmers during the period under review.
- Wigan pool has attracted the largest number of junior casual swimmers, school swimming sessions and individual swimming lessons during the whole eight-year period.
- Atherton and Tyldesley pools have always attracted the least number of junior casual swimmers during the period under review.
- Howe Bridge and Hindley pools have increased the number of school sessions over the eight-year period, the only two pools to achieve this, Howe Bridge quite significantly.
- With the exception of Wigan, all pools have been able to increase the number of individual lessons over the eight years, most notably, Howe Bridge (7,500), Hindley (7,000) and Tyldesley (2,000).

**4.6.** As a simple comparison of numbers at the individual pools would be misleading (due to the differences in opening times and pool sizes), a comparison of the percentage change in usage at each pool in respect of total casual swimming was performed. The results are shown on a graph at Appendix F. The graph clearly shows that a decline has occurred across the Borough, however, the rate of decline is variable between individual facilities. The main points summarised are:

- Howe Bridge usage increased until decline set in around 1998/99. However, this pool (at 83% of 1993/94 figures) has not suffered the same rate of decline as the other pools, four of which have dropped below 80% of 1993/94 figures.

- The greatest total decline is at Wigan pool where the 2000/01 figures have fallen to 75% of the 1993/94 levels.

**4.7.** To obtain a greater insight into the decline, the same exercise was conducted in respect of adults only and juniors only. The results are shown on graphs at Appendices G and H and again there are variations between facilities. The main points are summarised:

#### **1. Adult Casual Swimming**

- There has been an overall decline over the eight-year period of 33% on adult casual swimming.
- Adult usage at Howe Bridge showed a decline over the period yet still retains 81% of adult casual swimming usage based on 1993/94 figures, the highest of all six pools.
- Wigan and Hindley pools showed the most marked decline with 60% of 1993/94 figures in 2000/01 at Wigan and 59% at Hindley.
- Atherton pool showed the most marked decline up to 1998/99 but adult usage then increased in 2000/01 up to 76% of 1993/94 usage. This figure exceeded the usage at Ashton, Tyldesley, Hindley and Wigan pools.

#### **2. Junior Casual Swimming**

- There has been an overall decline over the eight-year period of 27% on junior casual swimming.
- Junior usage at Howe Bridge showed a decline over the period yet still retains 80% of junior casual swimming usage based on 1993/94 figures, the highest of all six pools.
- Junior usage shows a decline at all six facilities with the most marked reduction of 51% since 1993/94 at Atherton. Ashton, Hindley and Wigan pools have all reduced to approximately 70% of the 1993/94 usage with Tyldesley doing slightly better at 76%.

**4.8.** Clearly, there has been a sustained decline in casual swimming over the past eight years. As part of the evidence gathering process L&CSD personnel were asked for possible reasons for the decline and what they had done to address this. This has been dealt with in this report under Objective 5.

**4.9. Capacity** - In response to a Lottery Bid, Sport England used their Facilities Planning Model to determine whether the current provision of pools in Wigan could meet the level of demand. The demand is calculated by using the proposed number of visits the local population anticipate making (based on a sample survey) to determine how many people would expect to be able to swim if they all decided to swim at the same time. This is subjective, as a desire to take part in an activity does not necessarily result in participation.

**4.10.** The capacity (demand) at each pool was calculated and compared to actual attendance. The results of this exercise have been shown on a graph at Appendix I. This clearly shows that the pools at Wigan, Tyldesley and Atherton are attracting less than half the estimated throughput.

**4.11.** A separate exercise has been conducted as part of the review to identify the amount of time that the pools in Wigan are open to the public for casual swimming activity and to compare this with the usage. Two graphs are shown at Appendices J and K, which show that the proportion of time allocated to specific activities is **not** matched by the proportion of usage on these activities. Appendix L provides further explanatory detail to these graphs. It must be noted that to obtain a comparable usage figure for club use, school sessions and pool hire (parties), the sessions recorded have been multiplied by 30 to give an approximate number of users. Gala

events have been multiplied by 100 to give an approximate number of swimmers. Spectators have been disregarded. This approach is highly subjective for a number of reasons but does suggest that although the pools are available for casual swimming activity for 45% of the time, this only attract 19% of total users.

#### **4.12. Price - Price Sensitivity**

The graphs at Appendices M and N show the price changes (%) against changes in usage (%) for both adult and junior swimming. In addition, for comparative purposes, the retail prices index excluding mortgages (RPIX) has been calculated at April each year. This index has been used as it was considered more applicable to all users of the pools, not just those with mortgages. It should also be noted that the inflation applied to the prices by the Council will be different to the RPIX as they will be more specific in terms of employee costs, fuel costs etc.

**4.13.** The graphs also indicate, through variation between percentage changes in usage and price, that price is not the only factor to affect the number of people who choose to swim. If price were the only factor, there would be a clear relationship (evident on the graphs) between price and usage.

4.14 is different

**4.14.** As part of the review, Glasgow City Council were contacted due to their recent charging policy change whereby all young people under the age of 18 are able to swim free of charge with effect from April 2001. This was introduced with the aim of encouraging children and young people to swim for the health benefits that this brings. Although the Council is unable to provide figures as evidence for this review, early indications are that casual swimming for this group of people has doubled since the introduction based on the same period last year.

#### **4.15. Price - Price Comparisons**

Trend data is available for the period 1993/1994 to 2000/2001 on prices charged for swimming sessions by Wigan and this is shown on the graph at Appendix O. The main findings are:

- Adult casual swimming prices have increased from £1.35 to £1.85, equating to £0.50 or 27%.
- Junior casual swimming prices have increased from £0.75 to £1.10, equating to £0.35 or 32%.
- Inflation over the same period based on RPIX (see explanation above) was 19%.

**4.16.** Prices charged by other Councils for the year 2000/01 were compared with charges at Wigan in respect of Adults, Juniors and Senior Citizens. The results have been presented in graphical format at Appendices P, Q and R. The main findings are:

- The prices charged by Wigan Council in respect of adults, juniors and senior citizens fell in the mid range of those charged by other Greater Manchester Councils and St Helens. However, the prices charged for juniors is at the top end of the range whereas the prices charged for senior citizens is at the lower end of the range.
3. Salford City Council and Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council do not charge senior citizens for swimming.

#### **4.17. RECOMMENDATIONS**

***R1. Use the information provided in this report to identify and address where decline is most significant.***

***R2. Use the information in this report to identify where the decline has been slowed at our own facilities and share good practice between all facilities where this can be shown to be a contributory factor.***

**R3. Optimise the programming for target groups to ensure opening hours availability and usage are aligned and regularly monitored for each facility.**

**R4. Monitor and report the effects of price increases on usage to Leisure and Cultural Services Panel and the Contract Management Board.**

**R5. Clarify whether the objectives of the service are to increase usage or increase income and adopt charging policies that reflect this.**

**R6. Note the experience of Glasgow City Council.**

**R7. Review performance management reporting to Leisure and Cultural Services Panel and the Contract Management Board, which includes the presentation of trend data.**

**4.18. KEY TASK 2 - Obtain trend data on usage patterns regionally and nationally.**

**4.19. APPROACH** – Contact was made with the Leisure industry professional bodies and associations to determine if any research had been undertaken specifically on swimming. These included Sport England (National and Regional offices), the Amateur Swimming Association and Institute of Sport and Recreation Management (ISRM). In addition, those councils whose Leisure Services had recently undergone a Best Value Inspection and been awarded two or three stars were contacted to obtain trend data and Glasgow City Council were contacted following a conversation with the ISRM about their recent changes to their charging policy.

**4.20. FINDINGS – Institute of Sport and Recreational Management (ISRM)**

Two relevant publications were identified which were published by the ISRM in conjunction with Sheffield University. They are entitled, ‘**Swimming in Decline?**’ (1995) and ‘**Swimming Participation – Down and Out or On the Up?**’ (1998). Both reports were purchased for the review and will be forwarded to the L&CSD with the final report of this review. It should be noted however that reference was made to the first report in a report presented to the Contract Management Group on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1994. The report stated that “**a summary of these findings will be presented to the next quarterly meeting of the Board**”.

**4.21.** The report, ‘**Swimming in Decline?**’, alerted local authorities to the problem of falling swimming attendances in the period 1991/2 to 1993/4. In the second half of this period, there was a 4% fall in attendances. The report is based on a survey of all UK local authorities’ recreation services in which 223 responded, giving a 45% response rate. Significantly the report highlighted:

- Between 1992/93 and 1993/94 only two growth markets were evident in swimming – discounted admissions and swimming lessons and courses. The major markets demonstrate significant decreases: 7% in the case of casual and adult admissions; 5% in the case of junior admissions. **Trend data from Wigan has only been collected as part of this review from 1993/94.**
- Despite the fall in swimming attendances on average, a third of authorities enjoyed continued increases in the early 1990’s.
- The ratio of junior to adult swimming attendances is just under 1:1 according to the survey results. This is well below the figure for the 1980’s, when junior admissions were estimated to be at least twice the adult numbers.
- The main reason for the decline offered by respondents, which had suffered a decline, is increased competition. This competition takes two main forms: commercial attractions such

as cinema, and ten pin bowling: and dry side fitness activities such as aerobics and multi-gyms. **In a report to the Contract Management Group on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1994, the reasons for decline suggested were poor Summer weather, increased prices, recession, other leisure products/services, demographic factors and reduced school swimming which was considered to contribute directly to reduced junior swimming.**

- The survey evidence casts doubt on the effect of dry side fitness activities as substitutes for swimming. First, the growth in dry side activities slowed considerably between 1992/93 and 1993/94. Second, of those authorities facing a decline in swimming attendances, over half were also suffering a decline in attendances for dry side activities. Although the data collected for this review is from 1993/94 only, the decline in casual swimming has not been mirrored by a similar decline in indoor, outdoor and fitness activities. See graph at Appendix S, which covers the period 1997/98 to 2000/2001.
- Other significant reasons offered to explain the decline are deterioration in the quality of facilities, reduced curricular provision for swimming by schools, and increased prices. **Due to the age of the buildings and lack of investment at Wigan, it would probably be true to explaining some of the decline as due to deterioration of facilities. School swimming sessions at Wigan have actually increased at two of the pools although overall there has been a decline of approximately 8% over the eight years examined. School numbers have also declined over this period, which is beyond the control of the L&CSD. Prices were found to have increased at a rate higher than inflation.**
- The survey authors stress the importance of market research to determine the customers, or more accurately lapsed or less frequent customers, reasons for the decline and to help establish whether the decline is short term or likely to have a longer duration. In a period of rising attendance, leisure managers may be able to get away with poor promotion. However, faced with a downturn in attendance and a possible increase in competition for customers, promotion is an essential management tool.

**4.22.** The following report, ‘**Swimming Participation – Down and Out or on the Up?**’, aimed to extend the emerging picture. This second report covers the period 1994/95 to 1996/97, i.e. the period for which trend data was used as part of this review. This time 482 local authorities were contacted and a 39% response rate was achieved. The survey results indicated that swimming attendances have been static during the period of investigation. In addition, the report highlighted:

- Dry side attendances have risen by 2% over the survey period in the responding authorities. **Between 1997/98 and 2000/01, (i.e. after the period covered by the report) dry side attendance increased at Wigan by 100% for fitness, 47% for outdoor activities and 50% for indoor activities.**
- The survey sample splits into two with half the responding authorities having had decreases in swimming attendances and half having had increases. **Wigan has suffered an overall decrease in casual swimming.**
- Few market segments display increasing attendances, however, lessons and courses show the strongest growth, 8%. **Lessons at Wigan grew by 15% between 1993/94 and 2000/01. This growth is paralleled by a fall in schools’ attendances of over 8% although total school roll numbers in Wigan have not declined below the January 1994 figure.**
- Other market segments demonstrating decreasing attendances include juniors (a 4% fall) and casual (a 5% fall). The ratio of adults to juniors in casual swimming is still more than 1:1, repeating previous survey findings.

- When asked for their perceptions of what has caused decreases in attendances, the most commonly cited reasons by respondents are growing competition from new attractions and alternative health and fitness sports, deterioration in the quality of their facilities, and reduction in schools' curricular swimming. These were amongst the same reasons given in the previous report. **The increase in dry activities at Wigan and the findings of the Asset Management Plan recently produced support these views.**
- Among the factors not perceived by many respondents to be important in causing decreases in attendances are decreases in provision, competition from private sector pools, and increases in admission prices. **The findings at Wigan would appear to support this view.**
- Respondents were also asked for their perceptions of what has caused increases in attendances. The most popular reasons were more programmed sessions for target groups, better quality facilities, specific promotional campaigns, and the growth of health and fitness sports generally.

#### **4.23. Sports Council**

In addition, we identified a reference to a Sports Council (North West region) survey regarding the decline in casual swimming, which reveals that most local authorities had suffered decreases in casual swimming attendances in the period 1992/93 to 1993/94. Adult decline is in the region of 14% and junior decline in excess of 15%. In addition, swimming attendances by schools, clubs and lessons shows a less uniform picture of decline.

#### **4.24. Best in Class Providers**

Best in Class providers were contacted as part of this review as they were identified as recently undergoing a best value review. In order to fulfil the compare element of such a review, it was anticipated that trend data on usage from them would be readily available. The only Council contacted who were able to provide useful information was the London Borough of Wandsworth. In addition, Glasgow City Council was also able to provide trend data. The results are shown on a graph at Appendix T, which also shows the trend at Wigan and the results of the General Household Survey and the ISRM survey.

#### **4.25. RECOMMENDATIONS**

***R8 – Contribute positively to survey requests that serve the leisure industry and that aim to highlight regional and national trend data.***

***R9 – Compare at a regular frequency the performance and trends in Wigan with other regional and national available survey and trend data. In particular, the Councils who responded to the ISRM survey who have experienced an increase in casual swimming. The L&CSD can control some of the reasons cited in the most recent report for increased activity.***

***R10 – Wigan must learn from the experience of others, in particular, discounted admissions, programmed sessions, better quality facilities and the need for market research.***

**4.26. KEY TASK 3** - Compare outcomes of Key Tasks 1 and 2.

**4.27. APPROACH** – Evaluate findings and report.

**4.28. FINDINGS** – Great difficulty was encountered identifying exact trend data across regional and national boundaries. However, both ISRM survey reports, together with the reference to the Sport England (Northwest) region survey, give the best available picture of the decline in casual swimming, although it is acknowledged that this information is dated. More research work by the sports professional bodies and agencies is therefore required to provide up to date clarity. Furthermore, as the pace of Best Value reviews is accelerated there will be predictably greater emphasis in comparative and benchmarking information becoming more freely available and a greater understanding between authorities to collaborate more effectively.

**4.29.** During the evidence gathering process, officers of the L&CSD were consulted and asked if they were aware of the regional and national trend in casual swimming and whether Greater Manchester are comparable. L&CSD representatives confirmed that they do not have definitive decline statistics, but feel that Greater Manchester's decline is broadly in line with the rest of the country. However, the department knows their percentage decline over the last eight-years.

**4.30. RECOMMENDATIONS-**

***R11 – Use trend data that is available in Wigan and report to the Contract Management Board. Use the data to focus in on specific areas of decline at individual pools.***

**5.1. OBJECTIVE 2 - Evaluate the current provision of casual swimming facilities in Wigan.**

**5.2. KEY TASK 4** – Compare Sport England recommended water pool provision per head of population for Wigan pools.

**5.3. APPROACH** – Obtain a copy of the Sport England Facilities Planning Model (FPM) report and consider the content.

**5.4. FINDINGS** – During October 2000, Sport England undertook a strategic overview of swimming provision in the borough and the surrounding area, assessing the impact of a number of possible supply scenarios. The FPM is a prescriptive approach to defining the level of supply of sports facilities required to meet the estimated demand from the population in a given area in the peak period.

**5.5.** Clearly, the combined actual throughput is less than the estimated throughput in the model, particularly at Atherton Baths, Hindley Pool, Tyldesley Baths and Wigan International Pool. In addition, the analysis suggests that:

- The supply of pools in and around the borough is capable of meeting 90% of estimated demand.
- Unmet demand is from potential swimmers without access to a car that lives too far away from the nearest pool.
- 80% of visits are by car see Appendix U, which shows how the model split at individual pools varies according to local car ownership rates.
- Potential throughputs in Wigan are 48% of available capacity.
- Actual throughput is approximately half of the potential throughput. Pools are therefore not performing as well as they could.

**5.6.** Possible explanations for the above are:

- Visits are not being made to Wigan's pools because they are unattractive and don't meet customer expectations.
- Swimmers are choosing to swim elsewhere.
- The availability of individual pools has been significantly over-estimated. Swimmers have to swim elsewhere.
- Potential swimmers are not being sufficiently encouraged to swim.
- Actual throughput has been under-counted.

**5.7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

***R12 – Challenge and investigate the validity of all the reasons offered by Sport England into why the actual throughput is only approximately half the potential throughput, at Wigan's pools. Address the considerable under use at some of the facilities.***

**R13 – Undertake customer consultation exercise relating to modes of transport used to access facilities to:**

- 1. Establish the importance of good quality and secure car parking provision on the basis that approximately 80% of customers visit facilities by car.**
- 2. Promote the use of public transport by displaying bus and train timetables at facilities. Consult with Greater Manchester Transport Executive and review and evaluate the existing public transport service. For example, the routing and frequency of services in relationship to swimming programmes; and the boarding/unloading of buses within close proximity to the facilities.**
- 3. Maximise participation of existing customers and potential customers who rely on public transport by making public transport a more attractive option. Develop and explore opportunities with the Traffic and Transportation section, Engineering Services Department.**

**5.8. KEY TASK 5** – Consider the implications of L&CSD's Corporate Asset Management Plan (relating to pools and leisure centres).

**5.9. APPROACH** – Review the content of a report titled, 'Active Life Services: Corporate Assets Management Planning Process Update'. This report was presented at Chief Officers Management Team on 11<sup>th</sup> September and to Cabinet on 4<sup>th</sup> October.

**5.10. FINDINGS** – In general, the aforementioned report paints a depressing picture of the L&CSD's assets. Clearly, over a significant number of years it would appear there has been a succession of inadequate investment in all the facilities, which is now compounded, in part, by their age. Specific concerns highlighted in the report refer to:

- Facilities having serious issues with boiler plant and energy usage, energy efficiency and environmental performance is low. Two facilities are still powered by coal (Howe Bridge and Atherton) and one with heavy oil (Wigan International Pool). It is likely that environmental emission legislation and rising fuel costs will mean that these will need fundamentally reviewing, within the next two years.
- Limited flexibility to change the buildings use and function to meet changing demand and expectation. There is a significant under use of stand-alone facilities.
- The Disability Discrimination Act places onerous requirements on the access and operation of public buildings. This will result in high costs to meet compliance by 2004 and in some cases, due to complex layouts, no solution can be found to the disability provision issues.
- Major repair and maintenance items are likely to become essential within the next 5 years, and include plant, equipment and super structure replacements, which are beyond the scope of existing Repair and Maintenance funds.

**5.11.** Over the next 25 years the expected investment required to keep all the facilities, with a pool, operational will be £25,172,472. Current investment levels are £17,522,046, therefore a significant funding gap of £7,650,426 exists.

## 5.12. RECOMMENDATIONS

**R14 – It is clear from the estimated funding gap, that a range of solutions will be required in order to deal with the immediate and long-term problems associated with the L&CSD's asset portfolio. This must include an analysis of water space against demand. Consideration should be given to the following options:**

- 1. Develop a transparent and objective commercial assessment criterion, which can be applied to each facility. This would draw together the Asset Management Planning process, build on the Sport England FPM, support feedback from all stakeholders relating to their current and future expectations, provide market expansion potential and corresponding projected income.**
- 2. Consider disposal or change of use for the least viable facilities and reinvest into the remaining portfolio to better serve customer demands to encourage the participation in casual swimming.**
- 3. Examine the current provision together with projected costs and the future vision of the Council and rationalise, if necessary. This may include the permanent closure of one or more pools and refurbishment of the remaining facilities to encourage more casual swimming at those pools.**
- 4. Explore and under a comprehensive review of advantages/disadvantages of transferring all or part of Active Life Services to Charitable Trust Status. Furthermore, that consideration is given to learning from other organisations who have previously adopted or who have considered this procurement process.**
- 5. Investigate the feasibility of providing, in the future, a modern 'commercially integrated' district facility under a Private Finance Initiative, within the west of the borough. Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of such a scheme in advance of the decision to proceed being taken.**

**Options 1 to 5 inclusive, are not considered to be mutually exclusive.**

**R15 – Investigate and assess long-term public/private lease agreements, partnerships with other external agencies and stakeholders to assist in the positive future provision of swimming opportunities, by maximising external funding.**

**R16 – Undertake a 'value for money' review of all current maintenance and repair contracts, and procured services to identify potential savings.**

**5.13. KEY TASK 6** – Establish the net revenue cost of provision for individual pools. We were unable to determine this within the time-scale of the review

**5.14. APPROACH** –Identify income and expenditure figures in respect of each facility over a four-year period and use 2000/01 data to identify net cost per swim at each individual facility.

**5.15. FINDINGS** - The net income from wet activities was determined and compared to the total centre income for each year. The results are shown at Appendix V, but show that income from wet activities as a proportion of all income from the six facilities has declined from 53% in

1997/98 to 42% in 2000/01. However, the figures used include the Robin Park Arena (with effect from 1998/99 only) and Robin Park Indoor (where the income has doubled from 1997/98 to 2000/01) where there are no wet facilities.

**5.16.** Figures were then extracted in respect of Wet, Indoor, Outdoor and Fitness usage and income as a total for all centres including Robin Park. The findings have been produced on graphs at Appendices S and W. In summary:

- Indoor and Fitness activity usage has increased over the four-year period against the decline suffered by all wet activities. Outdoor activities suffered a decline between 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 but the usage was still higher than the 1997/98 figure.
- Income for Wet activities has remained approximately the same over the period, despite falling usage but as a result of increased prices.

### **5.17. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**R17 The net cost of provision for each of the pools must be identified and reported back to the Select Committee.**

**5.18. KEY TASK 7** – Members and policy adviser to visit and evaluate the current provision of pools in Wigan.

**5.19. APPROACH** – Three members agreed to undertake a facility visit to each of the Council's pools and to record their observations, perceptions and discussions with staff and the public on an agreed assessment form. The visits were pre-arranged with and co-ordinated by the L&CSD and undertaken over a two day period, which commenced on the 20<sup>th</sup> and concluded on 21<sup>st</sup> September.

**5.20. FINDINGS** – Members observations, perceptions and areas of discussion are detailed at Appendix X, together with proposed solutions/way forward. The main areas are summarised here:

#### **1. Direction and Promotion signage**

Difficulty was encountered locating many of the leisure facilities visited, at best there was minimal direction signage. Only one facility had a welcoming sign at the entrance and most facilities retain the old MetroSport logo signs, which are barely legible.

#### **2. Security and Access**

Changing room lockers in some facilities were vandalised in significant numbers (30%). This clearly gives a bad impression to new customers. Improved car parking security was identified as a key issue. Access for the disabled varied considerably between facilities. There are no disabled changing facilities for the purely independent visit.

#### **3. Customer information**

Each facility provides a range of customer information leaflets and promotional posters. Some displays were well presented. Opening times and scale of prices were not always clearly visible. Staff confirmed that their I.T. capabilities are generally poor and it was difficult to target and analyse their customer base.

#### **4. Internal decoration**

The majority of facilities required redecoration or refurbishment. There was an obvious state of neglect, which does not send out a positive image to the customer. Invariably the changing

rooms were of poor decorative appearance and staff confided that this embarrassed them. Staff also confirmed that they have undertaken redecoration to minimise costs and to improve the appearance of the facility, during quite periods. This action is commendable.

#### **5. Maintenance and repairs**

Staff reported that the minor and major repair schedule lacks clarity and is open to interpretation. Building defects are reported to the Land and Property Department and they record an entry in the facility diary. However, progress of repairs rests with the duty manager to chase up. Repair times are variable and generally not satisfactory.

#### **6. Commercial Enterprise**

At several facilities staff confirmed that the area catering was under utilised and not well developed. This ranged from a facility not being able to provide hot drinks to a limited cafeteria. There is a range of discount cards/schemes available which staff reported difficult to monitor.

#### **5.21. RECOMMENDATIONS**

***R18 - To consider the proposed solutions/way forward offered by members in relation to their observations, perceptions and discussions with staff at the Departments facilities, during their visit.***

***R19 – Undertake joint annual senior officer and member visits to promote greater understanding, awareness and to act as a critical friend in the delivery of service to all stakeholders.***

***R20 – Review impact and effectiveness of existing discount card schemes, such as BLT and LINC. Wherever possible simplify their administration and maximise their usefulness in encouraging more users.***

## **6.0. OBJECTIVE 3 – Provide input into the L&CSD stakeholder consultation process.**

**6.1. KEY TASK 9** – Gain sufficient understanding of the issues relating to casual swimming and the existing consultation processes, and contribute in a constructive and effective way to the benefit of the L&CSD.

**6.2. APPROACH** – Using knowledge and experience gained from the evidence gathering process, in addition to elected member's range of experiences and expectations of consultation with stakeholders, prepare a summary matrix.

**6.3. FINDINGS** – Members have identified a diverse range of stakeholder groups who should be included in the consultation process. Furthermore, a number of consultation mediums have been proposed, together with a broad range of areas to seek opinion and understanding of, from the stakeholders. The findings have been summarised at Appendix Y.

**6.4.** As part of the evidence gathering process L&CSD personnel were asked two key questions, which together with bulleted lists of answers are shown below:

### **1. What factors have contributed to the decline in casual swimming?**

- Wider leisure choice available and rival fitness provision i.e. health suites.
- Due to reduced capital investment, physical condition of the facilities is poor and there is a lack of flexibility of use.
- Lack of interest from juniors, due to increased health and safety rules, reduced 'fun factor' and no unique pool experiences in relation to novelty value.
- Possible parental fears, due to possibility of unaccompanied children attending facilities.

### **2. What has been your response strategy?**

- Segment programmes to accommodate different users, i.e. Early Bird, Swim Fit, etc. and improved and enhanced swimming lesson programmes, i.e. now includes adults.
- Prices have been kept to a reasonable level.
- Attempted to improve facilities, where revenue budgets allow and expand provisions, i.e. Fitness Suite and Aerobics studio.
- Introduce GP referral scheme and Swimming Development Officer.
- Various marketing and promotional campaigns.

**6.5.** Two gaps emerged in our understanding of the service being delivered. The first related to the frequency, scale and effectiveness of L&CSD's customer satisfaction and consultation activities. Does the customer have a passive or active role in service development? The second related to the effectiveness of L&CSD's marketing and promotional activities.

### **6.6. Customer satisfaction and consultation**

- 1.** Customer consultation surveys have only been introduced within the past 3 months, in a formal and organised way. Two questionnaires have been developed and over 550 responses are currently being analysed. In addition, informal ad hoc interaction takes place on a day to day basis, in each facility.
- 2.** L&CSD received a 53% overall satisfaction rating in the KWEST survey 2000 DETR Performance Indicators 2000/01. The breakdown consisted of 14% very satisfied: 39% fairly satisfied: 7% fairly dissatisfied and 2% very dissatisfied.
- 3.** The Best Value Performance Indicator BVPI 119, amongst other things measures the satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities. In 2000/2001, 61% of those responding claimed to be very or fairly satisfied. Approximately half of these were users (78% very / fairly satisfied) and half non-

users (45% very / fairly satisfied).

4. The Department promotes a viewpoint card system, which is basic and relies on the customer taking the initiative. There is a recognition that the Department did not talk to its customers as frequently and consistently as it should have.

#### 6.7. Marketing and Promotion

1. Reports prepared for the Contract Management Board on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2000 stated:
  - **“In our quest to compete in the fitness market, I believe we may have neglected to promote our aquatics service, which represents a major element of our business”.**
  - **“...we may have neglected to promote our core aquatic service. This is now being addressed via a major press and publicity campaign for swimming pools, swimming activities and health related benefits, e.g Swim for Life campaign”.**
2. Over the last 15 months there have been 4 swimming promotions and L&CSD personnel have assessed their effectiveness. Their assessment includes:
  - Swim Safety Campaign (July 2001), **Minimum impact.**
  - Aqua Life Promotion (July/August 2001), **Reasonable impact but not fully determined.**
  - Nestle/Activate (August 2000), **Minimum impact.**
  - Swim for Life Challenge (July 2000), **Not a great success rate and little participation.**
3. The L&CSD use a range of promotional mediums to communicate with prospective customers. They include leaflets (as the main source of communication), press and radio adverts, competitions, poster campaigns, leaflet drops (via local papers) and word of mouth.
4. The bullet points under 4. Are different. Undertaking the review, the Committee members have formed a view about promotion as summarised:
  - The L&CSD has failed to take action when decline was identified.
  - The LCSD has failed to give an acceptable evaluation of previous promotional activities.
  - The L&CSD is unable to provide comment on the effectiveness of campaigns that is based on hard evidence.
5. A report prepared in December 2000 for Contract Management Board in May this year, stated that **“a new 2001/2002 marketing plan is currently being finalised to guide the service through the next twelve months and set targets for each aspect of the business”.**

#### 6.8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- R21 – Undertake a baseline consultation exercise, using a broad range of stakeholders, to identify perception, expectation and requirement from the provision of a casual swimming service.**
- R22 – Pilot consultation exercises prior to undertaking baseline study to determine the effectiveness of the consultation instrument.**
- R23 – Feedback stakeholder intelligence into a computerised management information system to build up socio-economic profiles and assist in targeting key stakeholders with, for example, promotional and marketing activities, or further focussed consultation topics.**
- R24 – Employ stakeholder consultation analysis into the business planning process to enhance, develop and communicate the future direction of the service more effectively and confidently.**

- R25 – It is important to undertake some research to determine the reasons for the decline in casual swimming. The views of customers, lapsed customers, less frequent customers and non-users, are needed to ascertain the reasons for their change in participation or non-participation and whether the decline is temporary or more prolonged.**
- R26 – Maximise opportunities to become more customer orientated and focused by undertaking a regular baseline customer/potential customer consultation exercise to determine:**
- The customer's perceptions for the decline in casual swimming and then compare with L&CSD's own perceptions.**
  - Explore how significant and effective the L&CSD's response strategy has been from the customer's perspective.**
  - Determine the gap between customer expectation and level of service that can be delivered, given all constraints.**
  - Feedback results from the baseline customer consultation exercise in to the business planning process to aid clarity, align perception, determine effectiveness of response strategies and influence strategic decision making in the future.**
- R27 – Avoid over dependence on the Viewpoint customer satisfaction card system. For example, undertake one to one exit interviews to determine satisfaction levels and relevant issues in a more proactive, customer-focused way.**
- R28 – Develop and target a promotional and marketing campaign, which aims to sustain demand either side of naturally occurring peak period of facility use. In addition, the intensity of the campaign may need to be variable dependant on the usage and capacity of each facility. The objectives of each campaign must be identified at the outset and a rigorous evaluation undertaken to determine the success or otherwise.**
- R29 – Continue to utilise and develop a broad range of mediums to promote and market the swimming facilities, but ensure each is evaluated for effectiveness and impact. Furthermore, consider a joint funding collaboration with all North West authorities and evaluate the potential of a local television campaign, aimed at arresting the decline in casual swimming by promoting the health benefits.**
- R30 – Ensure that all consultation or promotional activities are undertaken and deployed to the appropriate departmental standard, corporate branding and consistency. Currently, facility staff are encouraged to undertake their own initiatives and their level of competency may vary.**
- R31 – Experiment with more imaginative ways of meeting customer service needs and requirements. For example, consider piloting the introduction of a youth swim disco.**

**7.0. OBJECTIVE 4 – Identify existing partnership arrangements and opportunities for further collaboration.**

**7.1. KEY TASK 10** - To identify existing links between the pool facilities and other organisations, determine their effectiveness and potential for expansion or diversification.

**7.2. APPROACH** – As part of the evidence gathering process, representatives from the Youth Service (Education Department), Health Promotion (L&CSD) and Social Services were invited to informal discussion or to complete a short questionnaire, to share their experiences in relation to casual swimming. The Midwifery Service at Billinge Hospital was also contacted due to the significant fall off in attendances to aqua natal classes and to obtain views from an external partner.

**7.3. FINDINGS –**

3. The Health Promotion Unit is aware of the take up of the GP referral scheme but at the time of the review were unable to track continued use once the 12-week period has elapsed.
3. There are no formal links with the Social Services department whereby service users can be encouraged to use the pool facilities. However, discussions with a departmental officer suggested that the links that Social Services have with the voluntary sector may prove more beneficial to the pools and increased use i.e. Age Concern, DIAS.
3. The midwifery service at Billinge Hospital have been advised informally of the review and were requested to provide a summary of their views, and those of women attending aquanatal classes about the facilities. These were not received during the review but will be passed onto the L&CSD should they be received at a later date.
3. Representatives from the Youth Service were contacted, primarily because of the involvement of one youth worker in a scheme, which involved free swimming for young people. A representative attended a Select Committee meeting to give his views on the type of success that could be achieved through joint targeted working.
3. A L&CSD representative confirmed that their only true or real partners are the swimming clubs and with casual swimming, do not really have any other formal links. However, other organisations use the pools from time to time e.g. cubs, scouts, guides etc.

**7.4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

***R32 - The L&CSD need to be able to track whether people referred through the GP referral scheme had:***

- *Accessed services previously*
- *Continued to use services once the 12 week period had elapsed*

***R33 - The L&CSD need to identify where there are existing links and to note the benefits and to identify potential links with voluntary organisations through the Social Services and Planning departments that would be beneficial to both the groups and the pools.***

***R34 - To use the feedback from the Midwifery service when it becomes available to improve this service to the partner and customers. To establish links (contact name) where feedback can be given on an ad hoc basis in future.***

***R35 - To develop existing relationships with the youth service based on the work currently undertaken and the results (awaited) of the questionnaire previously issued.***

***R36 - To liaise with the major stakeholders (i.e. Youth Service, schools, elderly groups) prior to undertaking future marketing and promotional activity.***

**8.0. OBJECTIVE 5 – Establish ‘best in class’ service providers and identify and report on their good practice.**

**8.1. KEY TASK 11 - To undertake a literature search and document best practice.**

**8.2. APPROACH** - A search was undertaken of the Best Value Inspection Service (BVIS) website to identify where inspections have been undertaken of Best Value reviews undertaken by Sports and Leisure Services, which have included swimming pool facilities. Those inspections that resulted in the awarding of two stars (good service) and three stars (excellent service) and likely to improve were considered for this review as “best in class” providers.

**8.3. FINDINGS** – This paragraph is different. Our search identified three service providers who met our criteria and they are Suffolk Coastal District Council, Telford and Wrekin Council and London Borough of Wandsworth. Each BVIS report has been summarised and tabulated at Appendix Z. Some of the emerging good practice is grouped under the following headings:

**3. Consultation and Customer Satisfaction**

Consult regularly with a broad range of stakeholders, using a variety of techniques and mechanisms. Allow the results of regular consultation to identify and drive improvements in service delivery and relay this back to customers in a variety of ways including displays and focus groups. The results of the consultation process should be followed up thoroughly. Potential stakeholders would include:

- 1.1. Users and non-users.
- 1.2. Staff and all related departments on a formal basis.
- 1.3. Elected members at ward level.
- 3.2. Sport England, professional bodies and neighbouring Councils.

**2. Promotion and Marketing**

Capture the overall aims and objectives of the Department in an overall marketing strategy, from which individual leisure centre marketing activities can flow. Develop a marketing strategy, which includes:

- 2.1. A strong, consistent corporate branding of centres and activities.
- 2.2. Clear signage for new and existing customers.
- 2.3. A revision of pricing policy.
- 2.4. Ensure a range of information is available and accessible, including complaint forms.
- 2.5. Improved knowledge of the customer, utilising SMART card technology.
- 2.6. Better provision for key target groups.
- 2.7. Improve sponsorship opportunities.
- 2.8. Provide publicity material in differing formats and ensure availability to all.
- 2.9. Work closely with key stakeholder groups, for example, Education and Social Services departments and Health Trust. Particularly to access ‘hard to reach groups’.

**3. Provision and Facilities**

The service provision of the facilities will need to be fully explored by:

- 3.1. Undertaking a ‘value for money’ assessment.
- 3.2. Considering Trust, externalisation and internal capital investment options.

The facilities should consider improved:

- 3.3. Access for the disabled.
- 3.4. Response times for minor repairs and monitoring.
- 3.5. Changing room facilities and refurbishment.
- 3.6. Catering facilities.

#### 4. Staff and Performance

- 4.1. Ensure staff are friendly and responsive.
- 4.2. Encourage networking at regional and national level.
- 4.3. Provide feedback on customer requests.
- 4.4. Give training to frontline staff to think of disability in its widest sense.
- 4.5. Improve service by investing in staff, for example Charter Mark, QUEST.
- 4.6. Produce a comprehensive improvement plan.
- 4.7. Set out an action plan to monitor performance against service/business plan.

#### 8.4. RECOMMENDATIONS

**Not all these changes are in the final report.**

**R35 – Monitor the progress of the Best Value Inspection Service review programme of service providers and maintain an up to date data base of strengths, weaknesses, recommendations and conclusions.**

**R38 – Expand and establish formal networking links with ‘best in class’ service providers and systematically analyse all emerging trends, best practice, recent innovations and areas for improvement. Where possible, benchmark with these organisations. and identify recovery strategies where these were employed.**

**R39 – Compare and contrast lessons learned with similar ‘family group’ service providers to identify initial baseline position for the department. Following on from this, benchmark where appropriate.**

**R40 – Provide feedback from lessons learned into the business planning process and ensure transparency of process, so that cause and effect can be clearly identified. Monitor the effectiveness of service delivery changes at an appropriate frequency.**

**R41 – Contact the authors of the ISRM reports to identify those Councils that responded to the survey and claimed not to have suffered a decline in casual swimming. Once identified, contact the councils and arrange to process benchmark.**

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

9.1. Active Life Services face a number of fundamental challenges, within the next year or two. This review has identified some of the most significant, which include:

- The current physical condition and future prospects of some facilities have a questionable viability without a substantial capital investment. The L&CSD and more significantly the Council will need to consider and evaluate all available options relating to how best the future provision of casual swimming can be delivered.
- This paragraph is different The L&CSD face the challenge of reversing the current 8-year decline in casual swimming, which this review can not determine to be a naturally occurring cyclical process or an established and permanent decline. No doubt future monitoring of the trend data over an extended period will ultimately provide conclusive. However, the review recognises that this decline in casual swimming is not dependent on any one factor, but is more complex and inter-dependant upon many. The ultimate challenge in this area for L&CSD will be to identify, monitor and evaluate this inter-dependence, while simultaneously implementing various elements of an effective recovery strategy.

9.2. This paragraph is different This review promotes a series of recommendations, which are aimed to assist the Director and Cabinet Member of Leisure and Cultural Services and to stimulate debate within both management and political forums. The recommendations have not been prioritised purposefully, because they are broad ranging in cost, potential impact and effectiveness and time consuming in their implementation utilising other valuable resources. However, the review takes the position that the L&CSD professionals are better placed to set recommendation priorities, implement action plans, establish monitoring regimes and thereby maintain ownership. However, an executive summary of both main findings and recommendations is provided for completeness.

9.3. This paragraph is different Throughout the review period the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services and members of his senior management team have been of great assistance in responding to requests to provide information and have participated, within the evidence gathering process, actively and effectively at all times to their credit. Similarly, all members of staff, at each of the facilities visited, have shown a very positive and enthusiastic attitude, particularly when consideration is given to the poor condition of some of facilities in which they operate and deliver services to the public. They are a credit to both the department and the Council.