ACKNOWLEDGE
LEARNING FROM AUDIT, INSPECTION AND RESEARCH

SPORT AND RECREATION
The Audit Commission promotes the best use of public money by ensuring the proper stewardship of public finances and by helping those responsible for public services to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

For more information on the work of the Commission, please contact:
Sir Andrew Foster, Controller, The Audit Commission,
1 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PN, Tel: 020 7828 1212
Website: www.audit-commission.gov.uk
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Why sport and recreation is an important service</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why people participate</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A range of providers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of local authorities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drivers for change</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What do the services look like now?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspection judgements</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical factors</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How to improve</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and priorities</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate service delivery mechanisms</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical steps to service improvement</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bringing it all together</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1: Acknowledgements</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory group</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other authorities</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study team</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sport and recreation is an important sector for a number of reasons...

- It is a vital part of many people’s lives, enabling them to have fun, meet new people, develop their skills and abilities, keep fit, and achieve personal aspirations.
- It contributes to quality of life, and social policy priorities, such as health, neighbourhood renewal, and crime reduction.
- It is one of the fastest growing sectors in the UK economy, with a wide and growing range of service providers.

Local authorities are one key provider, and their sport and recreation services have many strengths...

- Six per cent of sport and recreation services were rated excellent by inspectors, and no services received a poor judgement.
- The quality of services and levels of public satisfaction are higher than for many other services.

...however, the competitive environment in which these services operate requires changes to local authority provision...

- One-half of local authorities will find it difficult to improve, and one-third are providing only a fair service with uncertain prospects for improvement.
- Their thinking needs to change from ‘How can local authorities best provide sport and recreation facilities?’ to ‘How can council investment best be deployed in order to meet the needs of our communities?’

This report draws together findings from audit, inspection and research, and identifies three key areas for action. Authorities need to:

1. Develop a purpose and priorities that are calibrated to an increasingly competitive environment by...

   - Consulting local communities about the needs of users and non-users.
   - Combining community and council priorities with a knowledge of the market place in order to position objectives.
   - Developing services that respond to feedback.
   - Widening access to include a broader range of users.
   - Ensuring commitment from staff.

2. Use the most appropriate mechanism for service delivery in the local context by...

   - Recognising and valuing different approaches.
   - Examining all options for delivering services through robust and objective options appraisals.
   - Overcoming historical legacies that hamper progress.

3. Take practical steps to improve services, including...

   - Developing a strategy that links clearly to the Local Cultural Strategy.
   - Promoting and publicising services effectively.
   - Learning from and working with others.
   - Managing performance.
   - Developing and training staff.
   - Using resources effectively.

Inspectors have identified many examples of good practice. All authorities need to examine their own circumstances to see how this good practice can be applied to provide better services to local people.
1. This publication is one in a series of AC Knowledge ‘Learning from Audit, Inspection and Research’ papers from the Audit Commission. It is intended primarily for elected members, senior officers and service managers who have an interest in the main issues for sport and recreation services, the drive to improve public services, and the key messages for stakeholders. The issues discussed in this report are summarised in a separate briefing.

2. Drawing together common themes from audit, inspection and research, this report enables policy and practical advice to be fed back to local authorities to help them to deliver service improvement. The report identifies key issues for sport and recreation, recommends action that local government can take to improve services, and highlights examples of good practice. It reflects what is actually happening in authorities and will help them to understand what they can do better, and how they can make a difference quickly. It will also help authorities that are already improving to focus on improving further.

3. Much of this report is based on analysis of 80 best value inspection reports published to February 2002. The study team visited or contacted a number of authorities, held discussions with a range of stakeholders, conducted workshops with Audit Commission inspectors, and analysed relevant national data. The findings from qualitative and quantitative research undertaken with service users and non-users also contributed to the analysis.

SCOPE OF THE PAPER

4. The main focus of this paper has been on issues arising from best value inspections in England and Wales of:

   - **sport and leisure centres**, including the provision and management of indoor and outdoor sport and leisure facilities, wet and dry centres and facilities on school sites;
   - **sport and recreation in parks**, including the provision and management of playing pitches, sports courts and other outdoor facilities in a park environment; and
   - **sports development**, in its widest sense, including development and support of the voluntary sports infrastructure, work with young people, disadvantaged groups or communities, sporting pathway development, school-based work, support for sporting excellence, and facility-based sports development.

5. Many other service areas are relevant to sport and recreation, for example, access to the countryside, natural resources and open spaces; grounds maintenance; golf courses; and leisure catering. These are not included in the scope of this report, although it is important to recognise the importance of co-ordination of service delivery. Nor are the wider suite of ‘cultural’ services, such as libraries, arts, museums and galleries. However, many of the key messages from this report are relevant to all aspects of cultural services.
6. In carrying out this study, the Audit Commission has worked with a range of stakeholders (Appendix 1). Angela Watson & Associates carried out the analysis and drafted the report. The Commission is very grateful to all those who have contributed. However, responsibility for the paper’s conclusions rests with the Commission alone.
1. WHY SPORT AND RECREATION IS AN IMPORTANT SERVICE

WHY PEOPLE PARTICIPATE

7. Participation in some form of sport and recreation, whether actively, as a volunteer or as a spectator, is an important part of most people's lives. People participate for many different reasons – to have fun, meet new people, develop skills and abilities, keep fit, and achieve personal aspirations. At least 45 per cent of adults and 87 per cent of young people participate in at least one sporting activity on a regular basis and as many as 73 per cent of adults participate on an occasional basis during a year (Refs. 1, 2 and 3). Research into spectator sport has shown that 75 per cent of British adults experience live sport in a year, either by attending in person, watching on television or listening to the radio (Ref. 4).

8. In recent years there has been growing recognition of the important contribution that sport and recreation make, not only to individuals' quality of life, but to a range of local and national priorities:

‘Arts and sport, cultural and recreational activity can contribute to neighbourhood renewal and make a real difference to health, crime, employment and education in deprived communities.’
Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) 1999 (Ref. 5)

‘Sport matters… whether it is watching some of our great sportsmen and women strive at the very edge of their ability or the rest of us working hard in a Sunday morning local league team, whether it is supporting our children in sport at school or swimming lengths in the local pool to get fit, sport matters to us all – to individuals, to families and in bringing people together for a common aim, to communities at every level.’
Tony Blair (Ref. 6)

A RANGE OF PROVIDERS

9. Sport and recreation is one of the fastest growing sectors in the UK economy. Real consumer expenditure on sport in the UK grew by 30 per cent between 1985 and 1995, and consumer expenditure on sport in 1995 was estimated at £10.4 billion (Ref. 7). The range of opportunities and providers is also expanding significantly:

- at least 15 industrial and provident societies and charitable trusts provide and manage sport and recreation facilities for local authorities. Many other charities and welfare organisations outside local authority ownership provide and manage their own facilities;
• 10 multi-site commercial leisure management contractors manage in excess of 250 facilities on behalf of local authorities;
• 300 plus direct service organisations manage local authority facilities;
• there are 50 multi-site private sector health and fitness operators, with more than 2,500 health and fitness clubs, and many more single site operators and personal fitness trainers;
• an increasing number of the estimated 150,000 sports clubs in the not-for-profit sector, provide or lease self-managing indoor and outdoor facilities and changing accommodation (Ref. 8);
• several hundred professional sports organisations and clubs provide and operate sports stadia and related facilities; and
• an increasing number of employers are sponsoring their staff to use sports facilities.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

10. Within this broad market, local authorities, particularly district and unitary authorities, are key providers or enablers of sport and recreation. They play a central role in the planning and delivery of sport for the community. In 2000/01 local authorities in England and Wales spent around £1.3 billion on indoor and outdoor sport (Ref. 9). At least 80 million visits are made to local authority owned sports halls and swimming pools each year, by a regular participant base of about 2.5 million people (those who use the facilities at least once a month) (Ref. 10). The sport and recreation services that authorities provide often have a high profile within the community and the facilities are valuable physical assets.

11. Sport and recreation services are different from many of the other services that local authorities provide – those people who use them do so out of choice rather than necessity. There is no statutory duty on local authorities to provide sport and recreation services. The Local Government Acts of 1972 and 1976 gave authorities the power to provide sport and recreation facilities and activities, and to provide financial support to voluntary organisations to make such provision (Refs. 11 and 12). The Local Government Act 2000 has given local authorities a new discretionary power to ‘promote or improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area’ (Ref. 13). This new power includes cultural well-being and the promotion or improvement of the health of a council’s residents or visitors. Most recently, an expectation, although not a requirement, has been placed on local authorities to lead on the production of a cultural strategy for their area that includes sport and recreation provision. Some authorities are now placing sport and recreation at the heart of economic regeneration.

12. The lack of definition of core sport and recreation services means that each individual authority is free to determine its own strategic priorities, which services it provides and the method of service delivery, based on local circumstances. This element of choice, combined with the significant diversity of sport and recreation services that can be provided, results in wide variations in the range and quality of provision, and in the level of expenditure on sport and recreation by different local authorities.
13. Local authority sport and recreation services currently serve a wide range of community groups. The diversity of sport and recreation activities and the range of different stakeholders can lead to conflicting interests and priorities within a service. For example, access to swimming by retired people during the day may compete with schools’ access to pools, and the use of sports halls for income generating activities may compete with activities that are aimed at meeting the need for low cost access for excluded groups.

14. Local authorities are increasingly working towards a wide range of national objectives including health improvement and rehabilitation, social inclusion, community safety, neighbourhood renewal and regeneration, community development, and environmental improvement and sustainability. Recent research has highlighted the link between sport and recreation and these wider social and community objectives. Realising the Potential of Cultural Services – The Case for Sport finds that:

‘Sport can play a role as an ingredient in wider ranging initiatives... Sport is not the solution, but properly used it can be part of the solution... more precise statements of the role of sport and its associated outcomes are required. This will lead to more coherent design of integrated programmes, a better evaluation of their effectiveness and optimal allocation of resources.’ (Ref. 14)

15. More recently the Cantle report, commissioned by the Home Secretary following the summer 2001 unrest in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, identified positive links between community cohesion, young people and sport and recreation opportunities (Ref. 15).

**DRIVERS FOR CHANGE**

16. Many current users of local authority sport and recreation services are positive about their experiences (Ref. 16). Despite this, there are a number of significant drivers for change in local authority provision:

- rapidly growing private sector provision, offering a range of modern, attractive sports facilities and varied activities, means that all local authorities are effectively operating in a market of provision;
- higher public expectations about the range and quality of sport and recreation services;
- increased choice about how people spend their leisure time; and
- increasing pressure on authorities’ capital and revenue spending on sport and recreation, at a time when deteriorating facilities require major investment.

17. The origins of local authority sport and recreation provision are rooted in a concern for public health and physical training. In the absence of any others, local authorities became the main provider. However, in the current market, authorities must ask whether it is still appropriate or possible to position themselves as the main provider.

18. With the current diversity of provision, authorities need to ensure that what they provide is valued by local people, contributes to corporate objectives, and is cost effective. At the same time they should not duplicate what exists elsewhere. The types of questions that authorities must ask themselves are:
Why are we committing expenditure and time on fitness centres and suites when the same facilities are a feature of private sector provision?

What are we trying to achieve with our sports facilities and programmes?

Who are we trying to cater for and why?

Are we competing with the private sector or working alongside them?

Once these questions have been addressed, many authorities will be in a better position to play a role in empowering, enabling and establishing partnerships, and forming alliances, rather than struggling to provide mainstream services with decreasing resources in an expanding market.
2. WHAT DO THE SERVICES LOOK LIKE NOW?

INSPECTION JUDGEMENTS

20. At time of analysis, the Audit Commission had published 80 best value inspection reports relating to sport and recreation. Of these, the majority (55 per cent) were judged as fair, 39 per cent as good, and 6 per cent as excellent. Fifty per cent were judged as likely to improve or will improve or, with the new improvement judgement for more recent reports, as having promising or excellent prospects for improvement (EXHIBIT 1).

21. Compared with data for all service areas, described in Changing Gear, the Audit Commission’s Best Value Annual Statement for 2001, the quality of sport and recreation services score is high, with more services judged as excellent, and no services judged as poor (Ref. 17). Based on these observations, it could be argued that sport and recreation services are doing relatively well compared with other service areas.

22. However, the figures also highlight the fact that one-half of local authorities will still find it difficult to improve, and one-third are categorised as providing only a fair service with uncertain prospects for improvement. Such authorities should be especially concerned by these facts in the context of the wider market of sport and recreation providers. Authorities are under increasing pressure from attractive new private sector facilities, and those that cannot or will not improve risk being less relevant for many people than their private sector counterparts.

23. Inspectors comment that the narrow scoping of many sport and recreation reviews limits the extent to which whole service improvements can be achieved, and may result in conflicting agendas and priorities across an authority not being addressed. This also means that authorities are conducting inward-looking reviews of their services, rather than expansive reviews of the wider market. Recently, a few authorities have responded to encouragement and carried out reviews with a much broader scope. Examples of more integrated approaches range from combining services for review (for example, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council’s review of Leisure and Tourism Services), to grouping many services under a broader theme (for example, Sunderland City Council’s review of Community Services) (BOX A). It is encouraging that authorities are starting to carry out more joined up reviews.
EXHIBIT 1 Inspection results for sport and recreation services

Fifty-five per cent of councils were judged as fair, 39 per cent as good and 6 per cent as excellent.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

BOX A Widening the scope of reviews – some excellent ‘3 star’ services that are likely to improve

KINGS LYNN AND WEST NORFOLK BOROUGH COUNCIL’S REVIEW OF LEISURE AND TOURISM SERVICES covered a range of services:

- Sports and leisure facilities
- Arts venues
- Tourist information centres
- Visitor attractions
- Children’s play areas
- Sports development
- Arts development
- Tourism development
- Grounds maintenance
- Public halls

SUNDERLAND CITY COUNCIL’S REVIEW OF COMMUNITY SERVICES covered two departments:

1. Education and Community Services:
   - Arts development
   - Adult education
   - Outdoor education, training and conference centres
   - Youth and community services

2. City Contracting Services:
   - Indoor recreation
   - Outdoor recreation
   - Sports development
   - Events management

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service
CRITICAL FACTORS

24. Inspections reveal three factors that are critical to improving service delivery, especially in the context of an increasingly competitive environment:

- **Purpose and priorities** – combining community and council priorities to form clear objectives that drive the direction of the service and strategic and operational decision-making.

- **Appropriate service delivery mechanisms** – willingness and openness to challenge existing ways of working, examining all options for service delivery to secure benefits for the public, and overcoming historical legacies that hinder progress.

- **Practical steps towards improving services** – developing sound strategies, marketing services effectively, learning from and working with others, strong performance management systems, training and developing staff, and prioritising and realigning resources according to objectives.

25. Approaches to these three areas are explored in the rest of this section; Section 3 then examines how improvement in these areas can be achieved.

PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES

26. Inspectors note that it is crucial that sport and recreation services are prioritised according to strategic objectives, and that they are delivered with community needs in mind. Authorities need robust information about who uses the services and whether users represent the communities that the authority seeks to attract.

27. According to the 2000/01 best value performance indicator (BVPI) figures, 54 per cent of residents are fairly or very satisfied with the cultural and recreational services that their authority provides, with 53 per cent of residents fairly or very satisfied with facilities (Ref. 18). However, the difference in satisfaction levels between facility users (70 per cent) and non-users (37 per cent) is marked.

28. Asking users what they want and getting the basics right has an important impact on the overall perception of services and satisfaction levels across an authority area. However, traditional customer satisfaction and consultation approaches are not sufficient to establish a full picture of local requirements. Understanding the population’s work patterns, time availability, income levels, willingness to pay and leisure options is fundamental to developing good sport and recreation services. Better performing authorities have begun to do this, and have used the information about their community to decide what the priorities for the service should be. They have then prioritised resources to deliver these priorities, and have demonstrated improved perceptions of the service and higher satisfaction levels.

29. Inspectors have found evidence to show that a clearly articulated strategy is vital to success. A council’s own purpose and priorities need to be clearly identified, either as part of a wider sport and recreation or cultural strategy or as a separate plan. The broadest and most powerful strategy would consider how sport and recreation contributes to the council’s health, social and environmental objectives. It would consider questions such as:

- How much of the local economy is devoted to sport and recreation?
• How can we ensure that our (scarce) resources are used to best effect, recognising the mixed market of provision of sport and recreation facilities?
• How does planning policy support our sport and recreation goals?
• How can the needs of different income groups be met?
• How can we increase the amount of time that people devote to sport and recreation?
• How can we promote sport and recreation in non-council settings, such as cycling?

30. Crucially, strategies must look beyond the boundaries of current services and beyond current users to understand the needs of the whole community and to use all possible resources and levers for achieving the authority’s goals. Targeting scarce resources towards an enabling role (for example, sports development or health education) may be more effective in terms of promoting well-being than continuing with direct provision.

31. Of the reports analysed, 45 per cent include recommendations that relate directly to the need to clarify service objectives. Reference to 2000/01 performance against BVPI 114 (the adoption by the local authority of a local cultural strategy) identifies that this is still an area of weakness; only 14 per cent of authorities have a cultural strategy in place. Authorities may also not have translated strategic plans into service plans and work programmes.

32. In the best performing authorities, policy links with corporate objectives are made explicit and are used effectively in order to develop the service. The corporate planning process is sufficiently embedded to enable staff or members to understand how corporate aims can be translated into actions on the ground. For example, charging policies for services should be grounded in an understanding of the market, and in social inclusion objectives, rather than focusing on income generation goals alone. Links to national initiatives are sometimes seen solely as a way to generate more income and to utilise existing facilities, rather than as a genuine partnership to achieve shared objectives and meet community needs. Frequently, existing services that follow historical patterns are simply redefined to justify how they fit these objectives.

33. Successful strategies should be up to date, they should involve all partners and stakeholders, demonstrate clear links at all levels, be concise, and use simple language that staff and service users can relate to. Inspectors have identified strategies that promise everything but do not prioritise goals, or are written in inaccessible language. There are a number of common pitfalls in developing strategies (BOX B, overleaf):
Lack of political guidance on corporate policy and service planning, which can result in strategies that are written but never adopted, since they do not reflect political priorities or the corporate approach to service planning.

Unclear corporate priorities and objectives, which can make it difficult for sport and recreation services to identify their own priorities and objectives and the contribution that they can make to corporate objectives.

Lack of clarity about the services that the authority itself will prioritise and deliver, raising expectations within the community for a service or improvements that the authority cannot deliver.

Narrow strategic scope that does not reflect the diversity of local sport and recreation interests, or the range of sport and recreation providers in the area – the needs and interests of some sections of the community are not considered and the full range of services that is provided by the authority, the not-for-profit sector, commercial sector and other public organisations are not reflected in the strategy. This results in unco-ordinated provision and duplication of services.

A lack of accurate information on who does and who does not use services, or on community need, making it difficult to plan provision effectively, and resulting in service priorities that are determined by what exists rather than by actual need.

Absence of clear solutions to strategic issues or lack of priority actions can result in documents that are more a description of the facilities, activities and issues than a strategic plan for future service delivery and improvement.

Language that is too complex or includes too much jargon, limiting its potential to be a tool that improves understanding within and outside the authority.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

### APPROPRIATE SERVICE DELIVERY MECHANISMS

34. The sport and recreation marketplace has evolved rapidly over the past few years and it will continue to develop in response to public demand and the latest technological innovations and trends. In some authorities, the type of facilities provided and the nature of provision have not been reviewed in the context of different public expectations and a changed marketplace.

35. More robust challenge to the traditional approaches to service delivery is necessary in many of the authorities inspected. This relates to many different aspects of the service, for example, the separation of sports development and facilities, co-ordination of client and contractor functions, and income and management of expenditure budgets. It also applies to the approach to management and maintenance of indoor and outdoor sport and recreation facilities. Many authorities are failing to identify and evaluate objectively all of the options for service delivery across the public, not-for-profit and commercial sectors. Of the reports analysed, more than one-half (59 per cent) include recommendations that relate directly to the need to improve approaches to demonstrating competitiveness and competition.

36. Significant variations exist across authorities in relation to levels of usage and cost effectiveness of sport and recreation services, and inspectors have noted that there is often a lack of evidence to demonstrate that the existing delivery mechanism is providing best value. Councils need to take an open-minded approach to service delivery, designing a service that is based on community needs, rather than on current users, and considering the full range of...
options for provision. The existence of a vibrant market in sport and recreation, the requirement for high customer responsiveness, and the array of options for delivery (private, voluntary, local authority, and so on), make this approach especially valuable in these services.

PRACTICAL STEPS TOWARDS IMPROVING SERVICES

37. In some authorities, the development of cultural strategies is beginning to improve strategic planning in the service, and community plans reflect the fact that sport and recreation services contribute significantly to corporate objectives and priorities. Cultural strategies are a relatively new initiative and the deadline for their completion is not until December 2002. However, it is still worrying that some authorities show relatively little progress in these areas.

38. Inspection reports identify that the approach to marketing in its widest sense and to publicity and promotion in particular, is a major weakness across sport and recreation services (BOX C).

BOX C Common weaknesses in the marketing, publicity and promotion of sport and recreation services

- No overall marketing strategy for sport and recreation or for leisure/cultural services as a whole, resulting in unco-ordinated, often fragmented marketing across facilities and services.
- Lack of recognition of market segments, and poorly targeted marketing that is largely ineffective in reaching priority audiences, including non-users and hard-to-reach communities.
- Lack of overall marketing image or corporate brand to promote service recognition.
- Over-reliance on traditional publicity tools and failure to be creative or to grasp the opportunities presented by new technologies and information and communications technology (ICT).
- Lack of monitoring of the effectiveness of marketing.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

39. Inspectors have noted that those authorities that have been identified as likely to improve have an organisational culture that encourages service improvement, by seeking out good practice and sharing information. They are also likely to have effective partnerships with a number of different organisations, and to value the contribution of those partners.

40. A few authorities have embraced performance management of sport and recreation, benchmarking with other authorities, comparing performance year-on-year. However, of the inspection reports analysed, nearly two-thirds include recommendations that relate directly to the need for better performance management systems and for improving the way that information is used to inform future service delivery. Inspectors found a number of common weaknesses (BOX D, overleaf):
BOX D Common weaknesses in performance management

- No robust performance framework, or a system that is in its infancy and is not yet well understood or applied.
- Too many or too few performance indicators (PIs) that fail to measure key outcomes and do not enable the whole service to be appraised, for example, the use of financial indicators only, or facility PIs only.
- No use of wider PIs that could measure personal leisure activity such as cycling, yoga or jogging.
- Inconsistent, imprecise or ambiguous definitions of what data actually means, for example, inability to distinguish the number of users from the number of visitors, or to relate financial performance to the achievement of outcomes such as increased participation levels.
- Lack of robust baseline data and no trend analysis, which means little or no capacity to measure or analyse performance over time, and a lack of overall analysis of performance information across the whole service to identify areas of good and poor performance across all service areas, as well as specific aspects of the service.
- Limited monitoring of whether service objectives are being achieved, often due to lack of targets or inappropriate and unmeasurable performance measures being selected. This makes close scrutiny by members difficult, and little or no analysis of existing customer and management information to match provision to the needs of different communities.
- Limited use of PIs to measure the performance of contracted organisations or other partners who may be delivering key services on behalf of the authority.
- Lack of comparison of performance, either across services or with other authorities or partners.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

41. A range of tools, support and guidance exists to help authorities to improve their approaches to performance measurement and benchmarking. However, the lack of BVPIs for sport and recreation, and the diversity of provision, means that national data is not easily collected. Better performing authorities successfully apply information and communications technology (ICT) to data collection. But some authorities are making little or no use of ICT to collect or analyse performance, financial or customer information that might be valuable in improving their sport and recreation services. Improvement is needed in the way that outcome-focused local performance data and benchmarking with other providers are used.

42. In such a people-orientated service, the approach and knowledge of staff has a significant impact on the user's experience. Inspectors have identified that in the best performing authorities, staff are seen as a key resource, they are clear about their role and objectives, and they receive regular and appropriate training. Yet of the reports analysed, 38 per cent include recommendations that relate specifically to the need for improvements in the area of staffing.

43. Inspections have shown that financial resources are not always being allocated in line with priorities. Many authorities are reluctant to take decisions involving the re-distribution of resources as community needs and key objectives change. Some authorities have demonstrated successful ‘invest to save’ schemes, and recognised that short-term investment can often lead to longer-term savings. However, the effective use of physical assets is poor, with some facilities being empty for long periods, and others not being fully used because they have not been properly maintained.
SUMMARY

44. The overall picture of services is mixed, with some flagship services existing in contrast with a large middle ground of average services that are struggling to meet the challenges of best value.

45. Inspectors have identified three critical factors which, when not addressed, amount to key areas of weakness. However, it is clear that examples of good practice exist. Some authorities have shown that they can deliver high-quality, user-focused services that are valued by the community. The challenge to all authorities is to:
   - use all of the resources that are available to the community – private, public, voluntary and personal;
   - understand and address, where possible, the expectations of current users;
   - deliver services in the future that will attract people who are choosing not to participate in sport at all; and
   - be outward looking.

46. This report shows that while some services are beginning to meet these challenges it is also clear that the design and delivery of better and more user-focused services will require a more fundamental shift in attitudes in many authorities. This change is possible, as those authorities that have got the most from best value have shown.

47. The remainder of this report explores these critical factors further. It presents examples of how authorities can improve services, and identifies good practice from authorities that have been through a review and inspection from which other councils can learn. This report does not put forward a single standard checklist of good practice. To do so would be inappropriate: good and improving authorities attribute their strengths to a variety of working practices, some of which may be inappropriate in different circumstances. This report describes various working practices that work well for authorities in their local context, and it attempts to stimulate thinking about matching practices to local contexts, which should enable any authority to improve from its current position and in its own specific circumstances.
3. HOW TO IMPROVE

48. This chapter addresses the critical factors in turn (EXHIBIT 2):
   - priorities and purpose;
   - appropriate service delivery; and
   - practical steps towards improving services.

EXHIBIT 2 The three critical factors for improvement

Improvements can only happen when three critical factors have been addressed.

PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES

49. Authorities’ policies, strategies and service plans for sport and recreation need to reflect both local community priorities and council or national priorities. A number of steps need to be taken to achieve this balance (EXHIBIT 3). Local authorities must:
   - identify community needs;
   - develop a purpose;
   - be responsive in shaping services;
   - enable wide access; and
   - build staff understanding and commitment.
EXHIBIT 3  Steps in developing a purpose and priorities

Five elements create a sense of purpose and priorities.

IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY NEEDS

50. Inspectors have found that if local authority sport and recreation services are to be used and valued by local communities, and the wider benefits of sport and recreation are to be realised, then authorities need to do much more to identify their potential users. They need to understand what is important to their different communities and then prioritise the delivery of services in order to meet the greatest need. In many authorities, only a minority of local people use sport and recreation services and facilities regularly, if at all. This minority may not be the priority audience that the authority is seeking to provide those opportunities for.

51. Most authorities now have experience of consulting users of sport and recreation services through a variety of different consultation techniques. These include:
   - customer satisfaction surveys;
   - self-completion questionnaires for specific user groups, such as corporate customers, schools, clubs and organisations, and staff;
   - user forums, representing interest groups;
   - comments systems;
workshops and focus groups; and
mystery shopping schemes, involving service users or other authorities.

52. Some authorities that are judged to be high performing are also consulting non-users, often as part of a co-ordinated approach to consultation, to assess resident satisfaction across all service areas. Techniques include citizens’ panels, adult residents’ surveys, young people’s surveys, roadshows, listening days and community fora.

53. However, even some of the best performing sport and recreation services have conducted relatively little specific or in-depth consultation with non-users and with groups that are traditionally under-represented in sport, such as people with disabilities, people from minority ethnic communities and those on a low income. They have limited data available to assist in addressing the reasons for the under-representation of these groups in the service user profile. Despite this, pockets of good practice do exist, for example, Hambleton District Council is able to access data on users on low incomes and therefore uses that information to inform service delivery.

54. Of course there are barriers to engaging local people and some groups are harder to reach than others. Inspectors have identified that even where consultation with non-users and under-represented groups does take place, critical information on the cultural, economic and geographical barriers that influence participation among adults and young people is often not obtained, possibly due to over-reliance on a traditional consultation approach. Better performing authorities tend to adopt more innovative approaches and consult beyond the ‘usual suspects’. Overall, authorities could do much more to make better use of existing networks, for example, religious and social networks, or support groups for people with disabilities, and existing centres of youth, community and educational activities.

55. In addition to consultation, other research can inform authorities about the people who make up their communities and their specific needs. This could include analysis of statistical data, such as the age and ethnic origin of residents, indices of multiple deprivation or mapping areas of sporting deprivation that have been identified through gaps in the provision of sports activities, clubs and facilities (CASE STUDY 1).

CASE STUDY 1 Identifying priority gaps through deprivation analysis
Richmond upon Thames Council has used health and national information to identify three wards with relatively high levels of deprivation. One of the areas identified is a Health Action Zone. Targeted consultation has been carried out with people in the deprived areas to provide information to shape service provision. Free sessions have been set up for young people living within the Health Action Zone through the Youth Service, with funding from a local charity. The Sport and Leisure Service provides coaches and the Youth Service provides a youth worker. Weekly sessions are advertised locally, replacing the annual holiday programme. Attendance levels have been high and the Council anticipates that further activities will be developed.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

56. All council services are faced with the dilemma of conflicting interests that need to be managed. One of the most common conflicts that sport and recreation services face is the needs and expectations of different service users. While a service is addressing one priority, this can sometimes be at the expense of another. Even within one stakeholder group, conflicts can occur. Within an authority, members and staff sometimes have different views
and aims, and within local communities, different users also have diverse needs and expectations. Authorities need to acknowledge and deal with these conflicts as and when they arise, listening to and, where possible, addressing each party’s concerns.

57. One of the important things that authorities must bear in mind is that, as well as the various needs and priorities of different user groups, there are a number of basic things that they must get right if people are to use their services. Getting the basics wrong is a potential major deterrent to those who might otherwise use the service. Research by authorities themselves, and research at national level by MORI (Ref. 16), shows that the public’s expressed priorities relate primarily to what could be termed ‘the basics’:

- the type of facilities available (particularly for young people);
- opening times;
- access;
- cleanliness of changing rooms and facilities; and
- cost.

58. However, the relative importance of each of these basic elements varies from authority to authority. MORI compiled data from a range of local government quantitative surveys to assess the reasons why people were not using sport and recreation services. The results showed that often the same reasons for not using facilities appear, but their relative importance varies between areas (EXHIBIT 4, overleaf, Ref. 19).
EXHIBIT 4 The top four reasons for not using sport and recreation services

People surveyed stated several reasons why they did not use sport and recreation services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority Type</th>
<th>Lack of time</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Lack of awareness</th>
<th>Difficult to get to</th>
<th>Inadequate facilities</th>
<th>Opening hours</th>
<th>Poor transport links</th>
<th>Not interested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitary (swimming pools)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitary (other sports facilities)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner London Borough</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MORI (Ref. 19)

59. MORI also identified a decline in user satisfaction levels over the past few years. This is perhaps unsurprising given the wider market of modern and attractive private sector facilities, with assertive and competitive advertising and promotion. Authorities need to be aware that user satisfaction with local authority sport and recreation provision relates primarily to getting the basics right. And inspectors note that getting the basics right does not require ‘high-tech’ solutions, expensive schemes, or major structural changes (CASE STUDY 2).
CASE STUDY 2 Giving users what they want

Inspectors found that facilities at Hambleton District Council are high quality and well maintained, with activity programmes designed to serve the demands of the majority of the local population. Opening hours meet the demands of residents and sports and special pursuits clubs. The results of regular council and service consultation with local residents are fed into the planning of future service provision. User satisfaction is high, and the service provides good value for money to the user and to the Council.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

60. Authorities that are judged to be high performing have a clear vision for sport and recreation in the area. They also have a clear statement of the purpose and priorities of local authority services against the backdrop of a broader marketplace of sport and recreation providers.

61. All authorities need to be clear about their own role in the market, and about where they need to focus their efforts (CASE STUDY 3). They must think about the bigger picture of provision, be open to challenge, and be outward looking in relation to engaging partners in provision. Authorities need to provide services and resources to the communities and areas of greatest need, not just to existing customers or community groups that are more able to articulate their desires or who know how the system works.

CASE STUDY 3 One player among many

In Hartlepool there is a mixed economy with sport and recreation facilities and opportunities provided by the public, private and voluntary sectors. Inspectors found that the Council works well with both the private and voluntary sectors to manage and develop this overall provision, and that the Council is clear about its own place in the market and where it needs to focus its efforts: ‘We don’t see the private sector as in competition, rather as a key part of the overall provision… so that the council can focus on areas which meet local priorities and on those who really need council provision.’

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

62. In addition to the local community context, many authorities increasingly recognise the impact that sport and recreation has on a wide range of social, health and economic issues. In better performing authorities strategy and service plans demonstrate explicit links to the strategic plans and objectives of other services in the authority and external organisations. In some, this has enabled additional resources to be allocated to the sport and recreation service and is key to achieving the authority’s overall aims (CASE STUDY 4, overleaf).
CASE STUDY 4  Explicit links to council priorities

SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Hartlepool Council recognises that sport and recreation is an important contributor to the work it carries out with young people. This includes a PE and Schools Officer who liaises with the Education Department and Sports Development Team to offer sport and recreation opportunities for school children. ‘Pathways For Sport’ encourages lifelong participation (for example, ‘Gym Tots’ sessions, which encourage toddlers and their parents/carers to take part in sport), and Active Sports Programmes encourage children to participate through Youth Games.

HEALTH PROMOTION

Basildon’s leisure strategy demonstrates clear links to health. The Council’s basketball initiative, ‘Hoops for Health’, has been effective in passing on information to young people about health and drugs issues. Funded by Essex County Council’s Community Safety Department as a pilot, the scheme promotes health and fitness through the Health Authority and an anti-drug message in partnership with the Drugs Action Team. The London Leopards Basketball Team is actively involved to help to emphasise the social benefits of sport. Ninety per cent of schools in the district have taken up the offer of basketball coaching.

REDUCING CRIME AND DISORDER

New Forest District Council aims to meet the needs of young people in Ringwood on Friday evenings by offering football league and fitness classes. Run in conjunction with the police and the town council, cases of vandalism and petty crime have significantly reduced since the scheme started. This mirrors the examples of positive diversionary work highlighted in the Commission’s report, Misspent Youth, which showed that providing sporting opportunities for young people could have an effect on their potential for being drawn into petty crime (Ref. 20).

LA21

Hambleton adopts national and regional initiatives to meet the Council’s own aims, and demonstrate how improvement can come from relatively small-scale and focused changes. For example, the Council recently opened a cycle way linking Brompton with Hambleton Leisure Centre. It enables workers travelling into Northallerton to use the Centre for showers and changing.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

However, in some authorities it has not been uncommon to find decisions being taken at both officer and member level without reference to the aims and objectives of the service:

- Decisions about the sport and recreation service are simply based on what has been considered acceptable in the past, rather than on current priorities.
- Where budget cuts are required, some authorities have reduced services on an ‘ad hoc basis’ rather than after considering their strategic objectives, other options and impact on the community.
- One council simply set aside its strategy completely on the grounds that with less resources, there was no possible way of achieving the strategy, and so there was little point in having one. Careful re-evaluation of the strategy with resources being prioritised towards achieving key objectives might have been a better compromise, and could have ensured that at least some aspects of the strategy were delivered.

AC KNOWLEDGE

22 SPORT AND RECREATION
With a shared understanding of purpose and strategic need, and with clear priorities for action, staff at all levels will be equipped to make better decisions. The strategy for the service should direct the allocation of existing human and financial resources and identify the priority areas where external funding or resources should be sought. In some cases the translation of strategy into resource decisions is evidenced by the creation of specific posts, often with partnership funding (CASE STUDY 5).

**CASE STUDY 5 Matching resources to objectives**

Wrexham has appointed a Community Cardiac Health Development Officer, in partnership with the Health Authority. The purpose of this post is to promote the health benefits of participation in exercise and sport and recreation. This will contribute to one of the aims of the Sport and Recreation Service and to the corporate priority to improve the quality of care, health and well-being of local people.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

**RESPONSIVENESS IN SHAPING SERVICES**

The resources that are spent on identifying community needs are of limited value unless this information is acted on to design, plan, deliver and improve services that meet those needs. Even in some authorities that have good consultation processes that are well embedded in the council, efforts can be undermined if important aspects of the results are not acted upon.

Authorities judged to be high performing have made efforts to use the information that they have gathered about their local communities to design relevant sport and recreation services and facilities. Provision is geared to match the demographic profile of the catchment area of facilities, for example, children’s and family activities in an area with many young families.

As with consultation, designing and delivering services to increase use by under-represented groups, especially socially excluded or target groups, requires a creative approach. Some authorities gain greater involvement, ownership and the participation of local people by establishing service advisory or management committees with decision-making powers for specific services. Other authorities use a combination of user forums, public displays, comments and complaints systems to identify areas for service improvement, and to obtain suggestions on how proposed developments should be implemented (CASE STUDY 6).

**CASE STUDY 6 Using customer complaints to improve services**

Dacorum’s sports centres consider how to address customer concerns at weekly management meetings, and they analyse complaints over time. Examples of resulting improvements include better cleaning procedures and equipment, in response to comments about cleanliness, extensions to a fitness suite to increase the availability of machines and reduce queues at peak times, and the introduction of an automated telephone answering systems to improve booking procedures. This is an example of getting the basics right and of building service improvements into day-to-day management without requiring working parties or customer service groups.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview
68. In authorities judged to be high performing there is a greater tendency to measure success and to tell people about what they achieve through regular feedback on progress (CASE STUDY 7). This creates a positive response and moves the relationship between the service and local people from a one-way, passive relationship to more two-way active engagement and involvement of the community. However, as people become more informed and involved with services, expectations tend to rise. The important lesson is to avoid raising public expectations unrealistically. Authorities must give customers clear information about the issues that can be acted on, and they must explain why they are not able to act on some other expectations.

CASE STUDY 7 Feedback on customer service and progress

Hambleton Leisure Services’ feedback on consultation is publicly displayed in centre reception areas and on noticeboards. It includes information both on areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and covers the action that the Council intends to take. Other organisations receive feedback through ongoing contact with the service, and non-user feedback is provided by press releases and articles in the Council’s newspaper. There are also regular consultation forums with a representative cross-section of users at each centre. Staff receive new ideas from users and report back on the implementation of initiatives arising from previous consultations.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

69. Customer feedback has a significant impact on the way that customers perceive services. For example, as a result of its best value review (BVR) one council has developed a more coherent approach to co-operation between its facilities, where requests for swimming instruction that cannot be satisfied at one centre are referred to other centres in the borough. However, this improvement was not communicated to customers, whose perception remains that the heavy demand for swimming instruction is not handled well. Inspection findings suggest a correlation between levels of customer satisfaction and the extent to which the sport and recreation service responds to, and reports back on, customer comments.

WIDENING ACCESS

70. In order to make services available to the widest possible range of people, authorities need to identify the characteristics of those people who use, or want to use, the service. Access can be limited by a number of real or perceived factors, including physical and sensory disabilities, and intellectual, cultural, attitudinal and financial barriers.

71. In the first instance, opening hours that reflect the needs of local communities are a critical factor in extending access. For example, Hertsmere extended the opening hours of its centres from 6am to 11pm to enable customers to use the facilities before and after work.

72. In terms of improving physical access, many authorities have introduced adaptations and activities to improve participation by disabled people, including:

- free use of facilities by carers and friends accompanying disabled people at Newham;
- health and fitness equipment that is designed for disabled people at Dacorum and at a number of other authorities;
- initiatives to integrate disabled and able-bodied people at Hartlepool; and
- tactile signs at Hertsmere.
73. However, the Disability Discrimination Act (Ref. 21) will exert further pressure on all authorities. They will need to consider access issues as well as programming, publicity and communication.

74. Extending access to services is a particular challenge in rural areas where facilities are spread over a relatively wide geographical area. Where public transport services are poor, some authorities have made efforts to increase access to many or all of their services through transport initiatives. For example, Hambleton District Council is participating in an initiative with other North Yorkshire councils and a private sector bus operator to subsidise local rural bus services using European funds; while North West Leicestershire District Council offers reduced admission rates to users of its subsidised bus scheme. Other authorities in rural areas focus on outreach initiatives.

75. Other barriers to participation can occur when authorities do not take account of users’ ethnicity, gender, age, ill health and deprivation. Inspections have identified examples of good practice where authorities are making efforts to overcome local barriers to participation (CASE STUDY 8).

**CASE STUDY 8 Overcoming local barriers to participation**

Hartlepool has a good reputation for its efforts in overcoming social exclusion. Its diversity work includes ‘What’s on for Women’ programmes and taster sessions for a local Asian women’s group. Initiatives to tackle high levels of poor health include the ‘Hartlepool Exercise for Life Programme’, which offers exercise and health advice on prescription via referrals from GPs, and also aims to introduce participants to regular exercise in order to maintain a healthier lifestyle, and ‘Hartlepool Hearts’, a scheme to help sufferers of heart disease to take part in safe exercise.

In Greenwich the Charlton Athletic Race Equality (CARE) is a partnership of more than 30 organisations. Led by the Council and Charlton Athletic Football Club it aims, to oppose discrimination and to encourage wide participation of black and minority ethnic communities and disabled people’s groups in sports participation.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service*

76. Price is a known barrier to participation in sport and recreation and most authorities have made the link between the need to overcome this barrier and improving access. The majority have a range of pricing, concessionary and loyalty discount schemes that aim to increase access and levels of participation. And some, such as North West Leicestershire and Dacorum District Councils, among numerous others, have linked their discount admission schemes to local businesses, enabling card holders to purchase other goods and services at a reduced price.

77. However, inspection has shown that most authorities need to revisit their pricing policies in order to determine whether their charges and pricing are based on community need, whether they are actually achieving what they set out to do, and whether they target cost subsidies at the right audiences. Monitoring pricing and usage enables authorities to understand the market and to learn about how customers behave (Ref. 22).
Some authorities feel that an emphasis on generating income to meet financial targets forces them to push up admission costs, thereby excluding some members of the community. Income generation should not be a barrier to broadening access. The concerns of one council that lower prices would attract ‘troublemakers’ (young people) and ‘undesirables’, which, in turn, would displace current users and damage income streams, says much about its reluctance to tackle this issue.

ENSURING STAFF UNDERSTANDING AND COMMITMENT

For an authority to achieve improvement in any of the areas discussed in this section, the involvement of a wide range of committed and knowledgeable individuals and organisations is essential.

Authorities that have been judged to be high performers, including those that still have work to do in formalising their documentation, tend to demonstrate higher levels of understanding of, and commitment to, what they want to achieve. Members, senior officers, managers and frontline staff understand why the service that they provide is important and how it contributes to the authority’s overall vision and objectives. In the very best authorities, external partners and community organisations also understand and share that vision. Authorities have identified different mechanisms and techniques to raise awareness and understanding of their objectives for sport and recreation and of the service that is delivered (CASE STUDY 9).

CASE STUDY 9 Understanding the links

At Hambleton District Council sport and recreation service staff were actively involved in preparing the Council’s district leisure strategy and service plan. As well as seeking to satisfy the leisure needs of the local community, the authority also sought to have an impact on national and corporate objectives in health, crime and safety, learning and LA21. The delivery of service aims and objectives was more effective because staff understood more clearly how what they did personally at the delivery level contributed to implementing strategies for the service and to the overall objectives of the Council.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

SUMMARY

By building a clear understanding of different local communities and their diverse needs, and by balancing these needs with council priorities, authorities will be able to provide better services that are more relevant to more of the local population (CHECKLIST 1).
CHECKLIST 1 – Purpose and priorities

AUTHORITIES SHOULD:

● Identify different local communities and their needs through open and wide consultation with users and potential users.
● Use the information that they gather to design and deliver relevant services and to get the basics right.
● Draw on national priorities and initiatives to support local objectives and meet local needs.
● Develop a sense of purpose for the service, based on community needs and council priorities, that outlines the authority’s role in the market.
● Be responsive to customer feedback and shape services accordingly.
● Widen access to services by using flexible opening hours and suitable pricing strategies, and by targeting particular groups.
● Ensure that everyone, including members, senior officers, service managers, partners and key staff in other departments, understand and are committed to all of these processes.
APPROPRIATE SERVICE DELIVERY MECHANISMS

82. Once an authority has decided what kind of services it wants to offer, it must decide what is the best way to deliver them. Inspectors have found that a major area of weakness for the majority of authorities is the extent to which they are willing to challenge traditional approaches to service delivery in any robust way. Many authorities are failing to identify and objectively evaluate all of the possible options and, as a result, progress in achieving real and significant improvement is seriously hampered. Some authorities are making efforts to explore and establish what is most appropriate to their local context, and their experiences so far provide useful learning for others.

83. In order to identify, procure and manage the most appropriate mechanisms for delivering services, authorities should (EXHIBIT 5):
  - recognise and understand the value and benefits of different approaches;
  - be open to, and actively seek out, all possible options for delivering services (direct, contracted, partnerships and so on), appropriate to the local context; and
  - overcome historical legacies that hamper progress.

EXHIBIT 5 Steps in deciding appropriate service delivery mechanics

There are three steps to take when making decisions about service delivery.

Source: Audit Commission
The Audit Commission’s recently published report, *Competitive Procurement*, aims to help authorities to approach procurement more effectively (Ref. 23). It is designed to be an aid to self-evaluation for those staff who are responsible for procurement at corporate or departmental level. This section covers current approaches and practice in sport and recreation services, rather than attempting to cover comprehensively the procurement process.

**VALUING DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

Authorities that were judged to be high performing in this area recognise the value of different approaches and the benefits that different sectors can bring to sport and recreation provision in their area (CASE STUDY 10). Authorities need to understand the different strengths, weaknesses and objectives of other providers and how they each fit with their own objectives. They also need to work with different sectors in order to provide a strategic framework and opportunities for partnership working, and to ensure that future provision of sport and recreation is co-ordinated.

**CASE STUDY 10 Recognising the value of other providers**

Hartlepool is clear about its place in the market and recognises that partnership is essential to delivering effective and efficient sport and recreation services. The Jester In-Line Skating Stadium is the result of the Council’s innovative approach to partnership working. To encourage Jesters to base one of its facilities in Hartlepool, the Council offered support in the form of rapid planning permission and assistance with marketing and running the national championships. In return, the area benefits by securing a first class facility and by an increase in tourism and visitor spending during events such as the championships.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service*

**OPTIONS FOR DELIVERING SERVICES**

As outlined earlier in this report, there is increasing diversification in terms of those providing facilities in the sport and recreation marketplace and in terms of the services that they offer. Over the past ten years the management options for facilities have significantly expanded. And now the number and type of service deliverers in sports activities, such as the provision of holiday schemes, coached activity sessions and club sport, is also growing. There is much more that authorities can do to exploit the increasing breadth of choice that is available to them.

*Competitive Procurement* identifies weaknesses in procurement across authorities, in strategies, market consultation and analysis, and in option appraisals (Ref. 23). Inspections of sport and recreation services reinforce these findings.

Consultation with potential suppliers is important in order to determine what services can be delivered and by whom. However, few authorities are making rigorous efforts to consult. Many choose to communicate with the market on paper or by telephone rather than engaging more proactively through meetings, open days or workshops.
89. Many inspection reports include recommendations that relate to the need for a more robust and objective approach to identifying options for service delivery. Although a number of authorities have undertaken some form of options appraisal, inspectors found that some were incomplete or subjective, exhibiting a bias for the current method of service delivery or lacking balance to the arguments presented. Authorities need to conduct robust options appraisals that identify the most appropriate delivery options based on capital and revenue issues, strategic priorities, future sustainability, cost/benefit analyses, and the needs of users and potential users.

90. Some of the authorities judged to be high performing have an explicit corporate commitment actively to seek out all possible options for delivering services. In some, such as the London Borough of Newham, the willingness to seek alternative sources of provision where they offer better value is expressed in corporate level objectives. And some can demonstrate robust procurement practices (CASE STUDY 11).

**CASE STUDY 11 Robust procurement**

Inspectors found that Newham has a robust and comprehensive procurement code of practice, which it applied to its sport and recreation service. This included rigorous and equitable tender evaluation, evaluation of references using a matrix grid of 29 categories of service, a thorough risk assessment; and visits to 22 leisure centres operated by potential contractors. In April 2001 Newham awarded a ten year management contract to Greenwich Leisure Ltd (GLL), following extensive negotiations that focused on the capability of GLL to deliver high-quality services, rating them against 26 performance criteria. Newham’s funding of GLL is £400,000 less than for its DSO, which previously delivered the service.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service*

91. Although in most cases it is still too early to determine how successful different delivery approaches are in improving sport and recreation services, there is a variety of options that authorities have been, or are, exploring (CASE STUDY 12). These include:

- continuation of in-house provision;
- externalisation or partnership with a private sector provider;
- setting up a new trust; and
- public private partnership (PPP).
CASE STUDY 12 Options and alternatives

Inspectors found that Telford and Wrekin was open minded to, and had no preconceived ideas about, alternative providers. A key factor in its choice was funding, although a balanced score card approach was used. The Council assessed the opportunities offered by the private sector alongside the opportunities for investment offered by its Corporate Capital Programme. In-house provision of sport and leisure services backed by internal investment was found to be the best option.

Dacorum is planning the process of transferring its sports centres and the Sports Development Service (including leisure development, community sport and youth sports development) to an industrial and provident society with effect from 1 October 2002. The costs of the transfer are expected to be in the region of £100,000. The board will comprise a mix of staff, customers, elected members, schools and co-opted expertise as required. It is anticipated that the transfer to trust status will achieve financial savings of around £400,000, along with faster decision-making, greater responsiveness to local needs, a stronger marketing image, and better staff involvement and business awareness.

Flintshire is in the process of setting up a PPP, with effect from 1 July 2002. The commitment to a PPP was driven by the need to achieve investment in facilities and a reduction on the revenue account. The specification is written in the form of outcome statements rather than inputs or resources required. The process of moving to a PPP has taken a long time. As a result, resourcing the service has been difficult for the past two to three years and staff have lived with uncertainty throughout this period. Managing this process has been a challenge, but the staff have been kept advised of progress throughout and they now look forward to the transfer.

Bexley operates three swimming centres, currently being managed by a leisure trust, that are in poor condition and need heavy investment. Since funding was not available internally, the Council decided to develop a 30-year PPP for the redevelopment, financing and operation of three integrated leisure centres. Members have decided that the PPP represents the only realistic way to secure major investment in the borough’s facilities and officers are confident that they can achieve their objectives in this way. Negotiations have been taking place since early 2002, with the preferred bidder based on an output specification and a payment mechanism providing incentives for good performance. It is hoped that the contract will be signed during 2002, with work beginning towards the end of the year.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

92. Where authorities have considered alternative service provision, it is often financial difficulties, rather than a desire to improve the service for users, that trigger the switch. Most have tended to consider single options for the whole of their sport and recreation service or for all of their facilities. But sport and recreation services usually comprise a number of discrete elements. Some of the better performing services have explored a range of alternatives to deliver a ‘jigsaw’ of provision.

93. Authorities can do much more to consider different ways of packaging the broad range of services and exploring where local circumstances might benefit from a different approach, for example, through local- or self-management arrangements, or through moving to a more enabling role.

OVERCOMING HISTORICAL LEGACIES THAT HAMPER PROGRESS

94. Inspectors have found that, where authorities have not successfully challenged traditional methods of service delivery through BVRRs, efforts are often hampered by an unwillingness to overcome historical legacies that stand in the way of real and significant improvement.
95. There is a tradition of proud service histories that is based on sport and recreation services provided by local authorities. Some authorities are reluctant to relinquish direct control of a high-profile service that accounts for a significant proportion of their overall budget, holding the view that they have a municipal right or duty to deliver sport and recreation services. But the traditional role of the local authority as the sole provider needs to be redefined in the light of changing priorities, reduced resources, increasing public expectations and other providers. In some authorities this is reflected in a shift in focus away from service provider towards enabler and co-ordinator.

96. Local authority spending on sport and recreation has not been sufficient to maintain the ageing stock of facilities. It is not uncommon for authorities to have many poor quality facilities that they cannot afford to maintain and that need significant investment. Some authorities have made efforts to reallocate funding through the disposal or transfer of assets in other areas, by reducing capacity or rationalising buildings to allow for improvements elsewhere, or by seeking partners or other providers (CASE STUDY 13).

CASE STUDY 13 Facing difficult decisions
Since local government reorganisation in 1996, Bridgend’s Sport and Recreation Service has suffered a 30 per cent reduction in its budget in real terms. As a result the Council recognised that it could not continue to provide the same level of service and has reviewed its whole approach to service provision. It has faced up to difficult decisions on facility closures and is pursuing a PPP.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

97. But many stop short of taking these difficult service and financial decisions and time is running out for ageing and poorly maintained facilities. Local authorities, and particularly some elected members, need to be prepared to think creatively in order to find alternative ways of filling the resource gap, whoever is the provider.

98. A lack of rigour in evaluating alternative methods of delivery, coupled with the historical influence of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), is most apparent in authorities that are not performing well in this area. In some authorities, thinking has not moved on significantly since the repeal of CCT. Many BVRs have separated facilities from development activities or community grants, often limiting the extent to which authorities are able to identify and drive forward whole service improvement for the public. Where there is a formal client/contractor split the relationship needs to be managed effectively, but where no formal division exists this attitude of internal difference and division needs to be addressed.

99. The lack of a link between facilities and sports development following the split between contractor and client under CCT is a common and significant problem. Those authorities that are judged as higher performers are trying to address this, but more authorities need to adopt a broader scope for future analysis and improvement that better reflects the use of services (CASE STUDY 14).
CASE STUDY 14 A broader perspective and changing culture

Inspectors found that Bridgend had a fairly traditional client/contractor and facility/development split in its service. As a result of its BVR the Council recognised the need to change the culture and structure of the sport and recreation service from ‘managers of centres to managers of sport’, through Area Managers with responsibility for facility management, sports development and community functions within their geographical area. The Council expects this to bring about a more ‘joined-up’ approach to provision, and to offer a better focus on social objectives.

Suffolk Coastal has taken the BVR of its leisure services as an opportunity to change the previous client/contractor culture. One of the main benefits identified by inspectors is the redeployment of staff resources into the strategic development of the service and the delivery of community activities. New performance monitoring arrangements that place customer focus and service improvements at the top of the agenda have replaced the past ‘adversarial and overly cost-focused approach to monitoring’.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

100. In deciding their strategic and funding priorities, authorities should take clear and open decisions on the future of services and facilities that are based on local needs, key objectives and available resources. Holding on to pre-conceptions about who should deliver the service, or not facing up to the increasing costs and poor standards of ageing facilities, considerably hamper service improvement.

SUMMARY

101. By challenging traditional approaches to service delivery, by exploiting the widening choice of delivery mechanisms and providers, and by facing up to the gap between service demands and the availability of resources, authorities will be better placed to find the best way of delivering sport and recreation services that are appropriate to their local context (CHECKLIST 2).

CHECKLIST 2 Appropriate service delivery mechanisms

AUTHORITIES SHOULD:

- Recognise and understand the value and benefits to authority services, as well as to individuals and partners, of the different alternatives offered by the public, not-for-profit and private sectors.
- Be open to, and actively seek out, all possible options for delivering services that are in line with strategic objectives and that best meet users’ needs.
- Conduct robust and objective options appraisals.
- Overcome historical legacies that hamper progress, in particular pre-conceptions about who should deliver services, inaction in relation to ageing facilities and obstructive CCT influences.
Once the purpose of sport and recreation services has been determined, and the best way to deliver council priorities is clear, the council must turn its plans into reality. In order to improve, there are a number of practical elements that authorities need to focus on:

- developing a strategy;
- the effective promotion of services;
- working with others;
- managing performance;
- developing and training staff; and
- using resources effectively.

**EXHIBIT 6 Practical elements of service improvement**

Improving the service involves several elements.

*Source: Audit Commission*
DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

103. When authorities are developing a strategy for their sport and recreation services, it is important and helpful that this is linked to the local cultural strategy. DCMS guidance states that the local cultural strategy forms the key link between service specific strategies, and the community strategy, corporate strategy and best value performance plan (BVPP) (Ref. 24). The guidance suggests that a number of principles should underpin the local cultural strategy, and it is interesting that many of these are central to the arguments presented in this report:

- services should be focused on the needs and aspirations of local communities and should address the broad range of cultural needs;
- the authority should place meaningful consultation with local communities at the centre of the service strategy;
- services should be guided by a clear vision for the future of the area;
- there should be fair access for all;
- cross-department and cross-agency partnerships should be developed; and
- the authority should take a holistic view and should not be constrained by historical roles and traditional service boundaries and functions.

104. Developing a local cultural strategy is valuable for sport and recreation services because it provides all authorities with an opportunity to:

- consider sport and recreation in a broader context;
- lead meaningful dialogue with local people on their wants and needs;
- consider and critically evaluate the authority’s role as sport and recreation provider and enabler, and assess which other organisations share this role;
- identify new ways of providing sport and recreation services;
- identify new possibilities for sport and recreation activities; and
- establish new working relationships across service departments and with the private and voluntary sectors.

105. Once a strategy has been devised, it is important that is translated into deliverable action plans that drive decisions and all aspects of service delivery. Where this fails to happen, the result is activity on the ground that is inconsistent with, or even contradictory to, the purpose of the service. For example, inspections identified:

- a service business plan that focuses primarily on increasing the use of facilities by families despite the fact that families do not make up a significant proportion of the local population and the corporate strategy prioritises other community groups;
- a policy of making community sport and recreation facilities available for Asian women undermined by income targets for charging for the time of sports coaches; and
- a policy of limiting the use of leisure centres by young people even though provision for young people is a high priority for the community and they are one of the six key target groups for the service.
106. Authorities that have been judged to be high performers tend to have strategies, action plans and clearly identified delivery mechanisms that are linked and that are implemented. Strategy is translated into action through work programmes for staff across the service, and includes all aspects of service delivery (CASE STUDY 15).

CASE STUDY 15 Turning strategy into practice

At King's Lynn and West Norfolk staff contribute to service business plans during workshop sessions. Once the business plans are agreed, action plans for individual staff members are drawn up at annual appraisals. Personal actions are linked to business plans and to corporate aims. Success in achieving the plans is reviewed at the end of each year. Inspectors found that consistent understanding of what the service is aiming to achieve is apparent at all levels, from Portfolio Holder and Chief Officer to Recreation Assistants. Staff could give examples of how their understanding of the corporate and service aims influenced their work. For example, a Duty Manager was aware that encouraging participation and involvement by young people linked into the Council's objectives for community safety and health improvement, and gave permission for an empty sports hall to be used free of charge by teenagers gathering outside the sports centre.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

EFFECTIVE PROMOTION

107. The People’s Panel in 1998 (Ref. 25) identified that one in three people feel that they are given only a limited amount of information or that they are not informed at all about sport and recreation facilities. Evidence from inspection suggests that this picture has not changed over the last few years.

108. Effective communication about sport and recreation services ensures that local communities are aware of what services and activities are available, how they can access them, and how their views can be fed in. It can help users to understand the vision and objectives behind the services offered. But inspection reports identify that the approach to marketing (in its widest sense), and to publicity and promotion in particular, is a major weakness across sport and recreation services.

109. Most authorities use a range of promotional tools, most commonly leaflets, posters and advertising on local radio or, in a few cases, television. The quality of promotional material varies, from professionally designed, attractive and informative literature printed on quality materials, to poor quality photocopies of basic wordprocessed papers. Coverage and content available on council websites is also highly variable. However, some authorities have plans for more creative or targeted activity such as direct mail, use of ICT, discount voucher offers, supermarket roadshows or freephone information lines, but these tend to be isolated examples. The value and use of staff as a positive communication tool is recognised by only a few authorities.

110. The level of spending across authorities on publicity and promotion of sport and recreation facilities varies widely, with limited evidence from inspections that authorities monitor how effective this spending is. A lack of understanding of the importance of this area of spend is also evident in some authorities – in one authority where the budget for the service was cut, the service chose not to undertake any promotional activity, despite the urgent need to
generate more income. Even in many authorities that are judged to be performing well, the marketing of the service as a whole needs to be reviewed in order to target non-users and to address equity issues by broadening the customer base.

111. Councils need to use consultation to inform their marketing strategy and to identify how best to reach and inform disadvantaged groups. They need to have a structured approach as part of a strategic marketing plan for the service, which will identify the best mix of product, place, promotion and price to achieve the service objectives. And they need to be aware of the importance of using language that is meaningful to the audience that they are communicating with.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

112. Authorities that wish to improve should seek out learning opportunities from elsewhere to help them to raise the quality of their sport and recreation services. Inspections have identified a range of programmes where staff or members visit facilities and services outside their area in order to seek out ideas that can be transferred and adapted to their own service (CASE STUDY 16). This has built political commitment and reinforced the important role that members play in championing improvement in the authority. Opportunities for learning are also offered by the Beacon Council scheme, particularly through themes of regenerating through culture, sport and tourism, local health strategies and neighbourhood renewal.

CASE STUDY 16 Learning from others

Hambleton Leisure Services staff visit and evaluate competitive facilities and services outside the area at least once a year. Examples of the range of practices ‘imported’ as a result include a customer feedback display and the introduction of new activities and facilities, such as salsa dancing classes and family friendly equipment.

As part of the Council’s BVR, Dacorum organised member visits to a number of sports centres. Each visit was followed up with a report, and good practice was fed into improvement planning processes. New practices introduced as a result of this include Customer Service Centres.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

113. In addition to visiting other facilities and activities, some authorities invite external views on their services as a way of drawing on others’ experiences and challenging their own provision. Examples include sport and recreation fora or customer focus groups to assess the services.

114. For effective service delivery and improvement, as well as learning from others, councils need to take steps to form partnerships with these organisations. Internally, there is a need for joined-up working across the authority at a number of levels. A range of different departments provide functions that support and deliver sport and recreation services; if these different services are not working towards a shared purpose and communicating with each other then the public receives conflicting and misleading messages about the services that are on offer. This manifests itself in simple customer-facing issues, like repairs and maintenance in changing facilities and sports halls, information on other council services, or access to other departments. Better performing authorities are now starting to address some of these issues and are taking a more cross-cutting approach to the review of services. Some are establishing multi disciplinary teams.
Authorities that are judged to be high performing develop and sustain effective partnerships with external partners, and see partnership working as essential in delivering sport and recreation opportunities. The development of partnerships can contribute to sporting activities that have value in their own right. They can increase both the number of participants and resources available, including levels of funding and expertise to provide the service. They can also help to contribute to wider local and national agendas (CASE STUDY 17).

CASE STUDY 17 Partnership working as part of the culture

Blackpool’s Sport and Leisure Services are enthusiastic about partnership working, internally and externally, in their efforts to make a real difference to local people. Inspectors identified examples of internal partnerships with Social Services. Work with foster children and their families has resulted in an increase in visits to sport and recreation facilities from 4,500 to 7,500 in 12 months, and a programme of exercise in residential homes for elderly people has also been established. With external partners, Blackpool has raised significant sums for projects in the local community, most recently from the Children’s Fund to support outreach community work.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

The most common partnerships for sport and recreation services are with local sports clubs, schools and colleges, health agencies and regeneration agencies, and between districts and county councils in the shire area. There are numerous good examples of joint working with education departments and schools on sport and recreation provision, but this approach could be further developed to explore the full potential of dual use of facilities. Dual use can offer mutual benefits in terms of access, choice, cost efficiency and reduced overheads, and it can help authorities to address social agendas, such as lifelong learning and social inclusion.

For partnerships to be successful, authorities need to demonstrate a real commitment to listening to their partners and to working together. They need to be willing to adopt different roles within partnerships to suit the particular circumstance and be proactive in creating a fertile environment in which partnerships can thrive. For example, Hartlepool’s partners view the Council’s willingness and desire to work together as a genuine demonstration of its strong ethos of working in partnership.

MANAGING PERFORMANCE

A significant number of authorities are using external improvement and accreditation schemes to help to develop their improvement culture. These provide a focus for change, and help to embed an improvement ethos. Some authorities have gained, or are seeking, external recognition, and have found that the accreditation process can bring a robust and independent external challenge to working practices, and a form of benchmarking with others. This, in turn, can help to improve service quality by helping to identify councils who perform better in specific areas.

The most widely used tool found by inspectors was QUEST, the quality assurance standard designed by and for the leisure industry. The scheme covers standards and principles for best practice in sport and recreation, self-assessment and external scrutiny. Other frameworks identified by inspectors include the EFQM Excellence Model, Investors in People, Charter Mark, ISO quality systems and SPRITO national standards. The use of such tools is most
effective when staff are fully engaged in the process and the outcomes. Some authorities have found that external recognition can boost staff morale and help to raise profiles (CASE STUDY 18).

**CASE STUDY 18 Improvement tools, benchmarking and quest**

Early in Hartlepool’s BVR of sport and recreation, the authority decided that embarking on the QUEST process would be helpful in assisting improvement and ensuring staff commitment. Inspectors subsequently found that ‘staff we spoke to who are on the various QUEST teams found the experience to be very valuable and fed information regularly into the review process, for example, an evaluation of the marketing of the service’.

Guildford Spectrum values QUEST and sees it as an improvement tool that drives the centre forward and ensures that it does not stand still. Officers believe that external accreditation adds value because it helps to identify weaknesses, even within overall areas of good performance.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interviews*

120. A lack of funding is frequently cited by less well-judged authorities as the reason that they have not pursued quality initiatives. It is clear that, for some authorities, cost is a barrier, but this is perhaps more of an issue of prioritising resources. For many others the real reasons are unwillingness to expose their services to self-examination or unwillingness to prioritise managers’ and staff time for the process of self-assessment. The same arguments apply to the take-up of the National Benchmarking Scheme that is managed by Sport England: the potential benefits outweigh the modest outlay. It provides valuable feedback to an authority, and can reinforce its efforts to instil an improvement ethos.

121. As part of performance management, authorities need to collect meaningful performance information and use it to inform strategic planning, operational decision-making and service improvement. While pockets of good practice exist, inspectors found that a lack of robust performance management data is a major area of weakness in many sport and recreation services, even in some of the better performing authorities. A particular challenge for the service is measuring the impact of sport and recreation spend and activity.

122. Despite the difficulties of measuring the impact of services, some of the best authorities are making efforts to develop a culture of outcome-focused and outcome-based PIs, and are ensuring that what is learnt from performance measurement drives service improvement (CASE STUDY 19).

**CASE STUDY 19 Measuring and monitoring performance**

The London Borough of Greenwich has centre-specific business plans, with reference to social inclusion objectives and targets with explicit measures against which effective monitoring can be undertaken. Client service plans include comprehensive action plan objectives that set out actions, rationale, responsibilities, timescales, resource implications, PIs, targets and links to the corporate strategy.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service*
ICT can be an effective performance management tool for sport and recreation services. It can provide performance data to inform policy and operational decisions, marketing effort, access initiatives and customer service. Among the specific applications being developed by sport and recreation services are credit card and direct debit payment facilities, swipe or smart card technology, electronic systems for booking and invoicing, and online booking (CASE STUDY 20). Many of the better performing authorities have recognised the potential of ICT in terms of improving their sport and recreation services and are making significant investments in technology (CASE STUDY 21).

**CASE STUDY 20 ‘Customer friendly’ systems**

Dacorum’s facilities accept payments by credit card and direct debit. Payments are ‘frozen’ if customers are away from the area for a significant period. The computer system displays customers’ details, which enables staff to greet customers by name, increases the speed of service, and provides a database that is used for marketing purposes.

Telford and Wrekin operates a flex card scheme, which gives a minimum of 10 per cent discount to all users, and substantial discounts to priority target groups. The card collects data about users of the service and identifies electronically those who are entitled to a concessionary rate. Using the flex card database, marketing effort is focused on retaining customers or regaining lapsed customers through discount voucher offers and direct mailing, with further loyalty schemes due to come online shortly.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interviews*

**CASE STUDY 21 Effective application of ICT**

East Devon is investing £200,000 in a new IT system and a further £30,000 in installation and training. The Council anticipates that the system will provide information that has previously not been available and help improve marketing, sales and customer service. Expected benefits include:

- increased knowledge of users and non-users;
- analysis of the take-up of the passport to leisure scheme;
- ability to create membership databases;
- easier and more frequent consultation; and
- operational efficiencies, arising from the introduction of electronic returns and timesheets from remote sports centre sites.

The system was selected following visits to current users by managers, advice from external IT consultants, on-site demonstration and practice use by staff.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview*

**TRAINING AND DEVELOPING STAFF**

Inspectors found almost universal praise of frontline staff by service users. The vast majority are helpful, friendly, enthusiastic and committed to providing a high-quality service. Properly skilled, committed and well-motivated staff play a vital role in service improvement.
Good staff engagement, where staff feel informed and involved in the way that the service is managed, and where communications and teamworking are good, were found to be important, particularly in enabling staff to deal with change. In many of the authorities judged to be high performing, inspectors found competent and enthusiastic service managers, who encourage staff to be responsive to improvement opportunities, provide sufficient ‘head room’ to allow for innovation and creativity, and recognise individual contributions appropriately (CASE STUDY 22). They also found examples where multi-skilling has improved job satisfaction and staff retention, as well as providing the service with a more flexible workforce. For example, Dacorum has trained café staff to double up as receptionists, and fitness instructors have been encouraged to learn ‘wet-side’ skills.

CASE STUDY 22  Staff recognition and reward

Guildford Spectrum operates a variety of staff recognition schemes and rewards. Schemes include a staff bonus scheme, a ‘mad ideas’ award, performer of the month (nominated by staff) and an ‘eagle badge’ award (nominated by members of the public). Rewards range from a financial bonus or gifts, such as cinema tickets, to reward badges, to freeing up time to work on special projects. The recognition schemes and rewards contribute to team building and staff loyalty. Staff are also given some flexibility in working practices through broad skills development and through the reward and project work available.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

Authorities also need to ensure that staff are equipped with the necessary tools to excel at their jobs, including appropriate training and development. Inspectors have identified that development opportunities, including access to training and appraisal systems, vary widely. Where there are few opportunities and performance review systems such as appraisals are perceived by staff to be ineffective, lower staff morale and higher staff turnover result. Levels of staff knowledge are also variable. Inspectors highlighted particular concerns in authorities where staff were unaware of the council’s child protection policy or were unfamiliar with its procedures.

Most sport and recreation staff have access to some training. Training on specific service-related capabilities, such as facility maintenance or health and safety, is generally good. However, opportunities for training in ‘softer skills’ such as leadership, communication and marketing are not as readily available. Higher performing authorities recognise the importance of training in sustaining and developing staff expertise, and invest accordingly. In addition to individual training schemes covering statutory legislation requirements and skills development, higher performing councils tend to provide better access to professional support in areas such as management development, organisational support, team building and customer care, including ‘Welcome Host’ training for frontline staff. They also encourage staff and volunteers to develop and progress, both within the service and in the wider sport and recreation sector. This development can take various forms, including internal and external secondments, job swaps, shadowing opportunities, encouragement to network locally and nationally, career development plans and training for academic qualifications.
USING RESOURCES EFFECTIVELY

128. Prioritising services or objectives across an authority overall, and within sport and recreation services, is politically and operationally difficult and complex. The decision to prioritise a particular area of activity, target group or objective, often provokes a demand for additional resources to allow the same level of commitment to continue on lesser priorities. This results in a search for external or growth funding, and fails to address the real tension and challenge of managing resources and priorities effectively – using resources differently.

129. At times of increasing demand and pressures on budgets, existing resources may need to be diverted or realigned to priority areas. Decisions need to be made to do less work on lower priorities, and to use existing resources more effectively in order to achieve the agreed objectives. However, inspectors have found little evidence that members and senior officers are taking these difficult service and financial decisions. The reasons behind this include poor links between corporate financial strategies and resource management, lack of accurate cost and budget information to assist decision-making, and members’ reluctance to face up to the implications of their decisions.

130. There are, however, pockets of good practice, often in authorities where there is a higher level of political understanding and commitment to the contribution that sport and recreation can make to achieving corporate objectives (CASE STUDY 23). In some, the importance of sport and recreation across the authority is translated into corporate decisions to invest in facilities following, for example, the transfer of housing stock or other assets. However, authorities must guard against using one-off resource allocations to continue to provide services in the short term, only to find themselves facing the same problem soon after.

CASE STUDY 23 Resources following objectives

Inspectors found that in Hambleton ‘the leisure service is clearly seen by members as an important element in achieving their corporate objectives for the Hambleton population and, as such, receives their additional support.’ Resources are made available to support policies and procedures to deliver service aims, and focus on the priorities of the Council, against the background of a ten-year financial strategy that anticipates growth alongside the retention of strong financial reserves.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service

131. Securing financial resources from other areas within the authority, and from external sources, is particularly important for a discretionary service. It enables far more to be achieved than would be possible from sport and recreation budgets alone. Some authorities have been successful in using small budgets to attract significant resources from elsewhere. However, it is important that authorities seek out specific alternative funding to support their strategic objectives and priorities, rather than chasing all sources of potential funding. This links particularly to an authority’s attitude to partnership and collaborative working and to its ability to link its sport and recreation services to social inclusion, learning, regeneration, health and renewal initiatives in real and meaningful ways.

132. The principle of ‘invest to save’, that is, allocating resources to invest in a facility, equipment or service in order to realise longer-term savings, is one that many authorities find difficult in practice. However, it can be very effective, as some authorities have demonstrated. For
example, inspectors have identified a range of energy efficiency initiatives implemented by some authorities to reduce costs and contribute to environmental sustainability (BOX E). Other examples of ‘invest to save’ initiatives include:

- capital investment in a new facility to replace two old and poorly maintained facilities, achieving significant revenue savings over the first ten years of its operation; and
- investment in ICT to reduce the amount of staff time spent on administration, enabling them to contribute more effectively to serving customers.

**BOX E Examples of energy saving initiatives**

- Energy management programme to reduce energy consumption and CO₂ emissions at sports facilities (Blackpool).
- Ionisers to reduce the amount of water, energy and disinfection necessary to operate pools (Dacorum).
- A combined heat and power unit to provide energy, making effective use of heat exchange to air condition a health and fitness suite while heating an outdoor pool (Dacorum).
- Energy efficient lighting (Guildford).
- Energy audit carried out by external consultants (East Devon).
- A staff project team, the Green Team, that champions energy saving activities (Guildford).

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview*

---

**133.** Authorities must also consider how to best use their physical assets. Inspectors have found many authorities whose facilities are empty for long periods, are closed at times where there is demand to use them, or where lack of maintenance prevents use during opening hours. Creative programming can be used to increase participation by under-represented or target groups during low-use periods. Alternative use of spaces, for example, squash courts for circus skills and table tennis, crèches for evening sports therapy sessions, and treatment rooms for reflexology and aromatherapy sessions to centre users, provide new and enhanced services to customers.

**134.** Authorities need to establish cyclical, planned and preventative maintenance and they must invest in sport and recreation facilities. For example, Guildford Spectrum has a detailed programme of plant repairs and refurbishment planned over the next 15 years, and Hambleton District Council’s 10-year financial strategy identifies resources for a 10-year repair and renewal programme for its sport and recreation buildings. Some authorities have created reserve funds for product development and renewals by setting aside a sum of money each year. Whatever approach an authority takes, the more knowledge it has about the condition of its assets through an up-to-date survey, the better informed its decisions can be on developing appropriate asset management plans and strategies for refurbishments, ongoing repairs and regular maintenance.

**SUMMARY**

**135.** Developing a clear strategy, working with others, managing performance and using staff and financial resources effectively are all vital to enable authorities to drive service improvement (CHECKLIST 3, overleaf).
CHECKLIST 3 Elements of service improvement

AUTHORITIES SHOULD:

- Develop a strategy and translate it into action plans that deliver the agreed objectives.
- Actively seek out learning and improvement opportunities from other internal departments and external organisations.
- Develop and sustain effective working partnerships to join up initiatives and work towards objectives together.
- Establish clear performance management frameworks to monitor improvement and develop a culture of improvement.
- Train and develop staff in order to improve their performance, and to increase motivation and job satisfaction.
- Make maximum use of resources, including physical assets, by reprioritising and redistributing where appropriate.
4. BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

136. Sport and recreation is an increasingly complex service area. It has been difficult to deliver it well in an expanding and ever more competitive marketplace. The impact of progressive resource constraints, historical influences on service delivery, competing political priorities, national social agendas, and changing public expectations have significant implications for the quality of services and the ways in which they are provided. This report has demonstrated that high-quality services are being delivered in some places, that there are practical solutions to current problems and dilemmas, and that improvements in services can be achieved for the public good.

137. Members are a key element in these improvements and, together with senior officers across an authority, have important roles to play. The challenge to both is the extent to which they are prepared to think radically about the future provision of sport and recreation services. Are they willing to face up to service weaknesses and respond appropriately, making tough decisions and choices where needed?

138. Sunderland City Council (CASE STUDY 24) and Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council (CASE STUDY 25, overleaf) have demonstrated good practice in many of the areas outlined in this report. Both councils are striving for excellence and are making real improvements in the way that sport and recreation services are delivered.

CASE STUDY 24 Sunderland City Council

A SENSE OF PURPOSE THAT DRIVES DECISIONS

Sport and leisure has been clearly identified at the heart of the Community Plan objectives. Tackling the ‘health of young people through sport’ and ‘regeneration through sport’ are two themes that align sport with strategic priorities in the city. The authority acts as an enabler and catalyst for community involvement with its pilot of a community-led sport and leisure forum in a Coalfield Regeneration area. The forum meets every six to eight weeks, participation is open to anyone in the community who is interested, and the group has a shared objective improving sport and leisure opportunities for local people. A monthly newsletter is distributed to all households in the area, with information about local activities and advice for local groups on how to access funding for capacity building in the area. The forum has already had an impact, influencing programming in two centres, and, if it is successful, it will be rolled out to other areas of the city.

IDENTIFYING AND PRIORITISING COMMUNITY ISSUES

Sunderland City Council identifies, prioritises and makes services available to priority groups in the community. For example, the Raich Carter Centre, located in an area of high deprivation, assists the Council in meeting its Community Plan objectives of social and cultural opportunities by providing a focal point for community participation. It has 6,000 members, of which 40 per cent are from the local community. Free membership to local residents, funded by the New Opportunities Fund, has countered local people’s concerns that the facility would cater only for those who could afford to use it and has ensured high levels of use by local residents. The centre contributes to community safety and young people’s agendas by providing activities for young people who are living in a high-crime area. It also supports the ‘healthy city’ objective.
SEEKING OUT ALTERNATIVE SERVICE DELIVERY OPTIONS

The Council is in partnership with a private sector provider who provides fitness facilities in four of their centres. This arrangement generates a surplus for reinvestment each year and, additionally, has released savings to enable the Council to provide a ‘Youth to Youth’ scheme for 60 young people. The scheme was designed to support and develop young people who are in danger of being socially excluded through work and education opportunities.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Performance management is used to inform decisions and deliver performance improvements at a corporate and departmental level. Community Plan objectives are understood and translated into business plans and individual centre plans. Each member of staff has clear targets and understands their contribution to the overall objectives. Communications systems are well developed, with feedback mechanisms in place to ensure that staff opinions are valued. The Youth Service (in Education and Community Services) and Indoor and Outdoor Recreation (in City Contracting Services) have jointly set targets to reduce youth crime and deprivation by providing leisure opportunities. Membership cards use swipe card technology and enable details about the individual to be held, which will make it possible to identify how key targets for participation are being met and enable targeted marketing by postcode.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview

CASE STUDY 25  Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council

IDENTIFYING, PRIORITISING AND MAKING SERVICES AVAILABLE TO PRIORITY GROUPS

The Council demonstrates that it is possible to be market-orientated and user-focused, while also increasing opportunities for non-participants, contributing to community safety and promoting inclusion for target groups. It listens and responds to the views of users and local residents. Initiatives are aimed at meeting community needs, targeting those who do not currently participate, and there are strong outreach programmes, taking activities out into the community, particularly the more rural areas.

A centre in one of Kings Lynn’s most deprived areas employs a development officer who is dedicated to increasing use by communities from the local estate. A local community leader has also been recruited as a member of security staff to help to improve security and safety for centre users. The conflict that originally existed between the centre and the local community has disappeared, the centre has become more accessible and is valued by this target market, and use by local residents now exceeds the local population profile.

Each leisure centre has a ‘Dropzone’ area that is designed and equipped for informal use by teenagers. With internet access, pool tables and music, they attract young people who are otherwise not catered for.

Sports development activities include an inter-village netball league to promote sporting opportunities for girls and women in rural communities.

ICT AS A MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING TOOL

The service introduced a central database with information initially sent to each facility on discs and the system rolled out to all facilities over three months. The database enables the Council to interrogate data and to build a profile of users, identifying the number of times that people visit and the times at which they visit. Since 2001, all sites have been networked so that information can be transferred nightly, and staff can access information at all sites in ‘real time’.
The system drove and enabled a review of the Council’s leisure card scheme. A direct debit scheme was introduced and monthly payments actively sought. Since then the income from leisure cardholders at one centre has grown from £40,000 to £280,000. Thirteen per cent of eligible residents have a card and 25 per cent of juniors hold cards. Fifty per cent of the 17,000 leisure cardholders have concessionary cards, which are visibly indistinguishable as all cards operate on a swipe system. The leisure cards issued include the postcode of holders’ homes, enabling the Council to identify particular activities and cardholders who participate in them in each postcode area.

Knowledge of the customer base also provides valuable information to support decision-making about possible price rises. For example, the Council increased the normal cost of a swim by 3 per cent and reduced the concessionary charge, which resulted in an overall increase in income.

The Council recognises the value of retaining leisure centre members. At time of joining, a fitness consultant discusses the different payment options with members, as well as their personal goals and preferred method of contact, such as mobile phone or email. A database of 1,100 names has been created of people who wish to receive email newsletters. All members are kept informed and are updated of changes and offers using their preferred contact channel. Individual members’ visits are analysed each month to identify changes in their use of the facilities. The consultant is responsible for contacting members who have not visited for some time to find out why and to encourage them to re-visit.

**EFFECTIVE PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION**

The Council’s ICT systems enable targeted publicity and promotion of sport and recreation services and activities based on postcode areas. The Council has conducted a marketing campaign promoting benefits, such as low costs, no joining fee and unlimited use of fitness equipment, health suites and pools. Every advertisement carried the monthly cost of membership. In one month this resulted in a gross increase of around 8 per cent in direct debit payments. The Council can also conduct targeted leaflet drops, for example, in streets where there are young people who do not attend swimming lessons.

The Council uses its in-house graphics department to design promotional materials, and has a good relationship with local radio stations. Ten per cent of the annual marketing budget is spent on radio marketing. This is supplemented by ad hoc press marketing. The same adverts are used repeatedly and there is a consistent focus on the unique selling points of the service.

*Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service and officer interview*

139. There is no instant panacea that will enable authorities to deliver a three-star service, and many have several areas to work on. The good practice identified in this report does not provide universal solutions, as each authority must analyse its own challenges and local circumstances. Wide-ranging approaches to best value will help authorities to identify ways to improve, as will learning from the experience of their peers and the information presented in the increasing flow of inspection reports.

140. Crucially, in a demanding environment, authorities need to be outward looking. They must consider all of the resources that can be brought to bear, assess how sport and recreation contributes to their widest objectives, and be open-minded when selecting service delivery options.
APPENDIX 1: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ADVISORY GROUP

The Audit Commission is very grateful to the members of the advisory group for their advice during this study. They were:

Ruth Alleyne  
Paula Clayonsmith  
Fred Coalter  
David Evans  
Mike Fulford  
Peter Gunn  
Richard Hunt  
Andy Kerr  
Tony Osmanski  
Mark Porter

Sport England  
Improvement and Development Agency  
University of Edinburgh  
City and County of Swansea  
Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management  
Guildford Spectrum  
Local Government Association  
Audit Commission Inspection Service  
Suffolk Coastal District Council  
Department for Culture, Media and Sport

OTHER AUTHORITIES

The Audit Commission is also grateful to officers at the following authorities for contributing to the study:

Basildon District Council  
Blackpool Borough Council  
London Borough of Bexley  
London Borough of Greenwich  
London Borough of Newham  
London Borough of Richmond upon Thames  
Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council  
North West Leicestershire District Council  
St Edmundsbury Borough Council  
Suffolk Coastal District Council  
Sunderland City Council  
Telford and Wrekin Council

Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council  
Braintree District Council  
Chorley Borough Council  
Crawley Borough Council  
Dacorum Borough Council  
East Devon District Council  
Flinthshire County Council  
Guildford Borough Council  
Hambleton District Council  
Hartlepool Borough Council  
Kirklees Metropolitan Council

The Audit Commission also drew on information from a wide range of authorities across England and Wales that have been inspected.
STUDY TEAM

The Audit Commission team consisted of Helen Goulding and Brian King. The team is grateful to Strategic Leisure for its early research and contributions to the study, and to Angela Watson, Ruth Phillips, Yvonne Barker and Gillian Dent from Angela Watson & Associates (AWA) for data analysis and for drafting the report. The team would also like to thank MORI for desk research carried out on attitudes to leisure facilities, and colleagues in the Inspection Service and Public Services Research directorate for valuable advice.
REFERENCES

Further copies are available from:

Audit Commission Publications
PO Box 99
Wetherby
LS23 7JA

Telephone: 0800 502030

STOCK CODE: LLI2735

£18 NET